

# Coloured Lighting and the Aura of Hollywood in Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*

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## ABSTRACT

Looking at Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* (2016), I explore the visual experience of coloured lighting prioritized throughout the film. While these moments of coloured lighting may initially appear to create mood for aesthetic purposes, I would like to contend that Chazelle is doing more by purposefully choosing to fully saturate certain scenes that highlight stark moments of reality that his characters Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) endure throughout the film. In doing so, Chazelle creates a dichotomy between the fantastical and unrealistic elements of Hollywood and the grounding, everyday realities of life that may be influenced by the former, but ultimately remain outside of both Mia and Sebastian's grasp. Chazelle's intentional introduction of colour in *La La Land* personifies this sentiment as it proves that the aesthetic use of colour is a warning that is doomed to fail because it represents a fantasy, something controlled and unreal.

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FROM THE VERY beginning of *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), the viewer is cued to expect a film that prioritizes its visual experience. From the Oz-like transformation of the Technicolour insignia before the film begins, to the lyrics in the introductory musical number that echo, "A technicolour world made out of music and machine" (Hurwitz et al.), Chazelle prioritizes colour as an aesthetic and thematic agent within the film's narrative. He accomplishes this task in a variety of ways, flooding *La La Land* with colour that saturates the screen through lush California landscapes, vibrant costuming, and, perhaps most striking of all, coloured lighting that, at moments, seems to overtake the entirety of a scene in often unrealistic, but fantastical, ways. While these moments of coloured lighting may initially appear to simply create mood for aesthetic purposes, I contend that Chazelle purposefully chooses to fully saturate certain scenes in order to highlight stark moments of reality that his characters Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) endure throughout both their relationship and their individual artistic pursuits. In doing so, Chazelle creates a dichotomy between the fantastical (and often unrealistic) elements of Hollywood and the grounded, everyday realities of life that may be influenced by

the former, but ultimately remain outside of both Mia and Sebastian's grasp.

Before I dive into my analysis of several important frames within *La La Land*, it is important to note that the use of colour in film is generally understood to be a highly subjective topic, frequently influenced by a context that "[relies] on introspection and close analysis of the films under investigation" (Flueckiger 212). Furthermore, we must bear in mind "the idea that colour is an aesthetic tool that may or may not be related to what's happening on screen, but is related to what's happening in the storyteller's frame of mind. That's the true liberation of the sense of colour" (Schrader 55). Eli Friedlander also endorses the opinions of colour subjectivity in her analysis of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) by stressing that although colour is an essential component of the film, there is no one-to-one, or universal correspondence, between colour and meaning that can be extracted across the scope of film studies generally (177). For the purposes of my analysis, I will be utilizing these perceptions when exploring the connections between Chazelle's coloured lighting aesthetic and the narrative timeline in three distinct scenes within the film. These three scenes explore the beginning, middle, and end of Mia and Sebastian's relationship



**Fig. 1** | Mia and Sebastian contemplate their artistic dreams against a red, blue, and purple backdrop, 1:04:53. Lionsgate, 2016.

and engage with a spectrum of emotions including intimacy, nostalgia, anger, frustration, sadness, and even longing.

The first fully saturated frame used by Chazelle arrives just after Mia and Sebastian are presented with career-defining opportunities; Mia's opportunity comes in the form of writing her own play, and for Sebastian it means playing in a blended jazz and pop band (Fig. 1).

The scene is set in the bedroom near the beginning of Mia and Sebastian's relationship, and throughout the course of the scene they engage in a discussion that signals their then-unknown future successes as artists. Mia remarks how her play "feels really nostalgic to me" and even makes Sebastian a logo for his future club, which he will end up using after this dream becomes a reality. The scene foreshadows the events that will transpire near the end of the film, but at this moment both the characters and the audience are unaware of the cost Mia and Sebastian will have to pay in the form of their relationship in order to achieve their dreams.

What the audience perceives, however, are the deeply saturated red, purple, and blue hues of this scene. This use of colour is quite different compared to the natural, vibrant colours of the opening musical number (Fig. 2), or the four coloured dresses Mia and her friends wear as they prepare for a night out in their own musical number (Fig. 3). While the previous scenes' brightly lit costuming and set design often accompany traditional Hollywood elements such as musical numbers with staged choreography, the bedroom scene between Mia and Sebastian is intimate and more realistic in terms of their personal relationship and aspiring dreams as artists. Although the scene still prioritizes

colour, it does so in a way that exemplifies the characters' inner emotional turmoil rather than their perceived, artificial performances played out through prototypical Hollywood clichés such as the musical dance numbers. While the use of colour in the musical numbers presents a cinematic and aesthetic purpose to the audience, the coloured lighting in the bedroom scene (as well as in the two subsequent coloured lighting scenes) offers a more unrealistic use of colour, but juxtaposes itself against the real and personal lives of Mia and Sebastian's characters and their relationship. In doing so, I believe that Chazelle employs the use of coloured lighting to expose and represent the hidden realities of Hollywood through scenes that engage in significant points of intersection between Mia and Sebastian's relationship and their respective artistic journeys.

Another fully saturated scene employing this same symbolism happens later in Mia and Sebastian's relationship, just as their artistic pursuits are about to take flight. Mia has just finished emailing various casting directors about her upcoming play, and Sebastian has taken a night off from his tour to come home and surprise Mia (Fig. 4).

As he does in the bedroom scene, Chazelle again saturates the backdrop with coloured lighting. This time, however, the colour is a sickly-looking, unnatural green that almost intuitively distracts the audience's senses. The innate reaction the audience feels when first viewing this scene prefigures the unfolding narrative that is to transpire throughout the rest of the scene. Over the course of the dinner, an argument ensues between Mia and Sebastian about his involvement with the band, and Mia becomes shocked at his "long-haul" involvement. This event segues into



**Fig. 2** | Opening musical number, 04:22. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 3** | Mia and her friends wear brightly coloured dresses for a night out, 12:13. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 4** | Sebastian surprises Mia with dinner against a green backdrop, 1:17:35. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 5** | Mia reminisces on the ideal version of her and Sebastian's lives together against a blue, purple, and pink backdrop, 1:59:06. Lionsgate, 2016.

a conversation debating the idea of fulfilling one's dreams versus the reality of having an unappealing, steady job. The scene is tense and filled with jarring insults that Mia and Sebastian throw at one another, only to end with a soundless record endlessly rotating and the piercing signal of the fire alarm establishing that dinner is ruined in the oven.

The scene not only ends on a rather dismal note for Mia and Sebastian's relationship, but also, much like the previous foreshadowing of the bedroom scene, it portends the anticipated failure of Mia's play. Once again, Chazelle overtly signals to the audience, both through the brighter, unnatural green colour and the explicit dialogue that the characters engage in, that the implications of this scene are rooted in both the reality of Mia and Sebastian's daily lives and the larger consequences and sacrifices that the world of Hollywood often demands. Additionally, while Chazelle implements the use of coloured lighting at both the beginning (Fig. 1) and middle (Fig. 4) of Mia and Sebastian's relationship and artistic journeys, he does so again at the end of the film after Mia and Sebastian have achieved their dreams, although separately from one another (Fig. 5).

While the deep blue and purple hues of this scene create a nostalgic longing between the two characters, prompting the audience to reflect upon the immense sacrifices a life in Hollywood requires, it is also noteworthy that Chazelle gradually moves from a warmer to cooler display of colour as these three scenes progress. Much like the seasons that define the narrative structure of *La La Land*, so, too, do the changing colours resonate with the rise and fall of Mia and Sebastian's road to Hollywood stardom and their relationship with one another, respectively. At the same time, Chazelle carefully inserts notes of red in this scene as well, thereby creating a connection to the red-coloured lighting of the bedroom scene where Mia and Sebastian's relationship first blossomed. While the aura of Hollywood has now become a reality for both Mia and Sebastian's characters, what remains fantastical is the perfect scenario played out in the vision Mia has of her and Sebastian's alternative life, where both characters achieve their dreams while maintaining their relationship. Once again, Chazelle situates his characters in the reality of their surroundings through the use of coloured lighting.

Like a ghost haunting its characters, Chazelle's coloured lighting in these specific scenes defines the critical moments of Mia and Sebastian's personal and professional lives. Friedlander notes, "Colour is dimly sensed at providing the unifying mood of the world. . . . Yet introducing colour intentionally, designedly, epitomizes the . . . desperate attempt to reproduce that relation to the world, to keep one's hold on the passing" (188). Chazelle's intentional introduction of colour in *La La Land*, signaling the fantastical aura of Hollywood lore, personifies this sentiment as it proves that the aesthetic use of colour is a warning that is doomed to fail because it represents a fantasy, something controlled and unreal. While Mia and Sebastian may have made it in the traditional Hollywood sense, their worlds are ultimately defined by those same lyrics that open the film: "A technicolour world made out of music and machine." ■

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