



## La La Land: A Film Studies Set Text

The aims of this Factsheet are:

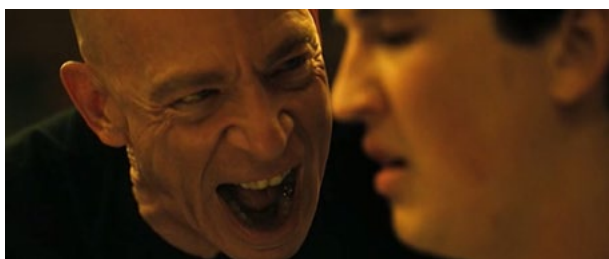
- Introduce some key features of the new A-Level Film Studies specifications,
- Provide an insight into a key set text for Film Studies, La La Land,
- Approach the film using the concepts of Film Form, Ideology and Context.

**Damien Chazelle's 2016 film La La Land is a set text for EDUQAS Film Studies**

<https://d35fkdjhgt99.cloudfront.net/static/use-media-items/48/47382/full-1382x2048/587a5198/1.jpeg?resolution=0>

La La Land (Chazelle, 2016) is a musical set in present day Los Angeles and follows the story of a young couple, Mia (Emma Stone) and Seb (Ryan Gosling) who both dream of becoming successful in their chosen fields. Mia wants to be an actress and is working at a coffee shop on the Warner Brothers backlot to support herself while she auditions for a range of roles and waits for her big break. Seb is an aspiring pianist who yearns to open his own jazz club where great musicians can jam and keep the flame of jazz alive. After a shaky start, they fall in love and help each other strive for their dreams. At the time of writing, the film had already won 5 BAFTA awards (including best film and best actress) and 6 Oscars (including best director, best actress and best cinematography).

From September 2017, Film and Media A-Level courses will change, and the texts you study will no longer be a matter of free choice. Each syllabus will contain a limited number of set texts that you will be assessed on. It is likely that your teachers will select the texts that your class will study and they will make the choice from a list of films set by the exam board. La La Land is a set text for the Eduqas (WJEC) A-level specification, but the director's work can also be found on the OCR Film Studies A-level, which features his film Whiplash (Chazelle, 2015) as a set text. The study of film as a distinct medium is no longer permitted within Media Studies courses so you will only be able to study film as part of an A-level Film Studies course.



**Damien Chazelle's 2015 film Whiplash is a set text for OCR Film Studies.**

<http://www.fletcherquote.com/vlcsnap-2015-01-17-14h18m26s140.png>



### Approaching the Exam

In each exam, you will be required to apply specific approaches to different films. Your teacher will be able to tell you which approaches are relevant to the different films you are studying at your school or college. If you are studying La La Land or Whiplash, these are the areas you could be asked about in the exam:

La La Land (Eduqas A-level)

- Key Elements of Film Form,
- Meaning and Response,
- The Contexts of Film,
- Spectatorship,
- Ideology.

Whiplash (OCR A-level)

- Ideology,
- Conflict as a Theme,
- This film is part of a synoptic section which means that questions could cover any area of the syllabus.

### La La Land: Elements of Film Form

The use of camera in the film is notable for the expressive use of movement, with the camera moving and swirling around the actors for much of the film. Many of the set piece song and dance numbers are filmed using long, unbroken takes which capture the authenticity of the performance, rather than breaking it up and building it using editing. Most strikingly, this technique is used in the opening song "Another Day of Sun", in which people climb out of their cars and perform a song and dance number while stuck in traffic on the freeway. The whole sequence is carefully choreographed with the actors' performances having to seamlessly co-ordinate with the camera movement in an unbroken take lasting several minutes.

The mise-en-scène in this sequence makes striking use of colour with all the characters wearing brightly coloured shirts which convey a sense of happiness and optimism, despite that fact that they are all stuck in traffic. Later in the film, Mia and her flatmates head out to a party with each of them dressed in a bright coloured dress, as if they are characters in a musical rather than real people. In contrast to these fantasy elements, many of the numbers are shot at real locations rather than studio sets which lends a sense of realism to the film which is not common in musicals.



**Bright, primary colours are a key part of the mise-en-scène in the opening number (left) and in the costumes of Mia and her friends (right).**

<http://thenewswheel.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/La-La-Land-film-movie-cars-Lionsgate-2016-scene-dance-760x315.jpg>  
<http://cdn-img.instyle.com/sites/default/files/styles/684xflex/public/1481148953/120716-la-la-land-review-5.jpg?itok=xRCGJI5Y>

As you would expect, sound is a key element of the impact in La La Land. In keeping with the conventions of the musical, characters are prone to break into song at any point, particularly when wanting to express their inner feelings. When asked to tell a story at an audition, Mia, instead, sings a song (Audition (The Fools Who Dream)) while she and her friends break into song as they prepare for, and head out to a party (Someone in the Crowd). Sound is used expressively at times in the film to link the two characters. For example, when Mia first sees Seb in the restaurant where he is playing Christmas carols, the noise of a car horn builds on the soundtrack until it becomes overwhelming, perhaps to illustrate the love at first sight Mia is feeling, and then in a smash cut we are back with Seb on the freeway for a flashback of their first interaction in the traffic jam.

Performance is an aspect of film form that you will need to be able to comment on in the new syllabus. Emma Stone was awarded with the Oscar for her role in the film and she gives a stunning performance. In particular, look at the audition sequences where she is required to give some emotional performances in medium close-up. Her performance is made more complex by the fact that she is acting in the role of someone acting in a role for an audition. Her auditions are often sabotaged by insensitive casting directors, including one where her audition is interrupted by somebody ordering lunch, an incident that Stone claims happened to her in reality.

### Activity

Watch the opening sequence of the Jacques Demy film 'Les Demoiselles de Rochfort' on Youtube. What similarities/differences can you identify between this sequence and the opening scene of La La Land in terms of the use of film form (camera, editing, mise-en-scène, performance).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hvjhyL04c4>

**Exam Tip:** Whether you are studying La La Land or another film, make sure that you know at least two sequences from the film in detail to allow you to use them to answer an exam question on the use of film form.

### Contexts

When placing a film in context, you should be considering what influence social, political, economic, and technological factors had on the making of the film, as well as its production context.

### Production Context

In terms of its production context, it is a good starting point to view La La Land as the product of an auteur director, Damien Chazelle. Although he has only completed 3 features as a director, Chazelle is already developing an auteur signature. All his films have been strongly connected to music, two being outright musicals and the third, Whiplash, a semi-autobiographical tale of a young drummer pushed to the limits by a demanding teacher. There are already a number of actors that could be said to feature regularly in his work, such as JK Simmons who appears in Whiplash and La La Land. The lead actor from Whiplash, Miles Teller, was also cast as Seb in La La Land before, apparently, dropping out after a disagreement about his fee.

**Real locations, such as the Hermosa Beach Pier, give the film a sense of realism often lacking in musicals.**



<https://static.standard.co.uk/s3fs-public/thumbnails/image/2017/01/13/10/la-la-land-london.jpg>

It can also be seen as an example of the musical genre and it makes use of a number of conventions, the most obvious being that characters are liable to break into song at key moments in the narrative. It also features a large-scale song and dance sequence at the very start which features dozens of performers in a co-ordinated routine. It is, however, very unlike big numbers from classic film musicals, in that it has been shot on location on a freeway, and the film makes use of new digital filming technology to stage a number of sequences on locations, rather than in the studio, which is the more natural place to shoot musical numbers. The fact that the film does not feature more numbers on this scale is perhaps down to its relatively modest budget, estimated at around \$30m. Other conventions include a narrative built around eager young performers trying to make it big in the industry and an extended expressionistic, fantasy dance sequence – both of which appear to owe much to films such as Singin' in the Rain.

### Social Context

La La Land contains a couple of moments which acknowledge the way that Hollywood has become a town where people are paranoid about their health. A customer in the coffee shop where Mia works returns a pastry after realising that it isn't gluten free in what seems to be a sly dig at stars like Gwyneth Paltrow who run profitable side-lines in publishing healthy lifestyle books. Later, attempting to leave a party, Mia asks Seb to fetch her keys. When he asks what they look like, she replies that it's a Prius. He looks down at the key box and sees rows of Toyota logos – it seems that everyone at the party has one of the environmentally conscious hybrid eclectic cars. While waiting for her keys, Mia looks bored as she listens to a studio executive tell her about how they might try and create a film franchise out of The Three Bears. In a sly dig at the way Hollywood is often accused of ruining the properties it buys, he floats the idea of "adding a fourth bear". Despite the nods to Hollywood's past, the film is very much a product of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Cultural Context

Cultural factors are also a context to be considered and the film has a significant Postmodern streak. Although it appears to be set in the present day, the film contains a number of anachronisms which make it less straightforward to date the setting. At a pool party, Seb is humiliated to be discovered by Mia playing in an 80s covers band. This nostalgia for the 80s seems to reliably suggest that the film is set in the present, as does the modern Prius car that Mia drives.

However, while walking with Seb through the Warner backlot during a break, the pair walk past a number of scenes being filmed and extras

dressed as Roman legionaries are visible walking past the coffee shop, which suggests that film production is going on there, in a way that we would normally associate with the heyday of the studio system. In addition, the pair go on a date to the historic Rialto cinema in Pasadena which has been closed for nearly a decade and ride a funicular railway that stopped working in 2013. These seem to suggest that the film is set in an imagined, fantasy of Los Angeles (“La La Land!”) rather than the real thing, and hints at dissatisfaction with the fact that “they don’t make ‘em like that anymore”. In this way, we can consider the film to be, to an extent, a postmodern musical which uses pastiche and bricolage to piece together elements of different historical periods to create something new. The film also draws on the history of Hollywood, making Postmodern references to *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Casablanca* as well as consciously setting a whole sequence at a location from *Rebel Without a Cause*. References to classic movies like *Singin’ in the Rain* are sprinkled through *La La Land*:



[http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/blogs/browbeat/2016/12/12/la\\_la\\_land\\_comparison-images/161212\\_BB\\_lamp-post.jpg.CROP.promo-xlarge2.jpg](http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/blogs/browbeat/2016/12/12/la_la_land_comparison-images/161212_BB_lamp-post.jpg.CROP.promo-xlarge2.jpg)

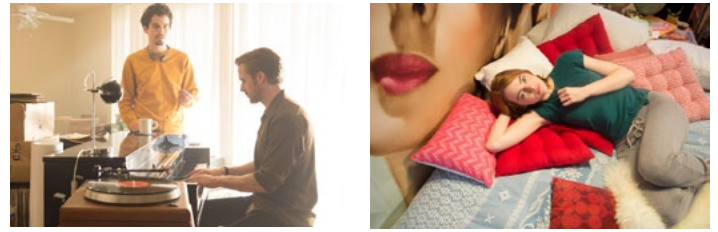
### Ideology

Genre films generally make use of binary oppositions to convey ideology – ideas about how the world is, or should be. Complex social problems are often reduced to simplistic opposites, one of which tends to triumph at the end of the narrative. As a musical, *La La Land* doesn’t offer goodies and baddies in a fight between good and evil, but there are some oppositions built into the film that suggest ideological positions.

### Sparsity vs. Opulence

Mise-en-scène is used early in the film to invite a contrast between Mia and Seb, through the furnishing of their respective apartments. Mia’s home is packed with fabulous furniture, pictures, plants, cushions and curtains making it a vibrant, summery, fantastical space. Meanwhile, Seb’s apartment is sparsely furnished with bare walls, functional furniture and boxes that he hasn’t unpacked since moving in. His sister chastises him for not unpacking, but he replies that he will only unpack the jazz memorabilia in his own club. It seems that Seb’s apartment represents his unfulfilled dream, whereas Mia’s can, perhaps be viewed as a visualisation of the dream waiting to be achieved. It is her that will become the big star by the film’s end. Seb’s apartment seems the more realistic of the two, but it is Mia’s apartment that is more positively represented, suggesting that the film feels that it is better to live in your fantasies than the real world.

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Gosling and director Damien Chazelle on the set of Seb’s apartment (left) and Mia in her colourful bedroom (right).

[http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2017/01/12/22/3C164EC800000578-4115106-image-a-36\\_1484261320260.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2017/01/12/22/3C164EC800000578-4115106-image-a-36_1484261320260.jpg)

<http://assets.vogue.com/photos/58912a134fe1526113020386/master/pass/00-holding-la-la-land-apartment-set.jpg>

### Tradition vs. Innovation

Seb is shown to be a traditionalist, listening to music on a record player in his apartment, driving an old fashioned convertible car and lamenting that the jazz music that he loves is dying out and being replaced by new styles. Mia, in contrast, drives a brand-new Prius (how can she afford it on a barista’s wage?), but in other ways, she is a traditionalist too. Her apartment is covered with posters from old Hollywood movies and the pair go on a date to see *Rebel Without a Cause* at the historic Rialto Theatre in Pasadena. In contrast, Seb’s friend Keith (played by John Legend) has started a band which combines jazz techniques with modern electronic beats and a more pop sensibility. This innovation is popular and propels the band to stardom, but Seb and Mia both seem more at home with the old, familiar ways of jazz and classic movies.

### Professional Success vs. Personal Relationships

Both Mia and Seb are introduced as creative individuals who are following a dream but getting nowhere. Mia is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of failed auditions, while Seb is fired from his job as a lounge pianist in a mediocre restaurant. Seb joins a band and achieves success, but his relationship with Mia suffers as he is constantly away on tour, causing them to argue. After landing a starring role in a major film, Mia has to choose between moving away to Europe for the shoot or to remain with Seb. She chooses the former. In her review of the film in *Sight and Sound*, Erika Balsom suggests that the film provides “a no-nonsense message of individualist drive. Professional success is what counts, no matter how you achieve it and no matter if a few hearts are broken along the way.” However, the ending of the film does complicate the message. In the final moments as they exchange a look across the club, do Mia and Seb regret putting their professional dreams ahead of their love for each other?

#### Activity

Can you identify further binary oppositions in the film? How are the following represented and what ideologies are suggested? Jazz vs. Pop? Art vs. Commerce? Dreams vs. Reality? The Group vs. The Individual? The City vs. The Small Town? Integrity vs. Selling Out?

### To Conclude

While *La La Land* is, in many ways, a perfect case study text for the new syllabus, the approaches outline here can be applied to any of the other set films on either the OCR or EDUQAS specifications. You may want to build up a set of notes for each of the films you study, ensuring that you are aware of how the key theories that apply to each film could be applied to the films you are studying. You should also have a detailed knowledge of 2 or 3 sequences from your case study films in order to allow you to answer a question about film form in the exam. Make sure you buy your own copies of the films on DVD and watch them regularly!