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After Yang

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After Yang

Abstract

This is a film review of *After Yang* (2021), directed by Kogonada.

Keywords

Androids, Artificial Intelligence, Death, Grief, Memory

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John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



After Yang (2021), dir. Kogonada

In a not too distant future, Jake (Colin Farrell) and Kyra (Jodie Turner-Smith) have purchased a second-hand android, Yang (Justin H. Min), as a companion for their adopted daughter Mika (Malea Emma Tjandrawidjaja). They have had him her whole life, so when he malfunctions and stops working, they seek to have him repaired—but they find that their warranty does not cover a “core malfunction.” As Jake tries without success to find a way to bring Yang back to life, the family confronts the mortality of Yang and the loss to them, but they also learn more about Yang’s life before he came to them, and wrestle with the notion of Yang’s own personhood.

Robot stories have always dealt with the question of what it means to be human by suggesting that these artificial beings can have an interior life and a quest for meaning that may not be so different from our own. More significantly, such stories suggest that the same questions we might raise for these hypothetical artificial beings also apply to us: why are particular events viewed as significant enough to keep in memory? How is our sense of self impacted by our experiences of joy and pain over time? Is the meaning of our life determined by whether we “live on” in an afterlife, or can meaning be found in a finite life? As Jake uncovers Yang’s memories, he relives them himself, including a conversation about why Jake chose to run a tea shop. Jake told Yang that he once saw a documentary about tea and how its quality is indescribable, but perhaps comparable to taking a walk in a damp forest after the rain. Yang understands the metaphor, and that “a cup of tea can contain the world” in a particular place and time. As they share drinking tea in a ritualized fashion, Yang longs for a deeper experience, but perhaps understands it better than he thinks because he recognizes the longing for it. Spiritual experience for humans is also rarely articulated or understood fully, but it is felt, and Yang is not without feelings.

Yang’s feelings are also encountered when Jake uncovers Yang’s memories of his previous owners, and we learn that he experienced loss and pain like any human might. Yang longs for connection, and finds it in the families that he has joined, the memories of which are not erased when he acquires a new family. They treat him like a person, and there is no reason not to view him that way, given his interior life. This is also a future world that includes clones, who also experience some prejudice in being viewed as less than fully human—and we learn that Yang also forged meaningful connections with them, through a shared history that again demonstrates his ability to care for others, even those he has lost, as having had lives with worth.

At one point, Kyra asks Yang if he believes in an afterlife, and he suggests that he is not programmed for this belief. Kyra notes that humans seem to have that programming, but that it may not always be a good thing. Yang confides his own belief, that “I’m fine if there’s nothing in the end... There’s no something without nothing.” He may be quoting Chinese philosophy with which he is programmed, but he also articulates here a deep truth about appreciating existence in the face of the threat of non-being, which is what gives life its meaning.

Director Kogonada has provided a deeply moving reflection on life in this film, and the way in which he portrays memory also overlaps with his own artistry as a filmmaker. Yang’s memories are short moments that can be accessed and repeated over and over, and we see this repetition in Jake’s replaying of them—just as he said he viewed the documentary about tea, over and over again. In seeking meaning in life, and perhaps immortality, those of us who love films definitely return to them for repeat viewings, in search of that quality of permanence and meaning. A type of immortality is found in memories and in the recording of them, and filmmakers know this better than anyone as they try to capture that. We are blessed that we can return to such viewings again and again, just as Yang’s family does with the recordings of his memories. The meaning of life is found in the midst of loss, so maybe Yang (and Lao Tzu) are correct that “there’s no something without nothing.”