**THE EMOTIONAL USES OF COLOR**

A practical, accurate commercial system of color cinematography was not perfected until Technicolor was introduced in Walt Disney’s animated short Flowers and Trees (1932) and in the feature film Becky Sharp (1935). The introduction of color was less revolutionary than the introduction of sound, which killed the silent film, but even though most feature films made since 1960 have been in color, the black-and-white film has continued to be made. In fact, directors such as Woody Allen (*Manhattan*, 1980) and Martin Scorsese (*Raging Bull*, 1979) have chosen to film in black and white to give their movies a calculated tone.

**Black and White**

A black-and-white motion picture is not merely a picture that lacks color, but rather it is an artistic creation with positive qualities of its own. An ample range of effects can be obtained – from precise images in which every hair, every grain can be clearly seen, to a smudged charcoal effect.

Oddly, black and white often gives a stronger impression of realism than color does, perhaps because of associations with newsreels and newspaper photographs. Steven Speilberg used it for this purpose in *Schindler’s List* (1994). Black and white often suggests the hard news of the daily paper, while color often connotes he fantasies of glossy fashion magazines, advertisements, and comic strips. In the cinema, black-and-white composition is often stronger and more dramatic than color.

**Color**

Nevertheless, color introduced a new world into the cinema and steadily grew more effective. It can be used to produce a powerful dramatic impression. The German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, for example, used garish (harsh) colors in such films such as *Despair* (1977) to create a seductive but finally suffocating tone to his melodramas.

The Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni claimed to have studied color for years before venturing to make his first color film, *The Red Desert* (1964). In that film, he used disturbing yellows, pinks, grays, and greens, even going so far as to paint dump heaps and fruit gray for one scene, to express a neurotic woman’s sensibility and the oppressiveness of her industrial environment. He changed film stock for a sequence in which the woman tells her child a story about a girl on a beach. The bright postcard colors seen in that sequence contrast dramatically with the sickly grays and greens of the rest of the film.

Steven Speilberg used very muted colors, very black-and-white-ish in some ways for *Saving Private Ryan* (1999) to reinforce the harsh realities of combat that he was trying to portray.

Color tends to be a subconscious element in film. It is strongly emotional in its appeal, expressive, and atmospheric rather than conspicuous or intellectual. Psychologists have discovered that most people actively attempt to interpret the lines of a composition, but they tend to accept color passively, permitting it to suggest moods rather than objects. Lines are associated with nouns, color with adjectives. Line is sometimes thought to be masculine, color feminine. Both lines and colors suggest meanings then, but in somewhat different ways.

Since earliest times, various artists have used color for symbolic purposes. Color symbolism is probably culturally acquired, though its implications are surprisingly similar in otherwise differing societies. In general, cool colors (blue, green, violet) tend to suggest tranquility, aloofness, and serenity. Cool colors tend to recede in an image. Warm colors (red, yellow, orange) suggest aggressiveness, violence, and stimulation. They tend to come forward in most images.

Some filmmakers deliberately exploit color’s natural tendency to suggest mood and tone. For example, in *Savage Nights* (France, 1993), director Cyril Collard explored the sadomasochistic behavior of an HIV-positive bisexual who had unprotected sex with two lovers. Since blood is the major transmitter of HIV, a precursor of AIDS, the movie is shot through red filters of varying intensity. In this film, the color red, subconsciously suggesting violence and danger, became a central metaphor for the hero’s diseased mind, body, and, indeed, his world.

In another example, *The Age of Innocence* (1993), Martin Scorsese suggested the sexually repressive nature of New York upper class society in the 1870’s by using tastefully subdued, correct, almost repressed, colors to reflect the conservative values of the society itself.

In the film *The Godfather* (1972), a film about the dark side of the American dream, Francis Ford Coppola suppressed color or smothered it in darkness to indicate the somber nature of the subject.

Ridley Scott’s *Alien* film series takes place in a testosterone world of cool, hard surfaces, heavy-metal technology, and blue-gray fluorescence. The color schemes of these films tend to be monochromatic visions of light and dark grays and muddy browns, flesh tones and primary colors suppressed.

Other filmmakers exploit the symbolic properties of color to enhance the differences between themes, settings, or characters. To contrast the two “worlds” of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1998), Robert Zimeckis indicated 1940’s Los Angeles by using a color scheme of washed out browns, setting up a sharp contrast to the garish world of the “Toons.” Gary Marshall hued the prostitute’s street world of *Pretty Woman* (1988) in garish primary colors to separate it from the millionaire’s world of cool, neutral tones (black, white, gray suits, cars, offices). Their shared world is warm browns and beiges shot through an amber filter. Though it was very apparent in the Toon movie, audiences probably didn’t notice the change in color in *Pretty Woman*; we just took it in passively into our subconscious minds.

These examples are by no means complete. As film making continues, new uses will be found to utilize the symbolic nature of color.