

Death and the Flesh: A Mental Health Nurse's Interpretation of the Film *Departures*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for a hermeneutic research course taught by Dr. Nancy Moules at the University of Calgary, where I (Hamada) interpreted Yojiro Takita's (2008) film *Departures*. I outline an interpretation of death that I came to after viewing the film, discussing death a form of "unsettling." Death unsettles by revealing life's impermanence which is often concealed in everyday life. We may be reminded of it through the death of another. As per Heidegger, when we are perturbed by life's finitude, we may be driven to action. Subsequently, death discloses life's grotesqueness. Hidden within the vitality of life is the inevitable decay of the flesh. For some, this may trigger a sense of disgust. As people who work closely with death, nurses learn ways to manage their disgust. However, this experience may not apply to mental health nurses. I end this paper by reflecting on my own experience as a mental nurse, questioning if my choice of specialty is perhaps related to the avoidance of death and the flesh.

Keywords

Death, hermeneutics, interpretation, film, mental health nursing, existential, disgust

The film *Departures* (Takita, 2008) portrays the life of Daigo Kobayashi, a cellist, who is forced to move back to his hometown after his orchestra is disbanded. He moves into his now-deceased mother's house with his wife, Mika. Daigo, now unemployed, sets off to find a new job in his countryside community. He sees an ad for a mysterious position helping people with "departures" and later finds out that the position is for an assistant to a funeral director. While initially hesitant

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to take on the role, Daigo, through his numerous encounters with the dead and their kin, begins to soften his stance on his new career. Indeed, it becomes apparent throughout the film that he has undergone a transformative experience, akin to what Gadamer (1960/2013) called *Erfahrung*. As per Moules et al. (2015), *Erfahrung* refers to an experience that is bound within “ecologies of meaning” (p. 45). To experience is not simply to perceive. Rather, in *Erfahrung*, we work out the significance of an event within our unique context. In *Departures*, funeral rites are initially foreign for Daigo. However, we witness his attempts to make sense of this new experience. Throughout the film, Daigo’s aversion to death fades bit by bit as he opens himself up to his new life. This transformation is contrasted in the film with the beliefs and attitudes of others who look down on Daigo’s new-found profession and express disgust at the thought of death in general.

While there is much to talk about in unpacking this film, in this paper, I (Hamada) will highlight an interpretation that arose from a particular address. The part of this film that addressed me was not a particular scene. Rather, I was intrigued by the “taken for grantedness” that peeked its way through various events in the movie. For example, Daigo talks to another townspeople while bathing together in the community bathhouse. Daigo asks him how long he had been frequenting the bathhouse. The townspeople replies that he has been using it for 50 years. The townspeople boasts about the craftsmanship that goes into the work of the bathhouse. He mentions how the owner pumps water from the well and heats it with wood, making the water “just right.” This man is also seen playing Japanese chess at the bathhouse in several scenes, conveying the different ways that the baths bring comfort to the community. The baths provide comfort not only in its literal facilities but also via a social function. For Daigo, the bathhouse is a place of catharsis. It is revealed that Daigo went to the baths as a child. This was the only place where he allowed himself to cry after his father left. As an adult, Daigo goes to the baths to clean himself after the shock of handling his first corpse. Despite the importance of the bathhouse to the community, we are reminded that nothing is enduring. Towards the end of the film, the bathhouse owner passes away, putting the fate of the bathhouse into question. This comes as a shock to many community members, who may have taken for granted the bathhouse’s continuing existence. Thus, the interpretation that I came to is the idea that death disturbs our given understanding of the world. It unsettles by revealing hidden truths about the world such as the impermanence of life and the existence of the grotesque. The rest of this paper will continue to build on these ideas, exemplifying the work of interpretation.

Impermanence, Reflection, and Action

Death disturbs our understanding of the world by highlighting its impermanence. This includes not just the death of people, but also the objects of our affection. In everyday life, we may simply assume that things will continue as they are. I described above the givenness of the bathhouse to the community and its unexpected closure. Despite existing for over 50 years, we are reminded that nothing is permanent. This is much like Daigo’s family home, which used to be his mother’s bar and before that, his father’s café. In *Departures*, we see that the past can call out to us through material details. Daigo’s father’s music collection remains in the home, serving as an emblem of a past relationship. There are also notches on the floor, inscribed from the spike of Daigo’s cello, that serve as a reminder of his past life. Although this is Daigo’s home, there is something about his environment that is uncanny. Having moved back to his mother’s house after a failed career in the orchestra, Daigo is confronted with the home of his past, which exists

only in memory. Simultaneously, Daigo is presented with the task of establishing a new home with his wife, Mika. While this is also “home,” it is not the enduring home he once knew. He cannot simply go on living the way he did before. Similarly, Moules and Venturato (2019) wrote about Moules’ experience of watching her family home be sold, excavated, and moved to another city. There is certainly something uncanny about seeing one’s childhood home be literally unearthed from its foundations, leaving a gaping hole in the ground. In German, the word for “uncanny” is *unheimlich* which, coincidentally, means “unhomely” (King, 2001, p. 96). As per King, the philosopher Martin Heidegger used this word to describe when our everyday attitude is disturbed, and we no longer feel a sense of being at home in the world. Throughout our lives, we may realize that the things we take for granted, such as the homes we grew up in, are only temporary. Although they may feel like the bedrock of our present, in their vanishing, we learn that all things are fleeting. Scott (2010) wrote that “the concreteness of existence is eerily misleading” (p. 64). When we lose something important, such as a home, it may force us to re-examine the stable ontology of our world.

Indeed, there is a relationship between death and concealment. Logically, we know that every human being dies. However, Heidegger (1927/2010) discussed how death is concealed from us in our everyday interactions with the world. He thought that the awareness of death is suppressed in society and when this happens, we cannot live authentically. Heidegger pointed out how death is often talked about as a factual occurrence, or rather, a “case” (p. 243). We hear of people dying every day, for example, in the news (think the COVID pandemic). We are given statistics conveying the number of deaths in wars, accidents, and natural disasters. In death being discussed in this way, however, it conceals for us that death is an event that uniquely, *we* face as individuals. In speaking of death as a case, there is a loss of a certain “mattering for us,” even though we know it is a certainty (Heidegger (1927/2010)). This type of indifference towards death, for Heidegger, conceals for us the fact that death will happen to *us* (or those we love) and that “it is possible in every moment” (p. 247). In living alongside this insight, Heidegger believed that we can live more authentically as people. This idea is reflected in popular culture, including music. In the Flaming Lips (2002) track “Do you Realize??”, they sang: “Do you realize/ that everyone you know someday will die?” To put it so plainly in everyday parlance might, for some, evoke distaste. Heidegger (1927/2010) thought that, in Western culture, there is a “constant tranquilization about death” (p. 243) to the point that to bring it up may constitute a “social inconvenience” (p. 244). It may be disturbing for some to awaken from the lull of denial. On the other hand, the Flaming Lips (2002) remind us that when we are aware of life’s finitude, we can live each day with intention. In a similar vein, Death Cab for Cutie (2005) makes an astute observation in “What Sarah Said,” a song about watching someone die: “And it came to me then/ that in every plan/ is a tiny prayer to Father Time.” They highlight how we plan our lives on auto-pilot assuming that we, and those around us, will continue to exist. It is only when we sense that death is near that we begin to appreciate each coming day. We are not entitled to each day, but rather each new day comes as a gift.

Death has a reflective effect on people. In *Departures*, through the passing of others, the living are made to confront life’s finitude. What is notable is the cataclysmic effect that this seems to have. I am taken by one man who is stoic throughout his wife’s funeral ceremony and is initially stern with Daigo and his supervisor for arriving five minutes late. In interpreting this scene, I came to the understanding that he may have felt compelled to act this way to “save face.”

According to Lin and Yamaguchi (2008), there is a great deal of pressure to project a public image that is reflective of one's social role in Japan. As the head of the family, he may have felt a strong need to maintain composure. With this in mind, we can see how overwhelming the force of death can be. The same man is unable to keep himself together and begins sobbing by the end of the funeral as the coffin shuts for the last time. We see many other men in the film breaking down as they finally come to realize that someone is lost. They plead for forgiveness and express their regrets. The *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) of death unsettles the usual social mores. The ability to save face may be impossible while confronting something so unspeakable. Even in cultures where emotions are expressed sparingly, it may be difficult to pretend that we are unaffected. On a similar note, perhaps in the face of death, the usual human affairs may appear trivial or arbitrary. The man who is initially stern with Daigo and his supervisor for being late is thankful by the end of the ceremony. By the end, the crew's late arrival is made superfluous in the light of what was experienced at the funeral. While death seems to unsettle emotions and rigid ontologies, it also seems to resettle us into a better understanding of what is important to us. Indeed, for those living in its wake, death could be interpreted as an invitation to reorient one's values. Daigo portrays himself as someone who carries a grudge against his father for leaving. However, learning the news that his father has passed, he is forced to make a decision about what to do. We see that Daigo has been thinking about his father at times throughout the film, yet neither of them has ever contacted each other. Putting aside his anger towards his father, Daigo chooses to travel to see his father's body. This is the last possible time that Daigo can see his father and this realization pushes him to reassess his feelings. Through the gesture of seeing his father one last time, Daigo admits to himself that he still feels a sense of love for him. Gadamer (1976/1996) wrote that "gifts of mourning are a way of cherishing human existence" (p. 75). I suspect that Daigo would not have made the trip to see his father if he did not feel that he was worth cherishing. Perhaps this is what Heidegger meant by living a more authentic existence—to commit oneself to making choices that are reflective of one's chosen values (Varga & Guignon, 2023).

From a nursing perspective, this may help us understand family members' experiences of grief. Death is not something that we think about frequently. As Heidegger (1927/2010) pointed out, this is partly due to our attempts to conceal it. Yet death, when we experience it personally, is a significant event. Moules et al. (2004) stated that in experiencing loss, ". . . something arrives in our lives and life will never be the same again. There is a loss of naiveté, a new awareness that was not wanted . . ." (p. 104). When this awareness is gained, *Departures* shows us that people can respond in unique ways. Some might attempt to bury their feelings in stoicism. Others may reflect on their feelings, in all their ambivalence and complexity. In death's unsettling of life, some may re-examine their previously held understandings and act in ways they normally would not.

The Existence of the Grotesque

Death, in its unsettling, also reminds us that life is not all "sunshine and rainbows." While we may get caught up in the trivialities or the exuberance of life, *Departures* reminds us that ugliness is just around the corner, intentionally hidden from view. While death, as an abstract concept, is something we may be aware of, it is the grotesqueness of death, or rather the flesh, that we often do not see. This could be why Daigo has such a visceral reaction when he is called

to pick up his first corpse. The smell and sight of raw flesh can be overwhelming. He feels so repulsed that he finds himself retching. He must wash himself meticulously to rid himself of any scent. Later in the day, his wife brings home a freshly chopped chicken from a neighbour. This reminds Daigo of the corpse, sending him retching again. Daigo has presumably seen raw meat many times in life, but after seeing the corpse, he perhaps sees it differently. Chicken meat, of course, is a product of death. Even if it has been cleaned up and presented elegantly on a platter, this is not enough to hide this truth from him. Daigo's boss makes the astute observation that "the living eat the dead." While this is quite an obvious observation in hindsight, the power of this statement may lie in the fact that we either forget this or it is often covered up. To continue to use the example of animal flesh, not many of us view the slaughter of animals. Instead, we buy meat from the supermarket (pre-packed) or at the restaurant cooked for us. We are sheltered from the grotesqueness of death. At the beginning of the film, Mika brings home an octopus to cook, but she discovers it is still alive. Daigo and Mika cannot bring themselves to kill it, so they throw it back into the ocean. In language, there are words for specific types of flesh such as pork, beef, or poultry, which may help us avoid the fact that we are eating dead pigs, cows, and chickens.

The grotesqueness of the flesh is also something that has been explored by artists. I am reminded of the painting *Saturn* by Francisco Goya (1820-1823). This image was deemed so repulsive that when I searched for it on Google, it activated my "Safe Search" function, initially blurring it from view. It seems human beings have become so sophisticated in their concealment of death that technology can now do it automatically.

Figure 1

Goya, F. (1820-1823). *Saturn* [Mural painting transferred to canvas]. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. ©Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.



Morden and Pulimood (2023) stated that Goya depicts the Roman god, Saturn, eating one of his children. They note that this painting is based on the myth of Saturn, who eats his children as he suspects that they will usurp him. What I want to focus on here is not necessarily the myth, but rather the reaction that many people get when viewing this work. When I saw this work for the first time, I was disgusted by it and had a desire to look away. The sight of blood and dismembered body parts was something I wanted to avoid. As a nursing student, I had a similar reaction when I was placed in a general medical-surgical ward. As someone who did not spend much time in hospitals, at first, I was physically repulsed by all the smells and sights of the body. I was overloaded by the sensory qualities of vomit, feces, and wounds. The sight of disfigured body parts was startling. What I was feeling was disgust. Korsmeyer (2011) wrote that disgust is a “reactive response built into our basic biology that functions as a somatic evaluation” (p. 30). She notes that disgust helps us keep clean and avoid contaminants. This is a particular challenge for nurses, who, by occupation, are in frequent contact with open flesh and body fluids. Perhaps this is why McCaffrey (2019) wrote that “nursing is partly a practice of learning to manage disgust” (p. 4). This is something that I had to learn over several weeks of that placement, just as Daigo does in the film. In the end, I chose not to pursue physical health nursing, instead opting to become a child and youth mental health nurse. While certainly one reason is that I enjoyed learning about psychiatry, *Departures* now challenges my understanding. Seeing the lengths that people go to avoid death, could it not be said that this is just another attempt to avoid its grotesqueness?

As we see from the film, a lot of touch is involved in preparing bodies, which is also the case in most physical health nursing specialties. Daigo is seen cleaning and stuffing the anus of the deceased so that funeral attendees can avoid unpleasant smells. In medical settings, one might spend time cleaning and measuring the depth of burns or bed sores. In contrast, in mental health nursing (and in child and youth settings in particular), this type of personal care is limited. This could be personally protective as, perhaps for some, it may trigger disgust. On the other hand, Holmes et al. (2006) stated that some mental health nurses overcome disgust in another sense. They noted that mental health nurses must self-manage social stigma, which can be considered a relational form of disgust. Throughout my career, I have met several mental health nurses who pride themselves in working with the marginalized. They specifically entered the field to work with the homeless, who often experience severe mental illness and drug addiction. The average person might feel the urge to pull away from these individuals, reading them as a vector for disease or violence. However, these nurses allow the stigmatized into their intimate, personal space (Holmes et al., 2006). Clearly, there is nuance in how mental health nurses experience disgust in relation to physical health nurses. In choosing mental health as a specialty, some may avoid the “indignity” of carrying out repulsive physical tasks but confront the disgust of social relations head-on. In *Departures*, both types of disgust are present. On the bus, schoolchildren are disgusted by the smell of rotting that lingers on Daigo. Daigo’s social relations also become fractured once his new line of work is made apparent. In Japan, there is historical stigma against labourers in “dirty” industries such as butchers, funeral workers, and tannery workers (Gordon, 2017). One thing that these industries have in common is their proximity to death.

Inpatient mental health nursing is unique in its logistical location to death. Unlike our medical counterparts, it is rare to witness the death of our patients (Williams et al., 2018). When our patients succumb to injury or illness (self-inflicted or not), the moment of death often occurs on a

physical health ward. I have heard mental health nurses refer to these parts of the hospital as “the other side.” Ironically, the “other side” is also a euphemism for death. As mental health nurses, we remain on the side of the living, and can only imagine what the deaths of our patients are like. Of course, we too feel grief, particularly for patients we are quite close to. However, it is rare for us to quite literally see or touch the dead. Although I have not worked in critical care, as a student and as a professional, I have been able to observe other parts of the hospital, for example, the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). As a traveller of sorts, I still remember experiencing a sense of shock at the sheer amount of technology required to keep someone alive. Just like how Google blurred out Goya’s (1820-1823) depiction of death, all the beeping machines in the ICU seemed to work in tandem in concealing death. I chose to use the word “concealing” here rather than “preventing” as, of course, the purpose of medical care is to save lives. However, what these machines conceal (and in turn, reveal) is that death is an inevitable event. Death is not an anomaly. Rather, what is exceptional is the modern-day prolongation of it through its medicalization (Field, 1994). I suggest that in our efforts to hide death and all its grotesqueness, we only further affirm that death is an unavoidable part of being in the world. All living things are flesh, and in the end, all flesh decays.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have built an argument for the interpretation that death is an unsettling phenomenon. Death unsettles us by revealing truths about human life. In viewing *Departures*, two ideas came to mind. Firstly, that we are all impermanent. In coming to an awareness of this fundamental truth, we may be thrown into reflection and be called to live more consciously. Secondly, I discussed that encountering the grotesque is a necessary part of being in the world. Living beings are composed of flesh and body fluids, which can elicit a sense of disgust. Death and physical injury remind us of this. *Departures* afforded me the possibility of reconsidering my own ideas about life and death. I reflected on my chosen nursing specialty and whether this could be interpreted as an avoidance of death and the grotesque. Death Cab for Cutie (2005) sang in “What Sarah Said” that “Love is watching someone die,” and this truth was certainly reflected in *Departures*. Daigo shows us that it is only by embracing the “unsavoury” aspects of death and dying that we can really begin to appreciate life.

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