Spa Night Scene Analysis (Excerpt)

By Ella Harmon

Andrew Ahn's 2016 debut feature film, *Spa Night,* is striking in its subtlety. The film's protagonist, David, passes between social roles with quiet grace, as he manages his first-generation Korean parents' ideals, mounting financial pressure, and his own budding queer desires. As much as *Spa Night* thematically centers around David's becoming through layered identities (gay, Korean-American, cis male, second-generation, working class), Ahn refuses any character's reduction to a symbol. The deliberate, understated quality of *Spa Night* allows viewers space to sink into the rich phenomenal texture of David's singular world, a world threaded with a deep sensitivity to the worlds of those he loves. Despite navigating contradictory expectations,[1] David's young masculinity has a center: one of stoic containment. His love is expressed through a hushed and disarming ability to *hold* others in their complexity. David's core challenge involves extending this skill to the incongruous corners of the self.

David's quiet demeanor "allows him to slip into these spaces and entrench himself in these worlds without drawing too much attention to himself, not just in the spa, but also in scenes like the USC sequence," Ahn offered in an interview for Angry Asian Man.[2] David's observational approach to social settings not only keeps him safe and adaptable, but translates to an acuity of perception in the film at large. The lingering stillness of a primarily tripod-bound

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[1] David's parents have framed his anticipated independence, college success, and procurement of a nice Korean girlfriend as *the* payoff for decades of sacrifice, while simultaneously requiring David's support as a dutiful son to subsist financially and emotionally. Both of these expectations are culturally laden and intensified by (1) David's personal gratitude for his parents' support and (2) his guilt over their immigration struggles, which operate at the level of structural oppression. David has long worked to care for his parents by translating documents, speaking spanish with their restaurant supplier, and maintaining an active family presence that many American sons his age might avoid. He continues this logic of care by taking on a job to buffer his parents pockets, but in doing so undermines their image of an ideal son. In working, David not only delays the possibility of becoming a university graduate, but his employment at the spa also feeds his hunger for male affection, a burden he can not scrub himself clean from.

[2] Angry Asian Man

camera, its preference for filming looks over what is looked at, and its isolating, off-center framings, all contribute to an atmosphere of careful, self-modulated subjectivity. A discreet scene in the film's final act encapsulates this tone quite well. The scene is sandwiched between two others of a more pitched character. A few hours after David tucks his painfully exhausted mother, Soyoung, into bed, his father, Jin, returns home in a disruptive drunken stupor, waking both of them. Jin's capacity to hold his family together has clearly crumbled and Soyoung calls him out on it in a rare explosion of long-boiled resentment.[3] Her shouting shortly collapses into sobs. David calmly bears witness to her suffering until Soyoung instructs him to follow Jin and make sure he does not drive.

At 10:20:35, the scene begins. A static wide shot of Jin staring up at the night sky feels like a breath. He sways slightly, small in the frame. The soundscape offers soft city ambience and distant bird calls. We cut to a static medium shot of David, with almost no headroom, looking on after his father. These 25 seconds of stillness are upended by a medium, handheld tracking shot of Jin's back walking down the street, guarded by David's shoulder dirtying the right edge of the frame. Jin is singing an un-subtitled Korean song into the evening air. The focus is shallow, leaving the path ahead nondescript. The street is lit by a complementary palette of gold street lamps and distant cyan, perhaps emanating from a green traffic light ahead. We cut to David and he is again framed tighter than Jin in a handheld tracking close up. David's key light is tungsten, contrasting the background of a cyan-lit street. This wash of color conjures the aqua interior of the spa, a setting where the film's naturalistic lighting style consistently falls away in favor of a steam-induced dreamscape, however compartmentalized. David's expression remains one of distant supervision, but bears a tinge of disappointment. He looks down and we cut to Jin's face,

[3] The parents' contradictions are here made most explicit. David quietly absorbs them. Jin slurs the words, "I can do everything," after falling down, clearly impotent. Soyoung reprimands David for helping his father up, then within minutes, asks David to help him (1:19:00).

now framed in its own equally tight, unsteady close up. He sings solemnly. There is no regard for the 180 degree line in this sequence. Boundaries have irrevocably been breached and we no longer know where they lie. The camera movement introduces unpredictability, wavering in a manner we haven't seen elsewhere in the film. Its shake suggests disturbance beneath the ritual forbearance. Back on David, a flash of annoyance, perhaps even disgust, shows itself. It is quickly swallowed and his facial muscles find an approximation of neutrality once more.

The next shot makes intentional use of *Spa Night*'s 2.39:1 aspect ratio. The camera finds stable legs again. Jin nods off at the far right edge of the frame in shallow focus. His shoulders and head are cut off, occasionally swept by headlights as vehicles pass through the vacant left two thirds of the image. Jin's closed eyes and setting imply danger, but the atmosphere is calm. Cars roll by like waves, an image aided by their sonic rhythm. In this strange expanse of time, Jin could not be farther from the driver's seat. He might even evoke the foggy memory of a child lulled to sleep by the low rumble of traffic. A shadow enters the right bottom corner of the frame, followed by a cut-off hand we know to be David's. He is nearby and ready to perform the quiet duty of containment. Unrushed, the hand smooths Jin's shoulder. Two forearms find their grip and begin to lift Jin. Before the action finishes, the scene abruptly cuts —

The spa's characteristically bored receptionist watches TV on her laptop. David stands across from her. He does the talking while his father's figure lingers in soft focus just behind him.[4] Ahn's curt editing style presents a kind of alienation effect, repeatedly jolting the viewer from dramatic investment to a recognition of absurd mundanity. It gestures towards the simultaneity of lives playing out in each moment, all structured by their own set of imposed

[4] Earlier in the film, Jin tells David to let him do the talking when they ask a moving company's manager for day work.

limitations. At the same time, abrupt cuts like this one speak to David's skill of compartmentalization and its practical necessity.

The scene elaborated above is much more than a transition between the climactic scenes that precede and follow it, but its situation is crucial. In the next scene at the spa, David finally carries out his queer desires in the steam room with a fellow young Asian man.[5] The eroticism of this moment is rendered through denial, both formally, as the fragmenting camera lingers on obscure body parts, and narratively, as David's first male lover rejects his advance at the end.[6] Afterwards, David scrubs the site of intimate touch raw with a sponge. The camera lingers, unflinching. The act of scrubbing, initially framed by the film's opening scene as a gesture of familial care, is here taken to its extreme of self-harm. All the while, Jin is somewhere in the spa. Its walls mark a masculine space that contains both sides of who David is and who he wishes he could not be.

The scene I've chosen to analyze is comprised of a restrained six total shots. Its bookended stillness mirrors David's reiterated composure. Aside from the scrubbing scene, David's face in the handheld tracking shot is the closest it ever comes to breaking, and still he performs the role he has been assigned with distant equanimity. The cost of this quietly valiant capacity is infinite fragmentation, so elegantly captured by cinematographer Ki Jin Kim's visual language. David's young masculinity is one that lovingly holds his parents multiplicities and carefully contains his own. He is: the dutiful son, the hidden parent, the interpreter, the

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[5] This is significant because earlier in the film, David shies away from the act with an older white man. Richard Fung's text, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," highlights the lack of on-screen representations of gay Asian men with other Asian men as of 1991. Given this context, David's erotic encounter is doing significant cultural work for an American audience.

[6] David's body is often fragmented by the camera, not unlike his actions.
Ahn says: "I always wanted the more erotic moments of the film to read as very subjective, fragmented experiences. They are perceived moments as opposed to documented moments. In this way, my job as a director was to find details in these experiences that could be stitched to create a feeling; the drip-drip of the steam room, the hand on a chest, etc." (Filmmaker Magazine).

day-laborer, the prospective student, the homosexual, the promise of grandchildren, the burden, the Christian, the janitor, the future, and the anticipated human symbol of hard work paid off. David is as Korean as he is Californian, as gay as he is loyal, and as conflicted as any adolescent in his position would be. When he runs, the landmarks of K-town are discernible, but his direction is not. Ahn refrains from resolving David's story, because such a story is never cleanly resolved. Instead, Ahn expands the frame in punctuated wide shots and lets screen time stretch out, holding David just as he is, even when David cannot do so for himself.