

After Life: History, Memory, Trauma and the Transcendent

David Desser

(i) Synopsis

The recently deceased enter a way-station, a limbo, here pictured as a rather drab institutional-style building, attended by civil servants, who are themselves deceased. The counselors help the newly dead pick a single memory to stay with them always. When the deceased have chosen their memory, it is filmed by the after-life crew, and upon satisfactory completion and viewing of the film, the deceased move on to the next stage, to relive their memory for all eternity. One of the counselors, Mochizuki, upon discovering that one of his clients married the woman to whom he was engaged before his death in the war, decides upon a memory he would like to take with him, and so he, too, moves on. After this batch of the newly dead is properly handled, a new group arrives to be guided to their memory.

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Kore-eda Hirokazu's *After Life* (*Wandafuru raifu*, 1998) was only the second feature film by the already acclaimed documentary filmmaker. His first feature film, *Maborosi* (*Maborosi no hikari*, 1995), was something of an art-house sensation. With its long takes, minimal plot, and suggestive themes, *Maborosi* appeared to be a throwback to the classical Japanese cinema of Ozu Yasujiro and Mizoguchi Kenji. *After Life* proved a bit more accessible and inviting, with its

universal themes and eclectic mix of film styles. In fact, the Japanese title, *Wonderful Life*, gives perhaps a better clue than does the English-language release title to the varied and multiple themes that Kore-eda's deceptively simple drama wishes to tackle. With its obvious allusion to Frank Capra's now-classic 1946 Christmas-time family favorite, *It's a Wonderful Life*, Kore-eda's film is a fantasy about how to come to terms with the meaning of one's existence. Here, too, other-worldly guides similarly appear to show these hidden truths to people who may be confused or at a loss to make sense of things. And as in Capra's film, we learn that sometimes our life is given meaning not for what we have apparently accomplished, for what we have ourselves especially done, but, rather, for how our lives have impacted the lives of others. More than in Capra's film, however, which only gestures to the historical underpinnings of the drama, Kore-eda is keen to highlight contentious and controversial issues in Japan's cultural memory and their legacy of trauma.

The main characters in this film are the after-life counselors. Oddly enough, they are people who could not choose a memory to take with them into eternity and so work to help others choose theirs. In particular, the film focuses on Kawashima, a young father who refuses to let go of his life in order to await a single glimpse of his daughter, who was three years old when he died, a glimpse he may have when she grows up. His feelings of guilt for abandoning his daughter, that he left his major life's work undone, keep him in the civil service of post-death counseling. But he does a good job here, and many of his "clients" are deeply appreciative of his efforts. One such moment of recognition occurs when Nishimura, a rather sad and lonely old woman whose life seemed to have been devoted to enjoying flowers, presents him with a bag full of the paper cherry blossoms that have been used to create her most favored memory. This moment of connection, subtle though it may be, is the kind of thing that Kore-eda is careful to highlight—an acknowledgement that human communication, sharing a little of one's soul, is where life, even in the after life, has meaning.

This is demonstrated even more clearly through the character of Mochizuki, whose crisis of conscience drives the film to its dramatic highlight. It is slowly revealed that Mochizuki was previously engaged to the woman his current client, Watanabe, eventually married. A casualty of World War II, Mochizuki died at the age of twenty-two, his grieving fiancée, Kyoko, eventually would marry Watanabe after

the war. At first, Mochizuki wants to turn over Watanabe's case to someone else; Watanabe is the person, along with Iseya, most unable to pick a memory. The difference is that while Watanabe is desperate to pick a memory to find meaning in his life, to find "evidence" and significance in his "so-so" existence, Iseya refuses to get with the program (and so will, ironically, become a part of it when he becomes a counselor). Yet in sticking with Watanabe's case, Mochizuki comes to see two crucial things: that Watanabe was happy with his wife, Kyoko (a happiness he would never have achieved, of course, if Mochizuki had lived), and that Kyoko always clung to the memory of Mochizuki. Watanabe then chooses to move on to eternity with a memory of Kyoko, while Kyoko, some years earlier, had taken along with her a memory of Mochizuki. Suddenly, Mochizuki comes to a realization and can now choose a memory to take with him: not a memory of being with Kyoko, however, but a memory of doing just what he has been doing for fifty years in the after life, the memory of helping people come to terms with their own lives. As Watanabe sits on a park bench with Kyoko in his memory, and as Kyoko sat on a park bench for all eternity with Mochizuki, Mochizuki will sit on that same bench, but with a memory of looking out at his co-workers helping others to achieve their memories.

This is a dazzling moment in the film—the Capra connection an interesting one in which Mochizuki finds his ultimate purpose in life in the memory of being central to the life and after life of others. But also it plays into Kore-eda's own attempts to imagine what it is that people would most like to remember about their lives and the ways in which the cinema itself is central to any such visualization. For the plot of the film is concerned with how people remember, not the absolute facts—though in one instance a memory turns out to be merely a wish that never came true, something to be discussed later. It is these remembrances, sensations, and feelings, that the after-life crew attempts to recreate. And the very attempts to recreate these memories are suspiciously reminiscent of what it is that film crews do to put images, sensations, and feelings—and thus create memories in their audiences—on film.

When it comes time, then, on Thursday, to start planning out the filming of the memories, the discussions look like production meetings of film crews, with designers, costumers, carpenters, cameramen, and assistants all involved in a kind of cinema problem

solving. We realize again that the after-life crew is not recreating the reality of the situation (what in documentary terms might be called “re-enactment”), but rather they are attempting to recreate the memory, the sensation, the feeling of that moment. Thus, for instance, they need not get a Cessna airplane for the pilot’s memory of flying through the cloud; they need only take one wing off the Piper Cub plane they have on hand. For what is important is what the view looked like and felt like from the cockpit and not whether or not the pilot was actually going to be in a plane for his eternal memory. (Like a film production, as well, Kore-eda humorously implies, the after-life crew seems to have budgetary limitations, so they must modify whatever sort of airplane they have on hand, just as in making a film like *After Life* a film crew must improvise and make do with a limited budget.) So, too, clouds made of cotton that fly by him on a pulley recreate the feeling of flying through the clouds as the plane remains on the ground.

Some of the cinematic problems are fairly easily solved. Pink cherry blossoms are easily recreated by paper cutouts, and they fall from trees simply by dropping them lightly from above through a sifter. A rope swing strung between bamboo trees and some rice balls easily evoke the post-Earthquake picnic. The hot summer tram ride proves a bit more difficult. The tram itself is easily made, and the rocking motion is created by gently shaking it from the outside. The train noise is added by recordings from a cassette. The breeze comes courtesy of a small fan. But how to create the sense of heat? A spray bottle of water to give a light sheen of sweat on the boy’s face does the job, and voila!

Other memory recreations are shown, too, such as Watanabe and Kyoko sitting on the bench. Perhaps the easiest scene to create turns out, as we will see, to be one of the most important and profound in the film. The “Red Shoes” dance, where the issue is the look of the dress and, suddenly, where the handkerchief came from that the girl must wave in the second part of the dance occupies a significant portion of Friday’s shooting day. Here, again, Kore-eda highlights the issue of memory vs. reality. The now-old woman remembers her feelings more than the dance itself (naturally), so that all of a sudden when she notes that the young dancer must wave her handkerchief, she can not remember where it was kept previously: a pocket, up her sleeve, perhaps she held it in her hand the whole time? Memory is partial, fragmentary, made up of moments, sensations, dim recollections.

And movies, too, we may infer, have much to offer in forming such memories through images that are themselves necessarily fragments.

The fragmentary nature of memory, however, sometimes slips over into more ambiguous territory, and here the story of Amano Nobuko is most interesting. It is perhaps unclear from the subtitles that Nobuko was a prostitute, and the memory she wants to take with her was the kindness of a lover who treated her with unusual respect and consideration. A rendezvous they had on a snowy Adult Day at the Imperial Hotel is her most treasured moment. Sugie, her counselor, is very sympathetic to her and is gentle in confronting her with the fact that she has, for instance, shed a few years off her actual age. He tells her that he, too, was not always truthful with his friends and then regales her with a litany of names he took over the course of his life. When asked if that is true, he then tells her “no.” So in either case, in life or in the after life, he has lied. But with Nobuko it is not a matter of telling lies; rather, as the years have gone by she has gotten used to the “truth” of the stories she has told others and even told herself. Far more significantly, Sugie researches the year of Nobuko’s memory and realizes, sadly, that it could not have taken place at all. Nobuko finally admits that her lover never kept their rendezvous. It is likely that in telling this story to herself for the remaining years of her life, even into the after life, Nobuko may have finally come to believe it. Yet the memory she chooses to take with her is of her waiting in the hotel room, eagerly anticipating the lover who never appears, as if this time he will appear and be all the things she imagined he would be.

Just as Sugie does not judge Nobuko for telling lies about her age or insisting on a romantic rendezvous that never occurred, so, too, Kore-eda does not judge his characters. As the cynical and feisty Iseya notes, good, bad, or indifferent, all the dead come to this after life. A woman who never married or had children, a man who married a woman who did not love him, a man who spent a good deal of his time in the company of prostitutes, a woman who lived the life of an ordinary wife and mother, a teenager who had little to show for her short life—all are equal here. Kore-eda is not concerned with how these characters died. What killed young Kanako, or Bundo, or for that matter Counselor Kawashima, who left behind a three-year-old daughter? We never learn, nor do we need to. Obviously, many of the people died of old age and Mochizuki died in the war, but for the most part Kore-eda is not concerned with how these people died,

but in the meaning they can make of their lives afterward. He is not making a film about the tragedy of lives cut short, of lives lived for ill or in mediocrity; he is interested in the redemption of lives, any life, through the meanings derived from memory.

Kore-eda is uninterested, too, in creating the “reality-effect” so many movies insist upon, especially those which may fall into the category of fantasy. He makes no attempt to create a coherent or explicable world; the way-station to eternity looks like an old school with its communal bathroom, institutional hallways, overgrown garden, and drafty rooms and hallways. Though the counselors are themselves dead, they can obviously feel cold, savor a cup of hot tea, enjoy a bath, and certainly feel pain, sadness, love and anger. The seasons change in this way-station, too, from the cherry blossoms in spring discussed by Kawashima to the snowfall we see during the course of the one week we spy upon. When Shiori goes location scouting for the filming of the memories—finding a bamboo grove, a park bench, a bridge where a couple can be reunited—she wanders Tokyo. Kore-eda makes no particular point to show that she cannot be seen by the ordinary people roaming the streets; makes no particular point, for that matter, to show how it is that Shiori gets to Tokyo in the first place. Compare this, for instance, with the heavenly firmament that opens up *It's a Wonderful Life* and the angelic powers which send Clarence the angel-in-training down to Earth. Not that Capra is creating a whole fantasy world, but, rather, even those little things that SF and Fantasy fans often demand from a movie are completely lacking here. Kore-eda simply has other fish to fry, other, more deeply interesting issues to pursue. Instead, then, of imagining his film as something like a Fantasy, Kore-eda situates his work more centrally in the realm of documentary. To understand this we will turn to a consideration of genre and how it impacts the film's style and themes.

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Film critics might distinguish between two different notions of film genre: a kind of “content” genre (gangster, horror, musical, Western) and a “formal” genre (documentary, narrative, experimental). But just as the boundaries between content genres are notoriously permeable or individual genres difficult to define, so, too, formal genres are less rigid than at first thought. The documentary, for instance, becomes ever-more flexible and contentious a mode, while many filmmakers blur the line between narrative and experimental

(think of the French New Wave, especially Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais). Given Kore-eda's extensive background in documentary (discussed further below), it might be no surprise that he deploys some of the methods often thought to be characteristic of the form. And, in fact, the production method of the film itself was characteristic of documentary; something we may liken to a "documentary attitude" on Kore-eda's part went into the film's making. He interviewed almost five hundred people, including some of the actors in the film and many non-actors, some of whom would eventually become characters in the film, asking them the central question of what one memory they would take into eternity. This interviewing method then went into the film itself as the interviews of the clients are shot with a particular perspective on Kore-eda's part: "With documentary, my stance is just to be there with the subject, passively listening, waiting until the subject wants to speak. [. . .] I've come to realize recently that listening is more difficult than talking, and that bending an ear to a companion's feelings and thoughts is becoming a lost art" (Ehrlich and Kishi 40). We see this "passive listening" and active watching as the subjects speak throughout the first three days of the film's story, the counselors patiently lending an ear to their clients, who are allowed to relate their memories in their own words in their own good time.

The documentary attitude, including the deceptively termed "passive listening," extends to one of the dominant film styles deployed by Kore-eda in the film, especially during the interview stages of the plot: the so-called "talking heads" mode. Often used to criticize documentary as bland or visually unimaginative, the talking head mode is actually a crucial part of documentary film theory and practice as pioneered by John Grierson in the 1930s in Great Britain. For Grierson, it was important to allow the subjects, literally, to speak for themselves—to be both seen and heard and so have a voice in their own story. *After Life* is a film about people's stories, about people telling their own stories (and in some instances, as indicated, people in pre-production who told their stories to the filmmakers and were then asked to do so again for the film). Kore-eda deploys the talking heads mode throughout the first three days of the film's plot. We meet many of the characters on Monday as they speak to their counselors, sitting across the table from them, looking just to the side of the camera. Indeed, Kore-eda spends three minutes and thirty seconds in the initial montage of talking heads, going from one character to another in a series of jump cuts.

The same holds true for Tuesday's counseling sessions. Except this time the characters are given more time to speak, more time to tell their stories, in their own words in this almost direct address to the camera. Here the use of jump-cuts is not so much between the characters, but rather, in another documentary mode wherein almost imperceptible jump cuts are used to disguise minor ellipses or other eliminations in a particular character's story. We notice then that there are one, two or, rarely, three small jump cuts as the characters speak to their (unseen) counselors. In the first few shots of the Tuesday interviews Kore-eda establishes a consistent rhythm, allowing the shots to play out at about the same rate: the man who talks about the tram gets one minute to discuss his memory. This is followed by the tale of a woman who was reunited with her fiancé after the war, which goes on for fifty seconds. Then the man who remembers the sound of a bell coming from a young woman's key chain plays out for forty-seven seconds. Then the very dramatic telling of a starving soldier's capture by sympathetic Americans near the end of World War II occupies almost two minutes, breaking the rhythm established by the earlier three shots in favor of a longer, more leisurely telling. Here we see how powerful the seemingly boring and staid talking heads strategy can be. Perhaps it is merely good acting (aided by two jump cuts within the telling), as the man speaks the same hesitant English he used with the soldiers; or it is the sight of a now-old (and deceased) man speaking of a memory that would seem horrible and frightening, yet might be the very one he takes with him into eternity. (We do not see the filming of a number of the memories of characters who relate their stories, including this man, the woman who speaks about childbirth, the man who almost committed suicide when he was twenty, even the memory of Kanako, who is convinced not to hold onto a clichéd outing to Disneyland.)

When Kore-eda breaks up the talking heads strategy with Shiori's conversation with Kanako, he nevertheless returns to it later on Tuesday and, again, establishes a gentle rhythm of cutting from one speaker to another: The old lady and her post-Earthquake story occupies one minute; the middle-aged woman remembering the pain and pleasure of childbirth receives thirty-four seconds (no jump cuts are used here). The man whose suicide was interrupted gets forty-eight seconds, followed by our introduction to Watanabe, which goes on for forty-two. Then the sex-obsessed Shoda regales his counselor

for forty-nine seconds, followed by Bundo for forty-seven. These shot lengths are too clearly similar for them to be accidental, and so they create a particular rhythm—one typically associated with the province of the fiction filmmaker who is seemingly better able to control the events that are filmed. Yet the documentary style of talking heads keeps us in a kind of cross-hairs between fact and fiction. He breaks this rhythmic pattern with the first actual communication between Kawashima and Nishimura, the old lady who loves flowers. Kore-eda focuses on her for a full one minute-twenty nine seconds, thus breaking the rhythm in favor of a more dramatic and moving session.

The real dramatic power of the talking head strategy, when deployed in such a dramatic context, is seen in the longest single interview session, one which utilizes three small jump cuts, but otherwise allows the character and camera to go on uninterrupted for a full three minutes and fifteen seconds. In essence, despite the jump cuts, this functions as a very long take and a very long time to leave the camera essentially in the same position without moving it. Interestingly, it is not a memory we might take to be especially significant—not the woman who has deceived herself about her lover; not the man who did not commit suicide; not the soldier captured by American forces; not even Watanabe when he comes to terms with his mediocre life. Rather, it is merely the memory of a woman who recalls dancing in her red shoes at various places throughout Tokyo many years ago, dancing for her older brother, the one she cared for until his death a few years ago. Perhaps the talking head mode is combined with the deceptively named passive listening on our part as we, in fact, engage with this woman's story on a most active level, listening to her, watching her, feeling with her precisely for the simplicity of her memory revealed to us through the documentary device of allowing people to speak for themselves.

Kore-eda did extensive work in documentary before making his first feature film, *Maborosi*. One can detect a clear pattern of consistent subjects on his part, and even a cursory look over the body of his documentary work will reveal a young man of keen interests in certain social and psychological values. Certainly, as Aaron Gerow notes of Kore-eda's work, "the place of memory in human existence is one of the central themes. The aptly titled *Without Memory* (1996) documents a man who, due to a hospital mishap, cannot build up any new memories, and *Kare no Inai Hachigatsu* [*August without Him*]

(1994) portrays the last year and a half of the life of an AIDS victim as a series of memories of him, trying to put on video what was important about him” (“Memories . . . of the Way We Were,” *Daily Yomiuri*). The tragedy of a man who cannot form new memories and the attempt to put recollections of a dying man on video are obvious precursors to important motifs in *After Life*. In fact, the AIDS victim of *August without Him*, Hirata Yutaka, even records on camera his childhood memories, in particular an image of his father whistling on a blade of grass (Ehrlich and Kishi 41). This kind of sense memory and the attempt to record it before it disappears—through the inability to hold on to memories or through death—bring poignancy to these documentaries beyond the obvious social dimensions of medical malpractice and HIV/AIDS. The theme of memory seems to have an autobiographical element to it, as well, as Kore-eda often speaks of how, from the age of six, he would watch as Alzheimer’s disease took over his grandfather’s memory (See Ehrlich and Kishi 39).

Alzheimer’s is a serious social problem in contemporary Japan. The Japanese are a particularly long-lived group, due to healthy eating and exercise, but their aging demographic, not overly afflicted with heart disease or high-blood pressure, is particularly susceptible to Alzheimer’s. While many films—documentary and fiction—have dealt with the effects of Alzheimer’s on Japanese society, especially the problem of caring for these aged patients in an era of the breakdown of the extended family, Kore-eda seems particularly interested in the tragedy of the Alzheimer’s patient and what it means for them and their family when the inevitable memory loss and dementia sets in.

We might say that this concern on Kore-eda’s part with Alzheimer’s and memory loss is one of his authorial characteristics as a documentary filmmaker, and one which he also pointed to in *Maborosi*. The aging grandmother who, at the film’s start, takes off for her girlhood home in Shikoku—with no sense of how to get there, nor any money for a ticket—is clearly afflicted with Alzheimer’s, but she may also be thought of as clinging to a memory that she might wish to take with her into her own after life. The inability to come to terms with a particular event that would come to haunt the protagonist, until a kind of transcendence is reached, is at the heart of *Maborosi* in the young woman’s traumatic memory of her husband’s suicide. Memory loss and memories kept, then, form a crucial component to the rich themes of Kore-eda’s cinema.

Of course, auteur directors are wont to repeat themselves, to quote from themselves, or to rework their own films. Echoes of *Maborosi* appear throughout *After Life* in the simple fact, for instance, that the young actress who plays Kanako, Yoshino Sayaka, also appeared in *Maborosi* (as the protagonist when she was a child). More significant recurrences may be found in the use of an aural memory cue: the “ding ding” of the bell that Bundo in *After Life* heard whenever the young woman he loved was near, recalling the bicycle bell that Yumiko gave her husband Ikuo in *Maborosi*, which is the only thing she can take with him after his horrendous suicide. Similarly, in a reversal of the pattern in *Maborosi*, the man who did not commit suicide in *After Life* because suddenly he was attracted by the moonlight playing across a train is the happy reversal of the mysterious light (*maborosi no hikari*, which is this film’s Japanese title) that tragically attracted Ikuo to his death.

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Jonathan Ellis reports that “Kore-eda explained that his initial intention was to provide “a ‘history’ of modern Japan from the Kanto earthquake in 1923 through the war and the post-war ‘economic miracle’ right up through the present. [...]” (35) Though Kore-eda pretty much abandoned so rigid a structure, Ellis sees a strong historical and political dimension to the film. He uncovers an allusion to the A-bomb in the film’s English title, *After Life*, while noting that it is perhaps no accident that some of the most moving scenes in the film “relate to the aftermath of World War II, when the Japanese veterans remember the struggle to get home” (35). Perhaps even the gentle hint Shiori gives Kanako that she perhaps might find a better memory than a day at Disneyland qualifies as a cultural swipe at globalism. Indeed, a more detailed teasing out of these motifs will show that Kore-eda does have something in mind regarding the sweep of 20th-century Japanese history.

The oldest of the newly deceased finds her favored memory in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake, which struck Japan on September 1, 1923. In the earthquake and its aftermath of aftershocks and fires, an estimated 140,000 people died. In addition, fears of civil unrest led to the summary executions of known radicals and anarchists and amidst rumors of Koreans (*Chosenjin*) poisoning wells and fomenting rebellion, vigilante groups hunted down and killed hundreds (perhaps thousands) of Koreans and Japanese of Korean

descent. These so-called “Korean riots” are part of the recollections of the woman who finds her eternal resting place in her memory of eating rice balls and swinging from trees in a bamboo grove shortly after the giant quake. Yet in recalling not just the earthquake, but the killing of Koreans in the trauma of the earthquake, Kore-eda deftly brings up not just the Great Kanto Earthquake and the anti-Korean riots, but a whole history of Korean subjugation and discrimination in Japan. Similarly, in recounting his story of surrendering to the Americans and being treated kindly, the old veteran of the Pacific War implies the kindness and humanity of American soldiers during the war and the Occupation. The goodwill toward Americans that many Japanese felt after World War II may be slowly fading, but Kore-eda, born in 1962, seems to recall those pro-American sentiments in this dynamic and moving manner.

In searching through his life Watanabe watches videos that remind him, and us, of the political activism of postwar Japanese youth—youngsters who vowed to change the system, to refuse to live lives of quiet desperation. But in the course of marrying, working, etc., those political ideals typically fell by the wayside as they did for Watanabe and as they did for the majority of Japanese youth once they settled into these routines. And the routines they settled into were those made possible by the “economic miracle,” Japan’s emergence as a global economic power, achieved on the weary backs of white-collar workers slaving in manufacturing and government jobs for their entire adult lives—the permanent employment that trapped Watanabe, as he ruefully recognizes.

The macro-history of Japan impacts the micro-history, of course, and the economic miracle that would eventually convince the culturally imperialist Walt Disney Company to open up (and be successful with) Tokyo Disneyland would lead to the treasured memories of numerous teenage girls, at least until Shiori convinces Kanako otherwise. Thus, Kore-eda’s allusions to the Great Kanto Earthquake, World War II, the economic miracle, Tokyo Disneyland, and the like sketch in a picture of the last seventy-five years of Japanese history, but not at the expense of his ultimate aim of showing how people live their lives within and among these events, not necessarily or primarily simply because of them.

If Kore-eda did abandon his attempts to relate the history of modern Japan through this film, he nevertheless manages to

demonstrate the continuity of traditional Japanese culture in the lives of Japanese people today. Here one has in mind the nature and contents of the memories the newly deceased wish to preserve—the quality and character of the events and imagery they cling to. In so many of the memories of the deceased and the actions of the counselors we see the legacy of traditional Japanese art and aesthetics. Most obviously, we may point to the character of Nishimura—the almost silent old lady who seems interested solely in flowers and the seasons. The first time we see her, in fact, she says nothing, and when she finally does speak it is to comment on how lovely the flowers in the garden must look in spring. When Kawashima asks if she was ever married, she can only almost imperceptibly shake her head, and we take it that Kawashima is at a loss for further questions when he asks her, then, if she ever had children (she nods “no”) and then if she ever had grandchildren! The film is often lighthearted, but perhaps never as subtly as here. Yet she does not seem sad or pathetic in her loneliness as her memory of watching cherry blossoms fall allows her and us to savor both the sadness of her life and the sweetness of her memory. This “sweet sadness” is called in Japanese *mono no aware*, and for many it is the most characteristic of all Japanese moods. And cherry blossoms are most prized in Japan (indeed may be something of a cliché, but nevertheless true for all that) precisely for their ability to bring forth this sweet sadness, an appreciation of life’s brevity and evanescence. They bloom in early spring, but last only for a few short days. Nishimura comes to bond with Counselor Kawashima for his appreciation of flowers and the seasons (he named his daughter Sakurako—after the word for cherry blossom in Japanese), and for his acts of kindness and sympathy for her. Just before she passes on, she gives him a bag of the (paper) cherry blossoms that constitute her memory.

Flowers and seasonal imagery are the backbones of such traditional Japanese arts as haiku and landscape painting, and *After Life* abounds with these devices beyond the clichéd cherry blossoms. The bamboo grove in which the old lady sought shelter is another traditional motif of Japanese art—bamboo signifies longevity and good luck and it appears in numerous scroll and screen paintings. A counselor remembers snow in the mountains as his earliest childhood memory, while both snow and the moon (another nature motif much favored in art and poetry) are important motifs in the week-long

structure of the film itself. Mr. Bundo claims that his earliest memory is from when he was only six months old: it is of being surrounded by his family amidst the dwindling light of autumn. The hot summer breeze whilst riding the tram constitutes the core of another memory. And if the counselors do not actually practice tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*, another of Japan's most vaunted of traditional arts), they sure do make much of their tea, whether the Earl Grey that Sugie serves Kawashima or the hoji tea of Kawashima's treasured memory.

Traditional aesthetics of a different sort are implicated by Mr. Shoda, who constantly talks about sex and his experiences in the pleasure quarters. He sketches in a picture of this life much closer to the traditional world of geisha and courtesans (the world of *ukiyo-e*, the pictures of the floating world immortalized in woodblock prints) than the doubtless more realistic, seedy world of streetwalkers and hustlers. The pleasures of sex are often intimately linked to the pleasures of eating, so it may be no surprise that Mr. Shoda ultimately opts for a memory of eating properly prepared rice porridge for his eternal dwelling place rather than an adventure in the pleasure quarters.

Kore-eda's sense of a history of Japan and a run-through of traditional Japanese aesthetics extends in interesting ways to the manner in which he highlights the history and aesthetics of Japanese cinema. In particular, no accounting of *After Life* would be complete without acknowledging the manner in which the younger director pays both homage and tribute to the films of Ozu Yasujiro and Kurosawa Akira.

In my essay, "The Imagination of the Transcendent: Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Maborosi* (1995)," I go to some length to compare that film with the work of Ozu Yasujiro. Of course, Ozu occupies a pride of place in the history of Japanese film, and his influence not only on Japanese cinema but on cinema worldwide can hardly be overstated. Yet one should be leery of seeing "Ozu" any time a couple reminisces, a family sits on tatami eating dinner, or someone says, "isn't it a nice day!" Still, the stylistic and thematic hand of Ozu is easily and importantly seen in *After Life* in the story of what we may take to be the central plot of the film, Watanabe's struggles to find a satisfactory memory and his subsequent impact on Mochizuki. In many of Ozu's films, e.g., *Late Autumn* (*Banshun*, 1949) and *An Autumn Afternoon* (*Samma no aji*, 1962), a couple dispassionately marries after agreeing to an *omiaï* (a meeting to discuss marriage). In *After Life*, Watanabe

tells Mochizuki that he had an *omiai* marriage—something he claims is rare nowadays, but was common among his generation. We see, courtesy of the videotape, the awkward *omiai* between Watanabe and Kyoko, where they discuss movies—something common in Ozu's films, too, where characters often refer to American movies and movie stars. The next videotape scene between them is classic Ozu, a straight-on shot from Ozu's vaunted "tatami-level" (a shot taken from a few inches off the floor of the traditional Japanese room, covered by tatami—woven straw floor matting). The flatness of the image, the straight-on angle, and the wife's entrance and exit from the side seem bound to make us recall Ozu's preferred method for shooting interiors. And the very ordinariness of the conversation, what might be called the "lack of action," is a typical strategy of Ozu's for building his theme of quotidian moments comprising the ultimate meaning of life.

Despite all this, the moment that truly recalls Ozu, where Ozu's most profound themes lend poignancy and depth to Kore-eda's film, comes when Watanabe finds the memory he wants to retain: he and his wife sitting on a park bench, playfully arguing about Watanabe's supposed love of movies. After one day in which they went to the movies together, he vows to take her to the movies once a week, imagining that "we certainly have plenty of time" to see more films together. In fact, that was the first and last time they went to the movies together. They didn't have more time—she died shortly thereafter. But it is not the irony or pathos of this comment that concerns Kore-eda. Rather it is the memory of what seems to be an ordinary day that Watanabe wants to retain, a day in which he and his wife simply sat together in peace and contentment. Watanabe's belief that he led a "so-so" life is, in one sense, quite true. Like the old couple in Ozu's masterpiece, *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953), their life was ordinary, average—what made it worth living was precisely the day-to-day existence of people making the most out of the life they have been given.

Yet the life people are given is often filled with sadness and loss. Ozu recognizes that such loss or sadness must be overcome, for life must go on. In *Tokyo Story*, Noriko is a young widow, struggling to make ends meet. In *Late Spring* and *Late Autumn*, the soon-to-be thirty-year-old daughters do not wish to leave their widowed parent and marry someone who is, essentially, a stranger, forced in essence to leave a happy and satisfying life behind. Some of the same spirit

infuses the scenes with Watanabe and his feelings about his marriage to Kyoko. Watanabe realizes that Mochizuki was his wife's fiancé before they met and that Mochizuki had died in the war. Indeed, Kyoko had visited Mochizuki's grave annually. Watanabe's sense of their "passionless" marriage is basically right, with Kyoko forever pining for a lost love and Watanabe always knowing that he was, at best, a second choice. Yet he made a life with Kyoko, a life he finally understands was satisfying and whole, a life whose essence he can take with him into eternity in the memory of a playful conversation on a park bench.

Ozu is not the only director of the classical Japanese cinema whom Kore-eda had in mind with his far-reaching themes and techniques here. One may also clearly detect the presence of Kurosawa Akira, especially *Rashomon* (1950). The most famous film ever made about the relativity of truth and the inability of people to know the difference between fact and fiction when their own actions and emotions are on the line, *Rashomon* appears interlaced throughout *After Life*. Kore-eda himself claims that "human emotions are the sparks that fly when 'truth' and 'fiction' collide" (DVD Special Features). Might Kore-eda also have in mind Kurosawa's masterful *Ikiru* (1952) in choosing the name Watanabe for the man who lived a life of bureaucratic ordinariness? A man who once had greater dreams but who was worn down, simply, by the years of living? Kurosawa's film is a moving study of a man who comes to learn the meaning of his life in a heroic act of perseverance, simply fighting the bureaucracy of the postwar civil service in order to have a swamp drained and a playground built on the site. No samurai warriors here, just an ordinary man living in ordinary, if difficult, times who comes to heroism through helping others. Kore-eda is less concerned with what his characters did in life than with their ability to find that one moment, whatever it is, that gives that life meaning now. The Watanabe of *Ikiru* found that meaning just before his death in his crusade to get a park built; the Watanabe of *After Life* finds his meaning just after his death in the recognition that his "so-so life" had, literally, its wonderful moments. Both men named Watanabe lived so-so lives, as do most of us—it was their good fortune to find life's purpose, as must we all. Through a deft commingling of Japanese history and its impact on individual lives, a rehearsal of traditional Japanese aesthetics, a homage to two of Japan's past cinematic masters, and deft genre-blending, Kore-eda

manages to paint at once a complex yet deceptively simple view of human life.

(v)

Appendix: Three Key Scenes

1) Monday [4:20-9:02]

This scene, part of the first full day, demonstrates Kore-eda's documentary, interview style, while at the same time it introduces the audience to the dramatic structure of the film. Here the newly dead, along with the audience, learn the rules, as it were, of the way-station: that the clients have three days to select a memory and that the memory will then be filmed. This information is delivered in dialogue that carries across individual cuts, thus creating a deceptive continuity. In other words, in one shot a counselor offers a bit of information, and the next bit of information is delivered by another counselor in a different cut. Thus the scene is temporally continuous (or even simultaneous) despite different individual spaces.

More importantly, Kore-eda's interview-style that lets characters be seen as they speak for themselves is introduced here. As an old lady enters the room and hangs up her coat, she is told to take a seat across the table from two counselors. We get a shot of the seat itself as she enters the frame. Thus it is the seat that we notice, the seat, so to speak, that all the newly dead will occupy. We then get a side view of the counselors and the client; the next cut is to a front view of another client, followed by a side view. When the next cut gives us a front view of yet another client, Kore-eda has thus already established that the newly dead are having the rules of this way-station explained to them by counselors and thus, following this shot, he need not give us these side angles any longer. And indeed he does not, for what follows from this are fourteen more straight-on head shots of fourteen different clients, until the interviews are concluded. And he concludes this sequence in the exact manner in which he opened it: a front view followed by a side view of one of the newly dead.

Within this scene, lasting a bit under five minutes, he offers up nineteen shots, creating an average shot length of fifteen seconds—a bit on the long side for a contemporary film. But more to the point, Kore-eda varies the shot lengths here, with shots as short as four seconds and as long as 45 seconds. Thus the rhythm of this scene is more varied—a five-shot sequence within the scene has an average shot length of five seconds, quite typical of mainstream movies, but

toward the end of the sequence he has individual shots of 19, 40, and 45 seconds. This is an interesting strategy, for within what amounts to the first key sequence of the film—where we are searching for narrative information (we ask: What is going on here?)—Kore-eda also offers up stylistic and generic conundrums, too—what kind of film is this, and what will it look like?

2) *Friday* (1:18.55 – 1:27)

After Life is not only reflective of Kore-eda's background in documentary filmmaking, but also his interest in the tricks of the trade of theatrical movies. In this scene, the memories of certain of the newly dead whom we have come to know are being recreated. While the entire scene shows how many memories are committed to celluloid, the early moments are most interesting, for here we see how, in essence, they are "faked." Of particular interest are the memories of cherry blossoms falling, flying through clouds, and riding the streetcar on a hot summer day.

Kore-eda introduces us to the concept of cinematic "trickery" through the cherry blossom memories of the old lady, Nishimura. We see her sitting next to Satoru on a bench and what we take to be cherry blossoms begin to fall. But it is then revealed that, in fact, the blossoms are merely pink paper cutouts that fall because other counselors slightly shake baskets of them from above. A simple trick, no doubt, but in another cinematic context one that would go unnoticed and seem to be "really" cherry blossoms falling lightly from above.

Slightly more complex is the recreation of the fond Cessna flight. Again, Kore-eda lets us in on the tricks. The plane is on the ground; painted backdrops recreate the sky. Cotton balls create clouds hanging in the sky, and steam blown through a fan gives the pilot the feeling that he is moving through the skies in his private plane, forever.

The most complex recreation is a youthful memory of a streetcar trip. A train car sits on blocks and the sensation of movement may be created when the counselors rock the car from the outside. The quality of summer light is a bit trickier, and so the lights shining into the car must be adjusted. A fan creates the illusion of the breeze, and the summer heat that creates that sheen of light sweat on weary travelers is applied by a spray of water. A cassette creates the sounds of the trolley, while reflectors outside, gently waved by yet other

counselors, further help the sensation of movement and of the summer sun shining eternally on the young boy's magical trip through eternity.

The point is not to show how easily such filmic realities can be created, but how much power such images actually have, how they not only reproduce the memories of these newly dead, but how, in essence, such cinematic images make powerful memories for audiences, like us.

3) Saturday (1:35-1:41)

Mochizuki's guilt over his dealings with Watanabe comes to a head when the older man has finally chosen his memory of sitting on a bench with his wife. (Notice the number of times throughout the film that characters, particularly Watanabe and Mochizuki, sit on a steel bench.) Mochizuki learns, to his surprise, that Watanabe's wife, whom he earlier realized was his former fiancée, chose a memory of sitting on a park bench with him for her eternal memory. Shiori and Mochizuki find the videotape of that part of her life—a moment from August 3, 1943 before the young man went to war and was killed. The economy of means and the understated implications are most impressive in this short sequence.

Shiori goes to what amounts to a film library and digs out Watanabe Kyoko's filmed memory. As they watch it, so, too, do we. It consists of only three brief shots. In the first, two people seen from the rear sit on a park bench with a patently unrealistic-looking sky in the background. (We are thus reminded of the earlier making-of-the-memories scene where locales are recreated for their mood, not their realism.) Next is a profile shot of an older Kyoko looking over at the person sitting next to her. The third and final shot is of a man's folded hands. Perhaps confused or wishing further validation of the identity of the other person on the bench, the two counselors recover the videotape of Kyoko's life from which the memory was selected. In this shot, a single-take from the front, we see Mochizuki and a young Kyoko sitting on the bench; we may notice that the young man has his hands folded. Thus it is clear that Kyoko did indeed choose her eternal moment to be one in which she sits next to Mochizuki, and not her husband, who chose a memory of the two of them sitting on that very same bench. Yet what might perhaps go unremarked in this series of shots is that it was an older Kyoko who sat next to the young Mochizuki and not Kyoko as she was in the actual moment in which the memory was made. It seems, then, that there might indeed be some ambiguity over who is sitting next to her, or it might be a very

complex memory which has been filmed, in which an older Kyoko visited that very same park bench and reminisced to herself about the meeting there years ago. Food for thought.

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