

Departures  
A Weekly Film Report

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This film was an interesting depiction of Japanese culture in the modern era through a very specific perspective. From this perspective the audience is able to see some aspects of culture that are not always shown or spoken about openly in addition to cultural practices that occur more openly, such as the use of bathhouses. For example, this film was a heavy reflection on death in the Japanese culture, especially its perception. Understandably, the main character was disgusted to learn that the job he was applying for was at an encoffining company, but the ritual pertaining to the ceremony of encoffining as well as the way others treated him because of his chosen profession is a reflection of the Japanese culture. There are probably cultures out there where those who help the departed depart the physical realm are treated very well because their job is very important to the circle of life. The encoffining ceremony itself was beautiful in the same way that the tea ceremony or a demonstration of martial arts of other aspects of Japanese culture. This was because of the refined, deft movements, which was especially obvious in the first scene with the main character. The ceremony itself also has many key elements of the Japanese culture, such as the respect given to the body and the family at all times, including bowing and silent acknowledgement to always show a respectable front. Especially in comparison to the encoffiners at the end of the film who were going to just dump the body in the box, there is a distinct difference between the encoffining ceremony and simply putting a body in a coffin. The encoffiners of NK Agent were also very accepting of religion and were present for many different types of burials, from a more traditional to Christian, etc. This acceptance of religion is a very significant aspect of Japanese culture. Obviously, this film was set in the modern era of Japan and as such the culture of modern Japan is very apparent, but perhaps more important is the inclusion of the death culture depicted in this film.

There were many cinematic elements that were also used in this film, such as the scene where the father's face was blurred out. They could have chosen to just not show the father at all, but the blurring of the face was a more realistic interpretation of the main character's lack of memory. Other interesting cinematic choices include the perspective of Kobayashi walking to NK Agent for the first time up a hill and the car passing; the view from the ceiling when the receptionist tells Kobayashi to quit in person, which made the tension more apparent by the awkward angle; and the scenes where Kobayashi is sitting at the top of the stair contemplating his life. There was also a lot of seemingly "filler" scenes of nature and music and such, but I think that was instead part of the meaning behind the film—these scenes were important for the comparison between life and death. Just like how the boss of NK Agent housed and cared for a variety of plants (a habit which Kobayashi took up in his home to an extent), this contrast between life—plants, nature, music—and the death that surrounds them in their job is a key element to the overall theme of this film. The scene with the salmon highlights this the most; the live salmon struggle and struggle, barely moving, while the dead fish just float down the river passively. The cinematic and story elements of this film were excellent in this sense.

I connected to this film because I have an interest in police dramas and such where death is a key element of the genre. Due to this interest, I never had a distaste or prejudice against people who work with death in their profession because I realize the need for people like this. I also have some familiarity with the circumstances of death because of film and books, like what happens to a body after death, and knew as soon as the character said the grandmother had been dead for two weeks that Kobayashi was going to have an extremely hard time. These things about bodies after death and such are usually never thought about; in fact, before I read more detailed mysteries, I had a large knowledge gap between "death" and "bones" because I never

thought about the physical process that are inflicted upon a body post mortem. I think a part of my understanding about professions involving death also comes from my grandmother, who worked at a mortuary since as long as I can remember until her retirement a few years ago. I thought that was a perfectly ordinary job, just as most kids think their family's jobs are, and never thought that she worked at a cemetery was weird. I also never noticed that my grandmother was never married and thought that living with Grandma was perfectly normal as well. Altogether, this film was very interesting because it filled a different gap in my knowledge about the cultural practices of the Japanese when someone dies.

I would give this film a five out of five because it has both an excellent message and that message is portrayed well. While a lot of this film was very serious and invokes emotion from the viewer, there was also a very grim graveyard humor at some parts, which I'm glad was included because it is more of a reflection that this is yet another part of life. Unlike the other movies that I've given a five to, I don't know when I'll watch this film again because it was very emotionally stimulating, so I'll have to give it a while.