

«IT'S MUCH MORE BEAUTIFUL!». COLOUR IN THE AMATEUR ITALIAN CINEMA: HISTORY, DISCOURSES, SOCIAL USES

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The purpose of my dissertation is to discuss the role of colour in the amateur Italian cinema.

The first chapter of the research addresses to a theoretical overview on colour studies and to a technological review on the development of the main colour processes throughout the history of cinema, in order to come to a definition of this complex and multilayered area.

As a matter of fact, colour has been examined by many disciplines, from physics to chemistry, from biology to neurology. In the field of social and human sciences, colour is mainly defined as a social construction: every cultural context influences colour perception, as French historian Michel Pastoureau argues,² therefore every *universal* symbolism should be avoided (red stands for..., blue stands for...).

If this is true in general, it can be reasonably assumed that colour perception in the cinematic experience is *culturally* conditioned as well. So, what does “studying colour in cinema” mean? According to the best known studies on the subject by Jacques Aumont,³ it means primarily comparing it with black-and-white moving images. Compared with black-and-white film, colour film on the one hand offers a faithful reproduction of reality, while on the other hand, by virtue of the same perceptual power, triggers an imaginary and spectacular deviation from reality.

In the history of cinema, to be more precise, there are two main types of colour film processes: the applied colour processes of the silent period, like hand-colouring, tinting or toning, and the so-called “natural” colour processes, which in turn are divided into additive, like Kinemacolor, and subtractive systems, like Eastmancolor. In the natural processes, colour is mechanically recorded out of extra human handlings and this automatic source gives rise to an interesting contradiction: little by little, while becoming a standard quality of films and replacing black-and-white films, colour becomes actually invisible. Colour is everywhere but, because of its “naturalness,” it tends to be unperceived, just an expected and insignificant property of films. This happens in particular in the mainstream and *genre* movies, while many authors, like Eisenstein or Antonioni, grow a personal style and develop a creative use of colour in their works.

This thesis is centered on the first of these two possible uses of colour in the cinema: the impersonal and invisible colour. Looking for the anonymous and collective chromatic styles in cinematic practices, we could argue that the amateur production is a key subject matter. Indeed, we can assume that home movies and amateur films are very distant from any artistic research: they are generally shot in order to celebrate the happy moments of family history, like births and birth-

days, christenings and weddings, holidays and Carnivals. It's exactly because of their stereotyped nature that amateur images are truly representative of a *nameless* style: they resemble each other and in this repetitiveness lies their illustrative power; furthermore, home movies images are the quintessence of collective memory, as Roger Odin points out.⁴ At the same time, and conversely, home movies are the most personal and once-off kind of cinema: addressed to a private and restricted public (family members), every home movie is a unique exemplar, because it is usually shot on reversal film (a negative film chemically converted in a positive one, ready for the home projection). The second chapter of the thesis describes and analyzes some important studies on the amateur cinema in order to define the borders of this multifaceted practice: while amateur cinema has been studied in many countries, from Europe to the US, little attention has been devoted to the technological issue of colour and to the introduction and spread of colour films. Retracing the small-gauge (16 mm, 9.5 mm, 8 mm, Super8) technological history, a pivotal factor emerged: colour film were developed *before* in the small-gauge and reversal version employed by the amateurs and only *at a later stage* in the 35mm negative-positive version used by the professionals and the industry. This technological leadership shows that amateur cinema was considered by manufacturing firms as a test bench in the field of colour films. Hence, this technical innovation was launched "from below" and was directed to the mass of the amateurs.

My work concentrates on the use of colour in the amateur *Italian* cinema and home movies: did the Italian amateur filmmakers develop, though unwittingly, a shared and widespread chromatic style? How did they use colour in their home movies?

In order to evaluate the implementation procedures of colour films, the third chapter is devoted to the discourses' analysis: a sample of around thirty Italian, French, English and American handbooks on amateur colour cinematography has been assembled. This "how to" literature gives expression to the trade magazines' editorial staff or to the film manufacturers: according to them, how should a *good* home movie look like? And, specifically, how should a *good colour* home movie be? The answers are rather uniform all over the world – the Western world, at any rate: a good colour home movie does not distance itself from standard norms and approved solutions of harmonious composition. Colour should not jar on our senses and should be limited in order not to distract from the story: it must be practiced "colour restraint," just as in the classical Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s. So, handbooks and manuals have a strong prescriptive power and their precepts exercise a conservative function: the amateur filmmaker has not to try new chromatic solutions and his/her creative potential is neutralized.

But, did the amateur filmmakers conform to the handbooks' norms? Or did they find new stylistic solutions and ways of using colour? In order to recognize the appropriation and the adjustment of colour films by the Italian amateurs, the fourth chapter is devoted to the practices' analysis: a sample of ten private collections of home movies between the 1930s and the 1960s has been taken into consideration. Colour reversal films, indeed, were launched in the middle of the 1930s, but their widespread availability in Italy was achieved only since the mid-1950s. Therefore, in order to observe not only the introduction but also the stabilization of this innovation, it has been isolated a wide lapse. The sample includes 16mm, 9.5mm and 8mm films, while Super8 films are excluded because this format was launched in 1965, when colour movies were by then common not only in the amateur practices but also in the theatrical cinema. In order to collect some information about the social and technological context, the amateur (or a family member) has been interviewed.

From the analysis carried out, it can be observed that a shared and widespread chromatic style does exist: it harks back not to painting and fine arts but to a minor artistic and iconic tradition, represented for instance by magic lantern plates, hand-painted photographs, picture postcards or tour guides. We could argue that colour home movies follow the accepted codes of this kind of images more than handbooks' advices. Among favourite and recurring subjects there are landscapes and flowers, flags and parrots, balloons and kites: Kodachrome, Agfacolor and other colour reversal films eventually allows the exact reproduction of true hues and shades of things. But beyond reality, in home movies colour is also used to stage family harmony's show: amateur filmmakers often shot parties and merrymakings, and these situations are utmost bright and colourful (to this end, Carnivals are the quintessential topic). Thus, the two main cultural meanings of colour – reality and, on the other hand, daydream – are put together in our Italian home movies sample. In turn, this *textual* aesthetic negotiation get along with a deeper *contextual* change in the Italian culture and society. In fact, between the 1950s and the 1960s Italy was overcoming postwar hardship and was opening up to a sudden modernization that appeared also by way of new colours in the everyday framework: coloured cars, coloured clothes, coloured furniture and hand tools, even coloured food and beverage... Although for the most part Italy still was an outdated and underdeveloped country, new colour reversal films captured these clues of innovation for the first time. Moreover, Italian amateurs were a sort of advance guard projected toward technological progress, an inner circle of pioneers that eagerly embraces newness and, doing so, helps decreasing the fear of technology and, more broadly, of the future. Even though many colour home movies show the “same old subjects,” nevertheless their representation is as much up-to-date as possible just because *it is in colour*. In conclusion, the amateurs met during the research are not true innovators of the visual chromatic style; rather, they are active protagonists of their time because of their openness toward technological change marked by new colour films as opposed to previous black-and-white films.

- 1 Ph.D. dissertation defended on 18 March 2013. Thesis supervisors: Prof. Luisella Farinotti and Prof. Federico Pierotti.
- 2 Michel Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps. Symbolique et société*, Bonneton, Paris 1992; Michel Pastoureau, Dominique Simonnet, *Le petit livre des couleurs*, Editions du Panama, Paris 2005; Michel Pastoureau, *Les couleurs de nos souvenirs*, Seuil, Paris 2010.
- 3 Jacques Aumont, *Introduction à la couleur: des discours aux images*, Armand Colin, Paris 1994; Id. (ed.), *La couleur en cinéma*, Cinémathèque française, Musée du cinéma/Fondazione Mazzotta, Paris-Milan 1995.
- 4 Roger Odin (ed.), *Le film de famille: usage public, usage privé*, Meridiens Klincksieck, Paris 1995; *Le cinéma en amateur, Communications* (edited by Roger Odin), no. 68, 1999.