

Name of Media: *Whiplash*

Link to website or IMDB entry: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2582802/>

Words such as “intense,” “provocative,” and “extreme” seem appropriate descriptors for the cinematic and musical experience that is Damien Chazelle’s *Whiplash*. Moments of the film are a sensory assault, and the effect is punctuated by a dramatic conclusion that pushes the boundaries of what music and film can do when fused together. The level of critical acclaim for the film attests to its ability to affect audiences on a deep, visceral level. J.K. Simmons portrayal of jazz conductor Terence Fletcher is particularly compelling, and it earned him an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. The film also won Academy Awards for Best Film Editing and Best Sound Mixing and it was a nominee for Best Picture. On a deeper, theoretical level, this film is an excellent example of Semiotics.

The plot of the film follows Andrew Neiman, portrayed by Miles Teller, as he follows his dream of becoming “one of the great” jazz drummers. This dream leads him to the Shaffer Conservatory, where he eventually falls under the tutelage of Fletcher in the school’s premiere jazz ensemble. Fletcher is known for his commitment to excellence at any cost, and his peculiar teaching philosophy is often demonstrated through verbally and physically abusive behavior toward his students. Neiman becomes a particular focus of Fletcher’s ire, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that, rather than the result of a defect in Neiman’s personality, this behavior is evidence of the potential Fletcher sees in him.

Eventually, Fletcher’s value system is imprinted upon Neiman. The young man withdraws from relationships with his father and girlfriend as he increasingly comes to

view them as distractions from the straight and narrow path that leads to greatness. Neiman pushes himself to the point of exhaustion in practice, and has an emotional breakdown when he is passed over for a part. He ultimately loses all regard for his own safety as he is involved in a car accident and leaves the scene without medical attention in an effort to make it to a gig on time. This incident culminates in disciplinary action being taken against Fletcher, and in Neiman withdrawing from the program as well as from pursuing music for a time.

Whiplash is ultimately a meditation on the nature of creativity that is symbolically constructed through individual and social interaction. It employs the familiar trope of the eccentric genius that must sacrifice all to achieve greatness. In its especially dramatic portrayal, there are moments in the film that seem to suggest that emotional pain equals greatness, and Neiman is intent upon following this reasoning as a kind of formula that will guarantee the success he seeks. This raises the question of whether or not this kind of single-minded dedication is, in fact, the very essence of creativity itself, and if musical excellence truly requires the emotional instability portrayed in Neiman's character.

Much of the research into the social and emotional needs of gifted and creative individuals suggests otherwise. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences suggests that individuals who are highly intelligent in one area tend to lack perception in others. While Neiman clearly demonstrates superior musical intelligence, his intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence are lacking. He is unable to relate to close friends and family, and distances himself from his own needs as well. Perhaps it is Fletcher's own prodigious level of musical intelligence that blinds him to the needs of his students. But while the popular understanding of musical genius may imply that such emotional disregard is a

prerequisite for true greatness, multiple intelligences finds that with a holistic curriculum gifted and creative students can excel relationally and technically in their disciplines.

While there is certainly a degree of nuance, or at least ambiguity, in its portrayal of the creative process, because the film stops short of condemning Fletcher's actions it can be read as tacitly condoning them. The final scene is particularly ambiguous, as Neiman's gaze at Fletcher after his triumphant solo can be read as either a search for approval or a look of defiance. Either reading implies that it was Fletcher, and the instructional philosophy he represents, that brought Neiman to this point. Educators deal with the pervasiveness of the "eccentric genius" myth on a daily basis. It informs the worldview of many of our students, and often the more driven they are the more it seems they have bought into the notion that to achieve greatness anything – be it relationships, physical health, or mental wellbeing – may be required as a sacrifice. For those educators tempted to use this film in the classroom, make sure to do so responsibly by inviting discussion about the nature of creativity and the creative process into the dialogue.

Whiplash has much to say about the creative process of communication through semiotics, or the use of signs, but its comment relies heavily on the stereotypical myth of the eccentric genius. In doing so it serves to propagate this myth. In the classroom, it is our job to help deconstruct the romanticism attached to being a dysfunctional human being, and to care for the social and emotional needs of the gifted students we are privileged to teach. The use of this film as an instructional tool can actually become an excellent point of departure from which to begin a discussion about the true nature of creativity, but only when guided by an instructor who is determined to place their student's development as a person above the development of their talent.