

“HERE’S TO THE FOOLS WHO DREAM”: HOLLYWOOD’S ILLUSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *LA LA LAND*

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ABSTRACT

The ideal of the American Dream has defined the lives of many people not only within the U.S., but also from all around the world, making it an international phenomenon. However, its significance has varied throughout time, adapting to the new circumstances of the people pursuing it and the opportunities coming their way. In such context, *La La Land*, the outstanding audiovisual 2016 production, deals with the newest conception of the Dream –the “Dream of the Coast”– by offering a glimpse at the true Hollywood lights and shadows through a nostalgic and flawed portrayal of the Dream and the real consequences of pursuing it.

KEYWORDS: American Dream, *La La Land*, Hollywood, nostalgia, identity.

“BRINDO POR LOS INGENUOS QUE SUEÑAN”:
EL SUEÑO AMERICANO COMO UNA ILUSIÓN DE HOLLYWOOD
EN *LA CIUDAD DE LAS ESTRELLAS (LA LA LAND)*

RESUMEN

El ideal del Sueño Americano ha guiado las vidas de muchos, no sólo dentro de los Estados Unidos, sino también en el resto del mundo, convirtiéndolo en un fenómeno internacional. Sin embargo, su significado ha variado a lo largo del tiempo, adaptándose a las nuevas circunstancias de aquellos que lo perseguían y a las oportunidades que estos encontraban en su camino. En este contexto, *La ciudad de las estrellas (La La Land)*, la aclamada producción audiovisual de 2016, aborda la nueva concepción del Sueño Americano –el «Sueño de la Costa Oeste»– mostrando la realidad de las luces y sombras de Hollywood a través de un retrato nostálgico e imperfecto del Sueño Americano y las consecuencias reales de perseguirlo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: El Sueño Americano, *La La Land*, Hollywood, nostalgia, identidad.



In his work *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen defines the “American Dream” not only as a national, but also international phenomenon. He associates the “American” part of the term with the fact that the United States is a “country constituted of dreams, whose very justification continues to rest on it being a place where one can, for better and worse, pursue distant goals” (Cullen 2004, 182). From the first pilgrims who reached the East Coast and built their communities there to those who, still today, go through all kinds of obstacles to reach their destination, America represents the land of opportunities, continuously exerting “an enormous allure that has only grown more powerful” (178).

Following this line of thought, Cullen identifies the notion of the “American Dream” under the ideal of “good life,” thus, developing the idea of the “Dream of the Good Life.” This conception of life has taken different shapes throughout the history of the United States: the dream of the promised land the Puritans were looking for; the one of people’s equality that arose during the American Civil War, reaching its peak during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; or that of “home ownership” that gave way to the U.S. Middle Class after WWII are just a few examples of how the Dream –and what dreaming means for people– has varied in over 400 years of the country’s history.

In this sense, one needs to address a more specific and geographically defined conception of the “American Dream:” the “Dream of the Coast” (160). This particular view of the “Dream” emerged in the mid-19th century, when California had just been officially incorporated to the United States, coinciding with the so-called “gold rush.” Thousands of people moved to the newest incorporation to the Union in search of gold in what Cullen considers as “the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history” (170). Though the golden dream soon vanished, the potential of “the Golden State” continued to prove the “metaphorical power for generations of Americans” (170), especially showing to be “quite practical for some enterprises” (172). Among these, the industry of motion pictures found in California a place to settle its growing empire.

Up until the early 20th century, “much, though not all, of the early movie industry was concentrated in metropolitan New York” due to the fact that Thomas Edison’s trust “controlled key patents on projectors” (173) limiting the places in which filmmakers would carry out their work.

Edison believed that the key to mastery of the movie industry lay in controlling the means of production. A group of Jewish immigrants with names like Fox and Warner, however, realized the money really lay in the content, that is, in making movies that people truly wanted to see. (173)

Looking for a break from the restrictive east coast and the new potentials and new freedoms (Deneen 2002, 96) that California offered, some of these filmmakers moved to the West like many other American entrepreneurs had done before them. Hollywood –absorbed by Los Angeles in 1910– would soon become the “international capital of popular culture” (Cullen 2004, 173).



The American film industry suffered a major growth over the 20th century, becoming the largest one in the world. Nowadays, it is the one that greatly embodies the “Dream of the Coast,” calling people from many different places to the new “Promised Land” if they wanted to succeed in the world of the motion pictures. But this dream has suffered some changes since it first appeared.

Traditionally speaking, the notion of the “American Dream” represents:

a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Wright 2009, 197)

Thus, everyone has the possibility of moving forward –or upwards– in the social ladder no matter the step they begin their journey at. This ideal has prompted many people to try and reach their different life goals throughout the country’s history. One of these goals is the one that Los Angeles represents for actors, filmmakers, musicians and all the kinds of artists who every year travel to the West Coast looking for new opportunities to grow professionally. In fact, Hollywood has become the major factory of U.S. culture, constantly promoting and seducing audiences into the most basic American cultural values (Grady 2015, 1).

In this sense, Hollywood acts both as the embodiment of the modern version of the American Dream as well as the medium to promote it. Yet, Hollywood’s version of the Dream has become a corrupt one by changing the focus of its art to a more “impersonal product to maximize profits at the tremendous, tragic expense of our culture” (Payne 2004). Against this new trend, new filmmakers –the ones belonging to the so called “Indiewood” (Sánchez-Escalonilla 2016, 22)– have been developing, since the late 20th century, a “strong trend of cinema –big and commercial as well as small and personal– aspiring to be human, intelligent, respectful of the audience and director-driven” with the aim to “portray real people with real problems, real joys, real tears” (Payne 2004). An example of these new trending cinema is Damien Chazelle’s *La La Land* (2016) which tells the story of Mia –a young woman who wants to become an actress– and Sebastian –a young musician who dreams about owning a jazz club. The movie, shaped as a musical, includes various nods to the classic old Hollywood in which dreams come true.

The “Hollywood Dream” is one that calls people “to be on that screen/And live inside each scene” (Pasek and Paul 2016, “Another Day of Sun”). It is one that prompts those willing to try and reach the top of the hill, “chasing all the lights that shine” and to “get up off the ground” when they fail at climbing it (Pasek and Paul 2016, “Another Day of Sun”). The lyrics of the song from the movie’s first scene embody one of the most significant traits of the American character –and, thus, of the American Dream: individual agency and personal fulfilment (Cullen 2004, 39). Both aspects are related to the individualistic conception of the American people, whose success depends only on their individual actions and choices, fulfilling their goals on their own. The men and women dancing on the motorway promote, through their singing, the ideal that the only way to fulfil your wish is by working



hard yourself, even fighting against others to achieve it: “They say ‘you gotta want it more’ / So I bang on every door” (Pasek and Paul 2016, “Another Day of Sun”).

Hollywood movies have promoted this individualistic notion of “hard work” and “non-stopping” for decades, offering a big optimistic image of the Dream. (Pileggi *et al.* 2000, 210) The lyrics of “Another Day of Sun” seem to support the same ideal, except for the fact that all the dreaming dancers end the song by going back to their cars stuck in a traffic jam. “Another day of sun” refers, in this sense, to the act of getting back in the car where they will spend hours to reach their plain and ordinary job.

The movie offers, this way, a less idealized and more realistic image of the Dream by beginning with a scene of a number of people in their cars commuting to their jobs in the morning in the midst of a traffic jam, while showing how only a few of them are able to take the closer exit out of it at the end of the day –and the movie, as Mia’s dream of becoming an actress has been finally fulfilled. These two scenes –one at the beginning of the movie and the other close to the end– put together offer a critique of the usual representation of the Dream by the media, especially Hollywood, perpetuating the “myth that achieving the American dream is within everyone’s reach” (208) by projecting the “success of a few individuals” (210).

Mia and Sebastian appear to be two of these individuals. Trapped inside her car, while commuting to the coffee shop she works at, Mia takes the time to practice the lines for an audition she has that same day. Sebastian, sitting in his car right behind her, works on a music piece trying to get the song’s rhythm right. Both characters embody the main features a “dreamer” needs in the pursuit of their goals, using every opportunity to dedicate time to them.

In the end, Mia’s audition turns out to be a disaster before she has even reached the place as she bumps into a customer that splits his coffee all over her shirt. The audition getting interrupted in the midst of the performance’s emotional part is just the final straw that leaves Mia down for the day. However, the Hollywood world does not let people time to lament over lost roles, that is how Mia finds herself getting ready to attend a party in one of the luxury houses at the hill –as these events become yet another place in which to find new opportunities.

The movie’s first party scene offers one of the most meaningful songs. “Someone in the Crowd” brings to the front the real Hollywood, that in which standing out in a crowded party turns to be more useful for you career than going to auditions: “Tonight’s the casting call/If this is the real audition/Oh, God, help us all” (Pasek and Paul 2016, “Someone in the Crowd”). The scene introduces the reality of the industry in which people preparing their roles, practicing their lines and trying to show their acting skills are barely paid attention, whereas those who dress and behave in order to be noticed in a party are the chosen ones:

Someone in the crowd could be the one you need to know
The one to finally lift you off the ground
Someone in the crowd could take you where you wanna go
If you’re the someone ready to be found (Pasek and Paul 2016, “Someone in the Crowd”)



In other words, the “Dream of the Coast” has become one resting on “personality” rather than on “character:”

They were celebrities, people whose fame rested not on talent, however defined, but on simply being famous. One of the strangest paradoxes of subsequent American history would be the histories of other Americans, among them Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, who emerged from highly particular cultural communities possessing enormous talent and yet who trivialized, even discarded, their gifts in a desperate desire to live the Dream of the Coast. (Cullen 2004, 177)

Because now the Dream is rooted in personality, talent is dismissed. Aspirant’s looks, behavior, willingness to submit to the new Hollywood norms are, now, more attractive features than talent or acting skills. In this sense, those moving to Los Angeles looking for this “Dream of the Coast” “fall into a form of enslavement –enslavement to a pursuit without end” (Deneen 2002, 97). *La La Land* shows that the real problem with the American Dream nowadays is that it has become “too incomplete a vessel to contain longings that elude human expression or comprehension” never reaching “the Coast we think we see [...] Still we go on dreaming” (Cullen 2004, 182). Thus, people have become slaves of the Dream as “the struggle for success is limited to the triumph of image and appearance, while people [...] are reduced to objects” (Sánchez-Escalonilla 2016, 32).

The same way Mia’s skills are frequently disregarded during the auditions, the talent of the other protagonist is also misused. Sebastian is an “old school” musician in love with jazz who wants desperately to save it from its approaching end:

“It’s conflict and it’s compromise, and it’s just... it’s new every time. It’s brand new every night. It’s very, very exciting! And it’s dying. It’s dying, Mia. It’s dying on the vine and the world says: ‘let it die. It had its time’. Well, not on my watch.” (*La La Land*, 00:45:22)

Sebastian’s resistance to “letting jazz die” represents the resistance to let the old traditional conception of the Dream die with it. There are two moments in the film in which he gives in to the system and becomes its compliant, and both times he ends up fighting against it.

Sebastian is the romantic artist, the music lover who dreams of a life of rhythm and vitality. But “empty bills are not romantic” (*La La Land*, 00:20:32), and so the urge to find a job to pay those bills leads him to the restaurant he used to play the piano in the past. That is why, at the beginning of the story, he is shown back to his former place of employment, being rehired by the manager with one condition: this time, he must stick to the setlist given by the manager. By adhering to the setlist, however, he is renouncing to his freedom as a musician to play what he loves and feels as meaningful, thus, becoming the performer of ‘elevator music.’ He becomes the factory’s worker assembling a product, losing his artistic side in the process.

This is Sebastian’s L.A., the one in which “they worship everything, and they value nothing” (*La La Land* 00:41:04). His critique of the shallowness of the *Dream*



today matches that of the Indiewood filmmakers, expressing themselves through their writing, their music and their films rather than giving in to the impersonal industry Hollywood has become (Sánchez-Escalonilla 2016, 31). Sebastian is a romantic in the sense that he keeps holding “onto the past” and letting “life hit me until it gets tired. Then I’ll hit back” (*La La Land*, 00:20:40). He cannot leave the past behind so he can conform to the present:

At the core of many American Dreams, especially the Dream of the Coast, is an insistence that history doesn’t matter, that the future matters far more than the past. But history is in the end the most tangible thing we have, the source of solace for all our dreams. (Cullen 2004, 284)

An old acquaintance of his, Keith, displays this ideal of focusing on the future and forgetting about the past, as he asks Sebastian how he expects to be a revolutionary when he is “such a traditionalist” (*La La Land*, 01:08:38). The problem in this sequence is that Keith’s vision of the world –like that of the new version of the “Dream of the Coast”– is not Sebastian’s ideal of it. Keith is asking him to be revolutionary and innovative, while Sebastian wants to keep jazz alive. Keith sees the aesthetic as key, something to attract people’s attention to his music in order to sell it. Sebastian feels the content and the essence of his music is more important. Like those first pioneers of the motion picture’s industry who moved to the West Coast wanting to make movies people were interested in watching, Sebastian focuses on the music, not the money or the fame. He is the “fool” who still “dreams.”

This way, Sebastian represents the classic Los Angeles and the old Hollywood, those in which talent was preferred over looks. Those in which “character” mattered more than “personality.” And it is his ability to look beyond the surface that makes him that “someone in the crowd” Mia sang about.

Mia: It’s pretty strange that we keep running into each other.

Sebastian: Maybe it means something.

Mia: I doubt it.

Sebastian: Yeah, I didn’t think so. (*La La Land*, 00:31:30)

Because the American Dream has been part of the U.S. history even before it was even born, it has functioned as the common ground, “binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile to one another” (Cullen 2004, 189). Sebastian and Mia seem to be these opposing people, coming together because of a shared notion of the Dream. He dreams of opening his own club, a place where jazz can be played and respected at the same time; her dream is to become an actress. Both of their goals are sustained by their nostalgic view of old clubs of jazz and the classic Hollywood movies Mia talks about. And that is their common ground: they both look at the future still holding to the past.

This shared perspective of the conception of the Dream is precisely what prompts them to support each other in their personal ambitions. In a very similar way to those working under the ‘Indiewood’ label –who portray the notion of independent cinema as the reflection of the director and their creative team (Payne



2004)– the traditional Sebastian is the one who suggests Mia should create her own script: “You could just write your own rules [...] write something that’s as interesting as you are” (*La La Land*, 00:43:08). Not only that but he praises her work when she does not feel very confident about it:

Mia: It feels really nostalgic

Sebastian: that’s the point. (*La La Land*, 01:04:06)

Mia’s script is nostalgic and that makes it personal and risk –the same way *La La Land* was described when it was first screened– but also totally worth it for Sebastian.

While Sebastian appears to be the biggest supporter Mia has throughout the movie, she also offers him a sense of stability that he was missing. Mia is the one who pushes Sebastian to accept Keith’s offer to join his band, so he can earn enough money to finally build his own club. However, time goes by and Sebastian stays in the band, something that Mia cannot understand. So, he explains: “This is the dream. Guys like me work their whole lives to be part of something this successful that people care about” (*La La Land*, 01:22:58).

Once more, the corrupted “Dream of the Coast” appears in *La La Land* as an ideal that limits the individual, placing him/her within a set of boundaries that erase the individual’s identity –of which his/her Dream is part of– when it does not fit in the system. In fact, Sebastian begins to lose himself the moment he accepts Keith’s offer despite the fact that he does not like their music or that he is forced to dress or pose differently. Los Angeles –representative of the State of California– is the paradise that lures people into its streets and buildings with promises of flourishing, only to leave them to merely survive trapped in an ordinary life (Wright 2009, 198). Both Mia and Sebastian are able to see the reality of the Dream, but they made different choices which in the end means they need to follow different paths.

The conception of the American Dream as a restraining ideal rather than a liberating one is also portrayed through clothing. Clothes carry great symbolism throughout the movie. A clear example resides on Mia’s clothing which seems to be very colorful at the beginning of the movie, always choosing bright and lighter colors in contrast with the more classic darker ones of other people in town –for instance, her ex-boyfriend Greg, his brother and sister-in-law or any of the casting directors she meets. Her vivid clothes can be clearly identified with her bright personality and her optimism, yet, they often play a major role in stopping her from being chosen or noticed in auditions and parties. In fact, Mia’s first audition goes wrong because she is wearing an electric blue jacket over the plain white shirt she is supposed to wear –the ordinary outfit every woman in the room is wearing, thus, making her “stand out” in the “crowd.”

At some point in the film, after a series of unsuccessful auditions, she gets called for a second one at a place where the presence of color seems to conceal a hidden message about the clothing choices for those tests. At the first audition for the role, even though Mia’s clothes are exactly the same as in the second one, the wall behind her is light green, while in the second –and shorter– one it is plain



grey. Thus, although the wall changes its color, Mia's appearance does not preclude any possibility of getting the role. It is not until later in the film, during her play's performance, when her wardrobe choices change into more classic ones –such as the striped suit at the beginning or the plain white shirt and dark skirt at the end. It is because of her performance in this passage that she gets the call from the casting director that finally launches her acting career. Five years later, she is a well-known actress and the spectator can now see her frequently wear somber and more classic clothes in her daily life while bright colors are relegated to her characters –as can be seen in the billboard announcing her new movie on the street. Sebastian, on the other hand, keeps wearing similar clothes from the beginning to the end of the movie.

In this sense, clothes become the more visual symbol of both characters' progression throughout the film, but also of the Dream's significant focus on physical appearance rather than on talent only. On the one hand, Mia is shown to have changed and adapted her wardrobe to fit in the Hollywood standard of clothing, losing a great part of her in doing so. On the other, Sebastian wears clothes that, although probably more expensive in prize, still reflect who he was five years prior –and who he still is.

In the end, the film is all about identity and the pursued Dream as part of it. The American Dream has always been part of what means to be American, brought by the pioneers who risked everything in search for a better life. The Dream creates an image luring the dreamer to reach it. However, the image the Dream projects is one that “can never be fully attained” (Downs and Stetson 2013, 691). Mia reaches her own dream only when she renounces to a great part of her –a part that defines who she is and that is symbolized in her clothes and in Sebastian's love. However, she participates in movies that present the notion of the Dream as attainable, playing women wearing colorful clothes like the ones she used to wear and creating the illusion that the Dream can be reached by being yourself. In this sense, the movie's end, with Mia and Sebastian's alternative and unreal view of what their Dream looked like, contrasts with the image of reality viewers see in the screen.

Thus, *La La Land* offers both a sense of optimism by showing that dreams can, in fact, come true while also acting as a critique on the ideal that is the Dream and its real consequences. While Mia loses herself in her actress persona, looking – thanks to her clothes in and out of the screen– like she is constantly acting in her daily life while being closer to her old colorful persona only on the movies she performs, Sebastian has become a successful club owner, but one who seems to keep looking at the past. Mia's embracing of the conception of the “Dream of the Coast” today and Sebastian's nostalgic view of it are portrayed in the movie as irreconcilable, offering an even more hopeless view on the prospect of the American Dream.

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