

# Lady from Shanghai

## (1948, Orson Welles, USA)

### Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL) Component 1: American Films (AS)

#### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning and Response The Contexts of Film

#### Specialist Study Area: Auteur (AL)

#### Rationale for study

The *Lady from Shanghai* exemplifies the tensions between a studio (Columbia) and auteur (Welles). Despite heavy studio cuts, the film remains a visually striking, unsettling film noir, notable for exceptional chiaroscuro lighting, compositions and camerawork.

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

##### 42mins

Michael and Elsa in the Aquarium

##### 1hr, 17mins

The Crazy House and Hall of Mirrors

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

##### Cinematography

- Uncomfortable close ups are used to make the characters appear grotesque and distorted. These close-ups give us a sense of how Michael O'Hara comes to view these characters, contributing to a sense of mistrust and unease.
- In the opening sequences, Elsa is photographed in a gleaming light against the blackness of the carriage, while Michael often stays in shadow. The lighting reflects Michael's view of Elsa, as beautiful and exotic, and his insignificance.

- Chiaroscuro lighting conveys an ominous feeling throughout. This lighting, combined with oblique angles and uncomfortable close ups, creates a sinister, dark and grotesque mood.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- The geographic area is extensive with exotic locations. However, the locations are forced upon the Michael, first as an employee, then as a prisoner - he lacks the freedom that Michael and Elsa are allowed.
- Elaborate backgrounds are used to comment on the characters' mental states and situation. The play in the Chinese theatre reflects the sacrifices and 'performances' that have just taken place in the courtroom.
- The set design of the funhouse sequence are imitations of the German expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*.
- The Hall of Mirrors remains one of the most striking scenes in Hollywood cinema. The scene is full of reflections and shadows and deliberately disorients the viewer. This expressionist and surrealist imagery is used to connote the sense of confusion and lack of trust - characters shoot mirror images of themselves, not knowing who or what is real.

##### Editing

- The film is edited in the classical Hollywood style, using invisible, seamless editing. Cross-cutting is used during the climatic sequence as O'Hara runs from the courthouse with Elsa hot on his tail.

##### Sound

- The musical score is indicative of the tensions between the studio and auteur (Welles) – Welles originally intended the Hall of Mirrors sequence to be silent, however, the studio added a musical score. The studio ignored almost every one of Welles' suggestions for the score.
- The film's theme, 'Please don't Kiss Me' which Elsa (Hayworth) sings, is used throughout the film as a motif. Welles was unhappy with this as he intended a darker score to convey

what he referred to as a “strangeness”.

- Michael O’Hara’s voiceover throughout the film is subjective and typical of film noir - the doomed anti-hero narrates the story, conveying the noir trope of an ordinary man deceived by a dangerous woman.
- Sound is used to disorientate the viewer and convey Michael’s sense of confusion. During the Hall of Mirrors sequence, the sound appears to be separate from the source - we have no idea where it is coming from.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

#### Representations

- Elsa is a femme fatale – a dangerous, beautiful woman who deceives the anti-hero. The femme fatale was a common character type in film noir. She represents post-war male anxieties about strong, independent women. The femme fatale is usually ‘contained’ in the film’s conclusion – here she is shot by O’Hara.

#### Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The film is a strange mix of noir, surrealism and Classical Hollywood style. Welles took influences from German Expressionism and French poetic realism. The film reflects Welles’ highly experimental nature, while still working within a studio system.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

#### Social

- The *Lady from Shanghai* is an early example of film noir that would become popular as the 1940s progressed. The doom-laden mood reflects the post-war period of uncertainty.

#### Historical

- *The Lady from Shanghai* was considered a failure by critics and lost money in the box office in the USA. However, the film was appreciated in Europe, particularly in France. The film gained appreciation from audiences and critics from the 1960s onwards and is now considered a classic.

### SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur - STARTING POINTS

- Orson Welles was given an unusual amount of freedom on his films. He directed, produced, wrote and acted in *The Lady from Shanghai*. He even hand painted some of the sets that appear in the Crazy House sequence.
- The final film is not Welles’ vision – the studio cut over an hour from the film and changed the music. The final cut demonstrates the tensions between an auteur’s vision and studio control over the final cut.
- The film was publicised as a star vehicle for Rita Hayworth. Hayworth was on contract at Columbia Pictures and she starred in some of her best-known films there. It was Welles’ idea that Hayworth cut off her iconic long dark-red hair and instead adopt the short, blonde hairstyle in *Lady from Shanghai*. The film failed at the box office and critics partly attributed this to Hayworth’s hairstyle.