Damien Chazelle's *Babylon*: Disoriented and confused

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Babylon is written and directed by Damien Chazelle (*La La Land*, *First Man*). The film has already come and gone from theaters in the US and was a box office failure, having lost tens of millions of dollars. Nonetheless, it deserves at least a brief comment, as it purports both to be an account of the transition from cinema's silent era to sound film and to expose "the real truth" about Hollywood. Furthermore, Chazelle has a certain reputation, based on the success of *La La Land* in particular.

The film, set primarily in the years 1926–1932, follows a host of characters that includes silent film idol Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt), tough, ambitious starlet Nellie LaRoy (Margo Robbie) and industry newcomer and Mexican immigrant Manny Torres (Diego Calva). The three leads are meant as composite figures, loosely based on actual Hollywood personalities or types.

Additionally, Jean Smart plays Elinor St. John (apparently modeled on gossip columnists such as Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, although their careers came later). Also on hand are black musical sensation Sidney Palmer (Jovan Adepo) and Asian lesbian singer-performer Lady Fay Zhu (Li Jun Li). In other words, numerous boxes are checked.

However, there is no discernible reason why MGM production head Irving Thalberg (Max Minghella) makes an appearance in *Babylon* as one of its few real-life characters—along, fleetingly, with William Randolph Hearst (Pat Skipper) and actress Marion Davies (Chloe Fineman). Neither Thalberg nor Hearst-Davies plays any particular role in the goings-on.

Essentially, Nellie LaRoy (inspired in part by actress Clara Bow), something of a wild child, rises *and* falls in *Babylon*, while Jack Conrad (associated with actor John Gilbert)—one of Hollywood's luminaries when the film opens—spectacularly, tragically "falls" and Manny "rises," at least for a time.

As it follows its central protagonists along their different paths, *Babylon* portrays the film world as almost entirely dominated by depravity, cynicism, cruelty, violence and megalomania. If Chazelle's picture of things were accurate, it would be impossible to explain how important films were created under such conditions.

Babylon is ambitious, and costly—and almost a complete shambles. It is badly constructed and unconvincingly done, providing little or no insight into the film industry, culture in general or American society.

One of the film's opening sequences involves an orgiastic Hollywood party, complete with elephants, musicians, drink, drugs, sex and death. The description in Chazelle's script of the scene—set in the "massive hilltop mansion" belonging to a film studio executive—may provide the reader with the unsavory and hysterical flavor of the film as a whole.

"Bedlam. Underneath cathedral ceilings we see—YELLOW BALLOONS—towers of CHAMPAGNE—overturned CHAIRS—tux-clad MEN with their pants off—topless WOMEN on tables. The whole place looks like a Gothic castle-meets-Gilded Age palace descended into chaos and filled with 200 DRUNKS and COKE FIENDS…"

Later, during the same scene, a "scantily-clad WOMAN tries to dance with Manny—but he's not interested. Watches Nellie as she mounts a TABLETOP. Watches as PEOPLE at other tables start grabbing at each other and tearing at outfits. A COUPLE, their faces smeared with coke, start f—ing in the open. Another COUPLE collapses atop a CAKE as they go at it. The music BUILDS in intensity as the whole place starts to look like an ORGY with Nellie a mad conductor presiding over it all, and Manny and a sea of drunkards utterly mesmerized by her…"

A young woman dies in the mayhem, referencing the Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle scandal in 1921, when Arbuckle was arrested in connection with the death of model and actress Virginia Rappé. All such tragedies in the film—a grip impaled on a flagpole during a shoot and various other accidental deaths occurring in film productions—are treated as jokes.

The dialogue in *Babylon* is crude, vulgar and cartoonish. The acting is forced, contrived, "over the top," to no meaningful end. Even Pitt, generally an elegant, relaxed performer, seems ill at ease and out of place here.

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Chazelle depicts everything and everyone in the worst possible light. Another semi-pornographic sequence takes place late in the film in an underground cave with reptilian gangster James McKay (Tobey Maguire), where the activities reach a high point of debauchery.

Babylon is murky in regard to what it wants to say about the film industry. Are we to believe that despite the organizational and emotional dreadfulness, something "magical" somehow emerged from this mess? We see no evidence of it. Chazelle does not offer a moment of convincing or aesthetically important film. How could he, given the primitive intellectual and mental level of his fictional constructs?

The relentless noise and chaos function to divert attention from the film's lack of substance and cohesiveness. This is a terribly misguided, misconceived work, which, ironically, conforms to the views of right-wing opponents of "loose, immoral" Hollywood.

The Pitt character is given a couple of speeches that presumably reflect Chazelle's own views. In one scene, out of the blue, Jack Conrad defends the movies against criticisms by his snobbish Broadway-actress wife: "It's not a low art, you know. I want you to know that. What I do means something to millions of people. My parents didn't have the money or the education to go to the theater so they went to the vaudeville houses and then they went to the nickelodeon, and you know what? There's beauty there." He goes on to claim that what happens "on the screen *means* something—maybe not for you up in your ivory tower, but down on the ground where *real* people live, it *means* something."

This is cheap populism, which Conrad-Chazelle later contradicts in any case by praising "Bauhaus architecture" and "twelve-tone" music and insisting that Hollywood has to "redefine the form… We need to innovate! We need to inspire!"

What does any of this have to do with *Babylon*? First, it doesn't present films that "mean something." For the most part, it shows one inanity on film after another, which would not have meant anything to anyone, with or without money or education. Moreover, *Babylon* has almost nothing to do with the lives of "real people" who are "down on the ground," not with conditions at the time nor with current conditions.

At these moments, and perhaps throughout the entire film, a demoralized and disoriented Chazelle seems to be expressing dissatisfaction with the film industry, but along what lines? In any case, it is not the form that has to be redefined (or expanded) as much as the content and subject matter. Inspire, innovate, how? With what ideas?

If one takes *Babylon* at face value, why would the director want to be part of such a wretched profession and industry?

The film's attitude toward history owes a great deal to postmodern subjectivism and the recent trend of "alternate history," exemplified by such efforts as Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Favourite* (2018) and Madeleine Olnek's *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018). In those cases, faced with historical complexities or facts that don't accord with modern-day sensibilities, the filmmakers simply make things up, in the name of a "progressive" mythologizing.

One of the obvious inspirations for Chazelle's *Babylon* was Kenneth Anger's notorious *Hollywood Babylon*, a salacious compilation of scandals, urban legends and "tall tales" first published in 1965. In an interview with rogerebert.com, Chazelle notes that the "one thing I personally love about *Hollywood Babylon* is if you remove the burden of it being interpreted at all as history and if you just kind of accept that any given content in it could be complete bullshit, and very often is." That is, eliminating the "burden" of fact frees the artist to adopt a method and an outlook that are ferociously subjective, encouraging a pseudo-historical view in which anything goes.

It's a form of radical infantilism–without any political radicalism. The fact of the matter is that Hollywood produced some of its finest work in the 1920s (Chaplin, Griffith, Keaton, Lubitsch, Hitchcock, von Sternberg, Vidor, Murnau, von Stroheim, Borzage, Ford, Walsh, etc.) How was that possible?

A profit-driven industry, manipulating and feeding on every psychological weakness and desperation rampant in bourgeois society, of course wreaks a great deal of havoc, on audiences and on its own personnel. There are certainly many personal tragedies. However, even a semi-objective standpoint on the period, putting into the background some of the Hollywood sideshow, is absolutely a closed book to Chazelle.

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