

Once Upon a Time in La La Land

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### Abstract

This paper will examine the films *La La Land* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* by utilizing Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Model along with Roland Barthe's essay, "Myth Today." *La La Land* exemplifies the chaos and hardships of living in and trying to make it in modern Los Angeles, an expensive and competitive city where hopeful people with unrealistic dreams face harsh realities. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* showcases a turbulent time in Los Angeles during the 60's and how stardom and glamour fade. I will examine the characters and stories of both films and how they bring to life commentary on idealistic fantasy versus bleak reality. Barthe's theorization of myth will help illustrate how the struggles and experiences of people living in Los Angeles highlights the city's cutthroat and bleak nature, a dark side that has always and still exists. Hall's "frameworks of knowledge" will help show how the films use characteristics of Old Hollywood to create a dreaminess and nostalgia in an effort to glamorize Los Angeles.

## Once Upon a Time in La La Land

**Introduction**

Through the decades, Los Angeles has attracted the attention and desire of many due to its glamour, the culture, its bustling entrepreneurial and entertainment industries, and, of course, Hollywood. What has been considered the City of Dreams is often celebrated in the films it produces, painting Los Angeles as a beautiful place filled with passion, showbiz, and where people go to work hard and make their dreams come true. Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* (2016) and Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019), two popular modern films that garnered various awards, can both be regarded as love letters to Los Angeles and Hollywood.

*La La Land* tells the story of Mia, an aspiring actress, and Sebastian, a struggling jazz pianist, as they meet, fall in love, and maneuver their way through modern day Los Angeles while pursuing their dreams and trying to make it in their respective careers. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is a tribute to Hollywood's Golden Age during the 60's. It follows Rick Dalton, a once famous TV actor, and his best friend and stunt double, Cliff Booth, as they both seek to reignite their statuses and careers. The film also follows Sharon Tate and Roman Polanski, a famous Hollywood couple tragically murdered by the Mason family.

While the films commemorate Los Angeles and illuminate its wonders and opportunities, they also highlight the city's rapacious, chaotic, and delusory nature. Underneath the illusive charm and appeal exists a City of Broken Dreams; a city that maintains a facade of hope and idealism where the majority face obstacles and suffer. *La La Land* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* offer ideas that we cannot have everything we want in life, pursuing dreams requires sacrifice, and it is extremely difficult (and nearly impossible) to have the ideal life in a city like

Los Angeles. These recognizable concepts take the form of myth, as Roland Barthes labels it, that have existed for a long time and continue to do so.

According to Barthes in his essay, “Myth Today,” myth is “a system of communication” (Barthes, 1973, p. 261) that is “constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it” (Barthes, 1973, p. 263). Therefore, the manifestations of myth are ones people are already familiar with because they reinforce the way we already view the world. Barthes states,

“The naturalization of the concept [is] the essential function of myth...This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden...but because they are naturalized. In fact, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system, but as an inductive one...myth is read as a factual system” (Barthes, 1973, p. 268)

This relates to *La La Land* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* because both films reassert that life in Los Angeles is not always the glamorous and rewarding life it is dreamt to be.

“Hollywood endings” where all desires are achieved, the protagonist is fully rewarded, and peace, love, and happiness triumph is an illusion. The films simplify these messages and also draw in viewers by incorporating elements of Old Hollywood locations and productions. This is in direct correlation with Stuart Hall’s concept of frameworks of knowledge on the model’s encoding side. To Hall, reality is “constantly mediated by and through language,” and the “operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and ‘naturalness’ of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use” (Hall, 1973, p. 511). The language of *La La Land* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* aligns with Hall’s argument and allows them to operate as a signification of persisting adversity and calamity in Los Angeles.

In what follows, I will discuss the story and characters in both films to show how their lives and the events that take place expose the underlying myth of the reality of Hollywood. Ultimately, this discussion will frame *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and *La La Land* from a Barthian perspective in order to argue that from past to present, Los Angeles is not the fairytale it has oftentimes been expressed as.

### ***Once Upon a Time in Hollywood***

Multiple characters, events, and storylines intersect in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* to bring to life a narrative about 1969 Los Angeles. In Stuart Hall's Encoding/decoding model, frameworks of knowledge are the already existing discourses or reference points used to create new discourses and media artifacts. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is a 1960s Los Angeles time capsule. Through production design, characters, costume, make-up, and shooting on-location, Quentin Tarantino draws inspiration from Old Hollywood and its golden age of classical Hollywood cinema from the 20s to the 60s to create a film with its own individual narrative that both celebrates and replicates Los Angeles' history. The historical Regency and Village Theater, Mexican restaurant El Coyote, The Playboy Mansion, and the Musso & Frank Grill are a few iconic locations integrated into the film. Aside from directly incorporating real individuals from history, such as Sharon Tate played by Margot Robbie, Tarantino "cited inspiration from '60s-era actors like Ty Hardin" and "Hal Needham" to create the main characters, Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth (Alter, 2019). Through these frameworks of knowledge, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* captures a feeling of nostalgia and charm, and it mythologizes life in Los Angeles and stardom in Hollywood.

Tarantino recreates Hollywood's Golden Age, but he also recreates a familiar idea for the audience that Hollywood uses and abuses everyone, and that all moments of glamour and fame have their end. Barthes remarks that myth "transforms history into nature," and that "what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (Barthes, 1973, p. 268). Rick Dalton, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, was a famous star in the 1950s as the lead actor on *Bounty Law*, a Western TV series. However, his once prosperous career is now dwindling as the film industry is changing and being taken over by younger and more modern artists. His stunt double, Cliff Booth, lives in a trailer and cannot find new work due to rumors he murdered his wife. Once in the limelight of Hollywood, both characters' careers have largely failed or are no longer existent.

Dalton lives alone in a large mansion, plays much different and smaller roles, is a noticeable alcoholic, and needs Cliff to drive him around because of a suspended license due to DUI arrests. Dalton's lifestyle references a deeper underlying meaning and historical reality. He is a familiar representation of the celebrity crushed by fame, a once celebrated figure full of potential that is taken over by the spotlight and then thrown away by a money-grubbing and ravenous industry. Myth "establishes a blissful clarity," Barthes remarks, where "things appear to mean something by themselves" (Barthes, 1973, p. 269). Dalton's reality is a familiar one. Throughout history, numerous celebrities have fallen victim to drugs, alcohol, and crime as a result of being exploited by Hollywood. Barthes explains, "myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (Hall, 1973, p. 268).

From a Barthian perspective, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* uses history to create a sign that brings to light the reality of the rise and fall of stardom. In one of the film's scenes, Dalton is on the set of a Western TV series when he sits next to his eight-year-old co-star and begins reading a book. It is the story of a once young and famous bronco buster, Easy Breezy, who takes a fall and has his life changed forever, having to come to terms "with what it's like to be slightly more useless each day" (Tarantino). The story parallels Rick Dalton and the course of his life and career in Los Angeles. It is a reflection of what Hollywood has done to him. When his co-star says she is "practically crying" even though she "hasn't read it yet," Dalton tells her in "about fifteen years, you'll be living it" (Tarantino). From this, the audience can acknowledge how fame's permanent sacrifice outweighs its temporary benefits.

At the end of the movie, the Manson Family members who were supposed to murder everyone in Tate's house are killed. Rick Dalton is invited for a drink by the cheerful and alive Sharon Tate, leaving hope his career could be revived through this new connection. It is a complete reimagining and remodeling of a tragic and brutal history. This shows that *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is precisely what its title insinuates: a fairy tale. It is an illusion and idealism for what could be if not for the destructive nature of Hollywood and the violence Los Angeles was experiencing during this time.

### ***La La Land***

*La La Land* utilizes a much more modern perspective, setting the film in current day Los Angeles, California. The story revolves around Mia and Sebastian. Mia is an aspiring actress, working as a barista in a coffee shop to get by while she attends various auditions and parties with friends to make connections. Growing up in Nevada and falling in love with classic

Hollywood films her aunt showed her, who was also an actress, Mia always idealized Hollywood and dreamt of making it big. Sebastian is a talented jazz pianist who is completely in love, and maybe even a bit obsessed, with jazz. He dreams of owning his own jazz club and spends nearly every moment of every day practicing and playing. After a few chance encounters, they fall in love, supporting each other's passion and pursuit of their individual dreams.

Trying to break into the industry and own their own club, they are both driven by a desire for more, their love for each other, and the magic and possibilities of the city that surrounds them. However, their efforts are repeatedly denied, and they endure hardships and numerous losses. Mia encounters countless rejection and failed auditions. In one of the earlier scenes of the movie, an audition she goes to proves unsuccessful when the casting director takes a call in the middle of her scene. Sebastian must play at various gigs in order to get by and also has difficulty finding or maintaining work. In one instance, he is fired from playing at a restaurant after performing an improvised piece on the piano instead of the traditional Christmas setlist. Throughout the film, both characters experience feelings of frustration, sadness, hopelessness, exhaustion, and confliction. From a Barthesian perspective, Mia and Sebastian project the normative ideology that being recognized in the entertainment industry and being successful in Hollywood is exceedingly difficult and nearly impossible for the vast majority. If this weren't the case, Mia and Sebastian would be famous and well-off from the start of the film.

Mia and Sebastian are a representation of the struggling-artist, a timeless characterization that shows talent, passion, and hard work are not always fully rewarded, especially in a place as competitive and merciless as Los Angeles. Barthes asserts, "What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have



produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality” (Barthes, 1973, p. 268). *La La Land* is a reflection of the reality of the many downsides and hardships of pursuing dreams in Los Angeles and Hollywood, a reality that is familiar with viewers. This further connects to Hall’s discussion in his “Encoding, decoding” essay when he states that the “level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and associations, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions” (Hall, 1973, pp. 512-513).

To display these dominant ideologies in a simplified manner, *La La Land* uses frameworks of knowledge by taking inspiration from Hollywood musicals from the 1920’s to the 60’s. The movie itself is a musical, incorporating songs, cinematography, colorful costumes, production design, and dance as “a throwback to the golden age of musicals” (Brazier, 2017). *La La Land* is particularly reminiscent of productions such as *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), *Swing Time* (1936), and *The Band Wagon* (1953) according to the article “How the Classic Hollywood Musical Influenced *La La Land*.” This mixing of old and new offers a layer of nostalgia and enchantment, enhancing the film’s discourse on fantasy versus reality in the world of Los Angeles and Hollywood.

According to Barthes, myth takes complex ideas and simplifies them by using recognizable meanings that reinforce the way we already view the world. Mia must live with other roommates at one point in order to pay rent. The beginning of the movie takes place in a long traffic jam on a Los Angeles highway. While Mia is on a double date at a restaurant, the people at the table engage in vapid conversation and discuss expensive vacations they have been

on, notably, an Indonesian “5-star jungle eco-resort” (Chazelle). This further highlights Los Angeles’ often unpleasant yet realistic qualities; that it is expensive, it is crowded, and the people can be rather superficial and pretentious. The nature and reality of the city blended with its cutthroat Hollywood industry makes it a place that is tough to maneuver in, be recognized in, and pursue dreams in without experiencing some losses along the way.

Later on in the film, an old classmate of Sebastian’s invites him to be the keyboardist in his band. Sebastian is hesitant at first, turned off by the group’s pop style of jazz. At the denotative level, Sebastian is joining a successful band, making a steady income, and has a flourishing career. However, at the connotative level, he is sacrificing his own values and the type of music he enjoys playing as well as losing a part of himself in order to make it in an industry that is solely concerned with profit and “the next big thing.” Even at the end of the film, Mia and Sebastian have both finally achieved their dreams and are immensely successful. However, they are no longer together, visibly proud of each other yet also saddened by the loss of their love and what could have been. This further shows that one cannot have it all, and some dreams are too idealistic.

## **Conclusion**

The ideology present in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and *La La Land* highlights the impermeable boundary between fantasy and reality. Damien Chazelle and Quentin Tarantino have recreated media artifacts that enforce the ideology I have explained throughout this paper. Both films reiterate the normative idea that pursuing dreams and maintaining fame in Hollywood is a slippery slope. They take on a greater signification which supports Barthes’ perspective in “Myth Today” and how myth is naturalized speech, using familiar meanings to reinforce the way

we look at the world. By constructing and drawing inspiration from material that has already been worked on and resonates with audiences, the movies' usage of elements of Old Hollywood fits into Hall's frameworks of knowledge on the model's encoding side. This allows *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and *La La Land* to be historically significant and culturally relevant.

Set in two different time periods in Los Angeles, both films support the myth that it is exceedingly difficult to obtain as well as maintain fame and success in Hollywood, a highly competitive and avaricious industry. Furthermore, through the pursuit of dreams and remaining relevant, one will endure loss or exploitation. While our society largely romanticizes "the hustle" of the entertainment industry and celebrates the glamour and magnetism of Hollywood, the films see through this illusion. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and *La La Land* are stories that exemplify the normative concept of reality pertaining to the limits, obstacles, and facade imposed by Hollywood.

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