

Missing Johnny

In director Xi Huang's debut film *Missing Johnny*, the lives of Hsu, Feng, and Lee gently intertwine to form a simple drama centered on the trials of everyday life. With its muted color palette, subtle score, minimal dialogue, and slow pacing, *Missing Johnny* is a pure example of the "Slice of Life" genre. The film provides a thoughtful observation of, and commentary on, the lives most of us live, spared of any dramatic flair or spectacle. To many, *Missing Johnny* may seem uneventful and unimaginative, but the real genius of the film is its stark realism that slowly unfolds from beginning to end.

The film does not rely on any flashy scenes or drama beyond what most people have experienced – a seething romance and a growingly tumultuous family relationship encapsulates nearly all the excitement in *Missing Johnny*. As a result, the film heavily depends on its cast to generate interest and audience engagement, a risk which pays off well. Rima Zeidan as Hsu, Lawrence Ko as Feng, and Sean Huang as Lee all perform wonderfully. Each captures a sense of fatigue and aimlessness as their characters are worn down by life yet trudge on with the hope of eventual happiness.

Missing Johnny opens with a sense of idyllic stability. Broad shots of Taiwan's metropolitan area are contextualized as the camera settles in on Feng's car stalling on parkway. He sighs and pulls off to the side and calls for it to be towed. Elsewhere, Hsu is just returning home with her new pet bird, and her landlord's autistic son Lee follows in tow, trying to steal glances of the bird. As Hsu and Lee reach home, they part ways. Lee comes home to his mother scolding him for ignoring her sticky note reminders, and Hsu sets up the cage for her bird as she talks to her boyfriend over the phone. The bird escapes the next day despite the effort of the three, but the calm background score and expressionless faces tell that these are normal occurrences.

As the movie progresses, the daily friction of life is evident. Lee disappears for days intermittently from home to mourn the death of his brother. Hsu breaks up with her emotionally distant boyfriend over an altercation and bonds with Feng over their frustration with life. The two become close but are weary of commitment. "I feel when people are too close they forget how to love each other," Feng tells her after they witness his family have a massive argument during his father's birthday. This quote reflects the attitudes of detachment they all feel towards the world.

The emotional states of the characters are all as plain as day. Feng is lost and has no plans in life, Hsu is upset with her lack of independence, and Lee is unable to overcome his grieving. All three seem tired. Xi Huang skillfully portrays this through long silences throughout the movie and a myriad of still shots with no particular focus. There are no melodramatic rows, just small events in daily life that continually weigh each character down. The atmosphere that Huang creates is not merely depressive; it is more subtle - the strenuous feeling of restlessness and monotony that everyone has felt before.

A weakness of *Missing Johnny* was its lack of focus. Xi Huang may have done so on purpose to further underscore a feeling of listlessness, but intentional or not, doing so detracted from the viewer's ability to critically engage with the film. I found myself often wondering where the film was going, and what significance the eponymous character Johnny would hold. The dearth of plot was instead filled in with symbolism. In retrospect, nearly every detail of the film, from the birds to the character's professions, were clearly meant to represent the characters themselves. While the film was rife with symbols, too

much is too much. It felt incredibly unbalanced – symbolism is not substantive enough to stand alone without plot.

The film ends as it started. As Feng and Hsu drive together aimlessly to escape their lives for a moment, Feng's car stalls again in the middle of a highway, blocking traffic. The two get out of the car and push it up the exit ramp. Credits roll as traffic resumes, and an after-credits scene shows Lee lying on a pile of newspaper in an abandoned building listening to the news. Life moves on.

Like the misdirected calls Hsu receives for Johnny throughout the film, the audience is given fragments of Hsu, Feng, and Lee's lives. Despite the vague expositions and disconnected events, the combination of the filmography and actor delivery form a coherent film that quietly resonates with its audience. *Missing Johnny* is far from an action-packed thriller, even the dialogue is kept to a minimum. Instead, it is a calm and thoughtful film, extraordinary in its almost brutal representation of the ordinary.

Bibliography

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