

An Analysis of the Ethical Value and Aesthetics of the Movie “Departures” from the Perspective of Ritual Narrative

Yiyun Zhou*

School of Medical Humanities and Management, Wenzhou Medical University, Wenzhou 325035, Zhejiang, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Ritual narrative is of great significance in the fields of medical humanities and palliative care because of its strong cultural symbolism and emotional cohesion. The Japanese film “Departures” shows the solemnity of the encoffining ceremony through visual form, completing the narrative reconstruction from dispelling professional prejudice to restoring the dignity of life. The encoffining ceremony is not only a physical modification of the deceased’s body, but also a restoration of the emotional memory of the bereaved family members and a reaffirmation of the meaning of the lives of the living. The study provides an in-depth analysis of how ritual behaviors in movies intervene in the field of life and death, revealing their ethical value and aesthetic enlightenment in the context of contemporary hospice care.

Keywords: palliative care; ritual narrative; “Departures”; narrative medicine

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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of modern medicine, life is often simplified into a series of precise physiological indicators, resulting in the lack of humanistic spirit in medical practice. The emergence of palliative care is to correct the tendency of technology supremacy and to find medical warmth for the life approaching the end of life in addition to cold medical equipment. The World Health Organization defines it as “a nursing model that provides all-round physical, psychological, and social care to patients and their families when dying patients do not respond to curative medical care, so that they can achieve dignity and peace at the end of their lives, thereby improving the quality of death”^[1]. Its point of view is not only to relieve physical pain, but also to respect the dignity of the dying person as a life subject.

The encoffining ceremony is an important intervention method in grief care^[2]. The movie “Departures” intuitively presents the death field that is double marginalized by the modern biomedical model and mainstream social culture through visual spatial construction. The film unfolds from the perspective of unemployed cellist Daigo Kobayashi, and meticulously depicts his process from his initial instinctive fear of the decay of corpses and the loneliness of death to his realization of the weight of life in the solemn coffin ceremonies. Dawu used the actions of wiping the body and tracing the makeup to create a link between the living and the dead that transcends time and space. Especially when facing his

father, who had caused him severe childhood trauma and eventually died in a foreign country, the small stone that slipped from his father's hand not only broke the grievances that had been frozen for decades, but also reached the ultimate reconciliation of the father-son relationship in a silent ritual.

The narrative power deeply embedded in the encoffining ceremony has unique medical and humanistic value. It transcends simple professional and technical movements and becomes a conversation about life using physical actions. Under the wrap of ritual, death is not the end of life, but a traceable curtain call. Ritual intervention can very well soothe the violent inner fluctuations of bereaved families and transform destructive grief into acceptable grief^[3]. Therefore, this study starts from the theory of ritual narrative and conducts further academic exploration into the life connotation contained in "Departures". The research will not be expressed in complex terminology, but will focus on how rituals restore the dignity of life, how to recreate emotional memories, and how to create connections that transcend life and death. Through the analysis of classic images, this article attempts to give contemporary palliative care practice a humanistic care perspective that has both aesthetic depth and ethical warmth.

2. Body Purification and Aesthetic Reconstruction

In the traditional social cognitive map, death is often associated with filth, fear and taboo, and the group psychological defense mechanism has led to society's general avoidance of the death field. The movie "Departures" materializes the encoffining ceremony and explores how the ceremony uses the aesthetic reconstruction of the body of the deceased.

2.1. The Practice of Destigmatizing the Field of Death

Anthropologist Mary Douglas pointed out in "Cleanness and Danger" that pollution is essentially a deviant substance that disrupts order^[4]. The decay and disorder of corpses caused by death are the greatest "impurity" in social psychology. At the beginning of the film, the director deliberately showed the highly decomposed body of an old man living alone that Dawu dealt with alone for the first time. The visual mess, the olfactory stimulation, and the desolation of the deceased dying alone together show the most primitive and ferocious aspect of death. This scene well captures the reason why society has a stigma against death, that is, the instinctive rejection of loss of control and decay. However, as the narrative develops, the encoffining ceremony displays a powerful cultural intervention function. The embalmer uses a series of standardized and ritualistic actions to clean up the "impurity". Every precise wipe and every change of clothing is not only cleansing in a hygienic sense, but also purifying on a symbolic level. The ritual transforms the originally disorderly and frightening body into a peaceful "dead person". This transformation process sends a clear ethical signal to the family members present. Although the life in front of them has ended its biological functions, its social attributes and dignity as a human being are sacred and inviolable. This aesthetic transformation of the field successfully reconstructs death from a negative event that needs to be quickly buried and forgotten into a solemn moment worthy of the last gaze and respect.

2.2. Establishment of Order in Non-verbal Narrative

Language is always pale when saying goodbye, and body movements become a narrative tool separated from language. President Sasaki and the protagonist Daigo showed very high accuracy and fluency when performing the coffin operation, which was almost an artistic performance. When Dawu applied makeup to the deceased, his finger movements were not only technical, but also had the rhythm and rhythm of a cello. This sense of ritual establishes a unique new order to the chaotic death scene. There are many scenes in the film where family members fall into hysterical crying, anxiety and even disputes over inheritance issues when faced with the death of a loved one. And when the embalmer starts working, this action has a certain psychological frequency modulation function, gradually calming down the noisy space around him. When Dawu gently applied a towel soaked in hot water to the stiff face of the deceased, and slowly spread the whitewash on the deceased's face, a quiet and sacred power flowed in the space. Such a sense of order effectively alleviates the cognitive dissonance and psychological confusion of family members due to bereavement, and incorporates the sudden

and destructive grief into a rhythmic and expected ritual process. The tenderness and respect coming from the fingertips is the most vivid expression of the central concept of “concern” in narrative medicine^[5]. When the living see this highest degree of respect for the body, they regain the psychological composure to face death.

2.3. Psychological Buffering of Time and Space in the Marginal Period

According to Van Hennepe’s theory of transitional rituals, funeral rituals include a “liminal phase” in which life and death are temporarily suspended^[6]. Through complicated and solemn procedures, the encoffining ceremony artificially extends the physical time of farewell and opens up a buffering middle zone between life and death. In the plot of the film dealing with the funeral of the grandmother in the old bathhouse, Dawu did not end the work in a hurry because of the cold weather, but carefully tied up a silk scarf that his grandmother loved most during her lifetime. This detailed action temporarily drew the family’s attention away from the cruel fact of “physical death of a loved one” and allowed them to return to the memories of grandma’s hard-working, kind-hearted and beautiful life story. In such ritual time and space, death is transformed from a momentary physical interruption into a gradual psychological transition with buffering properties. This extension of time and space leaves enough psychological space for the living to digest the tremendous grief, allowing them to successfully complete the role identity transformation from “having loved ones” to “missing loved ones”. In the modern fast-paced palliative care practice, ritualized “slow motion” plays a very important psychotherapeutic role. It can resolve bereavement guilt and social pain, and leave a gap for breathing in parting.

3. Emotional Memory Awakening and Repair

The function of ritual narrative is not only to physically modify the body, but also to awaken and repair the emotional memory of the living. The embalmer essentially plays the role of “memory repairer” in the film, achieving a “good death”, “good farewell” and “good life” through specific ritual media and behaviors, and re-weaving the broken emotional ties between the living and the dead. This is also the same underlying logic as the three elements “attention, representation and belonging” proposed by Rita Cullen, the founder of narrative medicine^[7].

3.1. Makeup Narrative Practice and the Return of Identity

“Good death” is the primary goal of palliative care^[8], which embodies the idea of allowing individuals to pass away in a way that is most consistent with their true wishes. In the film, makeup is not only a function of covering the surface, but also a narrative method to resurrect the true body of the deceased. The most typical case is Dawu’s burial for transgender people. The deceased was biologically male, but mentally identified as female, which caused fierce debate and confusion within the family. Dawu used meticulous observation to paint exquisite red lips and soft makeup for the deceased, and finally completed the “correction of name” for the deceased in the narrative. This is the highest courtesy for the deceased’s self-identification during his lifetime, and it is also the last protection of his will to life. After the family members see the peaceful and true face of the deceased, their original anger and confusion will be transformed into understanding and acceptance. Similarly, in the passage of repairing the appearance of a girl who was completely disfigured due to a car accident, the embalmer used his skillful skills to restore life to the tranquility of the blooming season at the last moment. These details show that the ceremony is an attempt to repair the incompleteness and regrets at the end of life, so that the deceased is no longer a cold number or a dilapidated body, but a complete, unique soul with a personal historical soul. The deep respect for life history is the most noble protection of the dignity of life by narrative medicine.

3.2. Object Narrative Media and Intergenerational Trauma Healing

For family members, rituals are a key medium to achieve “good farewell”. Bereavement often involves unfinished business, unresolved resentments, and deep guilt. The encoffining ceremony provides people with a semi-open emotional outlet, using specific objects as intermediaries to transform emotions into sublimation. At the climax of the film, the scene

where Dawu mortifies his father embodies the healing effect of object narrative. Dawu's decades-long grudge against his father is due to the long-term narrative gap in the father-son relationship caused by his father's abandonment of his wife in his early years. But when Dawu trembled and removed the small stone that represented childhood promises from his father's stiff palm, all the resentment disappeared instantly in the solemn ceremony. This "stone letter" is not an ordinary mineral, it is a text that connects the worlds of life and death, complementing his father's silent love and filling the gaps in Dawu's childhood memory. At this time, the ritual field became a huge emotional container, containing the dialogue between father and son that was decades late. The reappearance of emotional memories allows family members to use the "four ways of life", namely, thank you, express love, apologize, and say goodbye to achieve a complete reconciliation with the past^[9]. Ritualized farewells transform the originally destructive grief of bereavement into a warm feeling of longing and relief, thereby achieving true grief healing and psychological reconstruction.

3.3. Interactive Narrative and Professional Identity Sublimation

The sense of ritual in turn promotes the "good life" of the undertaker. From the perspective of narrative medicine, the doctor-patient relationship is an interactive relationship between subjects[5, 10]. From the beginning, Dawu was forced to enter the industry due to unemployment. He had a physiological fear of death and a sense of professional shame. Later, he calmly faced the passage of life with the sound of the cello. This reflects the mechanism of mutual achievement between subjects in hospice care. Every time when bidding farewell to others, Dawu actually reflects on himself in the life stories of others and completes the process of self-professional identity and spiritual redemption. By observing different families' views on death, he gradually understood the dialectical relationship between life and death. This creates a strong connection with life, which makes Dawu understand that death is not the opposite of life, but a part of the natural process of life, as natural as ice and snow melting into spring water. While the embalmer restores the dignity of life for the deceased, he also realizes the restoration of his own broken family relationships and subject identity. The life force drawn from death has become the deepest humanistic foundation of hospice care. It is both a care technology about "death" and a life education about "life". It teaches the living to embrace the fleeting beauty in their limited life, so that life can gain the courage and wisdom to move forward in the constant farewell.

4. Conclusion

The movie "Departures" uses detailed, profound and tense image narratives to well demonstrate the huge healing and reconstructive effect of rituals at the end of life. It shows the audience a simple but often ignored truth, that is, although death begins with the termination of body functions biologically, the process of saying goodbye can also be solemn and beautiful. In the clinical practice of contemporary palliative care, we should not only focus on the persistence of physiological indicators and drug control of pain, but should start from the last temperature of life, so that technical rationality no longer becomes dominant. On the contrary, medical practitioners should be able to use ritualized narratives to soothe the emotional waves of the living and the dead. It originates from daily life but transcends daily trivialities. It is essentially a kind of affectionate gaze and final recognition of the value of existence. It provides the deceased with a sacred place from "biological body" to "social memory", so that death is no longer just a cold break, but the end of the meaning of life.

Just like the enlightenment at the end of the film when he plays the cello again against the backdrop of the vast snow-capped mountains, the deep, quiet sound of the piano is like an invisible tie, tightly connecting everyone's hearts. This note is not only a solemn farewell to the deceased, but also a deep comfort to the living. It dissolves the accumulated resentment and fear of the unknown in its resonance. This artistic ritual experience allows the deceased to have a dignified curtain call, allows relatives to relieve their grief and complete psychological reconstruction, and allows the public to learn to accept the impermanence of life calmly. Medical humanities practice can absorb this tender perspective, so that every life journey can be transformed into a peaceful, solemn and noble praise of life accompanied by ritual narratives.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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