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Colored Perspectives: Shading World War II Onscreen

Films that deal with World War II—whether their narratives are concerned primarily with the war itself, the aura from which it emerged, or the ethos of its aftermath—have a particularly charged relationship to the presence or abjuration of color. As representations of a period that produced its own black-and-white archival footage, these works reckon with color not simply as an aesthetic choice, but also as a tool through which to define their own relationship to perspectival subjectivity and claims of historical authenticity. By examining the role of color in three vastly different World War II films— Andrzej Wajda's black-and-white 1958 rendition of the war's last 24 hours in "Ashes and Diamonds," the Harlequin prewar chaos of Bob Fosse's 1972 "Cabaret," and the delicate balance of color and black-and-white characterizing the postwar divided Germany of Wim Wenders' 1987 "Wings of Desire"—we may access a richer understanding, not simply of the films' stylistic approaches, but also (and perhaps more significantly) of their relationship to both their origins and audience. Color, that is, acts in these three films as a chromatic guide by which to untangle each respective text's take on both subjectivity and objectivity.

The best "entry point" into these stylistically and temporally distinct films' chromatic motifs is through three strikingly analogous crowd scenes—each of which uses communal participation in a diegetically well-known song to highlight a moment of dramatic urgency or volatility. In "Ashes and Diamonds," the performance of "The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino" in the basement of the Monopol Hotel acts as a window into the film's use of color. The song's closing lines, "…And all the poppies on Monte Cassino/Will be redder from growing in Polish blood," hinge on a color-based analogy; yet in a black-and-white film, that elision of biological and botanical red takes on a dimension of dramatic irony due to the impossibility of its onscreen representation. We, after all, cannot see the red of the hillside poppies (or the Polish flag), let alone of the bleeding citizens to whom the melody pays tribute. The song depends on a form of quite literally time-sensitive knowledge—color, both in film and in life, alters with age—to which the audience is not permitted access. Thus, even on a purely *textual* level, color serves to establish the relationship between audience and onscreen spectacle. A rift opens up between the occupants of the Monopol, who exist in the same red-and-white world as the song's simile, and the film's audience, who must always be slightly separated from its visual and musical subjects by the impenetrable black-and-white screen. Our relationship to this vital cinematic moment of wartime intra-national affiliation and identity affirmation, in other words, is mediated as much by the absence of color as by the characters themselves. On the one hand, we become hyperaware that every onscreen character is always seeing something we are not; on the other, we become attuned to black-and-white as the colors which characterize *audience* perspective within the text. Our consciousness both of the characters' subjectivity and our own is heightened by the chromatic gap between the two.

Yet it does not follow that the relationship between subjectivity and color always follows this model; while black-and-white can certainly increase audience alienation and awareness of our own subjectivity, an expanded palette may also evocatively blur the lines between audience-to-character identification and film-'to'-audience *manipulation*.

The opening of the *Biergarten* scene in "Cabaret" (the only musical number in the film to take place outside the expressionistic darkness of the Kit Kat Klub) conveys an intense impression of brightness and saturation—but saturation exclusively within the bounds of a carefully curated color scheme. Here too, as in "Ashes and Diamonds," the text of the song in question provides a clue to the role of color onscreen: although in this instance, only a single lyric—"The branch of the linden is leafy and green/The Rhine gives its gold to the sea"—openly references hue. The greens and golds of this song, however—unlike the absent poppy red of Wajda's work—only grow more visually dominant as the scene progresses. Shot after shot of shining blonde hair and tawny clothing, presented against an out-of-focus background of midsummer leaves, seems to infect the frame with the song's own color scheme; yet by the end of the number, the audience has only been further distanced from the perspective of the singers onscreen.

At first, the opening close-up of an angelic pale-haired singer in a golden-brown shirt depicts the song's Edenic vision with such visceral potency that we cannot help unconsciously opening ourselves up to the singer's perspectival position. It is only when the camera tilts down to reveal a red-and-black swastika (introducing the only onscreen colors not referenced in song's text) that our error becomes evident. From that moment on, the growing green-and-gold theme is joined by increasingly frequent pops of scarlet, which serve to highlight the almost viral spread of Nazi ideology even in shots where no red

armbands are present. Yet if we ignore or fail to make note of such seemingly innocuous red accent notes as a child's hair ribbon or a striped awning, we may find ourselves seduced by the play of light on those flaxen heads and rippling leaves. The diffusion and interaction of three principal colors becomes a direct metaphorical stand-in for the manipulation of subjective perspectives so key to the catalyzing of prewar Germany itself. We are left, at the scene's close, all the more aware of our own perspectival fallibility—of the film's power to temporarily sway audience alignment away from both our own beliefs and those of the main characters (who, after all, are no more thrilled with the increased Nazi presence than we are). Color in this case becomes a tool with which to critique the audience's colored *perspective*, our initial and willing blindness towards the epidemic of chromatic and ideological uniformity onscreen.

While the final concert scene of "Wings of Desire" does not feature any lyrical references to color, it further expands and refracts the idea of hue-as-tool so successfully utilized during "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" across at least three separate mono- and polychromatic palettes. The first 'movement' of the scene follows the newly mortal ex-angel Damiel (Bruno Ganz) as he navigates his way through the pulsating neon blues and greens of a packed Berlin Nick Cave concert (the colors of which he could not perceive in his past existence—in Wenders' vision, angels only see black-and-white). The cool tint of the flashing stage lights, combined with the haze from concertgoers and smoke machines alike, create an impression of color which seems both surreal and tangible—submerging the audience in the subjectivity of a character who is new to the very concept of color itself. We share in his experience of the almost unbearable sensory intensity of post-war human life. This is color as pure window into—and through—the character onscreen.

The camera then re-enters the concert hall, this time with the existentially depressed trapeze artist Marion as our focal character. We assume that the colors will have remained consistent; after all, the diegetic light has not changed, and the audience expects a certain degree of neutral accuracy (and therefore regularity) in the chromatic perceptions of two now equally human characters. Yet the subsequent tonal change, although subtle, undermines that anticipation of objectivity. The flashing lights no longer seem either so rich or so volatile. Even the air appears to have taken on a warmer hue, occasionally split by long bands of almost muddy burnt orange light which were completely absent before— although the splashes of poppy red costumes and hair which marked Damiel's trip through the crowd are now notably missing. The difference is just noticeable enough to create the impression of a new subjectivity—and to make us feel more uncertain about the 'real' appearance of the room. The warmer, more stable colors through which Marion moves call into question the origins of Damiel's bluer perception, and force the audience to draw our own conclusions as to which presentation to trust. Yet unlike in "Cabaret," no one perspective—or palette—clearly predominates over the others; rather, multiple and even potentially contradictory views exist in tandem.

It is not until the arrival of the scene's third color scheme, though, that we can fully appreciate the film's approach to subjectivity. As the angel Cassiel leans casually against the concert hall wall, his shadow—presented in his characteristic black-and-white—appears to double and triple itself in the pulsing strobe lights. Once drained of color, the crowded space seems unmoored from mortal time, leaving the isolated angel in a room full of characters whose temporal reality he can never fully share—no matter how closely he studies their perspectives. The drastic tonal alteration to the (now almost noir-ish) tinted

stage lights, as precipitated by the switch into black-and-white, forcefully reminds us that observing others' subjectivities is in itself a highly 'colored' process. Like Cassiel, we as viewers of "Wings of Desire" are briefly sampling characters' views from an irrevocable (yet intimate) distance, accessing their essence while necessarily separated from their ephemeral time. Through our own subjectivity, we gain entry to those of the figures onscreen; and yet *because of* our subjectivity, we are barred from unrestrained access.

Until this point, we have constrained our discussion of color to a focus on its complex role in conveying subjectivity across each of these films. Yet as is becoming increasingly evident, the importance of color lies, in no small part, in its ability to convey multiple (and even, on occasion, paradoxical) perspectival messages within a single text. Thus, as we move from analysis of these three scenes towards a more overarching examination of the films in their entirety, a further question of color's relationship to point of view demands address. What can be said about the way subjectivity's counterpart— objectivity, or, as is more particularly pertinent to World War II films, historical veracity— is claimed or conveyed through color onscreen? How, that is, does color alter the way a film situates itself within and against the idea of empirical history?

While some films, such as "Korczak" (1990, also directed by Andrzej Wajda) have utilized black-and-white in order to more smoothly integrate archival footage into the narrative flow[1], the only newsreel recordings in "Ashes and Diamonds" are firmly external to the film's diegesis. In fact, the single news clip the characters watch is only shown for a few brief seconds, framed by Maciek and Andzrej's heads and projected on a sheet wrinkled enough to ensure that any hint of similarity between narrative content and

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[1] Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 270.

documentary footage due to color palette is thoroughly underplayed. Indeed, its monochromatic scheme actually makes any assumed impartiality on the part of the camera particularly suspect, unlike the clearly subjective blue-greens of "Wings of Desire" or the evident audience manipulation achieved by patterns of gold, green and red in "Cabaret". As befits the story of two men on opposite sides of an intra-national battle, we are unable to decide *'whose'* black and white we are seeing with the specificity which allows us to discuss 'Marion's oranges' in "Wings" or the infectious Nazi scarlet of the *Biergarten* scene. It is not that this black-and-white is perspectively neutral and therefore objective; rather, it cloaks its subjective alliances in monochrome. That affiliative enigma was, after all, key to the film's release under the censorship rules in place at the time[2]; had Wajda's film been as indisputably representative of Maciek's perspective as the black-and-white scenes in "Wings of Desire" are of the angels, it would likely have been shelved. "Ashes and Diamonds," as the film out of the three discussed to be released closest to the war's end, faced less pressure to reincarnate history as validated by the vernacular of archival footage for the simple reason that the war's aftermath was still affecting the Polish film industry so intensely in 1958. This black-and-white, therefore, is less concerned with validating the film's relationship to history than with exploring—and occasionally obscuring—the relationships between audience and character. Its sense of veracity comes not through archival emulation, but instead through the superfluity thereof: its authenticity is one of immediacy rather than faithful recreation.

"Cabaret," on the other hand, demonstrates a much more pressing sense of the temporal gap between the events onscreen and the audience consuming them. This is likely

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[2] Annette Insdorf, "Ashes and Diamonds." Class lecture, Analysis of Film Language at Columbia University, New York, NY, February 20, 2018.

not simply a virtue of its later release date; musicals, as a genre more commonly associated

with performativity than mimesis, must work harder to earn audience trust as historically

faithful texts. Most of our daily lives, after all, do not involve choreographed song. Yet

rather than aiming to recreate the chromatic texture of history *records* from the prewar

period, the use of color in this film signifies a relationship to history more aligned with

Walter Benjamin's assertion that, "[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to

recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a

moment of danger."[3] For "Cabaret" traces its tonal lineage back to the styles of *visual art*

contemporary to its narrative, styles which are themselves expressions of lived prewar

experience. By borrowing from—and in some instances, directly recreating—the darkly

gaudy, ochre-based color schemes of New Objectivist painters such as Otto Dix, George

Grosz and Max Beckmann, the film stakes a claim to authenticity of visceral impression

rather than of documentary realism.

  That expressionist approach to history and historicity may be especially prominent

in the early scenes inside the cabaret (such as the precise quotation of Dix's "Portrait of the

Journalist Sylvia von Harden" during "Wilkommen"[4]), but it carries through consistently to

the film's close. In the final shot, a few flashes of red amid the sea of greenly lit uniforms

comprising the Kit Kat Klub's audience–an image utterly unachievable in black-and-

white—evoke a fragmented and color-based impression, rendered almost purely abstract

by the funhouse mirror in which the scene is reflected. As the last faces dissolve, we leave

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[3] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* Ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.
[4] Otto Dix, "Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden" 1926, oil and tempera on wood. 121x89 cm. Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.

"Cabaret" with an exclusive focus on the patterns of hue emerging from the club-goers'

disjointed, Expressionist outlines. The decision to forgo historical black-and-white, that is,

allows for a focus on immediate lived sensation—the simultaneous homogenization and

nazification of what used to be a field of heterogeneous faces—in a manner that only color

film could achieve. The film's final move is calculated to capture that graphically authentic

"moment of danger"[5] discussed by Benjamin through an image of reflected color, rather

than to present the kind of objective "reflection" which is the aim of historicity.

Yet if the historical approach of "Cabaret" is characterized best through its

relationship to contemporaneous art, it is the graffiti on the Berlin Wall which defines the

relationship of "Wings of Desire" to archival authenticity. We see the wall in black-and-

white long before we are introduced to its hues, which builds awareness of the gap

between record and reality into the viewing experience; and Damiel's frank discussion of

his desire for sensory input (including color) highlights the film's own status as a removed

secondary text rather than a direct historical archive. Instead of using black and white to

evoke the aura of credibility surrounding documentary footage, the work's initial

monochromatic scheme characterizes both the angels' and audience's observation as

inherently *distanced from* temporal historical reality by its un-tinted timelessness. When

we are finally allowed to see the wall in color, then, the experience is one of sudden

intimacy with history—but an intimacy that is entirely dependent on subjective immediacy.

We perceive ourselves to be experiencing history as it happens—although we are looking

at a wall of images which themselves no longer exist and to which we have up until now

only been filmically introduced through the ultimately more enigmatic black-and-white. Yet

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[5] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History". 255.

while that dramatic introduction of color provides us with more privileged knowledge about the historical setting than we have previously been privy to, it comes alongside an awareness that any historical information which conveys such a sense of mortal intimacy must by definition be incomplete and partisan. When we finally do see the "ocher or orange" faces of the Berlin Wall, their historical accuracy is inseparable from their chromatic indefinability, the degree to which their colors seem to morph depending on whose eyes perceive them. Historical fidelity in "Wings of Desire" is ultimately presented as both ephemeral and subjective through the film's use of color.

Of course, color's role as a conveyer both of character subjectivity and historical veracity also manifests in many subtler, more detail-dependent ways. Much remains to be written about the use of—and juxtapositions between—various recurring color motifs in each film. The dark splotch of blood on the sheet Maciek hides behind at the end of "Ashes and Diamonds," for example, creates a sense of audience alienation from onscreen historical bloodshed that is antipodal to the saturated splash on Damiel's hand in "Wings of Desire"—the red of which serves rather as synecdoche for sensory interaction with a historical moment. Similarly, the transition from black-and-white to color in the opening of "Cabaret" presents a drastically different relationship to reflective surfaces than the move into Marion's mirror in "Wings of Desire": the first points to subjectivity as a vulnerable point full of the potential for audience manipulation (will we allow the abstraction of the initial black-and-white reflection to blind us to the already-spreading red?), while the second presents angelic black-and-white subjectivity as a potent—although incomplete— moment of intimacy and information.

Nevertheless, even in these more delicate moments of visual conversation between film and audience, color ultimately functions as a language through which both subjectivity and objectivity may be addressed, examined, and/or deconstructed onscreen. Wajda's black-and-white can be read as a dialect of subtle audience alienation, ambiguous perspective, and refusal of mimetic relation to history-as-canon. The colors of "Cabaret" present history as immediate and personal—and therefore ultimately defined by both the vividness and the insidious malleability of subjective lived experience as compared to objective past. "Wings of Desire," with its polarized color schemes, chromatically embodies the fault lines which emanated throughout postwar Germany itself: like the wall it depicts, the film presents both a kaleidoscope of exigent subjective color and timeless achromatic imagery of a city defined by its unprocessed past. Yet in each instance, across disparate color schemes and diverse approaches towards subjectivity and history, color acts as key to the interpretation of—and audience interaction with—the filmic text that it characterizes.

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