

Lady Bird Analysis:

Communication Through the Medium of Film

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In the art of filmmaking, the purpose of a production is to communicate a message to an audience through the telling of a story. A film conveys its messages denotatively with the literal images that appear on the screen, and connotatively through the meanings and symbols the audience attaches to those images in order to provide the narrative with greater depth. Film is a medium that leaves a lot of room for interpretation amongst the audience; therefore, it requires a team of talented filmmakers that can collectively work together to ensure that a film's intended message will be received correctly by those who watch it. Director Greta Gerwig of the 2017 critically acclaimed film *Lady Bird* said that "film is a collaborative medium. You have your vision of what it is, but then other people get to bring their storytelling corner to it – 'this is how I tell this story' [...]" (O'Falt, 2017). A movie does not communicate solely with actors and dialogue, but also with an intricate system of cinematic elements. Through the carefully crafted use of colour, lighting, post-production editing and soundtrack, *Lady Bird* is a prime example of brilliant communication through the medium of film.

The Medium is the Message

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan was the man behind the famous line "the medium is the message". McLuhan claimed that in communication, the way in which a message is delivered is more important than the contents of the message itself. "A medium is any vehicle that conveys information" (Lorimer, 2016), and in this case, the medium of film will be analyzed while applied specifically to the award-winning picture *Lady Bird*.

Colour

In *Lady Bird*, the use of colour is very important and strategically placed to create a visually stimulating production, but also to relay connotative meanings behind the physical objects themselves. In the opening shot, main character Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson's dyed red hair and bright blue-painted nails stand out from the white sheets and soft pink of her and her mother's pajamas as they lay sleeping in a bed. Red is considered a distinctive colour that stands out from typical blonde, brunette and black hair tones, and is also known as a colour that has connotations of being fiery, passionate and strong (Aslam, 2006). For this, one can only assume that Christine chose to dye her hair this vibrant colour as a sign of rebellion. These chosen colours of red and blue already provide a character profile for Christine, in that she looks like a teenager who expresses herself through her colourful physical appearance – and all before her character has even said or done anything. Her colourful appearance becomes more apparent when Christine breaks her wrist, choosing a cast that is bright pink and stands out as an expression of her vibrant personality. This is especially noticeable when she is in an assembly at her Catholic high school, with the obvious shade of pink standing out from the crowd of black and white student uniforms. Christine also chooses to wear blue socks with her school outfit, differentiating her from her peers who all wear white socks and shoes. Christine's very colourful

look, along with her preferred name of “Lady Bird”, shows the audience that she is desperate to be unique and noticeable in a crowd. These colours transform Christine’s character from weird to quirky, effecting how she is perceived by viewers, and how her message as the film’s focus becomes easier to grasp as we begin to understand her.

When Christine is accepted to attend college in New York City, she decides to give her room a makeover before she moves out of her childhood bedroom. Choosing to paint her walls white is a pivotal moment for “Lady Bird’s” character with the colour representing a clean slate as she prepares to begin this next chapter in her life. By covering up the pink that resembles a young girl’s room, it shows that she is ready to move on from her childhood, now that she is graduated, eighteen and growing up. She is not only painting over the adolescent pink, but also everything she wrote on her walls like quotes and the names of her high school boyfriends. The pure colour of the white paint is a metaphor for a fresh start, with her putting drama in the past and looking forward to the future.

With these explanations, one can see that there is a much deeper meaning to colour in film than what first meets the eye. Colours all have connotations of emotion and cultural symbols that an audience attaches to them, and filmmakers are very aware of this. While people may not always be conscious of why certain colours are specifically chosen for a film, the impact can be felt, nonetheless.

Lighting and Post-Production Editing

The shots in *Lady Bird* are not fancy or elaborate in order to stay true to director Gerwig’s vision of the film looking like a memory. They are simple shots such as ‘over the shoulder’ during a conversation or shot through the reflection of a mirror like when Christine and her mother are talking in their bathroom.

Where director Gerwig, cinematographer Sam Levy and colorist Alex Bickel made up for the simplicity of the shots, was in the complexity of the post-production lighting and filtering. This filtration system that Levy and Bickel developed for *Lady Bird* creates a grainy look for the picture. Gerwig said that “it looks painted and almost more saturated, but it’s lost a layer. It looks more like a memory and it looked like the time to me” (O’Falt, 2017). This filtration system also created two colour palettes that were each applied to separate parts of the film. Bickel explained that when Christine is hanging out with the cool kids like Timothée Chalamet’s character in the ‘cool kids’ world’, there is “always a cyan piece of paper in the highlights and lavender in the blacks; and in the Lady Bird world there was more personality, more warmth and humanity, less vogue and more sweet” (O’Falt, 2017). The cyan filter is also applied when Christine is in New York, giving these shots a cooler feel as it is an unfamiliar place and she is no longer in “Lady Bird’s” world. The contrast in filters becomes apparent when she enters a church in the city, and the lighting is immediately noticeable as yellow-toned and warm again. This makes the audience feel that church for Christine is like coming home, emphasizing how lost her character is in such a foreign and intimidating city. These two filters add emotion, and effect how each location and

situation are interpreted by audiences without them even noticing – no other medium can do that, again proving how film has control over how a message is delivered.

Soundtrack

One of the unique things that film offers to the telling of a story is a soundtrack. As the medium of a message, cinema has the ability to provide a distinctive experience to the audience with the help of music to set the tone and mood of the story. In some cases, a good soundtrack can carry a movie. If the music is instrumental and soft, sometimes one does not even notice that it is there, but rather just feels its effects as they watch images unfold on the screen before them. Music can completely change the way a person interprets a message by the way it makes them feel, making it a key contributor to how the medium of film affects the message it is delivering to the audience. With music's ability to relay a message all on its own, an effective and emotionally composed soundtrack is crucial to the communication of a movie's narrative.

Composed by Jon Brion, *Lady Bird*'s soundtrack is simple in order to complement director Gerwig's vision of the film feeling like a memory. With the filmmakers not wanting the production to be overstimulating, the soundtrack only presents itself noticeably a few times. One particular scene where music was key for the audience to decode a message was when Christine's mother is driving home from the hospital where she works full time as a nurse. In the car, she looks at peace and relaxed as a happy song plays in the background; however, when she arrives home the song is immediately cut off when she shuts her car door before walking into the house. This signifies that her home life is a cause of stress for her and her drive home from work every day is when she finally gets a few minutes of peace. As this scene is quite early on in the movie, it gives some character development to Christine's mother, telling the audience that she works very hard to support her family. Another thing that music can be used to signify is the time period of the film. For example, when Christine goes to a high school house party, the well-known pop song "Cry Me a River" by Justin Timberlake is playing, letting audiences know that the story is set in the early 2000's.

For a movie like this where there is a lot of internal reflecting within the characters and reserved dialogue between them, music is what tells the audience how those characters are feeling and how the audience themselves should feel as well.

Conclusion

Film is an effective medium of communication for the power it has over an audience of any size. Filmmakers know that each person will interpret a motion picture differently, yet they still have the ability to connect with viewers as a whole through cinematic elements. This medium is unique compared to other media because it relays a message through not just words, but also through visual, auditory and emotional cues that are just as effective, if not even more so. *Lady*

Bird's direction, cinematography and colour techniques impact the delivery of the film's content in ways that are both noticeable and subconscious, altering and controlling what this coming of age story communicates with the audience. In cinema, the medium *is* the message.

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