Whiplash: Heaping scorn on mediocrity

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Written and directed by Damien Chazelle

The second feature film by American writer-director Damien Chazelle, *Whiplash*, raises intriguing questions about the present debased state of culture and the general lack of artistic inspiration. It tells the story of Andrew (Miles Teller), a young jazz drumming student at the fictional Shaffer Conservatory in Manhattan. Idolizing famed drummer Buddy Rich, Andrew is determined to make his mark in the music world. (The title comes from an arresting Hank Levy jazz composition, written in 1973, performed in the movie.)

The film's opening sequence showcases the 19-year-old musician frenetically beating on his drums in the darkish recesses of the conservatory. He eventually comes to the attention of Fletcher (J.K. Simmons), an instructor who determinedly seeks out the most talented students to compete for a spot in his elite jazz orchestra. Fletcher believes the next great jazz musician will be formed by pushing students to their limits—and beyond. The teacher is an emotional terrorist whose motivational tools include various forms of mental and physical abuse. The results produce either award-winning competitors or kids so demolished they may be driven to do violence to themselves.

Fletcher is fond of telling his students that saxophonist Charlie Parker became the legendary "Bird" when drummer Jo Jones hurled a cymbal at his head during a jam session in 1937. Screaming "not my tempo" at his drummers, Fletcher's fear-provoking words incite Andrew to practice until blood covers his sticks and drums.

No amount of physical or emotional pain is too great for the taskmaster to inflict on his acolytes. And Andrew obliges, forfeiting everything in the interest of maintaining his place in Fletcher's band. He dumps his girlfriend Nicole (Melissa Benoist), worries his kindly father (Paul Reiser) and is deprecating towards his relatives. Among the latter is Uncle Frank, with the wonderful Chris Mulkey in a brief appearance.

Even a debilitating car accident on his way to a competition does not deter Andrew. But it does eventually lead, through his father's intervention, to Fletcher's dismissal from the conservatory. For this, there is retribution and, predictably, a transformative—and electrifying—finale.

Chazelle's *Whiplash* is a movie whose urgency and seriousness stands out in present-day cinema. As the director states in the movie's production notes: "I wanted to make a movie about music that felt like a war movie, or a gangster movie—where instruments replaced weapons, where words felt as violent as guns, and where the action unfolded not on a battlefield, but in a school rehearsal room, or on a concert stage …

"To capture the emotions I felt in my drumming years, I wanted to shoot each musical performance in the movie as though it were a life-or-death contest… I wanted to showcase all the details I remembered—all the dirt and grime and effort that go into a work of music… At the same time, I wanted to capture those fleeting moments of beauty that music allows—and that film can so movingly capture. When you listen to a Charlie Parker solo, you enter a state of bliss."

As part of his quest to represent musical performance as a "life-and-death" event, Chazelle has his character Fletcher rail against the pervasiveness of mediocrity in today's artistic world. ("There are no two words in the English language more harmful than 'good job.'") If the writer-director is appalled at the present state of culture, he has the right to be. One only has to look at the "Top Box Office" on any given week, for example, to have one's worst suspicions confirmed.

The film's overall visual and emotional bleakness makes its own statement. The music, on the other hand, is passionate and elevating at times. Providing occasional glimpses at "a state of bliss," it functions as something of an antidote to an overall depressive mood.

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Simmons is outstanding as the monomaniacal Fletcher, and Teller, who drums in *Whiplash*, succeeds in conveying the superhuman effort required to be a top-flight musician.

That is not to say that the work does not suffer from the 29-year-old director's lack of experience. But weaknesses in the plot and imagery are superseded by the movie's unrelenting, whiplashing pace. In fact, the quiet moments that Andrew shares with his father feel like a contrived intrusion, which makes Reiser's role a relatively thankless one.

What the film—with all its justifiable anger and frustration—never seriously addresses, however, is why banality is so often the artistic norm today. Clearly, and *Whiplash* itself makes this obvious, the current problems do not stem from a lack of individual talent. Instead, the film argues, by implication, that the failing is a subjective one that can be corrected through the sheer application of will. This only pushes the question sideways: then why is there this generalized subjective failing? How and when did that emerge?

Artistic genius (or its opposite) is a complex product of the interaction of circumstances and individual effort. There are reasons, bound up with the historical turning point represented by Elizabethan England, for example, why Shakespeare was not an isolated figure, but rather the greatest of an entire school. The poet or musician doing important work is translating new moods and feelings, associated ultimately with emerging, progressive social needs and interests, into artistic images or sounds. Alternatively, there are social situations not conducive to artistic greatness, such as the past several decades of general reaction and stagnation.

The flowering of jazz in the 20th century was not simply the consequence of individual commitment and self-sacrifice—although those qualities are vital—opposing themselves to laziness and self-indulgence. It had specific musical roots of course, but it also came out of deep popular feeling and emerged in part as a response to great events: war, revolution, Depression, oppression. And even in music, the art form most distant from the immediate or direct cognition of reality, the rational element has to be championed in our day and age. Music's creation too depends on the composer or player knowing and feeling something significant about the world.

Chazelle's movie narrowly and one-sidedly tends to promote, with whatever ambivalence, the American sports (or worse, military) paradigm, in which the coach (or drill-sergeant) berates his or her charges to improve their game. More often than not, such pressure proves counterproductive. In any case, art and music are not primarily physical-technical endeavors. They involve the creative reimagining of the world. The artist pushes him- or herself for a purpose. Speed and technical prowess are subordinated to a greater intention.

All that being said, the sharp dissatisfaction registered in *Whiplash*, which is not simply Chazelle's, but a widely held sentiment, is legitimate. The filmmaker is quite right to heap scorn on the reigning mediocrity. But then what is to be done?

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