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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**WHEN COLOUR NARRATES:  
Colour as a Narrative Tool in Audio-visual Storytelling**

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## **ABSTRACT (ENG)**

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This thesis explores the use of colour as a narrative tool within the realm of cinema. Even though colours have taken up a considerable role in the history of film, colour theory and colour aesthetic have not received reasonable attention in film studies compared to other fields. The thesis reflects upon why this might be the case based on the hypothesis by David Bachelor that a history long “chromophobia” has existed in the arts in the Western world. The paper then seeks to give an overview of relevant theory of colour that tries to shed light on the multiplex nature of colour itself, and in continuation to that, its ability to convey meaning within audio-visual story-telling. Finally, this paper shall investigate the selected works by three directors - Eric Rohmer, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Alfred Hitchcock - that utilize colour narratively within their work but in various ways. It is the aim of this thesis that the analysis supported by theory shall prove the quality and unique property of colour in audio-visual storytelling.



## ABSTRAKT (CZ)

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Tato diplomová práce zkoumá využití barvy jako narativního nástroje v kinematografii. Přestože barvy v historii filmu převzaly významnou roli, teorii barev a barevné estetiky nebyla ve filmových studiích nikdy udělena dostatečná pozornost ve srovnání s ostatními obory. V úvodní části se zabývám tím, proč tomu tak je, a beru si na pomoc hypotézu Davida Batchelora, který míní, že chromofobie se v umění v západního světa objevuje již odnepaměti. Dále se ve své práci snažím poskytnout přehled o relevantní teorii barvy, která se pokouší osvětlit multiplexní povahu samotné barvy a dále její schopnost zprostředkovat význam v audiovizuálním příběhu. Nakonec zkoumám vybraná díla třech režisérů: Erica Rohmera, Rainera Wenera Fassbindera a Alfreda Hitchcocka, kteří v rámci své práce využívají barevnou naraci, každý však jiným způsobem. Cílem této práce je ukázat, že má analýza podpořená teorií prokazuje kvalitu a jedinečnou vlastnost barvy v audiovizuálním vyprávění.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Cinema and Colour

Research in silent films from when cinema began has a number of physical and historical implications. According to an extensive survey made by the Library of Congress, only a fourteen percentage of the American silent movies produced between 1912 and 1929 has survived in its original form.<sup>1</sup> The survey shows that the “vulnerability of nitrate film stock to fire and deterioration and the industry’s practice of neglecting or destroying prints and negatives”<sup>2</sup> contributed to the loss of the film heritage. The earlier films that actually survived, are often in such a poor condition that it can be very hard to see what is going on in the picture. Similar to the severely limited research material in silent films, a study in colour in cinema has its own set of problems. The earlier colour film stock had that issue that the colours vanished or changed over time. Eastmancolor contributed significantly to this tendency when they in the fifties introduced a much cheaper and more convenient single filmstrip system, and therefore marked the end of Technicolor’s monopoly on their complicated and expensive three-filmstrip system. Thus Eastmancolor film was used in most films recorded from the fifties until the eighties in spite of the problems of colours fading or changing over time.<sup>3</sup> For this reason Martin Scorsese initiated a successful campaign that quickly made Kodak to improve the technology behind their film stock. Steven Spielberg that allied with Scorsese stated in relation to his own film archive: “After only five years, the blue is leaving the water of Jaws, while the blood spurting from Robert Shaw’s mouth gets redder and redder.”<sup>4</sup> As a result many of the older films we watch today in cinemas,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-13-209/endangered-silent-film-heritage/2013-12-04/> (Downloaded: 15-09-2017)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dalle Vacche, A., et al. *Color, The Film Reader*. London : Routledge. 2006. p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 4

television, DVD or streaming are altered and will appear different from when they were introduced.

The circumstances of older films and fading colours is far from being the only problem we encounter when studying colours' significance in cinema. The study of the meaning of colours calls for a number of different disciplines as they can be viewed in a historical, cultural, philosophical, aesthetic and scientific perspective – and colour theory is often an ensemble playing between ontology, phenomenology and physics.<sup>5</sup> This interdisciplinary and complex nature of colours means that its presence should be open to a manifold of analytical interpretations. As expressed by Charles Riley: “an interdisciplinary approach is the only satisfactory way of dealing with colour.”<sup>6</sup> Even though it seems tempting to view certain colours as being in possession of an inherent and universal meaning, it is the aim of this thesis to view colours and its narrative functions from specific contexts and perspectives.

Within colour theory there exists a predominant consensus that our perception of colours and their meaning in a broader correlation is based on cultural constructions solely. To further the cumbersome even more, our mutual perception of colours—both within and across cultural borders—is as we know unstable and unsystematic. Even the slightest chromosomal variations will result in different perceptions of a given colour.<sup>7</sup> How is it possible to agree on a universal understanding of a colour's meaning if we cannot even agree whether a colour is green or blue? And how can we code colours when they change character according to the colour it is juxtaposed to? Or according to lighting conditions? This curious phenomenon supports a theory that colours do not exist in reality, but is being created in the brain: “until it reaches the brain, colour does not exist. But how the brain decodes the complex information it receives, and how it

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, S., Street, S., Watkins, L. *Color and the Moving Image*. New York : Routledge. 2013. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Everett, W., et al. *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Paintbrush to Pixel* Bern : Peter Lang AG. 2007. p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

reconstructs in the mind a moving picture of the world beyond the eye, has yet to be discovered.”<sup>8</sup> Added to that is the paradoxical phenomenon that when light hits a surface with all colours from the colour spectrum, the light waves that the object cannot absorb get thrown back for us to perceive. Thus, the colour we perceive of an object is the only colour it is not.<sup>9</sup> Colours are therefore in itself a paradox: They are simultaneously a physical and a physiological phenomenon, both objective and subjective. Reflecting on this contradictory nature Mausfeld and Heyer has in their *Colour Perception. Mind and the Physical World* characterised colours as ‘Janus-faced’.<sup>10</sup> The colours we perceive individually and on the projection screen can not be taken for granted. Because of this, the complex nature of colours is reflected in the various theories put forward through history on the meaning of colours in cinema. Therefore, the meaning of colours in movies has to be discussed in a specific context from one example to the other.

## **1.2 Thesis: Colours can have significant meaning in films as a storytelling device**

I must admit, that when I had to decide for a subject for my Master thesis, as a practising and training cinematographer I wanted to choose a subject that I (for rather selfish reasons) could learn and benefit from in my future work. In connection with my past minor work (short films, music videos, commercials and corporate films), I have come to realise the extreme difficulty in working with colour. More than once have I convinced the director, artist or client during the process of post production to convert the final edit into black and white. Colours were simply too disturbing and far too many.

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<sup>8</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006) p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Everett (2007) p. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 10

They were unfixable because they were not treated with ideas or as a concept at all. Converted to black and white, the films all of a sudden looked good. I am a great admirer of black and white and the monochrome, but I probably love colours even more. Since childhood I have felt the immediate impact of saturated colours. I have a tendency to stay for hours in the supermarket when shopping groceries, even though I rarely fill my basket entirely. My closest friends who know me best have mocked me because of this, and say that it is surely because of all the vivid colours in there. True or not, I must admit: colours are enchanting and beautiful. Studying colour theory and aesthetics as well as watching films more targeted on the use of colour, I have gained knowledge and tools how to better create a pleasing image using colour. But the questions always arise: *what* colours do I choose? And *why*?

In this thesis I will not elaborate on the birth of colour film nor the historical and/or technological implications mentioned above. Nor is it my aim with this thesis to describe the physiology of the eye and how we perceive colours in the brain. Instead, my aim is to examine how colours can influence the audience and function as a narrative tool on line with the other expressive tools in filmmaking such as sound, music, camera movement, editing etc. Nevertheless, in my search it is necessary to involve theories on colours that seeks to shed light on its complex nature and their possibilities within the context of cinema. Even though it is not the scope of this thesis to include all existing theories, I will seek to give an in-depth overview of the different ways colour can serve as a narrative tool in filmmaking.

Chapter 2 Theory on Colour initiates with a discussion based on David Bathelor's *Chromophobia* that revolves around our perception of colour and how (at least in the Western world) it has been influenced by Western thinkers throughout history. Interestingly, there has been an ongoing debate about colours' position in the arts that can be traced all the way from Aristotle up until the twenties century. It seems

there has been a degradation of colours in arts in general, and when colours with the advent of Technicolor's three-strip technique saw its breakthrough into cinema in the thirties, the discussion moved to this domain as well. Though it is not my aim for this thesis to focus on this on-going debate, it nevertheless is remarkable how early theorists about colour in cinema had to take a stance and argue for colours' reason for being or not. During my research, the debate has therefore been impossible to avoid which is why the aura of this thesis finally reflects a stance that colours possess a unique and unusual power in visual storytelling. In *The Colour of Black, White and Grey* I will discuss the "problem" of black, white and grey within the domain of Colour Aesthetics. Supported by visual theorist Rudolf Arnheim, I will then seek to examine the possibilities that colours add to cinema as a storytelling device compared to black and white and/or monochrome. Last, I will bring forward the ideas of Johannes Itten, a Swiss painter, teacher and colour theorist whose theories are of great value both from the perspective of any visual artist who works with colour as well as the analysing spectator in judging the visual works of others.

In chapter 3 *Colours in Cinema as a Storytelling Device*, I will analyse the use of colour in relevant films and carefully selected scenes to shed light on their function as a narrative element within the story. In my analysis section I have chosen the work of three very different directors, all from different countries. Firstly, I will examine the work by French New Wave director Eric Rohmer who against the tendency within the movement shot many of his films in colour. The focus is how Rohmer in *The Green Ray* (1986) has incorporated theological colour symbolism to cleverly express (in a film that never mention a word about religion) the presence or non-presence of God within the characters portrayed. Next, I will discuss pivotal scenes from the colourful work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear eats the Soul* (1974), and how he utilizes colour as an expressive means of character psychology. Lastly, I will discuss Alfred Hitchcock

and his expressive use of colour in his colour films. Focus is on *Marnie* (1964) and how he uses colours as leitmotifs to connect certain values with certain characters.



## 2 THEORY ON COLOUR

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### 2.1 Colour Cinema and its Complexities

From the very early days of cinema there has been numerous attempts to include natural colours in the process. Even before the birth of cinema there seemed to be an urge to add colours to the captured image. As early as 1861 James Clerk Maxwell presented what is considered the first demonstration of a photograph in colour using black and white film combined with and projected through coloured filters. In the early days of cinema, colour systems were developed to bring colours to the moving image. A process called Kinemacolor, which was a two-color process, photographing and projecting a black-and-white film behind alternating red and green filters, was the first commercially successful used from 1908 to 1914. It suffered though from noticeable colour flicker and from red and green fringing when the subject filmed was moving. Later came Chronochrome with a three-color process which rendered colours more truthfully and resolved the fringing problems of Kinemacolor. Though it was Technicolor's three-strip system introduced in the early thirties that firmly established colour cinema, these early systems (which counts more than I have highlighted here) serves as a testimony that colour has been present in cinema almost since its inception. In fact, the first film colorization method was hand done by individuals who painted each frame on the print manually. George Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* from 1902 was an instant international success and was done using this method.

Interestingly, even though colours have taken up a considerable role in the history of cinema, colour theory and colour aesthetic has not received reasonable attention in film studies compared to other fields. In fact, as Edward Branigan famously noted in 1976: "criticism of film to the present day has largely proceeded as if all films

were made in black and white.”<sup>11</sup> In recent times more study in the field has been conducted, but compared to other film studies of creative narrative elements (such as camera work, editing, sound and music) colours in film is still a subcategory in film theory. As expressed in *Color: The Film Reader* in 2006 by Brian Price:

“unlike the major areas of investigation within film studies—genre, auteurism, national cinema—to name but a few, color remains an area of inquiry significantly less well heeled. [...] despite the centrality of color to the experience and technology of cinema, it has most often been no more than the occasional subject of the theorist, historian, or practitioner; a source more of fleeting observation than of rigorous conceptualisation.”<sup>12</sup>

When colours in cinema were more broadly introduced (especially with Technicolor’s three filmstrip system) in the 1930’s and 1940s, a consensus about their sub-ordinance to the more serious black and white films ruled within film critics and intellectuals, especially in Europe.<sup>13</sup> In the following I will discuss theories that illustrate the power of colours as a narrative tool; why this critique of colour has emerged in the West and how this tendency still might influence our perception of colours even today.

### **2.1.1 The Anxiety of Colours**

David Batchelor claims that the above mentioned trend can be traced down to an extensive and long tradition where colours in arts have been subject to an extreme prejudice in Western culture. Batchelor’s central argument suggests that a long-lived chromophobia – a fear of colours’ corruption and contamination of Western culture –

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<sup>11</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006) p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Everett (2007) p. 24.

has been manifested in the Western thought through millenniums and influences the art world even today. According to Bachelard it is developed through countless efforts through history to devalue and downgrade colours, devalue their significance and deny its complexity: Aristotle wrote in *Poetics* which is the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory; “a random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without colour.”<sup>14</sup> To Aristotle—and many thinkers after him—thought and Spirit is in the actual line where the rest (colours) is at best simple ornamentation. Pliny the Elder placed colours in the ‘wrong’ side of the West–Orient opposites in a belief that the rational Western culture tradition was threatened by a non-Western insidious sensuality; Immanuel Kant could never accept colours as taking part of the Beautiful and the Sublime.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle named even colours a drug, a pharmacon; and similar with Plato the painter was just “a grinder and mixer of multi-colour drugs.”<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes writes: “Colour [...] is a kind of bliss [...] like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell.”<sup>17</sup> With Barthes though, something else happens; the reception of colours change course when they turn into ecstasy, they become erotic and gains the power to take-over and eradicate. Chromophobia meets with Barthes its opposite: chromophilia. Nevertheless, the perception of colours is connected to absenteeism, intoxication, a loss of consciousness, a loss of the self. According to Bachelard this long-lived chromophobia can be divided in two main categories:

“In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded

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<sup>14</sup> Bachelard, D. *Chromophobia*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London : Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007. p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. It is typical of the prejudices to conflate the sinister and the superficial.”<sup>18</sup>

On one side colours are coded in the Otherness, the feminine or the primitive and in the other they serve as carrier for the superficial, the cosmetic or the excessive. One way or the other, colours are associated with a corruption, a degradation, a fall. A fall from thought to feeling, from the Sublime to the vulgar, the Holy to the earthly. A fall like this is connected to sin, *the Fall*. In modern culture this could be a fall into narcotic drugs. Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) is a fine example on the association between psychedelic drugs and colours. The colours in the film intensifies and becomes more vivid when the characters take LSD. A newer example of a similar use is *Ciro Guerra’s Embrace of the Serpent* (2015) which for the most part is in black and white but in the final part turns into colours and abstract patterns to visualise the protagonists travel into the subconscious. He is influenced of the sacred healing plant *yakruna* which is a fictional representation for the real life ayahuasca brew used as a traditional spiritual medicine in ceremonies among the Indigenous peoples of the Amazonia. Even though most films today are made in colour, the film shows that this conventional use of colours to visualise the loss of the self (the chromophobia that Batchelor suggests) still remain to this day.

“The Fall” (into colour) are thematised explicitly in a number of films. In Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (1987) the viewer is being taken back and forth between two worlds, heaven and earth. When the angel falls from the spiritual world in black and white into the human and mortal world everything turns into colour. The fall into earth is even caused by another fall – namely a fall in love – and the first thing the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

angel asks a random passer-by the names of the colours he sees, the first one of course being red. Bachelor concludes that:

“His fall from grace is a fall into colour, with a thud. It is a fall from the disembodied all-observing spirit world into the world of the particular and contingent, a world of sensuous existence, of hot and cold, of taste and touch, but most of all it is a fall into a world of desire. It is a fall into a consciousness and self, or rather a fall from super-consciousness into individual consciousness, but it is a fall into self made with the explicit purpose of losing the self in desire.”<sup>19</sup>

Michael Powell's fable about Second World War *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which *Wings of Desire* is loosely based upon, is a similar example. Here the protagonist is not an angel but a pilot with wings that crashes to the ground where intense colours draw an England in war. Andrej Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) opens in a monochromatic sepia-tone but changes into colour when the three protagonist's brakes into the mystical Zone where unknown and alien forces rules. Other less dramatic examples where the protagonists fall into colour could be Gary Ross's ironic comedy *Pleasantville* (1998), but the most prominent and iconic example would be Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). It is the most striking example that supports Bachelors theory:

“the extraordinary, wonderful *The Wizard of Oz*. Made in 1939, this movie's great piece is a spectacular descent into brilliant Technicolor. Having been scooped up by the tornado, Dorothy's house, together with Dorothy herself (Judy Garland) and Toto, falls out of the sky into Munchkinland, a fall that has a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 36-37.

direct impact on the narrative and an especially direct impact on the Wicked Witch of the East. Dorothy's own drift into colour, as I was devastated to discover when I first saw the film, revealed to be 'only' a dream-state, a result of her fall into unconsciousness."<sup>20</sup>

Colours is the world of dreams and Dorothy has to get back home. Home to the familiar, her family, childhood, Kansas, the reality – but above all: back to the monochrome and grey.

Even though colours on film today makes up the far majority of the films produced, it is Bachelors point that the Western culture has not put the chromophobia behind: the codes and connections that has been attached to colours throughout history is still apparent in the way colours are expressed and perceived in Art today.

### **2.1.2 The Colour of Black, White and Grey**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explored colour both as a subjective and cognitive phenomenon, but also through practical observation of real objects like the feathers of birds, the juice from plants, the scale from fish, insects etc. Goethe's description of colours as a phenomenon stands in contrast to Newton's geometrical and mathematical diagrams of refraction of light. With Newton black is not a colour since it does not occur in the spectre of colours that forms when the light refracts in a prism. Black can only occur as a shadow, the absence of light. With Goethe on the other hand, black is the visible form of darkness and the visual representation of the absence of light. The colour theory of Goethe builds less upon a mathematical formula and more upon a theory that originates from a phenomenological perceived reality "that binds

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 39.

everyday and cultural experience with the wonder of colour in embodied forms and as the diurnal mystery of light and dark.”<sup>21</sup> Whether black is a colour is in this regard a matter of perspective, and in the discourse of colour cinema on a theoretical, aesthetic and analytical level we cannot leave out black, which is most often the case. Tom Gunning explores in his article *Where Do Colors Go at Night?* the fundamental paradox whether black is a colour and the absence of colour at the same time. He argues that black as a representation of the absence of light has a very unique and powerful effect in a medium which is created by light. The symbolic effect of black is one of the most expressive in the medium of film:

“Black as a hue creates the forms of objects that play important roles in the color systems of films, from the Batman’s costume in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) to the abstract figures in Brackhage’s *Black Ice* (1994). In the stylistic system of individual films, black interacts with other colors. It marshals powerful cultural connotations (death, evil, mystery, nothingness), but all colors carry such baggage to some degree. Black, however, can swallow or overwhelm other colors in darkness, asserting control over visibility itself.”<sup>22</sup>

Even though black often defines an object in a figurative way, it also has the ability to depict the undefinable and intangible: the darkness that sprouts from a half open door, the shadow that throws from an unseen threat, or the invisible black corner in room in the night that we know consists of more than we see. The darkness hides a *something*, and this invisible something is visualised for the viewer by means of black. Cunning answers his own question: black *is* a colour (at least in the world of cinema), and it is the colour of darkness, the night, the shadow, nothingness and the invisible. Black is

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<sup>21</sup> Gunning, T.: *Where Do Colors Go at Night?* in Brown, S., Street, S., Watkins, L. *Color and the Moving Image*. New York : Routledge. 2013. p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88

therefore the colour that makes the invisible visible. On line with the rest of the colour palette black asserts “its power among colors, not simply as their negation, but in the Goethean tradition, as their potential.”<sup>23</sup>

If black is a colour, it needs to be included in the discourse of colour theory and colour aesthetics. Exactly the black and its contrast relationship to white have taken up a significant part, not only in the films of Sergie Eisenstein, but also in his comprehensive writings on film theory. Eisenstein’s essay *On Colour* can be viewed as a logical successor to his previous theories on the fate of the silent movie when sound arrived in the twenties. His more known work from 1928 *A Statement* written in collaboration with V. I. Pudovkin, and G. V. Alexandrov presented the possibility to avoid a redundancy in the sound in films. They developed a contrapuntal technique regarding sound in line with the already know montage technique. It suggests that sound should not double the “sound” that we already “see” in the picture. There is no need to add the sound of clapping hands to an image of clapping hands.<sup>24</sup> Eisenstein’s *On Colour* continues this thought in regards to picture and the synchronous. Colours adds another dimension to the film universe that if used correctly (contrapuntal) adds another tool in the narrative toolbox on equal with the other montage elements:

“On the question of colour, the aim of my article are very modest: I felt it important to establish the place of colour on an equal footing with the other elements of montage within film-making. We have identified it as the necessary and uniquely all- embracing precondition for achieving total and genuine synchronicity between the sonic and the visual image, between sound and depiction as separate functions.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 89

<sup>24</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006). p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



But with Eisenstein the aesthetic and thematic colours are: black, white and all the grey tones in between these two poles. “Within the pictorial image, colour stands in roughly the same relationship to the graphic outline as does music to the pictorial image as a whole.”<sup>26</sup> Through our imagination, our intellect, black, white and grey represents the colours of reality. It is comparable to the way the musical composer translates the visual image to a corresponding audio-visual image: “in the realm of sound we have composers no less brilliant, capable with equal finesse of translating a striking visual image on screen into the only possible corresponding images in music.”<sup>27</sup> Eisenstein’s point is that the colours *are* there, already present in the black and white image, and it is the task of the talented Cinematographers to generate these colours through the monochromatic.

Paul Coates notes that Eisenstein’s resistance to include the chromatic colours in his theory might be caused by the limited access to colour film stock in the Soviet Union at the time. Instead of lamenting this circumstance he chooses to classify black, white and grey as the real colours in art.<sup>28</sup> Whether this accusation is true or false the question still rises why Eisenstein chose to hand-colour the fluttering and triumphant flag in vivid red in the final image of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Would a grey flag hold the same meaning?

### 2.1.3 The ‘Real’ Colours

Rudolf Arnheim’s film theory is built up by a wish to regard cinema as an autonomous art form. Cinema is—or at least can be—an independent form of expression separated from the other established art forms. Arnheim argues in his essay from 1935 *Remarks*

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<sup>26</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006). p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Coates, P. *Cinema and Colour. The Saturated Image.* London : BFI. 2010. 178 p 67.

on the *Colour Film* for the justification of colours in cinema, not only that it is another element to enhance realism but that it moreover serves as yet another creative storytelling tool. In black and white movies its 'colours' can be arranged in a one-dimensional scale that runs from black to white through a palette of greys. A such greyscale is a representation of light intensity. With colours a one-dimensional scale is no longer sufficient because many colours have the same greyscale value – that is, the same value of light intensity. Arnheim calls this one-dimensional scale of light intensity the Quantitative Scale. A scale of blue hues from very dark to very bright blue is also measured quantitative, but if we mix e.g. yellow and blue, the scale will run from one colour to the other through a range of other hues, where green will be in the middle. Arnheim calls this a Qualitative Scale. More scales with different hues and combinations is therefore necessary and will crisscross each other. Arnheim's point is that colours in cinema—compared to black and white cinema—brings in more dimensions and therefore new possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

In a black and white movie, the 'colours' we perceive can—because of their grey-tone values—form three types of relations to one another: Equality, contrast and relationships. Arnheim defines these relations:

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<sup>29</sup> Arnheim, R. Remarks on the Colour Film. *Sight and Sound*, 1935, Vol.4(16), p.160-162.

**Equality** serves

1. to produce a uniform plane (e.g., a uni-coloured sky);
2. to express a similarity of content of several objects (e.g. the black widow and the little black dog in Lubitsch's Merry Widow); and
3. to cause two objects to melt into one another (e.g. a black garment against a black background).

**Contrast** serves

1. to make one object stand out against another (e.g., dark garment against white background); and
2. to make subdivisions within one object (e.g., the black and white striped dresses in Mädchen in Uniform).

**Relationship** serves

1. to bring out the different shadings within the object itself; and
2. to make two objects stand apart from each other neither by extreme similarity nor by extreme contrast.

It is a fundamental principal in the optical dramaturgy to separate and distinguish characters and objects in relation to each other and their environment. In a black and white movie extreme contrast can only be done one way: the juxtaposition of black and white (quantitative). Moreover, it follows that the objects need to be homogeneous, e.g. a woman in a pure white dress in front of a black wall. This extreme use of contrast between light and dark inevitable adds a dramatic effect that might be unwanted for the filmmaker. In a colour film, objects can be separated from each other without the use of high contrast, and there are as many ways to do this as there are primary colours. Imagine a mise-en-scène: a deep yellow corn field, a blue sky and green trees in the background. A young girl with a red dress stands in the middle of the cornfield. Our attention is immediately drawn to the young girl because the colour of her dress separates her from the cornfield and the rest. An interpretation could be that the girl

does not belong here, or that she is dominant and in control of her environment. If we turn this same image into monochrome black and white all the colours turn into values of grey, and the girl will now be equal or very similar to the cornfield. Now, she suddenly seems to belong to her surroundings and we will not see her as dominant and being in control. To separate the girl from the cornfield in monochrome we would need to give her a black or a white dress, where white (at least in some parts of the world) would give us the impression of purity and innocence where black leads us to the quite opposite. Colours in cinema add more dramaturgical tools. They bring more dimensions and can produce more complex relations between characters and objects without adjusting the relationship between light and dark.

Conveniently, when examining colours in a visual medium, we could draw our attention to the great art painters of history and seek to understand how they utilised colours as one of their most essential means of expression. How could they take advantage of the many shades of colour and use them for a specific and desired effect? The musical composer must learn the notational language of music in order to create harmonious music. Likewise, the painter must not only master the skills in controlling the various hues on his palette, but also know about the psychological effects different hue and their combination can have on the viewer. Since a painting is composed of one single image, the painter cannot—unlike in films—take advantage of movement or sound to direct the viewer. Nor can he take advantage of music to create a mood, or dialogue to tell a story. But somehow the great painters accomplished all of this in one single silent image. Though very different in expression and style they all seemed to understand the fundamental language of colour – the principles of colour harmony and colour contrast.

## 2.2 Colour Harmony and Contrast

Many theorists and scholars through history have sought to theorize and systemise the problems of colour. Sir Isaac Newton saw a correlation between the musical notation system and published with *Opticks* in 1704 the first colour wheel where each hue was connected to certain musical notes. Goethe's colour wheel from 1809, *Farbenkreis zur Symbolisierung des menschlichen Geistes- und Seelenlebens*, sought to connect specific hues to human characteristics and emotional states. The colour wheel (or colour circle) has taken many forms throughout history. Basically, it is an abstract visual representation of all existing colours and their inherent relationships. It is usually based on three primary colours that can be mixed in various proportions to create all existing colours. A colour wheel can illustrate how colours relate to each other, e.g. the colours opposite side of the wheel illustrates the polar opposites of two colours and is said to be complementary, while the colours next to each other shares a closer relationship and is called analogues. We know that colour wheels have been an instrument of art painters; noted by Johannes Itten: "Delacroix kept a color circle mounted on a wall of his studio, each color labelled with possible combinations. [...] Delacroix, rather than Cézanne, is the founder of the tendency, among modern artists, to construct works upon logical, objective color principles, so achieving a heightened degree of order and truth."<sup>30</sup> Itten was a Swiss painter, teacher, writer and theorist connected to the much influential Bauhaus Movement. His writings were highly influenced by theorists of colour, painters and teachers before him (Goethe, Adolf Hölzel, Franz Cižek et al.), but even though Itten recognised that the significance of colour contrast has been noted by many before him, he discovered a lack of a "systematic and practical introduction to the special effects of color contrast"<sup>31</sup> Itten was one of the pioneers of identifying strategies for successful colour combinations. He contributed to the colour theory by

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<sup>30</sup> Itten, J. *The Elements of Color*. New York : Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. 1970. p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Itten (1970). p. 32

developing the twelve-step colour wheel as well as theorizing and defining seven colour contrasts - methodologies for coordinating colour utilizing the hue's contrasting properties.

The seven colour contrasts (which I will get back to later in this chapter) is derived from a colour wheel of three primary colours, yellow, blue and red (which is traditional in the field of art painting where paint and pigments are used). A primary colour is a colour that cannot be mixed by any combination of other colours. The secondary colours: green, orange and purple are formed by mixing the primaries in pairs. The tertiary colours are formed by mixing a primary and a secondary colour. As a result, the wheel shows the primary, secondary and tertiary colours on its outer ring - twelve distinctive hues in total.



Source: Itten, J. The Elements of Color. New York : Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. 1970. p. 3.

We speak of contrast when it is possible to distinguish two colours from one another. Colour harmony is the evaluation of two or more colours in conjunction. Harmony implies balance, and the basic principle of harmony is derived from the psychological rule of complementaries. It postulates that colours are connected systematically by nature and is strengthened by some physiological phenomena. Various simple experiments imply that our colour vision strives to create balance and order. If we stare at a green square for some time and then closes our eye, a red square will appear behind our eyelid as an afterimage effect where the green square was. The experiment can be done with any given colour and the afterimage will always be of the complementary colour. As Itten writes: “The eye posits the complementary colour; it seeks to restore equilibrium of itself.”<sup>32</sup> Other experiments shows likewise effects in our colour vision: If we insert a grey square in a vivid coloured plate of the same brilliance, the eye tends to perceive the grey square tinged towards the surrounding colours’ complementary colour. These experiments suggest that “the human eye is satisfied, or in equilibrium, only when the complemental relation is established.”<sup>33</sup> When mixing two complementary colour pigments one gets grey. If we stare at a medium grey square no afterimage occurs. Hence, medium grey seems to express a state of total equilibrium in the eye, and thus serves as a reference point. So, imagine a composition which includes vivid colours in such suitable proportions that if mixed together yields medium grey; the image then expresses a harmonic equilibrium because the eye evaluates the totality of the whole image. Any other colour combination which does not yield medium grey cannot be in this harmonic state. It becomes expressive and discordant, and many painters have exploited this phenomenon in creating works that yield exciting, provocative or even volatile effects.

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<sup>32</sup> Itten (1970). p. 19

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

### 2.2.1 Seven Colour Contrasts

Itten's seven colour contrasts is named as follows: Contrast of hue, Light-dark contrast, Cold-warm contrast, Complementary contrast, Simultaneous contrast, Contrast of saturation and Contrast of extension. Each describes the interplay between colours and hues; each has a specific characteristic and function and should be discussed individually. Even though this is a major field of study, I will nevertheless seek to describe the main ideas about each contrast and the effect each can have on the viewer.

**Contrast of hue** serves to create contrast by means of at least three different hues. The strongest and most aggressive effect is achieved by use of three primaries. Less powerful is the image using three secondaries as the colour palette; a weaker effect occurs using tertiary colours. It can almost feel analogues. Contrast of hue assumes a vast amount of expressive possibilities. The mix of black and white into the composition can make colours either brighter or darker. Itten's studies shows that if one colour is emphasized and the others are merely accents, that one colour "enhances expressive character."<sup>34</sup> To Itten, the significance of this contrast "involves the interplay of primeval luminous forces. The undiluted primaries and secondaries always have a character of aboriginal cosmic splendour as well as of concrete actuality."

**Light-dark contrast** is, as the name implies, the contrast between lightness (brilliance) and darkness. Strongest effect is between pure black and white. As in the example of Film Noir genre, derived from German Expressionism, this is a contrast that can yield one of the most expressive compositions if the range from darkest to whitest is full range. The contrast can also be obtained when colours are included. In painting the

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<sup>34</sup> Itten (1970). p. 36.



genre is called Chiaroscuro and the power here is that a great amount of blackness will activate the brighter colours and make them seem more saturated: “The radiant reds in Rembrandt’s paintings are so only because of contrast with yet darker tones.”<sup>35</sup>

**Cold-warm contrast** is a contrast between what is considered warm and cold colours. The circle is divided in two halves where yellow through orange, red to violet is the warm colours. They seem “warm” to us probably because they remind us of the sun, fire and light which is usually hot. On the other side of the circle we have the cold colours green, blue and purple. Juxtaposed in a composition, the warm colours seem to extrude, while the colder colours recedes. Hence, it brings out a three-dimensionality to the image, which is then very effective for representing perspective. The complementary effect (which is unavoidable because of cold/warm polar opposites on the colour circle) simultaneously pleases the eye while the amount of one colour above the other adjusts the desired dramatic effect. Maybe this is why this contrast is seen again and again both in paintings as well as in cinema, photography or other visual arts.

**Complementary contrast** suggests two opposite colours which if blended together would yield gray. They therefore form a “pair”, that as opposites require each other. As colours do not have the same “weight” the adjustments of each complementary colour compared to the other is therefore powerful in creating either complete stasis or imbalance.

**Simultaneous contrast** represents the effect discussed above; that the eye for inexplicable reasons requires a complementary of a certain colour to create balance;

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<sup>35</sup> Itten (1970). p. 41.

so strongly even, that it creates it in our perception apparatus in case of its absence. Simultaneous contrast is the one contrast that deals with visual perception illusions and cannot be photographed or painted as such. The contrast induces a feeling of excitement and lively vibration in the eye involving the spectator into the creation of the image:

“Under these conditions, colors give an appearance of dynamic activity. Their stability is disturbed, and they are set in changeable oscillation. They lose their objective character and move in an individual field of action of an unreal kind, as if in a new dimension. Color is as if dematerialized.”<sup>36</sup>

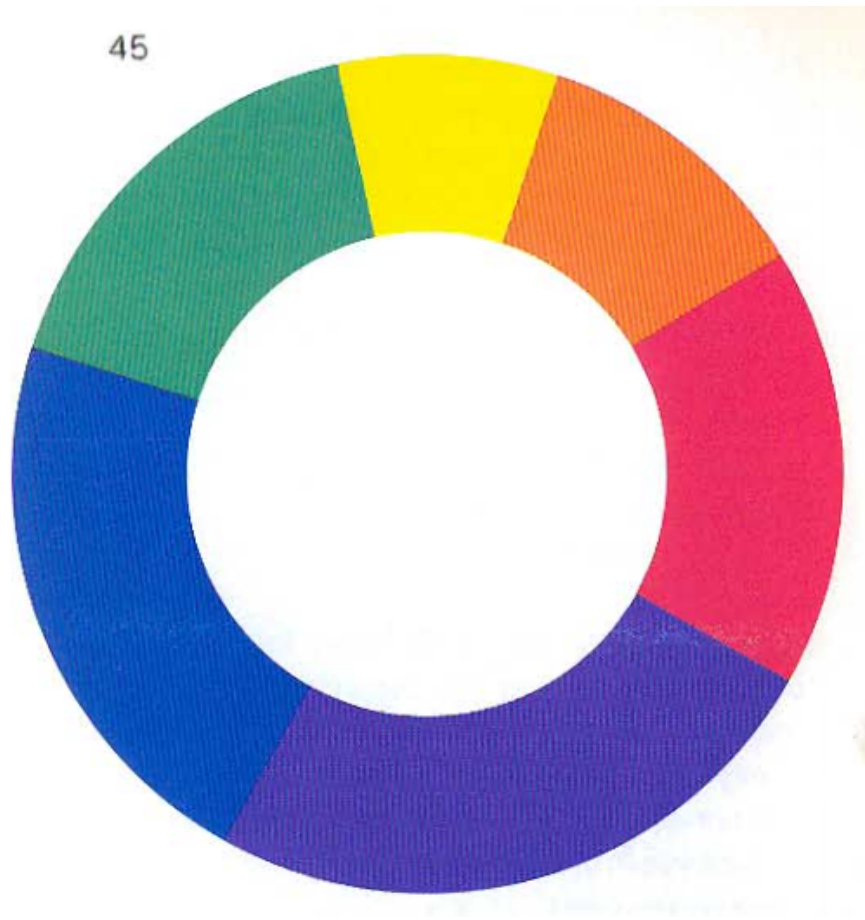
**Contrast of saturation** is the contrast between pure, intense colors and dull, diluted colors. This dull/vivid contrast is relative since a colour may seem dull in one composition and vivid in another. It depends on the colour it is juxtaposed to. Best example of contrast of saturation is in a monochromatic composition, but it differs from light and dark contrast since the colours share the same brilliance. The contrast is obtained by chromatic modulations, the purity of the colours.

**Contrast of extension** is the contrast of much and little, great and small. It represents the totality of two complementary colors in balanced proportion. As mentioned, colours do not have the same “weight” which is why the balanced proportions differ with different colour pairs because of their brilliance values. For example: with yellow and purple, much less yellow is needed compared to its purple counterpart to balance the image. With the orange/blue pair, the proportional amount is more equal. This colour contrast is derived from Goethe, who laid out numerical values for the right balanced

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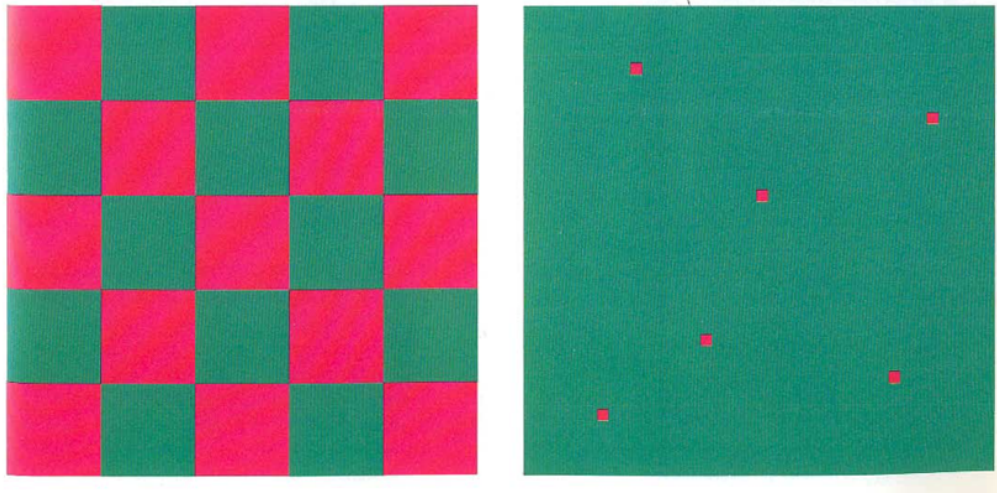
<sup>36</sup> Itten (1970). p. 54.

proportions of the hue pairs. The figure below shows a circle of primary and secondary colours in harmonious proportions.



Source: Itten, J. The Elements of Color. New York : Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. 1970. p. 61.

Now, if we adjust to this balance e.g. by letting the yellow colour decrease in size relative to the purple, then the composition gets out of balance, but at the same time it makes the yellow highly active. This is the power of contrast of extension. The colour which occupies less space “extends” its dominance over the image. The lesser the amount of the active colour, the stronger the effect. It is therefore a very effective tool in directing the eye to certain areas or objects in the composition. Note that contrast of extension does not require total polar complementary colour pairs, but the strongest effect occurs when utilizing a complementary relationship.



Source: Itten, J. The Elements of Color. New York : Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. 1970. p. 61

By use of colour contrasts one can make images that not only please or displease. It inhibits the ability to create moods; to create the illusion of perspective (which is of utmost importance in a two-dimensional medium that attempts to capture a three-dimensional world); if adjusting the proportions of intensity, light and dark, one can dampen or enhance dramatic effect; and used to its extreme it can direct the eye and create focus on certain areas in the frame. The seven colour contrasts represent physiological rules of colour vision that does not imply colour symbolism or cultural connotations. Knowing these rules can be highly beneficial for the visual artist as well as the filmmaker to consciously plan the visual effects they want their finished piece to have.

### 3 COLOURS IN CINEMA AS A STORYTELLING DEVICE

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The power of colour as a means to convey meaning was acknowledged by Technicolor early on in the history of cinema. It seems their drive to push colours to the screen was not merely for the sake of spectacle:

“The eye is the organ of perception. The impulses of light received by the retina are transferred over the optic nerve path to the brain, and we become conscious of light and dark, motion, form and color. [...] Compared to sight, the other senses are dull and groping. It is the sense which most frequently affects the nervous system, dominates the attention, and stimulates the mind.”<sup>37</sup>

The cite above is by Natalie M. Kalmus who was the wife of Technicolor founder Herbert T. Kalmus from 1902 to 1922. She worked as a so-called Colour Director and her job was to supervise and consult on productions where Technicolor equipment were used. Kalmus’s work were to provide the director with a colour scheme that corresponded to the films narrative, and she was responsible that the colours applied in the film were used correctly within the framework of colour symbolism prescribed by Technicolor. According to Price, Kalmus’ colour aesthetics composed in *Color Consciousness* can be perceived as no less than a blue print in the understanding of colours and their aimed associations in the early Technicolor films. Reminded by Eisenstein, Kalmus claims that “[...] the complete absence of colour is unnatural. The mind strives to supply the missing chromatic sensations, just as it seeks to add the missing inflections to the actor’s voice.”<sup>38</sup> We need colours to understand character psychology and we are therefore willing to add our own subconsciously in case of their

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<sup>37</sup> Kalmus, N. M. *Color Consciousness*. Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, August, 1935 p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006). p. 25.

non-presence. She therefore states that: “from a broader point of view, the psychology of colour is of immense value to a director. His prime motive is to direct and control the thoughts and emotions of his audience.”<sup>39</sup> To help the director fulfil his or hers vision, Kalmus has mapped down the base colours (including black, white and grey) and their psychological and emotional effect. Even though this seems brave and not supported by scientific level, the somewhat outdated document nevertheless functions to this day as a kind of manifest that prescribes how we can regard colour and colour symbolism from a Western cultural point of view, and how colour as a narrative manifested itself in the earliest colour films that might still live on to this day. In this chapter I have sought to discuss and analyse examples where colour plays an important role as a narrative, but in each case study it serves the narrative in a different way. In my analysis I have relied both on writings by scholars and my own findings and impressions when watching the discussed films during the process of writing this thesis.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 26

### 3.1 Colours as Theological Symbolism in *The Green Ray*

In his ground breaking essay *The Ontology of the Photographed Image*, Andre Bazin raise the question: What is Cinema? He compares the photograph with the painting stating that the photograph has the ability to convey reality without creative intervention:

“For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. [...] All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.”<sup>40</sup>

The photographers’ personality though is reflected by his choice of subject matter, composition etc., but not at all to the degree of that of the painter. The objectivity is the strength of cinema; therefore, the task of cinema as an art form must be to reproduce reality as truthful as possible. The technologies were approved by Bazin only if they enhanced the viewers’ relationship with the image’s realist effect. He therefore proposed (among other things) a camera on an eye level with the actors, the use of natural light, deep focus, widescreen, and longer takes. Any form of manipulation and distorted version of reality like accentuated editing, lighting and sound design should by all means be avoided.<sup>41</sup> The fact that French director Eric Rohmer has often been associated with neo-Bazinian realism makes sense when you watch his films. With only a few exceptions the films of Rohmer are lit using natural light only. No electrical light source is used to pinpoint specific and relevant objects in the narrative. These movies are characterised by a transparency where the various filmic techniques step

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<sup>40</sup> Bazin, A. *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London : University of California Press. 2004. p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

in the background so that the narrative—the realistic one—is observed by the camera and transmitted as real and as unmediated as possible.

Rohmer's unwillingness to 'interfere' in the natural representation of reality is exemplified by one of Rohmer's long-standing collaborators, cinematographer Nester Almendros. On the actual photography of *Pauline at the Beach* (1982) it happened more than often that the whole crew was put on standby for several hours in order to wait for the perfect lighting conditions. Anyone with little insight in film production would know that this is extremely unusual. The actual shooting of a movie is often the most expensive part of film production and having a crew on standby must be the Producers' worst nightmare and last resort. The importance of the use of natural light thus were absolutely essential to Rohmer as a means of serving realism. His arrangement of colours in the frame, however, gives us an impression of a very deliberate and controlling presence behind the camera. As Fiona Handyside points out, Rohmer has developed a paradoxical use of colours that both hides and reveals the filmmaker through a cunningly interplay between *invisibility* and *presence*. The *invisible* is coded through the natural light, camera on eye-level, longer takes etc. while the *presence* is revealed and expressed through a deliberate and carefully selection of colours by the filmmaker. This paradox between the invisible and presence is echoed in the theological themes inherent in Rohmer's films, and the colours we see on screen—costumes, props and their relation to background—comes to play a key role in the portrayal of Gods presence or non-presence in the characters portrayed.<sup>42</sup>

Before we dive into the analysis of narrative colours in Rohmer's films, it might be convenient to stress out that Rohmer's interest in colour is not only apparent in his films. He was active in the intellectual discourse about the subject in the forties and fifties and developed his own theories about the use of colours in cinema. As early as

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<sup>42</sup> Handyside, F. Color and Meaning in the Films of Eric Rohmer in Brown, S., Street, S., Watkins, L. *Color and the Moving Image*. New York : Routledge. 2013. p. 150-159.



1949 in *Reflections on Colour* he welcomes the technological development and points out that the colour image heightens the reproduction of the realistic. Rohmer stresses though that what we have seen so far (in regards to the Technicolor process) is not a real reproduction of colours: “The colour picture is ugly, I agree. You can’t shoot a film in violent tones,” he admits, but here lies the problem “which it is up to technology to resolve.”<sup>43</sup> In his 1956 essay *Of Taste and Colours* the ambivalence is gone; he states that now the technology is so remarkably improved that colours slowly but steady will conquer the movie, and that the sophists (which he called the advocates for the black and white films’ superiority to the colour film) will collapse one-by-one.<sup>44</sup> Rohmer argues not only for colours’ ability to heighten realism, he also point out that colours can bring an extra dimension to the medium; another vehicle capable of conveying meaning:

“If certain films, among the best and the most ambitious, continue to be shot in black and white, it is not because color doesn’t suit them but because they are not suitable for color, that their very ambition forces them to limit their estimates. To claim that they would have gained nothing from color doesn’t make much sense, because we don’t know what effects the director would have achieved. We see, on the other hand, what other films would have lost had they been in black and white.”<sup>45</sup>

Rohmer divided the best colour films into two categories: On one side we have those films that uses colours aesthetically in order to create an overall harmony and tonality; where colours are a supplementary refinement; “it touches, it underlines, it substantiates the dramatic texture, yet it is never its only source.”<sup>46</sup> Here colours can

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<sup>43</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006). p. 121-122.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

touch or high-lighten details but is always inferior to other narrative elements. On the other side we have those films where colours occasionally—but unquestionably—play a meaningful role. They are not just an expansion of something else nor a supplementary refinement: “it is not enough for a blue or a green to bolster the film’s expression; they bring with them new ideas, their presence at a specific moment evokes an emotion sui generis.”<sup>47</sup> The colours in this category become *in charge*.

With Rohmer’s controlled colour palette he seems to combine these two categories. His meticulously selected colours in costumes and props show very often a reduced colour palette which creates an overall aesthetic of very pleasing pastel colours. But hidden beneath the apparent realism lies a rather stylised film, and once in a while colours jump to your eyes and scream for interpretation. We are invited to ponder upon the forces behind the reality that surrounds us. Rohmer was catholic, and to him the underlying forces are Devine. Colour symbolism in the catholic church plays a significant role. Green symbolises the freedom from bondage and represents bountifulness, hope and the victory of life over death. Green is worn in connection with *feria*, which is Latin and means *free day*.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, in the Danish language we use *ferie* to describe holiday – a word from Latin that means holy day.<sup>49</sup> In Rohmer’s *The Green Ray* (1986) the protagonist Delphine is leaving Paris for a holiday during the summer. All she wants is to relax, read books and get a suntan at the beach. Nevertheless, throughout the film she struggles to find that peace and her surroundings constantly reminds her how lonely and miserable she really is. As we learn in the film when Delphine overhears a conversation by a group of elders: the ‘green ray’ is a natural phenomenon that can occur in the last split second of a sunset. If the right

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feria> (Downloaded: 15-09-2017)

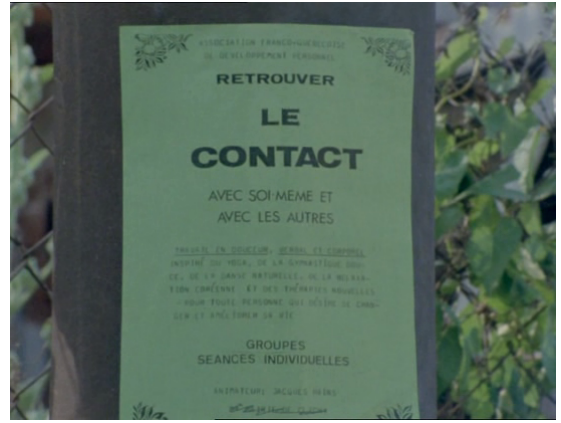
<sup>49</sup> New Oxford American Dictionary (3 ed.):

[http://www.oxfordreference.com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/view/10.1093/acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m\\_en\\_us1246672?rskey=RnBZd0&result=29971](http://www.oxfordreference.com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/view/10.1093/acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m_en_us1246672?rskey=RnBZd0&result=29971). (Downloaded: 17-09-2017)

atmospheric conditions are present, the sun should turn green in the blink of an eye before it sets behind the horizon. In the very end of the film Delphine experience this phenomenon and the restless protagonist is finally brought into new self-awareness and equanimity. Throughout the film Delphine is constantly surrounded by green, whether it being plants, coloured walls or props. The green symbolises the awareness and connection to nature, and her very vivid red jacket being the complementary colour of green shows the distance and alienation to her environment. The green colour constantly gives her clues to seek the revelation she so desperately needs to cure her loneliness. After seeing her sister who tells her that green is her colour for the summer we see her walking in the streets. After passing a vivid green pole she sees a green playing card with golden horns lying on the ground before her. She notices it, turns it around and it shows the queen of spades. In card symbolism and mysticism, the queen of spades “embodies the innate ability to achieve,” and the person receiving this card “has strong inner guidance and the ability to tap into resources beyond the intellectual mind.”<sup>50</sup> The card then signals what Delphine will discover in the film’s final scene. She mentions the card to her friends, but because of her downbeat mood and pessimistic view she mistakenly calls it a “bad omen”. The card sign is followed by another sign which is less mysterious and more direct: a bold green invitation poster to a group seminar with the text: *Retrouver le contact. Avec soi meme et avec les autres* (english: Find the contact. With yourself and with others). Delphine is oftentimes exposed to these synchronicities in her way, but because she does not allow herself to delve into the presence, she does not react to them in a positive way. Instead, the poster reminds her how lonely she is and she sees the encounter as a punishment.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://thecardsoflife.com/queen-of-spades-person/> (Downloaded: 01-09-2017)



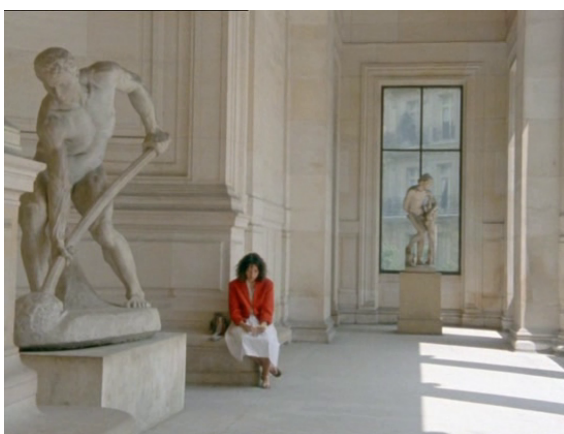
Source: The Green Ray. (1986). [video] France: Eric Rohmer.



Source: The Green Ray. (1986). [video] France: Eric Rohmer.

As a contrast and complementary to the green Delphine is often wearing red clothes. As previously noticed, this contrast serves as a strong visual metaphor for how distant and out of balance she is. Unsuccessfully she wears red to signal power and confidence, when she in reality is fragile, indecisive and insecure.

In one of the opening scenes she meets Manuella, a friend of hers, in a park at a museum with large Greek statues. The setting and mood in the sunlit park with the green lawn and bright white buildings is relaxation and calmness. People are lying down, chatting on the benches, and Manuella is sitting calmly reading a book in the sun. When Delphine arrives and Manuella asks her how she is, she replies that her eyes hurt from the sun and that they should move into the shade. Delphine is wearing her vivid red jacket while Manuella wears bright pastel colours that blend perfectly with their surroundings. In the following shot we see Delphine sitting alone in the shade looking down fiddling with her fingers. Next we see Manuella leaning on a white pillar reading her book while catching beams from the sun. The silence breaks when Manuella asks Delphine “what’s that matter?”. The conversation exposes the films main conflict: that Delphine has no one to spend her holiday with.



Source: The Green Ray. (1986). [video] France: Eric Rohmer.

The term *feria* is used in Latin not only to describe Sunday and Saturday. The official translation of the Roman Missal uses 'weekday' instead.<sup>51</sup> It then associates with the everyday and marks the proclamation of God's presence in even the most tedious everyday life. The green colour that is connected to *feria* thus symbolises the possibility to realise the Divine and transcendence in the trivial and commonplace – if only one looks carefully enough, or, if one looks in the right way. This is precisely what happens when Delphine walks up the hills and sees the green ray bursting from the sun. Delphine is fighting her severe loneliness and the façade she has to keep up with (she goes by herself when she cries, and tells everyone that she has a boyfriend even though they already broke up), yet, throughout the film she has only been dismissive to the opportunities and the men she meets on her way. But in the final part where she almost gives up the internal fight, she finally loses the firm grip of her heavy red bag, and here on the platform waiting for the train to bring her home, she suddenly becomes open for the surrounding opportunities. She let herself seduce by a young and handsome man she randomly meets at the platform, and they decide to walk up a hill to watch the sunset:

“The twosome settles to watch the sun dip down over the sea. All of a sudden, the green ray's flickering appearance rewards their attention. A little gasp of laughter greets the arrival, Delphine's only one in the film. It comes out naturally, unexpectedly. Her ripple of delight meets with the swelling waves, and the refracting light of the green ray: a moment of release, heralding the future's new irresolution.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feria> (Downloaded: 01-09-2017)

<sup>52</sup> Peacock, S.: *Colour*. 1st ed. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2010. p. 58.



Source: The Green Ray. (1986). [video] France: Eric Rohmer.

After Delphine sees the green ray she bursts into laughter; it is a laughter of relief. Then the film very abruptly ends with the credits starts rolling to the sound of strings (the same string melody that was heard when she saw the green play card and poster earlier on) and superimposed on the horizon where the sun had just set. The film ends immediately after its climax; everything that has happened from the beginning has led up to this very important moment that signals what Rohmer's message is: to find true happiness and peace (God) one needs to stop the constant chase, the roaring train of progress and success; instead, one should contemplate about ones' surroundings because transcendence and the Devine is everywhere if one only looks the right way.

### 3.2 Yellow as Psychological Expression in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*

Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of the prominent figures in the New German Cinema, made forty feature films in his relatively short career of only fifteen years. Inspired by playwright Bertold Brecht, Fassbinder's oeuvre of films makes particularly use of the so-called *Ferfremdungseffect* – an “alienation method” which utilizes various stylistic means with the intend of bringing awareness in the audience that they are watching a film. Especially the acting is made deliberately stiff and unnatural so the audience is forced not to identify with them. The point is that acceptance or rejection of the characters' actions should take place in the conscious rather than the unconscious. In this way, the audience has to participate actively in the film an is forced to take a stance. Fassbinder's films (the ones shot in colour) is often very vivid in tone and applies a playful overall contrast of hue. The film I will discuss in the following is no exception to that and is often praised as his most prominent work: *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* from 1974. The film revolves around a love relationship with an older German woman, Emmi and a young Moroccan immigrant worker, Ali. Their relationship is quickly put to test when everyone around the couple rejects their partnership.

The following example shows the implementation of the colour yellow in a certain and very crucial scene in the film. The couple is experiencing the peak of their crisis. No matter where they go their relationship is nowhere acknowledged. Up until this point, Emmi has been able to sustain her strength to withhold the oppression they experience from all sides, but this scene marks the turning point. Emmi finally succumbs the pressure and breaks down; and she is almost swept completely in the yellow colour. The couple sits around a table in a café; no other guests are there. The waiters are standing on the side, resentful and refusing to serve them. They are completely alone in the world. The empty chairs and tables are all in bright saturated yellow and they are fully surrounded by them.





Source: Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1974). [video] Germany: Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

There is no build up to this image; as Peacock has stated: “the impact is immediate [...] it is forcefully established in one image.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the empty chairs and tables together form a chaos of vertical and horizontal lines to emphasise the dramatic effect even further. It is as if they are locked inside a prison of yellow bars. Throughout the film the colour palette has utilized a playful contrast of hues compiled mainly of saturated red, blue and green. Yellow has only taken up a lesser part as an accent in the various compositions until now. Because of the extensive amount of yellow in this paramount scene, the image takes a striking, disharmonious and disturbing character. The visual aggressiveness of the image then becomes a warning sign. It is discordant and you feel a sense of unease: something bad is about to happen. Emmi admits that

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<sup>53</sup> Peacock (2010). p. 85-86.

she cannot any longer stand the pressure from their surroundings. She proposed that they shall travel away for some time, and then when they return everything will be fine and everyone will be nice to them. How naïve this may sound, this is exactly what happens when they return. The neighbours seem overtly happy to see them again and Emmi's family as well as her colleagues at work who were the cruellest to her before, are suddenly friendly to her again. It seems as if everything has turned upside down. In one crucial scene her colleagues are paying the couple a visit. One of them quickly address Ali's appearance: "He is a handsome one, Emmi... and so clean." Emmi responds that he is very clean and showers everyday. She then invites them to feel his muscles and they speak about him as if he was not present at all, as if he was an object. He leaves the apartment without saying a word and Emmi assures her friends that his mood has something to do with his foreign mentality. As it turns out gradually, things have not turned upside down. Emmi has turned upside down. The sudden "friendliness" from the outside world is filled with bad intentions, and Emmi jumps right in. The racism that Emmi and Ali was exposed to before their vacation has now moved into their home where Emmi turns out to be no better than the others. She treats him like he was her slave; tells him that she does not like couscous and that he should eat like the Germans. If we look at the colours, after the vacation the colour palette has changed. Yellow is now much more present than in the first part of the film. Even the colours of the walls in their home seems more yellow than before. The new situation is marked by this change in colour scheme; and to emphasize even further Emmi is even wearing a vivid yellow shirt in the first scene after they return from their vacation. Her son Bruno comes for an unexpected visit. He was the one who smashed the TV in rage when Emmi brought the news of her recent marriage to Ali. Now he came back to apologize and give some money for the broken TV. Emmi tells him that he should not pay for it and that she almost forgot about it. Which is far from the truth of course. She

is as dishonest as he is. After their reconciliation which happens over just two sentences without much eye contact, Bruno asks her if she can do him a favour and take care of (his daughter) Beate every day from one to five pm. She agrees to help him and he leaves soon thereafter. The colour of their respective clothes is peculiar and fitting in that it represents their imbalanced and disharmonious relationship. Emmi in her yellow shirt and Bruno in a purple blazer. The complementary colours (yellow/purple) connect them irresolvable together – as mother and son. But they form a disturbing pair. The yellow/purple combination has more than often been used to represent a cartoon villain, the Joker and Two-Face to name but a few. The combination is aggressive per se. The imbalance occurs because Emmi always stays in the foreground thus taking up a larger space than Bruno. The yellow colour is over-represented compared to the purple thus giving the overall composition a disturbing character.



Source: Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1974). [video] Germany: Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

### 3.4 Colours as Leitmotifs and Seeing Red in *Marnie*

The impressive amount of films by the hands of Alfred Hitchcock are mostly in black and white. Only fifteen out of the fifty-three films he made are in colour. The aesthetics of the black and white German expressionism might very well be the biggest influence of Hitchcock's style, and it is above all the expressionistic and artificiality that characterises his films. His whole oeuvre of plot driven suspense thrillers are viewed by many as an almost blueprint of how filmmaking is supposed to be made – or at least: how to build up suspense. It is one of the good examples where art and craft come beautifully and effectively together. Everything in his films, every shot, every angle, every sound, has a specific purpose in the narrative and when he chose to shoot his first colour feature, one would assume that the colours should not be an exception to this rule. His colour films are expressive, yet I would argue that his choice of colours are connected to theme and story. The film would not be able to work the same had it been shot in black and white.

“Hitchcock thinks in terms of color; every costume is indicated when he sends me the script....There is always a reason behind his thinking, an effort to characterize. He's absolutely definite in his visual approach and gives you an exiting concept of the importance of color.”<sup>54</sup>

The quote is from costume designer Edith Head, a long time collaborator to Hitchcock who worked on several of his colour films. It supports the postulate that certain objects in the mise-en-scène becomes bearers of meaning because of their colour. Costume might be the most important tool in this regard since it connects to the character who wears it, and is easily changeable from scene to scene to support the development of

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<sup>54</sup> Dalle Vacche (2006). p. 132.

the story as well of the character itself. Furthermore, it addresses the viewer who is with all along. Noted by Richard Allen, the costume design not only applies to the protagonists but to every single person in the frame whether it being extras in the background.<sup>55</sup>

For the control freak Hitchcock, working with colour meant that much more choices would have to be made, much more elements to control. Hitchcock thus constructs and builds his *mise-en-scène* much like the art painter does from a blank white canvas: all forms and colours are applied purposefully by the painter where nothing is left to coincidence. Following quote shows Hitchcock's awareness of the power of colours and colour contrasts:

"I [Hitchcock] should never want to fill the screen with color: it ought to be used economically—to put new words into the screen's visual language when there's a need for them. You could start to color film with a boardroom scene: somber paneling and furniture, the director's all in dark clothes and white collars. The chairman's wife comes in wearing a red hat. She takes the attention of the audience at once, just because of that one note of color."<sup>56</sup>

According to Richard Allen, Hitchcock's use of colour builds upon the Western cultures symbolic and emotional meaning conventions of colours.<sup>57</sup> They hereby function to support or reinforce our understanding of a character or the plot itself. In addition, a colour is connected to a character or prop to function as *leitmotiv* – a way to guide the viewers' attention by connecting ideas or objects to one another very similar to the concept of Equality we discussed earlier with Arnheim.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 131

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

The yellow bag in the opening shot of *Marnie* (1964) represents the first in a series of yellow objects which appears throughout the film. Patti Bellantoni has explored in *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling* how colours can influence and provoke certain emotions in an audience. About the yellow colour she writes:

“Yellow is a contrary color. It's the color of both jonquils and yellow jackets. That's your first clue, or warning. One of the reasons yellow is the color used for caution signs is that it's visually aggressive. It appears to come toward you. We've build it into our consciousness as a cautionary color.”<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Kalmus describes yellow as the colour of deceit, jealousy and inconstancy, and that it symbolizes harvest, reward and riches.<sup>59</sup> In correspondence with both Bellantoni and Kalmus, the yellow colour in *Marnie* is associated with money, power, lust and felony. The bag turns out to be filled with stolen money; the big and shiny yellow refrigerator at Mrs. Edgars' house is most probably bought by Marnie's stolen money; the powerful and disingenuous Mr. Rutland wears a yellow slipover; and Marnie gets swept in Mark's yellow bathrobe just before he rapes her at their honeymoon.

In these examples, the colour that these items contain is more important than the item by which it is a part of, and more important than the function of the item. As John Belton writes, the colour liberates itself and becomes an epistemological phenomenon: “it takes its identity, in part, from the object possessing that particular

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<sup>58</sup> Bellantoni, P. *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die. The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Oxford : Focal Press, 2005. p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Kalmus, N. M. Color Consciousness. *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, August, 1935, p. 143.



color. As an attribute of the object, it has no object status in itself.”<sup>60</sup> It is therefore inaccurate when Andrew Sarris writes *brunette with yellow handbag walking on platform*, when a much more fitting description would be *yellow handbag walking with brunette on platform*. The point being that the camera follows the yellow bag in a close up before showing Marnie, and the significance of that bag and its content cannot be dismissed.



Source: Marnie (1964). [video] USA: Alfred Hitchcock.

Paul Coates writes that we are being cued to money before Marnie; it is as if the bag has been penetrated by its own content and refers to the original colour of money – the colour of gold.<sup>61</sup> Even though Marnie quickly disposes of the bag the yellow colour forces its way even deeper to her identity when she washes the black colour dye out of her golden blond hair; and even though she throws in the drain the yellow key (to the suitcase withholding her old identity), she is wrapped up in the yellow colour when

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<sup>60</sup> Belton, J. Color and Meaning in Marnie in Brown, S., Street, S., Watkins, L. *Color and the Moving Image*. New York : Routledge. 2013. p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> Coates, P. Cinema and Colour. *The Saturated Image*. London : BFI. 2010. p. 92.

she gets inside the taxi and drives away from the crime scene.<sup>62</sup> Though subtle, yellow follows Marnie without her consent; it is addressed directly to the viewer as a leitmotiv. The colour is a part of her and she cannot hide herself from it.



Source: Marnie (1964). [video] USA: Alfred Hitchcock.

The colour red plays a much more apparent role in *Marnie*. Like the yellow, it is in the first place connected to objects in the narrative and transcends the function of the object itself: the red flowers in her mothers' house, the red ink on the spilled white shirt, the red thunder strikes etc. yet, the red colour in these examples comes to have a different function: not only it addresses the viewer but the characters within the narrative as well. Every time Marnie sees a red object it provokes an anxiety attack in her. The object itself has no particular meaning for the attack, it is clearly the colour itself. Again, the colour is the primary function and the object it is part of is secondary. For example, when Marnie arrives to her mother's house the exaggerated big bouquet of red flowers on the table seems misplaced. It is there because red needs to be there, to give Marnie her first anxiety attack. When Marnie gets the attacks, it is visualized by a monochrome red tint to the whole image superimposed by a close-up of Marnie. It clearly reflects her subjective condition and her fear for the red colour. Marnie knows that red colour provokes the anxiety attack, but she doesn't know why. The viewer doesn't know why as well, but it is very likely assumed that it is rooted in some

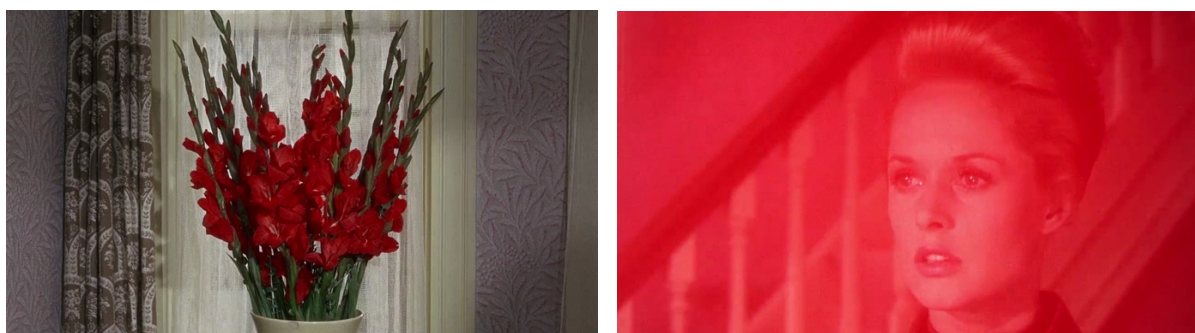
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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 92



suppressed trauma. Hitchcock hereby makes the red colour a mystery in itself, that it is both up to Marnie and the viewer to solve:

“Hitchcock’s strategy over the course of the film is to detach, then re-attach the color red from red objects. By detaching red from red objects, Hitchcock explores the gap between color and object, extending it to create a color mystery. In detaching red from its objects, Hitchcock engages his audience in a game of detection in which the meaning of the color red is the goal.”<sup>63</sup>



Source: Marnie (1964). [video] USA: Alfred Hitchcock.

It is confirmed in the final part of the film that the red mystery (maybe not surprisingly) is connected to blood and a murder. Even though the meaning of the red colour seems obvious and banal, it is nevertheless suppressed and hidden in the same way it is suppressed by Marnie. But red in Marnie is not only blood, it is an expression of a complex set of suppressed horrors and desires that has possessed her like unrequited love for her mother, oedipal jealousy, guilt and fear of male sexuality. Red associates with all these troubles throughout the film, and at the same time it is everything the film leaves unsaid but signals about Marnie’s relationships with her relatives and other people she meets. Red is a signifier of her general perception of and experience in the world around her.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 190

## 4 CONCLUSION

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### 4.1 *Are We Afraid of Colours?*

To recall: Aristotle wrote “a random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without colour.”<sup>64</sup> A sentence that seemed to have more consequences than he might have thought. Aristotle’s favouring of line over colour has very often been argument for the plot structure’s precedence over character. Colours are fleeting and subjective (like the character) where clear sketched figures (the plot) creates narrative. Colours interrupt and disturb the order that the line and shape have manifested, exactly like the character disturbs the plot and pushes it in different directions. The more attention we give to colours the less readable is the form and the less we perceive of the narrative and the moral messages. At least this is the assumption. Colours therefore defy the idea by Aristotle about what the narrative art form is supposed to do, namely: “to establish narratives that effectively convey moral lessons and that purge society of emotions and impulses deemed hazardous to the healthy functioning of the republic.” But, if colours are capable of calling attention to itself; to lead astray our focus and disrupt the structure, then they must be in possession of a very special force. It has not been my focus in this thesis to discuss this age-long art historical issue about line versus colour, but throughout the process of reading and writing it has been hanging above me like a cloud. What I discovered was, that it has influenced the way we can use colours as a narrative. Without taking sides, if it wasn’t for Aristotle and the thinkers who followed his footsteps in devaluating colours, we would have been forced to find another illustrative way to visualise the Otherness, the influence of a drug, insanity, the mystical and Holy versus the earthly and carnal.

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<sup>64</sup> David Batchelor in Dalle Vacche, Angela & Price, Brian (ed.): p. 63-64

## 4.2 When Colour Narrates

Today most films are in colour; it seems the “sophists” lost the fight. That does not mean though that all films in colour inhibits a certain colour code or overall concept. Many films seem as if they have been shot without paying much attention to the possibilities of colours’ symbolism and narrative property. This is a shame because there is so much to gain from it if used correctly. Johannes Itten has (amongst others) shown us tools to work with colours to achieve certain effects. If you are a visual artist and understand what you want to say, the more you can make these rules work your way. As a filmmaker you want to be in control of the drama on screen. Simply speaking, higher contrast equals drama and conflict. The more conflicting elements in the image, the more your eye will bounce back and forth in the image thus creating an almost tangible sense of tension, movement and excitement. If exaggerated, it can even have a disturbing or volatile effect.

The core of this thesis has been to study colours and their potential in filmic narrative. Even though I haven’t been able to include all the ways colours can function narratively, I have attempted to highlight a diversity. In the films by Eric Rohmer there is a division between colours as artistic expressionism and as part of the ontological reality that the camera must capture as truthful as possible. It is therefore in this regard not *all* colours that narrates, but some which are carefully chosen by Rohmer and his collaborators. Reality reveals itself (colour-wise) on the basis of a number of choices. Some of them controlled my Man, some by God:

“Rohmers films record color as faithfully and accurately as possible in order to reproduce the real world upon the screen. However, they also reveal this real world as one that is a result of choices. In Rohmer’s world view, some of these choices may be made by people, but some of these choices have been made by God. In paying attention to the order and harmony of color in the world, the

filmmaker reveals a truth beyond the truth of color coding – his truth that God is there, lurking, if only one can read his signs.”<sup>65</sup>

The invisibility and presence in the films by Rohmer mirrors in this image. As an audience you want to understand the true meaning of a film, the intentions of the filmmaker. We know that in some films we need to look carefully for signs and codes to decipher the true meaning, and in the colour films by Rohmer it is especially the colours you should look out for. The colours apply to the viewer and its intellect. And if the viewer is not aware of the theological colour symbolism, a significant amount of the ideas and overall message gets lost.

A less subtle and bolder use of colour is seen in Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The expressive and playful use of colour brings attention to itself. But it is not only serving as a reminder that we are watching a movie, and it is not only a décor. Suppressed feelings, hidden agendas, relationships or true character is mirrored in the colours of the surroundings and in the costumes of the characters. Very different is the case study of Alfred Hitchcock. The yellow colour in *Marnie* functions as a leitmotiv. It connects itself to certain values – which in this case is money, wealth, power, lust and felony – and is used to illustrate certain characters’ relationship to those values. The yellow colour is chosen for its symbolic connotations in Western culture, as Bellantoni showed us, it serves as a cautionary colour, used widely all over the world in warning signs, it is a visually aggressive colour and it immediately directs our eyes towards it. Even Because of this, yellow is the best choice to support the narrative, but nevertheless, Hitchcock could have chosen a different colour to tell the same story since the colour itself has a paramount function as a leitmotiv. The colour is used to connect characters to a (by Hitchcock) established codex. If the colour had been

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<sup>65</sup> Handyside (2013). p. 158.

purple, we would have connected the same values to that colour and it would have served the purpose (though it would lose a strong symbolic effect of the yellow).

All colours have both positive and negative values connected to them. In cinema you have the option to choose how to use a certain colour, but when a code is established one should stick to it throughout (unless it serves a purpose to signal a change in the narrative). If Hitchcock had included a scene with a young loving couple lying in a big yellow field of sunflowers, the narrative function of the yellow colour would eradicate, it would lose its power as a leitmotiv. With the red colour in *Marnie* Hitchcock takes it a step further: the red colour both expresses and influences the emotions and the behaviour of the protagonist. Red, as an epistemological phenomenon, becomes the mystery that is both up to the viewer and the character to solve. The colour is no longer only directed to the viewer. It is not just presented as a representation or expression for something; it is its own, and it takes up no less than a starring role in the narrative.

Nothing can substitute the in-depth analysis of a single art piece. Each film discussed in this thesis could have been scrutinized and analysed to fill up the scope of this thesis on its own. As mentioned in the introduction, the reason for choosing this subject was of rather selfish reasons because I wanted to learn about colours' narrative abilities to better apply these tools to my own future work. It was therefore my choice not to dive deeply into one single piece but to get knowledge about multiple aspects of colour narration. Doing the research in the initial process of finding the topic, I must admit, that I had the impression that many of the colour interpretations on films I would encounter while reading would be esoteric in kind, highly philosophical and likely to be farfetched or overanalysed. What really happened was a quite different thing: it was 'aha experiences' one after the other. What I discovered was that a great number of the filmmaker's I admire unquestionable work with colours to incorporate them into the story. I also discovered that the multiplex nature of colours gives multiple ways of

employing them. There is no one right way of utilizing colours into the narrative. A good piece of work is one that sets up a system, a set of rules to underline and support the overall meaning of the work. It then stays truthful to this system in order to give meaning to the individual set of rules. If Rohmer had put Delphine in a green dress when she was in despair, the system he had set up would break and the meaning of that particular colour would not only lose its power but the meaning of the film would disappear completely. Delphine cannot embody green until the very end when she sees the green ray and experiences the revelation. Likewise, if Hitchcock had filled his *mise-en-scène* with random red objects throughout *Marnie*, the colour would no longer be a mystery and its narrative function would vanish. It would not have the same impact on the viewer when Marnie gets her panic attacks and the whole screen gets covered in red.

It has been the aim of this thesis to bring forward the inherent and unique properties of colours as a narrative tool, and I hope the result has proven my hypothesis. From my own personal perspective, I have become aware of the impact and how important it is to select colours carefully in a visual medium. The awareness has changed the way I watch films and heightened my viewing experience.

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