

On Normalcy

Analysis of "Better Luck Tomorrow"

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I really enjoyed Nina Revoyr answer for the question why the main character in her book, Southland, is a lesbian. She wanted to show that a "normal" novel can have a protagonist who is a lesbian and has the same kind of issues as non-lesbians. There is nothing special about them. Meanwhile her book's main focus is not sexual orientation. The other part of her answer was that she is lesbian, so it was natural for her to write a lesbian character. In the 2003 movie "Better Luck Tomorrow" all the main characters are Asian Americans. However the story has very little to do with race issues. The questions the movie raises--and answers to some extent--circle around violence, power, moral code, suburban anomie, teenage angst, relationships, peer pressure... Just like countless other movies, but in a unique combination. Both artworks are pushing us to redefine what is considered "normal". We are living in a world where white, heterosexual males are no longer assumed to be the reference points. At least that's the kind of vision these artists are moving towards. They prove through their vision that all humans have issues and strive for happiness independent from their sexual orientation, gender and skin color.

Having said the above I am ready to contradict myself. 5 out of the 6 main characters can be described as overachievers. It is a natural for them to excel in all competitions, taking on as many honors as they can, participate in as many extra curricular activity as they can fit in their schedule. They never step out of the underlying value system that considers these goals and practices part of every day life. This depiction seems to feed into the stereotype that Asian Americans are achievers. However the director, Justin Lin, who also wrote, edited and partially produced the movie is an Asian American. I believe that he wanted to create a challenging movie, asking questions. He treated the overachieving nature of the characters in such a matter of fact way that he managed to create an eerie atmosphere.

I was watching carefully and found only three small segments where the issue of race came up at all. First Ben gets accused that the only reason he got into his high school's basketball team was that they needed a token Asian American. I was aware of the tendency started about 10-14 years ago in Hollywood that to make a movie acceptable or give the appearance of political correctness they had to have a token African American actor in it. I never heard the expression though referring to Asian Americans. On one hand it should be valued, because it shows that Asian Americans are reaching similar significance in the US as African Americans. On the other, and more important hand of course using "token Asian Americans" is of course just an excuse to avoid dealing with the deeper causes of prejudice and racial discrimination. This movie puts a spin on it, because according to its plot the accusation was false and Ben got into because he was good at shooting ball. Just like with everything else he was meticulous and spent lots of time and energy to accomplish what he did. By playing out the related scenes the way they did the director pointed our attention to both exclusion and to the "token" practice, but did not provide specific answers.

The next inter-racial (and intra-racial too) scene was when the gang of the main characters crashed a party. I paid special attention to check their opponents, who they provoked. I even stopped the DVD to see the racial make up of the group. Their leader was Caucasian, just as I remembered at first viewing. However behind him there was an Asian American, an African American and a Latino youth. This selection must have been orchestrated by the director on purpose. I rarely see such a divergent yet closely knit group in real life. I would love too though, because it would signal that we reached such a stage where skin color really overstepped the barriers of public consciousness. The composition of the two fighting groups proved that right and wrong, or to put it in another way testosterone driven teenage angst, is not race dependent.

The final scene with some race implication was when our little group of heroes, I mean anti-heroes, is cruising in the city and a carful of Latino youth pulls up next to them. Tension, with a potential for violence, was tangible. I don't think that it was simply my prejudice that the Latinos looked like gangsters, I believe the director wanted to give that specific impression that they are ready to fight. But no fight erupted there and then, the cars went to different directions after a few heavy minutes. This non-incident pointed our attention that conflicts between gangs do not necessarily happen between whites and non-whites. The "other" races are just as capable of infringe upon each other. Again, whites were removed as reference points.

In the grand story of the movie these incidents were negligible. They do not touch upon the main plot. However these elements along with others provide the atmosphere. An atmosphere where violence compensates for the pressure these youth are under. The expectations they have to live up to, including their owns, their parents' and their peers' is unhealthy. They need an outlet and they find it through illegal activities. Their real motivation for criminal activity is not the money it brings. They need the excitement to be able to step out of their "goody two shoes" image. Also, most of them considers this a transitory experience. They are seniors on a high school, soon moving on to a higher plane, level of existence school. Their question is not whether to go to college or not, but which Ivy League school to attend. In the final , surprisingly optimistic, scene they don't drive off to the sunset on a Mustang (i.e. horse), but on a convertible BMW. Money was never the real driving force.

The director said in an interview: " I strove to create a film space that did not define Asian Americans in opposition to "whiteness," but rather, to establish them as active participants in the ever evolving face of Americana." I believe he achieved his goal. I would like to see more movies that do that. Although personally, I would rather avoid movies that are not just violent,

but violence itself is their subject matter. But any movie that helps to redefine "normal" and widen the definition of "American" is welcome.