

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
September 2014

Love Is Strange (dir. Ira Sachs, 2014)

On Camera

Ben: John Lithgow: *The World According to Garp* (82), *Terms of Endearment* (83)
George: Alfred Molina: *Prick Up Your Ears* (87), *Frida* (02), *An Education* (09)
Joey: Charlie Tahan: Alec Baldwin and Cate Blanchett's son in *Blue Jasmine* (13)
Kate: Marisa Tomei: *My Cousin Vinny* (92), *In the Bedroom* (01), *The Wrestler* (08)
Elliot: Darren E. Burrows: *Northern Exposure* (TV 90-95), *Forty Shades of Blue* (05)

Off Camera

Cinematography Christos Voudouris: mostly Greek credits, plus *Before Midnight* (2013)
Editing Affonso Gonçalves: all of Sachs' films, plus *Winter's Bone* (2010), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012); and Michael Taylor: *The Loneliest Planet* (2011)
Musical Score: Mostly Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), esp. "Berceuse in D-Flat Major, Op.57"

Previous features from director-cowriter Ira Sachs

The Delta (1996) – Dark, atmospheric, *Huck Finn*-inspired romance between a white Southern teenager becoming aware of his homosexuality and a half-black, half-Vietnamese stranger
Forty Shades of Blue (2005) – Top prize at Sundance; love triangle among Memphis music producer (Rip Torn), his Russian wife (Dina Korzun), and his distant son (Darren Burrows)
Married Life (2007) – Mannered, *Far from Heaven*-ish comedy-drama set in the 1940s about a man (Chris Cooper) plotting to kill his wife (Patricia Clarkson) and marry his young mistress
Keep the Lights On (2012) – Semi-autobiographical drama about a gay European filmmaker (Thure Lindhardt) who has a multi-year relationship with a younger, drug-addicted lawyer

If you enjoyed *Love Is Strange*...

Make Way for Tomorrow (1937) – An elderly couple forced out of their upstate home must take up separate and (they hope) temporary lodgings with their adult children in New York City
Tokyo Story (1953) – An elderly couple from a rural Japanese village travel to Tokyo to visit three of their adult children but forge by far their closest bond with their dead son's widow
Beginners (2011) – Lonely cartoonist (Ewan McGregor) bonds with his father (Oscar winner Christopher Plummer), who reveals his homosexuality only after his wife of many years dies
Cloudburst (2011) – *Moonstruck*'s Olympia Dukakis and *My Left Foot*'s Brenda Fricker play a longtime lesbian couple who flee their nursing home and head to Canada to get married

Facts about *Love Is Strange* you may appreciate...

Sachs' films often feature a close-knit ensemble, yet he allows his actors no rehearsal time.

Lithgow and Molina, friends for decades, have been married for 33 and 29 years, respectively.

Though several artists' works are tucked into the production design of the film (including some by John Lithgow), the paintings by Lithgow's character are by Sachs' husband, Boris Torres.

Sachs conceived of *Love Is Strange* during a period when he, his husband, their newborn twins, the twins' mother, and various relatives and guests were all cohabitating in one apartment.

Love Is Strange was financed piecemeal by 20+ donors, allowing it to amass the necessary budget (which has all been recouped) without entitling any one sponsor to creative oversight.

In addition to being a filmmaker, Sachs is a tenured professor at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and has sustained both a film series and a cross-generational mentorship program in NYC.

Just a month ago, a Catholic church in Inverness, IL, fired its musical director of 17 years for announcing his impending marriage to his male partner on Facebook. (*Tribune* 13 Aug 2014)

Broad conversation topics...

Small Packages: Critics and catalog writers are often forced to crystallize rich, complex movies like this in single sentences. If you were forced to do so, what gloss would you give?

Casting: How would *Love Is Strange* play to you if the two leads were either bigger stars *or* relative unknowns? Did associations with Lithgow and Molina inform your take on the film?

Rhythm and Structure: *Love Is Strange* often moves at a very day-to-day pace but occasionally leaps forward with a simple cut to a later point where quite a bit has changed. What did you make of the film's rhythm and dramatic structure, while watching it and/or in retrospect?

Editing: This film encompasses five key characters and several important satellites: all portrayed in keen detail, all interrelated, and all facing situations that implicate everyone. At any given beat, we feel curious to see *any* of their reactions, alone or in groups. Imagine the editors' travails! When did you notice the film guiding your attention to a specific figure or set of characters—at single moments or for longer stretches—despite other, tempting possibilities?

Music: Chopin's compositions for piano pervade the film. The "Berceuse" we hear so often translates to "Lullaby." What sense does that make to you? How do you rationalize this film about a 39-year relationship choosing piano *solos* for so much of its score? How would your reaction to the film change if it privileged an original score instead of these classical pieces?

New York: In *Make Way for Tomorrow*, a rural couple relocates to bustling, intimidating New York City. After awkward interactions with their children, they unexpectedly spend the whole third act enjoying urban bounty and the kindness of strangers. *Tokyo Story* features a self-contained travelogue of the capital eight years after World War II and shows how the older couple are stimulated by the big city but quickly pine for their quieter, provincial life. What messages did *Love Is Strange* send about New York, both in dialogue and in images?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Costumes: How do the men's wedding outfits inform your sense of each?: Ben's purple, polka-dotted bowtie over striped pastels and a light grey suit; George's elegant combination of bolder solids (deep blue shirt, crimson necktie, rich brown suit, pink pocket square).

Camera Movement/Editing: Rather than stay fixed on Ben and George during their wedding, the film occasionally cuts to members of their audience and at least once *connects* them to the loved ones they have invited through a pan that almost excludes them from the frame.

Props: As Ben and George sing "You've Got What It Takes" at their reception, we see unopened Rachmaninoff music on the piano stand—a very different composer from Chopin, unheard through the film. It remains on the stand in the group meeting about their problem.

Editing: The last shot at the wedding reception is a close-up of Joey with a big smile on his face. What might motivate you as the editor to conclude the sequence here?

Match Cut: The image of George's music students reciting from the scores in their hands is cruelly reproduced soon after in the image of Father Raymond reciting from the "Christian Witness Statement" that governs policy at Saint Grace and in the Archdiocese.

Script: Ben's impositions on Kate's writing time do not start after he moves in; she is already concerned about the late hour and the work before her after the meeting about their finances.

Editing: A series of shots, seemingly from the POV of a moving car, take in various NYC monuments (the Washington Square arch, etc.) as a transition between the negotiations over where Ben and George will go and the first scene of Ben at Elliot, Kate, and Joey's home.

Score/Framing: Elliot and Kate also play classical piano music during their first dinner with Joey. The shots in this scene barely include Ben, at the right periphery of the frame.

Framing: As Ben unwittingly pesters Kate during her attempts to write, neither appears at the center of any shot. This scene begins with a perpendicular profile shot of Kate at her computer, all the way to the right edge of the frame, with a good deal of blank wall space behind her—a composition much more typical of Japanese cinema, like *Tokyo Story*.

Sound: We see very little of the social worker's office, but sound informs us it's a busy place.

Lighting: As Mindy enthuses about restorative "chromotherapy," her Poughkeepsie apartment is dimly lit in a series of ... non-restorative colors, like a jaundiced yellow and a sea green.

Props: Joey has unusual objects taped above his desk and his bed: an image of a coffin (in two different places), another of a tightrope walker, bills of U.S. and possibly U.K. money...

Camera Angle: The camera holds entirely to a shot of Ben's face, only slightly obstructed by George's shoulder, as Ben apologizes in the bunk bed for their current circumstances.

Music: We think Chopin plays non-diegetically over the end of this bunk-bed scene, but it turns out to be the young girl student from the ensuing shot—in a performance George criticizes. Her second attempt bridges isolated, colorless shots of George crying as she plays, and his voice-over recital of a letter to parents, which ends in a quotation of Paul from Corinthians.

Costumes: George wears one pair of brick-colored pants (another bold color choice) at least twice after he moves in with Ted and Roberto. He probably doesn't have all his clothes.

Framing/Production Design: As Ben coaxes out Joey's story about not speaking to the girl he admired in St. Croix, the camera films him through the metal bars of his bunk bed. The low, wide pattern of those slats repeats almost exactly in Joey's and Ben's pillowcases and sheets.

Costumes: On Ben's final day of painting on the roof, in addition to a sunhat that wouldn't look out of place in a Japanese film, he's wearing a very David Hockney-style long-sleeved T-shirt with horizontal stripes—an homage to a gay artist, maybe, or an attempt to play the part.

Framing: In contrast to the gorgeous, sun-dappled architecture that appeared earlier in the film, Ben's admiring views of the NYC skyline almost all feature a fairly ugly brown water tank.

Writing/Editing: As we cut away from Kate leaving Ben alone with his injury (and having left him food to re-heat), we think we are finally seeing her enjoying a moment to herself amid the city... but she's only hustling off to yet another domestic errand, about the stolen books.

Editing/Framing: During the dinnertime summit about the missing books, the film sometimes isolates each character, sometimes poses the married couple together, sometimes groups the three-member nuclear family at Ben's exclusion, and sometimes includes all four people.

Editing: As we cut from Ian's West Village apartment to Ben and George enjoying a recital together, we don't know how far forward we have jumped in time. Are their problems over?

Costumes: I already can't imagine George wearing what Ben wears in the gay bar—a black shirt “embellished” with a sort of ultraviolet-lit rain-forest pattern of leaves and swirls.

Framing/Location: As Ben and George walk away from the camera discussing his artistic prospects, they turn left out of the shot, defying *five* one-way signs directing traffic right.

Writing: The men have been discussing “our apartment” during their conversations, as though they have already moved in, but the parting at the subway lets us know they haven't yet.

Writing/Editing: George assures Joey it's okay to want to remember Ben “as he was,” and the film corroborates him by leaping over the period of Ben's apparent decline, death, and burial.

Editing: Joey is alone for about 90 seconds on that stairwell landing after he leaves George.

Framing: When filmed from behind, Joey and his new friend are framed together, skating into the sunset. In reverse shots, though, they are usually split, with the camera privileging him.