

DOI: 10.31866/2617-2674.5.2.2022.269532

UDC 791.634:7.017.4

SYMBOLISM OF COLOR IN CINEMA

Oleksandr Kovsh^{1a}, Mykyta Dziuba^{2b}

¹ Lecturer at the Cinema and Television Arts Department;
e-mail: oleksandrkovsh@email.ua; ORCID: 0000-0002-3007-8381

² Master of Audiovisual Arts and Productions;
e-mail: nika_1999@ukr.net; ORCID: 0000-0002-5295-2973

^a Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine

^b Kyiv University of Culture, Kyiv, Ukraine

Keywords:

color;
gamma;
color perception;
color gamut

Abstract

The purpose of the research is to analyze the perception of color by the viewer and to establish the role of the color score in the structure of the film, to determine the symbolism of the main colors in the fabric of the film. To achieve this goal, the following tasks are outlined: to establish the role of color in building the character and image of the character; to prove the importance of the ability to build and harmoniously organize the color scheme in the use of a monochromatic color system; to consider the role of color and its symbolism on specific examples. **The research methodology** consists of the application of the following methods: theoretical – for the analysis of films, and informative sources; generalization of the different colors' influence on the general association of perception, the formation of subjective perception of scenes with the dominance of a certain color from the chromatic range; structural and functional, which consists in the isolation of color as a separate element from the integral fabric of the film and determining its function in the construction of characters, creating dramatic tension, etc. **The scientific novelty** is that the role of certain colors is analyzed in the example of modern projects, and a detailed analysis of the selection of colors depending on certain tasks in various scenes is carried out; with the help of theoretical analysis, the factors that influence the general impression of the viewer are determined. Thus, work was carried out on the collection and systematization of theoretical material on the topic and an attempt was made to apply theoretical concepts in practice. **Conclusions.** In the course of the article, we have analyzed the ambiguity of colors, the use of color combinations with sound, with other colors of the chromatic range. The role of color in conveying symbolism, associations, and the significance of changes in perception has been determined by analyzing films.

For citation:

Kovsh, O. and Dziuba, M. (2022). Symbolism of Color in Cinema. *Bulletin of Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts. Series in Audiovisual Art and Production*, 5(2), pp.207-215.

Problem statement

Films play an important role in modern society. They have penetrated all spheres of the culture of different countries and have influenced people's lives since childhood. One of the main components in creating a film is the color balance, which helps the viewer to better understand the meaning of the film.

Each color due to its historical development in the minds of viewers has its symbolic meaning. Therefore, directors often use color as a means of influencing the viewer's subconscious and the perception of the frame in general.

In addition to influencing the audience's psyche, the color in the film creates an atmosphere, creates a general mood, and also carries additional information about the content of the film or individual characters. Colors in cinema perform certain functions – plot, dramatic, symbolic, and are used by a complementary color scheme. In particular, in this article, we consider the specifics of the symbolic meaning of color in cinema.

Recent research and publications analysis

The theoretical basis for mastering the symbolism of color was laid in the work of I.V. Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1840). Related to the topic of the work are also found in Ukrainian researchers, such as A. Alforov or M. Hertz. Significant interest was also noticed in the framework of popular science materials in blogs.

The purpose of the research is to analyze the symbolic meaning of color in cinema. Identify the features of the influence of color on the consciousness of the viewer. Establish the role of color in creating the atmosphere of the film, building

the image and character of the characters. Prove the importance of the ability to create a harmonious color scheme using a monochromatic color system.

Main research material

Most of us have a laid-back attitude when it comes to painting a picture of popular colors. For example, red means anger and stress, blue means peace and relaxation, black means depression, white means purity and perfection, and so on. However, colors can mean much more than just a change of mood. They can also influence desires and the flow of thoughts.

Meaningful use of certain colors in cinema is related to the psychology of audience perception. In *The Art of Color*, Johannes Itten (2019) notes that most color combinations ("harmonious") usually consist of close tones or different colors with the same intensity. For example, if you look at a green square for a while, you can close your eyes and see a red square. But the opposite result is possible.

There is also a more subtle way of harmonious organization – the use of similar colors, i. e. monochromatic color scheme. In the case of the obvious dominance of a certain color from the chromatic scale (7 colors) in a film or a single scene, we can talk about the purposeful use of color to create a specific emotion in the viewer. It is always important to keep in mind that each color has several associations, one of which corresponds to the context and with a certain degree of probability may coincide with our subjective perception. That's why directors always pay attention to the color scheme of their films – thanks to color, they can convey a much deeper meaning (Itten, 2019).

Yellow is the lightest color. It can lose this quality when combined with darker

colors (gray, black, purple). Accordingly, transparent and bright tones of yellow are perceived positively, and blurred and dim – negatively (Itten, 2019).

It is generally believed that yellow is the color of friendship, but in cinema, it can take on the opposite meaning. Thus, in *Birdman* (2014), director Alejandro Iñárritu uses yellow in scenes with the protagonist's daughter, which broadcasts her unstable psyche and, consequently, illness. In the film *Elizabeth* (1998, directed by Shekhar Kapoor), yellow means "madness". It is thanks to the shades of yellow that it is possible to strengthen the unusual habits and aspirations of the deluded Queen of Britain.

The frame, flooded with yellow light, is used by Danny Villeneuve in *The One Who Runs the Blade 2049* (2017). This means that the hero is close to insight, and the plot will soon return in an unexpected direction.

In *Sin City* (2005, directed by Robert Rodriguez), almost all the characters are mutilated. The director uses yellow to highlight the vile villain and emphasize that he is the main antagonist in the film.

Wes Anderson is a fan of bright yellow. The director often uses yellow, illustrating naivety, joy, and a child's view of the world. However, in the *Hotel Chevalier* (2007), a short prologue to the film *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), this color symbolizes loneliness, painful madness, and isolation of the two main characters from the world and themselves. Thus, with the help of the dominant yellow color in combination with the refined atmosphere and romantic music, Wes Anderson expresses the general state of the place, and time, as well as the inner experiences of the characters. In the frames, you can see small details that slightly balance the visual perception. For example, gray suits,

blue books, etc. (Kolir v kinovyrobnytstvi vid natiaku do yaskravoho symbolizmu, sei-khai, n. d.).

The ambiguity of red depends on the density and tone. Approaching red-orange – a way to express militancy, danger, dominance, power, and madness. This is the symbolism of red and orange in some scenes in *Macbeth* (2015, directed by Justin Kurzel).

It is worth noting that often the color red indicates something that sharply manipulates a person's feelings: love, passion, danger, violence, and anger. Recall the famous scene with rose petals in the movie *American Beauty* (1999) by Sam Mendes. The red rose here symbolizes lust and passion, as well as reflects the main character's attraction to his daughter's friend. And in general, red rose petals appear throughout the film and appear in every scene of erotic fantasies (Kolir v kinovyrobnytstvi vid natiaku do yaskravoho symbolizmu, sei-khai, n. d.).

You can also give an example of the cult movie *Space Odyssey* (2001, directed by Stanley Kubrick). The arch, where astronauts encounter artificial intelligence, is dominated by red. In this scene, red tones are a harbinger of danger and confrontation. Even the computer itself has a red eye, which predicts potential danger long before the event and creates a sense of anxiety in the viewer.

Scenes of violence and fights are also dominated by red. In fact, through the association with blood, it is possible to impose on the viewer the feeling that he is also experiencing physical pain.

Sergei Parajanov's films *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) and *The Color of the Pomegranate* (1968) are also dominated by red.

In *Color ...* it is associated with the symbol of Armenia (pomegranate), as well as

the color of blood – living water, which resurrects, rejuvenates, and gives new life. The value of the color in the fabric of this film is determined by the high degree of conventionality of what is depicted in the film. According to the researcher M. Herts, color is the material with which the director creates his film. "The Color of a Pomegranate is an image that flows into each other and is directed only by the conditional division into chapters and quotes of the great poet. The acting here is conditional, the characters most often embody symbols, statues, mechanical dolls" (Herts, 2015, p.40).

In *Shadows ...* it is dictated by the local color of the landscape, interiors, Hutsul ornaments, and costumes. The blood appears here in one of the first scenes – the murder of the protagonist's father Ivan when after brandishing an ax in the frame splashes of blood appear and turn into silhouettes of fiery horses. Especially dramatically, these colors are combined with black, creating a gloomy mood, and causing subconscious bad feelings. Film critic Andriy Alforov, in an interview about the exhibition dedicated to the film's anniversary, claims that the role of colors in Parajanov's films is to enhance the dramatic elements. The researcher draws parallels between Paradzhanov and the American avant-garde artist Kenneth Engeromta, as well as the director Michelangelo Antonioni, who managed to reflect the inner state of the heroes through color (*Tini Zabutykh Predkiv u chervonykh tonakh*, 2016).

In Tim Barton's *Sweeney Todd, the Fleet Street Hairdresser Demon* (2007), all of Helena Bonham Carter's (Mrs. Lovett) costumes are created by costume designer Colin Atwood based on a synthesis of black and red. Even when Helena's personal life improves and the disturbing

black color disappears from her toilets, red remains, broadcasting that the heroine's bloody past is not over.

The pink hue is formed as a result of a combination of red and white. This color symbolizes softness, innocence, and tenderness. According to several studies, it has a calming effect and evokes positive emotions. However, a metaphorical interpretation is also possible here. For example, Dolores Umbridge, a world-famous character in *Harry Potter* (2001, directed by Chris Columbus), adored the color pink, which evoked feelings opposite to tenderness and emotion (*Kolir v kinovyrobnytsyvi vid natiaku do yaskravoho symbolizmu, sei-khai, n. d.*).

Pink is often associated with women – a typical stereotype often used in movies. In *Bad Girls* (2004, directed by Mark Waters) scenes where there is a "girls' squad" are dominated by shades of pink. In this way, the director emphasizes their femininity and beauty. In fact, in this ribbon, pink serves as an exaggeration.

Pink also signifies beauty and playfulness. For example, in the film *Blonde in Law*, the work of director Robert Lukevich (2001).

Blue on yellow seems a bit dark and loses its brightness. A pure blue is a color that has neither yellowish nor reddish hues. If red is a symbol of dynamism, then blue becomes its opposite – passivity. At the same time, blue can express a hidden danger, such as in the scenes of *With Eyes Wide Shut* (1999, directed by Stanley Kubrick), or a magical mystery, such as in the scenes of *Moulin Rouge* (2001, directed by Baz Luhrmann).

Blue is the color of thrillers and horrors, which causes the viewer to feel alienated and uncomfortable. The fabulous meaning of blue in the episode of the animated *Fantasy* (1940, directed by Samuel Arm-

strong, James Elgar, and Bill Roberts) is complemented by terrifying motifs of the unknown, dangerous and evil.

Blue also expresses melancholy. For example, in *The Eternal Radiance of Pure Reason* (2004, directed by Michel Gondry), the director uses shades of blue to reflect, first and foremost, the melancholy of characters and heroes (Kolir v kinovyrobnytvstvi vid natiaku do yaskravoho symbolizmu, sei-khai, n. d.).

Blue is the embodiment of the dreaminess and unreality of what is happening, for example, in *Birdman* (2014, directed by Alejandro Iñárritu). Interestingly, in *Harry Potter* (2019, directed by David Yates), blue, on the other hand, is associated with destructive power.

Green in combination with yellow, as a rule, evokes light feelings and is associated with the birth of something new, with youth and harmony. If you add shades of blue to the palette and mute the tones, green will reflect coldness, indifference, confusion, and fear. In this sense, it is used mostly in monochrome movie scenes. For example, *Dizziness* (1958, directed by Alfred Hitchcock) is a reflection of the mystery of the protagonist's image, green scenes in *The Matrix* (1999, directors Lana and Lily Wachowski) create an unnatural effect of another reality, and in *Room of Fear* (2002, directed by David Fincher) is an illustration of anxiety. Green can represent the negative and is often the calling card of villains. For example, green smoke from a potion indicates its poisonous properties, and green fog accompanies witches and evil wizards.

Orange is the color of warmth, joy, and peace (this applies to the external environment and the internal state of the hero). In Wes Anderson, a follower of Kubrick, you can see the tendency to use

this color in almost all films. It signifies friendliness and happiness. Each scene leaves behind a warm feeling in the soul and an involuntary smile. Orange also conveys exoticism. For example, if the landscape is different from our planet, as in the movie *Martian* (2015, directed by Ridley Scott).

The double values of orange change according to the amount of red. In combination with red shades, orange acquires an energetic, sensual, festive, or fabulous sound. However, when darkened by black, it begins to fade and expresses alertness and danger. The contrasts between saturation and choice create a light atmosphere in the somewhat sad Tenenbaum Family (2001, directed by Wes Anderson). In this film, the color orange is rich and symbolizes good feelings. In contrast, in the background image of *The Martian* (2015, directed by Ridley Scott) – orange is combined with yellow to emphasize the gloom and transport us to another planet.

Purple color uniquely affects the subconscious. Depending on the contrasts, it can make the viewer both sublime and depressed. This color is often used to create a fantasy reality on the screen, and other worlds, to immerse yourself in the inner world of the hero. In purple, unlike other colors, the ambiguity of reading does not depend on the context, it is meant in almost every case. For example, in *Neon Demon* (2016, directed by Nicholas Winding Refn), the choice of purple suggests an escalation of the conflict throughout the story, and in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014, directed by James Gunn) it takes us to another dimension.

Still purple is evidence that the hero is in his dreams. A very revealing scene between Joy and Kay in *Running on the Edge of 2049* (1982, directed by Danny Ville-

neuve), where we learn that Joy is a robot and has a shell of Kay's fantasies, and is not a real person.

The appearance of purple on the screen can mean lost opportunities, and lost, or wrong decisions of the heroes (*Bridge of Arts*, 2004, directed by Eugene Green). Purple can also mean parting with people, dreams and illusions, all kinds of loss, and death (*Cabaret*, 1972, directed by Bob Foss).

Black reflects not only destruction. It is a color mystery that shows such shades of emotions as restraint, strength, and depression. You can see that black clothes are worn by authoritarian or negative characters.

For example, in the *Grand Hotel Budapest* (2014, directed by Wes Anderson), Dmitry (Adrian Brody) is dressed in black, just as Joling (Willem Defoe) is sitting next to him in black – a hired assassin, a negative character in the film. If you follow these types, it turns out that during the film, they never change the color of their clothing. These are minor characters who should not be expected to change their character, their main task is to create conflict. And it is this conflict that moves history forward. The black color in Willem Defoe's clothes emphasizes his destructive strength, determination, and emotionlessness; he is capable of anything, and murder for him is within the norm.

David Lynch is black – never neutral. The black color in Lynch's film symbolizes darkness and everything that is hidden behind it, everything that is already on the other side. In *Blue Velvet* (1986), it is Frank's leather jacket, Dorothy's evening dress, and black beetles underground in the first frames of the film.

In general, the colors of clothes in the movies are often symbolic. An example is Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991, di-

rected by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Weiss). The main character is the only one in her village who wears blue things. This symbolizes her "differentness" compared to other characters. Although this detail is not mentioned in the dialogues of the film but in the tale itself it is noted that Belle stands out against the crowd.

Color opens up great opportunities for the director and allows you to use unusual combinations, and work with contrasts. For example, at the end of the film *Oil* (2007, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson), when the adopted son comes to the father for the final conversation, the characters stand out with the light of different colors. Yes, the son is flooded with cold bluish light, and the father's space contrasts with the warm shade of a table lamp. These shots evoke a sense of sharp polarity in the characters.

In filmmaking, color is often used as a way to distinguish between two periods of life. These are not always strictly black-and-white and full-color "modes". Halftones and shadows can also "talk" to the viewer.

The *Fauna Labyrinth* (2006, directed by Guillermo del Toro) depicts two worlds. In the fantasy world, warm colors mean softness. The harsh reality of Ophelia is dominated by sharp corners, as expressed by blue and gray tones. As the plot progresses, the two worlds begin to intertwine, and the colors mix. "My idea was to show how one world is starting to affect another," says Guillermo Del Toro, the film's director. Ophelia is beginning to see the world objectively. "According to the cameraman Guillermo Navarro, during the creation of the film "... used color as a language in which to explain the intricacies of the plot."

In Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000), color distinguishes plot lines. At first

glance, this is not noticeable, but some scenes are painted to show the separation between the two plot stories. Michael Douglas's line is gray-blue. Then, when we see the heroes and their history in Mexico, the yellow hue prevails. *Traffic* is an example of how several groups of heroes and, accordingly, their stories are intertwined. Color helps to separate them.

Color often helps the director to tell several stories in parallel, and the viewer – not to get confused, especially when it symbolizes a certain space. Yes, Christopher Nolan in the film *Beginning* (2010) had to visually separate the levels of dreams. There are four of them in the film, but each of them has the same characters. Nolan uses color codes to keep the viewer crazy when moving from one level to another. They are different for each level and serve as their distinguishing mark.

The first level of sleep is easily recognizable by the gray rainy street. In the second level, the events take place in the hotel, where soft light turns each frame yellow. The color code of the third level is white, there is a snow-covered castle in the mountains and camouflage white suits. In the fourth, deepest level of sleep, the palettes of the previous three are mixed.

One of the most stunning examples of color play is reflected in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). This is a black-and-white film in which the viewer can watch a girl in a red coat several times. This color change is clearly symbolic.

The director of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), Manoj Knight Shyamalan, also uses color symbolism in his films. In *The Invulnerable* (2000) it is purple and green, in *The Mysterious Forest* (2004) it is red and yellow, and in *Signs* (2002) it is blue. Colors

are a random choice. They are selected according to specific scenes, their content, and sacred significance.

Conclusions

Color is a very important part of our lives. It affects the perception of reality, controls attention, and can trigger neurophysiological processes in the brain. Not surprisingly, this remarkable phenomenon has taken a special place in art – including in the field of cinema.

When choosing to use a certain color, directors focus on the general human associations associated with a particular color. However, there is always the option of subjective reading, which depends on personal preference for color and the benefits of harmonious combinations. You can see that every director tries to convey the mood, tone, or character of the characters to the viewer through the art of color. And it is through these aspects and associations that we conclude that color has a symbolic meaning in cinema.

Thus, the symbolism of color in cinema is reflected in different ways. Cinematographers broadcast the character's inner world, additional content, or transition to another world through a specific color, and also influence the viewer's consciousness, encouraging him to immerse himself in the atmosphere of the film. It is important that after watching the tape, where yellow predominates, we have positive feelings, but at the end of the film, where yellow is combined with red or black – negative. The color tone of the film depends on the worldview, creativity, and ideas of the director, cameraman, and colorist. Color is one of the important factors influencing the development of the plot and the emotional state of the viewer.

REFERENCES

- Goethe, J., 1840. *Theory of Colours*. Translated from the German. London: John Murray. [online]. Available at: <<https://archive.org/details/goestheoryco01goetgoog/page/n6/mode/2up?view=theater>> [Accessed 07 February 2022].
- Herts, M., 2015. Symvolichne zobrazhennia hottie i smerti u filmakh Serhiia Paradzhanova "Tini zabutykh predkiv" i "Kolir hranatu" [Symbolic depiction of life and death in the films of Sergei Parajanov "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" and "The Color of a Pomegranate"]. *Suchasni problemy khudozhnoi osvity v Ukraini*, 10, pp.37-40.
- Itten, J., 2019. *Kunst der Farbe: subjektives Erleben und objektives Erkennen als Wege zur Kunst*. Berlin: Christophorus.
- Kolir v kinovyrobnytstvi vid natiaku do yaskravoho symbolizmu, sei-khai [Color in film production from a hint to vivid symbolism, say hi], n. d. *Jak.koshachek*. [online] Available at: <<https://jak.koshachek.com/articles/kolir-v-kinovirobnictvi-vid-natjaku-do-jaskravogo.html>> [Accessed 07 February 2022].
- "Tini zabutykh predkiv" u chervonykh tonakh ["Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" in Red Tones], 2016. *Bloh turystychnoi ahentsii Okraina*. [online] 11 April. Available at: <<https://www.okraina.com.ua/blog/prikarpate/tini-zabutih-predkiv-u-chervonih-tonah>> [Accessed 07 February 2022].

СИМВОЛІЗМ КОЛЬОРУ В КІНО

Олександр Ковш^{1а}, Микита Дзюба^{2б}

¹ викладач кафедри кіно-, телемистецтва;

e-mail: oleksandrkovsh@email.ua; ORCID: 0000-0002-3007-8381

² магістр аудіовізуального мистецтва та виробництва;

e-mail: nika_1999@ukr.net; ORCID: 0000-0002-5295-2973

^а Київський національний університет культури і мистецтв, Київ, Україна

^б Київський університет культури, Київ, Україна

Анотація

Мета дослідження – проаналізувати сприйняття кольору глядачем та встановити роль кольорової партитури у структурі кінотвору, визначити символіку основних кольорів у тканині стрічки. Для досягнення мети окреслено такі завдання: встановити роль кольору у побудові характеру та образу персонажа; довести важливість уміння побудови та гармонійної організації кольорової гами у використанні монохроматичної системи кольорів; розглянути роль кольору та його символіку на конкретних прикладах. **Методологія дослідження** полягає у застосуванні таких методів: теоретичного – для аналізу кінотворів, інформаційних джерел; узагальнення впливу різних кольорів на загальну асоціацію сприйняття, формування суб'єктивного сприйняття сцен з домінуванням певного кольору з хроматичної гами; структурно-функціонального, що полягає у виокремленні із цілісної тканини кінотвору кольору як окремого елемента та визначенні його функції у конструюванні персонажів, створенні драматичного напруження тощо. **Наукова новизна.** Проаналізовано роль певних кольорів на прикладі сучасних проєктів, проведено детальний аналіз підбору кольорів залежно від певних завдань у різних сценах; за допомогою теоретичного аналізу картин та рецензій до них визначено чинники, які впливають на загальне враження глядача. Зібрано та систематизовано теоретичний матеріал і здійснено спробу практичного застосування теоретичних концепцій. **Висновки.** У статті проаналізовано багатозначність кольорової гами, використання поєднань кольору зі звуком та іншими кольорами хроматичної гами. За допомогою аналізу кінокартин встановлено роль кольору для передачі символіки, асоціацій та визначено значущість змін сприйняття.

Ключові слова: колір; гама; сприйняття кольору; кольорова гама