

How *Paterson* sidesteps the clichés embraced by *La La Land*

## Escapism can be delightful. But artistic creation also uses the fodder of daily life.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue



Adam Driver in the movie *Paterson*. Photo by Mary Cybulski / Amazon Studios & Bleeker Street.

Damien Chazelle's film *La La Land* is sweeping the award circuit with its whimsical dreamscape. It's a quintessentially Hollywood movie about following one's dreams to LA and stardom.

The greatest compliment that can be paid to anyone in *La La Land* is to call that person a dreamer. In the opening scene, young performers who are stuck in traffic leap out of their cars to sing about their dreams of making it in Hollywood. The

magnificent performance boasts vaudeville soft-shoe, hip-hop, and break dance, all sweeping the viewer into the film's kinetic energy.

The story is not new: boy meets girl, hardship follows, dreams are lost, and dreams are fulfilled. But the characters often erupt into song and dance, a device that reminds us that dreamers move through life at a different speed, with a song always at the back of their throats. Chazelle wants to recall a time when movies delighted and overwhelmed the senses with spectacle and skill. *La La Land* does: it's an airy confection of delight that is at the same time wised-up and nostalgic. And it aims for a vision of moviemaking that is rhapsodic and earnest without being sentimental.

Set across the country in New Jersey, Jim Jarmusch's movie *Paterson* also explores the creative life, but with a very different vision for how it unfolds. The movie is as far from *La La Land* in tone and style as it is in its setting. Paterson, the main character (Adam Driver), drives a city bus. We follow him on his route every day for a week as he overhears conversations between passengers and watches the hours pass slowly. We also see that on his lunch break or in the few quiet moments before his route begins he writes poems in a small, paperbound notebook.

The movie is a visual and narrative masterpiece. The landscape conveys the character of the town, its history, and the inner life of its inhabitants. The rich dialogue makes one feel as if one knows the characters, even those who only pass momentarily across the screen. Like Paterson turning a line of poetry over in his head as he drives, we viewers can reflect on this movie for weeks.

Many stories about artists veer into cliché: the artist as the solitary genius who toils in obscurity until her brilliance is revealed or the artist as a rebel resisting life's comforts in order to create bold new works that outlast him.

*La La Land* relies on these clichés and cannot deliver on them. The climactic song celebrates "the rebels / The ripples from pebbles / The painters, and poets, and plays." But in the end, the dream is only of fame and glitz: having a full-time nanny and attending industry parties. The artist turns into the movie star.

Paterson sidesteps these clichés. Even though he organizes his entire life around writing poetry, Paterson doesn't call himself a poet. He does not share his work with anyone except his partner. There is no hint that he will one day be discovered or even that he would want to be.

His poetry cannot be separated from the mundane realities of driving buses and cooking dinner, yet his poetry and the rest of his life are not the same. Artistic creation uses daily life as fodder for its work. It doesn't denigrate the ordinary as something that has to be left behind. Instead, the work of making art transforms life and elevates it. This is the movie's most enticing suggestion: that creating is a necessity of life, like working and eating and loving.

In stories of artistic creation, delight and escapism have their place, and *La La Land* is good for that. But for a vision of creativity that smolders in every fiber of one's life, I'd choose New Jersey over LA anytime.

*A version of this article appears in the February 15 print edition under the title "Two visions of creativity."*