

Four Slices of a Pie, Flavored with People Who “Do Stuff”

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My Introduction to the Slice-of-Life Genre:

***Fruitvale Station* (Coogler, 2013)**

Ryan Coogler's best is when he tells personal stories.

Coogler's debut film traces the final day in the life of Oscar Grant. This took place on New Year's Eve of 2008, and immerses audiences fully into that time and world of Oakland, California. Through its intimate visual storytelling, *Fruitvale Station* offers a personal and authentic portrait of a life gone too soon.

Following a 24-hour period, the film introduces us to Oscar (Michael B. Jordan) and his entire circle in its 90 minute runtime, including his mother, Wanda (Octavia Spencer), and Sophina (Melonie Diaz), his girlfriend and mother of his child. Michael B. Jordan, with Coogler's soft, observational direction, anchors this film forward and humanizes Grant as a man and not a written character. In the first scene, Grant is introduced to us as a man who has cheated on his girlfriend, has ties with drugs, and has a child. There is a blend here that delivers nuance and doesn't portray this man as this or that.

Covering a real-life event, especially over the course of only one day's time, is a huge challenge. Really, there is no way to really know what Oscar Grant was up to the entire day. Regardless of the truth contained in that specific day, we learn truths about Grant's life as a whole. The way he loves his daughter, supports his mother, sets goals, has hopes. On top of that, the ending of that night and this film are the same, and that appears to be the main focus here. With accounts from Grant's family, Coogler does as much justice as possible to the man without dramatizing him or his death, which is worth appreciation. Michael B. Jordan does equal amounts of justice.

The film begins with its ending, which is a bold decision to make when considering audiences that aren't familiar with the Killing of Oscar Grant. He dies, and we travel backwards and follow him until his death. And he doesn't do anything eventful, or "cinematic". Throughout, he just moves in small actions, like buying a card and dinner for his mother's birthday, or getting gas. Michael B. Jordan has a tough task of keeping audiences interested in Grant's everyday life, but he pulls it off strongly. There is nothing outstanding about his mannerisms, line delivery, or facial expressions. And that is what is most effective when the ending comes around, because this is not a character. This is a man.

I grew up across the Bay Bridge in South San Francisco, and I felt right at home. The benefit of capturing a real event is that you simply **have** to be true to the setting. A Bay Area native, Coogler displays the culture and environment wonderfully. It is shot on location. Grant listens to The Jacka and drives towards "The City", a term that Bay Area folks (including myself) use in reference to San Francisco. The people on the BART break into dance and come together because someone owns a speaker. Many films take place in San Francisco/the Bay Area, but few of them capture the life that these cities truly hold. *Fruitvale Station* does, and it does it well.

No, I Don't Love Everything:

***A Real Pain* (Eisenberg, 2024)**

Jesse Eisenberg loves Chopin.

A Real Pain is a difficult one. Eisenberg created a narrative about two cousins taking a Jewish heritage tour in Poland, and it is a very intriguing take on generational trauma and identity. The characters here really carry it through.

Kieran Culkin plays Benji in an Academy Award winning performance. What strengthens Culkin's performance, along with strengthening the character of Benji, is the character of David, played by Jesse Eisenberg. Eisenberg wrote these characters as polar opposites of each other, most explicitly in their emotional and social expression. Benji's jokes and outbursts don't work as well without David's reserved, collected personality. On screen, they work with fluidity and effortless chemistry, however it is a pinch overdone.

When referring to these two, it is a mostly "them" picture. Culkin is less of a supporting actor and more of a co-lead; there are other characters on the tour with them that are the real supporting characters. Their placement in the film emphasizes the differences between David and Benji, as well as giving a lot of show-not-tell on Benji's interactions with others. It gets tricky. Too much show-and-tell can dig your film into the gutter. Benji and his insufferable public personality can only go so far before the emotional hits Eisenberg is going for become unrewarding.

There's a scene in the middle act that highlights their tour guide, James (Will Sharpe). In the shortest of summaries, Benji humbles him for constantly speaking and information-dumping on each stop of the tour, rather than letting them **feel** the moment. The irony here is hilariously off the charts.

Any kind of magnetic energy brought to screen by this cast is immediately pulled back when the score kicks in. Almost always, it is incredibly jarring and out of place. Looking at this as a quadruple-feature, the score is even more abrupt and is the most amateur-ish addition to *A Real Pain*. To tell a story you hold close to you, the biggest difficulty is figuring out which of your favorite personal pieces work and don't work in terms of the filmmaking. The narrative thread is there, the cinematography and performances collaborate to let moments breathe, but then all air is lost when that score comes in.

Unlike the *Fruitvale Station*'s of cinema, *A Real Pain* lacked in impact. As the credits rolled, I didn't stare in thought, absorbing and pondering over what I just experienced. But why? Two wonderfully interesting main characters, a natural and brilliant script, and captivating direction. It had all the bases to come together and really hit me. David put it best:

"You see how people love you? Do you see what happens when you walk into a room? I would give anything to know what that feels like, man. To know what it feels like to have charm. To light up a room when I walk in. But you light up a room and then you, like, shit on everything inside of it."

Then Benji laughs. It's funny.

Except, when your film literally does what your character says, it's quite difficult to laugh with him.

Score, at its Most Effective:

***Minari* (Chung, 2020)**

Minari is extremely impressive in balancing purity and honesty with dreaminess and wonder.

Directed by Lee Isaac Chung, *Minari* follows a Korean American family as they try to navigate along the American Dream on their newly found farm in Arkansas. On top of pulling my heartstrings apart, this is also one of the funniest movies that I have ever experienced.

An applause for the cast, all around. Their performances, in combination with Chung's direction, this film successfully captures different perspectives of this family: the parents, the kids, and the grandmother. We see them together and separately; this fleshes them out as a real family. Steven Yeun and Han Ye-ri are excellent as Jacob and Monica, parents who are just trying to figure things out. There is no side to take between them; they are both right in what they argue for with each other. Does Jacob really have it all figured out? Why doesn't Monica fully have faith in his vision? This is what is most compelling, and what builds the most significant themes: sacrifice, hope, and trust. And between bits of arguments, there are moments of softness, such as Monica washing Jacob's hair for him in the bathtub.

Alan Kim as David and Youn Yuh-jung as Grandma Soonja are standouts in this cast. Their chemistry as a grandmother and grandson is authoritative and powerful, as if they were already related and were candidly shot.

"Grandma, you're not a real grandma."

"What is a real grandma?"

About a minute later, David serves her his urine in a bowl instead of Mountain Dew, and her reaction is priceless. Again, this is one of the funniest movies I have ever experienced.

David and Anne (Noel Cho) are learning to adapt with the new kids. An already difficult task, it's not much help when the kids on the bus are laughing at Paul (Will Patton), who helps their father out for work. This is one perspective that is briefly touched on, but could take more time exploring.

The score is exceptional, and is arguably the biggest contributor towards the vibe delivered for audiences. It is calming and passive, while not being overused. Moments that need to breathe are left in silence. With its visual style of scenic, landscape shots and practical lighting, the cinematography and score work together in presenting tranquility with somber, melancholic undertones. Things look so lovely. Sound so lovely. But why do I feel sad? Chung plants seeds that are returned to in the strongest of manners, David's illness being a prime example. The whole film, there's a sense of worry for him, leading up to his big moment, running to be with his grandmother—a very rewarding piece of this film. And when things aren't looking up, Chung lets you sit with Jacob as he looks at his land and smokes a cigarette. He gives you hope in such a desperate time.

By exploring this family, *Minari* takes a look at adolescence and adulthood, and the growth that occurs in both. Lee Isaac Chung paints his canvas with delicacy and grace in the most beautiful way.

A Favorite.

***Past Lives* (Song, 2023)**

What a debut for Celine Song.

Of the films covered so far, this is the most, absolute most, concrete example of people just “doing stuff.”

This picture starts and ends in the same place, with a jab of heartbreak in between. And it is all conversation. In *Past Lives*, people walk and talk, sit and talk, and sometimes it’s in the present, sometimes it’s in the past. On paper, that is quite literally it. But it is woven together perfectly; genuinely perfectly.

Greta Lee plays Nora, a woman who moved to New York from Korea when she was a child. Teo Yoo plays Hae Sung, a close friend and romantic interest from that period in Korea. They eventually get back in touch, and the audience observes their experiences together from both time periods, including the two of them separated and apart from one another. The second half takes its own form, as Hae Sung visits New York to visit Nora.

By the time Hae Sung visits Nora, she is already married to Arthur (John Magaro), and happily, for over ten years. She wouldn’t leave her husband for him, right?

Romance films have tainted the reality of love.

Because here, we are in fact following a film about love. However, director Celine Song explores much deeper, introspective concepts about the connection between two people. Control, fate, what-if’s. There’s more to it than two people who know each other well. In the end, we narratively progress nowhere. Hae Sung’s trip ends, and he returns home. Nora is sad, Hae Sung is sad, Arthur is relieved, and I’m sad.

The cinematography works as a device that leaps this story forward, with layers and layers to dig into. Every frame is carefully crafted. Horizontal movements of the camera are fully straightened and held still, shifting left and right as a representation of a timeline. An establishing shot of Korea—we move left. New York—we move right.

While every shot has an intent, each is done subtly all throughout the runtime. The ending sequence of *Past Lives* is seriously up there with the most effective and impactful endings of a romance. Hae Sung's Uber arrives to take him to the airport; he is driven out of frame, to the left side, back into Nora's past. As Nora turns and walks toward the present and her future, the wind blows her clothes back, towards the left side of the frame. A part of her is clinging to the past. Then, that score hits. And everyone's heart breaks a little bit.

In other romance films, this would mean that deep down she loves Hae Sung, and we will one day get the sequel, *Future Selves*, which follows Nora as she travels Korea to find Hae Sung, only to realize that he is married with two kids. Not this film. Interestingly, Nora's story in *Past Lives* highlights the loss that comes with immigration. As much as Hae Sung was an important person to Nora, what he also represents is her past. Not missing it, but thinking about what that life could have been. The impact of *Past Lives* on audiences is personal, and dependent on each individual viewer's experience, and it is spectacular.

