

# THE USE OF COLOR IN THEATER AND FILM

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I propose a brief overview on the use of color in theatre and film and point to some references that I consider as seminal on this topic. How is color used in theatre and Film? How is it different and why? What is used on stage and on screen in terms of colors (props, costumes, make ups, sets, lights)? Are there any aesthetic rules and conventions, and how can they be questioned? I relate these rules and conventions to other color theories. In particular, what is the impact of certain colors in term of meaning and in term of emotions? I discuss the following questions: how do color choices participate in the aesthetic choices of a stage or screen director? Are these choices conscious or unconscious? How do color impact on the viewer? Is it cultural or universal? I share some of my experience as a stage and screen director in terms of using colors. Finally, I explain how I articulate my own artistic practice with theory, and how my status as an artist-researcher allows me to do so.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Colors convey emotions. And they usually convey emotions in a very subtle way, but also in a very uncontrolled manner. Colors are undoubtedly an important aesthetic component in any artistic creation. This component can be consciously used or not, depending on the artist and on the process. But it is always there. Let's have a look at the way colors are used in theatre and film.

In theatre, the audience can see a show because it is lit. A great amount of thinking is usually put into designing the lighting. And it is very common in theatre to put color filters on lights in order to create particular moods. The first aim of lighting is to make things on stage visible. But the second aim, as important as the first, is to create an appropriate mood for each moment of the story. A lot of books have been written about how to light a show (Palmer, 1993) (Setlow & Essig, 2012) (Gillette, 2013) (Reid, 2001) (Shelley, 2009). The work of designing the light for a show is usually done jointly by the director and the light designer. But light is not the only choice connected to colors in the elaboration of a show. Every choice relative to the set, props, costumes also has an impact on the general color perception. And in the end, it is the combination of the two (the elements on stage and the lighting) that provides the audience with an emotional experience, partly impacted by the color perception.

In film, the work on colors is quite different. The lighting is usually much simpler in terms of colors (Alekan, 1998) (Storaro, 2011) (Frost, 2009) (Brown, 2007) (Brown, 2011). Again, the overall color perception is impacted by the choice of sets, props, costumes. But when a director or a cinematographer wants to add a color tone to an image, they put filters on the camera rather than on the lighting itself (there are of course exceptions). And the director also has the option to correct colors with a colorist at the end of the post-production chain. So a lot of choices related to colors are made at the very end of the

process, even though it is usually much easier if these considerations about colors have been discussed and planned before the shooting.

To summarize, both theatre and film directors use sets, costumes, and props to impact the colors of their work. But in theatre, the lighting is the important phase, being the one that reveals what is seen. Whereas, in film, the perceived colors are the results of a combination of filters put on the camera and fine-tuning made by the colorist at the end of the post-prod chain.

In part 2, I describe in more details what are the vehicles of color on stage and in film. In part 3, I investigate on the aesthetic rules and choices that can guide the use of color, whether these choices are conscious or not. In part 4, I draw examples from my own experience as a stage and screen director. And finally, part 5 concludes this introductory survey on the use of color in theatre and film.

## **2. COLOR VEHICLES**

Every element that is part of the design of a stage or a set (furniture, costumes, props, make-up, carpets, wallpaper, wall paints, etc.) impacts the overall color perception. A director can choose for instance to have every element in pastel tones or in bright colors, and that will obviously create a very different feeling. Every element has an impact on the overall composition. A lot of inspiration can be drawn in this matter from the paintings of the great masters. Which paintings do a director like the most? How are they composed? What is the palette of their colors? Is it harmonious or not? What mood does it create? Paintings are obviously a great source of inspiration for stage and screen directors. Not just for colors, but also for composition, and for lighting.

Color and light go closely together. Colors are the components of light. So anything that generates light or reflects it or let it go through has an impact on what is seen and on the colors of the scene. Take a moment to look in front of you and notice every color you can see. Which ones catch your eyes first? What is the relationship between color and light? Can you list every element that is defined, among other things, by its color (a book, a wall, a framed picture, a lamp, a floor, a carpet, etc.)? Now, how would you describe your overall feeling in front of this scene? What has the biggest impact on the definition of this feeling? This is the kind of questions stage and film directors ask themselves when preparing a show or a film. As the director, you are the person in charge of the overall aesthetics, and therefore in charge of each decision that contributes to this aesthetics. Are there any rules that guide all the decisions stage or screen directors have to make?

## **3. AESTHETICS CONSIDERATIONS**

The way directors approach colors is very different from one director to another. There are some color theories that can be used as guidelines (Hyman, 2006) (Bleicher, 2011) (Mollica, 2012). Some directors follow them, or at least make their choices being aware of them, and some directors have their own personal approach to color, which may or may not be different from what these color theories propose. The way directors choose colors is based, in my opinion, on several things, and the influence of these things can vary greatly along their careers: what they know about colors, their culture, their experience in using colors, the questions they ask themselves about colors, the possibility of them having a dialog about colors with their lighting designer or their cinematographer, the show or the film they are directing and its needs in terms of color, etc. So there may exist some

aesthetics rules about the use of colors, and they may be used by some directors as guidelines, and broken by other directors, or even followed unconsciously by some directors. And some people might argue that the knowledge of these rules can only improve the artistic abilities of a director. But as with any aesthetic rules and guidelines, this is when directors can transcend them that they truly become artists.

Another interesting question is the way certain colors impact meaning and emotions, and these considerations are also very important in the way directors work with colors. Colors are components of light, and therefore, each color has a different energy. So each color has a different feeling, acts differently upon us, and there are various ways to draw a typology of colors, and these ways have been different across the ages (Finlay, 2003) (Ball, 2003). There are very few books that manage to do a great synthesis on this subject, but two of them are particularly amazing as they draw from history, from various cultures, but also from spiritual traditions (Berton, 2002) (Simpson, 1999).

Finally, there is the question of culture and its impact on the interpretation of colors in terms of meaning and emotions (Gage, 1999). If color is intrinsically linked to a culture, then will an audience in Japan or in Camerouns react the same way to a show or a film? Probably not. And the challenge then becomes to find ways to make a show or a film as universal as possible, in term of its storytelling and emotional meaning, in spite of the fact that some of its aesthetic components will remain quite identifiable in terms of its origin, and may seem a bit strange or odd to some cultures. But this is in my opinion one of the great advantages of cultural differences: they provide learning experiences about other cultures, and therefore about our own.

#### 4. EXAMPLES

Here are some brief illustrations to the various points I discussed so far, chosen from my experience as a stage and screen director. The first example is my stage direction of the play *The Lesson*, written by Eugène Ionesco, which I directed in 2010. I started by reading the play over and over again, letting images come into my mind, and usually these images came with lighting and colors. At some point in the process, I also played around with the color cards of William Berton (Berton, 2002). I thought of certain aspects that I wanted to emphasize in the play and I let my mind free-associate colors with these aspects. I worked on this show with Olivier Horn, who is an amazing light designer. He captured the essence of what I wanted, and translated it into lighting in a very subtle way. I also started thinking about the set, props, and costumes very early in the process. I thought very early about a small round table covered with a bright red cloth in center stage. And then I wanted the professor to have a dark outfit and the student a bright one. They ended up dark brown and light yellow. I work very intuitively on colors, and the final decisions are always the end result of a fruitful collaboration with the light designer, the costume designer, and the make up artist (I did most of the set and props design on this show).

The second example is the making of the short film *King Cake (La Galette des Rois)*, written by Vinciane Mokry, which I directed in 2012. Very early in the process, I wanted a golden yellow and a royal blue to be the two guiding colors in my creative process. I made choices of props and costumes as well as lighting based on these two dominant colors. And these two colors also served as guidelines for the colorist. At the end, the result is very subtle, and is the consequence of a permanent dialog with the cinematographer, the production designer, and the colorist. But the original intention is there and has an impact on the general tone and mood of the film.

Being an artist-researcher, that is, sharing my time between my art practice and my research, I can articulate the two together. My practice informs my research, and is the basis for it. And my research opens new perspectives to me as an artist and directs some of my artistic choices. For instance, this investigation on the use of color in theatre and film is based on my practice, but at the same time allows me to go one step further in my thinking, and therefore will have an influence on how I do things next time. There is a permanent interaction and dialog between practice and research.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Colors are perceived in film and theatre as the result of several components: set, props, costumes, make up, lighting, and each of these components has an impact on the overall color perception. Colors have a direct impact on the emotions of the viewer and are usually chosen for that purpose. There are some aesthetic rules that can be used as guidelines and some cultural differences that can be taken into consideration. But in the end, much of the creative process happens in the subconscious mind and is the result of several factors: what directors know about colors, their culture, their experience in using colors, the questions they ask themselves about colors, the possibility of them having a dialog about colors with their lighting designer or their cinematographer, the show or the film they are directing and its needs in terms of color.

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