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Drive My Car

Abstract

This is a film review of *Drive My Car* (2021), directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi.

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It may be wrong to depend too much on a title, especially when the film was not made in English, but in this case the film (and the short story it's based on) have the same title in Japanese, and I think we're justified in using just about any thread we find to take us into a film. Especially when the title is in the imperative voice. "Drive my car," we're told and that voice commands our attention. We're commanded into Ryusuke Hamaguchi's film. Sure, we could just watch it, but I'd recommend responding to the imperative.

Grammar teaches us that the imperative voice establishes the imperative mood, and since Clifford Geertz, we've been alert to the close link between mood and religion. His famous definition says that religions establish "powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods." Religions (subtly or not) command those moods. Does *Drive My Car* establish a powerful, pervasive and long-lasting mood? There's much more to Geertz's definition, but I'd argue (for these few pages) that this movie's imperative mood makes the film religious.

It depends, of course, on how powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting the mood is. I maintain that the mood established by *Drive My Car* is powerful and pervasive. Need it last a couple (or several) thousand years? Need it last a life-time? Maybe it's enough that the movie's mood commands us for three hours. But what is the mood of *Drive My Car*?

It isn't as simple as "pensive" or "ominous" or "joyful" or many other common moods. What's important is the command to a mood, the request that we drive his car. As Geertz says, the mood is "established." *Drive my car!* We're to be in the characters' moods for three hours. So it's a movie about crossing over, about empathy, or just maybe about envy. That's one of the powers of film, isn't it? We join the characters' lives for a couple of hours. It's like the great movie by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others*.

We envy even the unenviable. That's the power of religion or film.

What I feel in this movie (and feeling, not understanding, is the key to mood) is that I want to live the life of Yūsuke Kafuku, the main character, and all the other characters, too. I *envy* him. It's not the same as wanting to be James Bond or any other wish-fulfillment. Yūsuke has a lonely, grieving life. His wife has many lovers and through sex with them (and him) she's able to imagine stories that become screenplays. Love-making is her way to the lives of others. But it's sad for them both. They're so lonely, so estranged, and also so beautiful. The house is from an architectural digest. They have beautiful bodies, and they wear beautiful clothes. I want to start wearing turtle-necks with comfortable sports jackets. I want to drive his red Saab 900, but more on that later. And, yes, I want to be lonely and grieving and sad. But that's what this movie does with its imperative mood. It makes us not only admire but envy the moods of others. We envy even the unenviable, the lonely, the sad.

Oto Kafuku, the screenwriter who is Yūsuke's wife, creates a story that's on-going through the first thirty minutes of the film, so much so that it's not clear whether it's a story created out of love-making, if it's something that happened to her, or something that is happening now. As if in a dream, she tells of being infatuated with a teenage boy and going to his house and room, masturbating, and taking an object from his room – she calls it a token – and leaving something of her own. Over weeks, over months she does it. Is she gradually becoming him? It's creepy, sneaking into someone's house, but so is sneaking into someone's life, driving someone's car, envying someone's life, watching a movie. Movies are a little disturbing. But we've been invited into this movie, through the imperative voice, and I, for one, love being in it not in spite but because of its disturbances, for that is the power and pervasiveness of its moods. A mood is like a fog. It suffuses. It's amorphous but ineluctable. As Oto tells her story, we don't just listen. We're in it. We've been commanded, and we love being in it. We love being her. We envy the unenviable.

Not only does Oto live by imagining the lives of others, but her husband Yūsuke does, too. He's an actor and director, professions based on being others, perhaps envying them. He drives many cars. And when Oto dies suddenly (as had their child before the time of the film), Yūsuke directs a play in Hiroshima, a city with its own history of death, a profoundly unenviable city. It's hard to avoid the melancholy sense that becoming others is founded on death. Being in Hiroshima as an American is hard, but I bet it's even harder being there as Japanese. Why not avoid such visits, such atomic disturbances? Because movies use the imperative voice and command us to be in others' lives, even to envy those lives, even, hard as it is to say, to be in the city of the mass-murdered. And envy Yūsuke I do; I envy him making a play in Hiroshima. I feel the power and pervasiveness of being sad and lonely and mournful and creative in Hiroshima. And the play that he directs is *Uncle Vanya*, a key play in the theatre of loss. And this production commands greater participation with others than is usual. The actors act in many languages. There are Korean speakers, Japanese speakers, Chinese speakers, English speakers, and a Korean woman who signs. Watching rehearsals might be seen as confusing: so many languages! But it also might be seen as an opportunity to participate with great variety. Drive my car? Drive this many cars? Yes. I love and envy all of those characters. And among the actors is the handsome young Japanese actor who has had an affair with Oto, Yūsuke's wife. *He* is Uncle Vanya, the role that Yūsuke played at the start of the movie. So other, those two. But theatre commands that they become one another. Not easy, this driving of others' cars.

But this is not all and it's not the best. Yūsuke's visual self is his red Saab 900 convertible. We see it on the Japanese highways, distinctive, the only car of color. It has style and beauty. It's unique. I really do want to drive it. Perhaps, as our students say, it's his "true self," that most puzzling expression. When Yūsuke is in Hiroshima to direct *Uncle Vanya*, the theatre company

commands (that imperative voice again!) that he *not* drive his car. What genius. As this movie commands us to drive his car, he's commanded *not* to drive his own car, to give away his "true self" to another. And the driver is a woman who is, we think, utterly unlike Yūsuke, and unlike Oto. Misaki Watari is silent, unsophisticated, not beautiful, not creative. "Stolid" comes to mind. So does "abused" for her mother had been distant and commanding. "No bumps," "No swerves," were the mother's demands, for she was in pain and Misaki had to drive her to appointments. Misaki was also responsible for her mother's death. She is unenviable in many ways.

So, this is the most literal "drive my car": Yūsuke reluctantly giving himself over to this woman and letting her drive his car. He could give himself over to the role of director or to the role of Uncle Vanya. He could allow Oto's creative infidelities to drive his car, and even allow the handsome, intriguing, dangerous Kōji Takatsuki to play *his* role, Uncle Vanya. But Misaki? Stolid Misaki? Lumpish Misaki? Abused Misaki? Guilty Misaki? Drive his car? But that's the mood we're commanded to in this film: the mood of becoming those we *don't* expect. The lives of others who really are others. The unenviable.

Spoiler alert: the movie ends with Misaki shopping. It's so common, so ordinary. Where's Chekov? Where's an intriguing screenplay of leaving tokens in a boy's room? Where's the architectural digest? Where's beauty? A common supermarket, common purchases. A common person, Misaki, going to the parking lot to put those ordinary purchases in the extraordinary red Saab. And that is what the imperative to "drive my car" involves. It's handing over the keys. As Mary Oliver writes (in "Acid"), "creeping out of your own life/[to] become someone else." Becoming these people, even (I've claimed) envying them. Envying the unenviable. Accepting, feeling, even desiring their moods of loneliness and desperation and persistence.

Are these moods “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting” enough to meet Geertz’s test? Personally I think they are, and I think that nothing need last that long to qualify as religious. Life, as the poet wrote, is short. Even the religious life.

But here is a better test. The young actor who had the affair with Oto is obsessed with the perceived harms of paparazzi. He has a violent reaction when his image is taken, when others drive his car. And (spoiler again) he kills a fan that he catches snapping a photo. This film is the opposite. It’s the openness, the welcome, the breadth of the invitation to open the door and become others through theatre or literature or film. That mood is religious. Go ahead, drive my car.