

Six of us viewed *Departures* (2008). Ages ranged from 68 to 93

We were unanimous in liking the film enormously and each one of us contributed interesting comments and personal experiences.

### **Comments on narrative, casting and cinematography,**

Two of us found the film too long. If it was shown on TV they would cut it. Unlikely to be shown on TV. Maybe in the early hours.

E.M. : "at certain points I thought 'this will be the end' but it carried on."

M.G. : while there were a lot of coincidences & clichés I didn't care because I liked the film so much. The wife's pregnancy as predictable & secretary's parallel abandoning of her child as part of the loaded structure. The very predictability was part of the charm of the whole.

J.L: pointed out the non linear narrative with a long flash-back with the car in the mist as marker, and the flashbacks to childhood. The way there were moments of shock: the disbanding of the orchestra, the octopus, the razor cut, the discovery of the transgender episode – as if the director wanted to jolt us out of complacency after calm and serene moments. She also noted the way the sound track was made up of music, silences and natural sounds. The importance of hands: not only in the tending of the dead but also in other tasks. Importance of touch give a feminine quality to the film but the director is a man.

J. G: noted the camera movements. A lot of tracking, sweeping zooming, overhead shots, close ups.

The music was commented on. Specially by E.M whose daughter is a cellist and declared that the main protagonist was actually playing the instrument - albeit that may not have been on the soundtrack. Apart from the classical pieces it sounded like Japanese folk songs.

J.L. It has a feminine quality.

There was disagreement about the unrealistic sequences of Daigo playing his baby cello on the bank in a landscape background. Some found it trite and superfluous, others poetic and release from the serious matter of the subject. Comparison with the landscape paintings in *Amour*?

### **Exchange of views:**

**Body preparation:** Comparison between the way the whole family is present at the body's preparation and our contemporary practice where we leave the task to the undertaker and only see the end product. Shocking sight of father in a blue satin frilly kind of romper suit. Not

always so: three sisters nursed their mother and washed and prepared her. This must still exist in some communities. The funeral customs of different communities are secret. Whereas we know about marriage customs we do not know the diverse funeral rites in our multicultural society. The importance for the grieving process to involve the whole family and give each other support.

**On the transgender episode:** In spite of it being her second viewing, R. did not remember reading the subtitled word **suicide** and only perceived the words 'charcoal'. The mother accepting attitude, the coming to terms of the father, and touching thanks to the encoffiner. Subversion of beauty as female...

**Eating and Death:** the images of dead chicken to be eaten, and live birds in the fields. The puffer fish as a dangerous food to eat.

**Family of the deceased:** the encoffiner enters people lives at a time at the decisive point of death. The films shows how the different families react. The sense of dignity and respect for the dead body. Love and affection and sense of reparation elicited by the ceremony.

**Beautiful women:** gender imbalance: no young men dead, beautiful faces, do they seem desirable? no sign of age. E.M: sadly it is not so 'titilating' as that. It does beautify death. Debate around the different signs of ageing on the skin women of different ethnicities...?

**Cremation:** the touching scene where the son sees looks at the furnace where his mother is cremated. In Pere Lachaise they invite you to see the coffin being burnt. (see also below: additional comments)

## Questions:

**Would we be as shocked if one of our daughters married an undertaker?** Yes but not the same as in Japan where it is a caste issue. For very orthodox Jews the Cohen (alleged to be the descendants of the original priests of the Temple) are forbidden to attend funerals or go near a cemetery. On the other hand every synagogue has a team of voluntary men and women who tend the dead and and it is seen as an honourable task. Very observant jewish communities do not allow women to attend a funeral.

Loved the japanishness of it but it would but not everybody's cup of tea J.G. I wanted my daughters to watch Amour but I think I might start them with this film .

E.M. I would not recommend it to people who are depressed. I mean people who might be contemplating suicide. It does beautify death.

### **Did the film make you decide to make your last wishes?**

R. I had already before seeing the film

E.M. I will keep to my decision to give my body for science research. No ceremony. No funeral. It will not cost my family a penny. And the family can have a party and talk about me.

**Additional comments from J.G.**(some of it lost in cross conversation and bad sound. Added after the session.)

E.M. said about Japanese wanting to have both ashes and a bit of bone from a cremation (as evidence?). A programme I'd seen called 'The Culture of Silence' about doctors withholding (or not) information from patients. The series was cross cultural and this incident took place in Japan. In the film a doctor is speaking to the husband and sister of a woman who had cancer and on whom he had just done a mastectomy. After talking for a while about the disease he pulled out a box and emptied the contents onto the table. The box contained the woman's breast. I was shocked as I think I was supposed to be at the bluntness on the part of the Dr and thought he must be an extreme example of openness. During our discussion I began to think this frankness (shocking to us) was custom and expectation in Japan.

My friend had told me that her sister was helping her arrange things with the undertakers and in conversation the sister had made it clear that she wanted to watch it happening. We laughed when she told me and added 'I think she wants to make sure I'm dead'. (Relating to the needing of evidence with humour).

I went to the funeral of a friend and watched from a viewing room. The viewing room looked down on a industrial complex of stainless steel (very Alphaville) whereas in *Departures* we see a man looking through a small window in an old furnace. One was so alienating I would never choose to watch another cremation in England. The other was so simple and real - I could imagine always choosing to watch and say a final goodbye to someone I loved. There may be cultural differences in needing evidence of the disposal of the body.

I was very moved by the touching and caressing of the bodies in the film. I was also struck by the parallel with childbirth or to be more precise with the work of a midwife during labour. Childbirth as process is often described as similar to dying - the beginning and end of life and I had a feeling that the work of those attending in both instances was similar but hadn't appreciated the parallels so clearly before *Departures*.