

# ***La La Land's Nostalgia***

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# **Index**

|                                     |             |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                     | <b>p.2</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                 |             |
| - The nostalgic wave                | <b>p.3</b>  |
| - La La Land                        | <b>p.4</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>                    |             |
| - What is nostalgia?                | <b>p.5</b>  |
| - Allusions in La La Land           |             |
| - The “Jazziness”                   | <b>p.6</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>                    |             |
| - Home                              | <b>p.9</b>  |
| - Utopian thought and utopian space | <b>p.10</b> |
| - Nostalgic place                   | <b>p.11</b> |
| - Construction of nostalgia         |             |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                   | <b>p.12</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                 | <b>p.14</b> |

## Abstract

Nostalgia consists of three key elements: a longing to an idealised past, a dissatisfaction with the present and a utopian projection of the past in the future. *La La Land* contains all three elements. The longing to the past is evoked by allusions and the use of *souvenirs*, which are many in the movie. Souvenirs are demarcated but suggest a unlimited utopian possibility. Jazz as a genre plays an important role in the movie and acts as a souvenir. The utopian thought is embodied by the utopian spaces in *La La Land*. Music plays a key role herein. There is a clear relation between the nostalgic place and the utopian space. Nostalgia is constructed in *La La Land* by having the longing to the past and the realisation of the longing to a perfect future in the utopian spaces caused by the dissatisfaction with the present of the characters. These elements are all present in the movie.

## Introduction

### The nostalgic wave

There is a nostalgic wave submerging not only Hollywood, but all of pop culture. Film, music, music videos, fashion and pop art. This wave of nostalgia is omnipresent in western culture today. If you just look at what is in cinemas right now; *Power Rangers*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *T2*; *Trainspotting* and *Kong: Skull Island*. Last year, 2016, *The Jungle Book*, *Rogue One*, *Fantastic Beasts*, *Finding Dory*, *The Magnificent Seven* and even *Zoolander 2* were all major movies with big budgets that are sequels or remakes of older movies. *Sing Street*, *The Nice Guys*, *Everybody Wants Some!!*, *Hail Caesar* and *Café Society* were also 2016 movies, which are not remakes of any sort but all took place in a specific past period (80s, 70s and 50s, all utopian versions). To say nothing of the huge comic book-film resurgence that started with *Iron Man* (2008), and is blossoming (with 5 superhero movies coming from Marvel or DC in 2017). All these films are largely based upon the comics of the 60's. The latest trend in trailer music is also using old rock and pop hits. *Suicide Squad* (2016) used Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975) in its trailer, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* (2017) uses Sinatra's *My Way* (1969), *Justice League* (2017) uses The Beatles' *Come Together* (1969). The music industry is no different, while Bruno Mars and Daft Punk are clearly influenced by Funk and Disco from the 70's and 80's, Kendrick Lamar used samples from the years 72' and 73' for *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) (which also incorporated many jazz influences). French artist M. Pokora has even redirected his career towards making covers of the 60's hits of Claude Francois.

Where does this nostalgia wave come from? Why do we seem to feel so nostalgic, and to what? Fred Davis already described this phenomenon as the "nostalgic wave" in 1977.<sup>1</sup> Similarly to now the nostalgia had effect on multiple aspects of the culture, movies like *Grease* (1978), radio serials reminiscent of the thirties, old school fashion etc. Davis writes that this nostalgic feeling in the 70's was due to the deep dissatisfaction of the state of affairs at that time. The 60's were undeniably challenging for the American people, wherein fundamental and taken-for-granted convictions were questioned or brutally rejected. People had to cope with the abrupt changes, tensions and traumas in their society, and nostalgia helped them.<sup>2</sup> The 30s were the object of the nostalgia in the 70s, while historically they may have been as chaotic as the 60's.

What is the cause of today's nostalgic feeling? What is "lacking" or dissatisfying? One answer would be the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 which is considered the worst financial crisis since the great depression in the 30s. Other examples of dissatisfaction include: the collapse of the housing market. The growing threat of terrorism, starting with the worldwide shock of 9/11, and now the Islamic State. The refugee crisis. More recently there was the Brexit in 2016 and the US presidential campaign which lead to much division. There are a lot of controversial political, social and economic events that lead to division, confusion and fear right now. Streaming services allow people to listen to older music easily and frequently. People are feeling nostalgic, because times have been and are challenging. So people long to the times where everything was still "alright". US president Trump used the nostalgic feeling in his presidential campaign. With the undeniably effective slogan "Make America Great Again", first used by Reagan in the 80s, Trump refers to a bygone better time when America was "great".

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Davis, "Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia wave" in *Journal of Popular Culture* 11-2 (1997):421.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Davis, "Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia wave," 422.

## La La Land

Suddenly, in the midst of this nostalgia wave there comes a movie that immediately gained mass attention and critical acclaim. *La La Land* (2016) is a colourful, vibrant, emotional musical which seems to have become an instant classic. The film follows Mia (Stone) and Sebastian (Gosling), two dreamers in Los Angeles who fall in love and pursue their dreams. Mia is an aspiring actress and Sebastian is an unemployed jazz-pianist, Sebastian wants to own his own jazz bar, and by doing so “save” jazz. Sebastian gets a job in a successful band led by frontman Keith (Legend) but Mia encourages him to quit for he does not like the music he plays. Then it is Mia’s turn to get a job in a movie, but as it is in Paris the two have to end their relationship. The film ends with a chance encounter between Mia and Sebastian. Sebastian owns a jazz bar which Mia, who is now married, visits. When they see each other the film presents a “what if” scenario where we see an alternative version of the film in which they ended up together. However it is made clear that this is not the case, and they go separate ways again.

*La La Land* comes as a big original success in the nostalgic wave, without relying on existing property. However it is very interesting for it still seems to be very nostalgic, whilst being a completely original product. It does not rely on existing properties or music. Furthermore the fact that it is a musical is also interesting because musical as a genre seems to be dying. There are very few musicals made and even fewer that become successful, a notable exception being *Les Misérables* (2012). Most musicals become commercial or critical flops, but *La La Land* immediately gained success in both fields. *La La Land* seems to be nostalgic to an older period than the focus of the current nostalgia wave, which seems to take the 70s, 80s and 90s as its “central point”. But *La La Land* seems to be nostalgic to the 50s (and 30s). while Chazelle’s earlier film *Whiplash* (2014) dealt with similar themes of ambition and love and success, *La La Land* has a much more nostalgic feeling. It is nostalgic to this “classical Hollywood” period of film where musical was one of the most popular genres.

Taking all this into account the following question is: how exactly is the score of *La La Land* nostalgic? How is nostalgia constructed? To answer this question one must first dive into what nostalgia is, this with the help of Caryl Flinn and Susan Stewart’s texts. Then comes the analysis of the movie, and especially the music. We will look at the importance of the idealised past and the utopian future in nostalgia and in the movie. This thesis will explore nostalgia in *La La Land* and try to explain what it is, where it comes from and how it is constructed in the movie.

## Chapter 1

### What is nostalgia?

The first question to be asked is: what is nostalgia exactly? There are three characteristics of nostalgia. Firstly, Sean Gammon writes that it is a longing to a past time. This past time is idealized to an extent where only the good parts of that time are remembered. Historic fact and authenticity are not taken into account.<sup>3</sup> People look at this bygone time as through a lens that magnifies the positive aspects of said time but ignores the negative aspects.<sup>4</sup> It is not necessarily a lived experience. Susan Stewart writes that it is a “synthesis of lived and mediated experience” (1984, p. 135). This means that one does not necessarily have to have lived in the time subjected to nostalgia to feel nostalgia for said time. The mediated experience in this case is for instance film or music (or both). If this media is persuasive it can be nostalgic. Secondly, nostalgia is not only looking back to an idealised past. It is also reacting to a lacking present. There is a feeling of something missing in the present, there are frustrations, tensions, or there is confusion, which leads people to look back to the past, but through the aforementioned “nostalgic lens”. The fact that the positivity of the past is magnified also means that the negativity of the present is highlighted. This essential inclusion of the present is what separates nostalgia from mere remembering or reminiscing. Finally, nostalgia also has an important utopian aspect. Not only does nostalgia see that specific time as “perfect” or “how it should be” but it automatically also projects the idealised past into the future. So there is a longing to make things right again.<sup>5</sup>

How then, is *La La Land* so nostalgic? And how can we be nostalgic of a period few of us even knew? As said before, Stewart writes that nostalgia does not necessarily involve lived experience.<sup>6</sup> But in this case the nostalgia directed towards the 50s (and earlier) and the largest experience we have of this period is mediated, mostly by film. In this case it seems to be an entirely mediated nostalgic feeling, without any “real” lived experience. The majority of what we know of the 50s is from television and film. How is nostalgia evoked then?

### Allusions in *La La Land*

What is so nostalgic about *La La Land*? To begin with the film is full of homages and citations. Both musically and visually. Some sets are very reminiscent of musicals like *Broadway Melody of 1940* (1940) and *Moulin Rouge* (1951). Some moments are clear citations, for example the moment when Sebastian (Gosling) starts to sing and leans on a lamppost is an homage to the iconic moment in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952).

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<sup>3</sup> Sean Gammon, “Fantasy, Nostalgia and the Pursuit of What Never Was,” in *Sport Tourism: Principles and Practice*, Eastbourne (2002): 63.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Davis, “Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia wave,” 418.

<sup>5</sup> Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 91, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1984), 135.



The dancing scenes with Sebastian and Mia (Stone) are very similar to the classic Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films between 1933 and 1949. The ending of the film is very similar to the one in the french film *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), with the big “what if” scenario, where we see what would have happened if Mia and Sebastian ended up together. Furthermore the score is very reminiscent of the classical Hollywood score. With big, loud orchestral arrangements. Explosions of strings, for instance when Mia runs out of the restaurant after hearing the main theme on the speakers. The score also has a ‘jazzy’ sound with frequent use of a swing drum rhythm and ‘jazzy instrumentation’ (bass, trumpet, drum). The upbeat quality of these musical moments are very “Hollywood”, as are the synchronised dance sequences that accompany it. “Mickey Mousing” is a technique used in the movie that is very reminiscent of the 30s and 40s. Mickey Mousing is when the score follows and underscores every character’s movement on screen.<sup>7</sup> Max Steiner often used it, and it is frequently used in *La La Land*. For instance during “A Lovely Night” Sebastian is sitting on a bench and the movement of his feet are precisely underscored. In a later scene we see Sebastian’s napkin float away and we hear a flute accompanying its movement. This technique is rarely used today, but was very common in the 30s and 40s.<sup>8</sup> All in all the score seems very traditional, with big bombastic moments, and smaller, more emotional melancholic themes. In an industry dominated by the loud “drones” of scores like *Inception*’s (2010), the *La La Land* score feels very nostalgic but also very fresh. But these allusions and citations could be seen as mere reminiscing, or tributes without being necessarily nostalgic.

### The “Jazziness”

The fact that jazz plays such an important role in the movie is in itself nostalgic. Jazz is often seen as a genre of the past. When you say jazz, most people would think of a badly-lit bar in the 50’s where some smoking musicians in tuxes are playing in front of a listening, often invisible crowd. Elsdon writes that this has to do with the fact that the jazz iconography has been largely constructed by, and thus is inseparable of film.<sup>9</sup> So the fact that jazz has such a prominent role in the movie and its narrative is already an indication. While *Whiplash* represented jazz as existing and alive, *La La Land* uses it as something “dying” and “from the past”. Furthermore one of the protagonist is what Scott Deveau (1991) would call a jazz neo-classicist. who is trying to save jazz and go back to the “golden age”. He is put (quite literally) against the progressivist Keith in a scene where they explore these

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 85.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Elsdon, “Framing Jazz: Thoughts on Representation and Embodiment,” in *Watching Jazz: Encounters with Jazz Performance on Screen*, ed. Björn Heile et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

issues. They both want to “save” jazz in different ways. Keith combines it with a more accessible mainstream sound while Sebastian is a purist: “Part of the story is that Seb is a traditionalist, and Keith hauls him into this different world of music that becomes increasingly more modern, and increasingly electronic,” (Hurwitz, 2017). The character of Sebastian is centered around the fact that he wants to “save jazz”, which means saving the past, “going back”. Keith on the other hand wants to save jazz by modernizing it, combining it with funk and pop. This was a big discussion in the jazz world, when fusion and the avant-garde movements started emerging after bebop, many “jazz-purists” were against the new technological and commercial developments, insisting instead on tradition and history.<sup>10</sup> As Deveau puts it the neo-classicists feel “nostalgia for a Golden Age located ambiguously somewhere between the swing era and 1960s hard bop” (Deveau, p. 527). Sebastian is clearly a neo-classicist, but Keith represents the more modern fusion genre that artists like Herbie Hancock would make. Interestingly Keith is presented as an antagonist. While his intentions are not bad at all, he is the one that “corrupts” Sebastian’s “purity”. He is the antagonist in the sense that he is the cause of Mia and Sebastian’s dispute about his dreams. While Mia likes the music Keith makes it is represented as the contrary of what Sebastian wants, and thus the movie positions itself, however subtly, on the neo-classicist “side”.

The movie, and especially the “jazz-world” portrayed, are full of what Stewart calls “souvenirs”. These are real objects that are placed inside a narrative (the film) precisely to evoke nostalgia. These objects are “impoverished or partial” (Stewart, p.136) as to be complemented by a narrative.<sup>11</sup> They are used purely in the context of the movie and not in their original contexts, without being specifically explained. The only thing that matters about them is that they are significant objects out of the specific time period subjected to the nostalgic feeling, in this case the “jazzy” 50s. It can be related to Freud’s genesis of the fetish, a part that is substituted for the whole.<sup>12</sup> Which means that these objects receive an unlogical amount of attention, because they are a substitution of the bigger matter at hand. The original context of the souvenir might tarnish the idealised image of the past, thus it is completely subjugated to the medium. The stool of Hoagy Carmichael for instance, or the old jazz LPs, the picture of Bill Evans and the giant poster in Mia’s room. These souvenirs of the classical Hollywood and “jazz golden age” period are used not only to evoke that time, but to show Sebastian’s attachment to it. There are also musical souvenirs, the 80’s are represented with songs like *Take on Me* (1985), *I Ran* (1982) and *Tainted Love* (1981). These are used in a comical context in which Sebastian is stuck playing these “simple, primitive” songs, while he is a “true” jazz pianist. Jazz souvenirs are present too such as *Japanese Folk Song* (1967) by Thelonious Monk, which Sebastian is trying to copy in an early scene. These souvenirs are the objects of Sebastian’s longing to the idealised past of jazz ‘purism’. They stand for the whole of the period which they represent. As we follow Sebastian during these moments his nostalgia is extended to us, and we too feel nostalgic. Furthermore the jazz presented in *La La Land* is the more traditional bebop style that was mainstream in the 50s. This is exactly the jazz that neo-classicists would defend. When Sebastian talks about the jazz he so adores, it is always this particular style that is being played. While the performances of jazz are not really souvenirs, for they are not concrete objects of that period, it could be said that the idea of the jazz ensemble is. The jazz iconography that Elsdon mentioned is very present every time that jazz is performed. If the scene were put in a 50s setting it would not seem out of place at all. It is treated as a fetish, a representation of the whole of jazz. However jazz as a musical genre can be said

<sup>10</sup> Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” in *Black American Literature Forum* 25- 3 (1991): 527.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 135.



to operate as a souvenir in this movie, for it has very concrete elements, is recognizable by the public, is taken out of its context and complemented by the narrative of the movie. Jazz also is fetishistic for it represents the bygone time of the 50s. So if the performances are not souvenirs jazz as genre is indeed treated as a souvenir thus it contains and delivers nostalgia for the whole, which would be the 50s in this case.



## Chapter 2

### Home

Because nostalgia is a reaction to a lacking in the present the idea of “home” is important. It is the idea that the object of the nostalgic longing: “the past”, is a feeling of being home. This is the place where everything is alright, where everything is exactly the way it is supposed to be. This place of course does not exist and is purely ideological. But it is the place we long to be. Therefore the “home” is nostalgic, because we long to the past, but it is a completely utopian longing. Flinn uses this term (used by Marothy) for music. She states that when the music leaves the tonic, it creates a nostalgic feeling, the longing to return to the tonic. This is why we feel “satisfaction” when the harmony goes back to the tonic, especially after a dissonance. The music comes “home”.<sup>13</sup> This idea is also present in Claudia Gorbman’s theory of film music. Film music would affect our subconscious, and make us subconsciously think of the pre-oedipal stage, when we were in the womb. This is the ultimate feeling of home, according to her.<sup>14</sup> Music has a special influence on this because it directly, without us noticing, affects the subconscious. Film music in particular because it is not “heard” or actively listened to. Sounds that we perceive as dissonant or sad or negative are those sounds most remote of what we heard in the womb. And the sounds we perceive as nice and warm are the closest. Now *La La Land* has a few examples of this feeling of home. The scene where Mia hears Sebastian play and enters the bar is a perfect example. She hears the main theme play while she walks down the street, it captures her attention almost as if she remembers it from somewhere. She enters the bar while the theme becomes louder. This is the first time they meet. When she sees him play every light goes out, and only she stays visible. All sound fades, except the theme on the piano. This is clearly the “home”, everything else fades away. The bar becomes the womb, the home for Mia and Sebastian. The “home” is a very demarcated place, a sanctuary of the idealised past. However it is a very utopian environment, for it is perfect and idealised. It is as if the theme brings the home to life, and everything becomes alright again. These are the musical manifestations, like the one Flinn describes. At the end of the movie, after the big “what if?” scene, where we see the two living a life together that we as audience know they will not live. We go back to Sebastian playing the main theme on the piano. Here a few things happen. Firstly, visually and thematically, we go back to the reality. The big dream sequence is over, and we are faced with how things actually panned out. Secondly, musically, Sebastian never returns to the tonic, Thus robbing the audience of the satisfaction of a return to the home. He never finishes the piece with the E the public expects, but stops at a C. This has a clear narrative function. We realise that the love story between Mia and Sebastian is over, or rather is abandoned without ending, obstructed by the ambitions of the protagonists. Justin Hurwitz, the composer, has said that the last note goes back to stereo: “When we go from that low-fi mono to the wide stereo on that very last note ... it feels like we’re returning to reality. That’s what that cut is when we cut to Ryan at the piano”(2017).<sup>15</sup> So the sound editing supports the harmonic choice Hurwitz makes by leaving the tonic. The music never comes “home” and the public understands that the same is true of their relationship. This longing inside the music creates nostalgia to the tonic,

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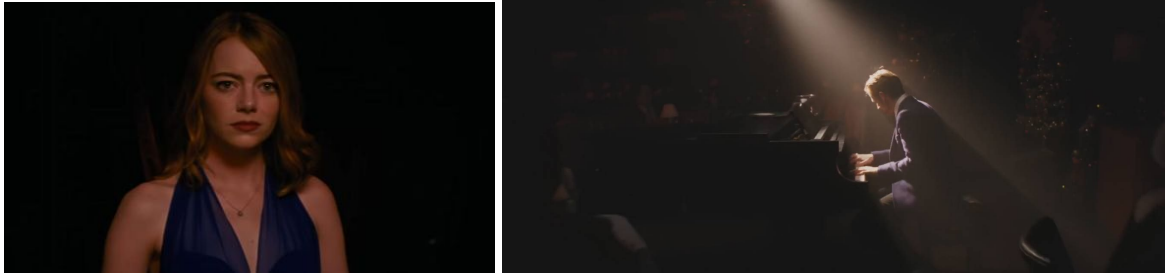
<sup>13</sup> Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 94.

<sup>14</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> “La La Land’ Composer Justin Hurwitz Goes behind the Music.” *WTOP*, February 21, 2017.

<http://wtop.com/entertainment/2017/02/la-la-land-composer-justin-hurwitz-goes-behind-the-music/>.

which symbolizes the home, or the pre-oedipal feeling. If the music does not create the sense of home and brings the home to life then it is no longer a utopian environment, therefore no longer the home.



### Utopian thought and utopian space

Nostalgia, as mentioned before, has an important utopian aspect. The longing to a better or even perfect future in the image of the idealised past. Caryl Flinn also writes this of film music: “music offers more than conventional language; it reveals glimpses of a better, more unified world.”<sup>16</sup> This is the “utopian thought”, the longing in film music to a utopia, where everything is as it is supposed to be. This is once more the “home” where the audience subconsciously longs to be, which, as we saw, contains a very utopian aspect. There is a sense of collective identity constructed around film music, which is the unifier.<sup>17</sup> Thus music both creates the longing to return to a “home” and the longing to utopia. This utopian thought has been concretised in the musical genre, through the use of what is called: “the utopian space”. Ian Garwood and later Robynn Stilwell use this term to describe the moment in musicals where everyone starts to dance and sing and the music suddenly becomes diegetic without having any visible source.<sup>18</sup> This has no narrative logic but the audience just accepts it with the suspension of disbelief. An example of this would be the opening highway sequence of *La La Land*, the planetarium or the “what if?” scene. These moments in the film are very utopian, it is no longer “realistic”, the narrative is locked in a sort of dream state. The “what if?” scene is perhaps the most striking example. This is the embodiment of how Mia and Sebastian would have liked to have things go, it is especially what the public would have wanted. The space, the set, the costumes, the extras are all very fantastical and at the service of Mia and Sebastian’s utopia. Mia and Sebastian however follow the music, which seems to be, in this case the main narrative. It is a synthesis of all the main themes of the film and all image is synchronized to the music. There is a clear connection between Flinn’s utopian thought and the utopian space in musicals. The utopian space is the embodiment of Flinn’s utopian thought in film music. The place where everything is as it should, everyone is happy, they are in the right place and the right time. In some cases a collective unity of the characters is created around the music. In the “what if?” scene, J.K. Simmons’ character, who was Sebastian’s employer whom he fired on christmas (because he refused to play simple christmas songs), suddenly becomes a “nice” guy while this has absolutely no narrative logic. The same happens when Keith once again comes to offer Sebastian a job in his fusion-band, but Sebastian sends him away this time with one move of the hand. In a utopia there are no antagonists. Of course there are musical moments in musicals that do have antagonists or conflict in them but these are not utopian spaces.

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<sup>16</sup>Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Garwood, “Must You Remember This?,” in *Movie Music, the Film Reader*, ed. Kay Dickinson. (Hove: Psychology Press, 2003), 122.



### Nostalgic place

Interestingly besides the utopian spaces in *La La Land* there are also “nostalgic places”, these are the places on which the nostalgia of the characters is focused. The jazz bar turned samba-tapas place for instance. Sebastian’s nostalgia seems to be focused on this place, which acts as a souvenir. This is the place towards which his whole neo-classicism is directed, the place that symbolizes what is wrong with the present and thus the corruption of the “great past”. The nostalgic place is something limited and very demarcated. It exist purely in relation to a specific time and place. But as it is a souvenir it must be complemented by a narrative, in this case Sebastian’s longing to save jazz. The nostalgic place too is idealised, it exists purely in relation to the narrative and its exact history is not explored in the film. In the case of the samba-tapas bar it is a place with a supposedly rich jazz history, we know this from Sebastian. But Sebastian wants to save it, he wants to restore it to its former glory. This is once again the fetish, the bar stands for the whole of jazz.<sup>19</sup> Which Sebastian wants to save. Another example of a nostalgic place could be the “The Lighthouse” bar, where Sebastian takes Mia to listen to jazz for the first time. Here the bar itself is not a souvenir, but rather the jazz is. It is looked at by Sebastian and Mia, it is complemented by the narrative given by Sebastian, and it captures his nostalgia. The quartet represents jazz as a whole once again (or rather the neo-classicist standpoint). Los Angeles must not be forgotten as a nostalgic place in *La La Land*. The way it is represented is purely nostalgic. The cars are old-fashioned, the costumes could as well have been used in a 50s film. Mia walks in front of a mural representing all the Hollywood icons. Sebastian and Mia go to the Universal lot, where a lot of classic films like *Casablanca* (1942) were shot. The whole story plays only in these “old” parts of Los Angeles which are very reminiscing of the Hollywood golden age. The city acts as a nostalgic place with all these souvenirs and allusions to the golden age of the city. If we look further Los Angeles also fulfills to the utopian aspect of nostalgia, with its highway, sunset, the planetarium and its bars not only functioning as allusions and souvenirs but also as settings for the many utopian spaces.

### Construction of nostalgia

The nostalgic place is very demarcated, distant and from the past. The utopian space however is free of demarcation and is sometimes even free of logic. Both are of course highly idealized and both are parts of nostalgia. This is how nostalgia is constructed in *La La Land*. Nostalgia is partly longing to an idealised past. This is the nostalgic place and use of souvenirs in *La La Land*. The sets, costumes, souvenirs, citations and especially the music are pointing the public to the past, without ever

<sup>19</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 135.

mentioning any negative aspects of this period. Nostalgia is also longing to a better future, which music delivers in the utopian thought, which is embodied by the utopian space in musicals. These two “spaces”, the utopian and the nostalgic place are both key elements of nostalgia. Because the nostalgic place is demarcated and bound to the past it is complemented by Sebastian’s longing to save it. The utopian space is the accomplishment of the underlying desire, the projection of the past in the future. In this case the music becomes more than souvenir, it is at the same narrative level as the images shown. The synchronisation gives a sense of unity and satisfaction. The Planetarium sequence is a perfect example of the two. It is a nostalgic place for it is used in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and it is shown in that context in *La La Land* when Mia and Sebastian go to a cinema where it is shown. So it becomes a demarcated souvenir. Then they go to the planetarium, and then starts a big dance sequence. It is very utopian (they fly), but takes place inside a nostalgic place. So the longing to the past is concretized in the building itself, which is used as a souvenir and thus is complemented by the narrative of the movie. And the utopian thought of nostalgia is also concretized in the big, romantic, fantastical utopian space created in the nostalgic place. These are two key elements of nostalgia, the third one is the discontentment with the present which is omnipresent in the movie. This is how nostalgia is constructed and evoked in the movie. Souvenirs create this longing towards a bygone, idealised past. They are most significantly embodied by locations such as the planetarium, the bar and Los Angeles. They are also embodied by the use of a musical genre such as jazz. These souvenirs are very demarcated, it is made very clear that they are from the past and they are stripped from their original context. However, they exist as a fetish, thus signifying to something bigger. They have to be complemented by a narrative thus they contain a limitless utopian potential in them. This is brought to life by the music in the utopian spaces. Utopian spaces are the realisation of this longing to a better place. If there was only looking back in *La La Land* it would only be reminiscing. The fact is that this is an original movie, with original music and a new narrative. This is why *La La Land* is nostalgic, through the use of music it honours the past, it longs to it. The glorious time of jazz and Hollywood musicals. However it keeps its originality and energy, this combined with the utopian space synchronised to it on screen delivers the utopian thought of nostalgia. The reality in which they live is simply the alienation of the tonic, and the utopian spaces are the return home. All these aspects are to be found in the use of the biggest souvenirs such as the planetarium or jazz. These souvenirs create the longing to the past and make the utopian thought reality, thus creating nostalgia.

## Conclusion

*La La Land* is an interesting movie for it is completely original whilst being nostalgic. We have concluded that nostalgia consists of three core elements. A longing to an idealised past, a discontentment with the present, and a utopian longing to a perfect future. All three of these elements are present in the movie. The longing to the past is evoked by the use of souvenirs. The score is reminiscing of the classical Hollywood period. The utopian thought is embodied in the utopian space in the movie. The music creates the longing to go home, so music in itself is nostalgic. But the nostalgic places are also the setting for the utopian spaces, where the music can create the sense of being home and of a collective identity. So the music both creates the longing to the past and gives us the satisfaction of utopia in the utopian spaces. However, *La La Land* in the end robs the public of the home. The “what if?” scene does not end on the tonic, it does not end with Mia and Sebastian being together. Perhaps we can learn something from this. In the context of the big nostalgic wave in our culture today, it is important to realise that nostalgia ultimately is a longing to the impossible. The past that we look back to does no longer exist and has, in fact, never existed. Nostalgia is caused by a discontentment of the present, but does not give any solutions. Maybe this is the hidden message of

*La La Land*, it creates this incredible utopian world only to abruptly disrupt it by what is ultimately the reality.

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