

Portfolio submission

JAP1501 – *Japan's politics and society*

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Assignment: *What elements of Japanese society are visible in contemporary Japanese cinema? Discuss with examples from a recent (1990s – 2000s) Japanese film.*



Coming to Terms: An Elegy of Remembrance - *Style and Sociology in Hirokazu Kore-eda's After Life (1998)*

My goal ... was to record the wonderful things unfolding before me on location and on set ... I wanted so-called real life to encounter the artifice of film. I was interested in the emotions that would arise from that collision.¹

Ultimately, we end up turning memories into our own images.²

1. Introduction

Ultimately, there is seldom something new to say about the cinema of Japan as an alternative form of filmic style and its original aesthetic cultural references. But once in a while there arrives a new artiste or *auteur* on the scene, which becomes an exponent for a transformation of that style, and makes the whole topic interesting again. The filmmaker Hirokazu Kore-eda might represent such a character; his film *After Life* (1998) – among others – exemplifying that trend.³ By merging fiction and documentary through photogenic *ostranenie*,⁴ this new wave of contemporary Japanese films reflects the quotidian of Japanese everyday life.

Commenting upon this field is no easy feat. Rather, as Ann E. Kaplan puts it: “Cross-cultural analysis, we know, is difficult – fraught with danger. We are forced to read works produced by the Other through the constraints of our own framework [and] ideologies.” (1992:142). Also, “any understanding and appreciation of Kore-eda Hirokazu’s [films] ... must also take into account a particular intertext: the films of Ozu Yasujirō.” (Desser 2007:273). Kore-eda’s relation to Ozu is seen through a multitude of themes (hopelessness, loss, trauma, alienation, memory – but still the odd and quiet joy), styles (long takes, ‘empty’ shots, de-dramatized narratives), and stories (daily life incidents, the *shomin-geki*). Many regard Ozu’s style as representative for an approach unique for Japan’s film culture and, as such, society.⁵

My thesis is that the style and content of Kore-eda’s films invokes and suggests the uniqueness of traditional Japanese cultural aesthetics and contemporary societal thematics. I will probe into this statement during this essay, illuminating issues of filmic style in *After Life*; analysing the content of the film and trying to make reasonable assertions about its relation to Japanese society. How can visual style relate to sociology? I hold any given culture’s expression as unique for the society that culture grew out from. Moreover, in Kore-eda’s film, the sociological can be seen in its themes and the content visually depicted (symbolism, events and characterization). Also, the message, or the essence of the film, I find global in nature, but national in form (Grønning 2005:147-48).

First, with Kaplan in mind, I will try to conduct a short close reading of some of the significant elements in *After Life*. Then I will see how the content of the film can relate to

elements of Japan's society. I will make some comparisons with Kore-eda's *Maborosi* (1995) and *Nobody Knows* (2004) to highlight noteworthy moments within *After Life*. Thirdly, I will be taking a brief look at how the film fits within the symbolism and aesthetics of the traditional Japanese Arts and Cinema before ending the paper by emphasising the kernel issues raised, and trying to place *After Life* in a greater context: Art as an expression of society.

2. Memories Kept: The Bureaucracy of Death (*a synopsis*)

*After Life*⁶ creates a spin on the well-worn depicted journey souls make after their recent deaths. Inside a colourless, decaying school building – a way station between earth and heaven in the oddly familiar form of a social services agency – there is an evocative shot of the newly departed arriving out of a 'white light', similar to a shot Kore-eda made in *Maborosi*, "from within the darkness toward the light" as David Desser puts it (2007:276). Only temple bells can be heard. Just previously, the film opens with a documentary-like hand held camera following two of the 'counsellors' up a flight of stairs, sharing stories of last week's escapades and troubles in helping their 'clients' making the choice. What choice is that? Within the following seven days, we see the events mainly through the eyes of two caseworkers, trainee Shiori (Erika Oda) and her mentor Mochizuki (Arata), as they and their colleagues try to help twenty-two people choose and ultimately recreate on film (assisted by a staff of film technicians) their most cherished experience and beloved memory to be relived and appreciated for all eternity – their only link to the past.

With the concept of the way station explained – through rough cutting of the clients sitting and sharing their memories in one of the three counsellor rooms⁷, filmed statically and symmetrically in flat 90° compositions similar to police 'mug shots' (Faldalen 2006 URL) – the film furthermore elaborates on the souls *unable* to make such a choice, and it is revealed to us that Mochizuki and the other counsellors themselves have suffered such a destiny. Everybody we see is deceased. Their final goal the same: To see their chosen memories screened to them and then evaporate into Elysium. The old Mr. Watanabe (Taketoshi Naitō) seemingly *cannot* find a single memory worthy of remembrance; the young Iseya *will not* choose as his young mind determines that not making a choice can also be considered a form of responsibility – both characters sharing an affinity with Mochizuki.⁸ Mr. Watanabe is given 71 reference videocassettes, one for every lived year, to help him pick out a moment of glory. Through the inspection of these grainy tapes, Mochizuki understands that Mr. Watanabe married a lady from his past, Kyoko (Kyōko Kagawa), who Mochizuki himself was engaged

to before he was killed in the War. Shiori, sadly enticed by Mochizuki's regret, helps him find the chosen memory of Kyoko in the company's archive. When he sees that he himself was a part of her most beloved memory, he lets the staff help him, after fifty-three years of waiting, film his final remembrance: He sitting alone on the park bench where he shared Kyoko's most desired moment, looking directly at his colleagues on the other side of the camera. With this, Kore-eda seems to imply that without memory, you have no identity: "I have a very powerful memory of fear, thinking that people forget everything just before they die" (Bear 1999 URL). But life (and death) can still be rewarding if you realize that you've become an important part of someone else's memory and identity. Thus, letting you in the end recapture 'yourself', as it were.

I wanted to give Shiori a clue to understanding that not everything precious about her resides simply in herself. When she sees, through the film [Mochizuki] left behind, that she herself is a precious part of someone else's life, she understands and values her own life differently and might be able to grow from there (ibid).

The spectacle of documentarist film production is contrasted with the narrative and visual space of the rural landscape and dilapidated building, "the focus on rooms recently emptied of their subjects" (Desser 2007:280),⁹ the seasonal change between autumn and winter, and the bamboo forest surroundings.¹⁰ The drama is restricted through a slow, thoughtful and meditative reductionism. The feelings of loss and regret only suggested. Most of the souls revel in their remembrance – the possibility of choosing their fondest memory and seeing it re-enacted on film (both in the production and during the 'final' showing) – seemingly unaffected that they are dead; even anticipating it and coming to terms with the naturalness of it in a lively way. Similar to *Maborosi*, Kore-eda emphasises that "I thought I'd try to limit the expression of emotion, to create a different kind of emotional expression that didn't depend on close-ups ... to communicate the character's feelings" (Ibid: 277).¹¹ Also, quoting Roger Ebert: "There are many long shots and few close-ups; the camera does not move, but regards" (ibid: 280). No artistry or overwhelming stylistics is used. Moreover, through the characters of Iseya (above quote) and Mr. Watanabe, Kore-eda does not keep himself from implying the inherent organicism of memories: The difference between what we remember and what we create. The metafilmic aspect thus manifests this thought, and in the end, through its documentary style, arguably makes the improbable concept of the way station believable (Faldalen 2006 URL).

Desser, in discussing *Maborosi* – a film likewise treating regret, loss and memory, in which a widow, Yumiko (Makiko Esum), must come to terms with the evidently unexplained suicide of her husband – asserts that Kore-eda, like Ozu, "tends to elide certain dramatic

moments in a film – refuses, that is, to move his narration by a series of climaxes,” and that he too “skips over those moments that structure mainstream films” (Desser 2007:281). According to Desser,

pathos is not what [they are] after. ... What is important for the filmmaker is Yumiko’s ultimate ability to overcome that loss, live with that loss, live again. ... What we need to know is that Yumiko can overcome, transcend, this enigma, this mystery, and that she can do so precisely by investing herself in the dailiness of life. She lives not for the high and lows, but for the moments in between, the only moments we see (ibid 282-3).

What does this say about picking the ‘high’ moment in one’s life when one dies, as the conditional element Kore-eda structure *After Life* around? We see, however, that the moments the twenty-two clients choose are not really high moments at all, but arguably quotidian moments. In Yumiko’s management to overcome, to transcend her grief, I think we are, as Ebert pointed out, not so much examining as regarding her “gradual turn to an acceptance of life” through the use of the quotidian (ibid: 277). In the same way we are regarding Mochizuki’s gradual turn to an acceptance of death: The silent meditation of sitting on a park bench making all the difference in the world.

3. The Faction Film: Common Fates and the Society

Some of the human aspect of Japanese society, how Japanese see and expresses themselves, is in *After Life* dexterously melded into the format of the fiction film. *After Life* transforms many Japanese referential codes, and in the way the film is created, both stylistically and thematically, places its open-ended and spontaneous elements in a space between fact – or documentary¹² – and fiction. It becomes a sort of faction film (Faldalen 2006 URL). Arguably, this creates a new form of reality, closer to real life (insomuch as it is considered ‘Japanese’ life). Cleo Cacoulodis observes that the essential tool *After Life* utilises to give it such a factual immediacy is its “deliberately mundane, documentary-looking surface ... – no glossy imagery or wispy music, mostly hand-held camerawork – and [its] use of both professionals and non-actors” (2005 URL). Kore-eda himself confirms this notion:

When you make a documentary you have to adapt to what reality imposes upon you. ... With regards to fiction, I used to think that documentary-style filmmaking was impossible because everything is already set down in the screenplay. ... I wanted to catch what came from the actors, which meant doing away with storyboards and always using handheld cameras. ... I've tried to use naturalism to search for [that] reality (Sato 2004 URL).

In *Distance* (2001), Kore-eda focused on an ensemble of four who all had relatives becoming victims of an Aum-like cult’s massacre, and in *Nobody Knows* – which was inspired by a real incident of child abandonment in Tokyo, for which Kore-eda used as documentary eye focusing on the viewpoint of the children – Adam Cambell notes that Kore-eda “With sights, sounds ... and even smells ... builds up a series of references to the wealth of sensations that

make up everyday Japanese family life” (2005 URL). Kore-eda employs common humans and common fates in his films. The stories from *After Life* grew out from almost 500 video interviews with ordinary Japanese (as well as personal reminiscence from the film’s professionals), whereas the thirteen most memorable amateurs were picked out to appear as themselves and tell their own stories in the film (Schiling 2000 URL, Bear 1999 URL). “I did not control what they said or give them lines to read;” asserts Kore-eda, “they told their own stories, in their own time and in their own words, and I recorded them on film” (Bearl 1999 URL). By even showing them in the film in a video interview fashion – telling their stories directly to the camera in an engaging and fascinating affection – Kore-eda achieves a form of reality, honesty and humour that seldom appears from films with prepared scripts (Schiling 2000 URL). Mainstream films would have unquestionably exploited flashback devices in this instance,¹³ but Kore-eda keeps his visual composition to the portraiture, filming all the characters in a set position,¹⁴ in tone with Tadao Satō’s emphasis on “the attitude and posture of the subjects, the orderly, almost geometrical sense of form” of portraits in Japanese traditional Arts and Cinema (1994:175). By this ‘show-not-tell’ essence of what is portrayed, mood rather than mimesis is arguably emphasised (Faldalen 2006 URL).

As a further consequence of the majority of the actor’s being amateurs, and that the film consists of memories from real life incidents – what they have to say about life and society in Japan becomes quite relevant. Debatably, at its more abstract, *After Life* is pure fantasy fiction in that obvious deceased spirits walk around at a way station between heaven and earth. But there’s still a sense of social drama – a feeling of closeness to ordinary life – to be seen: The characters that star in this tale; the symbolism, materiality and human relations contained in the content of the stories they tell; the behaviour of the protagonists; the structure of the ‘company’ and its employees that helps the dead pick out their eternal reminiscences; and the slow and silent flow of everyday life (as seen in events of one work week through the eyes of Shiori and Mochizuki). This societal thematic is arguably shown very truthful to contemporary Japanese society: There is an interesting new form of gender stratification to be observed in *After Life*. Shiori (with her subjective benevolent gaze) – as well as Yumiko (with her transcendence of sorrow) and the childish, abandoning mother in *Nobody Knows* (whose irresponsibility reflects that of parasitic singles) – can be seen as female characters in a society where the role of women is changing (Auestad in Grønning 2005). The men in the film come off as effeminate or soft; *nimaiime* type in Mizoguchian terms (Satō 1994:179). The narrative and visual landscape Kore-eda uses resemble the tamed and abstract kind that can be found in Japanese gardening, landscape painting and *ikebana* arrangement¹⁵ (Grønning 2005:48). Every

story contains elements from both mass cultures (the teenage girl choosing Disneyland ‘hot cakes’ as her perfect memory; all the old pig’s talk about love motels and discount prostitutes) and folk culture (the lady in the red dress reminiscing about pre-war dancehalls; the cherry tree blossoming that several characters remembers) (Sugimoto 2003: 245, 252, 255). On the final day, the bureau and its orchestra connote the (slightly westernized) ritualistic ceremony of a minimalist *matsuri* procession as employees and clients march toward the ‘eternal’ theatre (Grønning 2005:25). At a thematical level, the film illustrates a subject arguably among the foremost in the Japanese mentality: The Buddhist notion of a life *hereafter* (ibid: 23). Furthermore, what kind of characters and generational variations is represented in the film? There’s the elderly persons of the pre-, inter- and post-war generation, wherein we find corporate soldiers; arranged marriages; people fighting in the war against the Americans; unfaithful lovers and romantic couples; amnesiacs; those wanting to forget their past; and those keeping a nostalgic image of their junior high school youth. There is also the younger person, the prosperity and global generation, wherein we find anti-authoritarians; young boys at youth clubs; and the pilot gazing at the clouds in the air (Sugimoto 2007:73). In limbo they are all the same (so works the great democracy of death), but in real life their characters and stories paint a multifaceted society filled with both family, class and gender stratifications. On a different note, overtly political *After Life* is not. Though it can be said to make a slightly humorous remark on a sort of welfare system that even cater to the recently dead.

4. Snow and Moon, and Empty Rooms: Japanese Symbols and Visual Devices

Tadao Satō remarks that “The imagery and techniques employed in modern Japanese cinema bear a relationship to traditional culture and the arts,” in that they both “tend to be elegant, stylized, meditative, and sometimes unabashedly erotic.” He further claims that “Every Japanese artist is unconsciously influenced by the traditional aesthetics and outlooks that are an integral part of Japanese culture” (1994:165,181). While one might not necessarily agree with Satō on that, he might be spot on when it comes to *After Life*. At least, the way it tend to imitate reality – as with Japanese films in general, according to Donald Richie – makes visible its affinity with the traditional arts. The symbolic presentation is more stressed than a mimetic delineation. What is achieved is “not an imitation of outward appearance but a suggestion of inner essence, for true reality lay under the physical surface” (1994:157). In this, Thomas Rimer agrees with both Satō and Richie: “The Japanese visual heritage, in some fashion or other, informed virtually every directorial eye” (1994:150). What the narrative is concerned, for Rimer it plays a minimal role in the Japanese film – and arguably in *After Life*. The visual

vocabulary of the film contrasts the indicative with the outspoken and makes less use of the latter. Rimer stresses the primacy of the suggestive: The *appearance* of the characters, the inner *essence* and the *mood* of the story is kept in the foreground; the narrative per se, in the background. For him, plot may simply “represent the element that moves the film sequences along, but the observing eye dwells on, and learns from, the visual moment portrayed” (1994:151). What, then, does the empty images Kore-eda employ suggest – as with the establishing shot of the empty garden exterior every day? Here, his affinity with Ozu is again shown, and Kathe Geist sees the concept of emptiness¹⁶ as a positive or dramatic compositional tool more or less unique for Japanese film:

Ozu’s use of empty space ... is not confined to the single shot, but expands into the edited sequence ... The empty shot is not, of course, completely empty, but in terms of classical film style, it is empty of reference; ... these empty shots often invite the viewer to read meaning into them as much as the empty space in Japanese painting do ... [they are] used to suggest *a world lying beyond what the painter shows us* (1994:287, *emphasis added*).

This ‘Other’ world¹⁷ lying beyond what Kore-eda suggests for us, is helped envisaged by the subtle portrayal and thematical meaning of three Japanese iconic symbols: Snow, moon and cherry blossoms. Satō tells us that in the Japanese arts “snow often represents purity, purification of the heart and mind, and the will to survive” (1994:167). In the employees’ remembrance of their first memories, Mochizuki recalls that he “have this intense memory of snow.” “It was like... being surrounded by silence.” In her despair that Mochizuki is leaving, Shiori kicks and shuffles around in the freshly fallen snow, arguably destroying Satō’s symbolic value. Towards the end of the film we see a visualization of Mochizuki’s first memory: Iseya totally immersed in snow and, in contrast to Shiori, playing around in it; wilfully surviving?⁸ Moreover, the moon, according to Satō, acts often in Japanese film “as a witness who affirms the lover’s emotions ... [and] as the companion of wanderers and travellers.” Not the least that “The waxing moon is a most suitable background for these companions in misfortune, because even a sliver of moon eventually becomes a full moon” (ibid: 174-75). Shiori shares a close affinity to this symbolism. She meets, infatuated and jealous, Mochizuki looking up at the moon in a hole in the ceiling (where the janitor has placed the recently fixed ‘moon machine’), and notes first ”how terribly romantic,” before she asks: ”Who’s Kyoko?” Her boss tries to imply that Mochizuki’s decision to wander onwards can be understood by admiring the waxing and waning of the moon, which looks different only because of the angle of the light. Lastly, the ever-existent seasonal imagery of the popular cherry blossoming is for Satō “to the point of becoming a cliché.” It is also used in *After Life* as a cliché, but still a cliché uniquely Japanese: “When in full blossom the cherry evokes the

joy of springtime. The short season of the cherry blossoms suggest Buddhist notions of transience and evanescence, as well as the sorrow of parting” (ibid: 172). In *Maborosi*, Desser finds the bicycle to be an object symbolizing transience and loss, but presented and “transformed into an image of dailiness, of the quotidian” (Desser 2007:279). Are there any such objects in *After Life*? Arguably the above-mentioned cherry blossom would fit such a description, but I would rather like to stress the park bench: The two different benches – the one in Chuo park and the one in the back yard of the company building – that Iseya, the Watanabes, Shiori and Mochizuki at one time sits on: The bench that both star in Mr. Watanabe’s and Kyoko’s fondest memories, and the bench in the ‘studio’ that is transformed to represent this bench that Mochizuki chooses to re-enact his picked memory.

5. Shot Consciousness: Alternative Aesthetics and Transcendental style

Teshome Gabriel lists a number of non-western stylistically conventions that arguably corresponds well with the visual mode of production in Kore-eda’s film (Faldalen 2006 URL). The utilization of light is reduced to the minimal¹⁸ – only natural light is used as an active tool; one is little interested in facial close-ups as an expression for psychological realism (there is hardly any in of these shots to be seen in *After Life*); the camera is hand held – even in static shots; the film is shot on location (the ‘studio’ that is used in *After Life*’s narrative can be seen as a ironic remark on the studio system, including the portrayal of the ‘memory’ films’ technical staff); and amateur actors make up most of the film, who have a tendency to look straight into the camera and thus directly into the eyes of the audience. Like *After Life*, non-western films focuses on silence in the diegesis, where camera panning replaces editing – these two formal tools together providing less rhythm and less flow. In the exceptional case of Japanese film, close-ups (of hands, objects) are little used, and the film is read from right to left – the same is true for *After Life* (Gabriel 2000:310-313).

In discussing *Maborosi*, Desser points out that Kore-eda’s “intertextual dialogue with Ozu’s cinema represents the younger director’s effort to highlight the themes of loss, trauma and memory through the stylistic and narrative structure that enabled Ozu similarly to deal with timeless and transcendental issues” (Desser 2007:273). Reading *After Life* also as a deliberation on transcendental issues might prove useful. In his *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader explains that

Transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence; it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psychologism, romanticism, expressionism, impressionism, and, finally, rationalism ... To the transcendental artists these conventional interpretations of reality are emotional and rational constructs devised by man to dilute and explain away the transcendental (1972: 8-11)

According to him, the transcendental filmmaker should focus on: “The everyday: a meticulous representation of the full, banal commonplaces of everyday living;” “Disparity: an actual potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action;” “Stasis: a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity, but transcends it” (ibid: 39,42,49). Disparity is seen as an inability to reconcile one self with loss, or inner turmoil; the impossible environment or landscape the characters find themselves in. That might describe Yumiko in *Maborosi* sufficiently, though in *After Life*, it is not the ‘frozen view of life’ that is transcending the discrepancy of life but the characters themselves and the restoration of *past* events of ‘stasis’ that makes them rise above the disparity of a lifetime in limbo. This does not conform to everybody – least of all the employees of the company (here an image of the blind leading the blind comes to mind). Additionally, Dessler assert that “the focus is on ‘dailiness’ as highlighted previously in Ozu’s films and extended further [in *Maborosi*] ... Thus the film may conclude with stasis, a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity, but transcends it. ... [It] brings his film to a peaceful, leisurely close ... a still-life, a classic coda, a shot from within” (2007:279-280). The last image of Shiori who practices for and anticipates the first interview as a senior counsellor might be that still-life coda; the knock on the door and the sudden fade to black when she quickly raises her head, about to say “come in,” that shot from within.

6. Concluding points: Meta Film and Post-Modern Reality

In the introduction I hinted towards *After Life* being a transformation of the ‘classical’ Japanese film, in that it is influenced both consciously and subconsciously by the traditional arts’ aesthetic cultural, symbolical and cinematal references,¹⁹ but that it uses this heritage to discuss contemporary societal issues, thus melding the old and the new into a fruitful result. Its content – the loss, regret and memory of common fates in the society – is not only hidden in its style, it dictates the way the film is presented. Kore-eda’s documentary method subtly mirrors some of the so-called ‘pictocentric’ culture of Japan. Nowadays, the complete life on everyone can be shared on the super-information highway of the three ‘w’, but for three or four decades every moment of Japanese existence could be saved on grainy home videos. With *After Life*, Kore-eda makes a remark on this technology and the recording-obsession of the Japanese society. He also reminds us, with the re-enactment of the twenty-two clients’ memories, that the films we see today grew out from someone’s mind; someone’s fantasy; even someone’s memories. The videocassette²⁰ in *After Life* works as catalysts for the little narrative that exist. Mr. Watanabe sees himself as young and gets an outer perspective of his

life (making him understand that he had lived a whole life, nothing more, nothing less). Seeing Kyoko on film readies Mochizuki to make a choice as well.

After Life may be seen as a particular strand of Japanese ‘art’ film well received at international film festivals, but not necessarily (as a result) receiving similar acclaim and wide theatrical distribution on home turf, and as such marginal to the paradigmatic tendency of contemporary Japanese films popular within Japan (Desser 2007:274). In light of this, it is problematic to use Kore-eda and even Ozu as an example of modern Japanese films’ relation to modern society. On the one hand, marginal films are necessarily marginal in its portrayal of characters, moods and messages. Also, our reading of Ozu’s and Kore-eda’s films might say more about how we wish to perceive the Japanese (or ultimately, how they wish to portray themselves) than what the reality of Japan’s society dictates. On the other, the documentarist style might weigh up for that, and *After Life* might be considered a typical example of Japanese aesthetics (and Ozu’s style) transformed into a contemporary expression – a reductionist way to show pragmatic or simple conceptual points through pleasurable visual images. Furthermore, Kore-eda calls his impetus for making these films “a feeling of lack of certainty about anything – a universal undefined feeling of loss (ibid: 276). Arguably, this represents the complexity of post-modern Japan’s society to the fullest, with its economic, and thus material crisis; the unending growth of elders in society; the global cynicism of capitalism; and the clash of civilizations, both rural and urban.

Again, Kore-eda’s ultimate goal, as he points out, is that “Not everything precious about us simply resides in ourselves. ... When we see that we are a precious part of someone else’s life, we value our own life differently” (Cacoulidis 2005 URL). I would to a certain extent agree with Mark Schiling, who ends his 1999 retrospect of Kore-eda’s film by implicating it in a possible fulfilling reading for western audiences as well: “In assembling these memories into a cinematic montage, Kore-eda creates an intimate human reality that has nothing to do with New Age wish-fulfilment, and everything to do with the essence of who we are and the meaning of where we’ve been” (Schiling 2000). Its story might speak to us all, as well as ‘the Other’ in Kaplan’s term, but it is within the reference framework of the Japanese society that the film works. In the end, *After Life* embodies that kind of Japanese films that are “national stories and global fables” (Grønning 2005:147-48, my translation).

As such, it is in my opinion representative for a post-modern Japanese sociology insomuch as it embodies, adapts and surpasses the long-established arts to formally, visually and stylistically convey the content of the film; and that it deliberates on questions of modern (arguably both transient and transcendent) substance – life and death in Japan today.

¹ Kore-eda quoted in Bear 1999 (URL).

² A line uttered by Yusuke Iseya (playing himself) in *After Life*, transcribed from the English subtitles. All following transcribed excerpts from the film's dialogue will not be referenced.

³ I am much indebted to Jon Inge Faldalen's 2006 analysis of Kore-eda's film as a source of inspiration (URL). Many of his observations on *After Life* intersect with mine. However, I will cite his analysis only whenever a point is borrowed from an observation particularly or exclusively made in his text. As such, I will not treat or quote his essay as other academically works cited in my paper.

⁴ 'Defamiliarization', to see anew – a tool often explored by documentaries: See Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Device" (1917).

⁵ The discussion of seeing through western eyes Ozu (or Kenji Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa for that matter) as representative for Japanese paradigmatic filmic style – as inherent in the way he is used in western university syllabuses and western books as a classic example of Japanese moviemaking style – is contradicted by Hasumi Shigehiko, among other Japanese scholars, who (rightfully) insists that Ozu was not 'the most Japanese of Japanese directors'. (Desser 2007:281). Kathe Geist feels that although Ozu breaks with tradition, and differs from the more popular filmmakers of his day, his influence appears to be more "Japanese and traditional than Western and modern," and ultimately "Ozu was flaunting conventional film style while imitating traditional Japanese pictorial style" (1994:287,297). This debate, however, is too big to be faithfully reproduced in this paper. Rather, Ozu, because of their slight familiarity, will be used as a working tool and point of departure for comparing Kore-eda's film with that of Japanese cinema in general.

⁶ One would be hard-pressed not to agree with with Kore-eda, who "wisely chose to rename his film for its overseas releases in order to avoid associations with Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)" (Mes and Sharp 2005:212). But the Japanese title, *Wandâfuru Raijû* (katakana-ized *Wonderful Life*), is more ironic/nuanced and slightly less revealing than its English title, *After Life*, in that it points to the fact that the main focus of the film is not 'about' Limbo, or the form of purgatory the decrepit school- or social service agency-like building might represent, but rather the wonderful and joyous memories of the twenty-two subjects currently handled by the caseworkers.

⁷ The three different offices (and the private quarters) of the three different senior counsellors manifests their characteristics: The rustiness of Mochizuki's office with its simple window panels arguably mirrors the bucolic aesthetic of the books that are stacked in his room; the flowers that decorates Kawashima's (Susumu Terajima) office and room reflects his still close affinity with earth or life (and the left behind daughter); and the occidental ornament that works as centrepiece in Sugie's (Takashi Naitō) office points to his keen interest in antiquities and occidental habits like earl grey tea. Even Shiori is given a hobby, photography – in which a memory can be visually saved forever – creating a visual cue for her close link to that place, the way station, and Mochizuki.

⁸ This affinity can be further elaborated. Here are some key points: Watanabe having gotten in real life what was promised for Mochizuki; they both being 'corporate soldiers' their whole life and after life (Watanabe in a steel company, Mochizuki in the limbo/purgatory company); Iseya as a reflection of the young Watanabe (not making a mark on history in 'lived life', now taking responsibility in the 'after life'); and Iseya – for all his talk "that the re-enactment of his memory is merely a surrogate that can never replace the actual event [see opening quote], and that the caseworker's jobs are therefore completely futile (Mes and Sharp 2005:209) – finally becoming Mochizuki (taking over his work; their being of the same 'death' age; seeing him playing in the snow, immersed in silence, towards the end of the film – similar to the images of Mochizuki's first childhood memories).

⁹ Desser points out that these shots are "typical Ozu 'pillow-shot' – a transitional space empty of human characters, but which suggests their presence in their absence" (2007:282).

¹⁰ This reminds one of the nostalgically Japanese definition of *mono no aware*, which contain the sadness and fragility of life (and in this case season), which is perishable by its own nature. Also, the disparity between landscapes is further complicated by showing Shiori, when distressed by Mochizuki's inherent leaving, walking from the rural area of decaying building's surroundings through the noise of the urban city (as a ghost), in between the rustle and bustle of the masses in the shopping street or the car queue on the highway. Also, David

Desser notes that the “use of rural landscapes in contemporary films is striking for the sense of loss such landscapes already cause in their audience, given the overwhelmingly urban nature of contemporary Japanese society” (2007:276).

¹¹ For instance the central scene where Mochizuki admits to Shiori that he tends to leave: The shot is held for about four minutes; the characters situated at each end of the composition; total darkness held at bay from a small lamp. Denotative information is sacrificed to give a mood of sorrow and love through character poses, space and tone of voice (Faldalen 2006 URL).

¹² Having started his career as an assistant director at TV Man Union, Kore-eda has till this day made eight documentaries: *Lessons from a Calf* (1991), *However* (1991), *Nihonjin ni Narita Katta* (1992), *Shinshō Suketchi – Sorezoreno Miyazawa Kenji* (1993), *Yottsū no Shibu Jikoku* (1993), *Eiga ga Jidai o Utsuku Toki – Hou Hsiao Hsien to Edward Yang* (1993), *August without Him* (1994) and *Without Memory* (1997); the last one being a direct influence and source for *After Life* and strikes a familiar cord in that it deals a man with short-term memory only, making him unable to make new, long-lasting memories (Mes and Sharp 2005:207,210).

¹³ The so-called flashbacks of the memories are actually re-enacted for us in the second half of the film in a behind-the-camera or making-of sort of way. Though arguably, the grainy home videos that both Mr. Watanabe and Mochizuki look at can be deemed a flashback device. What Richie explains as Japanese arts’ “little concern for depth, for modelling, for illusionary space” might explain the absence of this tool, as well as ‘dreamlike’ camera- and narrative devices such as discontinuity shots, soft focus and image/sound disparity (1994:158).

¹⁴ See for example the images on the title page of this paper. The first is a shot of Shiori, the other of Mochizuki. The shots follow each other in quick succession (from right to left). Both have their head bent, looking down on a book. Their garb or clothes the same colour. The light is placed on the left side of both images, shadows on the right. Thus, in the first shot Mochizuki is left in the dark and in the other Shiori is illuminated. The symbolism of these shots can be even further discussed in terms of the plot: Shiori as the happy newcomer trainee, Mochizuki as her old regretful mentor (though they are depicted to be of similar age).

¹⁵ “In the Japanese garden,” Donald Richie notes, “the «natural» is not achieved until the rock is moved and the bamboo shifted. Before then, nature was not present, just as on a blank page emptiness was not present. Space is not reticulated before it is contrasted. ... In *ikebana* flower arrangement, for example, the spaces between the stems and the branches define space just as much as do the stems and branches themselves” (1994:159).

¹⁶ Or ‘*Mu*’, as it is called: “... the Taoist and Buddhist traditions of ... Japan saw the human being as merely an element in nature; they celebrated the void (*mu*) and tended to see space and time as relative and interdependent intervals (*ma*) rather than fixed measurements that could be pinned down and controlled. ... Nature rather than the human being was the dominant subject matter and ... [it] contains a lot of vacant as well as unseen spaces” (Geist 1994:284).

¹⁷ The symbol of the ‘company’ is that of two circles intertwined, rather like the infinity symbol ∞ , with the second circle slightly bent upwards and inside the first. This sign might represent the passage between the two worlds, earth and eternity, and how they relate to each other. It is also all too typical that a Japanese company – even a ‘way station’ one at that – should have a company logo.

¹⁸ Richie brings leverage to this notion with his blatantly argument that “shade and light ... have no place in traditional Japanese concepts” (1994:158). Though I think Richie is thinking of artificial light in the instance of Japanese films.

¹⁹ It should certainly be noted that the biggest influence Japanese director’s has had (as well as any country’s national film manufacture) comes from the dominance of American productions, both pre-war and inter-/post-occupation. But, “Though the direct influence of traditional Japanese art upon Japanese film may be seen as minor if the view is restricted to simple resemblance, it is vast indeed if the view is enlarged to consider the implications of a complete theory of aesthetics” (Richie 1994:162).

²⁰ The tea date between Mr. Watanabe and Kyoko, in which they talk about their interest in samurai films and European art films might be seen as a sly, metafilmic remark on Japanese Cinema’s past and present.

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