

# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Chasing their Dreams in the *City of Stars*: Emma Stone and Mia Dolan's Star Personae in *La La Land*

Author

María Gallo Val

Supervisor

Julia Echeverría Domingo

FACULTY OF ARTS

2023

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## 1. Introduction

Emma Stone, the Oscar-winning Hollywood actress, is the subject of study of this dissertation. Although one may question the purpose of analysing Emma Stone as a star, considering her relatively short and recent career, the fact is that she has built a solid persona on which she her roles are based, as is clear in the case of *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), a hit after which she became the highest-paid female actor (Elkins, 2017). Her cheery personality has brought her closer to the public, debunking the classical Hollywood concept of the star that Dyer dissects in his book *Stars* (1998). Dyer examines the identity built around the star persona, claiming that what the public sees is a construction made through publicity, specific roles given to the actors, and their performance in public appearances, among others. Some decades ago, stars were presented as figures closer to gods than to mortals. This idea has evolved, and younger actors have gained relevance among spectators thanks to presenting themselves as common people. As this dissertation analyses, this is the case of Emma Stone's star persona.

On the one hand, I will foreground the identity Stone has built and how the characters she has portrayed have allowed her to add nuances to her star persona. On the other hand, I will focus on Stone's character, Mia, in *La La Land*. The film tells the story of two aspiring artists, Mia and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) who fall in love and have to choose between their relationship and their dream career. The analysis will focus on Mia's evolution through the film, and how her character matures when she becomes a recognised star. It will show the metafictional relation between Mia and the star as a concept, and how at the beginning of the film, Mia's performance is closer to Stone's

identity, while at the end of the movie, when she becomes famous, she detaches from this model and embodies a more classical type of star.

*La La Land* has been analysed from different perspectives, but above all, most analyses and articles have focused on how the film brings the classical musical back into a contemporary setting, evoking nostalgia with all the references to classical Hollywood (Robinette, 2017; Escudero, 2019; González, 2017; Neher, 2017). From *The New York Times* (Scott, 2017) to *Vanity Fair* (Sanguino, 2019), every recognised film critic dedicated a web entry to this film, some, like the latter, relating the film with the “millennial” generation. Although the connections with the past in the film are obvious, there is no previous analysis of the figure of the star in the film and its evolution. Therefore, this analysis is going to offer a different point of view based on the star persona and its relationship with gender politics.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The exclusiveness and extravagance around the world of Hollywood raise curiosity and positions the stars under the critical eye of the viewer. Richard Dyer’s book *Stars* (1998) bases its theory on different aspects of what he calls the “star persona”, that is, the fabricated image actors create of themselves. According to Dyer, stars are not “real” individuals but a construction of the person behind them. This composition can be complemented by publicity, promotion, or the films in which the actor features. As Dyer claims, film characters are “devices [from] a wider design” (105), which also help to construct the concept of the star persona.

In the Hollywood industry, once a star falls into a specific role, it is very difficult to get them out of it (24). Dyer uses Klapp’s classification of stars into social – and stereotypical – types: *The Good Joe*, *The Tough Guy*, *The Rebel* and *The Pin-up* (47-51). These types rely on how the character interacts with society and on how the stars relate

to the characters they had to play, as normally once a star falls into one category, the same kinds of roles are usually given to them. However, for this analysis, I will use an alternative type, the *Independent Woman* (52). As Dyer asserts, the role of women is reduced to fewer types, normally associated either with love (45) – always heterosexual – or their rejection of it. While heterosexual men were generally portrayed in a complex and nuanced manner in classical Hollywood films, women were subjugated to a more static role which was seen as “atemporal”, always falling into similar roles and condemned to remain in the background. As female leading roles were scarce and mostly stereotyped, they were not as “worth analysing” as men’s (92-93).

Additionally, classical Hollywood actors and actresses were seen as God-like figures, detaching themselves from the public. This was common in the early theatre times, when the star was seen as an unattainable figure, out of the scope of mortals (43). Now, in order to fit into society's standards and become more accessible to the population, the stars tend to adopt the attitude of ordinary people.

As Dyer explains, different aspects contribute to solidifying how a star is perceived, from the image constructed in the media to the films’ promotion. *Promotion* refers to the material that has to do with the star, from studio announcements to public appearances (60). Another important aspect is media and *Publicity*, and the private information that is released about the star (61). *Criticism and commentaries* are also relevant when defining a star. This covers books and commentaries from writers and critics, as “they contribute to the shaping of ‘public opinion’ about a star” (63). The last aspect that Dyer proposes is linked with the films in which the stars appear. The characters they portray in different films help to categorize them and add certain characteristics to their social persona. Dyer talks about the concept of “star vehicle”. This refers to “films [that are] built around star images” (62), that is,

films that are written with a specific actor in mind. This is related to the social type they fit in, and it is an opportunity for the star to strengthen, if possible, their image. This usually happens in specific genres, like in classical musicals, where it was particularly usual to give a solo performance to the star. Although not every film in which an actor stars is a “vehicle”, these are more common than films in which the roles are out of line with the construction of their star persona.

Dyer talks about the convergence and divergence between the star persona and the characters they play, as sometimes it is difficult to differentiate the character from the star persona, and from the human being behind these constructions (97-98). Dyer states that “it is assumed that the ‘great’ stars transcend the type to which they belong and become ‘utterly’ individual” (99). As will be seen in the analysis below, apart from the ideological and social aspects, the stars use performance, *gestures*, *speech* and even their *name*, to build a persona. Everything, from the roles they play to the rumours spread about them, contributes to shaping an identity from which the stars can benefit and construct their persona. In his study, Dyer concludes that exceptional stars surpass those barriers and become one, embodying their star persona as their own.

Dyer’s idea on the lack of analyses of female leading roles will be complemented here with the representation of women in relation to discourses of love and professional success. Maria San Filippo proposes a study of the romantic comedy genre from a gendered view, suggesting how the “happily ever after has changed” over time. She suggests how the evolution of feminism has influenced cinema industry resulting in the incapability for women to “have it all”, referring to professional, sexual and love life (2022, pp. 17-37). In relation to *La La Land*, I will analyse Stone’s character Mia’s leap to stardom and how she favours her professional career over her love life, adopting an

apparently feminist stance but demonstrating San Filippo's views on post-romantic and post-feminist ideology representing women's inability to be complete.

### **3. Analysis**

#### **3.1.Emma Stone's Star Persona**

With the raise of social media and technologies, now everyone can know more about their favourite actors, and, consequently, the idea of the star as an unattainable figure has been debunked. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, stars were perceived as part of the grandeur of Hollywood, and actors seemed to be above mere mortals. Now, on the contrary, people are eager to know that screens do not separate artists from "normality". Emma Stone, the 34-year-old award-winning actress, is a clear example of a new wave of Hollywood actresses. Along with young actresses who have entered this sector at the same time as Stone, like Jennifer Lawrence, Margot Robbie, or Amanda Seyfried, they represent a new era of Hollywood that consciously tries to deviate from the glamour of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

For the younger generations, it is easy to engage with this new wave of stars, younger and more playful. As Dyer states, stars nowadays seem to be more achievable (23). They present themselves as natural, common people, and they use every opportunity to prove it. For instance, the magazine *Vogue* has dedicated a section to show celebrities in their "natural habitat". Emma Stone's video "73 Questions with Vogue" (Vogue, 2016) highlights the personality constructed around her star persona. She shows herself as cheerful, always making fun of every situation, and putting emphasis on her humble personality. Although she is interviewed in her fancy house in LA, she shows her dog, talks about her first job, and defines herself as "very fucking cool" (7:11), telling ordinary anecdotes, in line with Jennifer Lawrence's interview (W Magazine, 2018), in which both

appear to openly answer questions about their everyday lives. Their answers have nothing to do with their careers but with the identity they have built around their personae. They are both examples of these new actresses who are taking over from big, consolidated stars.

People, especially new generations who are keen on social media, are willing to see what their favourite stars do, and it is the perfect tool for artists to keep in touch with the fans. Stone presents herself with touches of a renovated star, closer and more mundane, but also keeping that aura of a star that separates her from the rest of society. Although her choice of refusing to use social apps like Instagram might be only based on keeping her intimate life private, the truth is that fans are enthusiastic about the possibility of Stone's new profile on Instagram, as they stated on the US *Billy on the Street* comedy show (Billyonthestreteetv, 2018, 4:45). Billy asks different people who are passing by whether they would like to see Stone on Instagram, to which a woman answers: "Everybody likes to know where the artists are. You're also people as well", referring to Stone. People like to be a click away from their favourite celebrities' lives, even if their social status still separates both worlds. In this same quick-street interview, Billy asked a woman if she liked to see Stone in horror movies (2:54). This woman, hesitant at first, answered a big no. Addressing Stone, her answer was: "I think, honestly, your intellect and your whole persona are a little bit above that". The interviewee assumes that a role is suitable or not for Stone, showing that she has created an identity based on the roles she has already played and her public image.

As already mentioned, actors are usually typecast, playing similar characters that fit into a specific category. As Dyer explains, women in Old Hollywood could be categorised either as the *Pin-up* type (50) or the *Independent Woman* (54). Attending to this narrow female categorisation, women in films were either sexually objectified or considered a social non-conformist. Although this is merely a stereotype, and it is

impossible to categorise all female roles in these two categories, especially in contemporary Hollywood, where there is greater variety, we could argue Emma Stone's star persona would fall into the second one. From her leap to fame in *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009) to the latest film she has starred in, *Cruella* (Craig Gillespie, 2021), her roles have been alike. Her debut in *Zombieland* introduced her to the main public, and marked how she was going to present herself as an actress. Her role in this film coincides with Emma Stone's spontaneous identity, as described above. Similarly, in *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), where she becomes the "marked" one for a false rumour that circulates in the school, she clearly embodies the figure of *The Rebel*. In the end, she prioritises being true to herself and telling the truth, but she is not afraid of being an outcast for fighting against what is established. Most of her characters are the free-thinker-kind of type who is not afraid to be different from the rest, embodying rebellious identities and always presenting themselves as flirtatious but also independent.

Within the *Independent Woman* category (54), Dyer makes a further distinction between two types—the superfemale and the superwoman. The superwoman relies on more masculine characteristics while the superfemale bases its personality on her feminine and flirtatious capacities. We could argue that Stone is closer to the superfemale, as her characters usually appear to be funny and flirty while presenting herself as ambitious and intelligent, like she does in *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (Glenn Ficarra, John Requa, 2011) or *Birdman* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2014). Despite being very different films, belonging to different genres, a rom-com and black-humour comedy, respectively, in both films Stone plays a girl who defies society in some way. In the former, she is a successful girl who at the beginning seems to have a perfect and stable life but ends up loosening the reins of her preestablished life when she falls in love with the arrogant guy that she despised at first, played by Ryan Gosling. In a different tone but displaying a

very similar personality, in *Birdman*, she plays a young drug-recovering addict, which would place her in the role of the defiant girl who does not follow the rules, but at the same time appears flirty and with an ironic sense of humour.

The paradox of the *Independent Woman* type is that, due to being associated with women, in the end, there is always a conventional “climb-down” (56) by which she ends up surrendering to heterosexual love. As Dyer claims, the superfemale subtype is always demanding male attention while challenging social conventions (54). This also applies to most of Stone’s former roles. In her role as Hannah in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, she ends up involved in a romance with the male protagonist despite having started the film as enemies. Much the same happens in *La La Land* and *Gangster Squad* (Ruben Fleischer, 2013), both co-starred by Ryan Gosling as well. Using again the strategy of enemies to lovers in *La La Land*, Stone is presented in her comfortable comic role, “goofing around” to attract her male co-star's attention.

Nevertheless, we could also argue that Stone additionally fits into *The Rebel* type (52), somewhat breaking gender barriers, since this category has been mostly associated with male actors such as James Dean. Whilst the *Independent Woman* is the female equivalent to *The Rebel*, Dean’s type, as it was associated mainly with men, was far more examined. Dyer states that also women could fit into this category, and names Jane Fonda as an example (53). The main characteristic of those that embody this type is their youth and “generalised angst” in their discourse. Dyer states that normally young people tend to be more radical and rebellious than grown-up characters. Similarly, Stone is normally assigned teenage and young adult roles in Hollywood, and her characters tend to be outspoken advocates for common rights. For instance, in the film previously mentioned, *Easy A*, a contemporary adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850) set in a high school, she is the one who goes against the norms, the one

that rebels against her classmates after being falsely judged for being a promiscuous girl. However, Dyer explains that, although Jane Fonda can also belong to this category, as she rebelled against the women's situation in the 1960s, she might be "a different type altogether" (53). Stone can be placed in both categories, depending on the roles she plays, since, in the end, both types have a similar root, which is the apparent rebellion against canonical behaviours.

Another term used in Hollywood is "vehicle films". These are the ones in which the personality of the star is exploited through roles that are specifically tailored for them. In the case of Stone, as previously said, she seems to always perform the same kind of role. Normally, she plays teenagers who rebel in some way. In the *Independent Woman* type, one of the superfemale characteristics is that these characters do not have any worthwhile project to follow in life, this is the case of Stone's role in *Birdman*. *Cruella* shows a more grown-up rebellious figure. Somehow the film justifies Cruella's rebelliousness as it has a more malicious approach but emphasises all the rebels who want to stand out. Her picaresque at the beginning of the film determines the classic irony that characterises Stone's characters. Even in the biopic *The Battle of the Sexes* (Valerie Faris, Jonathan Dayton, 2017), where she portrays the real-life female tennis player Billie Jean King, she embodies a defiant personality. Jean King was the first woman who defied a male tennis player to earn equal financial support. All her roles, even those that represent real people, have the same anarchist spirit in common.

Also relevant to her star persona is Stone's frequent screen association with actor Ryan Gosling. The three films in which they have co-starred have served to establish them as a screen couple and to promote the films around their relationship. Despite not having been romantically involved in real life, their chemistry guarantees a perfect movie selling. The first film in which they co-starred was *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, in which they go

from enemies to lovers. *La La Land* follows a similar character development: they start despising each other but then begin a relationship. And in the one in between, *Gangster Squad*, they instantly become attracted to each other and have a relationship till the end of the film. The use of them as a couple to promote the film is a practice that also reflects classical Hollywood. Previously, in the Golden Hollywood era, actors were usually paired to appear together in different movies. This gave an instant appeal to the project, as it ensured the views of all those spectators who were keen on these actors as a pair. It also created an opportunity to expand their film identities both inside and outside the screen. An example of this was Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, or Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, whose love trespassed the screen, and the industry used their relationship to promote new movies. Usually, these actors were paired to promote their love relationships and add gossip to their real relationships.

Gosling and Stone have been cast together three times in the last decade, establishing a long-term working relationship that exploits their chemistry. Various websites have written about their admiration for each other, including *ENews*, *Glamour*, and *Variety*, among others. *Entertainment Tonight* also wrote about their resemblance to old Hollywood stars. They are compared with Bogart and Bacall and comment on the idea of reuniting them “as a pair” in their latest film (Boone, 2016, para. 7). Dan Fogelman, writer of *Crazy, Stupid, Love* tweeted "My favourite scene is Gosling and Emma falling in love in bed. All improvised" (Weinberg, 2021, para. 4), giving the fans who were on tenterhooks the ideal Hollywood couple. Their connection draws attention right away, and their natural and constant mockery of each other makes them a perfect match.

To conclude this part, Emma Stone’s star persona can be said to be presented as cheerful and comedic. In interviews, she always shows herself as humble and very

approachable to the public. She seems like a normal girl. This positions her as an accessible star, which differs from the old meaning of the concept. Expanding on her star identity, she can fit into the *Independent Woman* type, but also into *The Rebel*. Both categories rely on a non-conformist kind in which Stone's identity easily fits. In her films, her characters follow the pattern of a rebellious young woman who presents herself as flirtatious, which is linked to the idea of the superfemale that normally is opposed to what society demands of her. Apart from this, Stone's connection with Ryan Gosling has helped her to promote their films thanks to their chemistry. They have become a consolidated couple who just for appearing together make the headlines. Stone's persona has been consolidated since she started her career and, although she still has a long way to go, her identity as a star persona is rooted so far. Despite presenting herself as naïve and funny, her charming youth cannot be overlooked. She has demonstrated to be very certain of the roots on which she is founding her career.

### **3.2.Becoming a Star: Divergence and Proximity Between Mia and Emma**

#### **Stone's Star Personae**

*La La Land* introduces two aspiring artists who meet by chance and eventually fall in love and start a relationship. Mia, Emma Stone's character, works as a barista while auditioning for film roles, waiting for her chance to pursue her dream of becoming a movie star. Mia's character evolution is related to her leap to stardom, that is, to her professional aspirations. Not only does her social status change, but also her performance, physical style and clothes, speech, body posture, and her relationship with her main love interest, Sebastian (Ryan Gosling), reflect this evolution. In the film, their maturation process, and the realisation that their love life will always come second to their dream jobs, are condensed in the film's bittersweet ending, which makes a clear reference

to *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), a classic Hollywood film that serves to introduce the main point of this analysis.

At the beginning of the film, Mia's character is presented as a spontaneous, cheerful girl. In the first conversation the protagonists have, which takes place in a daylight swimming pool party, Mia arrives at the party (27:15) and sees Sebastian in a ridiculous 1980s outfit playing "easy-going-absurd" songs, as he would define them. Mia, who is annoyed at Sebastian's rudeness in their previous encounters, first during a traffic jam and then at the restaurant – where he plainly ignores her when, amazed at his piano playing, she tries to talk to him – asks the band for the song "*I Run (So Far Away)*" (*A Flock of Seagulls*, 1982) and starts making fun of him by extravagantly dancing and making funny faces. Her movements, mocking Sebastian, are a response to these previous encounters and serve to introduce her personality. First, and focusing on her performance, she is presented as a funny, naïve, and cheerful character. Her straight posture determines her powerful aura, but rather than solemn or earnest, she presents herself as cheeky, and relaxed. Her body language also conveys her spontaneity. When she realises Sebastian is in fact the disrespectful man she has met before, she looks at him with disapproval and suddenly raises her hand to ask for the song, reflecting her impulsivity and free spirit. She casts a brightness associated with youth. Her exaggerated and quirky dance, trying to catch Sebastian's attention, indicates her sense of humour and unashamed personality, which matches with her real-life star persona. Adding to this, her facial expressions serve as a mirror to her emotions. She is very energetic, and her eloquent gestures demonstrate her humorous tone and the fact that she does not take herself too seriously. Focusing on physical appearance, in this scene, and during the first part of the film, she wears bright, colourful dresses that are quite "girly", normally with full skirts and without extravagant necklines, underscoring her youthful appearance and vibrant personality while keeping a

chic, atemporal aura around her (Figure 1). Her clothing mirrors her personality and, as she grows and matures, it becomes darker and more serious. At this point, she represents the prototypical young aspiring actor, full of energy, free-spirited and easy-going, nor far from Emma Stone's real-life star persona.



Figure 1: Emma Stone as Mia in the “swimming pool” scene, looking directly at Sebastian, dancing and mocking him.

Throughout the movie, her maturation process is determined by the choice she has to make between pursuing her dreams of becoming a star and her personal love life. The film presents these two scenarios as incompatible, and, when she is given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take a role that involves international travelling, she must decide whether their relationship will stand this life change. At this point of the film, she has to make a key decision that, as Isabel Treviño (2023, 43) says, activates the post-feminist figure of the “mobile professional woman”. Treviño emphasises the lack of representation of women “travelling” in films, either metaphorically or physically, as normally these mobile roles are attributed to men. *La La Land* presents a woman with a flourishing future that, consequently, is forced to decline being happy with the man she loves. This decision can easily be linked to gender ideology, as normally, women in the film industry are opaqued by men. The film puts a woman on the front but the discourse that it articulates is that a woman who wants to succeed might need to sacrifice her personal life.

Although Mia is empowered because of her professional success, still the spectator might expect a conventional happy ending between Mia and Sebastian. So, it could be said that the film fulfils our expectations by giving representation to a woman who in the end accomplishes her “mobility”, both physically, as her job implies travelling, but also figuratively, as she does climb socially, too. But the film may question Mia’s happiness with this choice by raising the question: what if they had ended up together? A question that the film itself tries to answer, as I will analyse below.

The film also reinforces the idea of competition between the couple in this “mobility”, and even at one point, Sebastian berates Mia saying: “Maybe you just liked me when I was on my ass ‘cause it made you feel better about yourself” (1:32:22). Reinforcing this idea, Treviño explains that “women tend to be portrayed as less mobile than men, and their mobility as more complex and problematic” (36). Her rise implies being professionally successful, but the film presents this choice as making her miserable. She ends up being a renowned actress and creating a family; nevertheless, not with the “love of her life”, pointing out the inability of women to be entirely happy, and showing the difficulties that mobility causes to the protagonist. This gendered vision gains importance in relation to the parallelism with classical Hollywood films. The film not only shows a change in performance, but Mia’s maturation process is also linked to what it means to become a successful woman in a contemporary world that is more prone to rewarding men.

As Mia and Sebastian’s relationship deteriorates, Mia starts behaving in a more restrained manner, being closer to the grown-up Mia seen at the end. There is a radical break between her youth and adulthood, somewhat like the evolution of Stone’s roles along her career, as she started embodying more playful and rebellious characters but, as it is natural with the passing of time, she is now playing more mature ones, even if they

still retain many of the connotations of her early roles, notably the idea of subversion and rebellion. Mia's role as a star is emphasised in a very metafictional way, recalling the Classic Hollywood era. At the end of the film, when Mia has succeeded as a worldwide famous Hollywood star, she is presented as a God-like figure, opposite to Stone's star identity, as previously mentioned in the first part of the analysis. This is not a casual thing. The movie is full of references to classic films and musicals, the most obvious one being *Casablanca*. Apart from the similar ending to the iconic "We'll always have Paris" in front of the Los Angeles planetarium (1:38:00), a very symbolic place that also references the stars, Mia's inspiration is the actor Ingrid Bergman, who plays the main female character in *Casablanca*. Her poster is in Mia's room at the beginning of the film (10:13, Figure 2) and appears again after the five-year temporal gap that shows Mia's new house as an actor (1:40:51). Becoming a big star like her has always been Mia's dream, so it is evident she ends up embodying her career inspiration. However, the difference between both films' endings is that, unlike Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) in *Casablanca*, who is prompted by Rick (Humphrey Bogart) to depart from Casablanca with her husband and therefore be a "good wife", Mia is motivated by Sebastian to choose her career and independence over him so she cannot repent for giving up her dream. Recalling Treviño's idea of women's mobility in the cinema, this "choice" comes as a disruption of the classical Hollywood film, erasing the passive role that women used to have and opening new paths. However, in both cases the choice is supported by the men's notion of duty, of what these women "should" do, and *La La Land*'s bittersweet ending makes us wonder why the film presents Mia's personal and professional dreams as incompatible.



Figure 2: Mia, dreamy, in her bedroom with the face of her role model actress Ingrid Bergman behind her.

As the film advances and Mia achieves her dream of becoming a recognised actress, she detaches herself from her previous self. The first scene in which she reappears after her professional success highlights the unattainable figure of the classic Hollywood star. This scene is a clear reference to the film's first scene, in which Mia is working in a Hollywood studios' coffee shop and a renowned star enters the cafeteria. In that scene, the camera focalises on Mia's admiration for her, following the star with her eyes as she leaves the coffee shop (6:41). Later, a very similar scene functions to present how the tables have turned, and now, Mia is the one being admired by the coffee shop workers. In this scene, the first close-up of her heels (1:39:40), without revealing the identity of the person on which the camera is being focalised, introduces a powerful person, some seconds later revealing it to be Mia. A tracking camera shot follows her into the same studios' coffee shop but now she is the one being invited to coffee instead of working there as a barista. Not only has the attitude of the baristas towards her changed but also her own performance. Her physical appearance is now more sober, and her clothing is less colourful and denotes elegance and class. This process of maturation is present at every level. She has changed her vividly colourful and flowing skirts for a tighter dress that stresses her figure and associates her instantly with luxury while underlining her

grown-up essence. Her hair is upswept in a bun, giving her a polished, less casual, and classier look. The bright and naïve Mia has been replaced by Mia-the-star. Now, it is the camera that follows the character, she has become someone influential, and worth following.



Figures 3 and 4: parallelism between Mia's evolution in the film. On the left, Mia as a barista serving coffee to a recognised actress; on the right, Mia-the-star wearing classy clothes, and being served coffee.

Her body movement also reflects this change, as it not only conveys elegance but also confidence. Being a star has positioned her in a privileged place where her status has improved. Her smooth but confident walk, her straight body posture and raised chin, or how she takes off and, on her sunglasses, exemplify this change. The sunglasses distance her from the ordinary world. They function as a barrier emphasising the distance between her previous life and this one, as it is the first time, she is wearing them during the whole film. They also serve to replicate the scene where she is the barista mentioned before. Her facial expressions go along with her star personality. When she is leaving the coffee shop, the camera shows her facial expression of pride and self-confidence, conveyed by her self-complacent, and at the same time, nostalgic smile, and by a subtle sigh while putting on her sunglasses. In some way, she might take a nostalgic breath remembering that this

used to be her life, even if, despite this, she keeps her elevated vibe during the whole scene.

As seen in this analysis, *La La Land* shows two different personalities of Mia's character – the down-to-earth Mia, who is presented as flirtatious and cheery, and Mia-the-star, whose distance and elegant composure is one of her most meaningful traits. Mia's duality can be compared to Stone's star persona. Earlier in the analysis, I commented on how Stone projects an image of friendliness and "normalcy", probably to demystify the distant figure of the star and embody a fresh and updated one, adapted to current times and to the newer generations and the digital age. From the beginning of the film, Stone seems to fit in perfectly for the character, even if it was not firstly intended for her (Kaloï, 2021), but as Chazelle pointed out, she, along with Ryan Gosling, were the dream couple for starring in the director's film (Macdonald, 2016, para. 4). As the film progresses, the spectator sees a vulnerable Mia, failing and trying hard to succeed, like a real flesh and blood person. On the contrary, after the five-year lapse, Mia's character changes and distances herself from the contemporary "new star" persona to embody the classic Hollywood star. It is ironic how Stone's star persona's connotations seem to disappear as Mia's "alter-ego" arises. In the end, Stone's character not only detaches from the mundane world but also from her own previously established identity. This has to do with the conflict between Mia's fabricated star persona interfering with the performance of the real actress and her own identity, as Mia and Stone seem to have comparable personalities at the beginning. This reinforces the idea of the star as a construction, as Mia transforms herself when she enters Hollywood. In the film, this build-up personality can be easily noticed in the analysis of performance, but other aspects around star construction are visible, such as the publicity showing her face near Sebastian's jazz club (1:47:03). By presenting Mia-the-star as distant and, in a way,

difficult for the spectators to identify with, the film seems to question Mia's choice. Although presented as the "right" decision, it does not feel like that, as she gains a status but loses her closeness and connections. Mia seems to detach herself from her previous happy life when fulfilling her professional dreams.

Mia and Sebastian's relationship is crucial in this respect. The film presents their love as being incompatible with their professional dreams, and therefore Mia's choice to pursue her career is the "right" thing to do. Yet, the film questions this choice by providing a "what-could-have-been" ending sequence that grants the perfect homage to classic Hollywood when Mia-the-star enters, by chance, Sebastian's jazz club accompanied by her husband at the end of the film. When Sebastian sees her, he starts playing their song on the piano, and a montage offers an imaginary sequence that shows the couple together in an "alternative universe", reflecting what could have happened if they had chosen their love over their careers. The traditional happy ending of the musicals and of romantic comedies (Deleyto, 2009, 23) becomes real during this almost ten-minute-long montage (1:51:00–1:59:00), in which the main characters have a happy life together. This sequence provides a traditional happy ending, and therefore questions Mia's decision to put her career over her love for Sebastian. Full of references to previous musicals from the Golden era of Hollywood like *Singing in the Rain* (Gene Kelley, Stanley Donen, 1952), *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse 1969), or *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957), it serves as the perfect homage to the classic musical film. Despite having the perfect ten-minute alternative ending, the film strives to emphasize how success comes with risks, and the ending remains more contemporary and "realistic", disclosing that not all dreams can come true. Nonetheless, and despite attempting to be realistic, the ending is an allusion to the classical movie *Casablanca*, where its main couple cannot be together either. Although differently, Ilsa and Mia share their duty on following the "right" path.

*La La Land* seems to detach from the domestic role of woman in classical cinema, but also puts pressure on the female figure to succeed. As a result, it leaves the spectator wondering whether it was actually Mia's own decision and if it was worth it after all, as the public and – judging by the protagonists' final nostalgic glance – they included, were longing for a conventional happy ending.

Therefore, Mia's process of maturation in *La La Land* can be compared to the classical Hollywood view of stars, and consequently with Dyer's analysis of the aforesaid. Chazelle's film serves as a window to the world of Hollywood that distances from Stone's own star identity and, in general, from the contemporary approach to stardom by newly arising actors. Stone's performance before and after Mia's leap to stardom is symbolic and reveals Stone's own metafictional representation as the star. While Stone seeks to stress her average, girl-next-door persona despite having the privileges of a celebrity, Mia-the-star is completely the opposite, she embodies a consolidated classic star from Golden Hollywood, following the model of Ingrid Bergman, explicitly referenced in the film. The differences between these two personalities accentuate the evolution of the movie industry, which goes along with Mia's growth. This homage is not only perceived in Stone's performance but also its grand finale, brimming with references to iconic musicals like *Singing in the Rain*. In the end, *La La Land* serves as the renewal of the classical musical, bringing back Hollywood traits, including the God-like figure of the star, despite being far from Stone's star personality construction.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Emma Stone has demonstrated that, despite embodying a more youthful and naïve kind of star, is up to other consolidated actresses. Her identity, as seen, is a construction that works in her favor when performing different roles. Her new aura in Hollywood has served as a breath of fresh air creating a different conversation between spectators and

celebrities. Nevertheless, it still embodies some reminiscences from the grandeur of Hollywood's Golden era, like the established duo with Ryan Gosling, having been consolidated in three different films.

In *La La Land*, her role evolves, leaving behind the connection with her real-life star persona and acquiring a more Ingrid Bergman-type of classical Hollywood star. Her evolution not only hinders the traditional happy ending of the classical musical but also underscores the idea that her love life is incompatible with a professional position of power. Mia ends up being successful, but the film does not portray it as such in her love life. This incompatibility between her love life and her career shows how, in the film's discourse, women cannot have it all.

The fact that now women can increasingly access positions of power has opened new doors for them, considering their careers as important as, or even more than, love. This might reflect the changes in contemporary society and feminist movements by which women have tried to acquire the same rights as men, giving them the opportunity to succeed and wanting to detach from what once was seen as the only path to follow. It might not be Mia's case, but the truth is that she cannot "have it all". While the film seems to present itself as feminist by putting the lovers' career over their relationship, tradition seems to be present, as the alternative happy ending suggests. In the end, *La La Land* mixes past and present bringing back classical Hollywood nostalgia, which results in the blending of canons and ideology. Times have changed, and consequently, it is normal that the film scene has done so. Although reality might strike to tell the spectator that sometimes dreams do not entirely come true, we will always have the classical musical "alternative" ending to see life from an idyllic point of view.

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