



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 22
Issue 2 October 2018

Article 7

10-1-2018

A Star is Born

Sherry Coman
Humber College, Toronto, sherry.coman@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2018) "A Star is Born," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss2/7>

This Toronto International Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

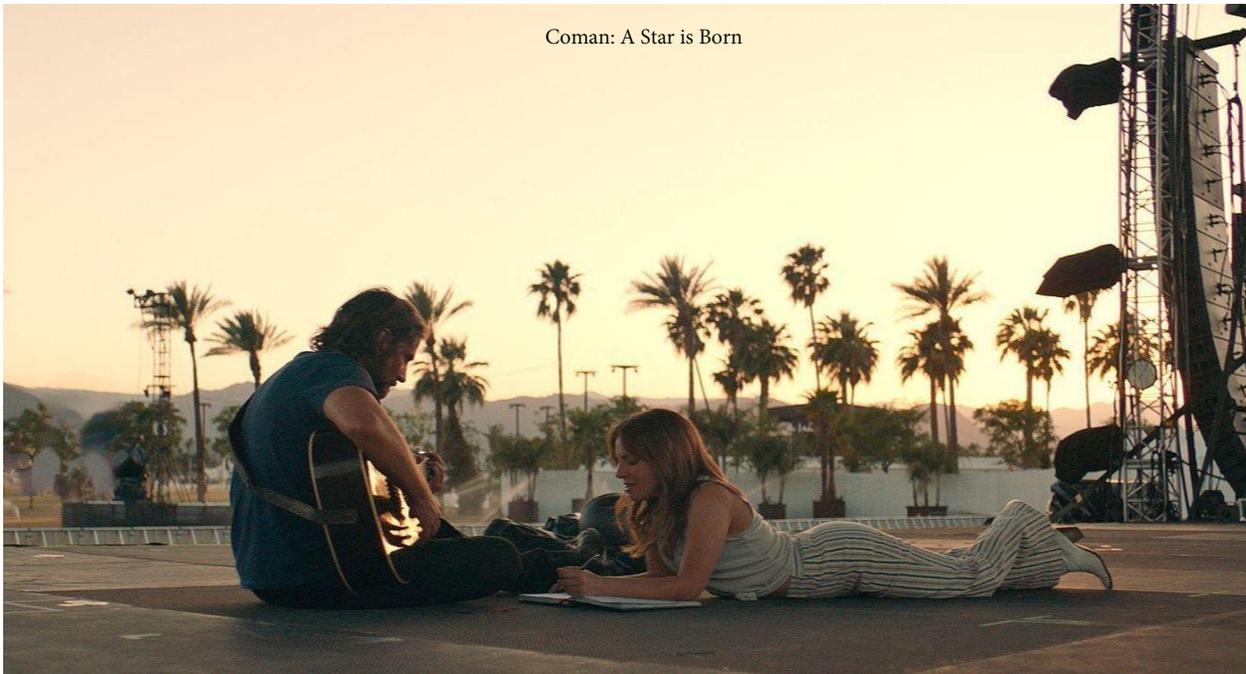
A Star is Born

Abstract

This is a film review of *A Star is Born* (2018), directed by Bradley Cooper.

Author Notes

Sherry Coman is a professor of film, visual culture and digital media at Humber College in Toronto and adjunct professor in film and theology at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario. As a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film, she works as a development consultant with writers and artists working in film, fiction and digital media. She is the also the curator and creator of online devotional projects for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.



***A Star Is Born* (2018), dir. Bradley Cooper**

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSbzyEJ8X9E>

In his iconic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”¹ written in 1936, Walter Benjamin laments ‘the film’ as a medium which fails to represent the ‘aura’ of a unique work of art, because it is encountered only through reproduction of its process. We are not with the actors on a film set witnessing the making of a scene but instead are watching a carefully constructed and detached product that has been manufactured *en masse*. His comparison is to the art made for religious ritual, or to the experience of standing in front of an original work of art in a gallery in the same way that the artist once did. We feel the presence of that creative experience, Benjamin says. By contrast, what he calls the “shrivelling of the aura” in mass produced filmmaking creates a yearning to somehow get to the heart of the creative experience. It is the reason, he says, that the film studios of his time built up the offstage personalities of their actors. This false construction means audiences are always anxiously searching for those moments of truth in creation by seeking behind scenes evidence, and even fetishizing the creators.

The same year that Benjamin was writing his landmark essay, cameras were rolling on the first *A Star Is Born*, directed by William Wellman and starring Janet Gaynor and Frederic March. The cult of Hollywood had already grown up a fascination in audiences with actor celebrities; it's no wonder Benjamin was worried. Tales of a talented person who is plucked from shadows in order to be nurtured and loved into the limelight, but often at tragic cost, were already a genre. The storyline itself seems to model Benjamin's observed need of audiences to be inside the creation of a work of art. We become, by projection, the person plucked from the wings who gets to see, finally, how genius is made.

Three remakes of the film later,² Bradley Cooper's *A Star Is Born* takes the convention and spins it unexpectedly, by shattering Benjamin's wall between the aura created in the making of a film and its mass reproduction. He does this by bringing a sophisticated level of craft to the filmmaking, and by establishing a counter-cultural atmosphere of naturalism on the film set that is recreated in promotional interviews, thus reducing and diminishing the cult of personality. In the first half of the movie, an almost *cinéma vérité* style keeps the storytelling down to earth: we recognize the motorbike, the parking lot, the grocery store as spaces from our own lives and characters are literally sitting on curbs and on the ground. When stardom begins for Ally, elevation occurs to signal the change: she climbs the stairs to the stage, her name is in lights, there are billboards high atop buildings that are filled with her face. Cooper wants us to understand that there is nothing natural or grounded about the construction of celebrity. A change of editing rhythm and some collapsing of the passage of time in ellipses intensifies our sense of having lost the real Ally. The net effect is a detachment at the very moment when we expected to be fulfilled and feel the rush of glamorous success. Previous versions of *A Star Is Born* have allowed a period of excitement in the glamour, but Cooper doesn't dwell there long. Instead we find ourselves

nostalgic for the origin of the story, when Ally and Jack first perform together spontaneously in a breathtaking fusion and explosion of creativity. As soon as that moment is over, so is the possibility of any naturalism in making art. The film makes it very clear that we cannot easily be famous *and* ourselves.

Bradley Cooper wants to help us let go of the pre-occupation with celebrity by returning us to the necessity of art emanating from our deepest selves, not our constructed selves. In order to achieve this, an atmosphere of naturalism needed to be present in the filmmaking. Lady Gaga, Cooper's costar and musical collaborator for the movie, refers to the filmmaking experience as having been a "sacred space" because the openness of the creative experience allowed her and others to "be themselves." Lady Gaga's description of how Cooper "unveiled her" by inspiring her to take off her make-up is itself a mirroring of this finding of the essential artist,³ and Cooper often refers to her in interviews as Stefani, emphasizing the actor's birth name, rather than her stage persona. In one TIFF interview among Cooper, Gaga, and costars Sam Elliott and Anthony Ramos, Cooper's directing note to "be yourself" is named three times by those gathered⁴ as influential to their own performances. The sacred space continues for the performers in the mere fact of being assembled together and doing interviews, freely and comfortably chatting about process. We are being taught to emulate this truth as much and perhaps more than the movie's world of glamour.

'Being oneself' is also a sacred underpinning of the storytelling: as Ally rises in fame, her hair color changes, she has back-up dancers and she is talked into a performing style not her own. Jack hides in the shadows in sadness, retreating into his own darkness as a way of coping. Cooper's film underlines the connection between false constructions and the demise of art, and also between Jack's addictions and his desire to live naturally, an impossibility in a celebrity-drunk world. "Read

this when you've come back to yourself," he says at one point to Ally without attack or insult, when he himself is in rehab. Near the beginning of the film when they have just met, Jack asks her why she doesn't sing her own songs and Ally replies that she has never been comfortable just being herself, because that person has been deemed not good enough. The journey of identity is a journey back to what we could not accept: that we have in fact always been good enough.

The sacred space of *A Star Is Born* is not a formally religious one, but the movie's central dilemma calls to mind what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God and how what is created is measured as 'good.' We are not cast-off clones of a deity with omnipotent powers, but unique individuals whose inherent gifts and talents, strengths and weaknesses are worth whatever they offer to the communities we live in. Jack tells Ally that anyone can be talented but only some people have "something to say." *A Star Is Born* teaches us that the prophetic gifts of artists must have the sacred space necessary to be fully formed and expressed and heard. Otherwise, we disappear down the black hole of lost identity and disconnection from creation. Art in its truest form lives through us and into other people. We are in the moment of Benjamin's aura when we understand how we've been made, each according to our gifts. The movie shows us that we transcend our ego when we are "comfortable with ourselves" and know that what is most truthful is also what is sacred and good.

¹ Benjamin, Walter (1969 [1936]). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Ed. H. Arendt. New York, Schocken. 217–251.

² See also *A Star Is Born* 1954, directed by George Cukor, and *A Star Is Born* 1976, directed by Frank Pierson.

³ "Interview Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga" published by kinowetter on 17 September, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5mmUok0BTc>

⁴ "Star Is Born: Exclusive TIFF 2018 Interview", published by Fandango on 7 September, 2018. <http://www.fandango.com:81/movie-trailer/a-star-is-born-exclusive-tiff-2018-interview-trailer/208383?mpxId=1317296195581&autoplay=true>