
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconstructing the Past in 1920s Cinematic Representations

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| ABSTRACT

This study situates itself within the field of Cultural Studies, exploring the interplay of nostalgia and authenticity in cinematic representations of the 1920s, with a specific focus on Damien Chazelle's films *Babylon* (2022) and *La La Land* (2016). Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of difference and Suzana Tosca's exploration of originality, this research investigates how Chazelle integrates inspiration from classic films, iconic figures, and historical events to create original works that evoke nostalgia without mere replication. This study analyzes how these inspirations are transformed into cinematic representations that blend historical accuracy with creative variation. While Chazelle's films authentically echo past styles, they simultaneously construct cultural narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences. The study employs a gender lens and a comparative approach that juxtaposes and contrasts *Babylon* with Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013). It concludes that both films offer viewers a composite experience of nostalgia and innovation. This dual perspective enriches both historical and cinematic discourses, thereby deepening our understanding of the complexities of human nature and societal evolution.

| KEYWORDS

Nostalgia, Authenticity, Filmic representation, 1920s, *Babylon*, *The Great Gatsby*.

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1. Introduction

Prior to its romanticization, nostalgia was initially conceptualized as a medical condition by physicist Johannes Hofer (Anspach 1934). It was treated in a manner analogous to anxiety or insomnia. In the context of the military, nostalgia was associated with homesickness and perceived as a cause of unproductivity (Br Med J 1976). It was only in the 19th century, during the Romantic Movement, that it began to be viewed in a romanticized light. This is when nostalgia became associated with feelings of sentimentality (Locke 1920).

This analysis examines the interconnections between the concepts of repetition, nostalgia, and authenticity, as explored in Susana Tosca's book *Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture* (2023). Our research draws upon Deleuze's philosophy, which posits that Chazelle's film *Babylon* does not merely replicate the style of the 1920s. Conversely, the film pays homage to and is inventive within the context of that era. Chazelle's creative process is informed by a number of sources, including Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* when presenting stories with differences, thereby generating a spirit of newness. This perspective suggests that repetition serves as a conduit between the past and the present, as evidenced by the comparisons with the narratives in the film *Babylon*.

Babylon provides a poignant exploration of reputation, power dynamics, and societal perceptions. Through the lens of Anna May Wong's story and the intricate tales of characters like Nellie LaRoy, inspired by Clara Bow, and Jack Conrad, *Babylon* vividly depicts how reputation shapes lives within the industry. The film sheds light on the interplay between reputation and power, from

scandalous whispers surrounding Nellie and Lady Fay Zhu to the manipulation of morality through the introduction of “moral clauses” in contracts.

In examining the interconnectivity between reputation, collective sense-making, and the institutional and economic structures of Hollywood's ecosystem, *Babylon* draws parallels between real-world events and the phenomenon of reputation management. Ultimately, the exploration of reputation in *Babylon* serves as an illustration of the broader societal forces at play during Hollywood's Golden Age, prompting reflection on the enduring relevance of reputation as a currency of power and influence within the entertainment industry.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines nostalgia as “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition.” This yearning for the past, if met, creates a feeling that humans find appealing, and it is used in marketing. Barbara Stern, an Associate Professor of marketing, states:

Advertisers claim that the use of nostalgia is a way to capitalize on the “gift” of brand equity possessed by recycled advertising (Winters 1990). In this view, even though consumers can not literally return to the past, they can, nevertheless, recreate it through nostalgic consumption activities (Stern 1992, 11).

La La Land is enhanced by the cocoon of nostalgia in which it envelops its viewers. To create a nostalgic atmosphere, Chazelle draws upon classic films, iconic figures, and real-life events. These elements are integrated into his films in both a subtle and overt manner, without resorting to direct imitation. The consequence of this approach is the creation of original works that authentically represent events. The concepts of authenticity, inspiration, originality, representation, and nostalgia are interrelated. One is inspired by something that is inherently authentic, and every entity possesses its intrinsic authenticity. A replica is a product that is derived from its source and is a unique entity in itself.

It can be argued that the character Sebastian attempts to perpetuate the authenticity of jazz by performing it classically, thereby creating an analogous ambience within his bar and utilizing artefacts from the 1920s that are considered to be authentic. This represents a genuine concept of recreation. For instance, he has a distinctive stool from the 1920s, whereas another establishment of a similar nature does not. This singularity renders his actions of recreation and his bar authentic. However, since it is based on another era, it has a referent, and that referent is thus the original version of the nostalgic concept. The era in question is composed of different elements that did not emerge fully formed.

In accordance with the tenets of Plato's philosophy, art is defined as imitation. This concept is exemplified in Chazelle's films, in which the artists' intention is to imitate reality. “Traditional mimesis is the imitation of nature by art through processes of representation” (Tosca 2023, 145). All characteristics of the aforementioned era are imitations of existing entities. Such items as a fur coat or the distinctive shape of a piano are derived from antecedent forms. This process of evolution continues until it reaches its ultimate source, the Big Bang. However, when we refer to the source, the bar, for example, with all its defining characteristics, it is evident that it cannot be separated from its one source, the Jazz Age. Consequently, the boundaries of authenticity are reached. The bar becomes a nostalgic representation of the 1920s, employing authentic objects and styles from that era. In this instance, the source of inspiration is the 1920s. It is thus unfeasible to attain authenticity:

Marx also critiques the flawed abstract movement or mediation of the Hegelians, which leads him to an idea that he does not fully develop. This idea is essentially “theatrical,” insofar as history is a theater. The concept of repetition, whether tragic or comic, represents a condition of movement. In this context, the term “actors” or “heroes” is used to describe individuals who produce something effectively new in the historical process. (Deleuze 2011, 19; my translation).

This implies that authenticity can only be achieved in the precise instant, which, in our case, is the 1920s. Consequently, even if we were to bring the chairs crafted in the 1920s and the music performed with instruments of that era, it would not be possible to achieve authenticity, as the context in which those characteristics were created is no longer extant. The norms in question are not those of the present era; rather, they are the products of a nostalgic impulse. Thus, it is not possible to recreate authenticity in its original form. However, it is possible to use objects that are considered to be original in order to recreate the nostalgic atmosphere that was characteristic of authenticity. The subsequent question is whether the creation in question is original or not. In *Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture*, Tosca elucidates the intricacies of the concept of originality:

I need to deal with a monster that has stalked me since starting to write this book. I hope that this chapter ends with my slaying it, but for now, let us know our enemy: the hydra of originality, with its many heads wriggling their way into all sorts of contemporary discourse (Tosca 2023, 143).

For a work to be considered original, what is the extent of permissible inspiration so that it does not become a mere representation? The film *La La Land* draws inspiration from a number of other films in terms of its performances: "Immediately, others began to imitate their actions, singing and dancing in a style reminiscent of *West Side Story*" (Tarditi 2020, 46; my translation). This inspiration also affects the aesthetic aspects of the film, as evidenced by the conclusion of the song, which evokes the pyrotechnics of *La main au collet* or *Blow Out* (Tarditi 2020, 57; my translation). Furthermore, the cinematography mirrors this influence:

Chazelle not only transports the audience to the depicted location but also replicates the exact image from *La Fureur de vivre*, which was shown less than a minute earlier. This is accomplished through the use of the identical camera movement and panning from left to right while the vehicle is in motion (Tarditi 2020, 79; my translation).

Finally, inspiration informs even the editing process. As Tarditi (2020, 40) notes: "A three-minute opening in which only the title *La La Land* appears on the screen, as was customary in the days of the blockbusters and musicals that the director took as his model." The distinctive quality of this work lies in its integration of original elements. The singularity of the actors renders this complex blend unproducibile. The principle of "nothing is created or destroyed, everything is transformed," as espoused by Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (Tarditi 2020, 72), is observed in Hollywood, thereby confirming the philosophy of art imitating life.

In *Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture*, Tosca investigates the impact of repetition in today's media landscape. The book delves into various aspects of repetition in media, including its role as a production technique, its function in conveying specific messages, its role in establishing themes, and its impact on aesthetics. Moreover, the book examines how audiences perceive and interpret repetition in media. Building on cognitive studies, it considers the effects of media on memory, attention, and emotional responses. It also enlightens how repeated media content influences social norms, values, and behaviors, thereby shaping cultural identities and reinforcing dominant ideologies.

In the opening pages of her book, Tosca describes the concept of repetition across various contexts. In a cultural context, for example, repetition can be used to perpetuate a tradition. She cites Rita Felski's *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (2000):

Felski wisely observes, 'for most of human history, activities have gained value precisely because they repeat what has gone before.' Repetition is the realm of ritual, tradition and imagined community, but it is of course also the realm of the static, the lazy, the conservative (Tosca 2023, 9).

Subsequently, Tosca delineates that repetition is also employed to achieve the same result from the action repeated. She posits that it is imperative to establish that, in both the linguistic and the action domain, repetition is aimed at achieving a sought-after effect, and not merely the automatic recourse of a bored mind (Tosca 2023, 11). Consequently, she proposes that repetition is not a mere coincidence but rather an intentional act. Tosca (2023) elucidates another facet of repetition, namely that it serves to recall something, thereby opening the gateway to the realm of nostalgia. She makes the following observation:

Perceiving repetition is about recognising things as similar or the same, and from that experience being able to deduce, generalise, synthesise and a few other higher level cognitive operations that are the basis for knowledge production. Looking for repetition is the basis of the essential cognitive mission of letting us identify patterns (Tosca 2023, 15).

The aforementioned assertion is made in the context of language and the recognition of words that are repeated in a foreign text. Nevertheless, this concept can be extrapolated to apply to a multitude of patterns, provided that the characteristics of the 1920s are taken as the patterns in question. In cinema, repetition can be used to evoke nostalgic elements, thereby attracting a larger audience with an interest in a specific theme, such as fans of the 1920s. According to Tosca (2023), "We generally like to encounter something which we know. This pleasure has a double dimension, since it points inwards: 'I get it/I recognise it', and to the repeated

thing, which we can develop a nostalgic attachment to" (28). This phenomenon, known as the mere exposure effect, is defined as a process where repeatedly presented stimuli are evaluated more positively than novel stimuli (Inoue et al. 2017, 1).

This repetition can be employed by directors as a means of paying homage to a particular work or concept. An illustrative example can be found in *Babylon*. The form of homage may take the form of mimesis, whereby certain techniques and styles are mimicked to achieve a certain effect that characterizes the subject. "A mimetic understanding of art judges the quality of each work by how faithfully they depict nature. Artworks are then copies of a truth that is somewhere else, but which they ideally want to mirror" (Tosca 2023, 142). This implies that the purpose of art is not merely to imitate reality, but potentially to create new truths or interpretations. This is consistent with Deleuze's philosophy as outlined in his 1968 *Différence et répétition*, which advocates for the repetition of characteristics from the 1920s, with some differences. This approach entails a creative engagement with the past, resulting in the production of something new. This methodology precludes the creation of an ersatz representation and subsequently claiming it to be authentic due to a lack of research.

In *Babylon*, historical patterns are observed to recur in a multitude of ways. From its stylistic choices to its historical allusions, the film pays homage to the 1920s, the era in which talkies were first introduced. The film contains references to events within the cinema industry that occurred during that era (Nehme 2022). The referenced stories in Kenneth Anger's book, *Hollywood Babylon: The Legendary Underground Classic of Hollywood's Darkest and Best Kept Secrets* (1959), contribute to the hidden reality depicted in *Babylon*. Upon reading the book and viewing the film, it becomes evident that the events portrayed in the latter are a reiteration of those presented in the former, albeit with modifications. Although the film is ostensibly about these stories, there is no direct representation of them.

Deleuze underscores the distinction between repetition, positing that "in the modern era, we are confronted with a multitude of mechanical and stereotypical repetitions, both external and internal. These repetitions, which are ubiquitous in our lives, prompt us to continually seek out and identify subtle differences, variations, and modifications within them" (Deleuze 2011, 2; my translation). This is what renders the film truly "inspired" by the era in question and an original work. For the purposes of this article, it is assumed that the accounts presented in *Hollywood Babylon* are accurate representations of the events described. This is because, as Deleuze notes, "repetition already bears on repetitions, and difference already bears on differences" (Deleuze 2011, 2; my translation). Regardless of the veracity of Anger's statements in his book, they cannot be wholly accurate, as any narrative that is no longer occurring in real time is subject to change, intentionally or unintentionally.

Chazelle's film diverges from Kenneth Anger's written account. In the film *Babylon*, there are multiple narratives that draw inspiration from the lives of the individuals referenced in the book *Hollywood Babylon*. Firstly, there is Clara Bow, the character Nellie LaRoy's inspiration. Although *Hollywood Babylon* is not the official source for Damien Chazelle's *Babylon*, there is nevertheless a discernible connection between the two. In one scene, Nellie is followed by University of Southern California football players after winning at craps. This parallels Anger's assertion that Clara Bow embodied the role of a "party girl" at "beery, brawly, gangbanging weekend parties." Nellie's attire is reminiscent of a widely circulated photograph of Clara Bow's contemporary, Bessie Love. She was able to cry on demand, a quality that was likely influenced by her close relationship with her manager, who was also her father (Kenigsberg 2022). The veracity of the portrayals in *Hollywood Babylon* is frequently open to question, given the blending of actual events with fictionalized details.

While her sexual appetite may be perceived as exaggerated, Clara Bow is renowned for embodying the wild flapper lifestyle on screen. Consequently, she was held in disdain by the Hollywood elite, particularly due to her working-class background:

Anger writes, the sound-mixing engineer in the monitor room, unfamiliar with the Brooklynese boom of Clara's voice, didn't tune down his dials for Clara's greeting. She made her entrance, hollered 'HELLO EVERYBODY'—and blew every valve in the recording room. One detail that *Babylon* gets right is Nellie's trip to visit her mother in a mental asylum in New York: Clara Bow's mother had schizophrenia, and Bow had her committed after she tried to kill her daughter one night in 1922, shortly before Clara left for Hollywood (Rife 2022).

Secondly, there is the silent film actor Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, who served as the inspiration for the character Orville Pickwick. From an early age, Roscoe Arbuckle was given the sobriquet "Fatty" due to his unusually high weight from birth (Pallaruelo 2023). There were persistent rumors that Fatty Arbuckle had raped actress Virginia Rappe. In the film, the character is not accused of the crime in question, but is discovered with the corpse in his lap as a result of a drug overdose. The two figures were connected by their shared experiences of death and panic. In the book *Hollywood Babylon*, the story is titled "Fat Man Out."

Lastly, there is Anna May Wong, the inspiration for the character Lady Fay Zhu. The character of Lady Fay Zhu, portrayed by Li Jun Li in the film, is inspired by the life and career of Anna May Wong, the pioneering Asian American actress and daughter of a laundryman. Similarly, Wong relocated to Europe at an early age, although she did so somewhat earlier than Fay. The film depicts Wong, who was rumored to be a lesbian.

Wong's career was negatively impacted due to a lack of alignment between her image and the prevailing social norms of the era, as suggested by *Babylon*. The film's portrayal of this phenomenon does not fully acknowledge the role of racism in this context. Wong was born in 1905 in Los Angeles' Chinatown, where her parents owned a laundry business that was comparable in nature to Zhu's establishment in *Babylon* (Kenigsberg 2022):

Moralists opposed Wong's "vamp" image, and she struggled to get cast by producers who were timid about violating regional laws against "miscegenation" (i.e., interracial relationships). With few Asian leading men to choose from, there were few roles for Anna May Wong, whose fashionable flapper persona should have made her a natural romantic lead. Frustrated with losing Asian parts to white actresses in yellowface, she moved to Europe in 1928 (Rife 2022).

These narratives reveal the nuances of the 1920s in cinema and elucidate the genesis of moral clauses, the significance of reputation, and the impact of such factors on star appeal. The case of Wong's lesbianism serves as an illustrative example. Tosca's analysis expounds the critical dimension of repetition in media and its far-reaching subliminal implications. From the perpetuation of tradition to the evocation of nostalgia, repetition plays a pivotal role in the formation of cultural identities and the reinforcement of dominant ideologies. Moreover, in the context of cinema, repetition can be a powerful tool for paying homage to particular eras or themes. This is exemplified in Chazelle's *Babylon*, where history is repeated in various ways, offering a fresh perspective on the 1920s. By echoing the stories and characters from Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* with slight variations, Chazelle engages in an innovative exploration of the past. This approach enables him to challenge the established cultural narratives by employing repetition as a channel between the past and the present.

Anna May Wong went on a European tour to further her acting career, but was dismissed from *Babylon* due to the negative associations she had fostered with Nellie. In the press, there have been reports that Nellie and Lady Fay Zhu may be engaged in an illicit relationship. In the scene, Nellie's investors identified this as a problem, and Manny, Nellie's new recruiter, promptly took action by terminating Lady Fay's employment. "Your image is not helpful" (Chazelle 2022, 01:47:37). This sequence is both nostalgic, in that it refers to Wong's story, and it also demonstrates the importance of reputation in Hollywood.

In *La La Land*, there is a clear emphasis on the influence of public opinion, even in the perspective of the actors themselves. This focus is not solely that of the producers. For instance, while Mia is preparing her play and rehearsing it in front of Sebastian, she expresses her concern by inquiring, "Will people like it?" (Chazelle 2016, 01:03:27) Sebastian, a person with some distance from the film industry, responds with a vehement "fuck 'em!" (Chazelle 2016, 01:03:29)

This exemplifies a discrepancy between the value placed on reputation by individuals within the film industry and those outside of it. The roles of the two protagonists then undergo a reversal as Sebastian becomes increasingly invested in his artistic career. He conveys his exasperation at Mia's inability to comprehend his rationale for not inaugurating his club. He asserts that his current endeavors align with the preferences of the public, rather than representing his vision for an authentic jazz club. Mia responds, "Since when have you cared about being liked?" Sebastian responds rhetorically, stating, "As an actress, you are ill-equipped to make such a judgment" (Chazelle 2016, 01:22:34).

Additionally, in *Babylon*, Jack Conrad commits suicide because his reputation is no longer what he wanted it to be. He is told that his time is up and that there is no reason why he should no longer have his good reputation. He blends in with the rest of the unexceptional actors and will most likely never be on the cover of a magazine again. This shows how much Hollywood depends on fans and public opinion. The impact of reputation on social interaction extends beyond its psychological effects, as evidenced by its capacity to influence social norms, attitudes, and behaviors.

Analyzing generalized beliefs that provided the condition for the Arbuckle scandal to have impact, I address: beliefs about Hollywood personnel and about the movies' content. These two related beliefs led to a desire for censorship and other restrictions on motion pictures (Fine 1997, 305).

The uproar over Hollywood actors and the content of movies were crucial in creating the conditions for the Arbuckle scandal to have a significant resonance. The scandal created a desire for the imposition of censorship and other restrictions on movies. It not only affected the individuals involved, but also had broader impact on the film industry as a whole, leading to shifts in public perception and resulting in calls for increased regulation.

In the late 1920s, moral clauses were introduced with the intention of preventing actors from compromising their reputations, which could potentially influence the censorship or even the production of a film. Should an actor with a tarnished reputation be cast in a film, investors may choose to withdraw from the agreement, as the film may be perceived as tainted by association with such an individual. This is shown in *Babylon* when Manny states, "People care about morals now" (Chazelle 2022, 01:44:50). Moreover, he cultivates Nellie's appearance in accordance with societal expectations, enhancing her linguistic abilities and providing her with fashionable attire to align with the elite and maintain a positive public image. Clara Bow consistently negotiated her contracts to exclude moral clauses that would impede her genuine personality and force her to conform to social norms (Hutchinson 2016).

"Institutional and economic orders are powerful, even if their effects are mediated by collective sense-making" (Fine 1997, 298). This implies that both institutional and economic systems have significant power, even though their effects are influenced by people's collective interpretations. To put it differently, institutions and economic structures have considerable reach in society, but people's understanding of them can influence their impact. Fine suggests that the power of institutional and economic orders persists, although the reception of that power is shaped by collective meaning-making. In the context of a scandal, the public's response is filtered through the prevailing institutional and economic orders, which may dictate how the scandal is addressed, its consequences, and the extent of its impact. The quote thus proposes that even scandals are shaped by the existing institutional and economic structures, and the ways in which people communally decode them. If higher powers decide that acting freely should be frowned upon, then the masses will follow that ideology, contributing to a person's bad reputation, as in the case of Clara Bow.

"Universal in September, production companies added 'morals clauses' to their contracts, appearing to assure virtue, while simultaneously providing the corporation with more control over its workers" (Fine 1997, 314). On the surface, these clauses appear to promise virtue from the workers. However, an analysis of the underlying purpose reveals that the corporation's control over its employees is the real objective. While the intention may be to ensure ethical conduct, the reality is that the corporation is being empowered with more authority over its workforce. This manipulation of morality for corporate gain highlights the intricate power dynamics within such institutional and economic orders. This resulted in considerable controversy within the industry, as evidenced by the numerous contributions to *The Motion Picture News* (1921, 1767). In advocating for the public's freedom of expression, Samuel Gompers, the founder and former president of the American Federation of Labor, elucidated the implications of censorship, viewing this infringement on the freedom of the people as contrary to the foundational values of the United States. He expounded upon the necessity of freedom of speech, which he regarded as a fundamental human right.

In examining the concepts of reputation, power dynamics, and societal perceptions during Hollywood's Golden Age, *Babylon* offers a compelling analysis. The film employs Anna May Wong's story and the intricate narratives of characters such as Nellie LaRoy and Jack Conrad. This cinematic production provides a compelling illustration of the manner in which reputation influences the course of individuals' lives within the industry, underscoring the complex interplay between reputation and power.

This interchange is evident from the scandalous whispers that can influence the trajectory of an individual's career, to the manipulation of morality through the introduction of "morals clauses" in contracts. *Babylon* illuminates the interconnectivity between reputation, the collective construction of meaning, and the institutional and economic structures of the Hollywood ecosystem. The film draws parallels to real-world events and prompts reflection on the enduring relevance of reputation as a currency of power and influence within the entertainment industry. In essence, *Babylon* features the enduring significance of reputation in shaping the lives and careers of individuals within the industry.

The films *Babylon* and *The Great Gatsby* contribute to our evolving understanding of the transformative decade, inviting viewers to explore the intersections of reality and expectation in the depiction of the Jazz Age.

How many decades of the twentieth century seem to be readily identifiable as somehow unique unto themselves? Six strikes me as a fair number. We all think we know what we mean when the words "twenties", "thirties", "fifties", "sixties", "seventies, and "eighties" trip off our tongues in class (Chalberg 2006, 11).

The conventional depiction of the 1920s, which is characterized by the Jazz Age aesthetic, often shapes our expectations when approaching films set in the era. In an interview on the More Score podcast, hosts Robert Kraft and Matt Schrader discuss with Chazelle the influence of collective perceptions of the 1920s on our visualization of the time period. Chazelle notes that contemporary society seems to have a preconceived notion of what the 1920s was like, despite the considerable distance in time between the present and that era (Kraft & Schrader 2022). This begs the question of why this vision is so deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness.

The answer lies in the abundance of historical documents and media artefacts from the era. The aesthetic of the 1920s has been disseminated over time through magazines, newspapers, photographs, films, and literature, among other media. The dissemination of this aesthetic has been further facilitated by modern media, which has made it accessible to a wider audience through fashion trends, films, and various media-sharing platforms.

Consequently, the visual and cultural elements associated with the 1920s have become embedded in our collective imagination, influencing our perceptions of the era. The profusion of online data pertaining to the 1920s provides invaluable insights into the cultural and social milieu of the era. Magazine archives, such as *Vogue*, offer insights into the prevailing trends and stereotypes of the era through their covers and content. Other periodicals present examples of fashionable attire and relevant advertisements from the Roaring Twenties, thereby capturing the essence of the period.

Similarly, newspapers from the 1920s document significant historical events, such as Prohibition and racism, and provide insight into the political and social context of the time. Photographs from Getty Images' archive gallery further enrich our understanding of the era, revealing the libidinous nature of American parties in the 1920s. Iconic films of the era, including *The Flapper* (1920), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and *Showgirl* (1928), offer visual representations of social norms and serve as historical markers. Additionally, the works of authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway vividly depict the era's scenes and actions, offering valuable insights into the culture of the 1920s.

When approaching a film set in the 1920s, audiences often bring with them expectations shaped by the popular aesthetics and trends of the era. However, these expectations may be based on a somewhat idealized or stereotypical image, as exemplified by the 2013 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. Chazelle's *Babylon*, on the other hand, attempts to delve deeper into the hidden realities of the 1920s, offering a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of the time period. Chazelle still wanted everything to feel and be authentic, and everything had to come from research (Kraft & Schrader 2022). By juxtaposing the stereotypical image of the 1920s with its veiled realities, *Babylon* offers a fresh perspective on the era, enriching our understanding of this pivotal moment in history.

The parallels between Jack Conrad's lavish gatherings in *Babylon* and Jay Gatsby's in Baz Luhrmann's cinematic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are readily apparent. Both films capture the essence of 1920s wealth, showcasing themes of luxury and materialism that were emblematic of the era. Nevertheless, while both films depict opulent parties that verge on the grotesque, they diverge in their portrayal of specific elements, particularly with regard to sexuality. In *Babylon*, Chazelle pushes the envelope by including more explicit scenes of nudity than in Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*. This decision adds a layer of sensual crudeness to the depiction of 1920s Hollywood, thereby highlighting the more hedonistic aspects of the era. While Luhrmann's film only alludes to the profligacy of Gatsby's parties, Chazelle's *Babylon* offers a more visceral portrayal of these themes. Baz Luhrmann's cinematic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* embraces the flapper style of knee-length dresses, beads, and fringe. The characters' clothing adds to the film's aesthetic and reflects popular perceptions of flapper fashion in the Roaring Twenties.

In contrast, *Babylon* employs a distinct methodology in its depiction of 1920s fashion. Rather than adhering to the conventional portrayal of flapper attire, the exhibition eschews this stereotypical representation and instead presents a more diverse range of dresses. While flapper fashion undoubtedly exerted a profound influence on the styles of the period, *Babylon* elects to explore other facets of 1920s fashion, thereby presenting a more nuanced representation of the era's sartorial choices.

In Baz Luhrmann's cinematic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, the characters sport elaborate 1920s hairstyles that adhere closely to the period's fashion trends. The hairstyles include sleek bobs, finger waves, and intricate updos characteristic of the era. The hairstyles serve to enhance the film's immersive portrayal of the Roaring Twenties, thereby evoking the sophistication of the era.

However, in *Babylon*, Chazelle employs a more unconventional approach to depicting 1920s hairstyles. While some characters in Chazelle's film exhibit conventional 1920s hairstyles, such as sleek bobs and finger waves, he also includes hairdos that deviate

from the mainstream aesthetic of the era. This does not imply that everything depicted in the film is historically accurate. Only those who lived through the 1920s can verify such details. What Chazelle does is use elements from that time, derived from existing documentation, and incorporate them into *Babylon*. Consequently, when viewing the film, the audience does not observe a precise representation of the 1920s; rather, they encounter a synthesis of simulations of aspects from the decade, woven into a fictional narrative. This combination does not guarantee the accuracy of the final portrayal. One noteworthy example is Nellie's hairstyle, which may incorporate elements not commonly associated with 1920s hair fashion.

In *Babylon*, Lady Fay Zhu portrays an openly lesbian character, which highlights the complexities and contradictions surrounding LGBTQ+ acceptance in 1920s Hollywood. In the cinematic community depicted in the film, Lady Fay's sexuality appears to be embraced. She displays her sexual orientation through her performances, singing about her relationships with women and selecting female partners to dance with and kiss on stage. Nevertheless, despite the apparent acceptance of Lady Fay's sexuality within the industry, her sexuality becomes a source of discrimination when it is exposed to the public through a newspaper article. Manny's response to the situation reflects prevailing societal attitudes of the time, as he expresses concern about the potential impact of Lady Fay's relationship with Nellie on the latter's career. He stated, "You're messing with Nellie's career [...] there's a new sensibility now, people care about morals" (Chazelle 2022, 1:44:50). Manny's decision to terminate Lady Fay's employment and prohibit her from further contact with Nellie serves to illustrate the pervasive stigma faced by LGBTQ+ individuals outside the film industry. To provide context, prior to the publication of the newspaper article, they all acknowledged Fay's homosexuality. For instance, during her performances, she sings about her "girl's pussy" (Chazelle 2022, 00:18:36) and selects a female partner to dance with and kiss.

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Babylon* examine the tumultuous world of the 1920s, drawing upon stereotypes and cultural perceptions associated with the era. Although both works share certain similarities, such as depicting lavish parties and societal decadence, they also diverge in significant ways. *The Great Gatsby* adheres more closely to traditional stereotypes, while *Babylon* takes a more unconventional approach, subverting these expectations. Despite these differences, both films effectively capture the chaotic energy of the Roaring Twenties, portraying a world where social norms are being redefined. The examination of this historical period by both films provides insights into the complexities of human nature and society, thereby offering a broad portrayal of the human experience. The films prompt the viewer to contemplate the past and its enduring influence on the present.

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