

From the Margins to the Mainstream? The Eastmancolor Revolution and Challenging the Realist Canon in British Cinema

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Abstract

This article focuses on Eastmancolor's introduction in the British film industry from 1954 to the complete adoption of colour by the end of the 1960s. We discuss how aesthetic experiments with colour offer a compelling parallel history to debates concerning British film genres, films and filmmakers. This approach allows us to see British film history through a different lens, to move beyond the constraints of the monochromatic realist canon and explore familiar and unfamiliar films in the 'fresh light' of colour. We select key film genres including the adoption of colour within the social realist film, considering whether black-and-white conventions were disrupted by the addition of colour. The section on Hammer horror films demonstrates how colour popularised a largely dormant British genre, while our consideration of the popular *Carry On...* comedies looks at colour's centrality to a new narrative approach for that series. Finally, we consider the historical biopic, focusing on *Isadora* (Karel Reisz, 1969) in relation to how colour defined thematic and narrative concerns with psychology, temporality and symbolism. We conclude that these years of experimentation constitute an essential transition period in which filmmakers were engaged in a complex negotiation with intermedial chromatic trends.

Introduction

Our research project, 'The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955–85', reveals how a colour-centric approach to British cinema challenges existing understandings of what constitutes the 'canon' of films that have received the greatest critical attention as markers of cultural value.¹ Discussions of international or American film canon formation highlight the critical selection of artistically or culturally renowned works which tends to be perpetuated by

¹ The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant no. AH/N009444/1.

academics, the film industry, and through popular discourse.² In relation to British cinema, critics have historically privileged black-and-white documentary social realism as a marker of quality and importance, often signalling such realist films as the ‘correct path for British cinema’.³ Focusing on the mid-century period from the initial adoption of Eastman Colour in 1954 until the full adoption of colour at the end of the 1960s, we discuss how aesthetic experiments with colour can offer a compelling parallel history to debates around British film genres, films and filmmakers. This approach allows us to see British film history through a different lens, to move beyond the constraints of the monochromatic realist canon and explore familiar and unfamiliar films in the ‘fresh light’ of colour.⁴

The academic study of colour film has increased in recent years, with the bulk of that work focusing on the pre-sound era or the Technicolor monopoly within the film industry.⁵ That scholarship has its own canonical traits, with fantasy, musical, animation, and historical films dominant in the US Technicolor feature canon while British Technicolor films such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946) and *Jassy* (Bernard Knowles, 1947) offer a different approach based on techniques developed by the British school of Technicolor.⁶ Our project moves beyond that time scale and focus, using the British experience of the 35mm Eastman Colour film stock as the key event to consider how colour reshaped this national industry.⁷ British ‘Eastman Colour’ is clearly not a discrete element than can be easily lifted out for study, as it represents a national usage embedded within broader Eastmancolor adoption in the US and elsewhere. American colour films represent the bulk of films released at British cinemas in this period, and remained popular with audiences. Additionally, Eastman Colour was regularly paired with widescreen processes such as CinemaScope, VistaVision, and Panavision, or other processes such as

² Janet Staiger, ‘The Politics of Film Canons’, *Cinema Journal*, 24.3 (1985), 4–23 (p. 8); Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004); Christopher Long, ‘Revising the Film Canon’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 4.1 (2006), 17–35.

³ Charles Barr, ‘Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia’, in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. by Barr (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 1–29 (pp. 13–14). For more on the documentary realist tradition, see: John Ellis, ‘Art Culture and Quality — Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and the Seventies’, *Screen*, 19.3 (1978), 9–50; Andrew Higson, ‘“Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”: The Documentary-Realist Tradition’, in *All Our Yesterdays*, pp. 72–97; Julian Petley, ‘The Lost Continent’, in *All Our Yesterdays*, pp. 98–119.

⁴ Barr, p. 14.

⁵ James Layton and David Pierce, *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915–1935* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 2015); Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

⁶ Sarah Street, *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation, 1900–55* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁷ The spelling ‘Eastman Colour’ is used throughout this article since it was the most common usage in British industry publications and documents. For more on Eastmancolor’s introduction see Heather Heckman, ‘We’ve Got Bigger Problems: Preservation during Eastmancolor’s Innovation and Early Diffusion’, *The Moving Image*, 15.1 (2015), 44–61.

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stereoscopic 3-D or Dynamation. For this article, we necessarily bracket the British use of Eastman Colour in order to consider its specific impact on the realist canon within Britain. In the broader project, the complex interaction of Eastman Colour with other colour processes, technologies, and the influences of Hollywood and other national cinemas, is given due prominence.

What we offer here are four case studies that foreground the use of colour within British film genres, each of which reveals a different perspective on how colour was deployed within the British film industry. Given its primacy within critical debates, the article first considers the adoption of colour within the social realist film, and whether the genre was disrupted by the addition of colour to its prevalent black-and-white aesthetic. The section on Hammer horror films reveals how colour was used to popularise a largely dormant British genre, while our consideration of the perennially popular *Carry On...* comedy series looks at how colour was central to the development of a new narrative approach for that series. Building on those sections, we look to the historical biopic, where a key film and director from the late 1960s allows us to consider how colour was being used to define thematic and narrative concerns with psychology, temporality and symbolism.

Colour in Social Realism

As already discussed, the strong association of social realism with black-and-white cinematography is well-established, almost clichéd, particularly in the established canon of 'New Wave' British films.⁸ Geoff Brown notes black and white as 'the perfect colour scheme for gloomy skies, smokestacks and poetic melancholy'.⁹ This viewpoint made filmmakers cautious when attempting to depict 'the real' in Eastman Colour. Art director Carmen Dillon and cinematographer Chris Challis, for example, created a muted palette for the sets of *Miracle in Soho* (Julian Amyes, 1957) in spite of the film's vibrant, cosmopolitan locale.

Yet colour presented opportunities for innovation within realism, and our project has brought to light films that contributed towards the mainstream shift to colour. Social trends influenced this development with colour increasingly vibrant in advertising, fashion and interior décor. British marketing specialist Eric P. Danger emphasized connections between colour and affluence, youth and modernity.¹⁰ While the classic 'New Wave' films featured these themes the persistence of a black-and-white realist aesthetic meant that the cycle was unable

⁸ The cycle from *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1958) to *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963).

⁹ Geoff Brown, 'Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism', in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 3rd edition, 2009), pp. 28–38 (p. 29).

¹⁰ Eric P. Danger, *Using Colour to Sell* (London: Gower Press, 1968).

to fully exploit this key observation. Filmmakers who did use colour to both reflect and critique the times produced work that pushed aesthetic and generic boundaries. One such director was Clive Donner who worked for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency and made commercials for television. *Some People* (1962), his first feature film, was noted for its vitality and fresh approach to realism by critic V. F. Perkins. Donner turned to Eastman Colour 'for the entertainment value, but also because to me the convention that reality is better in black and white is just a convention, and there's no reason why we shouldn't adopt another one'.¹¹ *Some People* was filmed in Bristol, a city that was not an industrial heartland, and focused on youth problems in housing estates. Donner used colour as a means of connecting characters to their local environment, their clothes and identities, with a satirical opening montage showing a neon sign flashing 'Bristol' followed by bright hoardings advertising food, jewels, motorbikes, hire purchase schemes and consumer products. This visual assault is full of colour interest, announcing the film's general tone of openness to stylistic experimentation, wit and energy. The world of advertising and hire purchase is very much part of the characters' lives in a city experiencing economic transition. In this way, *Some People* is alive to colour's potential for contemporary realist drama. Although *Some People* was well-reviewed and did well at the box-office, it eluded the critical radar, largely because it differed from the classic 'New Wave' cycle. Yet in retrospect it began an important trend in experimenting with colour for social observation.

Clive Donner went on to make other distinctive colour films, most notably *Nothing but the Best* (1963). This is a biting satire on social class, featuring Jimmy (Alan Bates), an opportunist who uses charm, guile and violence to repress his working-class background and rise to the top. Donner used colour to chart Jimmy's social climb and to demarcate the film's three segments, beginning with brash, primary colours and progressing to 'a sort of muddy, porridgy middle period, and coming out into rather muted elegant neo-regency tones'.¹² He and cinematographer Nicolas Roeg also incorporated experimental techniques such as changing colour negative into positive in the opening titles 'to show the whole hypocritical nature of society in which we live today: don't take anything at face value, have a look behind it, see what it is'.¹³

Colour provided opportunities for expressivity in other lesser-known realist films. It added dramatic value to *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (Roy Ward Baker, 1961), films that focused on racial issues. In their linkage of vivid colours with sexuality and racial identity, these films exposed the ideological assumptions upon which such judgements are made. They also reveal a complex relationship with colour during a period in which it stood for experimentation, novelty and exoticism while at the same time artificiality, danger

¹¹ V. F. Perkins, 'Clive Donner and *Some People*', *Movie 3* (October 1962), 22–25 (p. 23).

¹² 'Interview with Clive Donner', *ISIS*, 5 September 1964, pp. 15–16.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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and otherness. *The Family Way* (John and Roy Boulting, 1966) shows a young couple's aspirations for a 'Moonlight Special' honeymoon abroad, as advertised by vivid drawings of blue seas and skies, golden beaches and palm trees. But this turns out to be a swindle when the travel agent makes off with everyone's money; what at first looks exciting is the opposite. But the same film also uses colour evocatively to convey the past in a non-realist mode. A character recalls a romantic memory, but this is not seen through a flashback. Instead, as she speaks the background becomes infused with a blue/violet chromatic effect. In this way colour opened-up realist conventions to impressionistic effects and a greater variety of visual tropes to provoke audiences into re-evaluating information and cultural values.

Directors such as Ken Loach who were at first reluctant to use colour subsequently exploited its multivalent properties. The chromatic sensibility of *Poor Cow* (1967) contributed greatly to its verisimilitude, communicating a sensuous experience of the look and feel of the mid-1960s. The shock of seeing vivid colour in a realist drama is announced in the first scene of a woman giving birth. Colour then documents domestic interiors, urban development and also satirizes the advertising world. In this way, although the association between realism and black and white has persisted, films that were the exception to this rule in the mid-century period played a key role in challenging canonical histories of British cinema.¹⁴

Hammer and Beyond

Hammer Film Productions dominate discussions of post-war British horror cinema, starting with the first British horror film shot in colour, *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957). Hammer's status in the early 1960s was principally due to the lavish chromatic spectacle of period fantasy found in its films, something that set the company apart from other British horror productions of the period, which were largely associated with contemporary settings and a black-and-white aesthetic. The commercial failure of Hammer's own black-and-white contemporary horrors was linked by one critic to the studio's colour period fantasies since they were 'unencumbered... [by] suggestions of realism carried by modern locations'.¹⁵ Yet the success of the period horror films was challenged by a social and industrial shift towards a more 'realistic' use of colour within film as a result of a wider 'technological and aesthetic shift within cinema'.¹⁶

By the mid-1960s, the association between fantasy, horror and colour was

¹⁴ Street, 'The Colour of Social Realism', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 15.4 (2018), 469–90.

¹⁵ David Robinson, quoted in Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 65.

¹⁶ Hutchings, p. 132.

beginning to unravel, with the notion of colour adding realism having ‘important implications for the horror genre’.¹⁷ The success of the Amicus film *Dr Terror’s House of Horrors* (Freddie Francis, 1965) led to ‘a cluster of films which seek, presumably in the commercial interests of product differentiation, to relocate horror in a recognisable present-day world while at the same time appealing to the already established market for that period horror’.¹⁸ Other contemporary-set colour films attempted to blur the lines of demarcation by introducing elements of period fantasy into modern settings. This approach made the transition less conspicuous and played a key role in shaping the look of British horror in the following decade. Such films as *It!* (Herbert J. Leder, 1967), for example, combined the storyline of a supernatural Golem brought back to life by Arthur Pimm (Roddy McDowall) with psychological themes in the form of Pimm’s relationship with his deceased mother, an echo of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960).

These transitional films also echo Hammer’s earlier colour films in their approach to chromatic design. In the early stages of Eastman Colour’s adoption, the Society of Motion Picture Television Engineers (SMPTE) recommended Technicolor’s approach to film colour.¹⁹ Possibly as a result of that advice, the horror colour aesthetic developed at Hammer by director Terence Fisher, cinematographer Jack Asher, art designers Edward Marshall and Bernard Robinson, and costume designers Molly Arbuthnot and Rosemary Burrows for *Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula* (Fisher, 1958), has strong parallels with Technicolor’s methods, notably the use of colour to underscore narrative events.²⁰ Beyond Hammer, that chromatic legacy is felt in a number of late-1960s horror films, including *The Deadly Bees* (Francis, 1966), *The Psychopath* (Francis, 1966), *Twisted Nerve* (Roy Boulting, 1968), *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (Vernon Sewell, 1968) and *Corruption* (Robert Hartford-Davis, 1968), in which the use of colour combines those earlier associations with fantasy and the verisimilitude of contemporary settings and themes. The ethereal green lighting that dominates scenes of ritual sacrifice in *Curse of the Crimson Altar*, for example, resembles Hammer’s deployment of colour to designate the supernatural or otherworldly through the appearance of the eponymous antagonist in *The Mummy* (Fisher, 1959) and during sequences featuring the life-elixir in *The Man Who Could Cheat Death* (Fisher, 1959). The blood-red interiors of the homes of Mrs Von Sturm (Margaret Johnston) in *The Psychopath* and Mr Manfred (Frank Finlay) in *The Deadly Bees* infer the ever-present threat of bloody violence found in *Dracula* and *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (Fisher, 1966). Equally, the association of yellow

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 130.

¹⁹ Scott Higgins, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 47.

²⁰ Natalie Kalmus, ‘Color Consciousness’, *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, 25.1 (August 1935), 139–147 (p. 140). Technicolor’s Natalie Kalmus ascribed a role to colour similar to the musical score, editing and set design for their contribution to the film’s narrative.

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tones with a deceptive character such as Sir John Rowan (Peter Cushing), who murders a young prostitute in *Corruption*, draws parallels with the chromatic costume and lighting designs that represent the dual personalities of Carla / The Gorgon (Barbara Shelley) in *The Gorgon* (Fisher, 1964).

However, the echoes of earlier period horror colour design in these transitional horror films led to a familiar negative critical response, fueled by critics struggling to balance the prevailing association of colour horror as an escapist fantasy with the newer films' use of colour to portray a more brutal contemporary realism. This was most directly addressed in Penelope Mortimer's review of *Corruption* in *The Observer*, which also criticised the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) for allowing this 'pernicious and repellent rubbish to appear on the screen'. Mortimer's review warns audiences, 'In case anyone should think that this is just a good old horror picture [...] Here are no evil fangs, stakes driven through the heart, gaping midnight graves, horrible transformations. The thing actually purports to be realistic.'²¹ As the evidence of the films reveals, and as Mortimer's review underlines, overlooking these transitional films ignores a key moment within the British horror genre in which the association of colour / fantasy and black and white / realism was being shattered.

Carry On... in Colour

Unlike the ebb and flow in popularity of horror, comedy has long been 'the most popular genre in British cinema [...] drawing mass audiences when other genres fail'.²² Despite that popularity and dominance, there is no strong association between comedy films and colour in British cinema. To consider how colour remains an underexplored aesthetic aspect of film comedy, this section looks at the British film industry's most successful comedy franchise, the *Carry On* series of thirty films released between 1958 and 1978. Contemporaneous with the Hammer horror films, both series shared a desire to keep 'production costs to levels which were sustainable in British markets alone'.²³ The budget for the *Carry On* series was low even in comparison with other comedies of the time: the first film *Carry On Sergeant* (Gerald Thomas, 1958) 'cost around £73,000 to make, at a time when an average Rank comedy was estimated to cost £125,000'.²⁴ The different *Carry On* art directors 'were obliged to keep costs down by [...] recycling and cheap location matching' including the reuse of standing sets such as a Western town in *Carry on Cowboy* and those built for Twentieth Century Fox's *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963) for *Carry on Cleo* (Thomas,

²¹ Penelope Mortimer, 'Uplifting Blossoms', *The Observer*, 24 November 1968, p. 23.

²² Laraine Porter and I. Q. Hunter, 'British Comedy Cinema: Sex, Class and Very Naughty Boys', in *British Comedy Cinema*, ed. by Hunter and Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1–17 (p. 1).

²³ Laurie Ede, *British Film Design: A History* (London: IB Tauris, 2010), p. 74.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 75.

1964).²⁵ Although budgetary in nature, such restrictions on set and costume reuse may have actually increased the colour palette available for the films.

Discussions of this series have identified a narrative shift that happens across the 1960s, from institution-set films such as *Sergeant* and *Carry on Constable* (Thomas, 1960) through parodies of British and Hollywood genre films that start with *Carry on Jack* (Thomas, 1964) and run through *Spying* (Thomas, 1964), *Cleo*, *Cowboy*, *Screaming* (Thomas, 1966), *Don't Lose Your Head* (Thomas, 1966), *Follow That Camel* (Thomas, 1966) and *Carry On Up the Khyber* (Thomas, 1968), before the series reintroduced an institutional comedy focus with *Carry On Doctor* (Thomas, 1968).²⁶ What is not traditionally acknowledged in that production trajectory is the crucial role that Eastman Colour played in the development of the genre parody. The *Carry On* films are rarely celebrated for their cinematography, but the work of Alan Hume on *Cleo*, *Cowboy*, and *Screaming* is critical in creating the right tone, combining a naturalistic approach with examples of more experimental lighting techniques. *Screaming* uses specific lighting effects to parody (and echo) Hammer's horror films, with a particular colour scheme being used in different rooms: red for the mad scientist's laboratory, purple in the living room, and yellow in the basement where Orlando (Kenneth Williams) and Valeria (Fenella Fielding) Watt create shop mannequins out of female victims. Even away from such an obvious genre connection, Hume's lighting casts an illicit rendezvous in *Don't Lose Your Head* in purple and yellow shades, while green hues suggest a supernatural element to an otherwise comical crystal ball sequence in *Follow That Camel*.

Colour in set designs and costume also enhances the parodies by including contemporary sight gags such as the green-and-gold signage for Marcus et Spencius in *Cleo*, which mimics a similar 'colour scheme as the high street store Marks and Spencer'.²⁷ The series makes striking use of red and blue in uniforms for *Cleo* (Roman legion), *Don't Lose Your Head* (French soldiers) and *Up the Khyber* (British troops), allowing the films to both ridicule authority figures and make broad claims to issues of historical accuracy and generic identity. More obvious slapstick gags use colour to set up narrative events, such as in *Cleo* where Caesar's (Kenneth Williams) robes are pelted with red tomatoes, well before the later (largely bloodless) stabbing. Colour in costume is more predictably used to highlight the female body, creating iconic and canonical spectacle: Fenella Fielding's tight-fitting red dress in *Screaming*, Amanda Barrie's skimpy costume in *Cleo*, and Angela Douglas's silver outfit for her song-and-dance in *Cowboy*.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 78.

²⁶ James Chapman, 'A Short History of the *Carry On* Films', in *British Comedy Cinema*, pp. 100–115; Sally Hibbin and Nina Hibbin, *What A Carry On: The Official Story of the Carry On Film Series* (London: Hamlyn, 1988), p. 88.

²⁷ Nicholas J. Cull, "'Infamy! Infamy! They've All Got It in for Me!'" *Carry on Cleo* and the British Camp Comedies of Ancient Rome', in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 162–190 (p. 174).

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Throughout the 1960s, the series' increasing interest in half- or wholly-naked women would ultimately lessen the impact of colourful female costumes, but it underlines how important (and often overlooked) colour was to these parodic franchise entries.

Historical Film and the Colour Bio-pic

Both Hammer's period horror films, and the *Carry On...* series' historical parodies, draw from a rich tradition of British costume and historical drama, even though both franchises are generally less concerned with historical accuracy. From the mid-1930s three-strip Technicolor provided an aesthetic feature for historical films which emphasised period spectacle and perpetuated ongoing debates concerning realism and authenticity.²⁸ This is particularly applicable for the biopic, a sub-genre of the historical film which often engenders accusations of inaccuracy, fraudulence and misrepresentation. The full conversion to colour offered by the new Eastman Colour film stock saw a slow uptake for the biopic when compared to other examples of historical films. In the period 1954 to 1960 only two British colour feature film releases appeared to channel the biopic format: *Beau Brummell* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1954) and *John Wesley* (Norman Walker, 1954). This began to change during the 1960s with *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), a film that heralded technical advances in colour cinematography and postclassical developments in the genre by adopting a more complex, psychological approach towards the biographical narrative.²⁹

Isadora (Karel Reisz, 1969) continued this trend in its exploration of the life of the American dancer, Isadora Duncan (in an acclaimed performance by British actress Vanessa Redgrave). Reisz was better known for his contribution to the critically acclaimed black-and-white social realist films, particularly *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), but his debut colour feature has been hailed as a 'marvellously appropriate subject for the 60s'.³⁰ The film employs a similar temporal framework to *Lawrence of Arabia*, beginning towards the end of Isadora's life, and recreates her experiences as dreamlike encounters fueled with passion and tragedy. *Isadora* adheres to the conventional female biopic tropes of 'suffering, victimisation and failure', played out in the tension between her professional achievements and the demands of 'home, marriage and motherhood'.³¹ However, the film explores Isadora's complex persona by adopting a psychologically-centred narrative which is fragmented and

²⁸ Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, 'Introduction: the Past in British Cinema', in *British Historical Cinema*, ed. by Monk and Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–14 (p. 2).

²⁹ Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (USA: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 72–99.

³⁰ Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 271.

³¹ Bingham, pp. 10 and 213.

impressionistic. This approach is underscored by considered colour choices in the film's creative design.

Film and stage designer Jocelyn Herbert was employed to create the look of *Isadora*, and her personal archive reveals some of the colour challenges production personnel faced due to the non-linear structure. These were related to physical changes in Isadora's (and Redgrave's) appearance and in crafting aesthetic contrasts between different time periods. In her sketchbook, Herbert considers: 'going on the assumption that the past and present are going to be different — how and to what degree?'³² She debates whether Isadora's past should be filmed in black and white or colour to evoke a time that was more 'vivid and alive' and to recreate the 'garish and fun' sentiment of the 1920s.³³ Black-and-white cinematography which had previously 'reinforced dominant generic codes of realism' is assessed here in a very different context: as a signifier for the past and reconstructed memory.³⁴ The finished film follows Herbert's latter idea by employing vivid colour for most of the flashbacks, accentuating the subject's life story and reinforcing colour as spectacle.

It begins with twelve-year old Isadora in her parents' bedroom, the muted browns and flickering candle light creating a silent film effect that emphasises this is a different era. The action then shifts in time as she recites her memoirs whilst staying on the French Riviera in 1927. As Isadora's stage routines become more flamboyant and outrageous, her costume changes from predominantly white, promoting classical ideals, to fiery reds and oranges. Herbert's set designs, inspired by her work at the Royal Court, include sparse studio interiors decorated with minimalist furnishings, providing a theatrical ambience that reflects Isadora's artistic ambition. The apartment she shares with her first love, the English theatre designer Gordon Craig (James Fox), resembles a stage set: an expansive space in which to experiment with colour and light. The warm orange glow of these early sequences reflects Herbert's suggestion that Isadora's past should be presented as more 'vivid'. Later scenes shift from the romantic and opulent French château where Isadora sets up a dance school for girls, through to the grey, sombre tones of Soviet Russia, punctuated by brazen displays of red costume, flags and regalia (defiant until the end, Isadora also wears a scarlet red scarf at the moment of her untimely death).

Isadora presents an evocative biographical film where colour performs a significant symbolic role in depicting the subject's psychological journey. This is in contrast to earlier black-and-white biopics such as Ken Russell's *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World* (BBC, 22 September 1966), with Reisz's film version offering a stronger visual resonance through its chosen colour palette. As with the horror films discussed above, colour increased the creative

³² *Isadora* Folder (d.1967-1968), Jocelyn Herbert Collection, National Theatre Archives [accessed 23 May 2017].

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Street, *Colour Films in Britain*, p. 132.

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opportunities for filmmakers working in this genre, fueled by the broader move towards more psychologically-driven narratives. The input of practitioners such as Herbert helped shape the visual direction of mid-century British historical biopics, a direction that continued after the complete conversion to colour by the end of the 1960s.

Conclusion

Between the years 1954 and 1969, as Eastman Colour entered its period of mainstream adoption, it is clear that the British film industry was coming to terms with the new aesthetic possibilities of colour. As the case studies demonstrate, a focus on Eastman Colour in British cinema has begun to reveal how colour helped redefine the look of key British genres. While this period remains critically known for the monochrome and ‘realist’ films of the British New Wave, the new perspectives developed in our project contribute to scholarship aiming to challenge and expand that narrow historical view.³⁵

The case studies reveal how this British period of colour transition and experimentation can be linked to shifting cultural connotations of realism, character psychology, parody, and social commentary. The British industry was also reliant on colour for more prosaic reasons: most films from America and other countries were in colour from the early 1960s, and the rise of British-American film and television coproduction through the 1960s (in part due to London’s ‘Swinging Sixties’ pop culture reputation) meant Britain needed to convert to colour to keep in step with international colour trends. Other media were also converting to colour, with advertising, publishing, fashion and television offering alternative chromatic opportunities. Such intermedial influences (and challenges) meant Eastman Colour became mainstream in British film production around the same time as colour supplements appeared in newspapers, and as colour broadcasting appeared in Britain. BBC2 began broadcasting in colour from 1967, BBC1 in November 1969, and the regional commercial channels between 1969 and 1970. These initial mid-century years of experimentation, then, can be seen as an essential transition period for the British film industry but also one in which it was engaged in a complex negotiation with intermedial chromatic trends.

Beyond this period, colour remains a complex and shifting topic in terms of aesthetics, industry attitudes, and the realist canon. Hammer and the *Carry On...* series continued into the 1970s, with period horrors like *Lust for a Vampire*

³⁵ See, for example, Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996); Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* (London: Continuum, 2000); *British Horror Cinema*, ed. by Julian Petley and Steve Chibnall (London: Routledge, 2001); Chibnall and Brian McFarlane, *The British ‘B’ Film* (London: BFI, 2009); *British Comedy Cinema; Ealing Revisited*, ed. by Mark Duguid, Lee Freeman, Keith M. Johnston, and Melanie Williams (London: BFI Palgrave, 2012).

(Jimmy Sangster, 1971) or genre parodies such as *Carry on Henry* (Thomas, 1971) attempting to recapture the elusive commercial success of the 1960s. Contemporary psychological horrors offered a more pared-down realism in films such as *Fragment of Fear* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1970) or *The Shout* (Jerry Skolimowski, 1978), while the Hammer-inspired colour tradition was continued by low budget horrors such as *Frightmare* (Pete Walker, 1974) and *Virgin Witch* (Ray Austin, 1972). The historical biopic, meanwhile, became a key site of chromatic experimentation in the films of Ken Russell, most notably in *The Music Lovers* (1970) and *Valentino* (1977). The acceptance of colour in social realism across the 1970s may lack some of the commercial critique found in earlier films, but realist directors such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach continued to use colour effectively as they moved between television and film projects such as *Bleak Moments* (Leigh, 1971) and *Family Life* (Loach, 1971). While those realist traditions continue to echo through debates about a British film canon, the parallel history that our project is uncovering demonstrates how colour may be key to revealing a 'richer and more diverse British cinema'.³⁶

³⁶ Barr, p. 14.