

Comments for West Windsor Film Festival Screening of Departures, *Okuribito*

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Thank you for inviting me—it's a pleasure to be here and a nice excuse to return to this film which I first saw 3 years ago, after it had won the academy award for best foreign film.

I'd like to start by saying that though I am a Japan specialist, I do not see the film as first and foremost a study of Japanese culture and social practices, though it is set in the context of specific cultural beliefs and Buddhist ideals and rituals. Rather I see it as a reflection on more universal themes of life and death. In fact the practice of the mortician who makes house calls (*nōkanshi* or *nōkanfu*) is very limited in Japan. Japanese people are cremated at death, but the preparation of the body for cremation is usually done at a funeral hall. Though I'm told that this film increased the demand for the *nōkanshi* and created a kind of mini-boom in Japan.

So the film is not a window into typical funerary practices in Japan. Nonetheless, long-standing cultural beliefs about how to send someone off, the Buddhist idea of the cyclical journey of reincarnation, and the idea of karma—the idea that this-worldly deeds shape the afterlife—all create a wonderful prism in this film for exploring the way in which life and death, living and dying are intertwined in interesting ways.

So let me say a few things—perhaps summing up the obvious—about how I interpret some of the themes in the film. And then say a few things about Japanese society and culture, funerals, and Buddhism that might help shed light on some moments in the film.

The film is about death, but it is flooded with images of life and moments of respect for life. Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, Ode to Joy, is the song played by the Daigo's orchestra (which subsequently dissolves). "Life" is also symbolized by the "fresh" octopus that Mika brings back which they toss back into the river, the return to the countryside of Yamagata from Tokyo, the fish swimming upstream (who swim vigorously, only to die), and in spring, the cherry blossoms, migrating geese, presumably returning to nest, and of course Mika's own baby. The film is very much about the reproduction of life, in some sense the reproduction of life *through* death, as when the death of Daigo's father allows him to remember the image of his father's face for the first time, and then to pass along that memory and love (through the stone) to his own child.

There is a fleshiness and vividness around death in this film that is almost erotic. Beauty, pleasure, food, desire, and death are all bound together. I love the scene in which Daigo enters the shachō's office upstairs, above the coffins, and it is filled with blossoming, exotic flora; we learn about the shachō's love for cooking, and his wife, as they savor the steaming "puffer fish" roe. (Listening to the Japanese, I realized that these were blowfish (*fugu*) roe, actually blowfish sperm; blowfish is a delicacy which is also poisonous if not prepared properly. So the reference to life and death and the edge between them is

particularly vivid.) The Christmas scene in which the three employees of the company lustily tear into fleshy pieces of fried chicken is another moment in which the connection to life through death is affirmed. As the shachō remarks, “the living feed on the dead .”

I’d like to point out that I think the bathhouse also plays a special role in affirming these connections in the film. The public bathhouse or *sentō* has a particular history in traditional Japan, as a hub of community, as well as of physical and spiritual regeneration. Bathing is sacred in Japan, and the dead are also bathed as a final purifying ritual before departing to the other world. The owner of the bathhouse, the widow Mrs. Yamashita, is a particularly nurturant figure in the film, and the tender relationship she possesses with the older gentleman who has frequented the bathhouse for 50 years is very touching. This same gentleman turns out to operate the crematorium, we learn later in the film (at her cremation). In his final remembrance at the crematorium, about their Christmas together and her request for him to light the bathwater fires, there is a parallel drawn between lighting the fires of the *sentō* to warm the bath and nurture the body, and lighting the fires of the crematorium. The parallel is in some sense disturbing, but it also comforting, in that it links the cremation of the tender owner of the bath house with the warm, nourishing, and communal waters of the bath.

And then there is the moment in which, as the camera zooms into the flames in the crematorium, the scene dissolves into the flying geese overhead migrating home to nest.

Anthropologists who have studied death and the ancestors in Japan have shown that the boundary between life and death is quite fluid in the context of Japanese Buddhist beliefs, and that the spirit of the deceased is thought to fade gradually into the world of the spirits. This helps us understand the rituals in the film and the attention given to sending off the dead.

[I am not a specialist about Buddhism or funerary rituals, though there are some wonderful books that have helped inform me, including Hikaru Suzuki’s *The Price of Death*, and for a more historical perspective, Jacqueline Stone and Mariko Walter’s *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*.] Before the widespread professionalization of the funeral business after World War II, the deceased body was cared for and prepared for cremation by the family itself and by an appointed body of community members. Studies of these rituals, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, show how the deceased was understood to gradually fade from the world. The rites performed included 1) resuscitation (in which the spirit was ritualistically “called back” to this world as a symbolic attempt to revive the deceased. This was done by offering water on a chopstick wrapped with cotton or calling the deceased person’s name.) 2) separation of the spirit from the physical body (hammering the coffin shut; smashing the deceased rice bowl after the body left the house; also bathing and dressing the deceased in the white robe which symbolizes a pilgrimage) 3) and also rites performed in order that the deceased would attain Buddhahood. The rituals were based on the belief that the spirit lived on after it had separated from the body, and that the spirit was dangerous to the family if it was not cared for well by the living. Hence the association of death with defilement and bad luck (the job is associated with stigma in the film). Many rituals are undertaken to purify the family. (Signs out “in mourning”; at the first meal after the death, all family members drank a cup of sake to purify themselves from death pollution; even today there is a custom to purify oneself with salt after returning from the crematorium”)

The deceased spirit undertakes a journey, and it is not until the 49<sup>th</sup> day after death that it is thought to finally arrive in the world of the spirits. And it is not until the 33<sup>rd</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death that they are considered to have achieved the transformation into household ancestor or Buddha.

The idea that the recently dead are not fully departed is very present in the film. In fact in my own observation the recently dead are often treated like the living—they are spoken to, fed (offerings), consulted in family decisions, etc. I remember quite vividly visiting the home of a close family friend who died at the age of 78. Though it was several months later, the cot where he slept during the last fragile months of his life was still made. (Indeed his wife sometimes slept there when they had house guests.) In his bedroom, there was a small memorial table, featuring a large and vivid photo of him in his favorite golf sweater, some flowers, and in front of the photograph, his glasses. Because “the departed” are treated so intimately, anthropologists such as Robert J. Smith at Cornell have argued that the newly dead or “departed” should be categorized differently from “the ancestors,” and that perhaps the East Asian notion known as “ancestor worship” by Westerners, is misnamed, in that it is more typically the “departed” who are doted on rather than the “ancestors”—and also because it is often more intimate than the term “worship” connotes.

It is this notion of a gradual, incremental path from the end of life to death that has caused some anthropologists (Margaret Lock, McGill U) to suggest that Japanese attitudes towards death are one reason that the Japanese medical community has resisted the notion of brain death (widely accepted in U.S. and European medical communities) —that is the notion of irreversible brain coma—and why far fewer organs are harvested to this day. It is simply very difficult for families to let go of their deceased members so quickly after their death is declared.

The film is loosely based on the remembrances of a *nōkanshi*, originally published in Japan in 1993 as *Nōkanfu Nikki*, by Shinmon Aoki. The author was a failed businessman and aspiring writer, who, like the protagonist in the film, Daigo, came to the business of preparing bodies by answering a help-wanted ad. Many aspects of the movie are fictitious, but it does capture the protagonist’s battle with those who stigmatize the job, and his own gradual acceptance of and admiration for his new profession. Aoki’s prose is wry and matter-of-fact, and in contrast we see how the film is carefully crafted and produced to reach our hearts. I’d like to close with a quote from Aoki, which I think nonetheless captures the spirit of both film and book, and the idea that life spills into death and death into life in unpredictable ways. Aoki tells the story of visiting the house of an old pensioner who lived alone. The person had been dead for some time and the house was filled with maggots. (This story appears, loosely, in the first scene of the film.) He was horrified to find that the maggots had infested the torso of the body itself. They somehow managed to get the body into the coffin, and he writes about the moment he was sweeping up the remaining maggots together with a neighbor, thinking that perhaps the home would be used as the funeral site. He writes:

“As I was sweeping...I got a better look at the maggots as individual existences. I noticed some were trying to crawl up the pillars to get away. A maggot is just another life form. And just when I was thinking that, I was sure I saw one of them glow with light” (44).

Although I would not read this film as a study of Japanese culture or funeral rights, the film does what good anthropology does: it helps us to rethink the ideas about life and death that we take for granted as natural and inevitable, and it opens our eyes to other possibilities.