

Top 5: An Analysis of *High Fidelity*

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The 2000 film, *High Fidelity*, explores the ups and downs of relationships through the eyes of a record store owner in Chicago. On the surface, the film seems to be a simple romantic comedy in the vein of another film starring John Cusack, *Say Anything*. By taking a deeper look at the film's technical and literary elements, the audience can come to a greater understanding of the director's vision of the culture that the film addresses.

High Fidelity is based on a British novel by Nick Hornby. The novel takes place in London. However, when John Cusack began working on the screenplay with friends, D.V. DeVincentis and Steve Pink, the decision was made to change the setting of the film to Chicago. As Chicago was the city where the screenwriters grew up together, this seemed to be the natural choice. Chicago is very much a character within the film with the art department using an old record well-known record store, Wax Trax, as the setting for the main character's record store. Championship Vinyl as well as the fliers and stickers on the front register or posters in the store depict bands either from Chicago or on a Chicago record label. The director used the small neighborhood of Wicker Park to give the film a heart that is very distinct to the area. Additionally, the choice to film in Chicago allowed the director to stage certain scenes on the "L" train and platforms (Frears, 2000).

The intimate and familiar setting of Chicago allowed the director to use utilize a technique within the narrative structure that can be jarring if used incorrectly. Though the narrative of the film is linear, throughout the film, the main character played by Cusack, Rob Gordon, will break the fourth wall of the film and speak directly to the audience. Most often this is done in films with voice-over narration; however, in *High Fidelity*, the director makes a distinct choice to allow the actor to look into the camera and explain past or current events

directly to the audience in addition to voice-over narration in flashback scenes (Frears, 2000).

This creates an intimate connection between the audience and the main character, allowing the audience to better sympathize with his situation. This technique also limits the point-of-view of the audience, giving the audience a restricted point-of-view from Rob's perspective.

Most often, when Rob Gordon speaks to the audience, the speech will involve him creating a top five list of something that he shares with the audience. These lists are a motif within the film. Everything in Rob's life seems to be broken down into lists, whether it is the top five most memorable break-ups, the catalyst for the events of the film, the top five things he misses about his most recent ex-girlfriend, Laura, or something as simple as his top five favorite records. Some of these lists are directly shared with the audience as though the audience is part of his close circle of friends, while others are just part of the everyday conversations he engages in with the employees of his record store (Frears, 2000).

The most important list that Rob shares directly with the audience in the beginning of the film is his list of the top five memorable break-ups. After a devastating break-up with Laura, Rob makes a list of these break-ups which most notably does not include Laura. This is meant as a slight to her to somehow say that their relationship was less significant than the others. Yet, this is a form of verbal irony on the part of the character. He knows that this relationship is significant and therefore the loss of it hurts more deeply than he is willing to admit to Laura at that moment in time. The loss of this relationship and the subsequent top five list sets Rob on the path to reconnect with the top five exes to discuss their past and why the relationships failed. It is a path of self-discovery that will lead Rob to realize how important Laura is, placing their break-up into the top five (Frears, 2000).

Because the director has chosen to make the narrative of the film subjective with a restricted point-of-view, it would seem only logical that he would have employed a subjective camera view as well. However, while the audience experiences many of the events of the film in the same way that Rob does, many of the scenes are shot using an objective camera with the audience acting as a neutral observer. Yet, this is not the case in all scenes. The previously mentioned instances of Rob breaking the fourth wall make the audience a confidant instead of a neutral observer. The audience is an active participant in the context of the film.

As the narrative goes through each ex, the director uses a flashback to show the previous events in the Rob's history. With the restricted point-of-view, these flashbacks show the events from Rob's subjective point-of-view. For example, at first the audience sees the recollection of his break up with Penny from Rob's perspective and can understand his pain when he finds out that Penny, who would not have sex with him, has sex with another guy at his school shortly after the break-up (Frears, 2000). This allows the audience to sympathize more easily with the character because the audience shares the experience with Rob. It also allows the audience to come to revelations alongside Rob. For instance, later in the film, when Rob is discussing the past with Penny, the audience finds out that the reason Penny slept with the other guy was because she was so heartbroken over being dumped by Rob that she was unable to fight off the other guy when he tried to have sex with her, that the encounter was very close to a date rape situation (Frears, 2000).

All of this soul-searching would be uninteresting to the audience if the actor playing the character of Rob Gordon was ineffective in his role. John Cusack is a personality actor in this role. Essentially, he is playing a character that is very similar to his own personality and tastes. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that Cusack had a hand in writing the script for the film

and was instrumental in the change of location from London to Chicago. This allowed Cusack to tap into his own experiences to create a character history as he was writing the character of Rob Gordon for himself. Because of his familiarity with the Chicago area, Cusack was able to create an extensive back-story for the character of Rob Gordon. While these back-stories may not always be on the surface of a performance, the audience can always tell if this work had not been done. Cusack has said that while developing the script that he was able to see the high school that the character went to as well as places he may have hung out while growing up (Bevan & Frears, 2000). This was perhaps the greatest benefit of changing the setting.

The character of Rob Gordon was not the only role in the film written with a specific actor in mind. The part of Barry, played by Jack Black, was specifically written for him (Bevan & Frears, 2000). Up until this point, Black had been primarily playing bit parts in films like *The Jackal*, *Enemy of the State*, and *The Cable Guy* (IMDB, 2011a). This also allowed Black to use his abilities as a personality actor to create a character that is much like himself, particularly as a part of the musical duo, Tenacious D. Looking back at the performance now, it does not seem much different from the roles that Jack Black normally plays; however, at the time, this was one of the first major roles that he played.

Other star actors played minor roles in this film. Tim Robbins, who is most often known for his dramatic work, plays the conflict resolution expert that Laura moves in with after leaving Rob (Frears, 2000). This character is a departure for Robbins as he plays the character as an aging hippie. This is an example of Robbins as a wild card or character actor. He is able to seamlessly enter this role and move into the background since his character is not the focus of most scenes.

In addition to Tim Robbins, Catherine Zeta-Jones also played a minor role in the film as one of Rob Gordon's top five exes, Charlie Nicholson. Zeta-Jones was not credited for this role in the main title but is mentioned in the cast list during the final credits. This was a bit part that probably required minimum shooting time. She also acted the role well utilizing a realistic style of acting to portray the self-righteous yuppie who is too absorbed in her own world and thoughts to really seem to care about anyone else's. This is a realization that Rob comes to over the course of a dinner party that he attends upon Charlie's invitation in hopes of catching up and find out why Charlie left him for another man, Marco (Frears, 2000).

While the actors are the face of the film, without the work of the cinematographer, the actors would not be seen. It is the cinematographer's responsibility to light the shots for the film and work with the director to create the visual style of the film. Seamus McGarvey chose to make use of natural lighting and flat lighting. This gives the film a look that looks more true to life with desaturated colors and acts as a physical representation of the melancholy of the main character (Frears, 2000). The mood of the film would be less effective if the cinematographer used high-key lighting which would be too bright for the tone of the film. However, if the cinematographer had chosen to use low-key lighting, the film would have been too dark. The use of flat lighting allows the haziness of Rob's situation to come through in a subtle way—the best example of this use of lighting in the film.

The melancholy of Rob is not only represented in the lighting of the film but in the costume design as well. Rob dresses like the stereotypical indie-rock/grunge slacker of the early 90s. He wears flannels and old band T-shirts with tight jeans and Adidas sneakers (Frears, 2000). These costume choices are symbolic of his melancholy and laissez-faire attitude towards relationships. The main complaint of Laura throughout the film is that Rob does not grow or

change. He seems to have no ambitions and goes with flow. The best example of this in the film is Rob's list of top five dream jobs if time, education, and qualifications were not an issue. The first four options are music-related with the last option being an architect, something that Rob does not even know if he wants to do. Laura points out that he would rather own a record store than become an architect. Of course, this is a much better option as he is already living that dream; however, because of Rob's laid back and melancholy attitude, he does not recognize that he has accomplished that goal (Frears, 2000).

The character's attitude is not only reflected in the costume and lighting but in the editing as well. The editor utilized continuity editing with mostly direct cuts to create a steady pace to the film using long shots and static camera positions. The focus of the film should be on the actors' performances. By not distracting the audience with jarring jump cuts or using discontinuous editing, the mood of the film is encompassed by the emotions of the characters. For instance, by using a long take of Rob standing in the rain outside of Laura's apartment looking at up her in the window and craning up to see Laura looking down at him, the audience gets a sense of the separation between these two people who still care for one another (Frears, 2000). The shot creates the feeling of emotional distance by emphasizing the physical separation.

Besides editing, the director can also use sound and music to help set the tempo of the film. In *High Fidelity*, music acts as an additional character in the film. Rob Gordon owns a record store; therefore, it is imperative that the soundtrack for the film incorporate a specific type of music. Much of the film takes place within the record store with Rob and his two employees, Dick and Barry discussing independent rock music that would not have been known by the average radio listener but speaks to a very specific generation and culture. References to punk

bands like Stiff Little Fingers and other indie rock favorites such as Urge Overkill, Veruca Salt, and Liz Phair are littered throughout the dialogue and set design for the record store (Frears, 2000). Music is an important of this film and reveals information about the mid to late 90s independent music scene as well as the characters.

Rob defines his relationships through music. The audience can easily identify the time periods of the flashbacks by the music that is playing. For example, as Rob is reminiscing about his break-up with Penny, the song “I Want Candy” by Bow Wow Wow is played (Frears, 2000). This places the time of this break in the early 80s as the song was released in 1982. Additionally, Rob begins to organize his personal album collection autobiographically. Music acts as a means of documenting important events in his life associating specific songs with individual circumstances. Another example of this is the song “Let’s Get it On” by Marvin Gaye which he playfully remarks is responsible for his entire relationship with Laura. This song is also number one on his top five favorite records list (Frears, 2000). Its placement is another indication of the importance of his relationship with Laura.

All of these components speak to the director’s own style of filmmaking. Stephen Frears directed *High Fidelity*. While many of his previous films were period pieces like *Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Hi-Lo Country*, and *Mary Reilly* (IMDB, 2011b), this film has more in common with those previous films than one might expect. Frears seems to choose films that deal with the complexities of human relationships. He uses a steady pacing in the films and relies on the actors’ instincts to tell a compelling story. Frears will film many takes of a scene until he gets the desired result. Yet, this film differs from many of his other films in a very significant way. Often Frears makes films about love triangle that ended tragically; however, this film ends happily with Rob and Laura getting back together.

While this film deals with the complexity of human relationships in a very real way, its potential for social impact is minimal. It is simply meant as a form of escapism as most romantic comedies. That is not to say, however, that the film does not speak to a specific generation of viewers. Rob is a man in his thirties that is going through a mid-life crisis of sorts. Generation X has reached adulthood and is struggling to find its place. This film also speaks directly to those that have had failed relationships and begin to reflect on the past to try to figure out what it all means (Frears, 2000). It is a situation to which most people can relate.

The lack of potential societal impact is a direct result of the film's genre. The romantic comedy has very specific conventions which do not often lend themselves to some greater meaning beyond escapist entertainment. At its core, the romantic comedy is simply the story of bringing two people together. The plot of *High Fidelity* works to bring Rob and Laura back together as Rob grows into the man he needs to become in order to move past his extended adolescence into full-grown adulthood. He must leave the fantasy relationship behind and embrace the true and enduring love that he and Laura share. Unlike most romantic comedies, the comedy does not come from the events leading up to this resolution but from the conversations between characters about music and relationships (Frears, 2000). There is a real heart at the center of this film. It treats romance in a very real way rather than giving the audience an unrealistic portrayal of relationships (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011).

In conclusion, *High Fidelity* is a portrayal of the ups and downs in romantic relationships told through the perspective of a thirty-something Chicago record store owner. The various elements work together to create a film that speaks to a specific culture and generation of viewers. There is more than meets the eye to this romantic comedy that can be explored through the analytical process.

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