

DO YOU FEEL ALIVE?

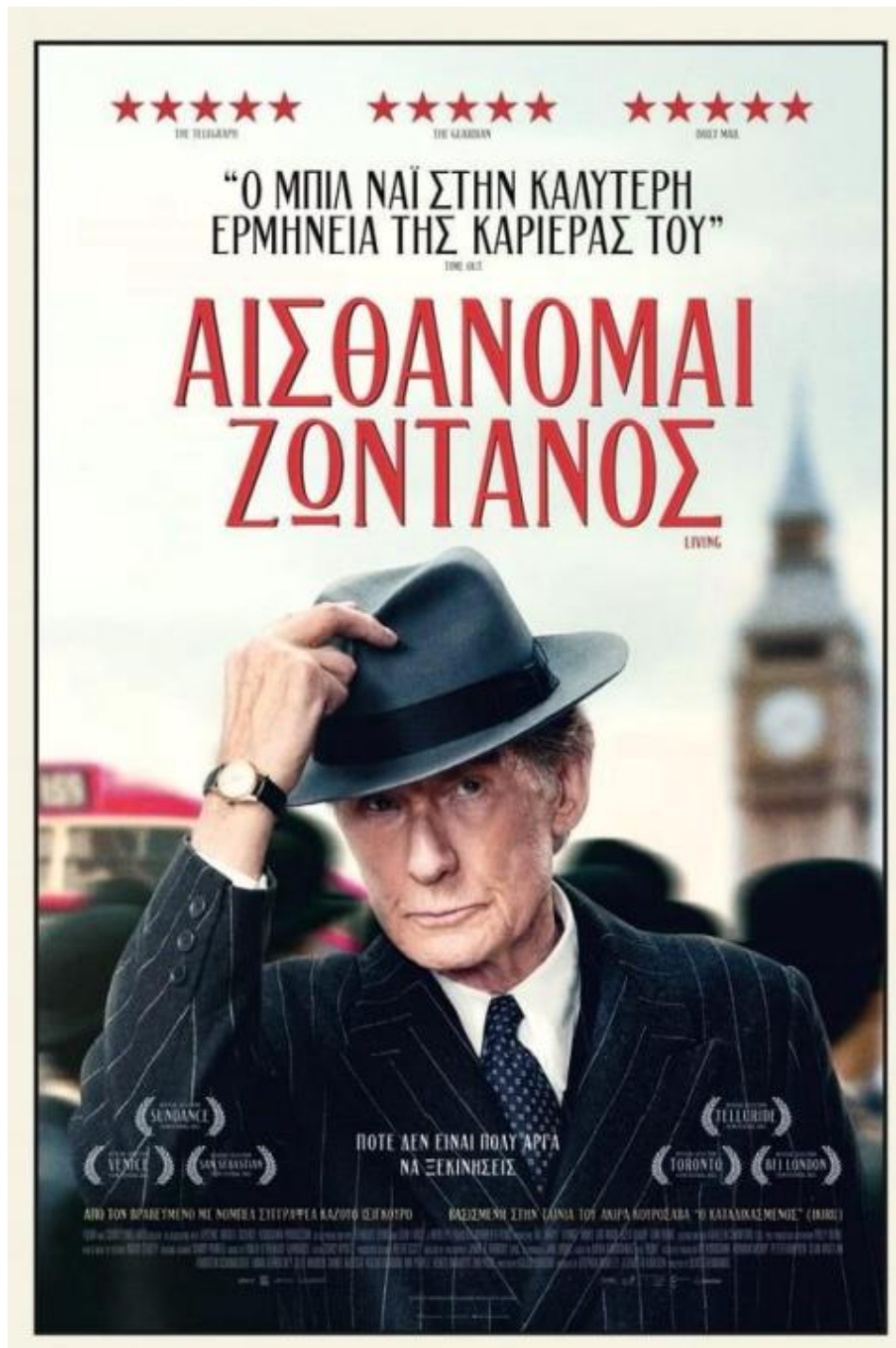
In the grey, gloomy post-war London, a young man, Peter Wakeling, starts his first day at the London County Council. His department head, Mr Rodney Williams, a stern middle-aged man in the Public Works Department, maintains the impeccable air of a gentleman, yet allows endless bureaucracy to produce no meaningful work. For example, no one acts on the applications submitted by the women of a neighbourhood seeking a playground for their children, who currently play in a rubbish dump. Then something suddenly changes: the ever-proper Mr Williams disappears from his post for days. When he returns, he is a changed man. What has happened?

The question is what happens to a life when its end is announced. Mr Williams, a conservative local-government official and department head, has spent decades in a dark suit and hat, trapped in routine: home, office, home, and the cinema every Tuesday. His life is as carefully scheduled as hundreds of others, as though everyone had emerged from a machine designed to produce identical, rigid, sterilised bureaucrats. It is an unchanging life, full of formalities and courtesies, thoroughly bourgeois, cold and repetitive, moving in an endless rhythm that can, nevertheless, suddenly crack. When Mr Williams learns he has at most six or seven months to live, he realises not merely that he will die, but that he has never truly lived. Yet it is never too late to live one's life.



He therefore decides to seek a little of the fragrance of the life he never lived—and will not have much time left to live. How can he make up, in a few months, for his total absence from the world of the living? Perhaps through an evening in the company of a writer in the dives

of drink; perhaps through the tender, innocent company of a lonely but lively young woman wandering London's streets; perhaps through one final, belated act against the monster of bureaucracy he has served for years.



Living (2022) is a British period drama directed by Oliver Hermanus and written by Kazuo Ishiguro. It is adapted from Ikiru, which in turn was inspired by Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1952; directed by Akira Kurosawa—see the related blog post of 3 November

2024). The South African director, aged 40, serves Ishiguro's adaptation with austere restraint. The story remains in 1952, taking us to post-war Britain, amid economic growth, the end of colonialism, rigid bureaucracy and the search for a better quality of everyday life—as embodied by the proposed playground. All of this is reflected in the troubled psyche of the protagonist, the unsmiling Mr Rodney Williams, a devoted bureaucrat and disappointed man. As mountains of paperwork engulf his office, he learns that he has a terminal illness. He begins searching for meaning in the time he has left. After this first major shock, and several smaller ones—the distance between him and his son, his daughter-in-law's anger over inheritance, and his meeting with the outgoing Margaret—Mr Williams reconsiders his life's priorities. These reflect the values of an entire society, which Kurosawa and then Hermanus criticise sharply, while also exploring lived time, social responsibility, and the relationship between private and public identity. Bill Nighy is wonderfully restrained and disarmingly moving as Williams, giving a deeply cinematic performance through his gaze, breathing, posture and silences. He embodies the crucial difference between the reflexive anxiety of how long we will live and the deeper challenge of how we will live—and what legacy we leave. Nighy was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor, and the film for Best Adapted Screenplay.

The film is set in post-war London, where Mr Williams receives a diagnosis of terminal cancer, leaving him only six months to live. Prompted by this unexpected turn in the protagonist's formal, dreary and lifeless existence, the film explores the human fear of inevitable death, the value of giving life meaning, the importance of human relationships, and every person's need to feel that their work leaves a mark on society more enduring than an existence that simply fades away.

The film opens with shots of a railway station, the principal means of transport for the middle classes in post-war London. Mr Rodney Williams is a senior official, one of the longest-serving employees in the Public Works Department of the London County Council. From the opening minutes, we see the formality and adherence to professional hierarchy characteristic of the era and London manners, as newly appointed Peter Wakeling interacts with the rest of the Public Works team. To a kindly, unsuspecting viewer, this formality might seem like a restrained expression of politeness and respect, the basis of friendly professional cooperation. A closer look, however, reveals an underlying coldness and the absence of a personal, human element in workplace relationships—the result of alienation in an emotionally empty society devoted to what one ought to do and how one ought to appear.



The employees are alienated and detached, as cogs in a superficial bureaucratic system that neither knows nor values the joy and productive potential of human contact. Cases move slowly or not at all; files gather dust on shelves, their contents of no concern to anyone; time is wasted on meaningless, dysfunctional formalities that “do no harm.” Once inside the office, we understand why citizens come and go waiting in vain for their cases to be settled. Mr Williams’s standard response is: “It is not within our jurisdiction, but I suppose we can put it on file.” This cynical resignation explains the treatment of a group of women’s initiative to create a playground on a former Second World War bombsite: their proposal ends up in the perpetual pile of open files on his desk.

Like the endless bureaucratic paperwork, Mr Williams’s days follow a predetermined, monotonous course. Then a medical revelation shakes this unending routine: late-stage stomach cancer, six months to live. The diagnosis is delivered with a certain indifference, unsurprising in an environment shaped by formality and emotional detachment. What is striking from today’s perspective, however, is that the doctor does not support his patient in coping with this undeniably difficult diagnosis, but remains the inaccessible scientist whose role is simply to convey medical information.

[LIVING — EXCERPT 1](#)



At this point, we should briefly comment on the vital importance of healthcare professionals supporting patients when diagnoses are expected to affect their quality of life, especially in terminal illness. A healthy, safe relationship of trust and honesty with a doctor has a demonstrably beneficial effect on a patient's mental health. This raises the question: how differently might Mr Williams have used the time available to him if his doctor—or another healthcare professional—had provided proper emotional support, rather than leaving him to carry this heavy burden alone? Perhaps he might have moved towards meaningful reconciliation with his family and those around him, made peace with himself in a timely and calm way, or fulfilled a deeply personal wish before it was too late. Or perhaps he would have seized his final opportunity to awaken a long-forgotten vitality, desperately trying not to leave the world as empty and colourless as he had lived for most of his life—tragically realising not only that he had not lived, but that he did not know how he might have done so.

Sadly, Mr Williams receives neither the expected understanding nor support from his family when he unsuccessfully tries to tell his son Michael and daughter-in-law Fiona the news.

LIVING — EXCERPT 2

Having experienced rejection by his family and lacking any alternative support—from colleagues, friends or his doctor—he decides to buy a lethal quantity of sleeping pills and end his life at a seaside resort. At this difficult moment, however, he meets a writer suffering from insomnia and gives him the pills. Moved by Mr Williams's story and wishing to repay his kindness, the writer promises him an entertaining night out in the city. The evening is unlike his usual routine: there is dancing and drinking, and a new, modern fedora replaces his traditional London hat. Yet this cheap entertainment does not emotionally fulfil the inwardly numb Mr Williams. In the scene featuring the song “The Rowan Tree,” he begins to cry, recognising the beauty, carefree spirit and quality of life he sacrificed for years at the altar of professional propriety and disconnection from human relationships—ideals society misleadingly elevated as the masculine model of industriousness, reliability and emotional composure.



Back in London, but still away from work—remarkably, none of his colleagues actively tried to find him—Mr Williams meets Margaret Harris, a young former subordinate, and invites her to dinner. His neighbour sees them dining at an expensive restaurant and rushes to Fiona, urging her to act to prevent a scandal in conservative London society. A

misunderstanding follows: Michael tries to talk to his father about the supposed scandal, while Mr Williams tries to share his diagnosis. Neither dares to say what is really on their mind. The tragic scene reminds us how important it is to share our feelings and thoughts when we need to, to ask for help and support, and to avoid the vicious circle of misinterpretations and mistaken assumptions about things left unsaid but which should have been spoken.

Mr Williams approaches Margaret and offers to provide a reference to help her move forward. Seeing her embody the joy of life, youthful energy, optimism, vitality and spontaneity, he realises how much his own life has lacked and soon makes her his role model. This realisation deepens when she reveals that, without his knowledge, she had nicknamed him “zombie”—the living dead. As she brings out the best in him, he grows emotionally attached to her and one evening confides his condition. In a deeply moving confession, he takes stock of his life and sadly admits that he let it pass unused, becoming merely a passive spectator. He compares himself to a child and life to a playground game. His greatest fear is that he will simply wait for life's end, like a lonely, uninvolved child waiting for its mother to call it home—which, in truth, is the call of our Creator. Seized by this thought, he decides for the first time to act meaningfully and turn fear into determination, making up for lost time. This is one of the film's most gripping scenes, raising questions about life's true meaning and urging viewers not to take life for granted, but to live it fully and meaningfully.



Driven by a new sense of duty and a desire to serve the community, he puts his plan into action the very next day. The playground that had taken hold of his imagination becomes a goal for which he is determined to overcome every obstacle—even himself. To everyone's surprise, despite torrential rain, he immediately leaves the workplace for the bomb-damaged site, which is to become the life's work of a protagonist once detached and concerned only with processing tasks.

[LIVING — EXCERPT 3](#)



The smooth flow of events is interrupted as the story jumps forward to the day of the protagonist's funeral. Events are now recounted through the memories of those close to him, who finally seem to understand the changes in his psyche and behaviour. Mr Williams knew he had little time left. His unexpected persistence and dedication, daily presence at the construction site, and sudden abandonment of pride—including his willingness to beg to realise his vision—now become clear. His effort shows that even the simplest purpose can give human existence meaning and sustain us in the hardest moments, when the end is near. The film as a whole is a hymn to life, which, paradoxically, acquires meaning and substance just before the shadow of death falls over it.

LIVING — EXCERPT 4

Inspired by Mr Williams's actions and determination, his former colleagues pledge to follow his example and become agents of positive change, but soon return to their familiar bureaucratic duties. This shows that permanently changing one's worldview requires indomitable strength and enormous reserves of inner resilience.

That is the legacy Mr Williams leaves in a letter to his younger colleague. He urges him never to lose heart and, when hope seems to collapse, always to remember their little playground and the happiness they experienced while working to complete it. Here the film's meaning is distilled: what matters is not only the destination itself, but also the journey towards it, the motive that drives us forward, and the fulfilment its realisation brings.



As the young man reads Mr Williams's letter with emotion, he makes his way to the playground. There he meets a police officer, who tells him he witnessed the protagonist's final moments. Mr Williams chose to breathe his last in his beloved playground, swinging and briefly taking on the role of the child who finally managed to play and, even if late, discover happiness. The officer explains that he left the elderly man exposed to the bitter cold because he could see that he was truly happy. Shortly before the end, Mr Williams was singing his beloved traditional song, "The Rowan Tree," the same song he had tried to sing at the bar with the writer Sutherland after learning his diagnosis. The song is devoted to a tree that, for both the lyricist and the protagonist, represents a refuge from childhood and a constant as the seasons change. The rowan tree symbolises the tree of life, whose unending cycle is revealed through nature. He recalls its incomparable beauty in spring and summer: for the tree, the season of blossoming; for a person, youth.



In the song, the names carved into the trunk belong to people who leave an indelible mark on our lives and, when they leave us, remain in our hearts as precious memories. The film's life-cycle motif is reinforced by its structure: it begins in the heart of summer and ends in the heart of winter. The two scenes featuring "The Rowan Tree" also form a circle, appearing near the beginning (the night in the bar) and in the final scene. The difference lies in the protagonist's state of mind. In the first rendition, he cannot summon the courage to finish, and the final line is cut short. In the second, reconciled to the approaching end and with peace on his face, he softly sings the line about his mother's call. We may wonder whether this story inspired the image of the playground and the fear he confided to the young woman. Now he can finish his favourite song because, deep down, he knows that, even at the last moment, he has avoided becoming the lonely, passive child he feared he would be.

[LIVING — EXCERPT 5](#)

The film ends on a bittersweet note. The hero loses his battle with illness, yet the final shot shows the same playground full of carefree children at play, reminding us that life goes on and, although it is not eternal, it is in our hands to live it as we deserve. A life is lost—and yet, until the final breath, it hopes, creates and dreams. This is an emphatically life-affirming elegy that, in its own way, restores our faith in humanism.



What is masterful about this film is that it does not condemn Mr Williams for not having lived, for isolating himself after his wife's death, for choosing to live only through memories, for becoming what he had aspired to be—a stereotypical Englishman—or for losing touch with his only son. It avoids easy moralising and instead goes deeper. In a heartbreaking way, it confronts the hero with his own choices in a life that slips away, lost in an ocean of respectability, bourgeois habits, vanity, drawing rooms, balconies with ornamental plants, and neighbourhood gossip. And yet this is a life that still dares to look death in the eye through the simple, human eyes of its protagonist. Life is certainly not a preparation for death; it is a journey worth enjoying, however we have lived and whatever way we ultimately chose to live.