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The Empty Space

As an early CinemaScope film, *A Star is Born* had to find ways to utilize widescreen and prove that the technology was worth its troubles. Musicals provided an ample medium to show off the usefulness of widescreen, as musicals often inhabit an elevated reality in which the larger screen space could be filled with choreography and artistic imagery. Regardless, *A Star is Born* prioritizes its use of widescreen on conveying emotionally impactful experiences, as the film is filled equally with dramatic sequences as it is with over-the-top musical numbers. Through careful composition, George Cukor is able to fill the widescreen frame, delivering an emotional experience that characterizes the film as a tear-jerker. *A Star is Born* uses space, depth, and light to compose its frame in order to deliver an impactful widescreen experience during its dramatic moments, while it prioritizes color for its musical numbers.

A Star is Born departs from the typical musical film due to its focus on accentuating Judy Garland's vocal performance more than on elaborate musical sequences. The result is an exploration of character and emotion rather than song, as each of the film's musical numbers associates a strong, identifiable emotion with the performance that may or may not be relevant to the song's tone. For instance, in the "Lose That Long Face" number, Esther has a subtle yet clear exasperated and downtrodden tone, which is clearly seen directly before and after the performance. This tone is explicitly shown through Garland's acting, as she wearily puffs out her cheeks and holds her newspaper wrong before the number, and looks completely exhausted and

dissatisfied as soon as the number ends. Esther's dreariness is juxtaposed against the cheery musical number, placing the audience in a role of empathy with her because we can see how her emotional struggles interfere with her actions. The juxtaposition of happy musical numbers with sad overtones is effective at establishing *A Star is Born* as a tear-jerker when actual tragedy strikes, which leaves the film's audience in a position of emotional vulnerability.

In its weakened emotional state, the audience may be more susceptible to noticing minute details, allowing for slower sequences that prioritize powerful cinematographic techniques. The most applicable scene to this method is the film's climax, during which Norman Maine commits suicide. The scene is arranged to have the greatest impact on the audience, as Maine's death is justified through the previous scene in which he overhears Esther say she cannot act anymore because of Maine. Thus, Maine controls the following sequence, and all of his actions motivate the camera movement.

Within the film, physical spaces are often used to emphasize the focus within the frame as well as how large and overwhelming the space around the focus is. Maine's death follows this trend as his suicide incorporates empty rooms and landscapes that force the audience to remain attentive to the focus, which is Maine. This differs from earlier in the film, when the space is filled with actors dressed in vibrant colors as well as other complex imagery, as is seen in the first backstage scene. Stanley Kubrick shows the effectiveness of emptying the frame except for the subject in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, specifically during Frank Poole's death. Kubrick composes the widescreen frame using complex symmetrical and asymmetrical arrangements in order to emphasize the vast nothingness that Poole spirals into. By alternating these shots, all of which are in indoor locations, Kubrick is able to disorient the viewer and put a large emphasis on how empty space is around Poole's doomed body, especially since space is physically portrayed

larger than usual due to the wider screen. Maine's death sequence begins indoors with extensive symmetry, making sure the audience feels safe and comfortable. Unlike Kubrick, Cukor keeps the indoor space very simple and empty, almost completely black at some points in order to make it seem like Esther and Maine are the only ones in the world, albeit with dark undertones. When Maine exits the house, the symmetry is completely broken as Maine travels from the top left of the frame to the bottom right, a long walk made longer by the wider frame. Furthermore, even though the space is still vast and empty, it is much busier than before, with the water both physically and emotionally swallowing Maine's tiny figure as he walks into the ocean. The lead-in to and execution of Maine's suicide give the largest emotional impact the scene could give.

Accompanying space is depth, which Cukor uses to quickly fill in the screen space and overwhelm the audience. While the empty space gives Maine's death a physical manifestation of emotion, the aftermath presents a different experience. The film is tasked with building up tension once again, adding noisy elements that eventually lead us to Esther, who is overwhelmed by everything around her. Through the noise, we are meant to empathize with Esther and feel her grief. Cukor achieves this buildup through the scene where we learn of Maine's death, when Matt Libby answers numerous phone calls from the press. Borrowing from Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, *A Star is Born* widens the space by placing the scene in an office with windows. Because we can see deeper into the building, Cukor is able to fill both the foreground and background with busy workers. This method is contradictory to *Rebel Without a Cause*, where the added depth through windows is used to keep the three main characters clearly visible within the frame, even when they are in separate rooms. Meanwhile, the scene after Maine's death is in a cramped but deep space that is clouded by both visual and audible noise, which transitions naturally into the voracious crowds that storm Esther after Maine's funeral.

Cukor uses light to make the transition from Maine's death to its aftermath much more impactful. Before Maine dies, *A Star is Born* inhabits a poetic aesthetic akin to a Renaissance work of art. Titian's *Danaë and the Shower of Gold*, painted in 1554, can be described as "ut pictor poeta" because of its seductive, dreamlike use of light. Similarly, Maine's death uses light to beautify the tragic moment, just as how Titian's piece beautifully depicts a virgin's tragic seduction by the god Jupiter. The poetic use of light in this scene effectively strengthens the emotional impact of Maine's suicide. While Maine and Esther have their final conversation, the sunset beams light into the house, which creates huge expressive shadows and adds a moody, dark undertone to the scene. Furthermore, Esther's dress is accented by a bright yellow hue, which mimics the sunlight from outside. Therefore, the composition indoors represents the complete spectrum from dark to light. In order to complete the light spectrum once Maine exits the house, an artificial vignette is added until the sun is low enough that the rocks on the shore are mere silhouettes. By stimulating our visual senses with poetic beauty, the film is able to further entrench us in the emotional death that we are meant to personally feel.

Although *A Star is Born* greatly benefits from its use of widescreen and color, the film could achieve the same dramatic goals in a "squarish" ratio without color. "Squarish" black-and-white films, such as Frank Borzage's *Street Angel*, already prove that dramatic sequences can be very effective, even without dialogue. Borzage uses exaggerated environments that reflect the characters' inner turmoil, as well as moody sources of light such as a lit match, to convey an emotional experience that stimulates the audience's senses. The addition of dialogue in *A Star is Born* could therefore simply exist to legitimize interpreted emotions through explicit language, while the environments and compositions would have the luxury to be more abstract and expressive due to the heightened musical world. While dramatic sequences would translate well,

musical numbers would be difficult to pull off under these restrictions and still impact the same experience. The wide frame allows for simple yet mesmerizing visuals to accompany and enhance musical numbers. For example, *Guys and Dolls* uses symmetry in most of its musical numbers to fill the frame and immerse the audience. *A Star is Born* uses the same technique, such as in the “Swanee” and “You Took Advantage of Me” numbers, both of which use symmetry and the color red to heighten the emotional impact of the music. Regardless, *Singin’ in the Rain* proves that with talented, enthusiastic performers, a musical can fully utilize a smaller frame without compromising. As Judy Garland’s amazing vocal talent holds together *A Star is Born*, the issue would be more with translating the film to a colorless medium. Luckily, Cukor uses colors as accents in *A Star is Born*, instead mostly focusing on incorporating white and black into the film’s musical numbers as seen again in “Swanee” and “You Took Advantage of Me”. Therefore, the film needs to only exaggerate its use of light in order to compensate for its lack of color.

A Star is Born is indivisible from its colorful widescreen composition. To restrict the film into a smaller colorless frame would be to essentially craft a new film out of an old one, even if the plot and emotional content remained unchanged. *A Star is Born* is spacious and poetic, and just as structure and vocabulary define the personality of a poem, space and light make *A Star is Born* a memorable emotional experience.