

Blinded by the Light

(Chadha, UK, 2019) 12A

Component: 2

Core Study Areas:

- **Core**

Additional Study Areas:

- **Aesthetics/Style**

Rationale for study: *Blinded by the Light* was directed and produced by Gurinder Chadha, who also co-wrote the script with Sarfraz Manzoor (the film is based on Manzoor's memoir 'Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion and Rock N' Roll'). The film explores identity and race in 1980s England through the prism of Bruce Springsteen's music.

STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

Javed entering college for his first day (9.52)

Javed 'trapped' in his bedroom with Matt's party lights shining in (17.32)

Singing to Eliza at the market - realism of the market contrasts with singing and 'dream' sequence in soft-focus, slow-motion as Javed imagines dancing with Eliza (46-48mins)

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The use of text on screen highlights the poetry of Springsteen's lyrics and their personal meaning to Javed.
- Elements of handheld camerawork, to reflect realism, contrasts with the musical choreography

and lip-syncing sequences.

Mise-en-scène



Image by Allstar Picture Library Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

- Much attention is paid to the period setting of the film with 1980s fashion, music and décor used throughout. For example, during the first scene in Miss Clay's classroom, the words 'Zammo says no' is written on the chalkboard (this is a reference to the famous drug storyline in 'Grange Hill').
- Javed's home is decorated in muted browns and greys, reflecting the lack of dynamism. His clothing changes when he immerses himself in his love of Springsteen's music, ditching his patterned nylon knitwear and adopting double denim, cut-off shirts and white t-shirts – similar to Roops.
- When Javed suffers from self-doubt towards the end of the film, he briefly resorts back to his patterned jumpers. This represents his loss of confidence and depression.

Editing

- Original footage of news reports and events are edited into the narrative, such as the news report on the redundancies at the Vauxhall Plant. This historically contextualises the film

and is a convention often employed by modern biographical films.

- The use of split screen at the start of the film offers a crash-course to the viewer of 1980s culture, with multiple viewpoints creating the sense of turbulence that was prevalent in society at the time.

Sound

- Music is integral to the plot of this film, with the lyrics of Springsteen's music dominating and helping to shape the narrative, even supplying lines of dialogue to the characters.
- The film plays with diegetic and non-diegetic music with some similarities to *Baby Driver*, such as the 'Born to Run' sequence, with all ambient sound absent apart from Javed faintly singing along.
- Other music, such as the bhangra dance music played at the daytimer, form important backdrops to the action and signalling emotion and theme to the audience.
- Voiceover is used from the start to align us with Javed's character.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- The setting of 1980s Thatcherite Britain is key to the narrative, especially considering the unemployment of Javed's father, Malik, and the rise of fascist and racist organisations, such as the National Front.
- Real life news footage is used to heighten the sense of verisimilitude, reminding the spectator this is (as stated on screen at the start) 'inspired by a true story'.

Cultural

- One of the film's main themes is the tension between Javed and his father, Malik. This is caused by Malik imposing traditional Pakistani values on his son, despite Javed viewing himself as British, and the racism experienced by Javed being a British-Pakistani in 1980s Luton.

- Other films, such as Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* and *East is East*, also deal with this issue from different perspectives.
- The inclusion of the daytimer sequence celebrates British Asian culture and points to the emerging celebration of this culture in British society.

Political

- References to the Cold War and tensions outside of Luton are highlighted by Javed's first lines of dialogue. However, the political issues closer to home dominate the film.
- We see racist attacks from the National Front, many of whom are teenagers and even children, in the Arndale shopping centre. However, the Sixth Form College represents a progressive future with a diverse population and a lack of aggression (aside from the unauthorised playing of *The Boss!*).
- Mr Evans (Javed's neighbour) provides support from an unlikely character and represents a supportive community.

Institutional

- Manzoor and Chadha are both life-long fans of Bruce Springsteen. After a gig, Chadha approached Springsteen to pitch the idea for the film.
- The permissions to use the music were vital to the project. As well as rare live performances of some songs, the soundtrack also features a previously unreleased Springsteen track.
- The rest of the music, including original music, was arranged and written by A.R. Rahman (*Slumdog Millionaire*).

ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA: Aesthetics (film style)

- The film is a period piece and there is attention to detail to costume, hair and props. This sense of authenticity is supported by the use of original footage at various points.
- The use of text on screen to highlight the words of the Springsteen soundtrack is crucial

to moments of the narrative, such as the night of the Great Storm and Javed 'discovering' Springsteen's music.

- This is a coming-of-age film and, as such, it employs lots of motifs from teen film (canteen tribes, a slow-motion corridor sequence, a teacher as a mentor, romance, etc.)

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

Opening Sequence – (0:0:47 – 0:3:39)

- The use of the Springsteen quote and dates to give historical and social context.
- Opening shot of the road sign – this shot is used again at the end of the film when Javed leaves Luton to attend university.
- Voiceover from a young Javid – his voice representing his diary entry / his ambitions as a writer, establishing friendship with Matt.
- Iconic props of the era – Rubix cube and a Chopper bike.
- Montage and split screens to set context, set to soundtrack of 'It's a Sin' by the Pet Shop Boys (indicative of British subversive culture or counterculture).
- As Javed cycles home, we see a range of images and shots to depict the turbulent political times. Nostalgic references to 1980s culture (Smash Hits, Walkman and Square Crisps) are included, alongside news on Poll Tax, original footage of unemployment, protests and Thatcher.
- Ends with glittering title text, set in front of the sun above Luton, as a plane jets off.

Discovering Springsteen – (0:23:09 – 0:29:04)

- Low key lighting and blue/grey colour palette of Javid's bedroom signalling the downbeat mood following the news of Malik's unemployment.
- Diegetic sound of wind signalling the Great Storm and the impending drama.
- Camera slowly zooming towards Javid as he first listens to 'Dancing in the Dark', with the

use of diegetic sound (tinny feedback developing to the non-diegetic soundtrack accompanied with text on screen, highlighting Javed's epiphany to the audience.

- Text dances around Javid as he watches moments of his life play out to the lyrics, cut with moments of humiliation in the house and then externally.
- Interruptions to the sound and switching to 'The Promised Land' (album version), avoiding the sense of a music video.
- Lighting, performance and projection of lyrics on the housing estate with fluid camera – Javed has changed and is understanding the music in a personal way.
- Fast-paced editing of scenes from earlier or shots of Javed in college tied together by the song. This sound bridge moves us from the epiphany to see Javed acting on his emotion and presenting his writing to Miss Clay.

Born to Run Sequence – (0:58:08 – 1:02:58)

- Lack of dialogue and exaggerated performance as Javed and Roops hijack the school radio and play 'Born to Run', having been previously denied.
- The camera tracks back as the boys sing (diegetic) down the corridor – pace of shots and movement convey the energy and excitement at getting their 'message' out to the college.
- They sing to the various 'tribes' – Goths as they exit, then interrupt the football game and move towards Luton town. Eliza joins in.
- Multiple locations in Luton and bird's eye shots of Luton are used.
- The picket line joins in with the song, cheering in time.
- Editing and dance sequences around the town mimicking a music video.
- Reference to other 80s teen genre films, such

as the 'Breakfast Club' dance along the motorway flyover.

- Revisiting the location from the start of the film and the signpost out of Luton is yet again highlighted with the 3 characters counting in time to the music and jumping.
- A change in lighting and focus on Eliza and Javid to represent the romantic/personal connotations of the lyrics.
- The feel-good sequence ends at the mosque – as the three characters dance into the scene oblivious, the song ends and fades as the voice of the reporter begins to dominate and the attack on the mosque is revealed.
- The mood and tone changes as Eliza and Roops exit the scene.

Leaving Luton – (1:49:19 – 1:52:03)

- Spring day used as Javed finally realises his dream and leaves Luton (blossom on tree, sunny day).
- Close up on cassette stereo as Malik swaps the traditional tape for Springsteen (Born to Run), with smiling reaction shots mirrored between characters. They are harmonised and reconciled.
- Previously, the yellow car has been unable to move (e.g. the argument or family pushing it). Now, it symbolises freedom.
- Focus on motorway sign out of Luton.
- Action cuts between exterior and interior of car – we see the car join the motorway that opened the film. Pace and performance reflecting the excitement.
- The young Javed stands upon the hill waving towards the car and smiling. This shows that his childhood dream has been realised, visually mirroring the opening sequence again.
- The final images on screen follow conventions of modern biographical films (the 'real' Javed with his icon, 'real' Roops as friends, Chadha with Springsteen, etc.)