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Seeing Ourselves: Asian American Affect

Rey Chow's *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Cinema* begins with the questions: "Where is the movie about me?...Where in this discipline am I? How come I am not represented? What does it mean for me and my group to be unseen? What does it mean for me and my group to be seen in this manner– what has been left out?" Asian Americans, perhaps, hold a specific claim to Chow's concerns over visibility, identity, representation, and subjectivity. For a long time, Asian Americans could not look to films from either Asia or America for the movie "about them," as neither fully captured the specificity of the Asian American experience and existence. Obligated to consider their crisis of visibility, Asian American films inhabited a fraught space within the broader cinematic landscape. While compelled by a representational burden to encapsulate the shared experiences of a particular minority group into individual works, Asian American cinema ultimately remains beholden to film's overwhelming injunction toward the universal. Foregrounding this tension between the universal and the representationally specific offers an entrance into the recently expanding field of contemporary Asian American cinema. Finally, let us consider a slightly different question to Chow. Our course, Moving Images: Contemporary Asian American Cinema, engages with many of the most important Asian American films of the past two decades, especially focusing on a post-2020 shift in increased representation. The perspective of students taking this course, therefore, is not exactly the same as Rey Chow's would have been in 2007, when *Sentimental Fabulations* was published.

The class is primarily made of Asian Americans, creating a collective in-group viewing experience that elides questions of outsider perception. Furthermore, the viewing material, with the exception of *Nomadland*, exclusively portrays Asian American stories and characters. While Chow's concerns about visibility and representation in 2007 were framed by the anxieties of Asian American absence or misrepresentation in film, today's Asian American cinema, particularly the films we engage with in this course, provides a space of collective image and identity creation. The question, then, shifts from one of representation (the problem of searching for "me and my group" in film and the resulting anxieties over *being* seen or not seen by others) to one of group self-perception and identification. Instead of asking "Where is the movie about me?" or "What does it mean for me and my group to be unseen or seen in this manner?", EAS 350 identifies and presents the most important movies about "us" to a group of "us," foregrounding a new query in Asian American cinema: What does it mean to see *ourselves* in a film?

In Alexander Chee's essay "What *Minari* Means to Me," the novelist attempts to delve "into [his] own family's story" through an examination of Lee Isaac Chung's film and an interview between its lead actor, Steven Yeun, and Jay Caspian Kang. Interspersing Chee's own childhood photographs in between a polaroid of *Minari*'s cast and an elementary school snapshot of its lead actor, Steven Yeun, the essay is at once a self-absorbed attempt at a one-to-one matching of the author's life to both the movie and actor's stories and a desperately poignant endeavor to "[patch] together an Asian universe for [him]self" and others isolated from an Asian American community. As the "first Asian American at [his] school," Chee focuses primarily on the autobiographical details he has in common to *Minari* and Yeun, particularly the experience of growing up as an Asian American boy in a predominantly white area (for *Minari*, it's the

American South; for Chee, Maine, and western Canada for Yeun). “Lee Isaac Chung said his family got his film mixed up with their own memories. I think a lot of us are having this experience,” he writes, clearly parsing between individual memories of his own childhood and the collective memories of Asian American immigrant families. The most significant moment of the essay, however, is not Chee’s meticulous recall of his childhood; instead, it is his description of the affective experience of seeing his own life in film: “I recognized the way Jacob walks, the same as my dad did, the same as the cousin who lived with us for a while in the 1980s…When Yeun did that walk, with his hands on his hips, the leg moving out from the hips in sweeps, a little like marching, I almost yelped.” This yelp marks Chee’s pivotal moment of recognition, that this is Chow’s “movie about him.” I bring up the yelp because it suggests an identification that can only be found through an emotional register, and I mention the essay because this affective intensity is inextricable from Chee’s impulse to intertwine the personal, the collective, and the universal. Much like Chee, I will now reflect on my own experience watching two of the films from our syllabus: *Minari* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. I prioritize these movies not because they were the best ones of the semester or my favorites (although it just so happens that they are), but because they were the only two that made me sob when I watched them. Although my tears can be partly explained by these movies’ tear jerking intentions, the intensity of my responses nevertheless suggest a level of emotional resonance and self-identification that I did not encounter even in other movies I considered “superior,” like *After Yang* and *The Farewell*, or ones I enjoyed more, like *Saving Face*. What does it mean when, through the process of emotional abreaction, the “movie about me” becomes the movie in which I see myself?

The ending of *Minari* left me heaving with tears, the kind that make your head throb long after their release. After the screening concluded, I left the auditorium to walk around the SPIA fountain in the dark, wiping my face and wondering at my overly emotional response to the movie's ending. My girlfriend joined me while I wandered in spiral formations on the steps. As the lights in the fountain danced on the surface of the water, I told her: Nothing in *Minari* ever happened to me. But it was my childhood, or at least the only movie I've ever felt encapsulated in. The growing pains of Asian American children in the South, the peculiar combination of Southern and Korean religious fervor, the natural beauty of rural scenery, hiding with your older sister while marriage-shattering fights happen in the living room, a father who is always disappointing. A self-consciousness about race never fully actualized due to the outward niceness of white Southern Christians. The feeling of knowing you do not belong, that it's not even a possibility. Another alternative ending, colored by my own childhood nostalgia: After the fire, Jacob, Monica, Anne, and David sleep on the floor of the living room together, their arms connecting the gentle curves of their backs into one unified whole. The movie ends with the sound of their soft breaths, a reminder that they are all alive. Sleeping together in one room, a family entwines into each other. We no longer hear David's heart beating on its own; instead, the only people on earth who matter breathe in sync with him.

Family sleeping all together, *Minari*

Here is the universal, that childhood feeling of being completely surrounded by the comfort of knowing your family is still alive, even while sleeping. Now here is the collective: for the Asian American family in predominantly white places, community is reduced to your immediate relatives. They become the entirety of your very limited world. Even the ubiquity of familial love becomes precisely about the immigrant survival experience. Finally, here is the personal. Still taking laps around the fountain, my girlfriend tells me her dad, despite experiencing a very similar Korean American boyhood, didn't resonate much with *Minari*. I think about why I did for a bit longer. Why does it matter so much that small, factual parts of my life were represented on screen? After all, art, and cinema in particular, provides us with the possibility of inhabiting others' subjectivities and bridging our shared experiences of humanity. In fact, other than *Minari*, I could only firmly point to the film *Ladybird*, whose protagonist I have little in common with, as another movie about my life. Again, the temptation to create a one-to-one matching is overwhelming. I've never been a white girl in Sacramento applying to NYU while pretending to be cool enough to date Timothee Chalamet, but I have had a mother, who happens to be a nurse, who loves me exactly like Ladybird's nurse mother loves her. I have been a Korean child in the American South playing in meadows and creeks, living in whitewashed houses with crosses nailed to the walls, and going to white and Korean churches, but I've never been a little boy with a heart condition and a father like Steven Yeun. Both films, and my recognition of myself in them, include the universal and the personal. Only *Minari*, however, captures the collective, an affective mirror of the Asian American experience that allows me to see both myself and others reflected within it. Eventually, after walking around contemplating the film's conclusion a bit more, I move back into my life, by which I mean I stay in the library until 2 am. At some point, the post-film reverie has to end, but the image of the

barn enveloped in flames remains with me for the rest of the night. Success, one of the false promises of the American Dream, remains illusory in *Minari*. My true emotional attachment to the film rests in the belief that its rightful ending is the fire and the night after, not the optimistic closing image of plentiful water for their land. What made me weep (my yelp, as it were) was not seeing Jonah and Monica's hard work go up in flames, but the realization that I had been subconsciously expecting its inevitability for the entire film. For most immigrants, the Dream is never realized, destined to be experienced only in their collective sleep. The affective nature of Asian American film ultimately transforms a moment of seeing yourself in the burning wreckages of the characters' hopes and dreams into a group recognition of the American fantasy.

Barn going up in flames, *Minari*

The affective failure, then, of rewatching *Everything Everywhere All at Once* in an Asian American cinema course for me this semester was its lack of this moment of group recognition. I watched the movie in theaters when in first came out with my entire family, and it left my mother, older sister, and me deeply affected. We were crying, laughing, and looking at each other through our tears. This semester, I was similarly touched by the film's striving toward the universal and still felt it resonated with me personally, and yet, my film journal from this rewatch is marked by an emotional distance:

> "My third time watching EEAAO. I cried less than expected, but still a lot. What is the function of my tears?… But a "universal" treatise of life. I'm curious about the presentation of a universal story. Why are

> "ethnic" works always required to be universal? It's still a great film. But there's also this sense that it's a film very interested in itself– it tries to be foundational and referential within its own parameters."

This entry is clearly affected by this having been my third time watching the film. I was compelled to overanalyze the way I reacted to it this year as compared to the way I reacted to it in the past, as seen in my questioning of my own tears. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* invites emotional reaction, touching on literally everything in the universe in order to impact a large audience. Incorporating universal themes of existentialism, family, and the pursuit of meaning in a chaotic world, it strives toward a "universal" treatise on life and speaks to shared human experiences. And yet, by the end of the film, I was left questioning why the Asian American film must strive toward the universal. When the "ethnic work" constantly seeks out broad approval, and in the case of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, universal relevance, what happens to its specificity?

As I noticed in my film journal, *EEAAO* is a film deeply interested in its own narrative framework, attempting to create a foundation of referentiality within its own parameters. The film, with all of its multiversal chaos, struggles to contain its complexity within its self-imposed limits of what it believes to be the universal experience. This internal focus, I believe, distances the viewer from the kind of group recognition that was so powerful the first time I watched it with my family. Despite this, I can't deny the film's deep resonance with Asian Americans. Even on a primarily autobiographical level, the film spoke to all three of the women in my family enough for us to leave the theater shaken. It seemed revelatory to view the distinctive contours of a mother-daughter dynamic shaped by the specificity of a queer Asian American experience. Yet despite *Everything Everywhere All At Once*'s clear emotional reach, its ability to speak across subjectivity, I feel a subtle disconnect when reflecting on the film in the context of the larger intentions of this course.

Watching the film in the context of an Asian American cinema course, I no longer felt that same visceral pull that I did in the theater. Instead of feeling swept up by the emotional currents of the story, I found myself more focused on the distance between the film's emotional universality and the more specific, collective experience that I felt acutely aware of in the classroom. The communal aspect that the class brought to the viewing process—that shared sense of an Asian American identity—was absent in my rewatch. This time, the emotional highs and lows of the film did not feel like they were collectively experienced; instead, they became more personal, more solitary, less connected to the group. Perhaps that is the paradox of a film like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—its attempt to speak to a universal truth of human experience is simultaneously what makes it lose its particularity, and in doing so, its ability to create a group recognition I had once experienced with my family. By trying to be the film about everything, the film about me failed to become the film about us.

Evelyn fragmented, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*

Asian American cinema, and perhaps all representational forms of media attempting to speak to a group experience, persistently contends with a fundamental tension between the pull toward universality and the need for cultural and ethnic specificity. Despite my more distant viewing of the film this semester, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* still moved me to tears, partly because I recognized in its splittings and disjunctions a reflection of the Asian American

experience itself. The way Evelyn's mind fractures, encapsulating her family within the chaos of the multiverse, mirrors the divergent nature of the Asian American collective. Perhaps the question I started this essay with is an impossible one for these movies to address. Can we see ourselves in film if there is no unified "us"—if our identities as racial minorities in America are always inherently and inevitably split and fractured? Akin to Evelyn's fragmented being, Asian Americans search to see ourselves in the refractions of existence: in universe-hopping, in the flames of burning dreams, in the entangled arms of a sleeping family, in everything, everywhere, all at once.

A multitude of universes, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*

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