

STUDENT ESSAYS

The poetics of auto-mobility in Ryūsuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car*

Motion and stasis are unstable categories in Ryūsuke Hamaguchi's Oscar-winning film *Drive My Car* (2021). The plot follows the central character Yūsuke Kafuku (Hidetoshi Nishijima) as he tries to process the sudden death of his wife Oto (Reika Kirishima) while directing a multilingual production of Anton Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*. A significant amount of this process of moving on occurs in Yūsuke's red Saab Turbo, as many sequences within the film are dedicated to the way this car becomes a vessel for navigating the emotional landscape as much as the physical one. In fact, various characters throughout the almost three hour long journey of the film are referred to as having broken out of a condition of inertia, equatable to a form of 'death', which – as Anne Hurault-Paupe writes in examining various states of motion in film – 'by definition means the absence of movement' (2014: 8).

Yoon-a (Park Yu-rim), the dancer-turned-actress playing Sonya, for instance, speaks of how her 'Body refused to dance' after the trauma of a miscarriage. It is Chekhov's words that were able to shake her out of this stasis, 'Moving [her] body that was stuck before', as she tells Yūsuke over dinner. This is accentuated by the fact that Yoon-a communicates through Korean sign language, which allows for this movement to be

understood both metaphorically and also in the physicality entailed in signing as a language of gestures. Talking about his wife, Yūsuke explains how she was 'Lethargic for years' after their daughter died of pneumonia, relying on the very physical act of her body moving during sex to be able to write stories for her screenplays again. 'Even so, I didn't move', confesses Misaki (Tōko Miura), Yūsuke's assigned chauffeur, reflecting on how she left her abusive mother under the debris of their collapsed house after managing to crawl out herself.

Yūsuke relates to Misaki's confession: 'You killed your mother and I killed my wife', he says to her on their last big cathartic car drive attempting to confront the weight of their grief by visiting the remnants of Misaki's old house in the fictional Kami-junitaki Village in Hokkaido. In fact, affirming Hurault-Paupe's quote (2014), which correlates death to inaction, Yūsuke also credits his inertia with ultimately killing his wife. However, as he confesses, this inertia involved him being in *motion* for an entire day, as he let the wheels of his car turn relentlessly, instead of having a difficult conversation with his wife upon her request that same morning: 'I had no plans that day, but kept on driving', he admits to Misaki. In this confession, what the film plays on is an important differentiation of the car as an automobile versus the concept of *auto-mobility* in its broader connotations. Composed of the Greek word 'autos' meaning self, and the Latin word 'mobilis' pertaining to *movement*, the etymological roots bring to mind a more expansive understanding of the word. Beyond merely describing the car as a 'self-moving' vehicle, as I will argue, what *Drive My Car* truly draws attention to is the notion of a movement of the self, both in the sense of self-evolution through change, as well as in having the capacity to *move* and *be moved* by others. Thus, though the car becomes a crucial factor in facilitating Yūsuke's character evolution in the course of the film, at this stage, in fearing change and seeking refuge in the safe-space of his car instead of confronting his wife, the automobile ironically poses a hindrance to his *auto-mobility*. More so than existing in the dichotomy between being a 'living room on wheels' (from a 1949 Ford brochure cited in Urry 2004: 30) and representing the idealisation of 'freedom' (Urry 2004: 28), as popularly mentioned in the literature on cars and motion, here the car transformed into a form of entrapment.

What becomes apparent in the film is that simply going *through the motions* is actually a condition of stasis and does not equate to *moving forward*. Moving forward is in turn very much idealised within the film and the subplot of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as a way of relieving the weight of personal grief and being able to find peace in navigating the obstacles of life. Indeed, a central motif within the film, both narratively and aesthetically, is the questioning of motion and stasis as antithetical concepts, which exist on opposite ends of a spectrum: moments that may seem *mobile* are actually conditions of being *stuck*, whereas other instances of apparent inertia are what Iain Borden might call truly 'automobile moments', in which 'we see ideas, personal change, movement and the unfolding journey all collapse into one' (2012: 99). As I will argue, in *Drive My Car* these moments of *auto-mobility* involve being moved internally through a focus on *e-motion* and the reverberations of voices in and between people and places. Throughout this transformative process, the reconfiguration of the self is dynamically mirrored by the reconfiguration of space in the film, particularly, though not limited to, the space of the automobile itself.

Fixed in motion

In an effort to subsume this non-dualistic approach to motion and fixity, Jörg Beckmann has proposed the concept of 'motility', which 'describes the mobile stages where people are physically, virtually or residentially not quite at rest and not quite on the move' (2004: 85). In fact, the car is exemplary of this contradiction, as John Urry observes that 'although automobility is a system of mobility, it necessitates minimal movement once one is strapped into the driving seat' (2004: 30). In the first half of the film, it is particularly this sense of entrapment in his daily routine of going *through the motions*, which is emphasised in Yūsuke's character, as the film creates parallels between his own body and that of the car. Therefore, what is suggested in seeing the car as an 'extension of the driver's body' (Urry 2004: 31) is an attentiveness to how its spatial affordances engender a particular set of traits which both Urry (2004) and Borden (2012) emphatically tie to notions of discipline, implying a disconnect from and control over one's

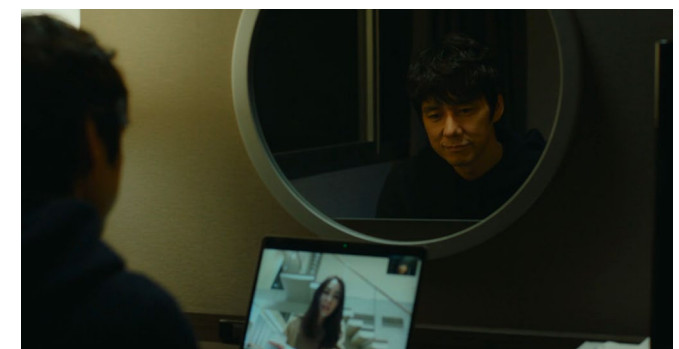
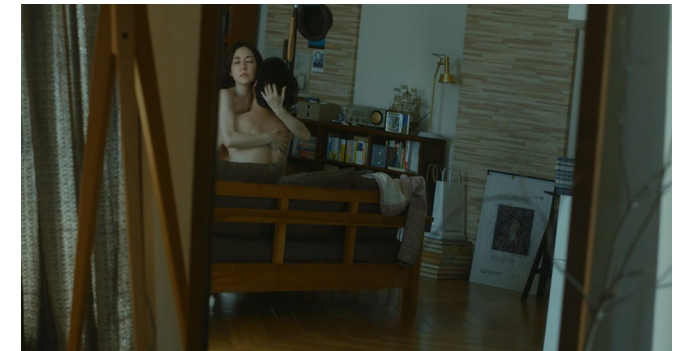
emotions. Being a good driver, in Borden's words, requires 'deep socio-psychological qualities of "independence" as well as "resourcefulness, calm behaviour under stressful conditions, [and] cold-bloodedness"' (2012: 61), which as character traits are not only applicable to Yūsuke in his driving, but additionally bleed over into his laconic style of directing, as well as into his relationship with his wife, Oto.

The interior layout of the car – a space which operates according to a 'complex and expanded field of vision' (Dibazar 2017: 315) – opens up the gaze, fracturing it like light across the rear- and side-view mirrors as well as windshield and windows. Within the setting of the car, Yūsuke's gaze being fractured through the rearview mirror cements the notion that the line between his body and that of the car have become blurred. However, when emulated outside of the car, this displacement of the gaze ironically formulates a visual regime of disconnection from reality. This is most notable in the scene in which he learns that his flight was cancelled and comes home

early only to find his wife having an affair. Simulating the spatial conditions of the car, in which the body of the driver is facing forward, the camera – taking Yūsuke's place – silently creeps up on the image of the affair, with the sound of it foreshadowing what Yūsuke is about to see in the reflection as he faces a sort of life-sized rearview mirror. A medium wide shot of him entrapped by the frame of the mirror, observing the affair without any overtly detectable perturbation creates the sense that he is encapsulated by the screens of a vehicle even in instances in which he is not actually driving, isolating him from the rest of the world.

Instead of intervening, he bottles up and quite literally drives away his emotions on his way to the airport hotel from where he later picks up a video call from his wife, pretending to be out of the country. The visual regime of disconnection is accentuated by the parallel created between Yūsuke's reflection in the computer screen during the video call and his reflection in the mirror above it. Both of these are once again

reminiscent of the spatial conditions of a car and its rear-view mirror. Though this is the first time since uncovering her betrayal that Yūsuke faces Oto, the automobile framing of this shot makes it impossible for their gazes to meet, establishing that he does not truly *face* her, neither practically nor metaphorically. As the camera placement denies immediate





access to his face, the layering of reflections reinforces a condition that keeps Yūsuke at an emotional distance. Though his body faces forward as a simulated driver, instead of moving toward Oto, the laptop screen and his white lies separating him from her emphasise his emotional immobility. In both of these scenes, the aforementioned qualities that make Yūsuke a good driver are the same ones that prevent him from interfering during the affair or from challenging his wife. Put in the language of automobility, he chooses in life to avoid obstacles instead of confronting them, which would entail a *crash*.

Strikingly, the only time in the film in which his movement is violently intercepted follows a couple of scenes later, when an actual car crash stops Yūsuke in his tracks. It forces him into a state of stasis in an attempt to break the cyclical loop of non-confrontation he has become accustomed to – akin to a perpetual state of being on autopilot. In fact, both his driving and his theatre practice as an actor and director are not only quite ritualistic in their nature, but they are also

deeply intertwined, as driving for Yūsuke is the medium through which he learns his lines. By repeatedly listening to his wife's voice on tape reciting the play he is currently performing (in this case *Uncle Vanya*), Yūsuke automates himself to be able to minutely respond to the precisely timed gaps in the tapes that are left for him to fill with his character's lines. As the wheels turn on the road alongside the tape of the cassette during Yūsuke's driving, it seems as though the recited text of the play relentlessly pushes forward in accordance with the motion of the car, leaving neither time nor space for considered self-reflection.

In fact, the car crash happens precisely after he stoically recites 'Yes, I do envy him a lot and his luck with women' – a line which in the play is directed by Vanya towards Astrov and in the film is mirrored in the dynamic between Yūsuke and Kōji Takatsuki (Masaki Okada), the young actor with whom his wife is having an affair. It is as if Yūsuke should be forced to reckon with this thought instead of *driving it away*



and passively accepting it. However, this crash ends up creating even greater parallels between Yūsuke and the body of the car, since he is later diagnosed with having a glaucoma in his left eye. Sharing a common blind spot in the driver-car assemblage of Yūsuke-as-automated and the car-as-anthropomorphised, this is a central motif, which is subtly referred to in a multitude of instances throughout the film. The medical

advice given to Yūsuke and Oto is that ‘Loss of vision in one eye is hard to detect because the other eye adapts. Which means that it doesn’t impact daily activities, and by the time one notices it, it’s often too late.’ This forms a sort of metaphor for Yūsuke’s intense regret for having feared change so much that he has completely disassociated from his emotions. Only when he stands on the hilltop of Misaki’s formerly destroyed house does he notice what it is that could have saved his relationship with his wife two years after her death.

One of the scenes in which his inertia is most apparent is the moment that directly precipitates him finding his wife’s dead body in their apartment when, in his car, he listens to Sonya’s closing words in *Uncle Vanya*. This single frontal medium close-up shot, which rests on Yūsuke listening to this monologue, cocoons him in the car, once more evoking it as a form of cage. Though his eyes well up at Sonya’s words, instead of letting a tear out, he physically puts one in

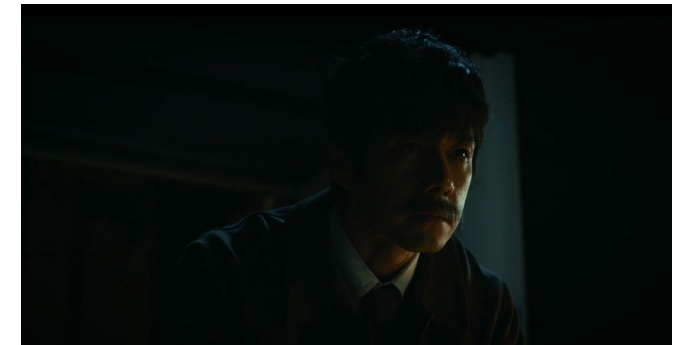


his left eye, in the form of eye drops prescribed to him for his glaucoma. These drops lead an artificial tear to fall from his blind spot, imbuing Yūsuke’s experience of emotions with a mechanised quality, as his feelings are always mediated and tightly controlled. This strict frame of control is additionally entrenched by his multilingual approach on stage which does not leave space for deviation or spontaneity. The words of the play form a cage in themselves, due to the precision needed of an actor to adhere to the exact translations in their correct timing, which the audience reads along on the screen above the stage. This unswerving nature assures the emotional journey of all participants remains one which is set in its established ways.

Spaces of liminality

‘Chekhov is terrifying,’ Yūsuke tells Kōji on his decision to not play *Vanya* himself after Oto’s death, but instead cast his wife’s lover in the role: ‘When you say his lines, it drags out the real you. Don’t you feel it? I can’t bear that anymore. Which means I can no longer yield myself up to this role.’ Part of Yūsuke’s journey throughout the film is learning to fully commit to the journey the character of *Vanya* is going through, instead of, for example, running off stage a line too early in one of his performances shortly after his wife’s funeral. The scene in question was the same one he was reciting just preceding his car crash in which *Vanya* is being asked whether Yelena is faithful to the Professor. As he is saying the lines ‘I envy him a lot’ and ‘That woman’s fidelity is a lie through and through,’ Yūsuke feels the claustrophobia of the text, acting as a mirror to parts of his life he would rather deny, especially in the delivery of the latter sentence, during which he stops projecting his voice. Instead, he says this line to himself, recognising it as a private truth. Echoing Yoon-a’s quote from the start of this essay, Chekhov’s words indeed move his body, yet in doing so cut short the emotional journey, guiding him offstage so as to escape from facing these feelings. Once more, Yūsuke does not allow himself to cry and attempts to regain composure over his emotions through discipline and denial. Seeking refuge backstage during the performance, framed in a medium close-up shot,

most of his face is plunged in shadows except for his left side, where his eye catches the light with a glint and draws the viewers’ gaze to it as a focal point. Hence, it might be said that Chekhov’s words illuminated something in him which he was turning a blind eye to, urging him to confront an uncomfortable truth. In creating a parallel between this delicate moment of the negotiation of private and public moments on stage and the scene of his car crash, this is just one of a myriad of moments in which the theatre and the car are presented as analogous spatial formations. This is a parallel which Haruki Murakami himself had already drawn out in the short story this film is based on. In figuring of the self as a *place* you travel away from and return to, in the short story, Yūsuke therefore speaks of acting as a form of *auto-mobility*: ‘But the place you return to is always slightly different from the place you left. That’s the rule. It can never be exactly the same’ (Murakami 2018: 24).



As vehicles of transformation and places of transit, both cars and the theatre function as uniquely ‘liminal’ spaces, echoing Victor Turner’s meditation (1974) on Arnold van Gennep. Turner expands on what we might be able to consider ‘rites of passage’ beyond overtly ritualised ceremonies, creating a link between religion and the journey of being transformed by a work of art. The journey of driving in a car features as a uniquely apt ‘[t]ransition rite’ (ibid.: 57) for Hamaguchi’s characters, as it emblematises all the spatial and psychological qualities of ‘crossing [...] a threshold which separates two distinct areas’, precisely, as Turner writes, because the ‘passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a

parallel passage in space' (ibid.: 58). With this in mind, what becomes clear is that the true moment of *auto-mobility* – of an evolution of the self – for Yūsuke does not only happen in him making peace with the role of Vanya in returning to play that character and confronting those uncomfortable emotions. In particular, it is also actualised in transcending that character

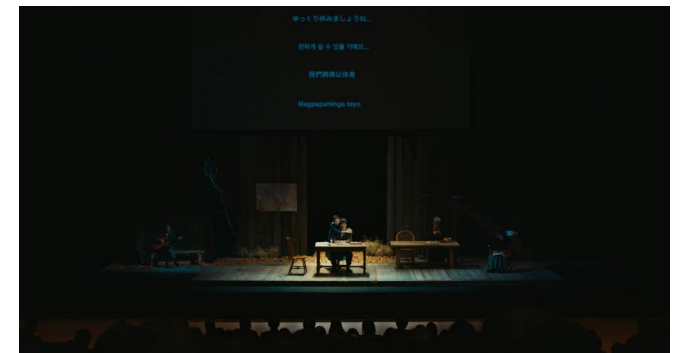


in his personal life and learning to play the role of Sonya, who comforts her uncle, and as previously mentioned, teaches him the importance of *moving on* as the key principle within both the film and its subplot of the play.

This is epitomised by the big moment of catharsis between him and Misaki on the hilltop in front of the remnants of her collapsed house and broken past. Instead of cutting the monologue short, Yūsuke is not only the one mirroring Sonya's words back to Misaki in an embrace, but furthermore allows himself to be visibly *moved* for the first time in the film, overtly externalising his emotions, as a single tear falls from his eye. He lets the pain of his vocal texture resonate in the space, creating room for a momentary loss of composure. By speaking it out into existence, Yūsuke sets his pain free rather than continuing to be weighed down by his misery. The full monologue is in fact a beacon of hope within the play, a plea that no matter how difficult life may be, the only way to actually find peace and be able to *rest*, is to *move on*: 'What can we do? We must live our lives. [...] And then at last, we shall rest. I believe it. I strongly believe it from the bottom of my heart. When that time comes, we shall rest.' In this sense, Chekhov's words resonate with the complicated dynamics of mobility and fixity and Beckmann's proposed notion of 'motility', in which 'one is never just "at rest" or solely "on the move"' (2004: 85), as these two conditions do not seem to exist irrespectively. This blurring of motion and stasis in which movement is exposed as a form of impasse is encompassed in the motifs of cyclicity that are repeatedly scattered throughout the film, such as the turning wheels of a car, the spools of magnetic audio tape on a cassette, or the spinning vinyl under the pin of a record player. It is only by breaking out of this trapped cyclicity, created between Yūsuke and Vanya, that he is truly able to return back to playing the character in the next scene, in which he is reliving this *auto-mobile* moment on stage with Yoon-a signing the words 'We shall rest' around his body as part of an embrace. Echoing Murakami's words from the short story as previously mentioned, he has therefore undergone a journey to return back to himself, albeit having transformed along the way.

There are particular affordances of the car as a dynamic space within the film, which facilitate this journey. Multiple reviews of the film reference this quasi-religious character of

the car, calling it a 'confession booth' on wheels (Brzeski 2021) or likening the striking red colour of the Saab to a Shinto shrine (Thomas 2022). Ironically, a lot of the affordances, which affectively create such an atmosphere, involve a slightly different framing of the same ones, which cemented Yūsuke's car as a cage, as previously analysed. Yet, they involve a notable





change of Yūsuke's sense perception within the car, as he is forced into its backseat for the first time, having to learn to abandon his 'cold-blooded' over-disciplined driver-subjectivity (Borden 2012: 61) for the sake of not only letting someone else into his physical and personal space, but additionally of learning to allow himself to be moved by them, as the imperative tone of the film's title *Drive My Car* suggests.

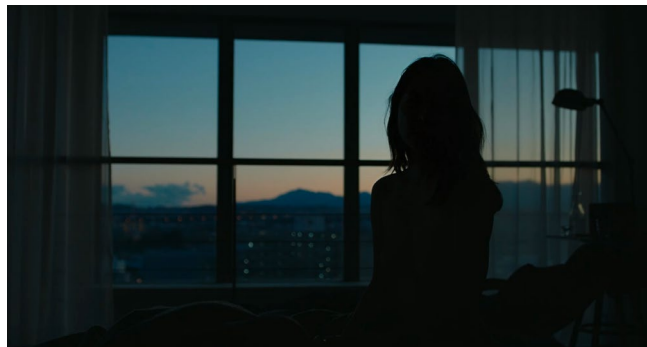
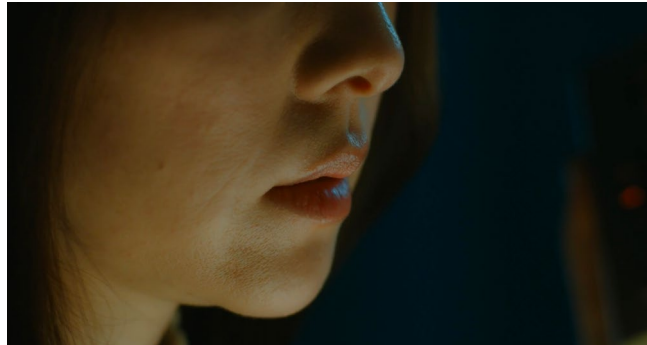
Analysing the driving kinaesthetics of the film, it becomes clear that Hiroshima as a transitional city for both of the main characters is far from a coincidental choice as the backdrop for their personal journey. Even though its weighted history is never directly addressed, there is a unique way in which the architectural space and rhythms of the city become internalised by Misaki and Yūsuke driving through its streets and motorways. This manifests itself in a particular focus on unhindered motion and forward movement, which serve as a reminder to strive for peace. Metaphorically, this is reminiscent of Sonya's cathartic final words, in which she urges both

herself and Vanya to move through and past their grief. Misaki explicitly addresses this philosophy when showing Yūsuke the city's waste incineration facility as they walk through its glass atrium, which has been designed in order to extend the 'Axis of Peace', architecturally connecting the three most important monuments in the city. As she explains, this allows the Axis to 'Continue on to the sea without being severed'. This is one of the few moments in the film in which we see them walking instead of driving, yet again there are direct links drawn to the spatial formation of driving, as their bodies both face forward in the same direction towards a common destination, which takes them away from the Atomic Bomb Dome as the centre of pain, towards the sea as a place that can still it. The effortlessness of unhindered motion facilitated through the Saab is incredibly pronounced throughout the entire film. With the exception of the aforementioned car crash, there are never any obstacles in the Saab's way, and the multiple high angle shots of it manoeuvring the cityscape illuminate the smoothness of



the car's pull towards relentless forward motion and reveal the camera's hypnotic attention. This is ultimately cited as the reason for choosing red as the colour of the car, as this distinguishes it against the otherwise predominantly grey and blue-tinted landscapes (Molloy 2023).

As important moments of connection happen in the tunnels of the motorways, their unique status as a 'vector' of movement instead of being a concrete place (Morse in Urry 2006: 6), allows for these tunnels to function as an emblem of liminality itself, accelerating the characters' transformative process. From within the car, the 'peculiarly hypnotic effect of pure movement, velocity and motion' (Borden 2012: 81), through which the outside world becomes distorted, emphasises that what the characters see through the car windows are not concrete objects, but rather the condition of motion as unhindered in itself. This creates the opposite effect than Hurault-Paupé's 'aesthetics of curiosity' (2014: 6), which she poses as being archetypal of the road movie, or Pedram Dibazar's analysis of Abbas Kiarostami's films, which 'join the everyday' (2017: 322). Especially in the latter case, the road functions as an unpredictable character, who will stop you in your tracks in ways 'over which no one seems to have control' (ibid.: 320) and demands an interaction. Instead, *Drive My Car* comes closer to van Gennepe's observation of liminal spaces in rites of passage, which rely on the 'physical separation of ritual subjects from the rest of society' (van Gennepe in Turner 1974: 58). The reflection is turned inwards towards the self, just as the car is relentlessly moving Misaki and Yūsuke forward.



The narrative structure of the film mirrors this forward drive as interruptions to the narrative flow are strategically avoided. Instead *Uncle Vanya* and Oto's story, used as sub-plots, intertwine with the main plot to perform the role that prolepses and flashbacks might. That being said, there is one singular flashback scene, which therefore stands out in the film, even though it is only four seconds long. This scene

consists of an almost imperceptible zoom in on Oto's back as she is reciting the text for *Uncle Vanya* onto a cassette recorder, jarringly intercut with an extreme close-up of her lips: 'I'm sure that the truth [...] isn't that frightening. What is most frightening, is not knowing it.' This is not the first time Oto and the unknown are enlaced. In fact, this is how the film first introduces us to the character in its very first scene, lingering on Oto's darkened silhouette set against multiple window frames while reciting one of her stories to Yūsuke. As it takes more than four minutes for the viewers to see her face for the first time, this establishes the recurring motif of Oto as an enigma, which for Yūsuke provokes the central question haunting him after her death: Did he ever really know his wife? This disconnect between the interiority and exteriority of a person is re-articulated in the aesthetics of the Saab, as its bold exterior contrasts with the scenes filmed within the car, which provide a much more subdued and dark background, cocooning the characters. This allows for the car's body to

serve as a metaphor for the enigma of the *Other*, which – as Misaki and Kōji attempt to teach Yūsuke – one must ultimately make peace with in order to be able to move on in life.

Voice as vector

In relation to Oto, both the aforementioned scenes evoke her un-graspability, bolstering an air of elusiveness and mystique that is suggested by the unveiling of her name's true meaning: pure 'Sound'. Especially as her voice becomes incorporated into the body of the car in the tapes Yūsuke relentlessly listens to every time he drives, though the viewers are technically aware of the source of this sound, she becomes somewhat of an 'acousmatic being' after Michel Chion's examination of the voice in cinema (1999: 20). Chion's pursuit is to truly pay analytic attention to the grain of vocal textures, which dress a film similarly to other aesthetic features, instead of merely viewing it as a 'vehicle for the verbal signifier' (Chion 1999: 1) and conflating it with speech. Both Chion and Charles Affron focus on the elusiveness of the voice (Chion 1999: 1) and the intense effects of presence it therefore harbours, both in the sense that it 'seems to fade away at the very moment it is produced' (Affron 1982: 105), as well as in its 'omnidirectionality' (Chion 1994: 33), dispersing 'like a gas' throughout the space (ibid.: 144) as it escapes the frame of the screen. Affron expands on Jacques Derrida's musings on the effects of presence that sound creates by emphasising that this even holds true for the 'reproduced voice', which for him is 'as generative of sound waves as the voice that is actually emitted in the present' (1982: 104). This aptly explains the omnipotent quality of Oto's voice in the car, at times superseding the bounds of the car-body and its diegetic sound, and reverberating in the ether. Chion's description of the 'acousmètre' as a voice that 'wander[s] along the surface [of the screen], at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle' (1994: 23) evokes Oto's restless soul post mortem haunting Yūsuke as he wrestles with her enigmatic nature. Through sound her presence is eerily felt, even as her voice undergoes a twofold process of disembodiment and alienation, as it is not only playback from a tape, but moreover – within the frame of *Uncle Vanya* – a reciting of words which are not her own.

This vocal aspect interacts interestingly with a self-imposed 'crisis of speech' (Affron 1982: 119) and a Bressonian process of automation, which is shown to be integral to Yūsuke's theatrical rehearsals in staging a multilingual play. Creating a scenario in which the actors cannot directly understand their scene partner's words, they are therefore forced to focus on their voice in isolation rather than as a 'vehicle' (Chion 1999: 1). Yūsuke explains to Kōji, who is struggling with this process, that this is essential for understanding what it means to truly listen to and 'Yield' oneself to another. As Chion ruminates on the importance of vocal texture and 'monotonous diction' in Robert Bresson's work, '[t]he Bressonian model speaks like we listen' (1999: 83). Thereby he is referring to the director's aversion to any form of externalisation of emotion through acting, which also includes an aversion to the theatrical voice resonating within the space. Speaking as listening, therefore, implies an inwardly centripetal movement of the voice

geared towards self-reflection. This is directly corroborated by the spatial configurations, as Yūsuke consciously closes the rehearsal space to induce this centripetal vocal movement and isolate the voice. Any time he is unhappy with his actors he fixes their bodies into a state of stasis around the rehearsal table, asking them to return to reciting the text, rather than allowing them to move freely through the space. Instead, Yūsuke seems to want his actors to focus on how they are being moved by the voices around them, precisely because their body is fixed. This notion further expands Beckmann's concept of 'motility' (2004), so as to draw attention to the movement of sound waves and affective *e-motion*.

The fixed body and averted gaze of the rehearsal space, as the actors are focused on connecting through their voice rather than through eye contact, is directly analogous to the embodied state of being in a car. As Dibazar (2017) notes, because of the displacement of gazes and forward facing

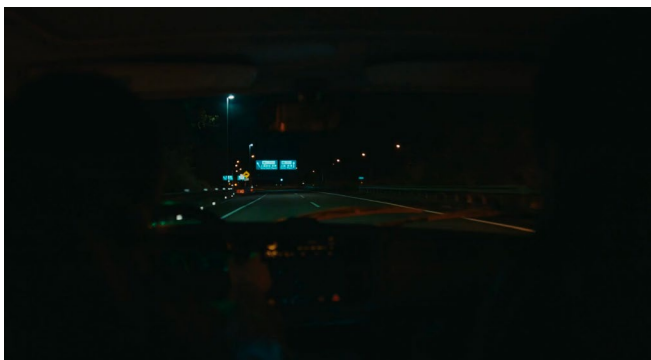
bodies, eye contact is not necessary for emotional connection within the passenger-driver assemblage of the car. Instead, these embodied conditions once more serve to isolate the voice and set it free within the space. The car therefore seems ideal for the endeavour of exploring voices – a central interest in Hamaguchi's cinematic practice (Kwon 2023). Michael Bull has analysed in depth the way in which people's experience of the car as conducive to personal freedom is directly intertwined with the soundscape and sound system of the car, reinstating it as a 'symbolic sanctuary' (2020: 371). This directly links back to Yūsuke jokingly reminiscing to Misaki about how Oto reconsidered marrying him, because her new name – Oto Kafuku – would translate to 'House of Gospel'. Posthumously, this analogy is made physically palpable through Oto's interpolation with the body of the red Saab and the words of Chekhov, which initially almost act as the car fuel, setting them into motion. Yet, Yūsuke's philosophy of acting does not seem to corroborate his understanding of people beyond the rehearsal table. In using a Bressonian *flattening* tactic of reducing his wife to the disembodied reciting of lines, it becomes clear that applying the same tactics of setting her *true* essence free by isolating her voice does not suffice as a key to her enigma. Yūsuke has to reckon with the fact that he has not himself truly learned what he is trying to teach his actors through his multilingual approach. Therefore, ironically his *blind spot* is realising that though Oto and him spoke the same language, he did not truly listen to her, which additionally means truly listening to himself, as Kōji points out to him: 'If you really want to look at someone, then your only option is to look at yourself squarely and deeply.'

Thus, voice in *Drive My Car* functions almost like a vector of movement in itself, parallel to the motorways and tunnels of unhindered motion in its infectious liminal character of being 'non-spatial' (Bull 2020: 361). Superseding the obstacles of the visual realm, sound waves are able to physically traverse skin barriers and turn bodies into chambers of reverberation. In this way the dichotomy between self and other is problematised, underlining Kōji's insight about how the other exists and resonates within the self. It can therefore be said that Hamaguchi places attention on the quality of voices within his film to demonstrate a



physical and emotional sense of *opening up*. This is especially felt in the scenes of Yūsuke and Misaki's last big cathartic drive to her old house, in which the tunnels they pass on the motorway initiate their mutual confessions about their grief. In one particular moment the camera is on the backseat of the car and the shot, which is similar to the initial shots of Yūsuke in his car discussed at the start of this essay, is able to frame both the relentless forward pull of the motorway through the windshield and Misaki's eyes in the rearview mirror. Once Yūsuke starts his confession, Misaki's eyes disappear from the rearview mirror as it is plunged into the darkness of the night. This displacement of the gaze has a confession-booth effect, for it emphasises how it is the voice which takes the characters on this transformative journey as a vector of unhindered motion.

In Hamaguchi's attempt to deconstruct listening as a practice, it is by no means a coincidence that Sonya's final guiding



words of both the play and the film, assuring Vanya that they will eventually 'Rest' and find peace, visually reverberate around Yūsuke on stage, as Yoon-a envelops him within the literal embrace of her language. The Korean sign language, as part of a 'corp-oral' culture of signing (Eleanor Leith in



Richardson 2017: 46), becomes the emblematic symbol of voice-as-motion. It echoes the idealisation of being *moved* by someone, which reverberates throughout the film. As Yoon-a quite literally draws a smile on Yūsuke's face to sign the line 'We shall rejoice, and with tender smiles on our faces', she allows Chekhov's words to genuinely set his body into motion, now that he is ready to process them. Strikingly, when Yoon-a signs the line 'We'll look back on our current sorrow', sorrow becomes spatial in this configuration, as both of them track it with their eyes and then physically leave it behind, through which Yoon-a's voice-in-movement parallels the transformative potential of the car.

Misaki and Yūsuke's journey towards creating space for emotional resonance also corresponds to the physical opening up of the space of the car over the course of the film. This reaches a pinnacle right after Kōji points out Yūsuke's *blind spot* to him, when Yūsuke once and for all moves to the front passenger seat of the car – as a first crucial step towards *auto-mobility* – and in silence offers a cigarette to Misaki. Loosening the single rule he had given her of 'No smoking in the car', his evolution of self – and the fact that he has not only *let someone* in his personal space, but moreover allowed himself to be changed by this – is further underscored through the physical opening of the car hood. In line with the symbolic imagery of the red Saab paralleling a Shinto shrine and being turned into a 'House of Gospel' through Oto's voice, the burning cigarettes Yūsuke and Misaki hold through the open hood of the car are reminiscent of incense sticks. As a form of symbolic purification to open up space for renewal and regeneration, from Hiroshima's waste incineration facility to the very fuel that moves the car forward, the act of burning is another recurring motif in the film, ridding the characters of the dead weight of grief they are harbouring and which is holding them back.

Susan Sontag has pointed out that silence is 'not an empty signifier', and importantly silence in the film also becomes a voice in itself (Olsson 2022: 64). On various occasions throughout the film, silence interacts with and influences the spatial dynamics of the car, creating a suffocating and claustrophobic feeling of discomfort. Misaki and Yūsuke initially combat this through playing Oto's tapes as a mediator of their



new-found intimacy within the space of the car. Eventually though, they stop feeling the need to play the tape, not only because they are opening up to each other, but also because they have become close enough to sit in comfortable silence.

Conclusion

Drive My Car is a film using the spatial configuration of the car as a vehicle of interrogation for an array of dichotomies, including, but not limited to, motion and stasis, and voice and silence. In accompanying Yūsuke's transformative journey, the red Saab undergoes multiple transformations itself throughout the course of the film, as it morphs from being a cage holding him hostage, to gradually opening up as a space, striking a fine balance between confronting him and Misaki with their grief and pushing them to move past it.

It also metamorphoses from acting as a symbol of Yūsuke's self – sharing a common blind spot and aversion to let anyone else in – to becoming a hollow version of his disembodied wife whose elusiveness Yūsuke is yearning to understand on the basis of her voice. Lastly, it encapsulates the apparent crevasse between people's interiority and exteriority in Yūsuke's inquisition of the *Other* as an enigma, while also providing the space to teach him how to truly listen to others, through an inquisition of the self. Only after this latter instance can we truly speak of moments in which the motion of the car coincides with the mobility of the self to create moments of *auto-mobility*. The Saab's dwelling in transit is undoubtedly transformative, as it is depicted as a dynamically constituted space with particular affordances such as isolating the voice, complicating the gaze, and fixing the body into a forward state of motion. These bestow it with a quasi-religious

character that not only marks it as a liminal space itself, but moreover also allows each person within it to become open to mutually affecting reverberations – both sonic and emotional. In this way, although it starts out as a symbol of individualism, the car ends as an emblem of relationality, beyond any notion of a single driver, epitomising Beckmann's notion of 'motility', in which at long last it is impossible to tell who 'are the movers or the moved' (2004: 85).

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