

# La La Land

(2017, Damien Chazelle, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making  
Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

## Themes

Gender Hollywood Jazz  
Nostalgia Movies Musicals  
Spectator

### The Contexts of the Film

#### Historical

The film pays homage to the Golden Age of Hollywood, in particular the Hollywood musicals of the 30s, 40s and 50s. The film gives an appreciative nod to musical including Singin' in the Rain and The Umbrellas of Cherbourg. To recreate the visual style of these classic musicals the film was shot in 55:1 Cinemascope ratio, this is a form of widescreen.

The film has been criticised by some for the glossing over some of LA's more turbulent history, such as its racial issues. The 'Zoot Suit Riots' of the 1940s saw mobs of white service men, off-duty police and civilians clash with young Latinos, and other ethnic minorities including black jazz fans. More recently, the 1990s saw more riots in response to the acquittal of LAPD officers who were accused of beating black motorist Rodney King. One of the main themes of the film is Sebastian's love affair with Jazz, Jazz is predominantly a black American genre, with a lot of famous Jazz musicians being involved in the civil rights movement. Critics feel that having the genre represented by a white character loses the original roots of the music.

#### Political

There is a nostalgic longing to the film about revisiting the 'Golden Age' of America. Some have linked this to Trump's 'Make American Great Again' rhetoric. A poll issued before the election revealed that 52% of Americans felt life was better in the 1950s, and 72% of Trump voters believed this was true. The film's homage to the films and music of this era led journalists to coin the phrase 'La La Land: Making Musicals Great Again'.

### Specialist Study Area

**Ideology:** The film presents such an ideological view of the era that it completely under-represents certain groups. There are no LGBT characters featured in the film and its representation of gender and race is also problematic. The film is nostalgic and allows escapism, however the idea of returning to this era is only actually beneficial for white middle-class men. The era that the film celebrates was actually a very restricted era for race and gender. This time period may be romanticised in these films but the time period itself was not a song and dance for certain groups. Women did not have equal rights and society was full of racial discrimination and homophobia.

Seb's Jazz idol, Charlie Parker, died in 1955 and represents the era of Jazz that Seb describes as 'pure jazz'. Charlie Parker was before Jazz crossed over into the civil rights movement with musicians such as John Coltrane and Charles Mingus being heavily involved in the movement. Seb's friend, Keith, tells him "you are holding onto the past, but Jazz is about the future." The story of Seb and Mia isn't the traditional love story, perhaps acknowledging that the 'good old days' are not actually relevant anymore. They both do end up following their dreams and making a success, however it is at the cost of their relationship. This statement itself proves that we really cannot have it all.

**Spectatorship:** There have been criticisms that the film is a male fantasy about artistic integrity and the role of Mia is to stand by and applaud. Another perspective outlined by Anna Leszkiewicz, in a New Statesman article: that actually the film is shot mostly from Mia's perspective. Mia represents the spectator, she watches Seb's performance at the restaurant and his 80s set at the party, she expresses genuine joy through being the spectator. She then transforms from spectator to star, although by the end of the film she is back in the spectator position. The camera tracks and weaves throughout the dance numbers immersing the spectator into the action.

### Opening Scene 'Another Day of Sun'

**Mise en Scene:** The traffic jam creates the notion of claustrophobia and not being able to go anyway, perhaps foreshadowing the lives of our two protagonists, Mia and Sebastian. The colours in the sequence are mainly primary with extensive use of red, yellow and blues these colours connote positivity and fantasy. The first woman who sings and the final women in the musical number both wear yellow dresses, this becomes Mia's costume iconography throughout the film. The performers express joy and optimism, in their body language as they dive across cars and dance through the traffic.

**Cinematography:** The film opens with an establishing shot of the blue LA sky and the camera tilts down to reveal the traffic jam. The camera glides along the traffic using a dolly shot giving us snippets of the people inside each car before zooming into the car of the first singer. The camera movement is fluent and graceful, it twirls, moves forward and backward in time with the music. As the dancers jump on cars the camera joins them using crane shots. The camera tracks the dancers and seems to predict and join in their moves. It doesn't simply capture the opening scene, it is part of it.

**Editing:** The editing is subtle in this sequence as the filmmakers wanted it to look as fluid as possible. After the opening song the scene does not cut away which makes the spectator question the boundary of reality and fiction.

**Sound:** The film opens with the diegetic sounds of car horns and radios playing. The radio presenter announces "it's another hot and sunny day here in California" which sets the scene for before switching to the non-diegetic music of the opening musical number. The song itself is contrapuntal to the situation. The positive title 'Another Day of Sun' is set against the miserable situation of a traffic jam. This opening message establishes the film's place in the current world, that need for a musical in the drudgery and turmoil of the current political climate.

### Seb's Piano Sequence

**Mise en Scene:** Seb is wearing a formal black suit which connotes his professionalism, however his shoes are black and white tap shoes. His shoes signify the artistic part of him is always there and can take over at any point. The restaurant is busy and intimate with white table cloths and lamps creating a cosy and rich atmosphere. Seb's body language changes along with his music. As he plays the Christmas carols his hands jump up and down showing little effort, his body is straight, and his face is constantly looking around showing he is despondent and on auto pilot when playing this type of music. When he begins to play his own music his body language becomes close in, his hands remain close to the piano and he is hunched over connoting that him and the piano are one being, his hair falls in his face showing how impassioned he is by his music. The lighting dims and changes to a spotlight as he plays, this creates the sense that he is lost in the music and does not notice anyone else, as he finishes, he stands and the lighting fades up revealing Mia.

**Cinematography:** Wide shots are used through the beginning of this scene when Seb is interacting with his boss. These create a distance showing the strained relationship between them. When Seb decides to play his own music the camera zooms into his hands to signify this change, this connotes his hands have a mind of their own and are working as an independent entity. A wide shot is used again once the song has finished which connotes his isolation at the lack of applause. This is followed by a close up of Mia seeming to be the only one paying attention to him, this close up surprises both him and the spectator as we realise we have been watching him from her perspective rather than our own. As she approaches him the camera tracks her making his rejection of her as much the spectators as Mia's.

**Sound:** As Seb's song reaches the dramatic climax we expect to hear applause, but instead he is met with silence. This creates a jarring effect on the spectator as, like Seb, we feel he deserves a reaction. The sound as Seb barges past Mia is enhanced to exaggerate his brush off and the impact it had on her.

### Seb' and Mia's Date

**Mise en Scene:** As Mia enters the cinema the film is projected onto her face, this connotes that she is no longer the spectator to Seb and for the first time in the film he is the one being made to look at her. This moment could also foreshadow Mia's future as the famous film star. As Seb and Mia lean in to kiss the film on screen goes wrong, this could foreshadow their love affair is doomed from the start.

**Sound:** The diegetic sounds in the restaurant of the dinner guest's conversations and phone ringing all fade out to make way for the Jazz music in the background. This becomes Mia's main focus as it reminds her of what she is missing with Seb.

**Cinematography:** At the dinner with her boyfriend the camera zooms in on a close up of Mia showing her sadness and disappointment of being there. Seb is framed in a low angle shot outside the cinema, this shot is often used to show power, however at this moment in time he does not have power as Mia has stood him up. The camera tracks Mia out of the restaurant and a crane shot follows her running into the distance to meet Seb, this shot would almost be fitting at the end of the film. The film has many false endings where if their love story had stopped at this point it would have had the traditional happy ending.

**Editing:** The scene cuts between Mia at the crowded table to Seb alone outside the cinema. This transition reinforces to the spectator what Mia is missing and where she would rather be. Shot reverse shot is used as Mia and Seb spot each other in the cinema.

### Mia's Final Audition

**Mise en Scene:** Mia and Sebastian are both wearing shades of blue which connotes that even though they are apart they both want the same thing. Blue connotes a calm and cool atmosphere suggesting they have reached a truce and neutrality. The director of the film wears yellow, this connotes positivity linking to the fact that she is the first person to hire Mia, yellow is also Mia's iconography which suggests Amy is on Mia's side from the start. As Mia positions herself to tell the story the lights dim and there is a spotlight on her, this has only been done before with Sebastian, so it signifies that this is finally Mia's moment and she is at last the main focus.

**Cinematography:** A close up is used to connect us to Mia as she starts to tell her story. The camera moves behind the directors so the spectator can watch them watching her, this creates several layers of spectatorship with Mia at last being the one being watched rather than the one doing the watching. As the camera is positioned behind the directors Mia is shown in a long shot making her look vulnerable. As she begins to sing the camera zooms in, so she is the only one in the shot, the black background allows her to appear raw and real to us. This immediately immerses us in her story, and we have no other option but to listen.

**Sound:** The story she tells is of her Aunt, the lyrics sum up her story so far. The lyrics "Here's to the ones that dream" is Mia talking about herself, she is wearing her heart on her sleeve and for once she is being herself rather than the other auditions that saw her playing other people. The lines "Here's to the hearts that break, here's to the mess we make" refer directly to her current situation with Sebastian and what has led her to this moment.

### Final Scene

**Mise en Scene:** The traffic jam works as a circular narrative as it leads her back to the jazz club. Mia is wearing black, this is the first time we see her without wearing a bright primary colour. The colour black connotes that she has grown up and shows a level of sophistication. The sign Seb's is significant as it connotes that Mia was still a creative inspiration to him and without her, he would not be where he is. The blue lighting in the club is traditional of a jazz club but it also creates a melancholic mood. The body language between the fantasy Mia and Sebastian in the fantasy sequence is close, they have their arms linked and are leaning towards each other, this is then contrasted when we see Mia and her husband, they are sitting apart from each other and not touching. This connotes that she would have perhaps been in a happier relationship had her and Sebastian worked out.

**Cinematography:** A close up of Mia shows her shocked reaction, this is then followed by a close up of 'Seb's' sign, revealing the cause of her reaction. The shot reverse shot is a motif that is constantly used throughout the film when Mia and Sebastian see each other. It is used again twice in this final scene, firstly when they first see each other in the club and then the final shot of the film. The shot reverse shot creates a connection between the two characters where the look that passes between them says more than any dialogue can.

**Editing:** A flashback is used in this scene as the spectator are taken back to the moment when Mia first sees Sebastian play. Instead of barging past her he embraces her. A fantasy sequence follows with key scenes from the film replayed and reimagined, this time creating a happy ending for the couple in an alternate reality.

### Assessment Question:

**Explore how cinematography helps to position the spectator throughout the film.**

### Assessment Question:

**How is the ideological perspective of the film reinforced through the mise en scene?**