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The Eye of 'Vida': Breaking Down the Cinematography of This Year's Best New Show



I began watching Starz's new show *Vida* because its creator, Tanya Saracho, wrote for *Looking*, a show I loved and recommended profusely for its too short two season and a movie run.

I also began watching because *Vida* has an all Latinx writers' room (the first show ever to) in a TV world where the majority of writers' rooms are still entirely white.

And finally I began watching because with *One Mississippi* and *I Love Dick* canceled and *Sense8* and *Transparent* wrapping up, I wanted more queer TV.



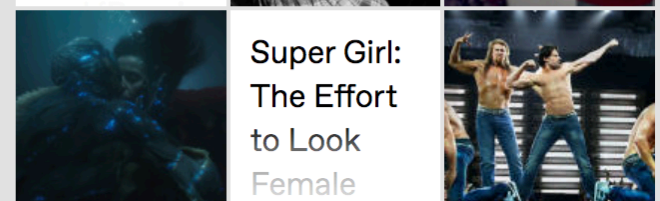
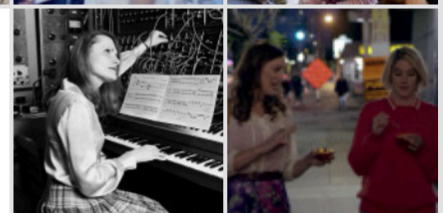
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Well, three episodes in it has not disappointed. It's funny and emotional and complicated and in episode 3 has a queer sex scene that really, truly rivals the best sex scenes I've ever seen on screen. But I don't want to talk about any of that. I want to talk about the show's cinematography.

Too often when work is made by someone who isn't a cis straight white man or about someone who isn't a cis straight white man, the conversation is about just that. And these conversations should happen. It's exciting to see oneself on screen for the first time and it's important to highlight how easy inclusive hiring can be.

But what's often lost in these discussions is craft. And, of course, if someone who isn't a cis straight white man is being hired to work on a TV show it's likely because they were so damn good they just couldn't be ignored. Sure, there are occasions where the craft doesn't match the content. But usually when a movie or TV show excites me because of its on screen or behind the scenes representation it's often also just really, really, really good.

The first time I watched the first three episodes of *Vida* I was too involved in the story and characters to pay much attention to what it was doing formally. But when I rewatched them with my partner I was struck by cinematographer Carmen Cabana's interesting and effective camerawork. My initial viewing experience had been deeply shaped by what the camera was doing and I hadn't even noticed. That is good cinematography.

Some of Cabana's work is stunning in an obvious way. There are moments in the show that have a heightened quality and the lighting and framing and lens choice in these moments creates some very screen-grabbable images.

Here are a few from the pilot.





With their symmetry and stylized lighting these images very much align with our idea of “good” cinematography. These are the kinds of moments film students would ache to get into their reel.

They’re also not how every scene should look.

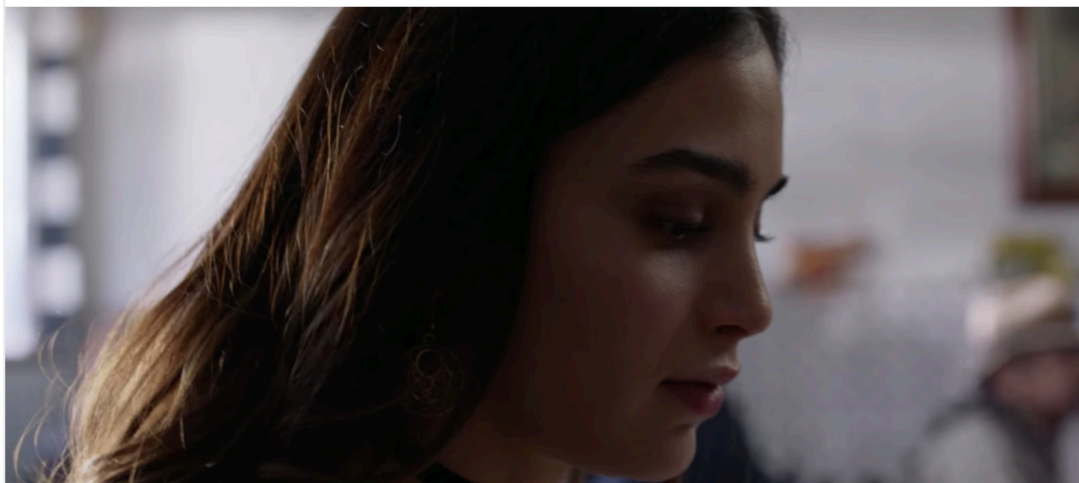
Good cinematography isn’t just about pretty or striking images. It’s about visual storytelling. Choices being made that best enhance each scene in this specific work to support plot or character.

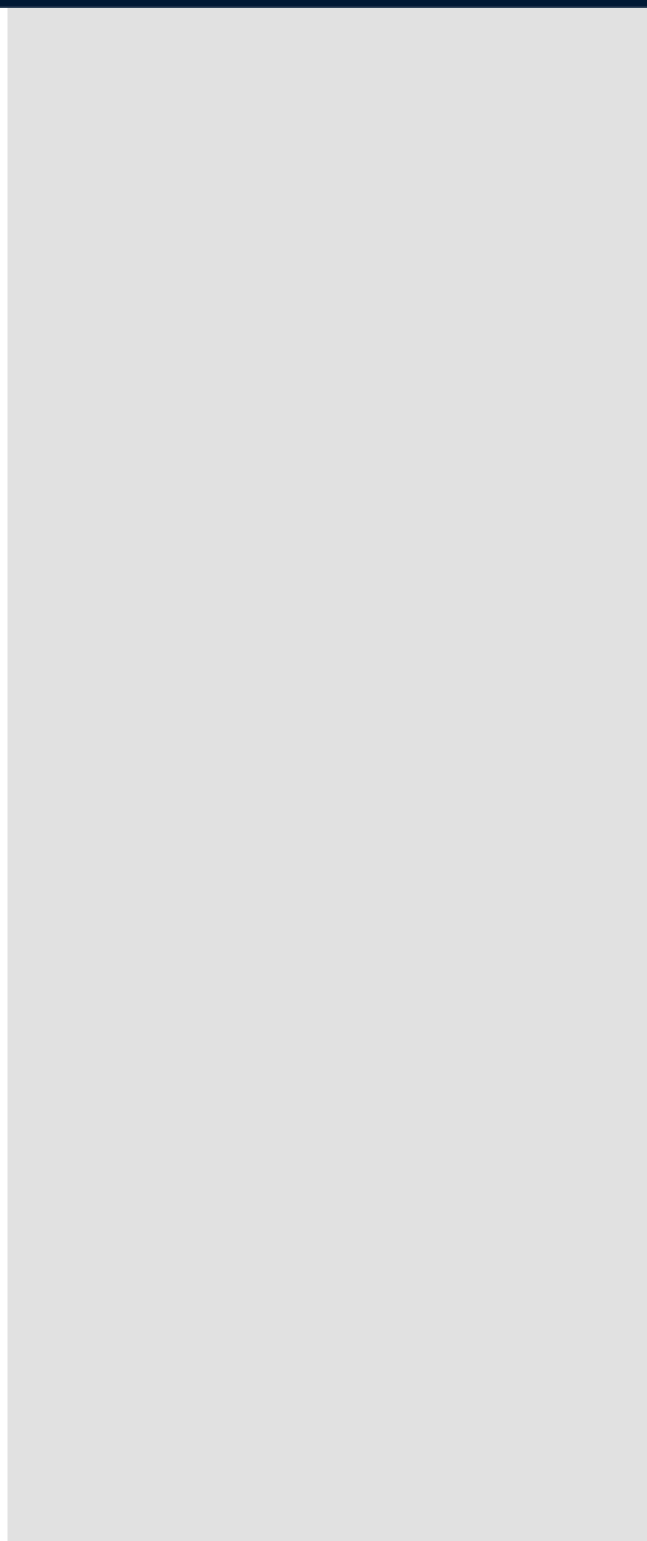
What separates *Vida* from the average show is the precision in which its most basic scenes are shot. To demonstrate this I’m going to breakdown what I’d say is the simplest shot scene in the pilot.

The vast majority of the cinematography in *Vida* is handheld so this would be easier in video form but I have a blog not a vlog so bear with me.

This scene comes 21.5 minutes into the episode. Two of the main characters, Lyn and Emma, are eating lunch at a small restaurant. Or, more accurately, Emma is eating lunch and Lynn is watching. Their mother has died, so they're both back home in East Los Angeles and during this scene they discuss Lyn's quasi-boyfriend, Lyn's new business venture, and what to do with their mother's bar/apartment complex.

There are five basic reoccurring shots in this scene, all handheld.





Wide, Close-Up 1, Insert, Medium-Wide, Close-Up 2. Simple.

But the variants of these shots, given the handheld movements, actually result in dozens of distinct images that illicit different feelings based on what's happening in the scene.

Handheld cinematography is widely overused. Yes, it can create a certain energy and allow the actors more freedom to move around, but it can also feel really sloppy and distracting. Handheld cinematography isn't a substitute for planning, but rather requires an even greater precision in its execution.

Since I wasn't on set I don't know whether the details of movements were carefully planned, or if Carmen Cabana and her team are just naturally brilliant. My guess is it's a combination of the two.

Not only does the camera float and land, shift and capture in subtle and creative ways in the more kinetic, complicated scenes. Even here each shot variant feels precise.

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Let's just focus on the wide shot. The key changes that occur are the amount of headroom the characters have and who is more on the edge of the frame.

Lyn gets a text and looks concerned. Emma asks if the text is from "Jupiter" even though she likely knows Lyn's boyfriend is named Juniper. There is minimal headroom.





Lyn tells Emma that she and Juniper are opening a store. Emma responds, "Oh God." Less headroom.



This approach continues throughout the shot. When there's an increase in tension the camera dips, creating a trapped, claustrophobic feeling. When the tension is alleviated the camera goes back up creating a more standard, visually pleasing frame.

The other shift that occurs throughout the scene is which character is more on the edge of the frame. Whoever is more at risk of being cut off, the more we identify with the other person. This is accentuated by the wooden shutters that block Emma, adding to this effect since Lyn is more frequently whose point of view we're in while we watch Emma eat.

Even in the three shots above we can see how the camera has shifted from totally in Lyn's POV to a bit more balanced. At the start of the scene Lyn is receiving a text message and Emma is in her own world

Even in the three shots above we can see how the camera has shifted from totally in Lyn's POV to a bit more balanced. At the start of the scene Lyn is receiving a text message and Emma is in her own world eating the food. But as they talk we begin to identify a bit more with Emma's perception of Lyn's lover and career choice.

This only increases as Lyn begins to describe her new business venture of "Aztec inspired lotions." Emma is almost fully centered which aides in aligning the audience with her perception/dismissal of what Lyn is saying.



But when Emma brings up a failed business Lyn previously tried and we can see the hurt on Lyn's face, we begin to move back in the opposite direction. Both of Lyn's business ideas may seem stupid but she's genuinely hurt by what her sister has said. By shifting the camera slightly back into her POV, we feel that hurt and see Emma's laughing as unnecessarily cruel.





In addition to these two reoccurring techniques there are more nuanced changes that occur, especially in the close-ups, that I can't even begin to analyze. But I know how they make me feel.

The first time I watched this episode I barely noticed the cinematography except that it was handheld and that there were a few notable images like the ones at the top. This is good.

There are only three more episodes in *Vida's* short first season and I won't be thinking about this at all while I watch them. Carmen Cabana's work blends together with the excellent writing and performances and other technical elements to create an immersive world. Film is a collaborative art form for a reason. The best movies and TV shows don't have one aspect that outshines all the others. Each component makes each other component better.

Vida has this balance of craftsmanship *and* is telling several stories we rarely see on TV. So, um, watch it? Please? All my favorite queer shows get canceled after one or two seasons, so maybe let's prevent that this time?

Thanks bunches. Enjoy!

#Vida #Starz #Carmen Cabana #Latinx #LGBTQIA
#Tanya Saracho #Melissa Barrera #Mishel Prada #Looking
#Cinematography

✕ Close notes

