

La La Land

(2016, Damien Chazelle, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

Core Study Areas
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area
Spectatorship
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

A bittersweet musical pitched somewhere between dream and reality, past and the present; a *ménage à trois* between a musician, an actress and the city of Los Angeles.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

Opening 'Another Day of Sun' 00:00:00-00:04:52

Seb on piano 00:21:05-00:26:04

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

All the main song and dance scenes are filmed in what appear to be a single take, in homage to the Hollywood musicals of the 30s, 40s and 50s. Those were often shot on soundstages that would allow for extended tracking and crane shots. Shooting dance routines in extended single takes allows the audience to fully appreciate the choreography and skills of dancers like Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) or Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Top*

Hat (1935), whilst recreating the thrill of watching performances live in a theatre. Use of complicated panning and tracking shots also allow the camera to follow the action to create the impression that it is almost one of the dancers, making the experience more emotional and immersive for the audience (see Aesthetics and Technology).

Sequence 1: The camera starts on open blue sky then travels along a row of congested traffic, key features of the LA landscape. As the first singer gets out of her car and begins to dance up the road, joined by other drivers, the camera glides in front of them, then over the bonnets and central median to seemingly join in with the dancers. The camera seems to be emulating or even anticipating the moves of the dancers. It also stops, starts moving, dollies forward and backward in rhythm to the music, the movement often changing on the beat, punctuating the fluid shot in the way a cut usually would.

Sequence 2: At the end of the sequence, after the camera's been calmly moving around the restaurant and Seb's performance, there is a sharp dolly in to his boss' unhappy face, signalling the suppressed violence of the confrontation. When Mia starts to walk towards him, we expect this to be the prelude to a 'meet-cute' typical of the romance genre. The camera tracks along behind her so we empathise with her anticipation, but halts abruptly when Seb barges rudely past her. This indicates that this film isn't quite the romantic dream we might expect, but rather one where the path of love does not necessarily run smoothly.

Mise-en-Scène

The title of the film puns on the Los Angeles location (LA), the nickname for Hollywood and the idiom for being lost in dreams (a core theme). The production design reflects this, using a mixture of typically LA locations from the gritty (vast congested freeways) to the romantic (Griffiths Observatory), often repainting or lighting the less pretty locations in a way that creates a dream-like Technicolor atmosphere. (See Aesthetics and Representation).

Sequence 1: The traffic jam freeway setting for this could be seen as symbolic. As the singers and dancers leave their vehicles and let their feelings of optimism pour out, by the end they are back in their cars, going nowhere. This could be seen as symbolic of the characters' inner lives (also reflected in the lyrics): that they are full of energy and aspiration, but also frustrated at the lack of movement towards their goal of becoming stars. It also echoes a similar scene in Alan Parker's *Fame* (1980).

Sequence 2: A spotlight is used throughout to pick out the character and to reflect their aspirations: to be on stage/screen, a star. As Seb plays, he veers away from the banal Christmas carols he has been instructed to recite, the lighting of the restaurant dims into darkness as he begins inserting his own flourishes. The light fades away into a single spot when he becomes lost in playing his own composition. As he finishes on a crescendo, he stands and we expect applause, but instead the spot vanishes the normal lighting of the restaurant returns and we see the audience haven't even noticed... he is brought 'back to earth with a bump'.

Editing

La La Land took almost a year to edit, partly because Chazelle and Tom Cross experimented with how to cut and pace the non-musical numbers. The extended single takes used during the song and dance routines are floating and dreamlike, and they wanted to make the dramatic sections more 'realistic' to distinguish them and root the film in some of the frustrations of the main characters. For this reason, there is a fast cutting rate in these scenes that creates a sense of near claustrophobia, so that the musical numbers are like 'an exhaled breath' where tension is released.

Sequence 1: Though this extended dance sequence seems to be filmed in one long take, actually this proved impossible due to the location with the barriers of vehicles and especially the central concrete media. Instead there are a number of cuts, but they are masked by the camera whip-panning, blurring the image so the sequence maintains its gliding kinetic quality.

Sequence 2: This scene is cut very differently to the dance routines. In Seb's apartment there are sharp jump cuts of coffee, a turntable etc. This jerkiness also echoes the way Seb replays the same section on the record. Once he begins to play both here and in the club, the camera becomes a gliding presence, witnessing his performance, similar to in the dance scenes.

Sound

Composer Justin Hurwitz was Chazelle's roommate in college where they first came up with the idea for *La La Land*. They first collaborated on a smaller budget jazz musical *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009) and on *Whiplash* (2014). As a musical, the director and composer had to work very closely together, trying to find an appropriate tone that fitted firstly the timeless quality of the film and secondly the mixture of happiness and sadness. The music needed to reflect the emotional complexity of the characters, whether it be Mia and Sebastian, or the traffic jam singers that open the film.

Sequence 1: As the camera tracks along the gridlocked cars, there is a diegetic use of music as we hear what each driver is listening to. This grounds the film in reality, before the camera rests on the first singer and the music changes to non-diegetic for the first dance number.

The lyrics to the song establish one of the main themes of the films: the sacrifices - especially in love - that actors/musicians/dancers etc. make when they move to Los Angeles to pursue their dreams of stardom. Despite the wistful lyrics the song is exuberant and joyous, celebrating the heat and ambition of LA in an optimistic way. It also foreshadows how Seb and Mia's relationship develops later in the film.

Sequence 2: The music Seb is instructed to play and the contrast with his own jazz compositions encapsulate one of the film's main themes: the conflict between what is commercial, banal and 'popular' and authentic artistic integrity, staying true to one's craft. The dialogue here also shows Seb's stubbornness and his struggle with compromise: 'Mutual decision, then,' he says when his boss tells him to stick to the playlist. 'Yes, made by me', the owner retorts. 'Signed off by me', Seb insists on adding.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

Similar to *Whiplash*, Chazelle's previous film, *La La Land* represents artists as individuals who struggle to reconcile their creativity with everyday life. In both films, the main characters have to sacrifice their relationships in an attempt to achieve their dreams. At the end of *La La Land*, we see that Seb and Mia have achieved their goals, but

lost each other in the process. There are numerous echoes of these personal sacrifices for art/fame throughout: the lyrics of the opening song frame abandoned romance within an optimistic hymn to potential stardom in LA, and Mia's audition song about her aunt puts the emphasis on pursuing dreams rather than settling for a 'normal' life.

After initially very positive reviews there was a critical backlash once the film began to garner award nominations. Some focused on the representation of gender in the film, with critics saying that Mia appears to be quite a passive character. Many of the key plot events are precipitated by Seb: he pursues her to her coffee shop, converts her to liking jazz, initiates her writing her own play (and funds it by compromising and playing in Keith's band) and forces her to attend the audition that starts her career. There are also many scenes with Mia watching adoringly as *he* performs, whereas he fails to even show up for her play. However, it is Mia who achieves the most success by the end, it is she who is able to craft something original and new (rather than remixing and innovating around other musicians work like we see Seb doing). The narrative could, then, be seen as the story of *her* birth as an artist (see Spectatorship and Ideology).

The lack of racial diversity was also criticised. Considering the size of the African-American and Latino communities in Los Angeles there are few people of colour after the opening scene. Additionally, for a film about jazz music, the only single black speaking role is Keith – who is portrayed as sellout to commercialism compared to Seb's obsession with jazz 'purity' (see Ideology).

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

The film is shot almost entirely in real locations rather than on sound-stages or using green screen. This helps contribute to Chazelle's original concept of making 'an old-fashioned musical but grounding it in reality where things don't always work out'. The director's other aim was to create a 'love song to Los Angeles' and to romanticise the city in a way other films have done with more classically beautiful cities like New York, Rome or Paris. The use of real, quite 'unpretty' locations like the Freeway 105 (opening), Mulholland Drive (Seb and Mia's first dance scene), and the Rialto cinema (where they have their first date) grounds the film. The use of colour in the production design and lighting give it a more 'fairytale' feel in keeping with

the romantic, aspirational mood of the characters. Linus Sandgren, the cinematographer said he and Chazelle worked closely to make a film shot on real locations with the feeling it is on a studio backlot (like the Warner Bros lot where Mia works).

The choice of set and location dressing also combines the contemporary with vintage elements, so the film seems caught (like the characters) between past and present. From the start, almost all the cars are modern (there's even a visual joke about how everyone in LA drives a Prius), except Seb who drives a car from the early 80s – but there are also French and Italian cars from the 1960s. Similarly, though characters often talk on mobile phones, the billboards that loom over every street in LA are all specially designed in a vintage style.

For the scene in the Griffiths Observatory, the exterior shots set the real location, but the interior scene is on a designed art nouveau-style set, as recent renovations had made the real Planetarium 'too modern' to fit the dream-like old-fashioned mood of the scene.

Costume designer Mary Zophres and production designers David Wasco and Sandy Reynolds-Wasco worked very closely together to use colour in order to capture the vibrancy of a place where people come to pursue their dreams, and also to reference other films with monochromatic dance scenes. Choreographer Mandy Moore and cinematographer Linus Sandgren also worked closely with the design team to make the performers stand out clearly from their background e.g. in the scene where Mia and housemates dress to go out, the characters are in single colour jewel-tone dresses, but the backdrops are textured with patterned wallpaper, throws or greenery outside.

Similar to the Jacques Demy film *Model Shop* (1969), another musical set in LA, they would often paint walls of real locations different colours to further enhance the intense, dream-like quality of the film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Historical

Some critics attacked the way the film glosses over LA's turbulent history, especially issues concerning race. In 1990, there were huge riots in the wake of the acquittal of LAPD officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King, and in the 1940s there were the 'Zoot Suit Riots' where black jazz fans were viciously attacked by large gangs of white

people. These racial conflicts are ignored by the film and the black community is marginalised by the film's narrative. Chazelle defended his choices by pointing out that LA constantly erases its own past and the film reflects the city's ahistorical nature.

Political

The film's references to previous movies and Seb's nostalgia for a bygone age of 'pure' jazz chimed with a sense of conservatism and longing for a 'golden age' in America that culminated in the election of Donald Trump. A poll conducted just before the election (and quoted in Geoff Nelson's *pastemagazine.com* article on representation of race in the film) reported that 52% of Americans felt life was better in the 1950s, and 72% of Trump voters believed this was true. Throughout his campaign, Trump used the slogan 'Make America Great Again' and some journalists linked this desire to return to a bygone age with the film's love of vintage cinema and music, titling interviews with Chazelle with headlines such as '*La La Land*: Making Musicals Great Again'. The film's success both at the box office and at awards ceremonies was seen as being indicative of the audience's desire for escapism after a period of political upheaval in the US, UK and across Europe.

Technological

Another way the film captures the vastness of Los Angeles is to use a 2:55:1 Cinemascope ratio, a form of widescreen rarely used in films today. This both gives a sense of the landscape and imitates the style of the 'Fred and Ginger' musicals of the 1930s which inspired Chazelle. During the planning for Sequence 1, Sandgren experimented with many cameras and techniques to achieve Chazelle's aim of capturing such a complex scene in a single shot. He initially attempted using Steadicam, but found the central median and cars obstructed the operator. He then tried using a technocrane, but the natural sunlight cast a distracting shadow. Eventually, he had to cut the shots but masked them with whip-pans so the impression is still of a single shot.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - IDEOLOGY and SPECTATORSHIP - STARTING POINTS

Ideology

For a film that seems self-consciously apolitical, there have been many critics who have suggested that it's precisely the lack of political engagement and obsession with nostalgia that makes it worthy of political dissection. Representations of gender

and race, as well as a complete absence of any LGBTQ characters, have been problematised in a range of critical articles that have taken issue with the idea that *La La Land* is just 'escapist fun'. Geoff Nelson at *pastemagazine.com* suggests that those arguing 'it's just nostalgic entertainment' are not acknowledging what a 'return to the past' is perhaps only beneficial for white middle class people: 'The past represents liberation for one group, a horror show for another'. The 'Fred and Ginger' films of the 1930s may be from a world of more traditional glamour and romance, but they also hide and distract from the racial discrimination, gender inequality and homophobia of this period of time. Other critics have identified the kind of jazz Seb is obsessed with 'saving' as a symbol of this dangerously apolitical nostalgia: Seb's 'pure jazz' is embodied by Charlie Parker, who died in 1955. His successors were artists like Mingus and Coltrane, who did use electronic instruments and experimented with fusing funk or rock (or later hip-hop) with more traditional jazz. They were also far more politically engaged and supporters of Civil Rights. The world Seb wants to return to is a world before jazz became political, a time when LA was riven by racism and during the 1940s black and latino jazz fans were beaten and killed by mobs because of the clothes they wore.

However, in its portrayal of Seb and Mia, the treatment of nostalgia could be seen to be more intelligent and questioning. Both characters do achieve their dreams at the end but – whilst this means living in a frozen past for Seb – for Mia it means embracing the new: the film that makes her a star is an unconventional indie movie with no stars and no scripts, which will be improvised through rehearsal. There's an element of melancholy to the final scenes and a proposal that 'living in the past' is not as easy or safe as the nostalgia of the film's surface style suggests.

Spectatorship

Some have criticised the gender politics in the film, accusing it of being a male fantasy about artistic integrity (Seb's struggle with the lure of the commerce) that Mia just facilitates and applauds (there are a lot of scenes of her watching Seb perform, very few of him watching her). However, another view is proposed by Anna Leszkiewicz, in a *New Statesmen* article: that actually the film is shot mostly from Mia's perspective. Initially, Seb seems the 'creative' one – unable to play Christmas carols without drifting into his own virtuoso compositions, whilst Mia recites dumb movie dialogue whilst

trying to put her soul into 2-dimensional roles. She seems more audience than creator. Yet that, Leszkiewicz says, is to unfairly dismiss being an audience member as a passive role. *La La Land*, she suggests, is a film that celebrates the audience experience: Mia may be a spectator for Seb, but she revels in the experience of consuming art: jazz, cinema, cheesy 80s pop, theatre. Cutaways to her dancing or cheering (even her dance to Seb's 80s covers band) show her joy in being an audience member. But Mia then takes these as inspiration to create something *new*: the film that makes her a star has no script, a little like her life. She is a lover of cinema, and this prompts her to be a participant (e.g. when their date movie breaks down they go to the

genuine location *Rebel Without a Cause* was filmed at, continuing the scene with their own story). The final 'dream ballet' medley is her fantasy of how she could have her success *and* Seb, but in this version he has virtually no agency outside of Mia's narrative; he is the one who becomes pretty 'window-dressing' to Mia's narrative. In the process she moves the joy of spectatorship to power into becoming a star. Part of the exhilaration of the film experience for the actual audience is that we can make the same leap – the way the camera moves around the dancers in musical numbers does make us feel like we've become part of the scene. The mural Mia walks past seems to symbolise this: all of cinema's greatest idols, sat in a cinema watching her, and *us*.