

*The Enormity of Life*. Dir. Eric Swinderman. Screenplay by Eric Swinderman and Carmen DeFranco. Perf. Breckin Meyer, Emily Kinney, Giselle Eisenberg. Anhedonia Pictures, 2021

*The Enormity of Life* is a dark, yet comedic example that not every story has a happy ending. The film tackles many heavy topics like mental illness, school shootings, and a loss of innocence. According to the film's writer and director, Eric Swinderman, "the enormity of life is that things can get really big, really fast," (Shiller). After a failed suicide attempt, Casey (Breckin Meyer), not only receives a substantial inheritance, but he also connects with a young woman, Jess (Emily Kinney), and her daughter, Jules (Giselle Eisenberg). In developing a relationship with them, he must decide whether his inheritance should help them or stay in the family.

Casey is an emotionally despondent man, suffering from anhedonia, who grew up with a mother who has tried to kill him multiple times due to her paranoid schizophrenia. Jess, meanwhile, is a young, single mom who struggles with her self-esteem and confidence. Together, they make each other happy which generates a sense of healing. On the surface, this film feels like it should have a happy ending, especially since the audience watches as Casey and Jess's friendship develops, but ultimately, not everyone wins their battle with mental illness. In the end, Casey decides to follow through with his plan to commit suicide because even though he's found a friend in Jess, those feelings are not strong enough to combat the fact that he does not want to end up like his mother.

What is interesting about this film is that the original title was Anhedonia, which "is a mental condition, by which the person who has that affliction, has an inability to experience joy," says Swinderman (Shiller). "They don't feel excited by the things that you and I might feel excited about or feel excited about, things that humans are excited about whether it's a new job, a career, money, drugs, sex, whatever it might be, they just kind of feel numb all the time, nothing really makes them experience joy" (Shiller). Swinderman, who changed the title at the insistence of his distributor, nevertheless kept the essence of the film in the tagline: a story without feeling.

Despite being a story without feeling, this movie is a rollercoaster of emotion that covers more than just mental illness and Swinderman hopes it sparks

conversations because he feels that we cannot talk about certain topics without getting political, stating:

people often don't want to have tough conversations, they'd rather avoid those conversations. We don't talk a lot about mental illness. We don't talk a lot about guns without getting political... This film is not a political statement. So, I hope that people can watch a film like this and have a conversation about it. Maybe through talking about the movie, they open up a dialogue about mental illness, about suicide prevention, about gun violence and school shootings. (Shiller)

Even though *The Enormity of Life* came out in 2021, the conversations Swinderman hopes to spark are very much needed, especially as the topics of mental health and gun violence continue to make headlines.

After being inundated by the 24-hour news cycles covering school shootings, Jules has become very afraid and has convinced herself that she is going to experience a school shooting in her lifetime. Her fear has become so great that Jess believes she has PTSD. Jules' fear is not that farfetched, however, because more than 344,000 students have experienced a school shooting since Columbine in 1999 (Woodrow Cox, et al). While Jules fears she will experience one school shooting, that 344,000 does not account for students who have experienced a school shooting twice. After the shooting at Michigan State University in February 2023, parents of MSU students who survived the Sandy Hook, Oxford, and Parkland shootings came forward expressing their disbelief that their children were facing a second school shooting in their lifetime (Bosman; Rosenblatt et. al; Baldas).

This film is about the loss of innocence and how mental illness and school shootings rob us of that. Casey loses his innocence as a young boy as he felt he needed to grow up quickly to raise his mother after his sister abandons them. Jess had her daughter, Jules, when she was 16, which forced her to grow up and Jules is now growing up in a world where school shootings have seemingly become a norm of American childhood. This film highlights how life can be too much at times and this feeling makes this film universal. Regardless of what we have been through, we all understand that feeling when the enormity of life weighs too heavily on our shoulders.

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*Lucky Chan-sil*. Dir. Kim Cho-hee. Screenplay by Kim Cho-hee. Perf. Kang Mal-Geum, Youn Yuh-jung, and Kim Young-min. M-Line Distribution, 2019.

Women characters in film and women working in creative media industries such as film have often been ruthlessly given short shrift. Meaningful research and writing on issues faced by women working in these industries as well as critical writing about their works has become urgent as more women are creating very insightful films, on their own terms. In the contemporary South Korean film industry, women filmmakers are gaining critical and commercial successes within their own nations and abroad. It is therefore crucial to evaluate their works and successes and not simply push their films to the margins with superficial and even erroneous labelling. The feature film *Lucky Chan-Sil* (2020), the directorial debut of South Korean film

producer Kim Cho-hee helps shine a light on such issues within contemporary Asian film industries. Cho-hee worked as a producer on acclaimed auteur Hong Sang-soo's films for several years before writing and directing the minimalistic and revelatory *Lucky Chan-sil*.

Cho-hee introduces the film's protagonist as a kind of fictional version of her professional self. The narrative follows indie film producer Lee Chan-sil (Kang Mal-geum) as she is plunged into an existential crisis when her only regular collaborator, film director Ji (Seo Sang-won), unexpectedly passes away on the eve on their next film shoot. Suddenly unmoored from her professional cocoon that she thought would be there forever, Chan-sil does not know what to do with her life. Having her own very precise understanding of what cinema is and what kind of films are worth her time, she is unable to find film work to her taste.

Dismissing Hong Kong eighties martial arts films, which a new acquaintance and possible romantic interest, filmmaker Kim Yeong (Bae Yoo-ram) affirms great liking for, Chan-sil finds herself at great odds with the world around her. Everyone seems to have smoothly and quickly moved on following Ji's death. Chan-sil's close actress friend Sophie (Yoon Seung-ah) has taken up other assignments and a duplicitous producer sarcastically dismisses Chan-sil's entire prior work – produced over more than a decade – as having no value.

Yet Cho-hee does not spare Chan-sil either. Chan-sil's complete admiration of Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu as she passionately justifies his work to a self-assured Yeong only serves to alienate her from him further. As Yeong calmly points out, Ozu is an auteur for valid reasons but his own excitement and love for cinema comes from different flavors. This potential romantic date turned disaster results in reality crashing down on Chan-sil. The incident serves as the first master stroke Cho-hee employs to pull Chan-sil out of her cozy professional bubble of the past into the real world where different cinemas thrive as do genuine, valid appreciations for the same. Chan-sil needs to find her footing in this reality.

The second reality check occurs the next morning, when, in a steamy haze, the ghost of Hong Kong cinema legend Leslie Cheung appears before Chan-sil. Their meeting is one of the film's finest sequences, as it coats Chan-sil's existential angst with wry comedy. Watching Leslie jump down the steps towards her, Chan-sil is sure she has completely lost her mind, and her breakdown is comedic perfection.

Cheung (Kim Young-min), who is fluent in Korean, becomes Chan-sil's confidant and genuine friend in need. Cho-hee writes this relationship with great affection and respect. For her, cinema is varied and each as precious, regardless of

where it is produced. By bringing in Cheung, who exists outside of Chan-sil's own filmic culture, to ally with and gently help the cinematically snobbish Chan-sil find her filmmaking essence and purpose again, Cho-hee makes Chan-sil, and perhaps the viewer as well, appreciate this unconventional relationship.

As Chan-sil's landlady, veteran actress Youn Yuh-jung brings in much needed serenity, and her home, in which Chan-sil has rented a room, becomes a small but safe refuge for Chan-sil to work through her crises. The character of Kim Yeong as a romantic partner is coolly dismissed by Cho-hee as unwarranted even though she puts Chan-sil in quite a distressing situation. Cho-hee portrays the character's actions as a moment of weakness for Chan-sil, thrust upon her by expectations from her friends because of her age. Despite the awkwardness of their meeting, Chan-sil quickly regains her composure and her self-respect as well.

*Lucky Chan-Sil* is perceptive and poignant in its depiction of an independent woman and filmmaker who struggles with her own ethics and individuality when she hits unexpected professional obstacles in a male dominated industry that is unforgiving and double-dealing. Superbly blending understated drama and droll comedy, Cho-hee depicts how women working both behind and in front of the camera struggle but nevertheless move forward when life hands them tough cards to deal with. She ruminates on the value of cinema and its subjectivity, on ageism and expectations imposed upon working women, and on their existential crises even as they possess a healthy sense of self-worth.

*Lucky Chan-sil* welcomingly breaks stereotypical representations of women who work in film. Cho-hee's script appositely, and with charming wit, portrays women who are in total control of themselves – their bodies, their minds, their lives – even as they toil in highly misogynistic industries. *Lucky Chan-sil* is a quiet yet boldly feminist film that opens doors to the unique cinematic talents of women in South Korean cinema. Meaningfully writing about them, whether creating characters in a screenplay or examining them in a review, is one way of celebrating and honoring their cinema.

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