

## Columbus (2017)

“Are we losing interest in things that matter... in everyday life?”



### Major Credits

Director, Screenwriter, Editor: Kogonada

Cinematography: Elisha Christian

Music: Hammock

Cast: Haley Lu Richardson (Casey), John Cho (Jin), Rory Culkin (Gabriel), Michelle Forbes (Maria), Parker Posey (Eleanor)

### Production Background

Kogonada is the pseudonym of a Korean American filmmaker, raised in the Midwest, who has made a series of video essays about directors such as Yasujirō Ozu, Robert Bresson, Stanley Kubrick, Terrence Malick, Hirokazu Kore-eda, and Richard Linklater for the BFI's *Sight and Sound* magazine and the Criterion Collection (See <https://vimeo.com/kogonada>). *Columbus* is his first feature film.

Columbus, Indiana has become a mecca of modern architecture and public art since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, featuring buildings by Eliel and Eero Saarinen, Deborah Berke, Richard Meier, Myron Goldsmith, I.M. Pei, and James Stewart Polshek. Columbus is also the birthplace of Vice President Mike Pence, although that fact plays no direct part in the film.

### Cinematic Qualities

*Columbus* possesses a distinctive visual and aural style that is both mesmerizing and contemplative. The viewer is continually reminded of the famous dictum attributed to D.W. Griffith: “The task is above all to make you see.”

1. Composition: Nearly every frame is either symmetrically organized to reflect the formal balance of the architecture (as in the cantilevered brick roof of Columbus City Hall), or it is deliberately asymmetrical—like the film illustration above—to reflect the subtle architectural variation

incorporated in Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church. Both buildings figure prominently during key moments in the movie.

2. Long takes: *Columbus* remains a perfect example of "slow cinema." Many shots are held for a long time without any dialogue. This extended duration, combined with the music of Hammock, contributes to the film's meditative quality.
3. Tracking shots: The camera is generally fixed, which intensifies the effect of unexpected movement. Note how, early in the film, the slow horizontal tracking shot brings Casey and Jin together for the first time by moving left to right along an iron fence until an open gate appears.
4. "Transparency": In a couple of scenes—near the beginning when Casey describes her emotional response behind the window of Eero Saarinen's Irwin Union Bank and near the end when she sobs behind the windshield of Eleanor's Cadillac—the director imposes a glass frame to mute a character's verbal expression and force viewers to interpret only what they *see*. Note as well how many scenes portray the characters reflected in mirrors.

### Questions for Discussion

1. In I.M. Pei's Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, Gabe and Casey discuss the myth of declining attention span. How does Gabe's "critique of a critique"—cited above as the epigraph to this guide—reflect the larger themes of the film?
2. Another conversation, this time with Jin, revolves around Casey's mother and the therapeutic effect of a building. Does architecture—and, by extension, *any* art—possess the power to heal?
3. The plot of *Columbus* is both a coming-of-age story (a bildungsroman) and a courtship. How does Kagonada alter expectations of both generic narratives?
4. We get only brief glimpses of Casey's neighborhood: the alley leading to her home and the vacant yard across the fence (seen twice), yet these images greatly enrich our understanding. Describe how these moments economically define Casey's back story.
5. Although this film can fairly be described as a "two-hander," centering on the evolving relationship between Casey and Jin, how do the three minor roles—Gabe, Eleanor, Maria—significantly contribute to the complexity of the seemingly simple story?