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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**“Here’s to the fools who dream”: *La La Land* as a
Reinterpretation of the Classical Musical Genre.**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the influence of the classical American film musical on the film *La La Land* (2016) and the way the film both follows and challenges the conventions of the genre. This essay starts with a brief introduction to the main characteristics of the classical musicals as defined by Rick Altman in *The American Film Musical*, the primary critical source. First, the essay will focus on the film as a tribute to the classical period of Hollywood, analysing the conventions of classical musicals that are referenced throughout the movie, such as the formation of the couple. Secondly, it will explore the way the film adapts to a contemporary socio-historical moment by subverting the expectations brought about by the genre by means of the introduction of the concept of “confluent love,” which results in the eventual separation of the couple. As this essay will argue, *La La Land* is both a classical and a modern musical, given that it manages to blend the main elements of classical musicals into the context of our modern society.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado explora la influencia del musical clásico americano en la película *La La Land* (2016) y cómo dicha película se ajusta y cuestiona las convenciones de dicho género. Este ensayo comienza con una breve introducción a las principales características de los musicales clásicos tal y como los describe Rick Altman en su libro *The American Film Musical*. En primer lugar, el estudio se centrará en la película como tributo al cine clásico de Hollywood, analizando las convenciones del musical clásico a las que se hace referencia a lo largo de la película, como la formación de la pareja. En segundo lugar, explorará cómo la película se adapta a un momento socio-histórico contemporáneo al desafiar las expectativas creadas por el género a través de la introducción del concepto de “confluent love” que lleva a la separación de dicha pareja. Como argumentaré en el trabajo de fin de grado, *La La Land* es tanto un musical clásico como un musical moderno, puesto que consigue introducir los elementos principales de los musicales clásicos al contexto de nuestra sociedad moderna.

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1. Introduction

La La Land is a musical released in 2016, and written and directed by Damien Chazelle. The film, a critical and box-office success, was nominated in fourteen categories at the 2017 Academy Awards, winning in six of them. Chazelle received the Oscar for Best Director, which made him the youngest director to ever receive the award. A. O. Scott, writing for *The New York Times* describes the film as “a fizzy fantasy and a hard-headed fable, a romantic comedy and a showbiz melodrama, a work of sublime artifice and touching authenticity”.

La La Land is set in Los Angeles and tells the story of Mia Dolan (Emma Stone) and Sebastian Wilder (Ryan Gosling). Mia is an aspiring actress who works as a barista at a cafeteria. Sebastian is an ambitious musician who dreams of opening his own jazz club. After a couple of ‘chance encounters’ they fall in love. The film follows them through different stages in their relationship, which is inextricably woven with their professional dreams in a journey that will eventually lead them in different directions.

In his book, *The American Film Musical* (1987), Rick Altman traces the origins of the film musical to the European operetta. The genre became especially popular in Hollywood after the coming-of-sound and the 1940s and 1950s are usually considered the “Golden Age” of the genre. Altman explores the narrative structure of the genre and its main themes. He delves into the question of what defines a musical, its origins and its main characteristics. For Altman, one of the defining features of the classical film musical is that its plot is structured around the formation of a couple. As he puts it in a rather succinct way “no couple, no musical” (103). This feature is problematic in relation to *La La Land* since the two protagonists do not end up together. Mia and Sebastian become a couple in the course of the film but then they go separate ways.

This essay will analyse how *La La Land* both follows and challenges the conventions of classical American musicals. The analysis will read the film in the light of the conventions of the classical film musical as described by Rick Altman in his book *The American Film Musical*. Yet, as will be argued in the second part of the analysis, *La La Land* also deviates from the classical tradition in what is, for Altman, one of the genre's defining features: the formation of the couple. As will be argued, by privileging professional success over romantic love, the film abides not by the romantic love tradition of classical musical but by the view of love that Anthony Giddens has called "confluent love."

2. The Classical Hollywood Musical

For Altman, the American film musical was a natural outcome of the coming of sound to cinema in the late 1920s. As he argues, the first musicals focused on music that was professionally made, that is, played on stage or in concerts. By 1933, the focus of the genre was usually middle-class adolescent love and entertainment as a whole. This tendency continued until the 1940s, with the coming of the Second World War, musicals started to include folk motifs and emphasized nationalism. This period is usually considered the “golden age” of a genre that reached its peak in popularity in the 1950s (119-121). For Altman, classical Hollywood musicals can be divided into three types: fairy tale musicals, backstage musicals and folk musicals.

The fairy tale musical is the one that first reached audiences and, according to Altman, it “borrows from a long European tradition and American Operetta” (131). It is characterized by the creation of “a utopian world like that of the spectator’s dreams” (272). Many of these films are set in aristocratic Europe, which connects with its origins in the European tradition, and construct that location as an ideal time and society. For Altman, this type of musical draws “its appeal from a more or less overt display of sexual desire” (141), which is both masked and expressed by means of dance. An example of the fairy tale musical is *Top Hat* (Sandrich, 1935) a film with one of the most popular star couples, if not the most popular, in American musicals: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The film follows the approach of sex as a battle: throughout the film they are constantly in conflict but they are brought together by dance.

The main plot of the show musical or backstage musical revolves around the process of putting on a show, whether it is a play, a film or a concert. Through this process the couple of the musical is brought together and when the show is completed,

so is the formation of the couple. An example of this type of musical is *Singin' in the Rain*, which stars Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor and was directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen in 1952. It deals with the lives of actors and people in the film industry at the time of the transition to sound. The production problems and final success of the diegetic film *The Dancing Cavalier* mirror the evolution and final reunion of the protagonist couple.

Altman's third category is the folk musical, which tends to glorify the past as an ideal society and "projects the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past" (272). One of the main characteristics of the folk musical is the emphasis on the community and the family: "the unity of generations is as important as the unity of the couple" (274). In contrast with the previous types of musical, folk musicals include group dancing to highlight the importance of the community. An example of this type of musical is *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Donen, 1954). Milly (Jane Powell) has just married into a big family and has to help her new husband's six brothers to find a perfect suitor to marry. The first time that the brothers court the girls there is a seven-minute musical number. It is this group dancing that first signals that they are going to be a family: the brothers and the eventual brides stand out from the rest of the town with their bright coloured clothes.

As can be seen in Altman's description of the three types of musicals, one of the basic features of the genre is that it is always structured around the formation of the heterosexual couple. He defines the basic structure of the genre as a "dual-focused one." Unlike traditional narratives, where we usually expect a cause-and-effect motivation, musicals rely on parallelisms to move the plot forward (19). If a member of the couple is shown, the other has to be shown in the next scenes in order to associate one with the other. According to Altman, the structure of the musical derives from character, not

plot. When the couple reunites and they solve the differences between the sets of values they represent, the film ends.

The male-female duality provided by the heterosexual couple is reinforced by a secondary dichotomy that can be conveyed through setting, shot selection, music, dance and personal style, among others (33). Through setting, men and women are identified with either similar spaces (to highlight the traits they share) or completely different spaces (to show how they complement each other). The music is one of the most important aspects of musicals and “the duet is the musical’s centre of gravity” (37). The duet is a performance in which the male-female relationship is emphasized as the couple sings together. It is used in intense climatic moments because it shows the emotions of the protagonists, their differences and what they have in common. The solo is also a key element for the dual-focus structure. A solo is a performance by one of the protagonists in which they show their emotions through song. If a member of the couple sings a solo, the other has to do the same in order to create balance.

Through these resources, the musical conveys sexual duality, but also a secondary thematic duality. Generally, each sex is identified with a particular attitude and lifestyle, presenting “diametrically opposed values or system of values” (145). The sets of values vary from film to film. In some cases one member of the couple is associated with the “work ethic and its values” and the other side is associated with “activities and qualities traditionally identified with entertainment” (49). In *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965), for example, the two members of the couple are initially shown as opposites. Capitan Georg Ludwig von Trapp (Christopher Plummer) is strict, serious and reluctant to show any emotions. Maria (Julie Andrews) is the opposite: spontaneous, joyful and open to emotions. Yet, as musicals tend to point out, both sets of values are necessary: the couple must reconcile their qualities and combine them.

This development is conveyed by the gradual change of the protagonists, showing the influence each has on the other. The resolution of the plot assures the success of the couple but it also ensures the merging of cultural values by means of marriage or, at least, the promise that the couple will stay together.

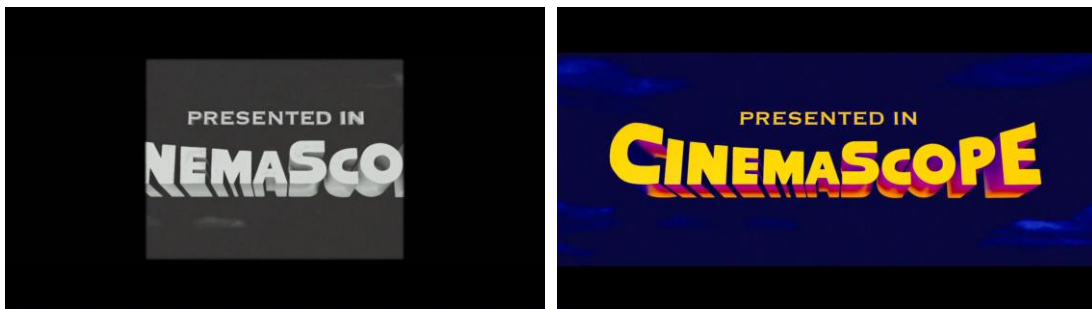
Another important feature of the Hollywood musical for Altman is the way in which it blends two distinct worlds: the fantastic world of music and dance and the real (diegetic) world. As a way to make this transition as smooth as possible there are some resources that the genre uses, such as the audio dissolve. The two worlds are represented by two different sound tracks: the diegetic track represents reality and the music track represents the “romantic realm” (63). In the musical there is a constant merging of the two, something that does not happen in other genres. The audio dissolve is the transition between the diegetic track of the movie and the music track. In a musical, the scene has to change from a “real” (diegetic) interaction to a singing or dancing performance in a way that is natural and organic. The audio dissolve is a key technique for the musical because the blending of sound tracks has to go mainly unnoticed in order to achieve that perfect blending of reality and fantasy.

In this essay I am going to analyse how *La La Land* uses most of the features that Altman finds in classical musicals. The film is unapologetically influenced by classical Hollywood history and classical musicals, as can be seen in the plot, the music and the techniques that are used. Yet, as this essay will argue, the film also departs consciously from the classical model in some aspects.

3. *La La Land*

3.1. *La La Land* as a classical musical

La La Land is a self-referential movie from the very beginning. The black-and-white classical aspect (1.33:1) ratio image that opens the film stretches out until it becomes widescreen (2.55:1), showing the words “Presented in CinemaScope” in bright colours (Fig. 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2: The screen stretching to 2.55:1 aspect ratio

CinemaScope is an anamorphic lens created in 1953 that allowed to film in an aspect ratio of up to 2.66:1. It is a reference to a specific moment in movie history, a change that made films “wider” and, as a result, more spectacular. This is only the first of many references to classical cinema, given that the whole film is filled with intertextuality; and many critics referred to it as a tribute to classical Hollywood. According to Mark Kermode from *The Guardian*, *La La Land*’s beginning is an invitation “to welcome the return of something lost, the revival of a golden age.” In fact, *La La Land* was shot on celluloid with a 35 mm lens. Linus Sandgren, director of photography of the movie, said they chose this option because “digital cameras capture reality so well that it becomes difficult to make a movie look “magical” during editing.” *La La Land* makes reference to classical cinema not only by using some analogical techniques, such as celluloid and the reference to CinemaScope, but also by making allusion to specific films and iconic scenes. Mia herself is a huge fan of the classics, she

mentions films such as *Notorious* (Hitchcock, 1946) and *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), and has a wall-sized poster of the iconic actress Ingrid Bergman.

Once the film screen has widened, the film proper starts with an image of what is usually considered the typical L.A. sky: it is light blue, the sun is shining and there is not a single cloud in sight. As the camera tilts down, it reveals another typical L.A. sight: a traffic jam on the freeway. The camera tracks to the right showing some of the cars while notes from the different types of music played in each car can be heard on the soundtrack. The camera gets closer to a green car in which the driver, a girl in a yellow dress, is humming the first notes of the song “Another Day of Sun”. She gets out of her car and sings about first love, cinema (“a Technicolor world made out of music and machine”), and her dreams of becoming an actress. Several drivers get off their cars and join the girl as she walks along the freeway and towards the camera. As the girl turns round, so does the camera (but in the opposite direction) and the communal dance number starts. This opening number can be connected to the folk musical in that it shows a group of people with a goal in common. However, the performers are unnamed and none of them is seen again during the movie. In this sense, the number is a reference to the anonymity of the city of Los Angeles, where many people strive for a life of success in the show business industry and only a few are able to make it. In a way, the number also seems to be foreshadowing the plot of the movie: the first woman to sing wants to be an actress and loves the classics and the second is a man who wants to be a musician and tries everything to achieve his goal. These two can be easily connected to Mia and Sebastian respectively. The sequence is highly choreographed and acts as an example of how musicals blend the real world with the realm of fantasy. The audio dissolve is barely noticeable and takes spectators straight into the fantasy world.



Figure 3: Ending of the “Another Day of Sun” number

This fantasy world builds up slowly. The first people to appear are wearing everyday clothes and their moves are not too complicated. But as the music continues and more and more people join in, it becomes more and more extravagant. The scene finishes with all the people dancing in unison on top of the cars (Fig. 3). The opening musical number is the only moment in the film in which there is the sense of community and communal feeling typical of the folk musical. The scene is shot as if it was a long take, a framing technique that was also widely used in musical numbers in classical cinema, but in this case it is not a real long take but a series of shots arranged together to create the impression of a long take (even if the movie was shot in celluloid, it was edited digitally). The first of these (invisible) cuts happens as the singer spins, a movement that the camera replicates in the opposite direction. It is as if the camera was part of the musical number, integrated in the choreography. The film is using modern techniques and technology to implement the ideals and the tradition of the classical musicals. For the rest of the movie there is a lack of community and the film is more concerned with the individual achievement of one’s goals.

La La Land complies with Altman’s idea of the formation of the couple, at least for the first part of the movie. The film is structured in four different parts, one for each season. The passing of the seasons in the film functions as an ironic remark on the fact

that the weather does not change much in Los Angeles. Every time the title announces the change of season, it is a sunny and cloudless day: “another day of sun.” The weather may not change much but each season shows a different stage in the relationship of the couple.

The movie starts in winter. Mia and Sebastian “meet” at the traffic jam that opens the film and do not get along at first. That first “meet-cute” ends with Sebastian honking his car’s horn at Mia, a gesture that later on becomes a recurrent joke in their relationship. The second time they meet is at a restaurant, but it is just after Sebastian has been fired, so he barely notices her and pushes her out of his way.

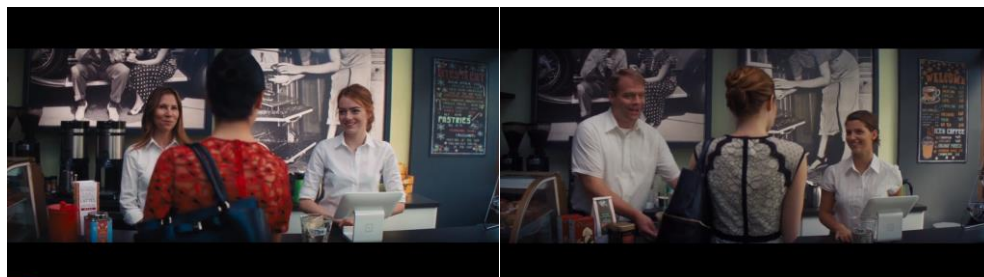
Mia and Sebastian meet again at a party, which starts the “spring” season in the film. After the party they dance together in the musical number “Lovely Night”. Neither of them wants to recognize that they feel attracted towards the other and they playfully ignore that attraction. Mia and Sebastian’s first date is at the cinema where they watch *Rebel without a Cause* (Ray, 1955). The movie is interrupted because the celluloid filmstrip burns, which is one of the different ways in which the film suggests that the old has to be upgraded, has to evolve. After the movie, they go to the Griffiths Observatory, a location that they have just seen in *Rebel without a Cause*. At the planetarium there is another musical number in which the audio dissolve takes them from the “real” to the fantasy world in an organic way, just like in classical musicals. The camera movements become once again part of the performance as the camera dances with them, tilting up and down and following them around the planetarium. It is in this fantasy world that their relationship starts. When they kiss there is a triumphal note on the soundtrack and the camera quickly zooms in on their faces. According to Altman, the objective of a musical has been achieved: the couple has been formed. The scene finishes with an iris, an editing technique that also takes spectators back in the

history of cinema, in particular to silent cinema since it was a typical way to end a scene at the time. Yet, in this contemporary musical, this is not the culmination of Mia and Sebastian's relationship.



Figure 4: Mia and Sebastian's first kiss

When their relationship becomes official, there is a change to the next season: summer. We follow Mia and Sebastian through the early stages of their relationship, when everything is going according to plan. When the couple starts to have problems with their relationship the seasons change again, and now it is fall. In this season, colours are duller and the film starts to deviate from Altman's pattern for the genre. The change back towards winter happens five years later, with Mia back at the studios, but she is not with Sebastian anymore. This closes the circle, going back to the beginning; the scene even mirrors one of the first scenes of the movie, only now Mia is the movie star and not the barista (Fig. 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6: Mia as an aspiring actress (left) and as a famous actress (right)

As is the case in classical musicals, music and songs have a crucial role in the relationship between Mia and Sebastian. There are two duets in the film: “Lovely Night” and “City of Stars”. In the first duet they keep denying their feelings for each other, even if the musical number shows their attraction and compatibility as a romantic couple. The number is filled with intertextual references. When Sebastian starts to sing, he twirls around a lamp post just as Gene Kelly’s character does in the movie *Singin’ in the Rain*. The scene is also a reference to the scene “Isn’t This a Lovely Day (to Be Caught in the Rain)” from *Top Hat*. In this scene Fred Astaire starts to dance, only to be joined quickly after by Ginger Rogers as she imitates him. This is also what happens in *La La Land*: the dance quickly becomes a game in which one makes up a move and the other copies it. It becomes almost a competition in which each tries to predict what the other is going to do. Even though their dancing is not as intricate and perfect as Roger and Astaire’s, it still manages to convey the level of intimacy between them. With this scene the audience can clearly see how romance is starting to appear between the two.

The duet “City of stars” is the second version of Sebastian’s solo of the same title and the emotional climax in Mia and Sebastian’s relationship. Sebastian is playing the piano and, as he starts to sing, the camera gets closer to Mia until she is shown in a close-up. The lyrics have changed from the first version, which was only sung by Sebastian, and the song becomes hopeful as Mia sings about “our dreams, they’ve finally come true”. At this point of the movie, their dreams have transformed. They include not just professional success but also love, which seems to match Altman’s description of the structure of classical musicals. They take turns to sing, just like in any other duet, until they join their voices in the chorus. In the song they promise to be there for each other forever and say they do not care about the future as long as they are

together. Yet, as the remainder of the film shows, this is not what the future holds for them.

Music connects Mia and Sebastian but it also serves to separate them. When Sebastian joins a successful band, we see him on stage playing the song “Start a fire”. At the beginning of the song a beam of light illuminates Sebastian on stage and another illuminates Mia in the audience, connecting them even though they are far from each other. Yet, as the song is being played, this connection starts to fade. Their success will lead them apart as can be seen when Mia is pushed back by the fans of the band until the view of each other is blocked. Their separation is also highlighted with the use of colour: Sebastian is illuminated with reddish tones and Mia with colder blue tones (Fig. 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8: Sebastian (left) and Mia (right) at the concert during “Start a Fire”

Silence is also meaningful between the two of them: when there is lack of music, there is something wrong. This can be clearly seen in the argument they have at dinner. The scene is set in the same way as the “City of Stars” duet which is establishing a contrast between both moments, one is the peak romantic climax of the relationship and the other is the ending. As tension starts building up, music continues playing in the background until the fight reaches its climax and then it stops abruptly. The silence is very long and leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable until it is broken by the fire alarm, which makes it even clearer, their relationship is doomed. Thus, when the music

is absent, it signals the appearance of conflict and separation. This separation is one of the main things what makes the film deviate from classical film musicals as I am going to analyse in the next part of the essay.

3.2. *La La Land* departing from the classical model

Even though *La La Land* showcases many of the traits that defined classical musicals, there is a quintessential aspect that it does not follow: the couple does not end together. According to Altman, the couple is what makes the musical a musical, two people that fall in love and are able to accomplish their dreams together. But, in *La La Land*, Mia and Sebastian separate in order to fulfil those dreams. Their professional careers prevail over romantic love.

This separation is hinted at the beginning of the film in the way the couple is presented. Right after the traffic jam dance number, Sebastian is shown in his 1982 Buick Riviera convertible. He is listening to a jazz recording he does not seem to be too happy with. In front of him, in a white Toyota Prius, we see Mia. She seems to be talking on the phone but she is actually rehearsing for an audition. When the cars start moving again, Mia is too involved in her script and Sebastian honks at her. We see Sebastian in Mia's rear view mirror in a point-of-view shot, he overtakes her (still honking) and she gives him the finger. From this moment on the film follows Mia. We see her at her job, at several auditions, at home with her friends and at a party that ends badly for her because her car has been towed away. As she walks back home, she becomes mesmerized by the jazz tune that comes out of a restaurant. She enters and a medium shot of Mia, in her blue dress, takes us back to the traffic jam scene when Sebastian is loudly honking at her. This is the transition between both storylines: the film goes back to the traffic jam but this time, the day is told through Sebastian's perspective. We see him at his apartment, talking to his sister. He goes to the restaurant where he works and starts playing lively Christmas songs on the piano until he changes to a jazz tune. This is the mesmerizing tune that Mia heard from the outside. Yet, this second encounter does not go any better than the first one. Sebastian has just been fired

for not playing the songs on the set-list and when Mia goes to talk to him, he just walks past her. In this way, both characters are presented as individuals, and we get to know their own interests and aspirations. These parallel stories connect them through the musical's dual-focus narrative structure, but it is also foreshadowing the fact that they had separate lives before and they will have separate lives again in the future.

Classical musicals tend to abide by the conventions of romantic love, an ideology regarding intimacy that has marked relationships in our society for centuries. The sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) describes romantic love as a type of love tied with marriage that drew on the moral values of Christianity and also incorporated “elements of *amour passion*” (39). One of the defining features of romantic love was its everlasting quality. However, according to Giddens romantic love has been replaced by a type of love he refers to as confluent love. Confluent love “is active, contingent love” (61) and so, it no longer relies in the idea of “forever”. Now it is not the “special person” that is relevant but the “special relationship” and that is what couples strive for (62).

In *La La Land*, confluent love is the basis of Mia and Sebastian's relationship. They both have complete respect for the other and their professional aspirations, they constantly support each other and that is also what eventually separates them. One of the most problematic issues they have is that Mia feels that Sebastian is abandoning his dream of opening a Jazz club and settling for something different. They realize that relationships are not ideal and that love does not have to be never-ending. When they part ways in the same place they started their relationship it is a hopeful farewell, they know that they will always love each other but they cannot continue the relationship because they are going to be pursuing their dreams.

The idea of individualism is very clear in the sense of personal fulfilment the movie seems to defend. The individual is privileged over the couple and even over the whole community. Therefore, the professional career is a very important aspect for each of the protagonists and it is reflected in the music. According to Rick Altman, the solos are used to connect the couple in the classical musicals but in *La La Land* they work differently. These songs can be interpreted in different ways and this ambivalence is in relation to the conflict between romantic love and professional aspirations.



Figure 9: Mia stares in the mirror during “Someone in the Crowd”

Mia’s first solo is part of the musical number “Someone in the crowd” that starts as a group performance in which her friends try to convince her to go to a party after a failed audition. The song can be about finding that “someone” to love, finding a partner; but it can also be interpreted as finding that “someone” who is going to launch your career. When Mia is alone in the bathroom everything slows down and the song becomes more personal as she looks in the mirror and asks herself: “Is someone in the crowd the only thing you really see?” (Fig. 9). She begins a quest to find who she is; she does not want to be only someone in the crowd, but a defined individual distinct from the rest. She also changes the lyrics from “someone” to “somewhere” as she says “somewhere there’s a place where I find who I’m gonna be” showing that a place is going to be essential for the formation of her identity, a place where she will get to

know herself. There are two places that are fundamental for her career: Los Angeles, where she experienced the struggles and failures of many artists as well as love; and Paris, where she will finally achieve her dream of becoming an actress.

Sebastian's solo comes a little later in the movie, in the first version of "City of Stars". It could be interpreted as a song in which Sebastian wonders about Mia, and if their connection will be the start of a relationship. But it could also be interpreted as another struggling artist wondering about his future. He sings about Los Angeles; he sees the city as a place of opportunities in which he can achieve anything he wants. Even if it is filled with people with the same dreams, he wonders if it is "shinning just for (him)", if he will be the one to be successful. But the song ends in a sad note, as he is sceptic about the relationship or his future as an artist saying it is "one more dream that I cannot make true".

Mia's true solo is "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)" and it is a crucial moment for Mia's career, her breakout moment. Right before the audition she had gone back to her parent's house, thinking that maybe she was "not good enough" but Sebastian convinces her to try once more. At the audition she draws inspiration from her aunt, the woman that inspired her to become an actress. In the song there are parallelisms between her and her aunt, they both wanted to be successful actresses but most importantly, they are connected through Paris. This is the city where Mia goes when she gets the part and the city where her aunt was happy.

This musical number is just the opposite from the ones analysed before, such as "Another Day of Sun" or "Someone in the Crowd". This is a clear example of how the transition has been made to a more realistic world. In the early musical numbers, the audio dissolve took characters and spectators straight into the fantasy world. "Audition"

is a quiet number in which there is only Mia in the shot since the rest of the room practically disappears in shadow as she is telling her aunt's story. The song is about those "fools" that try to make their dreams come true, even if it is "foolish". It illustrates the struggles that many have to face in order to achieve their dreams, especially in the show business. She is equating dreamers with rebels, those who go out of their comfort zone in order to fight for what they want. She stresses the importance of these people and the impact they have on those who surround them. She clearly conveys her ideology in the song, she considers her professional ambitions to be more important than romantic relationships. She wants to celebrate those who follow their dreams no matter the consequences; even if hearts "ache" and then "break", thus, following the concept of confluent love. The separation of the couple is worth if it means that you will achieve your goal (even if it is only for a moment).

For her, that moment of blissful happiness her aunt had in Paris is much more important than the failures in her life, she acknowledges that the pressure can be too much to bear, but she still wants to dream. Her aunt "captured a feeling, a sky with no ceiling", a moment in which the possibilities were endless. Mia is pushing every "foolish dreamer" to keep doing what they are doing because it is worth it, in spite of the failed attempts. She says her aunt was "smiling through it" and "said she'd do it again", and Mia abides by her aunt's philosophy. The song finishes with the word "again," which suggests the idea of repetition. And she is about to do it herself, following in the steps of her aunt.

Even though this prevalence of the professional career over romantic love is one of the main themes of the movie, the fact that the couple does not end together is rather disappointing for the audience. In order to leave the spectator satisfied, the film tries to trick them with a twist in the last scene: the epilogue. When Mia and Sebastian see each

other again at Sebastian's Jazz Club we see that the "romantic connection" has not vanished. Sebastian starts to play the piano. They are linked through the music again but also visually, the camera starts to get closer to both of them as the rest of the room disappears and a beam of light illuminates them, isolating them from the rest. As Mia watches Sebastian play, the scene seamlessly transitions to the past and they are back at the restaurant where they first met. But this time, Sebastian kisses her instead of ignoring her. This is the start of a nine-minute sequence of which the only purpose is to make the audience have a sense of fulfilment: it shows what their relationship could have been. Everything that has happened throughout the movie is re-enacted but slightly changed, Sebastian rejects Keith the moment he approaches him with his offer, Mia's play is a complete success and Sebastian is there to see it.

Throughout the sequence all the musical motives of the film are interwoven with the imagery, re-telling the story. They enter the world of fantasy, bringing back all the colour and spectacle from the first part of the film. It is once again filled with references to classical musicals but also to *La La Land* itself. It is a musical number that happens entirely in the fantasy world, and it is told through the art of the world of spectacle: the sets, painted backgrounds, the stage and even a light show. It shows how their life together would have been in Paris, with references to classical films like *Funny Face* (Donen, 1957) or *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951) (Fig. 10 and 11).



Figure 10: Parallels with *Singin' in the Rain*



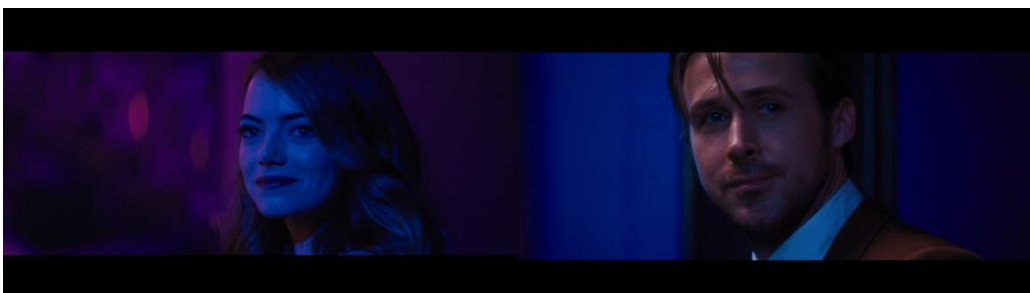
Figure 11: Parallels with *Funny Face*

When the melody of their duet starts to play, they sit to watch a home movie that shows how their life as a family would have been. This is connecting this fantasy with cinema: the life they could have lived is not real, just an illusion. The last scene of the epilogue shows Mia and Sebastian as they leave their house and follow the same path that Mia and her husband have taken to get to Seb's. The epilogue begins and ends with scenes that actually happened in the 'real world' thus connecting the fantasy with their reality.

This type of interlude is common in musicals but there is a difference: interludes in classical films are not placed at the ending like in *La La Land* and they are used as a summary of the film. For example, in the musical *On the Town* (Leonard Bernstein and Roger Edens, 1949), Gabey (Gene Kelly) is a marine that becomes infatuated with a picture of Ivy Smith (Vera-Ellen) and tries to find her all over New York with two of his friends and their respective partners. The interlude is placed right after the couple has been separated; it is part of Gabey's imagination as he remembers the three times that he has encountered Ivy and how he has fallen in love with her. The interlude is only a re-interpretation of the events of the day in the form of dancing, as if it were a stage performance. In *La La Land*, however, the interlude is an alternative ending for the movie, changing the events in the lives of Mia and Sebastian with the sole purpose of

cheating the audience into believing that the ending is fulfilling their expectations. This is due to the cognitive process called “recency effect” which indicates that the information that is introduced later in the narrative is better remembered and more influential to the audience (Baumeister and Vohs, 728). Since the interlude in which the couple end up together is placed at the very end of the film, its weight is enhanced in contrast to the actual resolution of the film. In the actual ending, Mia and Sebastian have remade their lives without each other because they decided to prioritize their careers over their relationship, but the what-if epilogue creates an illusion that spectators tend to remember better, the ending they expected to see: a “happy ending”.

When Mia leaves the club with her husband she stops at the door and looks back. They look at each other fondly and smile (Fig. 12 and 13). They are separating again but they are content. This goes back to the idea of confluent love, they know that they still love each other. They know what they had and what could have been if they had stayed together. But they are happy with what they have achieved nonetheless, each one has their own path and they accept that. And so, this is also a happy ending.



Figures 12 and 13: Mia and Sebastian smile at each other

4. Conclusion

This essay has analysed how the conventions of classical American musicals are used in *La La Land* and how the film challenges them in order to adapt them to our contemporary socio-historical moment. In order to contextualize the analysis, I have summarized the conventions of classical musicals as described by Rick Altman in his book *The American Film Musical*. The essay is structured in two different parts depending on the film's relation to classical musicals.

The first part of the essay has shown the way in which *La La Land* follows different conventions of the classical American film musical. The use of these conventions, such as the formation of the couple, and technology like CinemaScope, gives the film the atmosphere and the impression of classical musicals; taking the audience back to a completely different period in film. The film sees itself as a tribute to the classical period of Hollywood but it also wants to separate itself from that period and the ideology that it portrayed when it comes to the formation of the couple. This is the focus of the second part of the analysis, in which I have argued how *La La Land* adapts some of the conventions of the genre to its socio-historical moment. The ending is what differentiates the film from many other musicals and it leaves the audience confused, not knowing exactly how to feel. As has been argued, the film abides by Giddens's idea of confluent love, a type of love that does away with the forever of romantic love. The film is updating the plot to a contemporary context, in which Mia's and Sebastian's careers are more important than their relationship. As has been analysed, this concept of confluent love leaves the way open for the development of individualism and the push for self-improvement which results in the eventual separation of the couple.

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