

## Cinema and Mid-Century Colour Culture: An Introduction

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We have confused the factory-made color world around us in our rooms and magazines no less than on our bodies with the colors in nature, parallel to the way we have confused a photograph with reality.

(Michael Taussig, 'What Color Is the Sacred?')

Some of the most popular, online clickbait articles are photographic galleries that call attention to the chromatic quality of the historical images: for instance, collections of archival colour photographs and footage from the mid-century — often war scenes ('WWII in Colour'), or ordinary snapshots ('Everyday Life in Germany after the War') — are displayed in sensuous tones. What is appealing about these various compilations is that they reveal in *colour* a past usually thought and represented in the antique shades of black and white. In some cases, these are dealing with original colour documents, rediscovered and valorised precisely by virtue of the exceptional presence of such indexical hues resurfacing from the past. In other cases, the attention-getting aspect is, conversely, the digital colourisation of archival images originally achromatic, now retouched by amateur historians and graphic designers through digital software as part of the 'Colorized History' fad. Whether these colours are original or retouched, such examples bear witness to the renewed interest in historical colour in contemporary visual culture, undoubtedly prompted by the possibilities of manipulation and simulation offered by digital technologies that allow one to reproduce with a high degree of verisimilitude all the styles and chromatic regimes of the past. This special issue of *Cinéma & Cie* aims to address colour at mid-century as an *analogue* quality of still and moving images and, more broadly, of the intermedial cultures in which cinema was embedded. The central decades of the last century are our focus, as this is when colour gradually became the norm, and the films and media from the era, like these various clickbait articles, track this transition, formally as well as culturally.

Another aspect of our focus on mid-century colour history, as outlined across the following articles, is to think through the usefulness of cultural and technical watersheds for assessing film and media history. Just as popular fascination with the analogue colours of the past has surged, so too has scholarly interest. Recent

attention to historical transformations in colour's apparatus has been informed by the pervasive changes wrought by digital technologies to our chromatic palettes. But such renovations are not without precedent, as the history of colour cinema demonstrates. Frequently in film history, technical changes have led to shifts in colour style that are simultaneously cyclical and transformative. The very emergence of cinematic technology in the late nineteenth century led to a surge of colourful attractions in some of the earliest moving images, from the applied-colour hues of Annabelle Whitford's serpentine dance films to the prismatic splendour of Georges Méliès and Segundo de Chomón's magical trick and fairy films. Yet, the brightly, saturated aniline dyes used in these films were subsequently restrained and integrated into narrative and nonfiction filmmaking at the end of the first decade of the 1900s, as new modes of unobtrusive style developed, and bourgeois taste cultures grew prominent. Following the First World War, changes in the international colourant industry as well as the increased professionalization of laboratory research were crucial for the thriving chromatic culture of the 1920s in film and related media. These developments drove a colour revolution that enabled Technicolor's international rise, in fits and starts, to prominence. The three-strip innovations of the Technicolor Corporation in the 1930s led to an initial era of colourful experimentation and demonstrative design. This was followed by the normalisation of colour style into the genre system of classical cinema, relegating the technology as a significant but minor practice (compared to black-and-white production) that was primarily used in musicals, melodramas, and historical dramas. Such generic uses of colour held sway until after World War II, when advances in technologies such as Eastmancolor mainstreamed colour as the dominant mode of filmmaking in post-war cinemas around the world. As Scott Higgins's exemplary work on Technicolor in the 1930s has shown, technical watersheds thus often lead to an initial phase of vivid experimentation that is followed by a process of normalisation into existing, typically classical stylistic practices.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of watersheds then, the mid-century is a period in colour cinema history bookended by the stylistic normalisation of Technicolor into narrative cinema and subsequently by the adoption and transformative uses of Eastmancolor in post-war cinemas, with many other competing, international technical systems overlapping along the way (e.g. Agfacolor, Ferraniacolor, Fujicolor, Orwocolor, Sovcolor). Profoundly significant in this trajectory was the emergence of colour television internationally in the post-war era, which followed a separate, though intersecting, technical genealogy from film colour, as Susan Murray's remarkable *Bright Signals: A History of Color Television* delineates (reviewed in this issue by Doron Galili).<sup>2</sup> The ongoing development of these media helped define

<sup>1</sup> Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Murray, *Bright Signals: A History of Color Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

the chromatic landscape at mid-century, particularly during post-war boom of consumption, youth cultures and international new wave movements.

Change, however, is also gradual in ways not easily captured through a focus on technical breakthroughs and firmly fixed historiographic eras. This is why we take an expansive view of the mid-century, to account better for the cultural and intermedial currents that shaped cinematic colour as well as the asymmetrical flows of global media cultures. Beyond such technical and stylistic points of navigation, what the articles collected here also delineate is the broad, contextual developments that shaped cinema during the era. Watersheds do not occur in a vacuum, and for historiography it is necessary to take into account the media archaeological systems that enable technical and aesthetic change. For colour at mid-century, these systems are numerous and require a multidisciplinary approach. Indeed, colour has been examined in various disciplines, from physics to chemistry, from biology to neurology, and of course in art history and aesthetic theory.

In particular, colour in audio-visual image studies most often draws on four main interpretative points of focus: perception, technology, aesthetics and culture. Proceeding backwards from the last dimension, colour is indeed a social and cultural phenomenon, charged with linguistic-aesthetic values: for example, its representational relation as it becomes normalised at mid-century to truth and reality or, conversely, to fantasy and daydreams.<sup>3</sup> Every chromatic language and style, in turn, is inseparable from techniques and technologies (e.g. applied colour produces a different effect if compared to photochemical processes such as Eastmancolor). By virtue of technology, moreover, the spectators' senses are solicited, and their perception is affected by and contributes to colour culture on a social level, in an inexhaustible circle of reciprocal mediations and influences. As Edward Branigan maintains in his recent philosophical overview of colour in cinema and art, 'Color is relational. [...] Color is not a purely objective phenomenon determined by a light meter, but rather the result of many interacting systems'.<sup>4</sup> Such concern for the relational nature of colour is shared, in different ways, by the majority of research on cinematic colour that has burgeoned since the second half of the 2000s, particularly for those dealing with a *contextual* perspective that is attentive to the relations of a given colour film (or corpus of films) with its surrounding visual culture.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this is exactly what the essays collected here do: while not renouncing close analysis and the decoding of colour's symbolic meanings in the examined works, each keep an open outlook

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the cultural and symbolic meanings of colours see in particular the work of Michel Pastoureau, from *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps. Symbolique et société* (Paris: Bonneton, 1992) onwards.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Branigan, *Tracking Color in Cinema and Art: Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>5</sup> See at least Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and Paul Coates, *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2010).

on the socio-cultural and intermedial environment in which colour circulated at mid-century, never forgetting the relationship between colour technologies and the subjects who use them.

Such renewed interest in technological devices and their impact on spectatorship is grounded in the more general trend of the new film history inaugurated in the late 1970s. This historiographic practice turned the focus from the ‘inventor-as-hero’ narrative to the social uses of technologies, and from the single artist’s personal expression to the minor and lowbrow, and often anonymous, cinematic practices. While a great deal of research on cinematic colour has been devoted to the silent era,<sup>6</sup> this special issue aims to expand the time span of scholarship on the history of colour cinema. As mentioned, the mid-century is an expansive era lasting broadly from the late 1930s through the 1960s and beyond. Photographic colour systems dramatically transformed cinematic practice — from musicals and melodramas, to animation, experimental, and amateur cinemas — and led to the eventual normalisation of colour over black-and-white cinema around the world. In many ways, this transformation is difficult to observe, as colour was increasingly common and ordinary, even banal and unobtrusive as a visual quality that was experienced in mid-century media increasingly as *natural*.

The dialectics between naturalness and artificiality and between transparency and opacity have long been operating in colour studies, particularly in those inquiries dealing with colour from an aesthetic standpoint. Research of this kind often distinguishes two differing modes of colour appearance: on the one hand, colour in a film can be used as a thing, in and of itself, a pictorial resource that tends to abstract and detach itself from the diegetic objects and surfaces through which it becomes visible. In this way, colour can be perceived as a quality of its own, simply as colour. For instance, this is what happens often in the work of Japanese director Suzuki Seijun, whose chromatic design — from vibrant solid colours to sudden colour shifts — is analysed by William Carroll in the first essay of this special issue, ‘The History of a Broken Blue *Fusuma*: Colour in Suzuki Seijun’s Nikkatsu Films’. While delineating Suzuki’s remarkable and idiosyncratic approach to colour in the 1960s, Carroll also carefully situates his practice within the colour style of the Nikkatsu studio he was working in. On the other hand, colour in films can operate in an opposite mode: as unobtrusive, seemingly invisible, as in most cases, particularly as colour becomes the norm at mid-century. Colour is everywhere, but, because of its pervasiveness, it tends to go unperceived as an expected and insignificant property of visual representation. The co-authored essay ‘From the Margins to the Mainstream?’

<sup>6</sup> See the groundbreaking collection ‘*Disorderly Order*’: *Colours in Silent Film — the 1995 Amsterdam Workshop*, ed. by Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Film Museum, 1996); Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Giovanna Fossati and others, *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015); and the recent Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

The Eastmancolor Revolution and Challenging the Realist Canon in British Cinema' by 'The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema' research team — Sarah Street, Keith M. Johnston, Paul Frith, Carolyn Rickards — aims precisely to uncover the assumed invisibility of colour in British film history, particularly when dealing with Eastmancolor filmstock as opposed to the more celebrated Technicolor dye-transfer productions. Privileging lesser-known colour films over now canonical masterpieces (e.g. the works of Powell and Pressburger), the essay proves how the hitherto neglected and 'transparent' presence of colour unexpectedly activated an inner remodelling within certain popular genres of British film production, such as social realist documentary, horror, comedy and the biopic.

Beyond the historical and aesthetic perspective, the same dialectic between opacity and transparency is at work if we consider colour as an integral part of the cinematic apparatus. The methodological claims of apparatus theory, which has been a renewed topic of interest in contemporary media studies, are thus suitable also for our topic. Colour can be approached as a foundational element of the cinematic apparatus at mid-century, particularly given its capacity to negotiate between the binaries of transparency and opacity. The opposition of these binaries engages the apparatus in an ideological sense: far from being neutral, or natural, colour technology is inscribed with a range of social values and cultural desires. For instance, 'chromophobia' — which considers bright and saturated colours as the taste prerogatives of subaltern subjectivities (e.g. women, children, gays and poor immigrants) — circulates discursively in much of the reception of new colour technologies throughout the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> From a technological point of view, one of the main ideologies that colour sustains is that of *newness*. At least until the 1960s, colour images were deemed as state-of-the-art modes of display within modern visual culture, even if this supposed newness was in some cases clichéd and commonplace — 'tired', as Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka maintain: 'the new is "dressed up" in formulas that may be hundreds of years old, while the old may provide "molds" for cultural innovations and reorientations'.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the challenging assertions of the methodology of media archaeology, and it is fruitful for the study of mid-century colour. The *newness* of post-war colours can in fact be traced back before World War II. As a matter of fact, many of the following essays locate in the 1930s the groundwork of colour theories and practices that dominated the following decades. Kirsten Thompson's article, 'The Colour Revolution: Disney, DuPont and Faber Birren', in particular, addresses the material relationship in the 1930s between the DuPont chemical conglomerate and the Disney studio, which was supplied by DuPont with key raw materials for its cel animation. By doing this,

<sup>7</sup> See the well-known study of David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, 'Introduction: An Archaeology of Media Archaeology', in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. by Huhtamo and Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 14.

Thompson's essay proves to be, among other things, a rich media-archaeological exploration that digs into the very materiality of the cinematic apparatus: she considers colour as a material substance and a technological device, as hardware (*l'appareil de base*, according to Baudry).

Thompson's essay deals also with principles of colour aesthetic design, referring to the theoretical and practical work of colour engineers and colour consultants such as Howard Ketcham and Faber Birren, the latter being the champion of so-called 'functional colour'.<sup>9</sup> Developed conceptually in the 1930s, functional colour sought ways to best instrumentalise it through effective design and conventional associations between hues and human actions and reactions, as in 'red stands for alert, green stands for rest'. By adhering to functional principles, colour in design can achieve efficiently a wide range of objectives: increasing sales, reducing stress, directing attention in factories. Functional colour is a pivotal reference in mid-century colour practice, and it is a reference in several other articles collected here. In Federico Pierotti's 'Biopolitics of Colour in Mid-Century Italian Visual Culture: *Red Desert* and the "New Techniques of Life"', functional colour is considered as a biopolitical tool in a Foucauldian sense. In the context of Italian mid-century visual culture, functional approaches to colour were developed through a series of practices and discourses intended to regulate the biological aspects of human life, shaping viewers' perceptions and conditioning their moods, both at home and at work. Pierotti, nevertheless, locates in Antonioni's attention to colour in *Red Desert* (1964) a critical resistance against the attempted biopolitical automation of the Italian subject of the 1950s and the 1960s.

Also taking up functional colour, Justus Nieland examines its relation to the pedagogical and communicative work pursued in the Chicago School of Design (initially founded as the New Bauhaus in 1937), in the essay 'Colour Communications: László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Paepcke, and the Humanities Program of *Design Workshops*'. Nieland examines colour in relation to the 16mm Kodachrome films collected as *Design Workshops* (1940–1944), which László Moholy-Nagy directed in collaboration with his students at the School. As Nieland delineates, this collection of nontheatrical films fulfilled a number of tasks for the School: documenting its experimental, multimedia pedagogy, which dealt extensively with colour and new materials; training students in the use of the colour filmstocks and cinematic techniques; and last but not least, outwardly promoting the School's activities — hinging in part on the allure of colour film — to raise funds from corporate sponsors and philanthropic sources such as Rockefeller Foundation. Across this work, Moholy-Nagy was invested in the functional aspects of colour and design, yet he took these up at the School as part of a broader, vanguard vision of an arts and humanities pedagogy that sought to inculcate new forms of democratic and creative subjectivities for the new post-war world.

<sup>9</sup> See Faber Birren, *Functional Color* (New York: The Crimson Press, 1937).



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In wider terms, the struggle at the centre of functional colour — between attempts to control colour and its own autonomous resistance to regulation — has historically spanned colour theory. It reaches back, for instance, to Newton and Goethe's dispute about colour's nature: can it be rationally studied and controlled as an optical aspect of light, or is it best understood as a complex and sprawling physiological phenomena? Focusing on mid-century colour, we can ascribe to the latter — colour's autonomy — the many examples of psychedelic colours analysed by Bregt Lameris in 'Hallucinating Colours: Psychedelic Film, Technology, Aesthetics and Affect'. With particular emphasis on Roger Corman's *The Trip* (1967), Lameris discusses the variety of attempts to liberate colour and celebrate its subversive and countercultural power during the psychedelic, LSD heyday of the 1960s.

Perhaps it should be no surprise that in the decade in which colour became the cinematic norm on global screens, the wild countercultural experimentation around colour expanded what normative colour might look like and how it might function and be received. Even as the vibrant hues found at the close of the mid-century marked a new watershed in colour practice, it is true also that they returned to one of the founding associations of colour, that of the Greek *pharmakon*, the pharmacy where both colours and drugs were synthesized.<sup>10</sup> Even as industrially-produced colour was naturalized at mid-century, it bore within it the illusory and autonomous powers that have always defined our mediated access to it. Thus, even 'natural' colours and dyes in cinema have always been in a sense culturally conditioned, artificial, synthetic, in other words an apparatus.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Disseminations* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 61–172.