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### **Familial Narratives and Emergent Care in *Drive My Car***

Few movies of 2021 were greeted with as much fanfare as Hamaguchi Ryusuke's *Drive My Car*. The Murakami adaptation has been roundly praised for its stunning cinematography, alluring narrative, and stirring performances. Cinematic merit aside, I would like to suggest here that Hamaguchi's work also illuminates some broad social transformations that have swept across the Japanese nation over the past few decades. Contextualizing the movie with literature from East Asian cultural anthropology, we can begin to understand *Drive My Car's* decidedly-dramatic story as an allegory for the decline of the family's stabilizing power in Japan during post-bubble times, and the emergent, alternative forms of care that are developing to take its place. More specifically, I examine through two scenes how a Saab 900 Turbo car frames the familial arcs of its two central characters – stage actor, Yusuke Kafuku, and driver, Misaki Watari – and brings them together in an emotionally intimate, caring relationship that eludes easy categorization. By contrasting this restorative relationship with Kafuku and Watari's scarred familial pasts, and their initial inability to move on from them, Hamaguchi's movie complements the research of scholars such as Anne Allison and William W. Kelly, who argue for a more expansive and inclusive vision of societal belonging in light of the unique upheavals introduced by the neoliberal project in Japan.

The dissolution of Kafuku's married life serves as the movie's initial vehicle for depicting Japanese familial turmoils, and the inability of many societal agents to acknowledge them in a constructive way. At the start of the movie, Kafuku, a highly-regarded middle-aged actor, lives in

Tokyo with his wife Oto, who has made a name for herself writing experimental television screenplays. Their marriage appears to be characterized by deep intimacy and cooperation. For instance, they support one another in their careers. Oto tapes readings of Kafuku's plays so he can practice his lines while driving his red 1987 Saab 900 Turbo. Every morning, during drives to work, Kafuku helps Oto transcribe her screenplay ideas, which often come about during their frequent and passionate nighttime trysts. However, one day, Kafuku discovers that Oto has been cheating on him with multiple different men. Their conversation a few days later – again set in the Saab 900 Turbo – provides a window into their relationship.

OTO: Honestly speaking, did you want kids again?  
KAFUKU: I don't know. Nobody can take her place, after all.  
OTO: But we could have loved them as much.  
KAFUKU: There's no use in me wanting something that you don't want.  
OTO: I'm sorry.  
KAFUKU: It's not your fault. I made that choice with you. So it's all right.  
OTO: I really do love you so much.  
KAFUKU: Thanks.  
OTO: I'm so glad you're with me.  
*[Kafuku takes Oto's hand.]*

Two key insights can be gleaned from the above snippet. The first revolves around the couple's marriage prior to Kafuku's discovery of Oto's infidelity. Their life together in an expensive Tokyo flat, far from being a straightforward lifestyle choice, was shaped by the loss of their daughter twenty years prior. Furthermore, given that Oto feels that they could have loved a second child "as much", it can be inferred that, among other reasons, Oto does not want to have another child because she fears doing so would get in the way of her television career. While Kafuku and Oto are married and financially prosperous, their childless status can then be seen as

a reflection of the struggles of raising children and – more generally – the difficulties facing families in contemporary Japan.

During the nation's postwar economic boom, individuals were able to attain stability from two core sources – the company, and the family. With governmental aid programs largely absent, large Japanese firms “came to function as the most munificent providers of welfare in society” (Borovoy 2010, 63). In exchange for loyalty and organizational sacrifice, companies provided training, steady wages, and lifetime employment. Company life took on a distinctly familial flavor, with services like dormitory housing and arranged marriages often provided as well. Paternalistic managers saw it as their duty to mold not just good workers, but good people. Women, meanwhile, were expected to act as dutiful housewives, working to “sustain their husbands' productivity” (Borovoy 2010, 64) and to rear well-educated children. Family was thus construed as the core of Japanese life, both inside and outside of the home. In the mid 1980s, things began to change. Heightened global competition led Japanese companies to scale back their promises of lifetime employment. This very same competition raised demand for low-level, flexible labor, opening up “opportunities for women” (Kelly & White 2006, 73). Increased demand, combined with shrinking corporate safety nets and ballooning school costs, pushed more and more women into the workforce. At the same time, as the sizable “single digit Showan” (Kelly & White 2006, 64) population – those born between 1926 and 1934 – transitioned into their elderly years, young and middle-aged Japanese women of the 1980s and 1990s found themselves saddled with greater elder care responsibilities. Given the continued lack of government support, and the “increasingly global, neoliberal, and recessionary environment” that presented “rising bars to advancement” (Roberts 2014, 53), it is no wonder, then, that during this time, women, overwhelmed with work and caretaking duties, came to

increasingly defer marriage and forgo having children. Oto and Kafuku's situation points to this, with the death of their child mirroring the demise of a robust child rearing environment in Japan, and their collective decision to give up on further attempts indicating the precedence of chasing stable careers over raising kids in the neoliberal age.

Second, the latter part of the conversational excerpt reveals Oto and Kafuku to be in a state of denial. The movie shows that Oto has been actively deceiving her husband by carrying out daytime affairs with multiple actors from her TV shows. However, she attempts to manicure her marriage with Kafuku by reassuring him that she loves him "so much" and that she is "so glad" to be with him. Kafuku, for his part, knows that Oto is cheating on him; however, he refuses to acknowledge this or bring it up to his wife. Instead, similar to Oto, he opts to pretend that nothing has happened, and to carry on a charade of a perfect, loving marriage. This is seen in how earlier on in the scene, he professes to loving Oto "dearly", and at the very end, takes Oto's hand in a tender embrace. Just as the deception and loss undergirding their marriage carries resonance with the extreme pressures exhibited on Japanese families – particularly women – in the wake of the country's economic stagnation, the brand of denial exhibited by the couple in the scene parallels the continued insistence by those in the Japanese government and media on upholding Japan as a narrowly-defined "family nation", and how these outdated attitudes become internalized by individuals.

During the 1990s, as Japan's changing demographic patterns were becoming more and more apparent, government leaders opted to re-emphasize the role of women in reproducing, and looking after their own parents as well as their husband's parents. Prefectural and municipal officials launched crude campaigns calling for women to have more children; such drives were still founded upon the "middle-class model of the economic boom decades" (Kelly & White

2006, 74). Those lucky enough to secure spots in good nursing homes for their elderly relatives were derided as children who “throw away Granny” (Kelly & White 2006, 78). Magazines and television shows portrayed such phenomena as delaying marriage, not having children, and working in irregular jobs as lifestyle choices rather than decisions born by necessity. And in the wake of the post-1980s economic slowdown and shedding of the corporate caretaker model, policymakers responded by further gutting social welfare programs and escalating tone-deaf rhetoric of “self-responsibility” (Uno & O’Day 2020, 8). With the burden of social assistance and personal care still largely transferred from government to family – or, more accurately, the government’s rapidly receding ideal of “family” – Japan presently has “one of the lowest social welfare expenditures among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries” (Borovoy 2010, 68).

Neoliberalism has thus facilitated the crumbling of both pillars of Japan’s postwar social contract – first the corporate welfare structure, and then the family. Institutional support for those affected has been feeble, due to an inability on the part of political leaders to properly acknowledge the causes of the situation at hand. This has tragic consequences, as Japanese social observers race to create categories describing those adversely impacted by the nation’s post-bubble spiral into a precarious, “relationless society” (Allison 2012, 97). The *sarariman* of yesteryear have given way to the *furita* of today (Kelly & White 2006, 71); unable to afford rent, *net cafe nanmin* sleep on sofas in tiny internet cafe booths (Takeyama 2016, 35); one million *hikikomori* opt to withdraw from society altogether and remain in their parents’ homes, and 2.5 million more NEET (not in education, employment, or training) youth exist alongside them (Allison 2012, 102). The arc of Kafuku’s marital life in *Drive My Car*, encapsulated by the aforementioned early scene, therefore functions as a portrait of the decline of the family as a

source of belonging and comfort in modern Japanese society, as well as the stubborn attitudes held by many of those in power, who persistently push the nuclear family ideal of the miracle decades when all signs indicate that such an ideal may not only be obsolete in the current age, but actively harming individuals and leading to the “refugeeization” of the nation’s populace (Allison 2012, 97).

Such an interpretation of Kafuku’s story is further reinforced by two additional factors. First, the symbolic value of the car shifts through the scene. Hitherto, Kafuku’s car has served to signify Kafuku and Oto’s strong marital union, as they mutually support one another in attaining professional success. However, here, as a frame for the couple’s disingenuous conversation, and the stilted, staged gestures of intimacy that accompany it, the Saab 900 Turbo has transformed into a beacon for the loss, brokenness, and hollow denial characterizing Kafuku and Oto’s marriage. Second, shortly after the conversation, Oto abruptly dies, leaving Kafuku to wander aimlessly through life, driving through Japan’s industrialized cityscapes with Oto’s old play recordings as his constant auditory accompaniment. The pristine standard of family life that he set for himself renders him guilty and unable to exist in the present. This reflects the reluctance of politicians to accept and respond to the messy realities of family life in Japan, and the blame that they push onto people. Once rosy with the prospect of fatherhood, and subsequently finding solace in his close relationship with his wife, Kafuku has now – not so unlike Japan’s despondent leagues of *furita*, *net cafe nanmin*, *hikikomori*, and NEETs – become a refugee.

At this point, Hamaguchi’s film fast forwards two years. To arrive at our second main scene of analysis, we will fast forward with it. We have seen how *Drive My Car* captures familial fractures in modern-day Japan through the story of Kafuku’s traumas, which are framed by the device of his car. We will now see how the film offers Japanese society hope for neoliberal

survival – and possibly renewal – in alternative, non-familial relations of care, and expresses this through the relationship between Kafuku and his driver, Watari. Two years later, the taciturn, still-grieving Kafuku has gone to Hiroshima to take a two-month theatrical residency. The organizers of the festival restrict Kafuku from driving due to an accident caused by a previous resident. Instead, they provide Kafuku with Watari. Responding to Kafuku’s request to be shown more of the city after a long day of rehearsal, she drives him to a seaside garbage processing facility. The following conversation takes place during their walk around it.

WATARI: Straight down that way is the Peace Memorial Park. The line between the A-Bomb Dome and the Cenotaph is called the “axis of peace.” The architect who designed this facility created this atrium so that the line would continue on to the sea without being severed.

KAFUKU: Why did you come to Hiroshima?

WATARI: 5 years ago, a landslide occurred and our house was destroyed by the debris. My mother died in that accident. I’d turned 18 years old right before then, and had just officially obtained my driver’s license. The car was intact, so I left home in it after her funeral.

KAFUKU: So you’re 23 years old now.

WATARI: Yes. I had nowhere to go...so I began driving those garbage trucks. Driving is the only thing I can do.

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KAFUKU: My wife’s name is Oto....She died 2 years ago. Cerebral hemorrhage. She was on the floor when I got home and never regained consciousness.

An immediate observation from this scene is that Watari, like Kafuku, comes from a broken family background. She talks of her mother’s death and the obliteration of her childhood village by a landslide. Such striking pictures of destruction again point to the incredible strain placed on families by global capitalist transformations, as well as the loss and disconnectedness felt by many Japanese youth after the relative stability enjoyed by their parents’ generation. Elsewhere

in the movie, it is established that Watari's mother was a low-salaried hostess who suffered from mental illness. Likely unable to seek treatment for her ailment, she often abused Watari violently. This tidbit, along with Watari's current *furita*-esque employment situation – a driver who takes whatever work she can get – further echoes the precarity and so-called “care deficit” (Allison 2012, 103) affecting many individuals and families in Japan. However, while heavy in content, the scene at the garbage facility ultimately carries a cautiously upbeat message in regards to familial trauma. The two characters, Watari and Kafuku, are both scarred by the past. But here, they are able to use these very scars to relate to each other and find belonging. The conversation starts with Watari relaying the loss of her mother and the destruction of her village, but soon after, Kafuku shares the story of the death of his wife, hinting at the intense guilt that he felt for being out of the house that day. Through mutual vulnerability, and open acknowledgement – rather than denial – of their problems, Kafuku and Watari inch closer to forming an emotionally intimate relationship that provides them both with much-needed comfort and release.

What makes this particularly remarkable is the clear power, age, and wealth imbalance in this relationship. Kafuku is an important stage actor, while Watari is, for all purposes, his employee. Kafuku is middle-aged, and likely came of age around the beginning of the Japanese recession, whereas Watari comes from a younger generation. Kafuku, with his well-established career, enjoys a measure of financial affluence, while Watari, as mentioned earlier, comes from the *furita* class. Given the time-limited, client-worker nature of their association, Watari and Kafuku's relationship cannot be described as a straightforward friendship. Rather, it is more of a temporary coalition, one that makes life just a little bit more bearable for both parties. In a cultural anthropological viewing of the film, though, this is exactly the point. By presenting two characters – a worker and her client – of such disparate backgrounds, and the relatability and



recovery that their relationship is able to bring, Hamaguchi signals a path forward for healing the familial wounds inflicted by neoliberalism – a means by which individuals can move beyond “refugeeization” – that exists outside of the tidied, manicured, and ultimately constraining frame of the nuclear family.

Kafuku and Watari’s relationship points toward the chorus of other emergent, non-familial sources of care that have been developing in neoliberal Japan. In her 2016 ethnography, Akiko Takeyama dissects the mindsets of middle-aged Japanese women who seek out the company of male hosts. Neglected by their husbands, and trapped in oppressive, middle-class home environments, they aim to rediscover the vitality, belonging, and control that defined their younger years. Forming romantic relationships with male hosts “provides both single and married women a means through which they can pursue new ways of outfitting their selves and lifestyles,” (Takeyama 2016, 129) – even if such relationships, like Kafuku and Watari’s, are fundamentally dictated by the logics of the market. In the process, these women are able to reclaim their agency and attain a level of emotional fulfillment that contemporary family life has failed to provide them with. Host and hostess bars can thus be considered as one solution that is helping to fill the “care deficit” for Japanese people. Anne Allison identifies several more: a network of “regional living rooms” that bring people of all walks of life together; a Nigata community center that facilitates interaction between low-income elderly individuals and *hikikomori*; a “Stop Suicide” campaign that encourages people to share and find community over their mental health struggles; a “time bank” that allows individuals to donate “care in the present as insurance for one’s own care reception in the future” (Allison 2012, 105-106). This diverse assemblage of solutions, she writes, offers us a glimpse – in a “precarious present” – of a “sociality of a possibly different kind.” (Allison 2012, 106).

In sum, the humble yet potent bond between actor and driver, exemplified in this particular scene of *Drive My Car*, serves as an argument for redefining Japanese societal belonging; for moving away from the narrow, normative notion of belonging centered on the nuclear family that has traumatized so many individuals, and towards a more expansive vision that embraces non-familial coalitions, no matter how imperfect, messy, or temporary they may be. This message is driven home (no pun intended) by the immediate and broader settings of the scene's conversation. As Watari's initial remark indicates, the dialogue takes place while the two characters walk along the "axis of peace" in Hiroshima, a clear allusion to the city's 1945 devastation by atomic bomb and subsequent postwar rebuilding. Through this reference, Hamaguchi seems to be suggesting that despite neoliberalism's destruction of Japan's postwar family-based order, the Japanese people too, through creativity and a sense of collective responsibility, can find care in precarity. On this, he proves to be in agreement with anthropologists like Allison and William W. Kelly (Allison 2012, 106; Kelly & White 2006, 82). And finally, stepping back to the broader framing of Kafuku and Watari's interaction – which is, once again, Kafuku's red 1987 Saab 900 Turbo – we can begin to sense yet another symbolic shift occurring. Whereas the first scene between Oto and Kafuku signaled the car's shift from a harbinger of familial stability to a harbinger of familial brokenness, here, having brought Kafuku and Watari together, it metamorphosizes into a symbol of hope, thus completing the arc of Hamaguchi's film. A sense of renewal pervades through the scene. Even if it's not meant to last in this particular form – indeed, by film's end, Kafuku and Watari go their separate ways – that's okay. There is an undeniable beauty to such unexpected, fragile connections, and they just might be the key to surviving – and even thriving – in neoliberal times.

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