



Departures

Passion and Purpose, Death and Life

What do flying geese have in common with a dead octopus? Both function as a metaphor in this slow, but moving, masterpiece which won Japan's first ever Oscar (Best Foreign Picture, 2009). *Departures* is about dreams dashed and passions rekindled. It offers a portrait of a man who has found meaning in his life. Fundamentally, though, it is a tale about death, and with it, life.

Daigo Koboyashi (Masahiro Motoki) is a professional cellist in a Tokyo orchestra. After completing Beethoven's 9th Symphony to an almost empty house, the orchestra is dissolved. That night when his wife, Mika (Ryoko Hirose), is preparing octopus for dinner it suddenly moves -- it seems to be alive. But when they cast it into the Tokyo Bay to freedom, it simply floats lifeless atop the water. The tossing of the dead octopus represents the dreams that Daigo has to cast off. He had dreamt of showing his wife the big cities of the world with his music. Now that dream is gone. When he sells his expensive cello to recoup some of the cost he realizes, "What I'd always thought of as my dream maybe hadn't been one after all." It is the final nail in the coffin.

With no job in Tokyo, Daigo and Mika leave the big city and return to Yamagata, his hometown, where his

deceased mother has left him an old home. Rent-free, all he needs now is a job. When he responds to a newspaper advertisement asking for a person to help with "departures" he thinks it has to do with travel. Really it has to do with death.

Daigo's new job is as a "Nokanshi," or professional encoffiner. In Japan families no longer prepare the bodies of their loved ones for the final journey. Neither do the undertakers. This task has become a niche career. The Nokanshi go into the homes of the grieving and ritually disrobe, wash, re-clothe, and make-up the bodies. It sounds morbid, but it is actually an act of beauty in the hands of a caring professional.

For Daigo this undesired job becomes a journey of personal discovery as he learns lessons of life alongside the master, Sasaki (Tsutomu Yamazaki). He does not realize at first that the job has its own occupational hazards. The smells of rotting corpses are enough to bring up lunch. And these smells stick to his clothing

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and body, enough for others to notice. But there are blessings, too. The careful and solemn ritual is an act of grace given to those living. Daigo grows into the job until he finally understands this is his calling, his purpose in life.

Though not a Christian film, we can see in Daigo a person who has found his vocation, his ministry. Like the cleaners in *Sunshine Cleaning*, those who come to clean up after death or make up the dead to look beautiful are performing an act of ministry that others will not or cannot do. They are serving those who are in deepest need.

Director Yojiro Takita brings a sense of grace and gravity to the funeral rituals. With long lingering cinematography and a remarkably emotive original score, the film is beautiful to watch, eschewing trivial sentimentality. Though death is central to the film, it is not heavy and somber. Rather, it portrays these rituals as celebrating the life of the one who has gone. And in doing so, it is both respecting the dead and giving hope to the living.

Food features prominently. Nokanshis get very hungry after performing a funeral ceremony. Their job requires intense concentration and that generates immense hunger. We see Daigo eat a number of meals here, from romantic dinners with his wife, to thoughtful musings with his boss. In the latter, the wise Sasaki tells him, "The living eat the dead. Unless they're plants. Unless you want to die you eat." Eating is part of life and Nokanshis eat with gusto and enjoyment. Eating a

large and delicious meal after a ritual seems appropriate, as a way of endorsing the value of life, having been in the midst of death.

There is another occupational hazard of a Nokanshi: shame. People look down on them. It is a profession no one wants, but everyone needs. When Mika eventually

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finds out what he does, she asks, “Aren’t you ashamed of having a job like that? . . . Touching dead people?” And when he goes to touch her, she recoils in disgust, “Don’t touch me. You’re filthy!” Rejected by friends, he is now rejected by his wife.

Departures presents a portrait of the stigma carried by certain people in the Bible. Lepers were shunned, avoided due to their physical condition. They had to cover their faces and shout out, “Unclean! Unclean!” (Lev. 13:45) whereupon people would retreat from the leper’s presence. But they had no control over this disease; it was not their choice. Closer to Daigo is Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6). He dealt with dead bodies and was considered unclean. His was a shameful profession. What jobs carry this kind of stigma today? Probably undertakers and morticians. Dealing with the dead has always been a societal opprobrium. No one, it seems, wants to see or touch the dead. But other jobs also carry similar disesteem: refuse collectors, janitors, people who perform the tasks we sweep under the carpet. Seeing Daigo work this stigmatic job as a ministry reminds us of the inherent dignity of these jobs regardless of public opinion.

Director Yojiro Takita chooses the cello as Daigo’s instrument carefully, even though creating an orchestral score for cellos is difficult to do. The cello is a large instrument with a wide range of sound, something like the depths of the human voice. More than this, though, its shape resembles the feminine form: curvaceous and graceful. Playing the cello resonates with the act of encoffining, where both the instrument and the corpse need to be cradled gently with care and affection. Daigo’s attention to detail in his work reignites the memory of the cello he has left behind

Finding his purpose in living, Daigo rekindles his passion for music. This brings us back to the geese. When he finds his childhood cello, he begins to play again, now for fun not for funds. We see him playing outdoors, amidst nature, both in the cold of a harsh winter and the cherry blossoms of a new spring. When he sees the geese flying free, we recognize this as a metaphor for the fresh freedom he now finds in his music. No longer is it constricting, holding him to dreams

that would prove dead. Music once more enables him to experience and enjoy life. His purpose promotes his passion. They go hand in hand, as much of life seems to do.

Few films take on the subject of death. It is too tricky and not usually a good commercial enterprise. We tend to avoid it in common conversation, because it makes us face our own mortality. It took 15 years from the conception of the film’s idea until it became reality. But death is slowly creeping up on all of us.

Life, though, is tied to death. Daigo tells Mika, “Everyone dies. I will and so will you.” He is one of the gatekeepers on the journey to the next life. Toward the end, another funeral worker says, “I’ve often thought . . . that maybe death is a gateway. Dying doesn’t mean the end. You go through it and on to the next thing. It’s a gate.” Both he and Daigo have it right.

Life encompasses death, and death is indeed a gateway to the next life we all will pass through. But we can prepare ourselves now for that future journey even while we are living. Jesus says “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). He is the gate to life. If we put our faith in him, then we can be assured that when we die we will move into his presence. Later we will be brought into a new life in the new earth which will be his eternal kingdom (2 Pet. 1:11). Death will then be a gateway to that future life with King Jesus.

Nobody wants to think about death. But, as *Departures* shows, by facing death we look at life differently. We cannot live an authentic life if we avoid death. Are you ready for your departure yet?

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