

Whiplash

(2014, Damien Chazelle, USA)

Component 1: Key Developments in US Film

Focus Area Specialist Writing on Film (see separate resource for set Specialist Writing passages)

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1

First practice with Fletcher (15:28 - 22:35)

Sequence 2

Fletcher and Neiman in jazz bar (1:16:00 - 1:22:02)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Like many of the shots of Neiman performing in the film, there is one particular that is composed so he appears isolated by his commitment; the practice sequences are shot in a mixture of long shots (where there's lots of negative space surrounding his drum kit), MS where we see nothing but the performance (but get a sense of the physical dynamism of his drumming) and ECU of his pained face, bleeding fingers, sticks on drums (reflecting his extreme focus and endurance). It also promotes the representation of the 'artist as obsessive loner', cut off from any human interaction that may distract them from the pursuit of perfection (see the scene where Neiman breaks up with his girlfriend at 51:33).
- Sequence 1: The cinematography imitates that of a military exercise: a series of CUs of music pages turned, instruments slotted together – like weapons being prepared for battle. The extensive use of CU also reflects the musicians' focus. This is followed by a MS to show them 'snapping to attention' when Fletcher enters, another link to the military.

- Throughout the musical sequences, Fletcher's hands seem to conduct the camera as well as the character's playing: there is a focus on his hands, then the camera pans quickly to left or right, imitating Fletcher's intense gaze at each musician (and visually harmonising with the music itself).
- During the sequences where Fletcher attacks/'educates' Neiman, the camera 'whip-pans' back and forth between the two characters showing emotional responses to each other. This communicates both the intensity of the band and the bond between the characters, and the aggression of their relationship.
- Sequence 2: Fletcher on piano is first shown from Neiman's POV, then it gradually zooms in – but moves past his face, to his hands as they play the piano. Their movement is very different to the jabs and punches of the practice room: he seems a different man.
- When he calls to Andrew the camera whip-pans between them, instead of the more traditional cutting. This camera movement is the same as during many of their practice scenes as Fletcher 'inspires'/bullies Neiman. It suggests that, even in this new situation with a much gentler-seeming Fletcher that the fear, intimidation – and defiance – still exists between them.

Mise en Scène

- Sequence 1: Costume – Fletcher, when he first enters, dresses like a stereotype of a 'jazz man' (pork pie hat, lots of black). But he quickly sheds these to reveal a tight t-shirt that makes his physique look imposing (more like a martial arts instructor or sports coach than conductor/teacher).
- Sequence 2: Location – the jazz club is the visual and atmospheric opposite of the practice room. There is low lighting with dark colours. The spotlights pick out the musicians in soft white light, and they seem at ease. This contrasts with the practice room which is brightly lit so every corner is exposed – there is no hiding here!

Editing

- Sequence 1: During the musical sections, the shots are either wide pans (a Steadicam 'swooping' in time with the music and Fletcher's conducting); or fast jump-cuts, again in rhythm with the music, to CUs of instruments played. This reflects Fletcher's focus and precision, as well as his attention to the slightest nuance of every single musician's technique.
- In the confrontation between Fletcher and Metz (the 'out-of-tune' trombonist), the camera cuts back and forth between the characters; each shot getting inches closer, heightening the intensity and threat. Every third or fourth shot in the sequence cuts away to Neiman's responses, reminding us that we are seeing this event from his perspective; his combination of fear and admiration establishes his love/hate relationship with Fletcher. The same rhythm to the cutting is then used again during some of Fletcher and Neiman's confrontations.
- Sequence 2: There is a lot slower cutting rate in this scene. Shot-reverse-shot is used when Neiman first spots Fletcher and shows his reaction: surprised but also enchanted by this different aspect to his former teacher. During their conversation at the table, however, the cuts between their faces, and use of closer and closer shots, mirrors the rhythm of Fletcher's attacks on his students.

Sound

- Sequence 1: The music and dialogue in the scene have a very similar rhythm: even when the performance is halted, there is a beat to Fletcher's words. The abrupt shift from quiet and gentle to loud and imposing that we hear in many of the jazz pieces throughout the film are mirrored by Fletcher as he bullies Metz. This also suggests that Fletcher is almost 'personifying jazz'.
- The language he uses is typical of a bully who wishes to humiliate his victims, picking on any possible vulnerability (one student's sexuality, Metz's weight – later on Neiman's father's job and Jewish heritage). In this scene (and most of the others!) he seems like a sadist who uses perfectionism as an excuse to verbally and physically abuse his students.
- Sequence 2: The jazz being played in this scene is far quieter and gentler than that in the practice room and at competitions. The mood is almost contemplative, reflecting this different, calmer side to Fletcher.

- Fletcher's speech about pushing people 'beyond what is expected' seems to explain the extremity of his methods. Do you agree with him? Do people need to be pushed to achieve greatness?

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Representations: The film divided the jazz community, and drew either admiration or criticism from other musicians and artists. Some said it was a realistic portrayal of the obsessive dedication - not to mention the psychological and physical endurance – that is required to make great art. Others said it misrepresented jazz, musicians and other artists. Richard Brody in 'The New Yorker' said the film was a 'grotesque caricature' of jazz – and the creative process. Many pointed out that Neiman seems to lack the passion and inspiration that other films about artists try to capture. Instead, his musicianship seems obsessed with technique. Fletcher repeatedly tells an anecdote about Charlie Parker, and suggests he became a legend simply through his dedication to technique – in fact, Parker honed his ability through extensive collaboration with other musicians.
- Representation of authority: Critics also disagreed about whether the film condones Fletcher's 'method'. In many scenes, he appears like a sadist or bully of any profession: he humiliates and physically assaults his students; his excoriating judgement is unfair and vindictive. The scene in the jazz club seemed to offer some kind of rationale for his behaviour, but then his 'revenge' on Neiman undermines this. However, when Neiman begins his amazing final performance, Fletcher seems to have an epiphany and begins supporting his student. Is it Fletcher's bullying that has driven Neiman to 'greatness'? What do you think? Is Fletcher a teacher who goes to extremes to get the best out of his students? Or a sadist who uses perfectionism as an excuse for bullying?

Historical

- The film was controversial in its portrayal of jazz music. Some in the jazz community said it transformed a genre best known for improvisation and creativity into a military exercise or a game of competitive ambition. The lack of African-Americans in key roles was also mentioned by some critics. Watch

clips or trailers from other films that portray jazz musicians such as 'Bird' (1988) a biopic of Charlie Parker (who Fletcher reveres) – how are they similar/different to the portrayal in 'Whiplash'? Also watch other films whose theme is the conflict between the personal and creative lives (as well as their sanity) in 'Black Swan' (2010) or 'The Red Shoes' (1948). How are the artists and their mentors portrayed?

- 'Whiplash' appears to fall into a number of genres. Though its topic is music and musicians, it shares little in common with other film musicals, which tend to celebrate music (or other art forms) and have a lighter, joyous tone. Comparison with Chazelle's follow-up movie 'La La Land' (2016) would be interesting.
- Instead, 'Whiplash' shares more characteristics

with the military or sports genre. Both often feature young men who are driven by single-minded, inscrutable and initially sadistic mentors. War films like 'An Officer and a Gentleman' (1982), 'Full Metal Jacket' (1987), and 'GI Jane' (1997) all feature a drill sergeant who humiliates and abuses their recruits – but who eventually drive their charges 'beyond what is expected'. Sports films like 'Rocky', 'Raging Bull' and even 'The Karate Kid' have a coach who pushes the hero to greater physical extremes (echoed in the shots of Neiman's bloodied hands and dripping sweat as he practices). Watch the conventional 'training montage' from any of these films – how much do they resemble sequences in 'Whiplash'?