



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

After Life (Wandafuru Raifu)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

One of the visual motifs which runs through *After Life* turns out in retrospect to be a kind of running gag. Limbo staff-members passing through the corridor on the upper floor of the institution (evidently a former schoolhouse) look up at a skylight and see, variously, the full moon, daylight, falling snow or a crescent moon. But the ‘moons’ are revealed to be illusions: just shapes formed by a hole in the skylight’s cover. This relates to something that section chief Nakamura says to Shiori after she has had a row with Kawashima. The moon is fascinating, he says, because our perception of it changes with the available light, whereas the moon itself never changes.

Simple illusions can generate potent images and reactions; everything depends on how you see it. Together, though, they offer a philosophical conundrum with clear relevance to the ways films are made and seen. Exactly the same can be said of Koreeda’s film itself, which deals directly and straightforwardly with all kinds of human issues – the psychological processes of constructing and editing memories, emotional exchange versus dependency, the elusive line between solitude and loneliness – but somehow also adds up to a meditation on cinema as a medium.

The film’s genius – and, no doubt, a reason for its popular success in Japan, the US and elsewhere – lies in the way it integrates very disparate materials in an organic whole.

The fictional premise that a civil-service bureaucracy awaits us when we die is not original (the film’s title in Japan, *Wonderful Life*, acknowledges that Frank Capra, amongst others, got there first) but Koreeda uses it in a way that no filmmaker has done before: to interweave fiction and non-fiction so that each invigorates the other. Documentary material of purely anecdotal interest (for example, a 78-year-old woman’s memories of dancing for her supper in the cafés of Aoyama in the ’20s) is far more resonant in this fictional context than it would be otherwise; and fictional material (for example, a boring 70-year-old man’s belated realisation that his ‘average’ marriage meant the world to him) gains strength and credibility from being intercut with real-life testimonies.

At the same time, the film’s fiction/non-fiction interface reflects the premise that memories can be recreated in a film studio with results so ‘real’ that those remembering can be transported to another plane. Limbo’s sound-stage is decidedly low-tech, and the film has a lot of fun watching technicians simulate a solo flight in a Cessna with cotton-wool clouds or a tram ride on a hot, breezy day with off screen manpower providing the rocking motion. Much effort goes into fabricating images which will connote the senses beyond film’s reach: touch, smell, taste. By playing with the ontology of images, Koreeda also blurs the distinction between life and cinema.

Much of this must be very personal to Koreeda, who came to fiction films from a decade making television documentaries, several of which reflect the impossibility of remaining objective and detached when filming prickly human subjects. The film expresses the awkward tension between detachment and engagement in metaphorical terms as Mochizuki’s struggle to maintain his virginal cool when brought face to face with the realisation that he represented

‘happiness’ to someone else. This realisation prompts him to choose his own memory (something he has been unable or unwilling to do for the 50-odd years since his physical death), but it’s a memory which bucks the system: Mochizuki chooses to go out remembering not only his earthly engagement to a woman who married someone else after he died but also the team camaraderie and work from his time in Limbo, not to mention the young woman who adored him there. The tangle of emotional and cinematic issues here is almost mystical, but the film’s simplicity and transparent sincerity make it easy to accept. Koreeda’s unique achievement is that he has turned a deeply personal and private problematic into a mirror for every viewer’s own fears, desires and memories. ‘Masterpiece’ seems not too strong a word.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, October 1999

Koreeda on ‘After Life’

The film goes out of its way to avoid religious connotations, but some critics and audiences seem to want it to be religious. For instance, Donald Richie has written of it as a Buddhist film. How do you feel about that?

I deliberately stripped Japanese (or any other) religious connotations from the film. That was part of the original concept. You know, I love what Lubitsch did in *Heaven Can Wait* when he exploited all the comic possibilities inherent in death. I’m not a Christian, but that movie didn’t seem to me to be about Christianity. It was just a comic set-up, and that’s one reason why I chose the fact of death as the fictional framework for my own film. I wouldn’t go so far as to call *After Life* a light comedy, but I’m not aware of any other Japanese film which has approached the subject of death in this mildly comic way. Whenever people ask, I always say it’s not a religious film, but if someone who has a religion chooses to bring it to this film, then that’s up to them. It’s not for me to tell them they’re wrong.

Is there anything specifically Japanese about the idea of getting to grips with life within the context of death?

Not that I’m aware of. I think it’s more likely that it reflects my own approach: the thinking I’ve done, the filming I’ve done, the living of my own life. Actually, I was more conscious of using fiction as a framework to reconsider documentary than I was of using death as a framework to reconsider life. I was most interested in nestling fiction and documentary next to each other.

Much of the film is quite funny, but the scenes which get the biggest laughs are the ones in the studio where the memories are being recreated and filmed. You stress the makeshift way the staff produce their visual effects in these recreations. Do you see that as a satire on ‘illusionist’ filmmaking in general?

There’s definitely a certain ambivalence behind those scenes, but I didn’t set out to satirise film craft. The cheapness of the effects was obviously intentional, but for me that was an expression of warmth towards what was going on. Starting from the premise of ‘Hello, you’re dead...’ we’ve pulled these stories out of these people. But I knew something would stay buried, undiscovered, if people just talked about the past. By marrying these cheap recreations with the memories as recounted, I knew there would be leaps into other areas. And I was right: you can see the way people revise their memories, add details, bring in forgotten emotions. Still, it’s funny to see the film’s studio staff getting so totally serious about balls of cotton wool and

wondering whether they'll simulate clouds accurately or not. It makes me incredibly happy when audiences laugh at those scenes.

The studio recreations of the memories also raise the question of film's limits. People's memories relate to smell, taste and touch, none of which film can reproduce...

My understanding that we remember things with all five senses was endlessly reaffirmed when we recorded the 500 interviews. People remember a touch, a taste, something that brushed their skin. In the 100 years that cinema has been around I feel it has constantly been straining against the limitation of being a largely visual medium; there's something about the way we watch films which pushes that boundary. But in any case, in *After Life* the memories recreated on film are not the ultimate destination. What really matters is what happens inside the individuals when they relive the memory, and the film recreation is only an aid.

When Mochizuki agrees to identify a memory of his own, it seems that the colleagues who are filming him are part of his memory. Is that so? And if so, what does that imply about the process?

That's exactly the core of the film, but it's the first time I've been asked that question! Yes, it's true: Mochizuki's memory includes not only the 20 years he was alive but also the so years of service in limbo. His 'memory' is an acceptance and affirmation of the time spent in the way-station as well.

I actually had very ambitious plans for that particular sequence. Given the film's governing metaphors, I saw Mochizuki's image of himself – the memory he chooses to have filmed – as being equivalent to documentary and the image of the crew filming him as being equivalent to fiction. That's pretty much the way I think real memory works: a combination of fact and fiction. The other thing I hoped to get across was the impact on the other staff members of seeing themselves reflected within someone else's memory. My producer Sato Shiho and I had exactly that experience once while we were making one of the television documentaries. It's very salutary to become aware of being part of someone else's experience.

In the week the film covers the counsellors have to 'process' 22 people. By the law of averages, you'd expect one or two of them to be gay – but that doesn't seem to be the case. Any reason?

I thought long and hard about the final choice of those 22 people. There certainly were gay people among the so we interviewed; there was also a Japanese-Korean. But none of them made the final cut. My initial idea was that these 22 people, with all the shards of their experiences, would give us a 'history' of modern Japan from the Kanto earthquake in 1923 through the war and the post-war 'economic miracle' right up to the present wave of immigration from Iran and Asia. That selection would have included gay people, Japanese-Koreans and other minorities, of course. But as I was doing the research I realised this kind of intentionally balanced conceptual framework wasn't going to work – or at least wasn't going to be interesting. So I switched from a concept-driven choice of people to a character-driven choice.

I got the sense that Mochizuki was in some ways your self-portrait. Is that so?

Yes, but I'm not reflected only in Mochizuki. Parts of me are also carried by the other counsellors – they all have little burdens of me to carry! And of course in my own biography there are also 'fictional' elements.

Interview by Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, March 1999

AFTER LIFE (WANDAFURU RAIFU)

Director: Hirokazu Koreeda
Production Companies: TV Man Union, Engine Film
Executive Producer: Yutaka Shigenobu
Planning Producer: Masahiro Yasuda
Producers: Shiho Sato, Masayuki Akieda
Line Producer: Osamu Shiraishi
Post-production Supervisor: Shuichi Kakesu
Researchers: Yu Nakamura, Takahiro Mitsuyoshi, Yuka Tashiro
1st Assistant Director: Iwao Takahashi
2nd Assistant Directors: Naohiro Asano, Miwa Nishikawa, Teiitsu Kin
Screenplay: Hirokazu Koreeda
Director of Photography: Yutaka Yamazaki
Director of Photography (Re-creation): Masayoshi Sukita
Lighting: Yuzuru Sato
Lighting (Re-creation): Shigeki Nakamura
Editor: Hirokazu Koreeda
Art Directors: Toshihiro Isomi, Hideo Gunji
Stylists: Koichiro Yamamoto, Kazuko Yamamoto
Wardrobe: Shigeru Aoki
Hair/Make-up: Mutsuki Sakai
Titles: Hideki Takeuchi
Colour Timer: Masayuki Mitsuhashi
Opticals: Tetsuo Kaneko
Music: Yasuhiro Kasamatsu
Sound Design/Recording Engineer: Osamu Takizawa
Sound Effects: Kenji Shibasaki

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Janus Films/The Criterion Collection, Kadokawa Corporation,
Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, Kokusai Hoei Co. Ltd, Nikkatsu
Corporation, Toei Co. Ltd

Cast

Arata (Takashi Mochizuki)
Erika Oda (Shiori Satonaka)
Susumu Terajima (Satoru Kawashima)
Takashi Naito (Takuro Sugie)
Kei Tani (Ken-nosuke Nakamura)
Taketoshi Naito (Ichiro Watanabe)
Sadao Abe (Ichiro Watanabe, student days)
Toru Yuri (Kisuke Shoda)
Kazuko Shirakawa (Nobuko Amano)
Yusuke Iseya (Yusuke Iseya)
Hisako Hara (Kiyo Nishimura)
Sayaka Yoshino (Kana Yoshimoto)
Kotaro Shiga (Kenji Yamamoto)
Natsuo Ishido (Kyoko Tsukamoto, student days)
Kyôko Kagawa (Kyoko Watanabe)
Akio Yokoyama (doorkeeper)
Tomomi Hiraiwa (announcer)
Yasuhiro Kasamatsu (composer)
Kazuji Araki
Kunio Endo
Michi Okuma
Shinichiro Okuno
Yoshitaka Kaneko
Keigyoku Kin
Yone Kori
Masa-Aki Kojima
Terumasa Takahashi
Chie Takamatsu
Kimiko Tatara
Toshio Nomoto
Nanae Hirakawa
Taro Bundo
Tae Kimura
Makoto Shinozaki
Miyako Yamaguchi
Tatsumasa Akieda
Minami Usui
Yuri Isomi
Misato Isomi
Goki Kashiwayama
Haruka Kodo
Toranosuke Aizawa
Tatsuo Kimura
Masaru Goto
Ichiro Tanaka
Takashi Nakagawa
Takuya Nishimura
Masayuki Hagiwara
Kazuyuki Haneda
Kaoru Mashimo

Japan 1998
118 mins

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