



Dreams and Reality by Daniel Cheung

Brisbane Hauntings: Grief and Transfiguration in Drive My Car

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In October 2021, I travelled from Darwin to Brisbane to attend their international film festival. The festival was hosting the Australian premier of my brother's film *Friends & Strangers* so I decided to go support. I was feeling buoyed – after a long year of not being able to enjoy the film's remarkable international success, James was able to watch his film with an audience. It was coming home. It felt momentous.

My feelings about Brisbane, however, were complex. The last time I was there was in July 2020 to attend my friend's funeral. She was 27 when she died at the height of covid lockdowns. As a city that is largely unfamiliar to me, the sights and sounds of Brisbane were all associated with that time.

I was in Brisbane for four days and James suggested we see Ryusuke Hamaguchi's 3 hour epic *Drive My Car* while I was there. There are some works of art that you feel like come to you at the right time and this was one of them.

Drive My Car is a slow paced psychological drama set in contemporary Japan. It traces the life of theatre actor and director, Yūsuke Kafuku, over two main

periods – the weeks and days before and after his wife’s sudden death and several years later when he directs *Uncle Vanya* in Hiroshima. Whilst in Hiroshima, Yūsuke is forced into being chauffeured by Misaki Watari, a laconic young woman who is also trying to escape her past.

Drive My Car is based on a short story by surrealist author Haruki Murakami of the same name. Hamaguchi’s film is a stunning adaptation of this story. The brevity of the original work provides space for Hamaguchi to zoom in and explore Yūsuke’s mourning in greater detail. With a central theme of grief, Hamaguchi sensitively captures the sorrow, the confusion, and the despair that the shocking death of a loved one leeches out of you.

In grief, mere coincidences take on elevated symbolism as we desperately search for meaning when a whole world now seems closed us. In the film, we watch Yūsuke cling to these strange signs as if there is some twisted logic secretly whispering to him, perhaps a puzzle for him to decode. It doesn’t change what has happened but there’s a comfort in bringing coherence to seemingly disconnected things. In these moments, we feel like we can resurrect and summon our loved one to the real world once more – they are here now

and they did exist and they mattered to me.

Friedrich Nietzsche is a philosopher who was interested in the question of how we cope with suffering, death and pain. As a starting point, Nietzsche says that humans are driven by a thirst for knowledge of the world and understanding ourselves. However, we find that the conditions of life do not easily yield to these desires and we are therefore left deeply unsatisfied.

For Nietzsche, the solution to this disillusionment is transfiguration. Rather than simply enduring the negative in life we can transform these painful experiences. Through this process we can find joy and gratitude in the midst of the negative. For Nietzsche, when we transform our relationship with the negative we are able to celebrate the worthwhile in life. My friend who passed away wrote about Nietzsche and art as a salvation in her English Literature Arts Honours thesis. She quoted Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* stating, “repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life: these are sublime – the taming of horror through art” (Nietzsche, 40). Nietzsche offers the creative arts as a mechanism in which we can transform ourselves.

In *Drive My Car*, we find Yūsuke adrift

in Hiroshima undertaking a residency at a theatre there. We frequently catch glimpses of Hiroshima's stunning ocean views, mountains and woodlands in crisp Winter weather. The undeniable natural beauty obliquely hums with the trauma of a city that we all know was obliterated by an atomic bomb in 1945. It is a place too enmeshed in grief.

Much to everyone's surprise Yūsuke resists casting himself as the title character but chooses to direct Uncle Vanya instead. The lead is a young actor who Yūsuke knows was having an affair with his wife before she passed away. With martial-like reserve, Yūsuke begins to unravel the extent of the young actor's relationship with his wife. The discoveries are devastating.

When someone dies, they may leave behind many unanswered questions. Nevertheless, we may dwell on these questions, endlessly searching our finite bank of memories for scraps of assurances. As our memory fades, so can our once strongly held convictions. While his wife was alive, Kafuku rationalised his wife's infidelities and believed that regardless of her affairs, what they had was rare and special. This confrontation with her lover disturbs Yūsuke's narrative and again he must make sense of who his wife was and what their relationship actually meant.

Yūsuke shamefully avoids taking the part of Uncle Vanya as he fears Anton Chekov's work will expose him: he is not ready to interrogate who and what he has become. Yūsuke confesses, "Chekhov is terrifying. When you say his lines, it drags out the real you." But when the young actor is no longer available to play the titular role, Yūsuke steps into the part; recasting himself. The result is transfigurative.

At the conclusion of Chekov's Uncle Vanya, we are urged to believe that Uncle Vanya is on a path to peace thanks to the quiet counsel of his niece Sonia:

Voinitskey [Vanya] [to SONIA, passing his hand over her hair]: My child, there's such a weight on my heart! Oh, if only you knew how my heart aches!

SONIA. Well what can we do? We must go on living! [A pause.] We shall go on living, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through a long, long succession of days and tedious evenings. We shall patiently suffer the trial which Fate imposes on us; we shall work for others, now and in our old age and we shall have no rest. When our time comes we shall die submissively, and over there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we've suffered, that we've wept, that we've had a bitter life, and God will take pity on us. And then, Uncle dear, we shall both begin to

know a life that is bright and beautiful, and lovely. We shall rejoice and look back at these troubles of ours with tender feelings, with a smile – and we shall rest. I believe it, Uncle, I believe it fervently, passionately....[Kneels before him and lays he head on his hands, in a tired voice.] We shall have rest! (Anton Chekov, 244-245)

This scene makes a moving appearance in Hamaguchi's film. We too sense Yūsuke is on the path to peace through the unlikely bond he establishes with Misaki, his own real life Sonia.

It can take a long time to overcome the death of a loved one but ultimately we cannot live life engulfed by grief. If we do, we miss out on “life that is bright

and beautiful, and lovely”. Brisbane will forever echo with the memory of my friend, but each future visit will also be an opportunity to transfigure the negative into the sublime. Drive My Car reminds us that through our darkest days, we must engage the things that rebind us to life, whilst still honouring the darkness and the horror we've had to overcome. I believe it fervently, passionately...after all, the richness of our lives depends on it.

Works cited

Chekov, Anton. Plays. Penguin Books, 1985.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Birth of Tragedy. Penguin Books, 2003.

Wrapped World by Daniel Cheung

