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*If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) Review

Full of vibrant greens, yellows, reds, and blues, *If Beale Street Could Talk* portrays a tragic story without subtracting the humanity of its characters. While they fight the systemic problems in America’s justice system, Barry Jenkins shows the full array of human emotions. Even when the movie feels dark, Jenkin’s camerawork highlights the beauty of the scene. The colors pop and the camera intimately frames its subjects. During an interview with Barry Jenkins, Trevor Noah articulated the beauty found in Jenkin’s craft. “You are experiencing black people living life,” he said, “as a combination of pain, suffering, joy, love, passion… All of these things are taking place simultaneously.”

There screenplay has no villain, in the traditional sense, yet manages to create this sense of impending doom for the audience. The script hints at what happens behind bars, but never directly shows us. In one key scene, the character of Daniel (brilliantly portrayed by Brian Tyree Henry) speaks to one of the main characters, Fonny about his time in prison. “The worst thing,” he whispers, “is that they can make you so fucking scared.” In another scene, Kiki Layne’s character, Tish, comes to visit Fonny in prison. The audience can see the blood in Fonny’s right eye, but attention is never drawn to it. Daniel and Fonny’s time in prison is never expanded upon, but you understand their pain. These hints towards violence imposed by the system sits in the audience’s mind.

In the same interview with Trevor Noah, Jenkins comments on the lack of a villain in the story. He notes that “when there’s no bad person, when everyone is very gray and we can see how we all play a role in the system, then it comes from the screen, and it goes into your life.” You’re left to contemplate this during the film’s final scene. Fonny is forced to take a plea deal and the story withholds a traditional happy ending from the audience. Yet, Tish and his son come to visit him. Their love for each other persists, and the horrors of the system could not eliminate their humanity.