

FILM REVIEW ESSAY
'JUST CHOOSE ONE':
MEMORY AND TIME IN KORE-EDA'S
WANDAFURU RAIFU [*AFTERLIFE*] (1998)¹

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Director: Kore-eda Hirokazu

Distributor: Artistic License Films

'Let us not burden our remembrances with a heaviness that's gone.'

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (5, i, ll. 199–200).

A feature shared by cinema and psychoanalysis is the capacity that each has to utilise its own peculiar language and technical tools in order to reflect upon itself. For instance, psychoanalysis could use its understanding of the concept of 'unconscious resistance' to make sense of its reluctance to consider the importance of discoveries made by other disciplines; or refer to the 'idealised transference' in order to interpret the structure and functioning of psychoanalytic training institutes. For its part, cinema, not unlike theatre and literature, also has the means to represent some of its concerns in a self-reflective fashion. This applies, for instance, to *Wandafuru raifu* [*Afterlife*] (1998), the Japanese film written, directed and edited by Kore-eda Hirokazu, which portrays cinema as a universal container of the past in the shape of recorded memories composed of light and shadow.

The original kernel of inspiration for *Afterlife* derives from Kore-eda's experiences as a 6-year-old, bewildered by his grandfather's diminished capacity to recognise anyone or to recollect anything. 'As a child', Kore-eda offers

in an interview, 'I comprehended little of what I saw, but I remember thinking that people forgot everything when they died. I now understand how critical memories are to our identity, to a sense of self' (1998, Artistic License Films). Catalysed by the desire to explore these issues in more depth, Kore-eda travelled throughout Japan interviewing more than five hundred people about their most treasured memories, suggesting this would be what they will be keeping for ever after death. 'Just choose one', he told them. The eloquence of their responses so impressed him that he ultimately incorporated some of the actual interviewees and their stories into the final cut, integrating them with scenes portrayed by professional actors speaking dialogue he had scripted. In its creative genesis and as a finished commercial product, *Afterlife* is thus an admixture of quasi-documentary and fiction, a blending on multiple levels of phantasy and the unhurried reality of everyday life.

The unusual institution in which Kore-eda's movie is set is one of many similar metaphysical way-stations between life and death (or afterlife), a transitional 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1971) between one mode of existence and another. Its function is to help those who have recently died to select one memory that was most meaningful or precious. These memories are then dramatised, enacted and cap-

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tured on films—with all the practical problems attendant on representing feelings and sensations through visual images—in a not-quite-state-of-the-art movie studio, assisted by a troupe of actors and technicians culled from other recently deceased people. At the end of the week, accompanied by a small band of amateur musicians, the group of guests is ceremoniously escorted to the cinema where a private screening of their selected memories will mark their entry into the afterlife. The next day is Monday again, and another lot of guests is ready to take their place. The stream of people dying, we are implicitly reminded, never ceases.

The caseworkers practising in the way-station facilitate the process for their charges until such time as they are able to reach a decision. As we later find out, the staff consists of those who, following their deaths, had themselves been unable to select a memory to represent their own lives. There is no sense that the caseworkers' jobs represent a punishment for their failure to have selected their own memory. Absent is the moral ideology of sin, guilt and damnation—or, conversely, of reward for saintly life—related to the Western religious mythologies (themselves metaphors, or symbolic representations, of unconscious conflicts) of days of reckoning, of eternal bliss or infernal suffering. No angels, no devils.

As the members of staff ask questions and make suggestions, they show in their tolerant approach an awareness of unconscious processes and of developmental issues. They reflect, critically at times, on their own activity; during a supervision seminar, one of them, having become depressed and doubtful about his therapeutic role, wonders: 'Recreating memories of the dead ... What are we doing it for?' Or they allow a reversal of functions when one of them, a young man who has been dead for fifty years and not yet found a suitable memory, is unwittingly helped by one of his charges to make his choice and at long last leave for his afterlife, having made the 'wonderful discovery of being part of someone else's happiness'.

In 'Remembering, repeating and working-through', Freud (1914) suggests that we feel

compelled to repeat what we cannot remember. On the surface, this is the opposite of what happens in Kore-eda's film, where his characters will have to repeat for ever precisely what they *can* remember—indeed what they have selected as a memory, and insofar as it is a memory. But this repetition, we presume, will not have the neurotic quality of the acting out that often brings patients to psychoanalytic couches. It represents a consciously chosen, comfortable world in which to rest in peace, rather than the uncomfortable psychopathological one that our unconscious needs compulsively force upon us. Indeed, that restful space may have some of the temporal connotations associated with the earliest experiences infants have about time, when this is not yet organised around a three-dimensional structure. The memories the protagonists of *Afterlife* will take with them forever, in a sense, also no longer belong to the past—the circumstances under which they have been selected alter, so to speak, their status. Their significance spans the boundaries of time and they acquire in the process a quality not dissimilar to the timelessness Freud so vividly described as a main feature of unconscious primary process functioning. Far, then, from being prisoners of a past moment, Kore-eda's characters are thus freed from the restrictions of life and reimmersed into the depths of their psychological origins.

Freud examined another facet of the interplay between time and phantasy (a component of memory) in 'Creative writers and day-dreaming'. He suggested that phantasy 'hovers, as it were, between three times—the three moments of time which our ideation involves' (1908, p. 147). In the context of exploring the creative processes of artists, Freud conceived a dynamic time-line along which the activity of phantasy, sparked by something in the present, rouses an intense desire to which is linked the memory of an archaic, likely infantile, experience, giving way to a made-up scenario in which the wish is fulfilled. The phantasy, then, bears the traces of past, present and future, 'strung together', as Freud writes, 'on the thread of the wish that runs through them' (p. 148).

One of Kore-eda's film's most fundamentally psychoanalytic messages, embedded in the metaphoric leitmotif of having to make a difficult, yet not impossible, choice in order to pass from life to afterlife, is the idea of maturation along developmental lines. It affirms an appreciation of psychic growth as a dynamic progression to attain and then surpass successive developmental stages, and as a creative process of passage from one to the next. In this sense, the transitional travellers' narration and collaborative reconstruction of memory comports with the analytic process itself, to 'help revise radically patients' hitherto fixed, unconsciously directed constructions of both subjective experience and action in the world; to use words to change lives in a thought-through, insightful manner' (Schafer, 1992, p. 156). This process implies progress towards resolution, or at least relaxation, of oedipal conflicts and, in the therapeutic context, of the transference neurosis. In other words, entrance to the next phase, to the 'afterlife' in the parlance of Kore-eda's film, is contingent upon learning to live (paradoxically, given that it comes only after death) as a social person, to entrust to others something of personal value and meaning without feeling that one has given it up entirely or lost one's sense of individual identity.

In the course of the seven days allotted for their task, the transient populace of the waystation are called upon to enter a three-stage process. First, they are to engage in facilitated introspection and free-associative, self-reflective meditation. This is to yield, hopefully, the selection of a memory—'just choose one'—and the resulting imperative of providing an elaborate description of its multi-faceted elements. While to some being asked to be bound to a single self-selected fragment of life for eternity is a perfectly tolerable concept, to others it must feel absurd (how, for example, could the whole of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* ever be contained in the taste of a single *madeleine*?). The final stage involves the re-enactment of the memory by self-surrogates and the re-viewing of it in a format external to one's self, separate from one's own internal

memory system. This elaborate process of reconstruction conjures up Freud's suggestion that one of the psychoanalyst's tasks is 'to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind' (1937, pp. 258–9). The reconstructions undertaken in Kore-eda's diegetic film-studio appear at first to be quite different, being made out from what has been remembered rather than what has been forgotten. But we can nevertheless notice similarities in the project of Freud's metaphorical archaeologist who 'builds up the walls of the building from the foundations that have remained standing'; the psychoanalyst who 'draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis' (p. 259); and the solicitous film troupe in *Afterlife* who resort to their charges' recollections to recreate in precise detail what the dead individuals wish to take with them for ever.

In this regard, we could also think of the choice of a poignantly significant memory as an activity analogous to the creative production of the artist: it is born within and then, in accordance with the blueprint of artistic vision, is transformed into an aesthetically meaningful product accessible to others, even while its ultimate use is reserved for one's self alone. It is from this perspective that we can appreciate Kore-eda's distinction between 'death' and 'afterlife' as an interpretation of the processes of separation-individuation that Margaret Mahler et al. (1975) call 'psychological birth.' The child's emerging sense of self, as other than mother, brings both the loss of cherished symbiotic fusion (a sort of death) even as it heralds existence outside the maternal orbit (life/after-life).

Kore-eda introduces us to fragments of the wayfarers' life histories, with all their idiosyncrasies, joyful moments, dreams and dramas. How accurate are their memories? How many details have been added or altered by their wishful phantasies, by their parents' embellishments, by the defensive forces of repression, by the passing of time? We do not know, of course, in relation to the film characters' memories,

any more than we can be certain about our own. Indeed, we do not even know whether the many protagonists we watch on the screen recollecting moments in their lives are the 'real' people interviewed by Kore-eda on the streets of Japan or the actors he has employed to perform his script. Perhaps it does not ultimately matter; yet we are intrigued by the criteria people (should they be called 'souls'? We do not think so, as Kore-eda portrays his characters in all their earthly physicality) follow to come to their crucial decision. Some will go for the intensity of the experience; some for the role the remembered events will play later in their lives; some for the pleasure, peacefulness or satisfaction the selected memory could provide now, that is in their promised everlasting present.

As the film unfolds, we watch with interest and affection a number of characters recollecting significant moments from their lives. These fragments could be interpreted on innumerable levels: as screen memories; as the abdication of long-cherished idealisations and archaic anxieties; as the wish to recapture the ideal parents (remembered as actually experienced or, as reaction-formation, wistfully longed-for because of never having been experienced); as the desire to return to the bliss of maternal symbiotic unity; as reconciliation of inhibited or conflictually attained personal fulfilment and happiness with unresolved feelings of shame or guilt; as disengagement from malevolent internal objects. There are as many memories, and meanings, as there are people.

The therapeutic encounters we witness on the screen between aerial bodies at the edges of life and death constitute a challenging proposition: we, the viewers, cannot but identify with this strange, yet perhaps inevitable, predicament. What would we ask our fellow men or women? What would we answer to their questions? Viewing this film entreats its audience to thoughtfully participate (even if after-the-fact) in ways that exceed the simple-minded voyeurism of most commercial releases, and which mirror and extend Kore-eda's pre-production interviews, in effect ask-

ing each of us to reflect upon our own lives and, from our vast personal reservoirs of experience, to 'just choose one'.

Despite the potential appeal, for some, of the promise of such eternal, unwavering stability, a vision of an existence consisting of the ceaseless repetition of a singular memory is essentially regressive, and suggests an afterlife of stagnant monotony. If, as psychoanalysis imagines, the ebb and flow of gratification and frustration, and of the incessant interplay of tension and release through phantasies, desires and needs, underlie the libidinal propelling force of life, its deprivation signals true death, not after-life. Perhaps, then, resolution to this predicament comes by way of the impossibility of actually having an ideal version of one's memory. For the deceased in Kore-eda's film, the far-from-perfect conditions for the making of memory films—amateur performers, makeshift props, hurried production, the very fact of having an externalised representation of one's most precious memory—introduce a necessary irritant to the otherwise flawless internal image of the past. It is a solution that elegantly circumvents the controversy of memory as potentially false or constructed, or as a composite of archaically derivative distortions and condensations. The depredation from perfection is necessary because, much like the grain of sand in the oyster that gives rise to the pearl, it injects a source of potential conflict, a tolerable link to the vicissitudes of reality which define our experience of the adult world and of life itself. Anything else would be psychosis—or death.

The wish underlying any notion of an after-life is the maintenance of a link to other people, or, rather, to the internalised objects that furnish our memories. This, by definition, defies death; in the absence of contact or interaction with others, memories, hopes, dreams, even hallucinations, are the surrogate nutrients that sustain us. One of the many characters in Kore-eda's film is an elderly woman with a fixed smile on her face who selects as her special memory a vignette of herself as a latency-age girl, dancing with a grace and innocence long

ago lost. Even now, she is that girl. And yet, of course, she is just an elderly woman who has died but who can still remember herself as a young girl. So it is perhaps fitting that in the memory film, another young girl—borrowed for a while, as it were, from her own task of selection—is enlisted to portray her. For all eternity, then, the elderly woman will ‘see’ someone other than herself as she watches herself. In this sense, she, like the others—like us—cannot be subsumed or engulfed by memory, but only connected to it. This speaks to one perspective of subjectivity: to be a self is to be individuated not only from primary others but also from oneself.

These elements—attachment/re-attachment to the past, and solitude (death)/relationality (life)—closely resemble those delicate aspects of co-authorship in the analytic relationship. Kore-eda hints at the contours on multiple, intertwining levels—fiction and reality, caseworker and newly deceased, the melding of the filmmaker’s creative inspiration and his incorporation of its early manifestations into the finished movie, the diverse implications of participatory voyeurism within the film itself and between film and audience. But we refer here more specifically to parallels with the analyst’s role *vis-à-vis* the analysand (both in phantasy and reality) as, alternately or concurrently, co-conspirator, co-protagonist, antagonist, collaborator, muse, ally, obstructionist, prosecutor, liberator, svengali, navigator, mentor, respondent, editor, critic, to name but some! Of course, psychoanalysis as a clinical enterprise cannot be accomplished without two people and without the introduction of some or all of the symbolic personages just

outlined, whereas psychoanalytic literature can be, and usually is, produced by one person, thinking and writing alone (although that is not the case here), an activity that involves the internalisation of those symbolic roles. Yet, even here the ‘other’ is always present: indeed an oedipal structure characterises all creative productions—a parent, its child and a ‘third’ who could be conceptualised as the parent’s partner, as a midwife or as the real or imagined audience (viewer, listener, reader).

If a week’s residence in a disused school can provide a solution to the dilemmas of the afterlife, one may legitimately become curious about the essence of us human beings before we were born. It conjures up the idea for a sequel to Kore-eda’s film! Maybe another week in a caring institution, in the presence of an understanding team of analyst-like companions, helping future individuals to choose, this time, a phantasy to be put on interactive DVD and lived out in the minutest of details before passing away. The caseworkers could again be those who had been unable to choose their own phantasy for the future, and who have therefore not yet been born. Having collected memories in the process of living, people would then move to the afterlife studios for another week after their death. The premise is not drastically dissimilar to the wistful expression of many analysands—life, in other words, can be what we had decided it to be before we were born; or, failing that, it can be fashioned to comport with our better, more current vision of the future.

‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.’

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4, i, ll. 156–7.

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