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Rebecca Hall’s Peaks and Pitfalls:

The necessary execution of bringing *Passing* from pages to the pictures

Being a director in some ways is a lot like being an author, both have the ability to tell a story through their lens using setting, characters, conflict and plot, allowing each to interact and shape the other. They have to sell themselves and their work to publishing companies or producers to distribute their product, however the hinge that swings one from the other is the responsibility and volume of translation. Many would say it's a sea of money that parts these two professions and it's true, but it's where that capital is directed. With cash comes control, cash flows to departments in charge of sets, costume, and lighting. To actors who bring the characters to life as close as possible to how they envision them, and most important of all are the producers who try to puppeteer the director toward their vision. The creative mind is muddled enough, but what if it isn't an original story rather an adaptation. This was the challenge Rebecca Hall was taking on when directing *Passing*, a nearly century old psychological tragedy told from a narrative heavy perspective. Hall’s portrayal of the novella may not be strict to the story's fidelity, it offers a visually nuanced perspective and suggestive theatrics to best replicate the book’s intention.

The most jarring difference is the film's formatting, black and white and squared off aspect ratio that is reminiscent of and older Hollywood. Why is this the choice the director made, granted there is no framing mentioned in the story but why use one so unconventional? This framing helps us focus on our main character, Irene; Through her we see the story and its contained point of view that helps us understand and sympathize with her defensive nature. We are unable to see what goes on around her and what others are thinking. This feeling is aided by the selective blur effect used throughout, when Irene is uninterested, inattentive, stressed, or suspicious, a blur surrounds her and whom she is talking with, further blocking out the outside world making it hard for us to discern what is going on and if she is trustworthy

The other daring choice is the color, or lack thereof the film is shot in; Black and white can turn a lot of viewers and producers away from the best of scripts, so why was this choice seen as soo integral for the plot? *Passing*, being a story about race takes color into a great deal of consideration. The novella uses color descriptions to help elude to iconography of class, race, and identity; red, white, blue, and black are brought up a great deal, red is used for Claire often to show passion, white alludes to Irene’s deep wish to be so and alludes to wealth and control. Black and blue are brought up when talking about racial injustice, and notably three of the four make up our national colors leaving an important odd man out. It seems that this tool is too integral to leave out when telling this tale, however, Hall having control of a visual medium is able to say more while using less.

The story is about a black woman who is passing as white and is conflicted with what that means to her. She is pulled by two opposed forces, her race and her class, the black and white format helps us simply see the nuances of race by taking away color and leaving complexion. This is highlighted in the opening scene when Irene picks up a black doll, the toy is much darker than Irene’s skin; accompanied by her shyness it's alluding to the viewer that this character is hiding who she is. This choice also aids our point of view, Irene sees race as class, though she doesn't admit it, her complexion is her status. The black and white screen helps us see the acute divide in status and justifies Irene’s anxiousness if she were found out. This tense feeling that seems to be protruding throughout the film is not only helped by the visuals but the sound design.

Hall seems to have a less is more approach when it comes to *Passing’s* mise-en-scene, nothing is louder than silence which screams in a lot of this movie. Music is used to introduce tone, help guide the audience toward how they should feel or what to expect, Hall uses this to leave the audience in constant suspense. The lack of music gives us no indication of what to expect next or how other characters think. This is accompanied with the haunting sound design for the actors, their voices seem to protrude and stay with you almost making the most simple reactions or statements reference some covert meaning. This also aids the undisclosed but highly inferable sexual tension between Irene and Claire

This story is told from the perspective of a third person narrator who seems to be mostly limited to Irene’s thoughts even at times mimicking them. Due to this unique perspective we are able to understand Irene’s process and contradictions, however the film lacks this luxury instead relying on the actors to best convey feeling and mood. This unfortunately is the most important yet irregular aspect of the film, from accents to plain acting, it possesses many challenges. Most striking was the rooftop scene when Irene and Claire first meet after twelve years apart, the first aspect is the long uncomfortable stare; this aspect exists for an uncomfortably long time making the viewer tense and anxious especially when met by Ruth Negga’s portrayal of Claire. This gives us a sense into Claire’s fear of being found out, however the problem is what follows, when they finally sit down to talk.

In the story Claire and Irene seem to share a mutual attraction and while the author had subtly implanted this notion the movie makes this a very glaring reality with clever camera movement but also over exaggerated acting. When these two characters are talking for the first time it becomes distracting how much Claire’s eyes wander up and down Irene’s figure, and it would be forgivable if it happened but once or twice but in nearly every scene together they scan each other's bodies like dogs at the park. Another distracting element is Claire’s southern accent despite being from Chicago and Alexander Skarsgard’s unusually poor performance (not that he was given much to work with).

These acting faux pas are easily forgivable when given the scope of the project, time, money, and management that was given to Rebecca Hall is incredible. She was able to give the world *Passing* in a way that stays true to the source material while inserting her voice and art and in doing so has attempted to highlight and underline what a more conventional director might have failed to do. It doesn't follow the material to a “T” but one understands that while some scenes may have been slightly changed, removed, or added to the book it was for the benefit of the viewer. To help them digest the complex setting and narration of the story so the themes and ideals could take center stage.