

## Some thoughts on watching films

Stories are the stuff of life. They allow us to reflect on all sorts of issues at a safe distance as we engage with the characters, cry with them, laugh with them, get cross with them and generally share their experience. How they deal with the issues they come across may frustrate us, or give us new insights; cause us to laugh or cry; result in us hurling abuse at the screen or willing there to be a happy ending. And through it all we can encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places if only we take time to look.

### Questions to ask yourself

- ▶ What did you think of the film? What do you like most? Least?
- ▶ Which incidents made you think or feel most strongly? How well did you think the film treated those incidents?
- ▶ What issues did the film raise for you?
- ▶ What character(s) do you most identify with and why?
- ▶ Does the film have any echoes of Christian beliefs or stories from the Bible? Does it support or challenge Christian values?

### Some facts about the film

- ▶ The director, Hirokazu Koreeda, began his career directing television documentaries. Much of the action in *After Life* is shown as interviews conducted with the recently deceased regarding their lives. Some of these interviews were scripted, but many were done impromptu, with real people (not actors) reminiscing about their own lives.
- ▶ The Japanese title ("Wonderful Life") is a direct reference to the Frank Capra film, *It's a Wonderful Life*.
- ▶ Born in Tokyo in 1962, Koreeda originally intended to be a novelist, but after graduating from Waseda University in 1987 went on to become an assistant director for TV. Later, branching into film, his first feature, *Maborosi (1995)*, was based on a Teru Miyamoto novel and drawn from his own experiences. The main themes of his oeuvre include memory, loss, death and the intersection of documentary and fictional narratives.
- ▶ Kyôko Kagawa, who plays Ichiro's wife (Ichiro being the one who cannot choose his favourite experience), last appeared at SoS in *Tokyo Story*.

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**A chance to watch films together.  
An opportunity to discuss the issues raised.  
A time of friendship, food and fun.**

**4th Jan Kinky Boots**  
**1st Feb Pride**  
**8th Mar Two Days, One Night**  
**5th Apr After Life**  
**10th May Belle**  
**31st May Paddington**

**Films start at 5:30pm**  
**Followed by food, coffee and conversation**

**10 Bletchingdon Road**  
**Islip**

**Further details from Jonathan (Ox 842214)**  
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## After Life

*After Life*, known in Japan as *Wonderful Life*, is a 1998 film by Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda. It is set in a “waystation” where the souls of the recently deceased are processed before entering heaven. This involves choosing a single happy memory from one’s life which will then be re-experienced for the rest of eternity. And they have just a few days in which to decide.

Throughout the film, Koreeda examines the complex, symbiotic relationship between memory and altered perception. Objective memory, as shown through videotapes, provides a factual, dispassionate chronicle of actual events. Perspective memory, as related by the subjects to their receptive counsellors, reflects a biased, emotional attachment to the actual event, and is often affected by retrospective significance. Interpretive memory, as recreated by the staff on film, is a fabrication of the actual event, and is limited by time, resources, and the accuracy of the information provided by the subject. Is one form of memory more important than another? Does precise memory define truth, or is ingrained memory an interactive process that leads to personal, and ultimately relevant, truth?

### Remembering

How difficult would you find it to choose that one memory to keep with you forever. And what might that memory be?

### The things we value

Despite its title, it can be argued that the film is much more about life than death, as it encourages us to think about what is important in our own lives. What are the things we really value? What has driven you to make your choice above? How can we prioritise such experiences in our own lives?

### Other people

What do you think the film has to say about the way we remember others (as opposed to our own memories)?

### An overall picture

The film invites its characters to perform a “whole life review”. Sometimes it is difficult to see the effect and importance of our actions at the time and it is only when we look back that we discover that, something we may have felt was quite small and trivial at the time, turns out to have had major consequences. This is particularly true of spontaneous acts of love. Can you think of examples in your own life, either in terms of things happening to you or things you have done for other people?

### Who is the villain?

The recently dead are helped in their search for that one happy memory by the team of counsellors. For some it is a difficult process until they realise that there is a part of themselves which is truly good, even if it is deeply buried. Do you think everyone could be helped to find that good memory? Or are some people’s lives so painful that there is nothing worth cherishing for eternity?

## Film Review (*Electric Sheep*)

Memory is a recurrent element in the cinema of Hirokazu Koreeda and *After Life* is no exception. The film imagines a space between Earth and Heaven, where the recently deceased are taken once natural causes or physical misfortune have brought an end to their mortal existence. Each person must select the happiest memory from their life so that it can be recreated on film.

The first half of *After Life* involves the detailed interviews that case workers must conduct in order to decide which memories to recreate, suggesting that such recollections constitute a stockpile of personal information that must be systematically sorted and considered in relation to suitability. Many of the memories, although eventually scripted, were actually researched, with 500 people being interviewed. Koreeda cast the film during this process, balancing non-actors with professionals, and recruiting the documentary cinematographer Yutaka Yamazaki to achieve an otherworldly realism. The second half examines the tentative romantic relationship between two case workers, Takashi and Shiori that cannot develop due to the emotional power of memory: Takashi is unable to reciprocate Shiori’s feelings as he still yearns for the fiancée that he left behind after being killed in World War II.

The process of recreating memory that these case workers facilitate serves to show how such recollections can be erroneous, or subject to embellishment. Indecision or inconsistency on the part of some of the deceased indicates that the memories that are chosen as their passport to eternal happiness are possibly falsely remembered, or partially fictionalised, although Koreeda does not see this as a problem in the grand scheme of things, providing that sufficient personal resonance is evoked. *After Life* proposes that memories are ever-shifting, with certain details dependent on the situation in which past circumstances are recalled, or to whom they are being imparted. As a result, In the press notes for the film, Koreeda states: ‘Our memories are not fixed or static, the act of remembering, of looking back at the past, is by no means redundant or negative. Rather, it challenges us to evolve and mature.’

While most of the deceased ultimately force themselves to examine their personal history, sifting through lives of disappointment and strife to find a positive moment that will take them forward, it transpires that the case workers have been trained for their positions due to being unable to choose a memory. This steadfast refusal, or emotional inability, to explore their past has resulted in a weekly office routine, presented in a pared-down fashion to reflect the salaried existence of many Japanese professionals. However, through assisting the elderly Ichiro, Takashi discovers that their lives are linked and is finally able to make a choice due to the recollection that is prompted by a realisation of interconnectedness. It is Takashi’s contented expression as his scene plays out that best summarises Kore-eda’s beautiful illustration of the role played by memory in belatedly finding meaning in life’s special, if sometimes fleeting, moments.

*John Berra*