



*Depicting Desperation, Fanhood and Commitment in the British Movie*

*Blinded by the Light (2019)*

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Abstract	Article info
<p><i>This article examines the representation of the life of the British journalist Sarfraz Manzoor in the biographical film <i>Blinded by the Light</i> (Gurinder Chadha, 2019). The aim is to examine the different procedures used by the film director to portray the boyhood of Manzoor who finds salvation in the music of Bruce Springsteen. To answer the research question, a film analysis was carried out and also careful consideration was given to the reception of the movie. The movie portrays the desperation of the main character Javed and introduces the music of Springsteen. Also, the film focuses on commitment. The study contends that <i>Blinded by the Light</i> can be regarded as an unconventional musical biopic about Springsteen although it depicts the conflicts and hopes of the teenager Manzoor.</i></p>	<p>Received 13 December 2021</p> <p>Accepted 26 January 2022</p> <p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Biopic</li> <li>✓ Desperation</li> <li>✓ Cinematography</li> <li>✓ Commitment</li> </ul>

## 1. Introduction

It would be interesting to start this article by raising the following question: is the biopic *Blinded by the Light* (Gurinder Chadha, 2019) a biographical account of the British Pakistani journalist Sarfraz Manzoor or is it about American rock star Bruce Springsteen, also known as the Boss? Or is the movie about both?

At first sight, *Blinded by the Light* tells the personal story of Manzoor. He co-wrote the script with the British film director of Indian origin Gurinder Chadha. It is based on Manzoor's 2007 memoir *Greetings from Bury Park*. The film follows the young British Pakistani teenager Javed Khan in Luton, England during the 1980s who finds salvation in the music of Springsteen. However, as one watches *Blinded by the Light* several times, it is revealed that the movie narrates details about the music and the career of Springsteen although it was inspired by the life of Manzoor. The film tells the life of Manzoor, but it also integrates several details about the artistry of Springsteen.

The aim of this qualitative research study is to investigate the different procedures used by the film director of *Blinded by the Light* to narrate both the boyhood of Sarfraz Manzoor and the words and music of Bruce Springsteen. It will be shown that there are parallels between the fictional character of Javed, based on teenage Manzoor, and the music and career of Springsteen.

A film analysis that seeks to analyze the cinematography, mise-en-scene, and sound of the motion picture was carried out. Film analysis is primarily concerned with examining the visual and textual

content of a movie. *Blinded by the Light* will be analyzed by providing an interpretation of its different components.

Also, careful consideration was given to the reception of the movie by relying on several film critics' reports and the opinions of 266 Internet users who watched *Blinded by the Light*. It is suggested that the movie depicts the desperation and isolation felt by the protagonist Javed. Then, it introduces viewers with the artistry of Springsteen by incorporating his music and iconography. Finally, the movie gives particular focus to commitment.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

A biographical motion picture, also called a biopic, is a film which dramatizes the lives and careers of particular persons, typically public or historical figures. A biopic "is minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used" (Custen, 1992, p6). Additionally, musical biopics are, by definition, films which tell the stories of star musicians.

Also, film analysis which is the approach used in this article is primarily concerned with examining the visual and textual content of a movie. *Blinded by the Light* will be analyzed by providing an interpretation of its different components. However, it must be mentioned that current research indicates that there is "no correct, universal way to write film analysis" (Aumont and Marie, 1988, p29). Films are visual texts and the qualitative researcher who studies films can be viewed as a "bricoleur" (Denzin, 1994, p15).

Denzin suggests a practical approach to analyze films by designing four phases as a general model: a) looking and feeling the film, b) framing the research question and noting key scenes, c) structuring microanalysis, d) and searching for patterns in the entire film and writing a final interpretation which includes a realistic and a subversive reading of the film (2004, p241). It means that film analysis gives room for the inclusion of relevant interpretations about the film that is being analyzed.

### 3. Portraying Desperation and Isolation

The first procedure used by the film director to narrate the lives of Sarfraz Manzoor and Bruce Springsteen is to portray the desperation felt by Javed. The teenager feels he is an outsider and a loner. This idea is embodied in the beginning of the film when he criticizes his school: “*This place is bad. It’s the United Nations of kicking tribes. You’ve got goths, a Salt-N-Pepa crew, there’s Wham! Boys, Bananarama girls. And then there’s me. I don’t have a tribe*”.

Javed becomes a fan of Springsteen but his desperation reaches its peak when his father rips up the tickets for a concert of the Boss. The teenager breaks up with his girlfriend Eliza and tells Ms. Clay that his father will never let him go to America after he won a trip to Monmouth College, New Jersey, for writing “An American Dream in Luton”.

The zooming of the camera also highlights the desperation felt by Javed as his face gets larger in frame (See the shots).

**Fig.1.**

© 01:32:19 (Gurinder Chadha, 2019)



**Fig.2.**



01:32:25

Javed’s face is expressionless and he looks absent and uninterested. He is desperate because of family tradition and the conflict with his Indian patriarchal father and we feel that things don’t matter to him anymore.

Desperation is stressed by the nondiegetic sound of the acoustic version of “The Promised Land” played by Springsteen and which viewers hear in the movie. It must be said that cinematic sounds are categorized on the basis of whether they are diegetic or nondiegetic—in other words, “whether the sounds are sourced in the world of the story or not” (Sikov, 2010, p54).

The British Pakistani teenager decides to go to the United States despite the refusal of his father who tells him: “If you disrespect my wishes and walk out of that

door, don't come back". The determination of Javed to leave home is illustrated by the use of the point-of-view shot. The POV shot is "to have the camera see something in much the same way as one of the characters would see it: to view the scene from that character's point-of-view" (Brown, 2016, p10). POV is a relevant cinematic technique that allows viewers to share the feelings of Javed who is determined to leave the family nest. Viewers see that the teenager's decision is irrevocable.

Javed experiences what Jaspers (1951) calls a "limit situation" as he is confronted with some existential realities over which he has no control. Anyone facing limit situations may react in two ways: "either by obfuscation or, if we really apprehend them, by despair and rebirth: we become ourselves by a change in our consciousness of being" (p9). The limit situation transformed Javed into a new man and made him aware of his inner self. He did not sink into despair because of his father; rather he took a leap of faith toward what Jasper calls *transzendenz* (p13) and decided to visit the USA and the hometown where his great hero grew up. As a matter of fact, Javed was able to transcend desperation by listening to the music of the Boss.

In his memoir, Manzoor (2007) acknowledged that Springsteen helped him cope with his authoritative father, "the realisation that the tension between my father and me was not unique, that it was something as old as time, something that Springsteen also experienced, was a huge comfort. I was not alone" (p18). We can see that a fervent fan of the Boss was able to find salvation in the songs of his

idol. In the next section, it will be interesting to examine the way the film director used soundtrack and iconography of Springsteen to narrate the story of Javed.

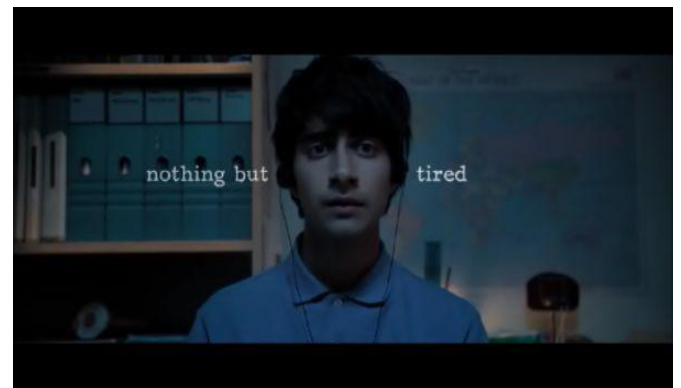
#### 4. *Being a Fan of the Music and Iconography of Springsteen*

The film director integrates the music and iconography of Springsteen to tell the early life of Manzoor. It is the music of Springsteen that made it possible for a sixteen year old British teenager from a Pakistani background to have his life transformed as he became a fan of a rock star who lives thousands miles away in New Jersey.

There is an identification that is established as Javed is overwhelmed by the lyrics of his idol after hearing them for the first time. He tells his friend Roops who gave him two Springsteen cassette tapes: "*I listened to everything. Both tapes. I'm telling you, I could feel it all right here. It's like Bruce knows everything I've ever felt, everything I've ever wanted. I didn't know music could be like that*".

The film director displays the lyrics of Springsteen within the framework of the film as shown in the following shot:

**Fig.3.**



00:25:02



The film director puts a stress on the lyrics of Springsteen and she wants the film viewers to read them and carefully examine them. This technique of pouring the lyrics across the screen is an effective way of immersing nonfans in the world and music of the Boss.

*Blinded by the Light* centers on Javed's admiration for Springsteen and therefore, Chadha highlights this idea by integrating Springsteen's iconography in her film as shown in the medium shot hereunder.

Fig.4.



00:44:13

The medium shot allows us to capture the protagonist, shown from the waist up, and his surroundings. We assume that “by being closer in to the action, we can see people’s expressions, details of how they are dressed, and so on. We thus become more involved in what they are saying and doing” (Brown, 2016, p63).

Fans relate to Springsteen through Javed as he wears the iconic checked shirt with the sleeves cut off in a DIY style that the Boss wears in the music video of “Born to Run” (1975). They also relate to Javed as he typifies the blue-collar persona of Springsteen who is wearing a white t-shirt and jeans in the music video

of “Born in the USA” (1984). The numerous posters of Springsteen on the wall contend the idea that Javed is an unconditional fan of rock music. Finally, Frank Stefanko’s black and white picture of Springsteen leaning on the hood of the C1 Corvette is widely recognized by fans of the Boss as it is also used on the cover of the rock star 2016 autobiography *Born to Run*.

In short, *Blinded by the Light* includes a wide range of iconic references about the career and music of Springsteen. Among these are the cover art of *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* with photographs of Javed and his friend Roops, the movie poster that uses the famous cover art of the single “Dancing in the Dark”, and photographs of Springsteen with Manzoor and Chahda in the closing credit of the movie.

### 5. Films and Commitment

The third and last procedure consists in focusing on commitment. The film director represents several characters as dedicated members to something they believe in. The Oxford Dictionary provides four definitions of “commitment” and this one is quite relevant: “a strong belief in a cause or activity and a promise to support it”.

First Javed is dedicated to Springsteen as he finds inspiration in his music. He views writing as a way out of Luton and consequently he informs his father that he wants to be a writer. His dream is to become a famous author and poet like his idol. It should also be recognized that Springsteen wanted to make a living by writing songs when he started his career. Springsteen told the journalist of *NPR*

*Music* Terry Gross that it is thanks to songwriting that he achieved success. “I can sing but I’m not the greatest singer in the world. I can play guitar very well but I’m not the greatest guitar player in the world. [...] and so I said, ‘Well, if I’m going to project an individuality, it’s going to have to be in my writing’” (Gross, 2016).

Similarly, the idea of commitment is embodied in Ms Clay, the teacher of literature, who deeply believes a writer has a responsibility to “tell the world something that it needs to hear”. Ms Clay echoes the words of Sartre (1948) who maintains that “the ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (p37). Indeed, authors should use their writing to reflect on the condition of the socially excluded and report their daily hardships. And even if they do not change the world, they give people a reason to hope for a better future.

Finally, Javed’s girl friend Eliza is a fervent activist who fights to free Nelson Mandela. She is also involved in political activism as she participates in the protest against the far-right fascist members of the National Front and opposes her conservative parents. Consequently, it can be said that *Blinded by the Light* is also about engaging in political activism. Foucault (1971) notes that politics “is probably the most crucial subject to our existence, that is to say the society in which we live, the economic relations within which it functions, and the system of power which defines the regular forms and the regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct” (p36). As a

matter of fact, Chadha’s film gives importance to politics and conveys a subtle criticism of Thatcherism as illustrated by the following shot:

**Fig. 5.**



**01:24:51**

The film director underlines the polarization of the British society of the 1980s as she juxtaposes the slogan used by Margaret Thatcher of “uniting Britain” with images of the protest that divided the people of Luton into those who favor multiculturalism and toleration and those who dislike the Muslim community and oppose immigration. Chadha told *The New York Times* that her film was also concerned with immigration. “Brexit was happening and it was very ugly. The world was turning into quite a divisive place. And I said, ‘I’m going to pick up this project and I’m going to put all my frustration about the world in here’” (Lyll, 2019).

Similarly, it is worth saying that Springsteen has spent his artistic career writing songs about the sensitive issues of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, veterans and racism, while engaging in philanthropic actions both in the United States and around the world. During the *Born in the USA Tour* of 1985 the Boss made a donation of \$20,000 to help the

Northumberland and Durham miners and their families in the aftermath of the 1984-85 strike. In short, both Chadha and Springsteen are concerned with addressing political issues in their artistic works.

## 6. Reception of the Film

It is interesting to use reception theory as a means to understand the experience of cinema and film viewing for spectators. A film is not simply passively accepted by viewers, but they interpret the meanings of what they watch based on their cultural background and life experiences. Stuart Hall, one of the main supporters of reception theory, asserts that there is the “encoding/decoding moments in the communicative process” (p1) as the audience interprets a media text.

19,612 IMDb users watched *Blinded by the Light* and gave a weighted average vote of 6.9/10. Johnny Oleksinski of *The New York Post* calls it “the feel-good movie of the year” (2019) while Leah Greenblatt of *Entertainment Weekly* calls it “a tender, heartfelt ode to the music of Bruce Springsteen” (2019).

Other film critics, however, criticized the movie as Glenn Kenny, from *The New York Times*, who claims that “these songs have the power to move, inspire, make you dance. For the first time in my experience of Springsteen, they made me want to hide under my seat” (2019).

Also 266 Internet users shared their views after watching the film. 156 out of 266 viewers liked *Blinded by the Light*. 60 viewers did not like it whereas 50 viewers expressed opinions about other aspects. 28 viewers found the acting good and fresh whereas 16 others did not like it and found it poor, hammy and awkward. 25 viewers

judged the film was full of clichés and did not reflect real life in Britain in the 1980s. We can see that viewers have mixed opinions about the film, but globally speaking *Blinded by the Light* was received positively by both critics and moviegoers.

Finally, assessing the reception of the film can be achieved by examining if it was a commercial success. Films are made to be comprehended and decoded but also to sell tickets in theaters. Achieving commercial success is very important for the film industry and critics often evaluate a movie according to its box office.

Chadha’s film cost \$ 15 million; however, it grossed only \$ 18.1 million. We cannot say that *Blinded by the Light* is a box-office hit and particularly if we compare it with Chadha’s successful film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) which cost \$ 6 million and grossed \$ 104.6 million. Perhaps, one of the reasons to explain the commercial failure of Chadha’s film is that it had to compete with the release of two films which preceded it, Danny Boyle’s *Yesterday* (2019) and Dexter Fletcher’s *Rocketman* (2019). The former is a romantic comedy based on music by the Beatles while the latter follows the career and music of the British singer Elton John.

It must be recognized that small films like *Blinded by the Light* have little room in theatrical distribution today. After releasing her movie, Chadha told *The Indian Express* that “there’s a great crisis globally for independent films. Those kind of smaller stories, relationship stories that aren’t big on visual effects, action, they’ve got squeezed” (2019). Indeed, one cannot compare *Blinded by the Light* with

Hollywood movies which gross millions of dollars. These films are very expensive to produce, not forgetting the fact that their production costs do not cover distribution and marketing. In this respect, Chadha released *Blinded by the Light* in 2307 theaters, but at the same time sold her movie to Netflix in India.

## 7. Conclusion

The musical biopic *Blinded by the Light* provides insightful reflections about what it is to be a British Pakistani teenager in Britain of the 1980s and in a way it can be considered as an “agent of socialization” to use the words of Custen that is “capable of teaching something” (p33).

Rick Altman, the professor of cinema at the University of Iowa, on the other hand, criticizes musical biopics. He states that they “seem flawless and yet they represent a form which never produced anything approaching a masterpiece” (Altman, 1989, p235). Indeed, some musical biopics are boring and formulaic but Gurinder Chadha’s film, I think, is not. Contrary to *Rocketman* (2019), *The Runways* (2010), or *Ray* (2004) which focus on the lives and careers of famous musicians, *Blinded by the Light* follows the story of a fan who finds inspiration in the words and music of the Boss. I find this way of centering on the personal story of a fan in order to portray the career and music of his idol very relevant.

I therefore contend that *Blinded by the Light* can be considered as an unconventional musical biopic about Bruce Springsteen although no actor was cast in the role of the rock star. The film director adequately used mise-en-scène, sound track, and iconography to tell the

early life of the British Pakistani journalist Sarfraz Manzoor and ultimately revealed subtle details about the artistry of Springsteen. Consequently, *Blinded by the Light* offers a tribute to the music and career of the Boss.

The present study has shown the importance of watching films and analyzing them. It is therefore recommended that films be used by scholars and students working on British and American civilization to reveal important aspects about the Anglo-American culture and society.

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