

Extended Essay

How and why cinematography used in *La La Land* to draw the audience in the romance of Sebastian and Mia?

Essay Subject: English Language/Literature

Word Count: 3630

La La Land, an award-winning film, is full of beautiful scenes created through the careful maneuver of cinematography - "every creative choice related to composition, lighting, and camera motion" (F. Schoenberg, Abigail)- like color, camera movement, and season. *La La Land* is a dream-like state which connects to the film's themes of dreams and romance. Additionally, musicals and fantasy have long been used as forms of escape from reality and its hardships as demonstrated in *La La Land* and its cliché romance story. Moreover, *La La Land* puts into question Hollywood's depiction of romance as it is usually glossed over and portrayed as a cure to all misfortune, whereas this musical shows the reality of romance and its conventions as well as the sacrifices needed to maintain a relationship. This film uses cinematography to draw in the audience to tell the tale of an aspiring actress and a jazz player falling in love and achieving their dreams. Which is why the topic was interesting to pursue, *La La Land's* ability to utilize film techniques to tell a romance story was intriguing. Thus, three specific scenes will be deconstructed; the "Lovely Night" scene, the argument scene as well as the epilogue/end scene.

Damien Chazelle -director, screenwriter, and producer- was inspired by Old Hollywood movies in the use of his colors; his fascination with Technicolor is a large factor to what makes *La La Land* unique and visually appealing. Technicolor is a technique created in the early times of color films, it made primary colors vivid through the dyeing of film strips. Thus the mimicking of Technicolor in *La La Land* makes the audience reminiscent of old Hollywood classics. Chazelle wanted to create nostalgia,

feeling, and heart in every single frame to appeal to the dreamers, the romantics, as well as the film lovers. His biggest influence was Jacques Demy's 1964 film, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, which used color to paint a love story (Puddicombe, Stephen).

La La Land, a title suggesting dreamers, uses 'poppy' colors, as described by Jordan Horowitz, to create a fairytale-like setting. This was important to Chazelle as he wanted to show romance, a magical moment, through the use of color; he wanted the story to borderline reality and fantasy. Thus, color, season, and cinematography allowed Damien Chazelle to show the progression of Mia and Sebastian's relationship.

La La Land is influenced by Old Hollywood which is evident in the use of bright primary colors, also known as, Technicolor. Chazelle, with the help of cinematographer, Linus Sandgren, also use color to show character development, as well as, symbolism. Therefore in Mia's introduction during 'Someone in the Crowd', the actress is surrounded by an array of color suggesting that she is deep within Hollywood glamor. Contrasting Sebastian's apartment as well as his clothes which are monochrome. This fits his character as he prefers to stay true to his art. Thus It can be argued that tacky colors symbolize Hollywood and its charm. 'Someone in the Crowd' gives evidence to this theory as it makes the scene seem almost theatrical. Playing on the theme of fantasy vs reality. Which is why when Mia and Sebastian meet at the second pool party, we see a clear divide between them, as the actress is dressed in bright yellow while the

jazz player in firetruck red. This is significant as the audience sees their separate identities. They have nothing in common and are instead confined as well as isolated by the bold lines of primary colors. Suggesting that primary colors could signify separation, making the scene that follows all the more important.

Spring is a symbolism of “promise, renewal, new love and romance” (Love, Presley). “A Lovely Night” marks the start of the romance between Sebastian and Mia mirroring the season they are in. Sebastian and Mia are shown walking back to their cars after a party in Los Angeles where they stumble on a view of the city showcasing the night sky. Their first dance takes place in LA’s Griffith Park, referencing the film *‘Rebel Without a Cause’* (Mallenbaum, Carly). According to Linus Sandgren, “this scene [Lovely Night] was meant to be a very romantic moment after the party. And we [Sandgren and Chazelle] wanted to take the real location and make it more dreamlike -blue and magic hour with the green streetlight.” Based on Sandgren’s comment the remote area which served as the backdrop of the dance sequence - because of its view of Burbank- was designed to be time ambiguous and timeless. Thus the street lamp lights were changed to fit the color scheme and give a mix of contemporary and classic. By removing anything that can be identified by a certain time, replacing street lamps to billboards, Damien Chazelle was able to keep the dreamlike mood. Therefore the audience could immerse themselves in the movie no matter their age and location.

Shot during 'magic hour' - "that brief period during which the light softens as the sun disappears from view" (Giardina) - in order to not only romanticize the city itself but also create the color pallet of Mia and Sebastian's relationship. The sky, a mixture of purple, blue, and red shows the bleeding and mixing of color inspired by the Technicolor films of the '50s as well as the 60s. Which gives the audience a sense of conflict - the initial hatred between Sebastian and Mia- and connection - the eventual love of the artists. There is a balance which is seen throughout their relationship, where the colors are soft a sharp contrast to the harshness and vibrancy of primary colors. The scene was able to create a romantic mood with colors more so than the use of body language or conversations with the characters.

Furthermore, the camera, in the 'Lovely Night" scene, takes long continuous shots "to give the audience that it was happening for real" (Sandgren). The camera follows the characters through all their actions and dances. This technique directly mirrors Old Hollywood scenes, which were Damien Chazelle's primary influence. In Old Hollywood movies, the camera would move in on the characters and the spotlight as if they were on stage. This works to recreate the feeling of the original films musicals which centered around the idea of putting on a show. Meaning that the audience feels included in the scene, in turn allowing them to see Sebastian and Mia fall in love. Furthermore, the romantic mood is enhanced by the playful music, the smooth long takes, and the soft mixing of the night sky giving off a fantastical mood. Making the scene seem all the more magical and dreamlike, a nod to the title, *La La Land*.

As previously mentioned, Chazelle's film was influenced by Hollywood classics, this scene in particular referenced '*Singin' in the Rain*' as the 1952 musical inspired Sebastian's lamppost swing giving a nostalgic feeling to the audience members as he reenacts the renown scene. Furthermore, Fred Alistair is credited for Sebastian's bench tap dance number as a form to express freedom and frustration over Mia's character, a stylistic choice made by Ryan Gosling himself after watching Alistair's films. The dance sequences are heavily influenced by the 1937 musical '*Shall We Dance*' as well as '*The Band Wagon*' which gives the older audience a sense of nostalgia. The two lovers mirror each other's movements almost like a competition. Tap dancing also gives evidence to that claim given that "tap dancing was a form of rhythmic battle" between two individuals (Valis Hill, Constance). The audience can clearly see the character's expression through their dancing, they feel included in the magical moment. The dance almost establishes Mia and Sebastian's relationship, fighting to gain control and instead gain respect as well as love for one another. The competitive tone slowly dissipates into fun and romance. The audience is able to watch the character development and fall in love alongside the two artists, in turn, empathising and relating to them.

Another important detail the audience notices is Mia's change of wardrobe. The actress is usually shown wearing heels, however, after meeting and dancing with Sebastian she was rarely shown sporting them again and is instead wearing tap dancing shoes. This could symbolize their relationship given that once they are no longer together she goes back to her old shoes and habits. On the other hand, this

could symbolize her being freer and not confined by expectations of gender as well as style in Hollywood. The audience sees Mia sacrifice a bit of herself to support Sebastian's love of jazz. Her outfit is also significant as it was entirely composed of primary colors; yellow dress, red bag, and blue heels. Meaning that she was deep in the Hollywood glamor and had not yet matured given that as the story progresses her clothes darken in color and become much more professional. It is also worth noting that given the fact that primary colors symbolize separation when Mia changes her heels to tap dancing shoes that are identical to Sebastian's it shows unity as well as the beginning of a connection which eventually leads to a relationship. Therefore, by the end of the scene, the viewers see the blossoming of love through the dance sequence, the color and most blatantly, the season.

La La Land is "organized seasonally, suggesting trouble in paradise" (Felsenthal). The argument scene between Mia and Sebastian is a cinematographic masterpiece. The season now winter foreshadows the argument, the soft sunlight no longer hiding the problems that the couple was facing. The viewers see Sebastian and Mia's love blossom from spring to summer and fall. However, the cold atmosphere reflects that of the weather, the sun is no longer keeping the fire going and thus their relationship is falling apart. They can no longer sacrifice their careers for one another as they are desperately trying to catch their dreams, opening a jazz club, and becoming a famous actress.

Chazelle wanted to “physicalize just how rancid the love between them [Sebastian and Mia] had become” (Sullivan, Kevin.P.). Sebastian intended on surprising Mia with a romantic candlelight dinner, thus the soft music of the vinyl sets the tone. However, it quickly goes downhill. The conversation turns bitter, it starts with the record scratch signaling the end of the song as well as the romantic atmosphere. The arguments erupt, noting the lack of movement the audience feels stuck. Damien Chazelle wanted the scene to be driven by the characters’ emotion alone, therefore, Mia and Sebastian were placed in this argument with only one option, to sit and talk it out. However, this approach may make the audience feel anxious as they may not like arguments and confrontation. The fire alarm interrupts the harsh exchange of words and signals not only the end of the conversation but also the end of the romantic dinner. The audience is much more devastated because they can see the effort that Sebastian has put into this multi-course dinner with the main course and the giant pie for dessert. However, when all of these events are added together the audience can clearly see what Chazelle intended, the burning out of their romance.

Linus Sandgren establishes the unsettling tone through the green lights coming from the window and illuminating the lovers' faces. The dark surrounding the two characters confuse the audience, as the tone switches between romantic and sinister. The dark surroundings giving them an uneasy feeling. The use of green and black to show evil or conflict has been used in film history for a long time, Disney’s villains are often depicted with this color pallet. Which again plays with nostalgia as well as

childhood fears, thus the audience is much more entranced and focused. However, Chazelle also uses green to show uncertainty, for example, Mia's green dress when she was choosing between then-boyfriend Greg and Sebastian. Therefore this scene shows uncertainty as well as unease, it questions their intent as well as their relationship status which is answered throughout the scene. The camera embodies the viewers, the constant switching from one face to the other mirrors the sense of urgency and panic that they feel.

Chazelle filmed this scene with wide coverage, a camera on each actor's face, allowing for more freedom in editing. This proved beneficial as Chazelle showed the tension through the camera movement. It was choppy, contrasting the fluid camera movements in earlier scenes, such as the 'Lovely Night' dance which helped maintain the Old Hollywood magic. The constant change from one character to another, not only allowed the audience to properly see the emotions being displayed but also gave a sense of realism. The switching between takes makes the audience feel helpless because they are part of the scene watching the falling out happen and yet they can't stop it.

Over the shoulder shots are used in the beginning of the scene to show the relaxed shoulders, the candlelight dinner is still maintaining the romantic atmosphere. The audience can see the couple happy to be in each other's presence which makes the following actions all the more painful, the viewers long for the actress and the

musician to go back to the happiness and 'honeymoon' phase. However, once the voices become clipped and the smiles forced, the camera zooms into their faces only in order to properly show the audience the emotions that these characters are going through. It is a slow burn conflict, the argument begins with the couple speaking softly but giving the viewers a sense of panic, the control of their anger and annoyance clearly visible. However, they lose the little control they had and the voices rise, both of them speaking over each other. Given that they are consumed with emotion hurtful words are thrown and the audiences wince knowing full well that they hurt their partner. The quiet that follows is unbearable as the camera focuses on Mia, her lips quivering and her eyes filling with tears and back to Sebastian's exasperated face. Here the audience may feel sympathy for Mia while harboring anger towards Sebastian's behavior. The record player scratching signals both the ending of the music as well as the romantic atmosphere.

The tension is heightened when the fire alarm beeps signaling the burning of the food, mirroring the burning of their relationship. Mia storms out of the apartment and the camera switches back to long takes. By the end of the scene, the audience feels drained as well as exhausted. It is also worth noting that they are both wearing dark clothing which could signify their maturity as they both grew up and have taken control over their careers. However, it could also represent their sadness. The end of their relationship.

The ending is composed of an epilogue set into the future revealing the success of Sebastian and Mia as well as a hypothetical sequence of events. Thus in the Epilogue, a lot of what-ifs are answered. This color packed sequence features Old Hollywood films, such as; '*Singin in the Rain*', '*An American in Paris*', '*Funny Face*' as well as '*Le Ballon Rouge*'. Here Damien Chazelle pays homage to all the movies that came before. The audience is overwhelmed by nostalgia; the reference heavy sequence uses technicolor to properly mimic the vividness and the brightness of primary colors. The scene meant to show what they would have had or wanted seems a little bit off, the audience realizes through this fantasy that the "vivid colors represent Hollywood in separation" (Runquist, Karsten). Hollywood is about perfection, lacking in authenticity as well as heart, almost one-dimensional. The audience feels disconnected from the characters. The tacky colors and the vividness, as well as smiling faces, make the audience go from happy, entertained and hopeful to slightly uneasy. It feels too good to be true, too fake, too Hollywood. Which puts into question Hollywood's culture regarding romance as well as their representation of it. Most importantly how romance is portrayed as perfect and its ability to conquer all conflicts. However, *La La Land* takes this depiction and shows the audience the jarring reality of romance through the unique ending.

The Epilogue, set five years into the future, is said to be from Mia's perspective as it largely focuses on her accomplishments as well as her career with Sebastian following her to the different destinations to play his instrument, the piano, in jazz clubs.

This further shows that their relationship would not have worked without sacrifice. However, *La La Land* is a place for dreamers, the epilogue strengthens that message as the two characters are shown achieving their dreams without sacrificing their love. Opposite of the harsh reality that awaits them after the end of the song.

The Epilogue is the epitome of magic, fantasy, and dreams, so it is no surprise that the shots are all continuous. The audience goes through the never-ending journey of bright colors without any interruptions. Damien Chazelle had the set placed in such position that the camera, as well as the actors, could move continuously. The viewers return to the feelings of hope and wonder. The audience gets to live another dream, where the lovers are together. Only to later be disappointed by the reality of it, Mia marrying as well as bearing a child with another man. The color scheme goes from vibrant and poppy to a dull blue. The blue mirrors the audience's sadness as Mia is shown to have become an established actress and Sebastian is pursuing his dream of having his own jazz club.

The biggest tear-jerker is the home video sequence, what if they had gotten together? Viewers are left wishing this was the reality, wanting to ignore the truth, desperate for their version of the ending. When the hypothetical sequence ends, Mia turns back once to look at Sebastian. Her face is illuminated by blue however the backdrop is a mixture of blue and purple. A nod to their first dance, leaving her words hanging, "I'll always love you". The purple also reminds the audience of their love as it

was the primary color of the former lovers' color pallet, it represented the mixture of red -love- as well as blue - creative control- which now seems fitting as it can be argued that being together aided them in achieving creative control, thus their dreams.

The clothes used in the epilogue are significant as they follow Chazelle's rule. They are styled in a way that is ambiguous, the clothes have a vintage style to them, however, they are worn with a modern twist. They show more skin than was acceptable at the time but is the same style. Similarly, it mixes the new and the old, most notably when a globe is shown with an airplane marking the route to France. The cinematography technique gives off a vintage feel to it, while the depiction of a new plane contradicts that of the camera. The audience can't quite place the scenes making it easier to follow as they don't have preconceived notions of the location. Mia is shown dressed in a dark dress while Sebastian in a brown suit. The use of dark color shows their maturity as well as their growth. Sebastian had lost himself in the midst of his career when he chose to join Keith's band, shown through the presence of bright red, yellow, and blue when performing on stage. However, he had stayed true to himself as he went back to his monochrome outfits after a wake-up call from Mia.

La La Land was able to walk a fine line between cliché and originality to tell the story of the star-crossed lovers. The lack of word exchange between the two characters left the audience wanting more, however, the simple smile at the end was a smart alternative given that it allowed for various interpretation. The ending though not loved

by all, was powerful in the sense that people wanted to talk about it, sing the music, and learn the dance sequences but also relive that surreal dream. The colors and cinematography appealed to the audience's creativity while the seasons were used as a timer. They divided the film and foreshadowed the lover's fate. The audience knew what was coming, however, they were too immersed in the dream as well as the cliché to realize.

La La Land takes the Hollywood dream of success, fame and true love juxtaposing it with the harsh truth that dreams and/or success come at a high price, and that "love doesn't always conquer all" (Hayes, Hazel). The camera cuts to a close-up of Mia and Sebastian bathed in blue light. The blue symbolizing creative control, concludes the movie by showing that they have both achieved their dreams at the expense of their love; thus delivering an impactful ending. *La La Land* weaponizes the nostalgia, the viewers finally realize what was lost, causing an overflow of emotion. The sadness is also intensified by the season, winter, reflecting the end of the bittersweet relationship. This is significant as winter is the last season and thus mirrors the finality of not only the romance but also the movie, leaving the viewers numb with the emptiness of lost love.

In conclusion, *La La Land* with the help of Damien Chazelle and Linus Sandgren was able to show the romance between the actress and the Jazz player through film techniques like sound, location, and season as well as cinematography like color,

lighting, and camera angles to draw the audience into the romance between Sebastian and Mia. This is significant as *La La Land* demonstrated the ability to impact an audience by means of auditory sensors -music- and visuals through the cinematography and film techniques mentioned above. This film, in turn, allowed for the rediscovery of old cinema as well as the surge of new musical films.

Work Cited

- Chazelle, Damien, director. *La La Land*. Performance by Ryan Thomas Gosling, and Emma Stone, Summit Entertainment, 2016.
- 10ThingsYouDidntKnow. "25 Facts About La La Land." *YouTube*, YouTube, 26 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE7senrvA3k. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- AC, Clare. "LA LA LAND EPILOGUE | FULL CLIP." *YouTube*, YouTube, 13 Apr. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkD10lhMMrg. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Blevins, Joe. "Before You See La La Land, Watch This Video Essay on Why Whiplash Worked." *News*, News.avclub.com, 7 Dec. 2016, news.avclub.com/before-you-see-la-la-land-watch-this-video-essay-on-wh-1798255093. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017
- cinematographydb. "The Cinematography of La La Land." *YouTube*, YouTube, 17 Apr. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJDOx7vQo1A. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- "Color Wheel Pro - See Color Theory in Action." *Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning*, QSX Software Group, www.color-wheel-pro.com/color-meaning.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Ellwood, Gregory. "How Many Times Have You Seen 'La La Land'? Bet You Still Didn't Know This." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 2 Feb. 2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-mn-0202-lala-tidbits-20170202-story.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

- Felsenthal, Julia. "A Feminist Reading of La La Land." *Vogue*, Vogue, 25 May 2017, www.vogue.com/article/la-la-land-feminist-critique. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- GeorgeEastmanHouse. "The Dye Transfer Printing Process - Technicolor 100." *YouTube*, YouTube, 22 Jan. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9S76vtk4Ro.
- Gray, Tim. "How Damien Chazelle & His 'La La Land' Team Created the 'Magical' Romance." *Variety*, 14 Dec. 2016, variety.com/2016/film/news/damien-chazelle-la-la-land-team-magic-1201941178/. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Harney, Megan. "Here Are All the Iconic Musical Movie References in 'La La Land' You Need to Know." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 15 Feb. 2017, www.businessinsider.com/la-la-land-musical-references-2017-2/#-and-ryan-gosling-and-emma-stone-waltz-through-a-romantic-star-filled-room-and-successfully-mirror-some-of-astaires-most-famous-dance-moves-2. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Harris, Aisha. "La La Land's Many References to Classic Movies: A Guide." *Slate Magazine*, 13 Dec. 2016, www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2016/12/13/la_la_land_s_many_references_to_classic_movies_from_singin_in_the_rain_to.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Hayes, Hazel ChewingSand. "Why LA LA LAND Feels Like a Classic." *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Feb. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCgsAFn1wXQ.

Accessed 4 Sept. 2017

"La La Land: Jordan Horowitz On The Color Palette Of The Film behind the Scene Clip." *Video Detective*, VideoDetective.com, www.videodetective.com/movies/la-la-land-jordan-horowitz-on-the-color-palette-of-the-film/340947. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Mallenbaum, Carly. "Your 'La La Land' Cheat Sheet." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 27 Dec. 2016, www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2016/12/27/your-la-la-land-cheat-sheet/95602260/. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Millma, Zosha. "Never Shined So Brightly: The Use of Color in 'La La Land'." *Film School Rejects*, ZergNet, 21 Apr. 2017, filmschoolrejects.com/color-in-la-la-land-26939a11accd/. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Miller, Julie. "The Clever Tricks That Made La La Land Look Technicolor and Timeless." *HWD*, Vanity Fair, 17 Feb. 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/la-la-land-production-design. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Ordon, Michael. "Lights, Camera, Colors Give 'La La Land' Its Lavish Look." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 16 Feb. 2017,

- www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-mn-0216-craft-la-la-look-20170216-story.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Preciado, Sara. "La La Land - Movie References." *Vimeo*, 4 Sept. 2017, vimeo.com/200550228. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Robinson, Tasha. "La La Land's Choreographer Shares the Film's Sneakiest Dance-Movie References." *The Verge*, The Verge, 20 Dec. 2016, www.theverge.com/2016/12/20/14013530/la-la-land-choreographer-mandy-moore-movie-interview-damien-chazelle. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Runquist, Karsten. "La La Land: Using Color | VIDEO ESSAY." *YouTube*, YouTube, 30 Mar. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPAf3a0XYNk. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- Sullivan, Kevin P. "How Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling Helped Write Their 'La La Land' Fight." *EW.com*, Time Inc, 24 Feb. 2017, ew.com/awards/2017/02/24/la-la-land-screenplay-breakdown/. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
- "Technicolor." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 Sept. 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technicolor.
- Love, Presley. "Symbols Of Spring | Signs Of Spring | Spring Season." *Universe Of Symbolism*, 2018, <https://www.universeofsymbolism.com/symbols-of-spring.html>.
- F. Schoenberg, Abigail. "What Is Cinematography?." *Thecrimson.Com*, 2011, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/2/8/what-is-cinematography/>.

Yam, Ido. "La La Land - Dinner Scene(HD)." *YouTube*, YouTube, 18 Apr. 2017,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw7g3QHOaOw. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

Giardina, Carolyn. "How 'La La Land' Got Its 6-Minute Sunset Dance Just Right (in Only 4 Takes)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 Jan. 2017,
www.hollywoodreporter.com/behind-screen/how-la-la-land-got-6-minute-sunset-dance-just-right-4-takes-968282.

Puddicombe, Stephen. "Is La La Land An Homage To The Umbrellas Of Cherbourg?." *Little White Lies*, 2018,
<http://lwlies.com/articles/the-umbrellas-of-cherbourg-la-la-land-damien-chazelle/>.

Valis Hill, Constance. "Tap Dancing America." *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 215–215.