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# Between Documentary and Fiction: The Films of Kore-Eda Hirokazu

## **Abstract**

This article investigates the representation of Buddhist values through the interplay between drama and documentary in two of Kore-eda's films—*After Life* (*Wandafuru Raifu*, 1998) and *I Wish* (*Kiseki*, 2011). It will argue that the spiritual aspirations of these two films is a product of their nondualistic treatment of a documentary and dramatic style of filmmaking.

## **Keywords**

Buddhism, emptiness, non-duality, Kore-eda Hirokazu, Japanese film

## **Author Notes**

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For a director who is often associated with a Buddhist worldview, Kore-eda Hirokazu largely avoids direct references to Buddhism in interviews with critics about his films.<sup>1</sup> And yet, a Buddhist worldview pervades his cinematic narratives, even those ostensibly focused on more secular concerns. References to intermediary places between life and death, the problem of worldly attachment, and the illusory nature of experience reoccur in Kore-eda's cinematic narratives, allowing the director to highlight the role that film plays in helping individuals learn to see beyond the limited perspective to which they are bound.

These Buddhist values gain greater significance when viewed in conjunction with Kore-eda's nondualistic approach to documentary (*dokumentari*) and dramatic filmmaking (*gekieiga*)—an approach that shares much in common with the interdependence of fiction and spiritual truth in Buddhist texts like the *Lotus Sutra*. Discussing his *raison d'être* as a filmmaker, Kore-eda suggests that his films focus on the “line between fiction and documentary,” seeking to “capture that moment in between these two.”<sup>2</sup> The line that Kore-eda refers to separates dramatic filmmaking from documentary, identifying it as a purely imaginative endeavor and classifying documentary as a cinematic style that captures the reality of some aspect of everyday life. In contrast to the perceived differences between these two cinematic styles, Kore-eda recognizes that fictional devices do not obstruct the documentation of spiritual truths. Rather, artifice, as both Kore-eda's films and Buddhist texts like the *Lotus Sutra* suggest, can lead to greater insights into human

existence. This article will investigate the interplay between drama and documentary in two of Kore-eda's films—*After Life* (*Wandafuru Raifu* 1998) and *I Wish* (*Kiseki* 2011). In Kore-eda's self-conscious use of fictional devices to help characters move beyond their egocentric worldviews, these films function like Buddhist parables that are updated for a more secular world.

### **Detachment and Nonduality**

Overt Buddhist iconography does not figure prominently in Kore-eda's films, according to Michael and Karen Fontenot, because his films are representative of Buddhist culture in the later stages of the religion, when, as Buddha himself suggested, his ideas “would so thoroughly pervade certain traditions that they would become invisible.”<sup>3</sup> Similar to the way Christ figures routinely appear in literature and film in Western traditions without overt references to Christianity, Buddhist themes influence the literary and cultural texts of a Japanese tradition with 1,500 years of contact with the belief system.

Kore-eda's *After Life* and *I Wish* touch on fundamental Buddhist principles concerning the problems of attachment, principles that have shaped a variety of Japanese literary and cultural texts. These principles are based in the most fundamental Buddhist teaching—the “Four Noble Truths”—which suggest that human suffering stems from the inability to free oneself from worldly interests. In

Kore-eda's treatment of this fundamental teaching, both *After Life* and *I Wish* thematize the process of finding release from the illusionary and self-centered thoughts that can entangle individuals in the experiences of the material world and their own egocentric desires.

One way to realize detachment from the world, Buddhism teaches, is by recognizing the nondualistic nature of ideas and perceptions that are often identified as separate and distinct from each other.<sup>4</sup> Nonduality is a central teaching of the Mahayana tradition, the most prominent form of Buddhism in East Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and China, which emerged one thousand years after the origin of the religion. The early works of Sakyamuni Buddha, for instance, speak of the nondualistic relationship between the consciousness and the objects of its perception, rejecting the notion of a permanent subject of experience that is distinct from the material world with which it comes in contact.<sup>5</sup> The Madhyamaka, a philosophical development in India that would come to influence the growth of the Zen school in Japan, reinforced the idea of the unity of the phenomenal world, helping believers move beyond dualistic constructs, referred to as the truth of worldly convention (*samvrti satya*) in Mahayana Buddhism, within which they live. To see the world in a nondualistic way, Mahayana Buddhism teaches, is to see the world before the truth of worldly convention divides experience into apparent opposites of self and other, good and bad, and other concepts. Nonduality points to the wholeness and completeness of experience before language fractures this sense

of unity. The Heart Sutra from the Mahayana tradition encourages practitioners to develop an awareness of the unity of phenomenal experience as they cultivate detachment from worldly perspectives.

All phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness; their true nature is the nature of no Birth no Death, no Being no Non-being, no Defilement no Purity, no Increasing no Decreasing. That is why in Emptiness, Body, Feelings, Perceptions, Mental Formations and Consciousness are not separate self-entities.<sup>6</sup>

The recognition of the nonduality of fiction and spiritual truth is a central theme in Buddhist texts. It is an insight that can lead to detachment as well as a technique to aid viewers in grasping a deeper awareness of their own egocentricity. Scripture like the *Lotus Sutra* highlights the interdependence between fiction and spiritual meaning, suggesting that artifice is not other to truth but can be used to inspire believers to follow the Buddhist path and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. As chapter four of the *Lotus Sutra*, “Belief and Understanding,” suggests, the Buddha often uses fictional devices, like parables and similes, to help believers gain a greater awareness of the true nature of experience.<sup>7</sup> Kore-eda’s films, this article argues, follows a similar pattern by highlighting the way that detachment from an egocentric perspective is realized through both the artless

realism of documentary and the imagination of fiction.

### **Documentary vs. Fiction**

Kore-eda's experiences working in television inspired his attempts to blend the realism of documentary and the imagination of fiction in his own cinematic narratives. After graduating from Waseda University in Tokyo, where he studied media arts, Kore-eda apprenticed as an assistant director of television documentaries.<sup>8</sup> Producing documentary programming, Kore-eda claims, sharpened his skills in capturing the nuances of human interaction.<sup>9</sup> Because of this early training, Kore-eda identifies more as a documenter of life than a creator of fiction, which is one of the reasons why he felt like an outsider in the feature-film industry when he started making his own films in the mid-1990s.

What does Kore-eda mean by *drama* and *documentary*, and how does he combine these two forms of cinema in his own work? For Kore-eda, drama refers to films that depend on the plot to guide the editing and arrangement of shots, whereas documentary, in its purest sense, captures authentic experience unmediated by narrative devices.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, for Kore-eda, the difference boils down to the contrast between a documentary filmmaker's acceptance "of an imperfect world as it is" and a dramatic filmmaker's desire to shape this world into a cohesive narrative experience.<sup>11</sup> In shooting his 2004 film, *Daremo shiranai*

(*Nobody Knows*), Kore-eda sought to balance these approaches by documenting the way unsupervised children manage daily life on their own but also by creating a story about how these children were abandoned by their mother in a Tokyo apartment. Kore-eda discovered that, in shooting the children's activities from outside of the apartment, he relied heavily on a documentary style. But once he started shooting their lives from within, turning his attention to character development and plot, the film took on the feel of fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The balance between the fictional and documentary style of Kore-eda's films changes each time he creates a new project.<sup>13</sup> There is always a scenario that guides the production—in the form of a fully developed script, a collection of scenes, or even just a story arc—yet it is one that allows room for improvisation and change.<sup>14</sup> While *Maboroshi* (1996)—the story of a woman who struggles to overcome the sudden and unexplainable death of her first husband—had a fully formed script before shooting, *Distance* (*Disutansu* 2001)—a film about the aftermath of the Aum subway gas attacks in Tokyo in 1995—was produced with just a series of situations in which actors would improvise their lines as they played the part of individuals whose family members were involved in the attacks.<sup>15</sup> Although actors such as Natsukawa Yui, who plays the wife of a member of the group, initially struggled without a script, the freedom to improvise scenes, others actors suggest, allowed them to express their own feelings about a real historical event that profoundly affected all Japanese people.<sup>16</sup> In the process of shooting one

of his most recent films, *Like Father, Like Son* (*Sôshite chichi ni naru* 2014), Kore-eda rewrote his script fifty times, editing it almost daily as he worked together with actors on the set and familiarized himself with their individual personalities and temperaments.<sup>17</sup> For Kore-eda, then, film is a living thing that evolves as the fictional scenario that launches its production is adapted to fit the real conditions of the actors' lives and the environment in which they perform.<sup>18</sup> The recognition of the nonduality between the fictional and real serves as the way for characters to realize detachment in Kore-eda's films; it allows them to understand the mediated nature of the experiences they take as real and the way fiction and imagination can lead to a greater understanding of spiritual truth.

### ***After Life* (1998)**

*After Life* complicates perceived differences between documentary and drama by making the fictional seem more real and the real seem more fictional, demonstrating how these two modes of representation are intertwined in the process of gaining detachment from the limitations of an egocentric perspective. The premise for the story is a product of imagination. Set in a way station between life and death, *After Life* tracks the souls of those recently departed who stay at the station for a week before moving on. To remind viewers of the deeper Buddhist themes of the film, Kore-eda references several different signifiers of Mahayana Buddhism in *After*

*Life*. The setting of the film calls to mind the intermediate state between life and death taught by the Sarvastivada, a Mahayana school that was influential in the development of Japanese Buddhism. In this intermediary state, known as *chû-u* in Japanese, the newly deceased wait for seven periods lasting seven days each for a total of forty-nine days before taking on a new life. During this time, the deceased are judged according to the sins they committed in their previous life. While acknowledging the importance placed on the number seven in traditional views of the *chû-u*, *After Life* shortens the total time the newly deceased visit the station to one seven-day period. In a humanistic shift, moreover, the film depicts the way station as a place where characters realize enlightenment through self-reflection rather than a place where they are judged for their actions. At the beginning of this seven-day period, the deceased are greeted by caseworkers, who resemble the compassionate Bodhisattva, and are informed that they have a week to choose one memory from their life that they will take with them to eternity. The workers recreate this memory as a short film and screen it for the visitors during a reception at the end of the week.

Despite its inventive storyline, *After Life* is shot in a style that brings authenticity to the characters and their individual stories. Originally conceived of as a serial television drama, the film includes a number of nonactors as characters in the production.<sup>19</sup> Kore-eda and a staff of four assistants interviewed around five hundred extras, asking them the same question that the caseworkers ask the newly

deceased in the film—Which memory would you take with you after you die?—prompting unscripted reactions that are included in the film. The setting in which these interviews take place, moreover, grounds the story in the everyday. Instead of stereotypical depictions of an ethereal heaven, the film is set in a rustic dormitory that exists within the temporal dimensions of the changing seasons. The leaf-covered grounds that establish the opening of the film give way to snowfall and then, finally, hints of spring toward the end. In this setting, the newly deceased pick up right where they left off before they died, engaging in the everyday routines of life, such as reading, playing chess, and chatting with others. Lacking a transcendent perspective on mortality, they are bound by the technology of the time, relying on videotapes to review excerpts from their time on earth.

The cinematic style of *After Life* avoids the narrative conventions of fictional films to depict the way station as a real place. Instead of a static background against which the story develops, the setting takes on a life of its own, becoming almost another character in the film. Kore-eda, as he himself points out, is the cultural inheritor of Ozu Yasujiro (1903–1963), one of the three titans of Japanese cinema, along with Kurosawa Akira (1910–1998) and Mizoguchi Kenji (1898–1956).<sup>20</sup> In particular, Kore-eda was influenced by Ozu’s ability to highlight the importance of space in his film. As Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell argue in “Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu,” Ozu’s films resist the “classical paradigm” of Hollywood filmmaking, in which filmic space is subordinated to the

interests of narrative and character development through attention to the visual continuity of the story.<sup>21</sup> Ozu, they argue, draws attention to the larger space of the setting by breaking the 180-degree rule and utilizing techniques like “pillow shots”—cutaways to empty spaces or objects unrelated to the story—to free space from its role as background in the service of narrative development. Revealing Ozu’s influence on Kore-eda’s cinematography, *After Life* includes numerous pillow shots that linger on spaces immediately before and after people have moved through them to create what Kore-eda labels “dead time” in the film. Images of empty courtyards and hallways serve as more than just establishing shots: they flesh out the setting and resist the demands of narrative causality. In this way, the film’s real-world setting, characterization, and cinematography allow Kore-eda to depict an imaginative scenario in more realistic terms, as if he were shooting a documentary in which nonactors recall experiences from their lives.

Along with making fictional scenarios more true to life, *After Life* highlights the artificiality of the experiences that the visitors take as real, helping them see beyond their limited perspectives. Within this realistic depiction of an imaginative setting, artifice is used to help visitors gain perspective. In certain aspects, the caseworkers resemble Bodhisattva, the compassionate beings of the Mahayana tradition that seek to help others realize enlightenment often through deceptive methods. However, these characters are updated in the same way that the intermediary state of *chû-u* is updated in this modern Buddhist parable.

Traditionally, there are three types of Bodhisattva in the Mahayana with three different styles of leading others to enlightenment: the King, the Captain, and the Shepherd. The King leads others to enlightenment by seeking to realize it first; the Captain stays with the group but leads from the front; and the Shepherd delays enlightenment in order to guide others from behind. The caseworkers in *After Life* resemble the Shepherd type of Bodhisattva with a humanistic wrinkle that breaks down the duality between Bodhisattva and believer. Their delay in moving on from the station is not due to their overwhelming compassion for others; although they do show a desire to aid those who come through the station. Rather, they themselves choose to remain in the station for various reasons—a fitting variation on the Bodhisattva that is true to the spirit of Buddhist beliefs in which things are not always as they appear and the boundaries between self and other are shown to be an illusion. Like Bodhisattva, the caseworkers use “expedient means,” or *upaya* in Mahayana Buddhism, to help visitors detach from a narrow, egocentric perspective. In a general sense, *upaya* refers to any activity that helps those who are stuck in the process of gaining enlightenment to move forward. As chapter four of the Lotus Sutra suggests, often the Buddha, knowing that believers are unable to grasp deeper truths, resorts to a “rare course of action,” using fictional devices such as parables and even illusions.<sup>22</sup> In chapter seven of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha teaches “The Parable of the Phantom City,” a story about a group of believers on a difficult journey who grow tired and discouraged in their travels. To encourage them to

continue on, the leader of the group conjures a vision of a magical city that does not exist but that nevertheless inspires the travelers to press on to their destination.<sup>23</sup>

As a series of images arranged in a way to conjure an artificial vision of reality, the medium of film functions as a form of *upaya*, providing a useful tool for the caseworkers to prompt the visitors towards a greater understanding of their lives and to prepare them to move on. *After Life* self-consciously thematizes the process of filmmaking, allowing the visitors to gain perspective by creating their own short films. During the preproduction and production stages of filmmaking, the workers often trick and creatively deceive the visitors in order to encourage them to move beyond the things that keep them tied to their lives on earth. In one scene, a worker, interviewing a newly deceased woman, fabricates a story about his life as a way of sympathizing with the woman, who struggles to overcome her vanity and tendency to represent herself at a younger age. In an effort to personalize the films, the caseworkers hold meetings before production starts, discussing ways that they can shoot the stories to make them meaningful for the visitors. Likewise, during the production of the film, which takes place in a studio on the grounds of the dormitory where the newly deceased reside, the workers utilize their technical skills in cinematography, set design, and special effects to conjure the illusion of a past reality. In two particular cases, the workers use cotton balls to re-create the illusion of flying a Cessna airplane through the clouds and gently rock a makeshift

trolley car back and forth to simulate the sensation of riding through the streets of postwar Tokyo.

The guests are invited to participate in the cinematic adaptation of their memories, which helps them recognize the mediated nature of the memories that they take as real, enhancing their understanding of their experiences. Instead of playing themselves in the adaptation and reexperiencing their memories from a first-person perspective, the newly deceased witness the production in the third person as codirectors while actors play their parts in the stories. Serving as the directors of their own films allow the newly deceased to relive the experiences as they provide input on set design and acting, while encouraging them to recognize the artificiality of the process of re-creating their memories. Staging the memory of an elderly woman dancing in a red dress as a young girl, the workers cast a child actor to play the main role while enlisting the woman herself to instruct the child on the correct way to dance. When questioned by one of the workers concerning the specific hand movements involved in the routine, the woman acknowledges that she does not know exactly how the performance occurred, giving her best estimation of the choreography. Although the woman acknowledges in this way the fictionality of this re-creation of her past, it does not lessen the sense of joy that she gets from the experience; she gains a deeper appreciation of the memory by seeing the event as detached from herself. Accordingly, the newly deceased people's

involvement in the productions of their memories allows them to see the events as simultaneously part of their lives and separate, as both real and fictional.

Although fixating on a single memory ostensibly suggests the opposite of detachment, in actuality it allows the newly deceased to recognize the roles their egos play in fashioning the events of their lives into a story. Mr. Watanabe, an elderly visitor at the station, struggles to choose a single event as a “witness” for his life—a climatic moment that can give his existence greater meaning. What he realizes is that the whole process is not about choosing a particular moment; in effect, it really doesn’t matter what one chooses. Rather, it’s about recognizing that, stripped of the emotional investment of one’s ego, any one moment is no more important than another; they all provide a distillation of one’s life. Recognizing this truth, Watanabe chooses a mundane memory, an everyday moment sitting on a park bench with his wife. In this way, the activity of making a film was not an end in itself but an expedient measure used by the caseworkers to help Watanabe realize greater truth.

The nonduality between a documentary and fictional style is reflected in the collapse of the division between the stage and real world at the way station. Although the film initially divides the station into a real location, where guests live in a dormitory-like building, and a place of performance, where the films are produced on a set and viewed in a theater, these divisions dissolve when the real world is revealed as another stage. A skylight in the roof of the dormitory, through

which characters view outside conditions, exposes the conditionality of any one perspective on the world. At the very end of the film, Shiori, one of the workers at the station, stops beneath the skylight on her way to interview new inductees, gazing up to catch a glimpse of a nighttime moon—a strange sight for the early morning. Suddenly, the moon disappears, leaving behind a blue sky, and we learn that the scenes of the outside world viewed through the window are merely pictures that are regularly changed by workers on the roof. What the viewer took as the real world, then, was itself just another illusion, not unlike the sets where the memories are turned into film.

As further indication of the breakdown of dualistic boundaries in *After Life*, the ontological divisions implied in the English translation of the film's title merge by the end. Unlike *After Life*, *Wandafuru Raifu* does not imply a linear temporality dividing one's present life from the great beyond; instead, it emphasizes the continuity of existence and a nontranscendent view of death. The station is not a static place where characters reflect on their lives: it's a place where they experience the ongoing flow of existence. Another elderly woman recalls the time she spent with her family making rice balls in a grove of trees in the aftermath of the Great Kantô Earthquake, which leveled much of Tokyo in 1923. More than reliving this particular moment from her childhood, rehearsals before shooting the scene provide a chance for the woman to teach the actors playing her family the

unique way that rice balls were made decades earlier, creating a meaningful interaction with actors who are preparing to play the roles.

The continuation of existence into the great beyond is no more evident than in the story of one of the workers, Takashi Mochizuki, which comes to light in the latter part of the film. Despite his youthful appearance, Mochizuki, we learn, is actually the same age as Mr. Watanabe, having died during World War II. The lives of the two men, however, are more intertwined than is indicated by their professional relationship. As it turns out, Watanabe's wife was initially engaged to marry Mochizuki before he left for war, and she passed through the same station when she died a few years before Watanabe. We also learn that her memory, preserved on film in the station's library, involves an afternoon she spent sitting on a park bench with Mochizuki right before he went off to war, mirroring Watanabe's own memory of sitting on a bench in the same park as his wife envisioned in her memory. Watanabe, who had been unable to decide on a memory, is inspired by the knowledge that he played a part in someone's life, giving him the courage to move on. In this way, the afterlife, as it is portrayed in the film, does not serve as a negative space in relation to the real experiences of mortality, but as a place where life continues much as it did before death.

The film's deconstruction of ontological, temporal, and epistemological boundaries is most clearly manifest in the filming of Mochizuki's memory. The fictional and the dramatic intertwine to the point that the difference between the

two becomes indistinguishable. In a surprising gesture, Mochizuki chooses a memory from his time at the way station rather than one that occurred during his mortal existence. This memory is not based on an experience that occurred in the real world of the dormitory, but rather one from his work on the film set re-creating the memories of others. Mochizuki sits on the same prop bench that Watanabe and his wife used to make their films. However, in Mochizuki's film, the bench and the background around it are not used to create the illusion of a real experience but rather are revealed to be nothing more than artificial set pieces where Mochizuki, nevertheless, enjoyed authentic relationships with others. The moment is captured in a shot-reverse-shot, in which we first see Mochizuki sitting on the bench from the perspective of the filmmakers—his coworkers at the station to whom he is saying goodbye. The perspective then switches to Mochizuki's viewpoint of his friends behind the camera. Surrounded by a fake backdrop of blue skies and clouds that captures the stereotypical view of heaven, Mochizuki has an authentic moment of connection as he gazes at his friends. Here, the real exists in the fictional, and the fictional exists in the real. The significance of Mochizuki's life is not to be found in something other than his work in creating illusions for others but in the very relationships he enjoyed on the set. Mochizuki decides to film himself sitting in this place of performance because it is rooted in something authentic: his work aiding others at the station.

In this way, *After Life* thematizes the nondualistic relationship between artifice and truth alluded to in Buddhist scripture, demonstrating that participation in a fictional re-creation of one's life can allow one to transcend the limited perspective that results from a dualistic and egocentric view of the world. That the film provides a humanistic updating of Buddhist themes and ideas by challenging hierarchies between Bodhisattva and regular believers, I suggest, renews the deconstructive impulse of Buddhism itself, constantly reminding us of the transitory nature of the structures that we use to map our existence.

### ***I Wish* (2011)**

Although Kore-eda's *I Wish* contains fewer references to Buddhist practice than *After Life*, it explores the same themes of desire and detachment through a familiar coming-of-age storyline. Indeed, the secular nature of the narrative, I suggest, is an important characteristic *I Wish* shares with the Buddhist parables found in the *Lotus Sutra* and other texts, which often utilize engaging and relatable anecdotes to teach spiritual principles. The narrative follows two brothers who live apart. Twelve-year-old Kôichi lives with his mother and his maternal grandparents in the city of Kagoshima at the southernmost part of Kyushu, while his younger brother, Ryûnosuke, lives with his father in the northern Kyushu city of Fukuoka. In contrast to Ryûnosuke, who is more accepting of this new familial arrangement, Kôichi

desperately wants to reunite his family, envisioning a fantastical process that will eventually lead to this reunion. As the story develops, however, Kôichi recognizes that his selfish desires have blinded him to what is best for his younger brother and the rest of his family—an epiphany that the imaginative storyline prepares him to accept. As in *After Life*, the interplay between fiction and realism allows Kôichi and the viewer to recognize the way that artifice can lead one towards a state of detachment from selfish desires.

As a modern Buddhist parable, Kôichi's story represents the process of finding release from the yearnings that can keep us from moving on in life. Separated by divorce, Kôichi and his brother communicate regularly by phone, conspiring to reunite the family. The opening of a new bullet train line linking the two cities, Kôichi surmises, may provide an opportunity to gather the family in one location. According to a rumor spread among Kôichi's friends in school, when the trains pass each other for the first time, a huge amount of energy will be released, granting a wish to those who witness the event. Thinking that this event may provide an opportunity for his family to come together, Kôichi plans to travel to the exact point that the trains will pass and to make a wish that Sakurajima, a volcano near his home, will erupt, forcing him and his mother to flee to Fukuoka and rejoin his father and brother. After saving enough money to make the trip, Kôichi sets out with a few friends to meet up with his brother about halfway between the two cities. But the journey, we discover, is more about Kôichi's maturation than about

fulfilling his wish. By the time Kôichi, Ryûnosuke, and their friends reach the spot where the trains will converge, it becomes apparent that Kôichi's perspective has changed. While his friends yell their wishes at the top of their lungs as the trains pass, Kôichi remains silent, having abandoned his self-centered desires.

Kôichi's epiphany at the end of *I Wish* is brought about by expedient means. The impetus for the imaginative story came from Kore-eda's production company, which, in conjunction with the Japan Rail Company, suggested shooting a film with a train theme to commemorate the new bullet train line between Fukuoka and Kagoshima that opened around the time of the film's release.<sup>24</sup> The grand illusion of the narrative—the promise of a magical reunion of family members that one might see in a Disney film—engages the imagination of Kôichi and the viewer, preparing them to learn an important lesson. Driven on by their hopes, the group of friends resemble the Buddhist travelers inspired by the allure of the phantom city. Despite the fictional nature of the superstitions surrounding the bullet trains, the fantasy establishes the larger narrative contours that prompt the children's journey and grab the viewer's interest. The film's use of rising action pulls us toward a climax. Unfolding in linear fashion, the unusually long exposition sequence hints at an ending that will deliver Kôichi and Ryûnosuke from their lives apart as they prepare for the fateful trip. We, along with Kôichi and his friends, grow in anticipation as the story reaches its conclusion.

Yet the fictional story that the film uses to grab our attention merely provides the opportunity for Kôichi to learn an important spiritual truth, much like the Buddhist travelers heading to the phantom city. When the two meet in what should be a dramatic moment as the trains pass each other and the children yell their wishes, we realize that nothing has occurred to magically improve the characters' circumstances—they return to the same lives they had before the trip as the trains recede into the distance. The change that the narrative promises to deliver is not manifested, in this case, in the transformation of the characters' conditions but in a simple epiphany. The significance of one's life is found in the smaller everyday moments that are often overlooked, as demonstrated in a montage of images from Kôichi's life and the journey he takes with his brother: the CD that Ryûnosuke passes along to Kôichi, a picture of the brothers taking a bath when they were younger, and the banner with all of the wishes of the children written on it. For Kore-eda, these smaller moments are more true to life than the melodramatic endings in which families magically reunite.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, these moments, as Kôichi and the audience realize, are the true miracles in Kôichi's life—not the spectacular explosion of the volcano nor the dramatic reunification of his family. Through this epiphany, Kôichi is prompted to follow his father's advice and to choose the concerns of the world over his own desires, something he ignored in wishing that a volcano would destroy his hometown. By choosing the world, Kôichi finds release from his narrow egocentric perspective, seeing himself as just one part

of a larger environment. It is this simple change that allows Kôichi to move beyond the stagnation that resulted from his overwhelming desire to reunite his family and to fully embrace his new life in Kagoshima.

In contrast to the fictional scenario that drives the plot, the film's documentary style reflects the everyday truths that Kôichi learns. As with *After Life*, the fantastical plot of *I Wish* provides the necessary context and narrative trajectory within which a documentary style is able to capture the mundane moments of daily life that become the real miracles. To create a true-to-life feel in its representations of the locations on and around the bullet train line between these two cities, Kore-eda cast the very people who staff the stations and shops that the children visit along their journey to play themselves in the film.<sup>26</sup> He left the plot open in the preproduction stage, designing the story around the actors, the conditions at the various locations, and other developments during shooting.<sup>27</sup> Cinematography documents the daily lives of Kôichi and his friends while resisting the impulse to transform them into characters within a story. Kore-eda utilizes static long shots, like his predecessors Ozu and Mizoguchi, to mute the melodrama of particularly emotional scenes. Wide shots, moreover, capture lived experience, allowing people to move in and out of the frame, thus depicting the individual lives of the characters against the backdrop of a larger world of which they are a part. A high-angle long shot of Kôichi and his friends walking down the stairs of the Kagoshima station after the journey, in particular, expands our perspective outward to picture Kôichi

and his friends as just one part of their environment, providing a visual representation of Kôichi's commitment to choose the world over his own selfish desires. In this way, the imaginative storyline of *I Wish* engages Kôichi and the viewer, allowing them to realize the beauty of the everyday as revealed through a narrative and cinematic style that is closer to a documentary style.

The give-and-take between documentary and drama in *I Wish* is embodied in the child actors, who are able, more so than adults, to seamlessly bridge the gap between fiction and reality through their perspectives on the world. Although Kore-eda initially considered a boy-meets-girl scenario, involving a fateful meeting between a young boy and girl at the point where the two trains pass, he decided on the film's final storyline when he auditioned the Maeda brothers, Kohki (Kôichi) and Ohshirô (Ryûnosuke)—real-life brothers and minor celebrities in the Osaka area known as the comedic team Maeda-Maeda—and was struck by their unique bond.<sup>28</sup> True to his attempts to document a child's perspective, Kore-eda allowed the children to determine how the narrative unfolded.<sup>29</sup> Although he wrote a loose script for *I Wish*, he encouraged the children to improvise their lines, particularly during interview scenes, in which they discuss what they want to be when they grow up.<sup>30</sup> In these scenes, they are playing a character in the film and, at the same time, speaking without self-awareness about their own hope for the future at an age when anything still seems possible.

In other films that include child actors, such as *Like Father, Like Son*, Kore-eda did not provide a script at all, preferring to talk over the scenario with the actors before shooting and then construct the scene based on their real responses to his questions.<sup>31</sup> Unlike directors who tightly control character movement through precise choreography, Kore-eda allows his child actors to explore the space of the frame, often tracking them from behind as they venture around the shooting locations. Many of the scenes are based on unscripted moments in production. The part in which the children run around the town looking for a vantage point to witness the bullet trains, for example, was a spontaneous event that occurred while the production team and cast were searching for a proper shooting location.<sup>32</sup> During the train ride to the site where the children see the bullet trains pass, moreover, the camera captures them playing games and chatting as if they have forgotten that they are in a film, acting, unaffectedly, as kids would act on a long train ride. In this way, the fictional setup allows the children's real personalities and perspectives on the world to come through naturally. For this reason, the engaging coming-of-age story pulls the viewer into the linear unfolding of the narrative only to subvert expectations of a dramatic climax, drawing attention instead to the beauty of the everyday. As in *After Life*, a work of pure imagination provides the context and impetus for a close documentation of the authentic experiences of its actors.

In his use of engaging storylines to represent the deeper truths of human experience, Kore-eda's role as a director loosely resembles the Bodhisattva, who

conjure illusions and utilize the devices of fiction to capture the attention of believers and to lead them to a greater understanding of themselves and their experiences in the world. Indeed, one of the reasons that Kore-eda made *I Wish* was to teach his young daughter about the transcendent potential of everyday experience through fictional characters with whom she could relate.<sup>33</sup> Even in such a personal story, Kore-eda reinforces his belief in the nondualistic treatment of drama and documentary by showing how they work together to reveal greater spiritual truths.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Buddhist themes in Kore-eda's films are mentioned in several of the secondary sources listed in the references section of this article, including Bert Cardullo, "Life and Nothing But," *The Hudson Review* 51, 2 (Summer 1998): 409–416.

<sup>2</sup> Itakura Kimie. "Kore-eda Interview." *Asahi Evening News*, May 12, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Fontenot and Karen Fontenot, "Afterlife: A Practicum on Buddhism." [http://h08.cgpublisher.com/proposals/115/index\\_html](http://h08.cgpublisher.com/proposals/115/index_html). Accessed May 5, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Heyman, "Dual and Non-Dual Ontology in Sartre and Mahayana Buddhism," *Man and World* 30 (1997), 439.

<sup>5</sup> John Dunne, "Toward an Understanding of Non-Dual Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, 1 (2011), 73.

<sup>6</sup> "The Heart Sutra," trans. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Elephant Journal* (2014), <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2014/09/thich-nhat-hanh-gives-heart-sutra-a-new-translation/>. Accessed May 5, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 92.

<sup>8</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Hokazono Yuriko, "Ronguintabu-: Kore-eda Hirokazu Kantoku," *Associe* 7(14), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Kore-eda and Hokazono, "Ronguintabu," 108.

<sup>10</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu, *Aruku yôna hayasa de* (Tokyo: Ichio Otsuka, 2013), 172.

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- <sup>11</sup> Kore-eda, *Aruku yôna hayasa de*, 172.
- <sup>12</sup> Kore-eda, *Aruku yôna hayasa de*, 172.
- <sup>13</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu, “Dokumentari- to fikushion no sôgo noriire: Kore-eda Hirokazu,” *Kôkoku Hihyô* 275 (October 2003), 82.
- <sup>14</sup> Kore-eda, “Dokumentari-,” 81.
- <sup>15</sup> Kore-eda, *Aruku yôna hayasa de*, 172.
- <sup>16</sup> Kore-eda, “Dokumentari-,” 81–82.
- <sup>17</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Kan Sanjun, *Switch intabyu- tatsujin tatsu: Kore-eda Hirokazu × Kan Sanjun* (Tokyo: NHK, 2014), 18.
- <sup>18</sup> Kore-eda and Kan, *Switch intabyu-*, 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Honda Takayoshi, “Shi wo toshite egaku inochi,” *Seishun to Dokusho* 40, 10 (350) (October 2005), 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, “Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu,” *Screen* 17, 2 (Summer 1976), 54.
- <sup>21</sup> Thompson and Bordwell, “Space and Narrative,” 42.
- <sup>22</sup> Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 92.
- <sup>23</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 117-142.
- <sup>24</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Takazaki Toshio, “Kodomo no nichijyôteki na mokusen kara hanarenai koto,” *Kinema Junpô* 1586 (June 2011), 70.
- <sup>25</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Michida Yôichi, “Uchigawa kara no kotoba wo hikidasu to iu sagyô. *Tsukuru* 456 (July 2011), 118.
- <sup>26</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu, “Interview: Eiga kantoku Kore-eda Hirokazu,” *Shûkan tōyô keizai* 6335 (July 2011), 118.
- <sup>27</sup> Kore-eda, “Interview,” 120.
- <sup>28</sup> Kore-eda and Takazaki, “Kodomo no nichijyôteki na mokusen,” 70.
- <sup>29</sup> Kore-eda and Takazaki, “Kodomo no nichijyôteki na mokusen,” 70.
- <sup>30</sup> Kore-eda, “Interview,” 119.
- <sup>31</sup> Kore-eda, *Aruku yôna hayasa de*, 31.
- <sup>32</sup> Kore-eda, “Interview,” 119.

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<sup>33</sup> Kore-eda, *Aruku yôna hayasa de*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Kore-eda Hirokazu and Ja Jank, “Ajia hatsu: independento eiga no chihei wa ima,” *Kinema Junpô* 1298 (December 1999), 84-89.

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