

Shelby McNeal

Dr. Blim

MUS331

14 December 2023

“I’ll Cue You In:”

How Music and Color Reveal Andrew Neiman and Terence Fletcher’s Similarities in *Whiplash*

There is a well-known saying that “You are who you surround yourself with.” Though cliché, this seems to be proven true. The film *Whiplash* perhaps serves as an illustration of this. In the film, a talented young drummer named Andrew Neiman grapples with the intense demands of his unfair, selfish teacher, whose core motivation lies in creating a legacy for himself (even if he is just remembered as having taught “one of the greats”). Andrew’s obsession with becoming “one of the greats” himself, makes the two an unfavorable pairing, that continuously bring out the extreme tendencies in each other. In an examination of key scenes, it becomes evident that the *Whiplash* score paired with specific colored lighting, effectively portrays the true perfectionistic motivations of both Fletcher and Andrew, revealing their underlying similarities.

Whiplash (2014) was directed by Damien Chazelle and composed by Justin Hurwitz. It follows the story of a jazz drummer named Andrew Neiman who attends Shaffer Conservatory of Music, a top-rated music school. There, he meets Terence Fletcher, who is a strict, abusive instructor who sees potential in Andrew and quickly transfers him to the top jazz ensemble. Andrew is driven by his desire to be a successful musician, so much so that he endures terrible and unfair treatment from Fletcher. He expects a lot of himself and feels his only purpose in life is to leave a lasting legacy. As Andrew says, “I’d rather die drunk, broke at 34 and have people at

a dinner table talk about me than live to be rich and sober at 90 and nobody remembered who I was” (Chazelle). Fletcher would likely resonate with this statement, as he, too, is motivated by his legacy. As Fletcher is nearing the end of his professional career, he turns to extreme measures as a last attempt to create a legacy that people will remember. He clings to Andrew because he sees potential in him and hopes to take the credit for teaching a great musician his ways.

Music and sound can effectively tell viewers a lot about a given character. Whether it is a specific musical motif or genre, music can reveal a character’s feelings or motivations. In *Whiplash*, Hurwitz’s score features almost exclusively jazz music, which clearly pairs well with the content of the film, considering Andrew and Fletcher are jazz musicians. *Whiplash* includes a significant amount of diegetic music, however, sometimes the music starts non-diegetically or switches from one to the other. These choices are all significant and serve a purpose, thus proving that “jazz was always insistently visual” (Pillai, 1). Additionally, the style of music in this film is significant not just because it is about jazz musicians. Jazz is characterized by syncopated rhythms and varying degrees of improvisation, which often means no two jazz performances are the same. Different from classical music, jazz is much more free and up to the artist’s interpretation. This is relevant because both Fletcher and Andrew seem to be motivated by perfect performances. However, a perfect performance, by definition, isn’t even technically possible in jazz music. Furthermore, “jazz is entangled with the ideological recognition of authenticity as individual, autonomous creative expression (Carlson, 6). This directly contradicts both Andrew and Fletcher’s expectations of perfection, as jazz is supposed to be about authenticity.

In illustrating the character’s motivation, the score directly pairs with the colored lighting choices throughout the film. Most, if not all of the scenes, in the film feature prominent green or

yellow-tinted lighting. The cool-toned green light appears when Andrew is experiencing either hope, success, or confidence. The yellow light, on the other hand, seems to represent Andrew when he is being mistreated, and experiencing extreme anxiety or obsession. Regarding Fletcher's character, the green light seems to humanize him (or as much as possible with an antagonist like Fletcher), and the yellow light supports his portrayal as a true, unredeemable villain. This is not to say that Fletcher is nice or that his actions are justified when he is filmed with green lights, it just represents his potentially redeeming moments. Working together with the jazz score, the colored lights reveal both Fletcher and Andrew's intensity and passion.

Early in the film, Fletcher observes Andrew's jazz band rehearsal. He barges into the rehearsal and takes over conducting, looking for new musicians to invite to rehearse with his studio band. As Andrew slowly walks up to meet Fletcher, slow jazz music plays non-diegetically and the tempo matches Andrew's footsteps, highlighting the slowness of his steps and his uncertainty. The music features a bass line, snare, and cymbal and feels oddly upbeat and cheerful, almost suggesting that Andrew is in a sort of daze. As Andrew turns around to face his jealous, staring classmates a saxophone starts playing long slow notes at a single pitch. Andrew quickly returns to reality as this ambient, smooth music becomes overpowered by the jazz band when they start playing again, and thus the music returns to diegetic. The use of non-diegetic music is representative of Andrew's excitement and hope for his experience with Fletcher's studio band. He feels proud and almost arrogant at first, however, he quickly learns the truth about Fletcher and his motivations. The shortness of the non-diegetic music in the scene signals that Andrew's excitement and hope will also be short-lived.

After a series of grueling rehearsals with Fletcher's studio band, Andrew, who appears much less confident, performs with the band for the Overbrook Jazz Competition. In this scene,

lighting is used to illustrate the emotional intensity. When the camera is facing Andrew and the other band members, they are lit up with traditional, warm-toned stage lights against an orange backdrop. This represents the anxiety that all of the musicians, but Andrew specifically, experience when performing. Fletcher has put a lot of pressure on the musicians to perform perfectly, so they appear tense and focused on stage. When the camera is facing Fletcher and the audience, there are green lights behind him. This reveals Fletcher's core motivation: to inspire someone to become one of the greats. A musician himself, Fletcher was never able to be considered one of the greats, he just ended up as an instructor, which is likely not good enough in his eyes. He takes this anger at his failed aspirations out on his students and selfishly tries to make one of his students one of the greats, thus improving his own legacy and giving his life the purpose it currently lacks. Similarly, Andrew suffers through this extreme, unfair treatment just because he wants to be considered one of the greats. Both characters are obsessed with living a life that people will remember long after their deaths, so much so that they resort to extreme methods.

After a rehearsal lasting until nearly 2 am, Andrew walks out of the studio in slow motion with bright green lights shining on his face. An ambient sound drones in the background and is slowly blended with muffled jazz music. This choice represents that even though Andrew was exhausted and likely brain-dead from an intense rehearsal, he never truly stopped thinking about jazz. This music continues to fade in as the scene shifts to Andrew reviewing his music on the bus ride on the way to the Dunellen Competition. He listens to this music through headphones, but viewers still hear it. Utilizing point-of-view sound here brings viewers closer to Andrew's character and more sympathetic or understanding of his choices. Andrew clearly isn't a villain, however, he has many self-sabotaging qualities, that could potentially make him hard to root for.

It becomes necessary, then, to make audiences empathize and see his experiences behind the scenes.

When Andrew loses his music on the way to the Dunellen Competition, fast-paced jazz music plays non-diegetically and is paired with quick cuts as he rushes to find his music. This music adds to the intensity and urgency of the scene. It remains in the background until Andrew puts his phone down and the music fades out abruptly into uncomfortable silence. Then, suddenly, the loud crash of the car takes viewers by surprise. Andrew's rapid breathing eventually breaks the silence. This portrayal of a car crash feels uncomfortably realistic. Despite just being in a car crash with a bloody face and hands, Andrew remains devoted to his performance and starts running to the competition. The fast-tempo cymbals and jazz music fade back in, but this time the music sounds almost haunting. The music lacks a melody, so it is just a repetitive loop that sounds like a never-ending cycle, likely mirroring Andrew's never-ending cycle of seeking Fletcher's approval. This intense moment most dramatically portrays the extreme measures Andrew is willing to take just to succeed. It is clear that both characters have developed extreme determination and obsession.

After their time apart, as Andrew was expelled and Fletcher was fired, the two meet again at a local jazz club. Here Fletcher invites Andrew to play the drums for the JVC Jazz Festival. Andrew hesitantly agrees. Fletcher is giving a pep talk to the performers before the show, which likely causes more anxiety than reassurance. This moment feels dramatic, as there is no music playing, either non-diegetically or diegetically. Fletcher's message overall is more positive than any of his others in the film. He seems pleasant and is even somewhat encouraging to the performers. But this is misleading, as he is betraying and manipulating Andrew. Fletcher is filmed with green lights in the background, however, at this moment the lighting choice is not

just tricking Andrew, but also the viewers. The green light is typically used to portray Fletcher's better moments, which this originally seems to be, however, viewers quickly find out that Fletcher has done perhaps his most cruel thing yet: attempted to deceive Andrew and purposefully humiliate him in front of a large audience. In this scene, Andrew is filmed slightly off-center to the right, with yellow lighting filling $\frac{2}{3}$ of the frame and green lighting filling the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$. This represents Andrew's hope that Fletcher has changed, but his fear and skepticism are still prominent. Because the yellow light is more prominent, it hints to viewers that Andrew is being mistreated despite Fletcher's convincing performance.

During the performance, it is quickly revealed that Fletcher was betraying Andrew. As Andrew is trying to improvise music he's never heard, the lighting flickers between cool and warm-toned, and Andrew is even completely in the shadow at times. As Fletcher concludes the song (while Andrew doesn't get the cut off), he smiles, appearing proud that he humiliated and embarrassed Andrew. The green lights on Fletcher's face fade into the warm-toned yellow stage lights, revealing Fletcher's true, malicious intentions. When Andrew comes back on stage and starts playing on his own, he takes all of the power from Fletcher and proves that Fletcher's job on stage is somewhat pointless, confirming Fletcher's earlier line: "Any fucking moron can wave his arms and keep people in tempo" (Chazelle). However, he eventually appears to approve of Andrew's playing, by nodding and fixing his cymbal. This is confirmed in the final shots of the film, which are extreme close-ups of both Andrew and Fletcher. While we see Andrew smile, Fletcher's close-up doesn't include his mouth, but viewers can tell he is mouthing two words. These words appear to be "good job," as Fletcher previously said "There are no two words in the English language more harmful than good job" (Chazelle).

Though not at first clear, Fletcher and Andrew share many similarities. Both are obsessive, perfectionistic, driven, and ambitious. In some ways, Fletcher's character may serve as a warning for what Andrew could become with age. While Fletcher appears more extreme in the film, upon deeper analysis, it becomes clear that Andrew also harbors these qualities. These similarities are represented through the score and lighting choices. Using a jazz score is ironic, as the film follows two perfectionist characters, yet jazz performances can never be perfect. The ending of the film specifically, highlights the profound underlying similarities. Fletcher remains illuminated by yellow light until the end of the film, which confirms his portrayal as a true, unredeemable villain. Interestingly, Andrew also remains illuminated by yellow light until the end of the film suggesting he is still experiencing anxiety or obsession. This choice is significant because it proves that Andrew will never be able to escape his obsessive nature and desire to get approval, play perfectly, and create a lasting legacy. Though ending on a good note (both musically and figuratively), neither Fletcher nor Andrew's characters are truly redeemed. Andrew appears to have adopted elements of Fletcher's personality, perhaps confirming that he will live a similar life. Andrew's newfound confidence is ultimately revealed when he tells Fletcher, the director of the band, that he'll cue him in.

Works Cited

- Ballas, Anthony. "Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16, winter 2018, pp. 114–117.
- Carlson, Gretchen L. *Improvising the Score: Rethinking Modern Film Music through Jazz*. University Press of Mississippi, 2022.
- Chazelle, Damien, director. *Whiplash*. Universal Pictures, 2014.
- Pillai, Nicolas. *Jazz As Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image*. I.B. Tauris, 2017.