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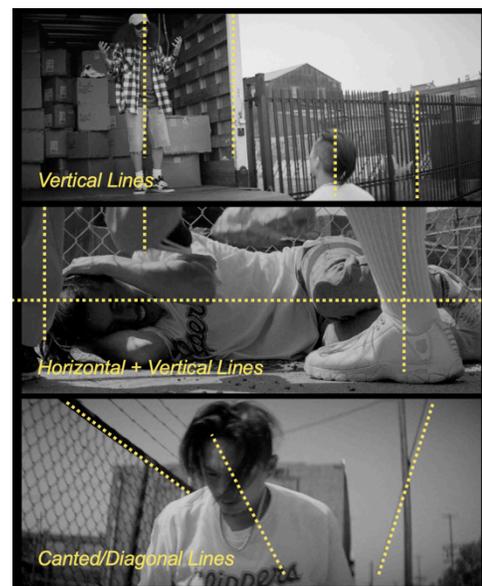
Film as Lit

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Artistic Realism in Justin Chon's *Gook*

“April 26th, 1992. There was a riot on the streets, tell me, where were you? You were sitting home watching your TV while I was participatin' in some anarchy.” The anarchy mentioned in the Sublime song *April 26, 1992*, is a reference to the days of fires, looting, and violence that shut down the city of Los Angeles after the acquittal of four police officers in the Rodney King case. Justin Chon was just 11 years old when his father's store was looted by these LA rioters putting Chon's family in crisis. **This crisis is the subject of Chon's 2017 drama, *Gook*, the derogatory name that had begun to infiltrate the Korean neighborhoods of South Los Angeles following the murder of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old girl shot in the back for suspected shoplifting. In *Gook*, Chon utilizes the artistic elements of line, value and texture to create a subtext of fear, anxiety, and violence that is both believable and fantastical at the same time.**

In an early scene Chon shows Eli, the main character, receiving a shipment of shoes from the back of a box truck, an interaction illustrated through several vertical lines. Framing a power dynamic that pits Eli at the bottom, these vertical lines hint at Eli's subordination; he's in desperate need. This power dynamic changes as Eli is jumped by a group of thugs looking to steal the very shoes Eli needs. Eli is now framed horizontally defending himself from the vertically stomping shoes. The horizontal line of Eli's body amplifies the desperation he is in, suggests his situation is helpless and dire. The scene ends with a beaten Eli confused and disconcerted. A chaotic



blend of vertical, horizontal, and canted lines frame his disorientation. This final shot visually compels the witnessing audience to feel similarly disoriented, unsettled by the violent victimization.

Later, in a scene capturing Eli in his car, Chon uses low key lighting to cast dark shadows across Eli's face as he desperately contemplates giving up the family business. In this instance shadows evoke emotion by highlighting Eli's inner turmoil. The opposing values of light suggest the family legacy of his father's business weighs heavily on him, that he feels trapped between oppressive working to keep his father's store going, and liberating freedom of leaving the store behind. In order to amplify the seriousness of Eli's reflection for audiences, drawing sympathetic worry through an unspoken but overt trepidation, Chon shrouds Eli in contrast.



The use of textured black and white film and the addition of documentary style newsreel footage and radio reports of the violence taking over the actual streets of Los Angeles establishes Eli's story as realistic though fictional, like saying "this film is based on a true story" without having to say it. There are several ethereal and surreal montaged scenes of hazy celebrations, interactions distorted by the glaring sun and slow-motion interpretive dances. The rays of



light beaming through swirling clouds of smoke shifted by the dancing bodies creates visual interest, a fantastical, dreamlike atmosphere in direct contrast to the violent complications Eli faces. By combining the realistic insecurity and racial hatred on the streets of 1992 LA with a warm and loving visual dreamscape, Chon is able to both engage audiences in fantasy but also share an extremely personal history.