

Who Killed Vincent Chin? (1988): Ethnicity and a Babble of Discourses

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Who killed Vincent Chin? A film by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima New York, New York: Filmmakers Library [distributor] 124 East 40th Street, New York, New York 10016. Telephone: (212) 8084980; FAX (212) 808-4983. 1988. 1 videocassette (82 minutes); sound; color; 1/2 inch.

Credits: edited by Holly Fisher; produced by Renee Tajima.

Summary

This Academy Award-nominated film related the brutal murder of 27-year-old Vincent Chin in a Detroit bar [sic]. Outraged at the suspended sentence that was given Ron Ebens, who bludgeoned Chin to death, the Asian-American community organized an unprecedented civil rights protest to successfully bring Ebens up for retrial.

Popular wisdom would have us dismiss the building of the Tower of Babel as an instance of divine punishment for human hubris, the tragic sin of pride represented by the belief that mankind could elevate itself closer to heaven through its own efforts. God punished mankind by scattering it across the earth and dividing it by a babble of languages that would prove mutually incomprehensible and prevent mankind from ever uniting again in such a prideful project. However, rabbinical authorities have been kinder in their interpretation of this biblical episode, noting that those who built the Tower of Babel were impelled by their love of God and their desire to grow closer to Him and that their tragic mistake derived from their naivete and from their desire for a unanimity of purpose that was suspect in divine eyes rather than from a more venial motive. Despite the sophistication of its cinematography and adoption of a Rashomon-like structure, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) is flawed by a similar naivete and hope for ultimate unanimity of vision in its desire to achieve racial harmony by explicating in detail and through a multiplicity of perspectives a tragic racial incident that occurred in Detroit, and its carefully articulated structure ultimately degenerates into a babble of competing discourses.

Who Killed Vincent Chin? is a film whose credentials as an example of ethnic filmmaking are problematic at best. Its director Christine Choy and producer Renee Tajima have released contradictory accounts of their motivation in creating the film, accounts that alternately emphasize the «American» or ethnically Asian nature of their film.

The film is based upon a Detroit murder and its judicial aftermath that galvanized the Asian-American community into a nation wide crusade against racial injustice. On June 19, 1982, after celebrating the waning days of his bachelorhood with close friends at the Fancy Pants Lounge, a Detroit strip joint, twenty-seven-year-old Chinese-American engineer Vincent Chin got into an altercation with Chrysler foreman Ronald Ebens and subsequently was clubbed to death by Ebens wielding a baseball bat while Ebens' stepson Michael Nitz held the victim down. The title of the film clearly is ironic since Ebens never denied perpetrating the murder and on camera expresses some bewilderment at the fact that he never served time for the offense. However, as a result of plea bargaining, Ebens pleaded guilty to manslaughter in a Wayne County, Michigan trial and was punished by merely three years probation and a \$3,700 fine. Protests from the Asian-American community and negative nation wide press coverage of the proceedings led the U.S. Justice Department to inaugurate the first criminal civil rights prosecution treating discrimination against Asian-Americans,¹ which resulted in the sentencing of Ebens to twenty-five years imprisonment. Nevertheless, later this sentence was overturned by a U.S. appeals court in Cincinnati on technical grounds, and Ebens was set free without ever serving prison time for the murder.

This apparent failure of the American judicial system attracted national attention; Choy and Tajima based their decision to film Chin's story upon a single news clipping about the killing in *The New*

York Times, two paragraphs of which «enraged» them.² They decided initially to do «a short 15-minute advocacy piece» aimed at raising consciousness about anti-Asian violence. The project at first attracted \$2,000 in funding from the United Presbyterian Church, followed by co-sponsorship from WTVS- TV, the PBS affiliate in Detroit, and later major funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But the two women had to overcome racial stereotypes, including, in Tajima's words, the belief that «these two Asian American filmmakers must have some vendetta against the killer, they're never going to do an objective piece on the whole story» and gender prejudice that concluded that women were not tough enough for solid investigative reporting in order to obtain funding for four years work on the film.³

Choy and Tajima have indicated that they desired to construct an American film, not one designated for an Asian-American audience, because they believed that the Vincent Chin story was pure Americana.⁴ Certainly the film presents twin prisms on the American dream: that of Ronald Ebens, former farm boy from Wisconsin who came from a town of 1,500 people with one main street to the lure and glitter of Detroit, from rural deprivation to a foremanship at Chrysler that allowed him to become a small-time entrepreneur, and that of Vincent Chin, an exemplar of the Chinese as «model minority,» who combined hard work with traditional Chinese devotion to family values to attain even greater professional success as an engineer. But the American Gospel of Success preaches rewards that are more apparent than real since Detroit is struck by an economic depression rendered even more devastating by the native automotive industry's failure to compete effectively with the Japanese, and both Ebens and Nitz will find themselves among the ranks of the unemployed, while Chin will become an indirect casualty of that failure when he is mistaken for a Japanese and fatally blamed for domestic unemployment. Both Ebens and Chin appear to have succeeded, but their need to resort to the trivialized and vulgarized leisure of the Fancy Pants bar raises questions about how alienating and emasculating that success might be if it drove them from the mechanics of a failing industry to equally mechanized sexual pleasure dispensed assembly line fashion in a sleazy bar .

Despite their claims that their film is an example of pure Americana, Choy and Tajima simultaneously view it as ethnically Asian-American and as a tool of empowering members of the Asian community in the United States. The filmmakers have a deeply rooted commitment to making advocacy films on behalf of Asian-Americans: «Both Tajima, who grew up in Los Angeles, and Choy, a native of Shanghai who came to the U.S. as a teenager, were both inspired to make films about Asian Americans and social change by Visual Communications, an Asian American media group formed in Los Angeles in the early 1970s,» and Tajima expressed the hope that the theatrical release of *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* would represent an historic opportunity to alter public attitudes regarding Asian-Americans.⁵ While in interviews the filmmakers repeatedly stress the complexity of the Chin case and the openmindedness with which they approached their subject, their political commitments surface in the subtext of the film and occasionally in their actual remarks, as when Choy admitted that one of her motives in dedicating four years to creating the film was «to give the Asian American community tsu kao chi -revenge with a principal [sic].»⁶

The film's biases become apparent if one examines some of its editorial decisions and their implications. The filmmakers deliberately chose a structure for their film that underscored the complexity of the events in the Chin case by recounting them from a multiplicity of points of view. Choy complained that the PBS story editor assigned to their film was far too traditional and «wanted an NBC 'white paper' approach—a speaker in front of buildings, talking about the case,» whereas they preferred «to have a central parallel structure, cutting back and forth between two points of view...» What they opted for was a «Rashomon structure,» a «metaphoric, minimalist approach» that would demand far more audience participation in imposing meaning upon the filmic discourse.⁷

But while this filmic structure allowed both Ronald Ebens and his wife and friends and Vincent Chin's mother Lily and her supporters to interpret the events from their perspectives, the resulting film's seeming objectivity is belied by significant omissions. The stature of Chin's murder as a racial incident seems to depend upon white dancer Racine Colwell's testimony that Ebens shouted at Chin: «It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work,» but a black bystander who attempted to come to the aid of Ebens and Nitz testified that they were pursuing more than one Chinese victim, and we subsequently learn from a black police officer who witnessed the fatal beating that Ebens and Nitz were stalking Chin's Chinese friend Jimmie Choy as well as Chin himself. The willingness of Ebens and Chin to rely upon a black to aid them in their pursuit of Chin raises questions about the nature, and even the

very existence, of their racial prejudice. What would motivate a black bystander to come to their aid if he understood the attack to be racial in nature? Apart from the Colwell testimony, we lack corroborating evidence that the altercation was the result of racial prejudice rather than the result of male rivalry with respect to the dancers on stage. The filmmakers were unable to obtain interviews with Nitz or with two friends who were with Chin and Gary Koivu at the Fancy Pants on the fatal evening, so we lack crucial evidence from participants in the incident regarding the degree to which it was racially motivated. And by eliminating all forms of voiceover or narrative, the filmmakers fail to explain this crucial omission or to permit us any insight with respect to its significance.

The filmmakers also fail to explain the exact nature of judicial failure in the Chin case. While the film expresses dismay at the absence of Lily Chin and : all of her supporters save one from the sentencing session in the first case held f in Wayne County, the film omits mention of the fact that no representative of , the prosecutor's office was present either, a fact that might equally well explain the leniency of the sentence. Liza Chan, an attorney for Chin's supporters, had asked the Wayne County prosecutor, William Callahan, to move to have the sentence vacated and a new sentence declared because, she contended, if Chin's interests had been represented when Judge Charles Kaufman had been determining sentence, the outcome might have been different.⁸ The film tends to focus on the failure to represent Asian-American interests symbolically in Court, but, in fact, only the prosecutor's office would have been able to make the legal case for a more stringent sentence, and Choy and Tajima fail to address its crucial absence at sentencing.

The filmmakers also failed to explain why after the successful prosecution of the first federal civil rights trial in Detroit in which Ebens was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison an appeal was granted «on technical grounds» and there was a change of venue to Cincinnati, a far more conservative city in which jurors could not be expected to be familiar with the kind of economic and racial tensions that had gripped Detroit during its 1982 depression when 17% of its work force was unemployed and the popular mood betrayed enormous resentment at the competitive prowess of the Japanese. However, an inspection of *New York Times* press coverage of the case reveals that a three-judge appellate panel in Cincinnati overturned the original federal civil rights conviction because the trial judge had failed to admit taped evidence submitted by the defense of purported coaching of prosecution witnesses and that the change in venue to Cincinnati was the result of excessive trial publicity in Detroit, a fact that raises questions about the strategy employed by the Asian-American community in the Chin case to obtain racial justice.⁹ As a result of these omissions, the audience is left ill informed regarding whether the judicial failure was largely the result of institutional racism, as is implied by the film's allusion to the prosecution's failure to call as witnesses the two black off-duty police officers who witnessed the fatal beating; or of inadequate financing of the prosecutor's office, which lacked the manpower to be present at the sentencing session since such a presence is not required by Michigan law¹⁰; or of sheer bungling.

Both Choy and Tajima have testified that their trip to Detroit and a perusal of the state trial transcript altered their original intention of creating a brief advocacy piece aimed at raising consciousness about anti-Asian sentiment. Instead, Tajirna noted, they became «convinced that there were grey areas» and became interested in their subject «as Asian-American filmmakers, not Asian- American activists.» Despite scarce sympathy for Ebens, they decided not to produce a strident indictment of the assailant, opting instead «to show the dynamics» of two people and two cultures and, in Choy's words, «to dispel the image of the Asian as either a noble victim or noble savage.»¹¹ They do Succeed in that final objective. There is ample filmic evidence of Vincent Chin's popularity and ability to adapt to the American way of life and of his loyalty to his family in that he intends to have his mother live with him and his future wife in traditional Chinese fashion after their marriage. But there is also evidence of Chin's failure at the kind of masculine bonhomie expected at the strip joint because his desire to tip the new dancer «Starlene» by inserting money in her G-string makes him much more offensive to her than Ebens, who appears far more gracious and supportive, and also belies the image of Chin projected by his supporters as an earnest, diligent engineer .

The film has far greater difficulty in projecting the nature of the two cultures involved in these tragic events. One aspect of the filmic discourse takes an approach that borrows heavily from Marx and Durkheim, emphasizing instances of alienation, false consciousness, and anomie in both cultures. Thus, we see evidence of the superficiality of Ron Ebens' adaptation to Detroit as a Wisconsin country boy is overwhelmed by the fast pace of an assembly line existence and urban life and turns to a pattern of

violence and alcoholism to relieve the tension. Ebens' friend, a fellow migrant from rural Wisconsin, stresses the quick pace of Detroit leisure and Ebens' ability to fit in with the faster set, but the pre-sentence report included a psychiatric evaluation that indicated that Ebens was an extremely hostile person with a long history of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems. Ebens blandly asserts in an interview that he is no racist, but the testimony of Fancy Pants dancer Racine Colwell regarding his racist remarks seems disinterested and credible, and Ebens himself seems insensitive at best in referring to the «alleged plight» of the Asian community because he knows very few Asians and, therefore, is unaware of any plight. Ebens' relaxed and genial manner throughout this interview, granted after the civil rights appeal case had been decided in his favor, is disarming: are we confronting an example of false consciousness or of the banality of evil? If both Ebens and Chin accept the American Gospel of Success as a guidepost to their lives and both seek release from their success through eroticized and trivialized leisure, are both men to be viewed as examples of alienation and anomie? Are assailant and victim alike victimized by a society that has failed to sustain its economic progress and that survives by forcing its workers to derive satisfaction from leisure that has vanished from the world of work?

The film sustains this social discourse by continual use of visual allusions to the wider environment in which the crime took place: the slumping economy of Detroit as symbolized by grim newspaper statistics and plant closings, the mechanical sterility of the assembly line, the invasion of Japanese cars into the American market as satirized in a cartoon assault of longtoothed cars. But this social analysis undercuts any personal culpability for racism by highlighting environmental factors beyond individual control.



Lily Chin
(Courtesy of Filmmakers Library, Inc.)

In contrast, the film presents a counter discourse that emphasizes individual guilt for racism and condemns Ronald Ebens clearly as a racist. Apart from testimony from Racine Colwell and Gary Koivu regarding Ebens' racist remarks, we see Ebens convict himself by selective memory of the night's events that smacks of outright fraud. The film effectively uses crosscutting to contrast Ebens' testimony with that of the dancers «Starlene» and Colwell, whose stories clearly contradict his. «Starlene» claims that he encouraged her by name that night, while Ebens asserts that he first learned the dancer's name during the trial; she indicates that he had a verbal altercation with Chin at the club while Ebens contends that he never directly addressed Chin that night. Ebens then denies making the «little motherfuckers» remark and actually asserts that the remark would not have been racist had he made it while Racine Colwell, a disinterested observer, claims that Ebens' remark had triggered the night's violence. This second level of discourse is incompatible with the first, for clearly either both Ebens and Chin are fellow victims of alienation, false consciousness, and anomie or Chin is a victim of Ebens' racism, regardless of the degree to which that racism has achieved institutional support.

The film's ambiguity extends to the visual and verbal levels in terms of its use of traditional symbols of Americanism because the film tends to conflate societal failure with individual racism. A telling example of this conflation is the film's use of the baseball motif in treating the social significance of the killing. In popular imagery baseball often is depicted as a pastoral sport whose leisurely pace and status as a summer game contrasts with the gladiatorial nature of football, a game that tests human mettle

as it is played regardless of the grimmest weather conditions. But in *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* baseball is transformed into a somber metaphor of American racism.

The crime against Chin was perpetrated by Ebens swinging a baseball bat, and off-duty police officer Morris Cohen first describes it as if he were announcing a sporting event: «He swung the bat as if a baseball player were swinging it for a home run -full contact, full swing.» Our horror comes from the realization that that contact was not with a baseball, but with the prone Chin's head.

We next hear mention of baseball when Lily Chin in her native Toishanese¹² tells us that when she first came to the United States her husband sought to acculturate her by exposing her to American customs like attending baseball games: «I didn't know much of anything. So my husband liked to take me to new places. [A scene of Tiger Stadium appears on the screen.] We went f to see a baseball game. But when people saw Chinese sitting there they kicked I us and cursed at us. I never went back.»

Her only adopted son Vincent does acculturate, and he is killed by a baseball bat. The irony becomes even more apparent when Nita Ebens, Ronald Ebens' wife, tells us that her husband learned that Chin had died after lingering in a coma for four days after recapitulating in sport the act that had caused the murder: «In fact, I think that he played baseball that night and came home a little late because he was in a baseball game.»

The bat motif appears again in an ominous social context as we view scenes of angry Americans wielding bats to club imported Japanese cars as part of a Labor Day celebration in Detroit. Ebens' attorney Frank Eamon tries to argue that such anger need not necessarily lead to anti-Asian violence: «It's a quantum leap to say that you're angry at Japanese people and then hit Oriental people,» but the filmmakers' decision to crosscut from his remark back to a scene of batwielding car smashers seems to invalidate his assertion and to imply that Colwell was correct in claiming that it was an anti-Japanese racial slur that had triggered the violence at the Fancy Pants and its tragic aftermath.

The problem posed by the use of the baseball motif is endemic to the entire film since *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* is caught up in two compelling but contradictory discourses. The first argues that baseball, ordinarily a pastoral and nonviolent sport, has become imbued with violence when it becomes a tool of society's racism. The second discourse contends that Ebens' individual racism had been triggered by the threat to his machismo when an Oriental male was able to shame him publicly by flooring him in their initial scuffle in the Fancy Pants lounge and by continuing the struggle on equal terms until Ebens introduced the bat on the street outside the bar. In this discourse Ebens chose to employ the bat as a symbolic means of asserting traditional American masculinity and power over a member of a purportedly inferior race who was effectively challenging Ebens' racial superiority by shaming him in public.

Thus, the film bears strong analogy to the building of the Tower of Babel in that its aim was a noble one, to help eliminate anti-Asian racism by examining the complex constellation of events that led to the murder of Vincent Chin to demonstrate how deeply racism is imbedded in our society and in individuals who may lack awareness of how fundamentally racist they are. However, like the builders of the tower, Choy and Tajima seemed to suffer from the degeneration of their efforts into a babble of competing discourses so that the audience remains perplexed and uncertain of the degree to which Chin's murder may be attributed to social conditions that victimized Ebens and Chin alike or to Ebens' individual racism that went unpunished by a judicial system that failed to met out justice. What eludes the filmmakers is the possibility that Ebens' racism was just as much a product of the broader socially oppressive system as the anomie from which he suffered and his relentless pursuit of trivialized leisure. If Choy and Tajima had forged a stronger link between the personal and the social elements of this film, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* would have leveled a far more accurate and troublesome indictment of American society .

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) All references to *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) will be to the 87-minute film directed by Christine Choy and produced by Renee Tajima that is available from Film News Now Foundation 335 West 38th Street, 5th floor, New York, N. Y .10018; telephone (212) 971-6061. Peter Stack, «Ugly Death of Vincent Chin,» San Francisco Chronicle, 1 March 1989.

- (2) John Stanley, «The Night Vincent Chin's Head Was Bashed In,» *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 March 1989, p. 29.
- (3) J. K. Yamamoto, «Film on Chin Case Four Years in the Making,» [San Francisco] *Hokubei Mainichi: North American Daily*, n.d., n.p.
- (4) William Wong, «A Fine Mist of Tear Gas, and Tears,» *East/West News*, 31 March 1988, p.4.
- (5) Yakamoto.
- (6) Steven A. Chin, «A Crime Against a Race: Film Studies Killing of Asian American», *San Francisco Examiner*, 1 March 1989, p. B6.
- (7) Burl Burlingame, «Filmmakers Searched for *Who Killed Vincent Chin*,» [Honolulu] *Star-Bulletin*, 2 December 1988, p. B1.
- (8) Judith Cummings, «Detroit Asian-Americans Protest Lenient Penalties for Murder», *The New York Times*, 26 April 1983, Section I, p. 16:1-5.
- (9) «U.S. Appeals Court Reverses Conviction in Michigan Slaying,» *The New York Times*, 13 September 1986, Section I, p. 9:4; «Reynolds Asks New Trial in Death,» *The New York Times*, 20 September 1986, Section I, p.14:1-2; «Slayer is Acquitted of Civil Rights Violation,» *The New York Times*, 2 May 1987, Section I, p.28:1-5; Isabel Wilkerson «For Asian-Americans, Acquittal in Rights Case Arouses Outrage and Fear,» *The New York Times*, 6 May 1987, Section I, p. 20: 2-6.
- (10) Cummings 16.
- (11) David A. Kaplan, «Film About a Fatal Beating Examines a Community,» *The New York Times*, 16 July 1989, Section II, p. 32.
- (12) Serena Chen, «Revenge -The Motive in the Chin Murder,» *East West*, 22 (24 March , 1988) 4.

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