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Graphic Design and the Cinema: An Application of Graphic Design to the Art of Filmmaking

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An Application of Graphic Design to the Art of Filmmaking

by

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Abstract

When the public considers different art forms such as painting, drawing and sculpture, it is easy to understand the common elements that unite them. Each is a non-moving art form that begins at the drawing board. Using line, color and shape to evoke a particular response from audiences is what ties these fine arts together. Graphic design, however, tends to separate itself from the fine arts. Because of its later development in the art world, as well as, its operation within modern technological developments, graphic design is driven by the idea of communicating to large audiences. In this way, although design finds its base in fine art practices, it is more easily related to filmmaking in many aspects.

Both graphic design and filmmaking are particularly unique in respect to their reliance on technological innovation, communication and public consumption. Even though the mediums operate in different manners, it is important to note that they share basic design principles such as color, composition and image systems. These elements of design help build a solid foundation for a successful piece of design or film.

The research discussed in this paper critically analyzes how design principles are incorporated into the 2015 Best Picture Oscar Nominees. By examining the aforementioned design elements, color, composition and image systems, I was able to break down the visual meaning of each film according to the use of these elements. All of the nominees were successful in their own aspect, however the more experimental the design of the film, the more effective the communication of their respective narratives.

Key Terms

Graphic design, filmmaking, cinema, art, color, composition, Academy Awards

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Chapter One: Introduction

One of the most recognizable traits of humanity is the ability to create art. The creation of aesthetically pleasing artifacts has the ability to connect each human being together with nothing more than a few brushstrokes or strikes of the chisel. The artistic quality of humankind furthers our understanding of each other and can ultimately take imagination to its greatest height.[1]

All of the arts build upon one another. The relationships between the visual arts—such as painting, drawing and photography—have been apparent throughout their respective historical beginnings. For example, during the nineteenth century, photographers employed compositional techniques of painters as an artistic influence for the foundation of their photographs. Without the development of photography, painters like Edgar Degas would not have experimented with new visual perspectives in their works.[2] This evolution of technique and creativity resulted in different forms of artistic thinking and tools for artists to express their new ideas. Among the most recent practices of art produced from this progression are the modern arts of graphic design and filmmaking.

Graphic design and filmmaking are considered modern approaches to the arts. This is due to the advancing technological era in which both came to fruition. Both graphic design and filmmaking are often viewed as two separate entities within the arts, but they are not. Visual arts affect one another. In its most basic form, the effect of graphic design on cinema is found in film titles or promotional material such as posters;

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[1] *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*, s.v. "art," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art.
[2] Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish, *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2013), 117.

however, this limits the effect of design on film to print or typographic sources only. Though it is true that graphic design contributes to the complete package of a film, one can also examine the influence of design principles further into the creation of a film itself.

The correlation between graphic design and film can be found in fundamental design elements such as composition, color and forms of visual communication resulting from the previously stated design principles. These design standards serve as the foundation of any piece of artwork, still or moving. The artistic quality of a film depends on the solidity of its design. Therefore, it is important for a filmmaker to have exposure to the practices of other visual arts before developing a moving piece of work.

A background in the visual arts has an important relationship with cinema, particularly when strengthening the message and artistic quality of a film. If a filmmaker can observe and learn the techniques of a graphic designer, the film in question has already gained a significant amount of effectiveness and visual meaning.

For the purpose of this paper, a study will be conducted concerning the relationship of graphic design and the cinema by analyzing design techniques and applying them to film. It is crucial to understand basic design elements such as color and composition in order to fully examine the quality of a film. How can these elements be applied to cinema in relation to graphic design, and why is it so important?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this study relies heavily on a complete understanding of design and film terminology. Because the two are closely related, terminology often overlaps.

Once a basic foundation is formed from the comprehension of design elements like color and composition, the study can be easily conducted.

The literature reviewed for graphic design and the cinema not only consist of specific terminology related to the visual arts, it also contains biographies and interviews of several artists who have either worked in both fields of study, or have openly used techniques that are taught in design education. These articles and interviews, from the Golden Age of Hollywood to the twenty-first century, provide examples of design terminology put into action. Thus, they become an essential part of the research in order to gain insight into how design can bring a film to life.

Graphic Design and Film

Visual culture has been an essential development of humanity for hundreds of years. Through the use of images as a visual aid, along with written communication, artists created a way of life that became dependent on more than words. Graphic design is an element that grew from the advent of visual thinking.[3] Graphic design is an art form concentrated in the effectiveness of communication through the use of images, words or other graphic forms.[4] The cultivation of graphic arts contributed to a form of communication and experience that led to visual culture, or a culture dependent on the use of forms understood by sight.[5]

Visual culture further evolved from two-dimensional print design. Once technology was created to record human actions in real time, people found a new way to relate to an art form. Father of motion pictures, photographer, Eadweard Muybridge,

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[3] Drucker and McVarish, *Graphic Design History*, xxii.
[4] Juliette Cezzar, "What Is Graphic Design?" AIGA, n.d. accessed December 7, 2014, http://www.aiga.org/guide-whatisgraphicdesign/.
[5] Drucker and McVarish, *Graphic Design History*, 366.

began to study sequence photography in the early 1870s. His most famous work, *The Horse in Motion*, gave the visual world something new: to record moments in motion rather than still images.[6] This photography developed into an art form called filmmaking. Filmmaking is a technique of taking narratives and transforming them into a visually meaningful story by using similar procedures found in other visual arts.[7] These moving pictures were able to immediately connect with an audience as a means of expressing different philosophies and experiences of humankind. As the technology of film evolved, so did the art form. Taking cues from art movements and design theories, filmmakers became equipped to not only make a moving picture, but also a piece of art.[8]

Through the development of technologies dependent on mechanical culture, both graphic design and filmmaking are linked as a modern approach to art.[9] Each of them find common ancestry in classical art forms such as drawing and painting, but they are set apart by technology. The digital age has certainly established the two as siblings in the art world with companies like Adobe that cater solely to design and film.[10]

Because of the modernity shared between design and film, both gravitate toward each other stylistically. Clarity of meaning prized in graphic design serves the same

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[6] Ian Christie, "Thoroughly Modern Muybridge." *Sight & Sound* 20, no. 10 (October 2010): 10-11. *Art & Architecture Complete*, EBSCO*host*, accessed March 27, 2015, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ibh&AN=53792900&site=ehost-live

[7] "Film," *Aesthetics A-z*, Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, accessed February 22, 2015, *Credo Reference*.

[8] John A. Walker, "Art and Film: A Survey of the Literature," *Art Book* 14.1 (2007): 67-69, accessed February 6, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8357.2007.00783.x.

[9] Richard Misek, "The 'look' and How to Keep It: Cinematography, Postproduction and Digital Colour," (2010) *Screen*, 51 (4). Pp. 404-409, accessed February 6, 2015, doi: 10.1093/screen/hjq045.

[10] Vonecia Carswell, "Adobe's Oscars Ad Recaps Photoshop's Impact on Art and Film," *Skilledup*, February 20, 2015, accessed February 21, 2015, http://www.skilledup.com/articles/photoshops-impact-on-art-and-film/.

purpose for cinematic creation. Elements of design that aid visual clarity are essential in the making of significant art. In the words of cinematographer Johanna Heer, "Cinema is art. Cinema is not storytelling only. Cinema should be explored within the same criteria other visual and performing arts are discussed."[11]

Design Principles

In order to fully understand the relationship between graphic design and filmmaking, an overview of basic design principles is necessary. Though many may have an understanding of composition and color, the two elements transform themselves into much deeper areas when applied to the formation of a narrative. Once an understanding of the two elements is established, one can apply them into forms of visual communication that are useful in the production of any work of art, or in the case of this study, cinema.

Composition

Compositional techniques are some of the most important skills learned in the early stages of a design foundation. The composition of a piece of art has the ability to communicate several messages by placement of objects within the picture plane. "[O]ur view of the world is based on the interaction of two spatial systems."[12] Arnheim, noted art and film theorist, speaks of the picture plane—the overall frame of a piece—and the objects held within. Composition is of the utmost importance to the perception and overall communication of a work of art. An audience views an image differently if the

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[11] Johanna Heer, "Cinematography," *BOMB* 1.2 (1982): 46-69, accessed January 17, 2015, http://www.jstor.org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/stable/40422330.

[12] Rudolf Arnheim, introduction to *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1983), vii, accessed February 21, 2015, http://books.google.com/books?id=b9Nv57tiOEUC&dq=rudolf+arnheim+art+and+visual+perception&lr=&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

subject of the piece is placed in the center, rather than the side of the picture plane. Central objects carry the weight of importance and symmetry, but can lose details of their surroundings, which can be equally important. [13] Meaningful composition takes skill and thought. Compositions can be created through several techniques. One of the most common terms within the realm of composition is balance, which includes symmetry, the rule of thirds and hierarchy.

Composition is dependent on balance in order to create a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing work of art. Balance in design serves to anchor forms in their relative space. "Visual balance occurs when the weight of one or more things is distributed evenly or proportionately in space."[14] The human eye is comfortable while examining a balanced design, but it can easily be distracted by an unbalanced one. It is important to create a design that is easily understandable. The correct balance of elements within the frame can create an opportunity for meaningful composition that is immediately comprehended.

One popular form of balance is created through the use of symmetry. By weighing the composition equally with elements in the frame, stability is formed and easily perceptible for the eye.[15] Symmetrically balanced compositions, whether in graphic design or film, carry a message of solidity.[16]

Though symmetry is often used and easily distinguishable to the human eye, there are other forms of balance that can create a more stimulating experience and narrative.

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[13] Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, 21-25.
[14] Ellen Lupton and Jennifer C. Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2008), 29.
[15] Ibid., 30.
[16] Gustavo Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2010), 8.

Asymmetry uses elements and negative space in a way that allows the two to interact with one another to create balance and tension.[17] Asymmetrical compositions allow for other elements within the frame to be shown and allot negative space for the eye to rest. An ancient standard of this type of balance is called the Golden Ratio.

The Golden Ratio is a mathematical relationship studied by the ancient Greeks in order to determine the most visually pleasing form of proportion breaks.[18] The Golden Ratio requires one side of the composition to be longer in relation to a shorter side. Applied to the visual arts, this is called the rule of thirds. The picture plane is broken up into a grid using a three by three format. Important compositional elements are placed at a cross point of the grid within the frame.[19] This allows a dynamic composition to be created that gives the plane balance and a fixed focus on the narrative conveyed.

Lastly, hierarchical structure within a composition is an important tool to clearly convey the meaning of the piece. Hierarchy with artistic elements is an artistic development pre-dating that of the ancient Egyptians.[20] Visual communication relies on a hierarchy of elements to highlight what is most important within the piece. Hierarchy is used to create a meaningful order for the artwork.[21] It is not essential for hierarchy to occur through size relation of elements in the composition alone. Hierarchy can be achieved in a number of ways, including size relation, position, color or focus. In filmmaking, use of hierarchy can be found in what is known as Hitchcock's Rule. This occurs when a particular element is emphasized in the frame by any of the previously

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[17] Lupton and Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 29.
[18] "Proportion," *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, accessed February 22, 2015, *Credo Reference.*
[19] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 7.
[20] Drucker and McVarish, *Graphic Design History*, 7-9.
[21] Lupton and Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 115.

stated forms of hierarchy. The use of Hitchcock's Rule reveals an important symbol within the film that will come into play later in the narrative.[22]

<u>Color</u>

Color is part of the daily lives of all people. It is integral to a human being's functionality to see the grass as green or the sky as blue. Color can have an overwhelming effect on the psyche of a person. Because color plays such a vital role in reality, it is an essential element of the visual arts. "The artist, finally, is interested in color effects from their aesthetic aspect, and needs both physiological and psychological information."[23] Johannes Itten, renowned color theorist, stated that one of the primary interests of the artist is the relationship between color, the eye and the brain. These relationships are a fundamental part of the creation of a piece of art and its intended effects on the viewer.

All colors are mercurial and can change the meaning of the work at hand. Color theory in design seeks to establish guidelines in which color can be understood physically and psychologically for the use of the artist and overall perception of the piece. Color is divided into three areas: hue, intensity and value.[24]

In order to fully understand the properties of color, one must first understand the term hue. Hue is the basic form of the color itself. For example, when one looks at the sky, it is first perceived as blue. If a person looks at the grass, the color that immediately comes to mind is green. "Hue is the place of the color within the spectrum."[25] Basic defining of color is one of the most important aspects of color psychology. Colors tend to

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[22] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 7-8.
[23] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color* (New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold, 1973), 16.
[24] Lupton and Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 74.
[25] Ibid., 74.

carry a simple meaning in relation to their hue. The hue of a color will affect the viewer's understanding of the piece immediately.[26] One of these aspects is that of warmth and coolness. Colors in the warm spectrum are red and orange; in the cool spectrum, blues and violets. The relative warmth and coolness of a color psychologically send messages of comfort or sadness. In film, warm hues usually represent a sense of home or love, whereas cool hues indicate fear or depression. Artists use these attributes in both design and film, often to create a simple method of communication for the design or scene in order to set a certain mood for the work as a whole.

The intensity of a color means the relative brilliance or dullness of the color itself.[27] Intensity becomes important in order to communicate different moods within the artwork. A dull color can be perceived as soft, whereas bright colors carry energy. Oftentimes, designers use both simultaneously to place significance on the brightest color, while other colors are dulled down so as not to distract from the focal point. The same principles apply to color usage in film. An example can be seen in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. The only color in the black and white movie is a Jewish child in a red coat. (See Figure 1)

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[26] Josef Albers, introduction to *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-2.

[27] Lupton and Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 74.

Figure 1. Color in *Schindler's List*

Through this simple usage of color and its relative intensity among the color-devoid

surroundings, Spielberg gives the audience an immediate symbol of the innocence of the

Jewish people and the violence of the Holocaust through the coloring of this one coat.

"Day and night, light and darkness — this polarity is of fundamental significance

in human life and nature generally."[28] The final aspect of color that heavily dictates its

visual meaning is value. Value is the light or dark characteristic of a color.[29] Overall,

light and dark carry symbolic meanings that have formed throughout time. Lightness is

seen as good. Darkness is attributed to all that is bad. These metaphorical relationships

are engrained into the artist's mind. The value of a color can change the meaning of the

color in an instant. For example, the lightest form of red is pink, which can be associated

with softness and, culturally, femininity. Red's natural hue can be perceived as love and

passion. But once red enters into a darker form, its meaning becomes darker as well. Dark

reds can be associated with violence or anger. It is fascinating that the change of value for

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[28] Itten, *The Art of Color*, 46.
[29] Lupton and Phillips, *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 74.

one color can completely change its psychological impact. Both designers and filmmakers use the attributes of value change to dictate the meaning of their works.

<u>Communication in relation to the Visual Arts</u>

Visual meaning is created with the aforementioned elements of design, composition and color, but an artist needs to create a cohesive work rather than sporadic uses of different elements throughout the piece. In order to unify a large piece of work, a designer will make use of a grid system to form a consistent design that can clearly communicate its meaning.

A grid is useful in design to unify elements as a whole. "A well made grid encourages the designer to vary the scale and placement of elements without relying wholly on arbitrary or whimsical judgments. The grid offers a rationale and starting point for each composition, converting a blank area into a structured field."[30] A grid is necessary in order to organize particular design elements within a large work. It allows for visual clarity, rather than confusion.

Though a film cannot use a grid in the same form as graphic design, there are elements of filmmaking that serve the same purpose to organize the movie as a whole. Oftentimes, directors will heavily storyboard each scene prior to filming. Storyboarding is a technique that advertisers use to clearly indicate what is going to happen, as well as what the finished product will look like. This organizational method allows for a smoother transition to the filming stage, instead of jumping blindly into the shoot.[31]

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[30] Ibid., 175.

[31] Andrew Horton, "The World of Hollywood Art Design: An Interview with Henry Bumstead," *Cineaste* (Summer 2001): 18, *Literature Resource Center*, accessed February 7, 2015, retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA76814629&v= 2.1&u=mag_u_usm&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=022e78f7be33637208e6d55dfb10d40.

Secondly, filmmakers use what is called an image system to organize the narrative of the film. An image system ". . . refers to the use of recurrent images and compositions in a film to add layers of meaning to a narrative."[32] An image system can use particular color and compositions in parts of the film to form a cohesive storyline. Unifying these visual elements can be extremely helpful in communicating symbolism within a film. An example of an effective image system is found in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2. Image Systems in *Oldboy*

The first image is seen at the beginning of the film *Oldboy*. It is a painting that is hung in the room of the main character. Underneath the painting is the quote "Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Weep, and you weep alone." By the end of the film, the main character recreates the ambiguous expression of the man in the painting on his face. Along with the red color element, the audience connects the both scenes visually and is left wondering whether there will be a happy or sad ending to *Oldboy*.[33]

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[32] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 21.
[33] Ibid., 23.

Existing Literature

Research concerning the relationship between graphic design and film needs further exploration. The correlation between the visual arts and film as a whole, however, has a definite recognized correlation. Several filmmakers have been inspired from master painters and are trained artists themselves.[34]

Rex Ingram was a 1920s sculptor who influenced early filmmaking. Ingram included several Fine Art techniques into his films, because of his professional training in the Fine Arts. The films he produced are often cited as compositionally masterful and would serve as inspiration for the aesthetic qualities of films in the future.[35]

By the 1940s, Jack Cardiff, the first cinematographer to work extensively with Technicolor, began to influence color usage in film. Cardiff was a trained painter whose cinematic techniques were heavily inspired by the works of master painters such as Van Gogh and J.M.W. Turner. Because of his familiarity with design principles, his cinematography is often seen as a true art form. As a painter, Cardiff knew exactly how to control color in connection with themes in film. Martin Scorsese said of *The Black Narcissus*, "The color itself became the emotion of the picture."[36] However, Fine Artists are not the only filmmakers to have an effect on the development of cinema.

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[34] Walker, *Art and Film*, 67-69.

[35] Kaveh Askari, "Art School Cinema: Rex Ingram and the Lessons of the Studio," *Film History: An International Journal* 26.2 (2014): 112-45, accessed December 29, 2014, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ibh&AN=96800074&site=ehost-live.

[36] Philip Kemp, "A Matter of Light and Depth," *Sight & Sound* 20.6 (2010): 9, *International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text*, accessed February 7, 2015, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ibh&AN=50915033&site=ehost-live.

Long before he became one of the most well known directors of all time, Alfred Hitchcock worked in the advertising industry. Hitchcock was trained as an advertiser and brought several advertising techniques into his films. Chief among these techniques was storyboarding. Hitchcock would spend a majority of his production time storyboarding every scene of a film. Due to thorough pre-planning, once filming commenced, he could complete a movie in a very short amount of time.[37]

Twenty-first century filmmakers continue the trend of taking inspiration from traditional visual arts. Evidence of graphic inspiration in the modern age is becoming more and more prevalent. One of the most popular directors of the past decade is Wes Anderson. Anderson combines a classical approach to filmmaking with that of graphic sensibility evidenced in all of his works. Anderson's films are characterized by their color palettes, compositional symmetry and clarity in design—meaning he does not clutter the frame with unimportant objects that distract from the central narrative. Anderson, much like Hitchcock, plans every step of his pre-production process. Much like a designer works, Wes Anderson makes design choices that will be used throughout his films. He creates a color palette and framing techniques based around symmetry. He extensively storyboards each scene prior to shooting in order to speed up the filming process.[38]

Graphic designer turned filmmaker, Mike Mills, discusses the fact that graphic design and film are very much alike. "[C]onceptually, I see no leap between the different

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[37] Horton, *The World of Hollywood Art Design*, 18.
[38] Isabel Stevens, "The Anderson Touch," *Sight & Sound* 24.3 (2014): 30-34, *International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text*, accessed February 7, 2015, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ibh&AN=94382374&site=ehost-live.

media; they are just different formats in which I try to communicate with people."[39] Communication of different ideas, cultural exchanges and empathy among a variety of subject matters is something that films do well. Movies have the ability to reach audiences far and wide to educate whole populations about different periods of time, people and exploration of new ideas. If a filmmaker has a solid design background and understands the importance of organization and clarity of information, his or her film will be a masterpiece in both the arts and visual communication. For the purpose of this paper, research will be conducted regarding the relationship of graphic design and filmmaking by thoroughly analyzing design techniques used within the 2015 Academy Award nominations for Best Picture. In order to understand the overarching narratives in films, it is crucial to recognize basic design elements such as color, composition and communication techniques that the former elements present. In what ways are these particular design elements incorporated into films, and, most importantly, how does this affect their quality and visual meanings?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Art, though also dependent on innate ability, is a skill that is performed through a thorough education in design principles. For a work of art to become a unified whole that has the greatest amount of visual meaning, technical training in the form is essential. Having a foundation built upon how the visual arts operate make the transition to other artistic mediums easier. It is in this way that a filmmaker can learn valuable techniques based solely on that of two dimensional design principles.

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[39] Steven Heller, "Mike Mills," *Print* 60.5 (2006): 36-38, *Academic Search Premier*, accessed February 7, 2015, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=iih&AN=22099543&site=ehost-live.

Graphic design and filmmaking often overlap in their individual utilization of design methods. The two are usually separated in the public eye due to technical dissimilarities. The difference between the two is mainly in format, with graphic design employing a two dimensional, non-moving surface while the cinema is a moving art form that can capture action in real time. Filmmakers are able to deploy design techniques throughout the creation of their films for the most impactful visual meaning. It is possible to examine a variety of design techniques used in cinema including pre-production design, color, composition and overall visual significance dictated by the former design techniques across cinematic history.

The focus of this study consists of examining design practices used in film by studying images from particularly poignant moments within films. The films I analyzed are the 2015 Academy Award nominees for Best Picture: *Birdman*, *Boyhood*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *The Theory of Everything*, *The Imitation Game*, *Selma*, *American Sniper* and *Whiplash*. Each of the eight films creates a formidable selection of the most current cinematic creations. By observing single images of the films from a design standpoint, one can make accurate analyses on the visual meaning of each film.

Chapter Four: Film Analyses

The 2015 Best Picture nominees offer a diverse selection of films that served my observations of color and composition. Each film was utilized for examining the differences in the design approach by the filmmaker to best convey the narrative at hand. For example, Wes Anderson's usage of storyboarding techniques prior to filming *The Grand Budapest Hotel* allowed him to speed up the process of production as well as

faithfully transpose the symmetrical compositions to screen. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3. Grand Budapest Storyboard

Another example of exemplary design from the 2015 Best Picture nominees is

Whiplash. Composition and color play a vital role in *Whiplash*. The film utilizes a dingy

color scheme to convey the bleak environment in which the main character, Andrew

Neiman, has been placed. The juxtaposition between dirty blue green and warm gold

tones throughout the film create an interesting atmosphere for the characters to interact.

The exterior environments, such as New York City and Andrew Neiman's dorm room are

tinted with blue green. This cool color indicates the apathy and overall depression

Andrew is experiencing outside the world of jazz. Once the focus is shifted onto the

music room and concerts held by Fletcher— the overbearing jazz instructor—the color

scheme changes to a heavenly golden color. This color is meant to mimic the several

brass instruments within the jazz group, as well as a glorification of Andrew's desire: to

impress Fletcher. The warmth of the gold directly contrasts the anxiety and emotional

trauma that Andrew experiences within the areas dominated by Fletcher. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4. Contradictory Color in *Whiplash*

To further the study, I analyzed the remaining 2015 Best Picture nominees: *Birdman*, *Boyhood*, *The Theory of Everything*, *The Imitation Game*, *Selma* and *American Sniper*. Each of these films offered substantial evidence of visually meaningful design. By thoroughly analyzing the design elements within this selection of films, I show that the base of great cinema is built upon fundamental graphic design principles.

Results garnered from the study of images from the 2015 Academy Awards Best Picture nominees support the concept that elements of design greatly affect the initialization of a film, as well as its finished product. Thus, it is possible to form an in depth discussion of why film can be considered a design discipline and how fundamental design principles influences its foundation. A thorough understanding of color and composition develops a vocabulary that communicates the message of a film to its intended audience. Through basic design principles, film becomes a legitimate art form within itself.

American Sniper

American Sniper gives viewers a chance to experience the life of Chris Kyle, a sniper with the most recorded kills in American military history, and as a result saved countless lives while in the Middle East fighting the War on Terror. The film, directed by Clint Eastwood, not only shows Kyle's heroism on the battlefield, but also the vulnerability that the veteran faces when he returns home. Kyle's mental health was affected during his four tours in Iraq, putting a strain on his family life and his overall well-being. *American Sniper* demonstrates that, while combat seems most prevalent in the soldier's life at war, the battle continues long after the fight has ended.

American Sniper exhibits a classical approach to filmmaking by remaining consistent with color and composition throughout. Coloring in the film is dictated by green, which is typically an unusual color choice for any film, while compositional strategies are more traditional but are cleverly used to draw the audience into the scenarios experienced by Kyle.

Color

The majority of *American Sniper* takes place in the deserts of the Middle East. Kyle's story revolves around his time spent in the war during four tours in Iraq. The colors that represent these tours are a dusty green and an overall white balance. This color palette can be related to Ridley Scott's similar coloring in *Black Hawk Down*. In the 2001 film, Scott's cinematographer employed the use of green and warmer colors to indicate a grungy and intensely treacherous setting, which proved to be an effective representation of war that had not been experimented with before.[40] In both *Black Hawk Down* and

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[40] Isaac Botkin, *Color Theory for Cinematographers*, Outside Hollywood, accessed October 11, 2015, http://www.outside-hollywood.com/2009/03/color-theory-for-cinematographers/.

American Sniper, the blinding washout of color lets the viewer understand that the war

being fought on foreign soil is far from home and indicative of danger. In *American*

Sniper, however, the palette is taken even further. The wash of white and muted tans and

greens gives no comfort; rather, it creates an atmosphere of stark detachment that can be

related to Kyle's indifference that allows him to be an effective shot. This desaturated

color palette is not limited to scenes taking place during the war. It often continues in

Kyle's life with his wife and family. This reinforces the narrative that the sniper is

affected more by warfare than he would like to believe. The battlefield is bleeding into

his home life as represented by the coloring. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5. American Sniper Desaturated Color

Composition and Image Systems

As previously stated, the filmmakers of *American Sniper* chose a familiar route as

far as technique in composition and image systems to tell Kyle's story. Most of the shots

are traditional, following the rule of thirds or centering the camera when needed. The most effective shots, however, come straight from the eyes of Kyle himself.

Because a majority of the film makes it clear that Kyle's position in the war was that of a sniper, the audience is allowed a unique glimpse into the role themselves. Before Kyle makes a shot, the camera frame is transformed into the sight of the gun. This gives each viewer the sense that they are the ones handling the weapon and making the difficult choices that Kyle made throughout his time as a soldier. This form of framing, called a subjective shot, heightens the intensity of the scene at hand, causing suspense before the gun is fired.[41] (See Figure 6)

Figure 6. American Sniper Subjective Shot

Another technique used to amplify suspense and urgency are the extreme close-ups of Kyle before, during and after he fires his weapon. Similarly to the aforementioned compositional technique, the growing close-ups remove all surrounding distraction in order for the audience to focus on Kyle and his increasingly difficult decisions. It also detaches the audience from the horror of war after the trigger has been pulled, removing them from the situation once more. (See Figure 7)

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[41] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 83-84.

Figure 7. American Sniper Close-ups

Birdman: (Or the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)

  Birdman is a modern age story of middle-aged actor, Riggin Thomson that explores the mental state of the main character while commenting on the culture of the instant celebrity. Throughout the film, the audience is taken on a journey through Riggin's attempt to redeem himself as an actor by writing, directing and starring in his first Broadway play in order to make a name for himself other than the one acquired by his massively successful comic book flick in the 1990s, *Birdman*.

  The filmmaking style of *Birdman* is exceptional. Looking beyond the beauty found within the natural use of lighting and dramatic stage aesthetic, the amount of technical planning to create one long running shot with minimal edits is a feat in and of

itself. This technique is utilized in order to create a seamless look into the life and mind of Riggin, making it a suitable choice for the narrative.

<u>Color</u>

Color throughout *Birdman* is dictated heavily by the environment and mental state in which Riggin is present. The film takes place in the heart of New York City with the theatre, stage and city as focal points of the story. The color of the environment outside the stage is natural, while stage lighting is the exact opposite.

When Riggin is seen in areas such as his dressing room, bars or the city, lighting and color within the shots are natural, indicating the fact that the main character has stepped into the real world. The use of practical lighting, or light from the actual sources on set, give these sections of the film a warm undertone that is friendly, yet retains the darkness of the environment. The sun also dictates the lighting and color in select scenes.[42] The extreme sunlight in one of the final scenes featuring Riggin and his daughter serves as one of the lightest shots and moments in the film. Rather than the typically dark or harshly lit scenes throughout *Birdman* which denote Riggin's dissociative personality that often isolates his daughter, the fuzzy, yellow quality, along with the lens flare in this final scene become the cue that father and daughter have forgiven each other and are ready for a clean start.[43] (See Figure 8)

The scenes that occur on the Broadway stage, however, represent a completely different facet of Riggin's mind. They give insight into the dramatic and disturbed aspect

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[42] "Emmanuel Lubezki ASC, AMC on Birdman," ARRI Group, accessed September 24, 2015, https://www.arri.com/news/news/emmanuel-lubezki-asc-amc-on-birdman/.
[43] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, (London: Albemarle Street, 1840), 310-311, accessed October 11, 2015, http://www.painting-course.com/wp-content/pdf/Goethe_theory_of_colours.pdf.

of Riggin's fragile mental state. The stage is heavily lit in an extreme blue and red light during the suicide scene of the play. The neon brightness of the color reinforces the part of Riggin that believes he does not exist in the real world: he is a character in his own life. Blue represents depression and the drowning sense that Riggin is constantly battling throughout the film, whereas the red light of lamps and signage represent Riggin's anger and many transgressions. The final scene of the film returns to the use of blue as an oversetting color to reinstate the sadness and magical realism of the narrative.[44] (See Figures 9-10)

Figure 8. Birdman Practical Lighting

Figure 9. Birdman Saturated Color

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[44] Ibid., 310-311.

Figure 10. Birdman Blue Overlay

<u>Composition and Image Systems</u>

     Birdman is unique in the use of camera operating style. The film functions on an

extreme level of technical difficulty by creating seamless shots called "running shots" or

a single take, made famous by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1948 film, *Rope*. With only eleven

shots throughout the entire movie, Hitchcock was experimenting with an approach to

filmmaking that followed more closely along the lines of reality.[45] With advancements in

camera technology, *Birdman* allowed for much longer takes than 1940s equipment

allowed. The single take effect of *Birdman* allows the audience to travel with the film's

main characters in a way that makes the viewer feel like they are following them in real

time. This creates an intimate atmosphere, giving the audience a one-of-kind experience

that is not found in many films today.

     Though the technicality of *Birdman* is astounding, it often chooses to use

traditional compositional techniques when the camera settles. This is an intelligent

choice, seeing as though the audience needs a technique that is familiar in an otherwise

unfamiliar style. The most striking compositional strategy is the central focus of

characters in emotionally charged scenes. *Birdman* begins with Riggin on an emotional

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[45] Chris Wisniewski, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Rope," *Reverse Shot: Museum of the Moving Image*, July 9, 2007, accessed September 24, 2015, http://reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/1312/rope.

high, literally and figuratively. Throughout the film, however, Riggin experiences several

lows. One of the lowest points Riggin's reaches is seen when he chooses to enter a liquor

store to drink away his problems. These scenes focus the main character directly in the

center for stability and power, in an otherwise unstable moment.[46] (See Figure 11)

Figure 11. Birdman Central Composition

Boyhood

Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* generated the most hype among the 2015 Oscar

Nominees. The story of a boy named Mason, who grows up on screen in a span of twelve

years, was newly explored territory in filmmaking. With twelve years in the making,

audiences experienced Mason's adolescence and the challenges everyone faces during

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[46] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 43.

youth. From his first crush to his parent's divorce, the story of Mason is one that many can relate to.

      Boyhood's greatest achievement is the consistent look of the film. In a span of twelve years, it could have been extremely difficult to create a cohesive film style due to the advancement of camera technology. A part of this consistency is not only the choice to shoot film rather than digital, but also to keep the film as natural looking as possible. This lends to the overall mood of a documentary, allowing audiences to experience his story as if it were real life.[47]

<u>Color</u>

      Lack of color in *Boyhood* lends to the natural aspect of the film. Without using an experimental approach with color and light in the movie, the filmmakers created a cohesive scheme that could be implemented across a span of twelve years. Not only does natural coloring allow for consistency in such a long shoot, it also creates a "home movie" aesthetic, which is befitting for this particular coming of age story. When color is accentuated, however, it falls mostly into the realm of greens.

      Green is the most prevalent color utilized throughout the film. Green dominates the majority of scenes, not to mention the poster as well. It is a color seen on Mason's clothing and his surroundings. In *Boyhood*, green serves to reinforce the idea of youth and growth. It is also most prominently featured in scenes that Mason feels his calmest and happiest—features of the color green as well.[48] (See Figure 12)

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[47] Jack Egan, "Contenders- Cinematographers Shane Kelly and Lee Daniels, *Boyhood*," *Below the Line*, January 7, 2015, accessed January 1, 2016, http://www.btlnews.com/awards/contenders-cinematographers-shane-kelly-and-lee-daniel-boyhood/.

[48] "Psychology and the Meaning of Colors," ColorPsychology.org, accessed February 14, 2016, http://www.colorpsychology.org.

Figure 12. Boyhood Color Usage

Composition and Image Systems

Color is non-experimental in *Boyhood* because of consistency over a twelve-year period. Composition is also traditional. The filmmakers utilized medium shots and the rule of thirds to keep the scenes from becoming stale.

The most striking compositions in the film occur as part of the image system. The image system in all films is based around the core meaning and ideas in the narrative.[49] This is extremely apparent in *Boyhood*. The first repeated imagery that is easily recognized by audiences is when Mason lies on the grass looking up at the sky as a child. This shot is repeated a couple of years later when Mason has progressed to his early teenage years. These scenes are progression shots, reminding viewers that he is growing up but still a dreaming child. (See Figure 13)

Figure 13. Boyhood Image System- Growing Up

The second use of repeated imagery, and perhaps the most metaphorical, is the continuous shots of Mason and his many road trips. This shows the several journeys he has taken to become the college freshman he is now. Toward the end of the film, the

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[49] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 22.

empty road signifies the continued journey he will take that the audience will not

experience. (See Figure 14)

Figure 14. Boyhood Image System- Road Trips

The Grand Budapest Hotel

The Grand Budapest Hotel tells the comedic yet loving story of Zero, the new

lobby boy, at the esteemed Grand Budapest Hotel. Through the years, Zero learns

valuable, if not hilarious, life lessons through his mentor, Gustave H. Told from Zero's

point of view, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* leads the audience on adventure after adventure

of Gustave H. through three different time periods. The film was the only comedy in the

2015 nominees and was as stunningly beautiful as it was heartwarming.

Director Wes Anderson is known for his quirky scripts, fun films and his specific

filmmaking style. Graphically speaking, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* represents a movie

shot on the basis of almost every design principle. Anderson planned every shot through

storyboarding and created unique color palettes for the different eras in the movie giving

it a distinctive look to match its story.

Color

The use of color in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is fascinating. By not adhering to

natural color rules for film, Anderson heightened the fairytale enigma of the story. A

color palette was created for each era of the film: the 1930s, the outbreak of World War

II, referred to as "The Lutz Blitz" and the 1960s.

The 1930s is where a majority of the story takes place when Zero is a young boy

working for Gustave. The majority of his adventure occurs during this era, likewise it is

here that the most unique and highly saturated coloring of the film is found. Taking

inspiration from the pink of the baker boxes instrumental in the film's plot, Wes

Anderson's palette for these sections are unapologetically pink. This color highlights the

innocence and youth of the young Zero and the flamboyant personality of Gustave by

placing importance on triggering the taste of sweet on the audiences' tongues that

correlate with the baker boxes seen throughout the film. The skies, the building, the

wardrobe all have hints, or are completely, pink during the day. Likewise, during night

scenes, the palette changes from feminine to masculine. Night scenes are awash with

royal blues. Much like German silent movies at the time, Anderson chooses to color

moments of day and night in these juxtaposing colors. Silent films of the era would use

tints and tones of colors such as blue to indicate night. Not only do these rich color

choices for both day and night make *The Grand Budapest Hotel* one of the most

aesthetically pleasing films in the Best Picture category, it gives the film a historical

background based in color.[50] (See Figures 15-16)

Figure 15. Grand Budapest Vintage Pink

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[50] Bregt Lameris, "On the Restoration History of Colored Silent Films in Germany," *Moving Image (15323978)* 15, no. 1 (Spring2015 2015): 103-108, *Art & Architecture Complete*, EBSCO*host*, accessed March 14, 2016.

Figure 16. Grand Budapest Nighttime Blue

The adventures of Gustave H. end with the beginning of "The Lutz Blitz," Wes Anderson's fictional name for the start of World War II. The final scene in which Zero is together with his new wife, Agatha, and Gustave occurs in a train car. It is also the only scene in the overtly colorful film that is devoid of all color. By choosing to make what one could call the epilogue of Gustave's story in black and white, the filmmakers are specifically leading the audience into the saddest and darkest moment of the tale. It is in the train car that Gustave defends his lobby boy and is shot by the enemy soldiers. Black and white completely separates this scene from others making not only the action shown shocking, but the color choice as well. (See Figure 17)

Figure 17. Grand Budapest Black and White

The last major color change in the life of Zero occurs when the lobby boy, now a grown man, is telling his story to an author in the 1960s. These scenes are characterized by mustard yellows and dim, reddish lights. These scenes are lit and colored more to the style of the era. The dinginess and yellow corduroy aesthetic of the 1960s that is recognizable in films and photographs from the era is placed in juxtaposition of the bright and colorful past when the Grand Budapest was in full function. By the 60s, the hotel is nearly closed. The coloring represents the muted death of the hotel and finally laying Gustave to rest. (See Figure 18)

Figure 18. Grand Budapest Mustard Yellow

Composition and Image Systems

Prior to filming *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Wes Anderson storyboarded the entire film, sequence by sequence. This helped Anderson and his cinematographer know exactly where the camera should be before, during and after the shot, thus speeding up the filming process. Storyboarding is a pre-production technique used by many filmmakers, famously Alfred Hitchcock, who was just as obsessive with this method of filmmaking as Anderson.[51] (See Figure 19)

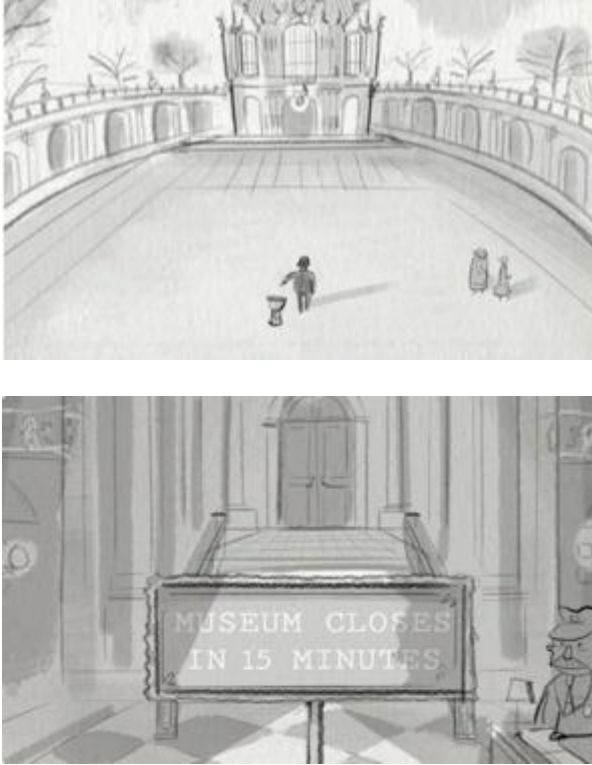[51] Horton, *The World of Hollywood Art Design*, 18.

Figure 19. Grand Budapest Storyboarding

Perhaps one of the most famous design techniques that set Wes Anderson's films apart from any other is the excruciating attention to symmetry within the frame. One of his filmmaking idols during Hollywood's Golden Age, Ernst Lubitsch, once said, "There are a thousand ways to point a camera, but really only one."[52] Anderson takes this quote to a new level with the compulsive centering of his focal points. Most filmmakers, and artists for that matter, avoid using a perfectly symmetrical design. The reason being that symmetry focused in the center can often become stagnant and uninteresting to the viewer's eye. However, in respect to Anderson's films, centered symmetry becomes a mainstay and creates a beautiful image system making each frame of the movie worthy of a film still. (See Figure 20)

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[52] Stevens, "The Anderson Touch," 34.

Figure 20. Grand Budapest Image System

Interestingly, as the storyline moves through different eras in Zero's life, the aspect ratio of the camera changes as well. The aspect ratio, or the ratio of the frame's width to its height, changes three times throughout the film. From 1985 to the present, the aspect ratio is set at 1.85:1, or the typical format in which moviegoers are accustomed to today. Once the narrative switches to the 1930s, however, the screen shrinks to reveal a square format, 1.37:1, representative of studio films at that particular time. In the late

1960s, the camera frame is lengthened into a widescreen, 2.35:1. This was the standard

for films in the 1950s and 1960s.[53] Though the lens size may change throughout *The*

Grand Budapest Hotel, the centered compositional technique Anderson is known for does

not. (See Figure 21)

Figure 21. Grand Budapest Aspect Ratio Changes

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[53] David Haglund and Aisha Harris, "The Aspect Ratios of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*," *Slate*, March 6, 2014, accessed December 30, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/03/06/grand_budapest_hotel_aspect_ratios_new_wes _anderson_movie_has_three_different.html.

<u>Selma</u>

      Selma chronicles Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaign to end inequality and bring about equal voting rights for African Americans by leading one of the most famous marches in history across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The film takes audiences on a journey through the latter years of segregation at the height of the Civil Rights movement. A biographical account of Dr. King's daring and leadership, *Selma* is an inspirational film dedicated to one of the most fundamental moments in American history.

      The filmmaking style of *Selma* is appropriate for the storyline. Filmmakers opted for a vintage look. The majority of the colors are muted with pops of primary colors that are indicative of the 1960s.[54] Although coloring in the film is kept to a mid-century aesthetic, the compositional strategies are kept intimate in a style similar to documentary filmmaking, making the historical narrative closer to the viewers' heart.

<u>Color</u>

      Throughout a majority of *Selma*, warm tones—mostly golds—dominate the palette. Gold becomes a color related to exaltation and nobility, which is appropriate for the martyr status of Dr. King.[55] When gold is not used, however, typical strategies employed in filmmaking, such as blue overtones for melancholic scenes, are utilized. (See Figure 22)

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[54] Patricia Thomson, "Bradford Young Discusses the Cinematography of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* and J.C. Chandor's *A Most Violent Year*," *The American Society of Cinematographers*, February 2015, accessed January 2, 2016, https://www.theasc.com/ac_magazine/February2015/ QandAwithBradfordYoung/page1.php.
[55] Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 307.

Figure 22. Selma Color Usage

What gives *Selma* such an elegant vintage look, however, is its utilization of

heightened saturation in primary colors. Cinematographer Bradford Young explained that

this strategy is symbolic of a Kodachrome, or Kodak film most would see in a family

photo album.[56] The Kodachrome aesthetic allows audience members to transport

themselves into the time period, as well as experience a beautiful filmmaking technique

meant to enhance a violent time in history. (See Figure 23)

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[56] Thomson, ""Bradford Young Discusses the Cinematography of Ava DuVernay's *Selma* and J.C. Chandor's *A Most Violent Year*."

Figure 23. Selma Kodachromes

Composition and Image Systems

As mentioned previously, *Selma* takes a traditional approach to the majority of the composition throughout the film. The most striking compositional strategy comes in the form of extreme close-ups during intense sequences of violence, such as the beating of Annie Lee Cooper. The camera's close proximity to the face of Cooper creates a space that is completely filled by the atrocity. The filmmakers wanted viewers to witness the horrid real life actions firsthand.[57] (See Figure 24)

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[57] "A Most Vibrant Year for Cinematographer Bradford Young," *National Public Radio*, March 1, 2015, accessed January 2, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2015/03/01/389481636/a-most-vibrant-year-for-cinematographer-bradford-young.

Figure 24. Selma Extreme Close-ups

Though image systems in *Selma* are downplayed, this does not result in a complete absence of the technique. *Selma* not only tells the story of Dr. King, but it also shows the importance of every participant involved in the Civil Rights movement. The film demonstrates that it is through community that change happens, therefore, several shots are dedicated to the resolve of men and women involved in the fight for equality. (See Figure 25)

Figure 25. Selma Image System- The March

Lastly, perhaps the most prominent imagery found in *Selma* comes from scenes where Dr. King is speaking to a crowd. Rather than only show close ups of his face, the filmmakers opted to take views from the back of Dr. King's head, allowing the audience to see the multitude of people listening to his message. This technique, similar to the one mentioned above, takes the power of Dr. Martin Luther King's words and conveys them to the masses. The importance of his words is given to the crowd in front of him. History changed for the better because of one man and those inspired by his words and actions. (See Figure 26)

Figure 26. Selma Image System- Speeches

The Imitation Game

      The Imitation Game, directed by Morten Tyldum, is the incredible true story of

mathematician and father of the modern computer, Alan Turing. During WWII, Turing

was part of a selected group of Britain's greatest mathematicians whose job was to break

the Nazi German Enigma code—a machine that encoded German military orders every

twenty-four hours.[58] The film takes the viewer through moments of Turing's childhood

and last years, but mainly concentrates on his advanced technological invention and

precursor to the modern computer, the machine named Christopher, that cracked the

Enigma code.

      The film is traditional in aspect to its methods of cinematography, yet it serves the

historical record of Turing's life extremely well. By creating a film based upon one of the

most significant figures in WWII, the non-experimental nature of *The Imitation Game*

allows for the story of Alan Turing to become the focal point. Óscar Faura,

cinematographer for the film, utilizes established rules for composition and color to

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[58] "Breaking Enigma," *Bletchley Park*, accessed September 19, 2015,
http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/content/hist/worldwartwo/enigma.rhtm.

create a period piece whose aesthetic matches that of the generalized idea of World War England.

Color

Color is the main visual key allowing the audience to understand the three different sections of Turing's life: childhood, WWII and his final years. By differentiating each era of Turing's story through color, the audience is given a clear indication of where the film is in his life. It also clues the audience in to the overall ambience of the period, thus giving a deeper visual meaning that dialogue could not accomplish. An example of this exact technique is found in Soderbergh's *Traffic* and has been used frequently in films to guide the audience through the story.[59] The color schemes in *The Imitation Game*, explained below, establish a well-designed visual narrative for the viewer.

In the 1920s, the film shows the early influence of young Turing's best friend, Christopher Morcom. In the 1920s, the eccentric young Turing was in his early teens. This was a bright time for the often ostracized Turing, for Christopher inspired him to accept himself and encouraged him when no one else would. Christopher, in turn, also became Turing's first love. Because these youthful schooldays were some of the best for Turing, the color focus of the 1920s is bright and has an overall white balance that indicates youthful clarity during this part of his life. By focusing on the color white in these areas of the film, the viewer is able to connect Turing's childhood with youth, innocence and purity, particularly in the case of his love for Christopher. (See Figure 27)

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[59] Botkin, *Color Theory for Cinematographers*.

When the film transitions into the late 1930s and 40s, the color grading of the era is warm and more highly saturated than any other era of Turing's life. Surrounded by warm reds and yellows, the majority of the film takes place in this expansive and important part of Turing's life and achievements. This color choice for wartime is quite unusual for movies. Most war films employ a darker, grittier color scheme to denote the horrors of war; however, *The Imitation Game* does exactly the opposite. Though warm colors are often not associated with "war" films, *The Imitation Game* is not a film about the action of the war itself. It is a biographical story of Turing, thus by choosing a palette steeped in color, the humanistic quality of the film is center stage. By employing a warm, vintage palette through light, lens colors and wardrobe, the filmmakers are directly connecting the audience to Turing's most active time as an inventor and his accomplishments, rather than the terrifying war stretching across the European landscape at the time. (See Figure 28)

Lastly, the 1950s are represented by a lowly saturated blue scheme. The colors all range in the areas of blue and grey and indicate the melancholic final years of Turing's life. Often shot with rain as the physical aspect of these scenes, the 1950s are in direct contrast with the light, innocence of Turing's childhood. The heavy subject of his last years, being arrested for the crime of "gross indecency" because of homosexuality, is represented through the dark blue that dominates these scenes. This color palette helps to further the fact that Turing committed suicide at the age of forty-one after being found guilty of the crime and ordered to take government mandated hormones to fix his "condition." (See Figure 29) By the use of color schematics, one can easily follow and understand on a deeper level the three areas of Alan Turing's life in the film.

Figure 27. Imitation Game White

*Figure 28. Imitation Game* Warm Tones

Figure 29. Imitation Game Cool Tones

Composition and Image Systems

Compositional layouts in *The Imitation Game* are traditional in the respect that the

camera mostly operates within the rule of thirds throughout the film. By using the rule of

thirds, the filmmakers give the audience the negative space needed while utilizing a more

interesting and active composition. The image system in *The Imitation Game* is intriguing throughout the film. Very similarly to Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, *The Imitation Game*'s image system is thorough with individual shots that use symbolic representation to unite completely different parts of the film.[60] The connection between the shots helps deepen the visual meaning of Turing's life and serves to connect audiences to overarching narratives not explicitly mentioned through dialogue.

Crossword puzzles and cryptic messages on paper are used as repeated imagery throughout the film. Part of this reason is not only that a crossword puzzle created by Turing himself is how the team of mathematicians was chosen, but this imagery also reinforces the idea of "the game." Focus on Turing's love for puzzles begins in his schooldays with Christopher Morcom and continues to Turing's final days when he is no longer able to complete the games due to decreased mental activity from the hormones he was forced to take. By showing the progression from his young, agile-minded schooldays to Turing's final days of mental impairment, the crossword puzzle game becomes a symbol of Turing's life visually indicating solvability to losing "the game." (See Figure 30)

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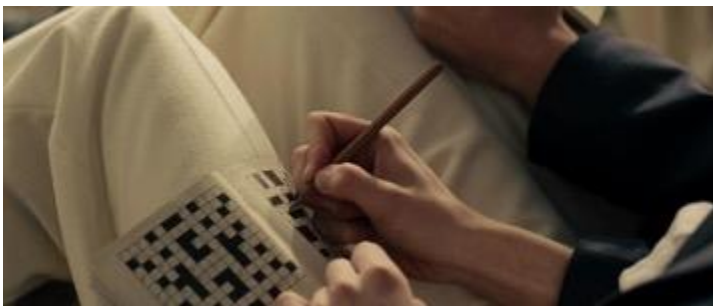
[60] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 22.

Figure 30. Imitation Game Image System- Crosswords

One of the most striking usages of a compositional image system is the central shot which is employed only twice in exactly the same manner in the film. The repetition of the scene is used toward the beginning of the film and at the very end. This is a more typical usage of an image system as the audience can easily recall it.[61] The initial occurrence of this technique is seen when Turing turns his desk chair around to face the overwhelming birth of the code-breaking machine, Christopher. The scene allows the viewer to be overtaken by the complexities of such an advanced machine. This compositional imagery is only repeated once more in the film. At the end of the film, Turing turns to face his fully developed machine, yet it has been unused for years. He explains that he cannot be left alone without Christopher, which serves to speak for Turing's invention as well as his love. The shot, with Turing being in the center once again, indicates the overwhelming sensation he felt at the birth of his miraculous machine, however, it has now turned into an overpowering sense of loss both for Turing and the viewer. (See Figure 31)

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[61] Ibid., 24-25.

Figure 31. Imitation Game Image System- Christopher

The Theory of Everything

In one of the most emotional and inspiring films in the nominee list, *The Theory of Everything* brings audiences the life story of world famous physicist, Stephen Hawking, and his wife Jane Wilde. Beginning in the 1960s before Hawking was diagnosed with motor neuron disease, the film takes a journey through his college days at Cambridge where he meets Wilde. As *The Theory of Everything* progresses, so does Hawking's disease as well as the deterioration of his relationship with Wilde. Though it is a movie filled with emotional highs and lows, it is hard to leave the sprawling biographical account not feeling utterly inspired.

Visually, *The Theory of Everything*, is the most stunning as far as color usage. Cinematographer Benoit Delhomme did not contain his use of color to a particular palette. The vibrancy of the film keeps the viewer's eyes in awe throughout the remarkable narrative. Not only are the highly saturated scenes to be noted, but also the

ability of the filmmakers to use a soft focus throughout a majority of the film. By creating

soft edges in certain moments of the film, the audience is immersed into a dreamlike state

that perhaps helps soften the blow of the enormous obstacles both Hawking and Wilde

overcome.

Color

As stated above, color in *The Theory of Everything* is not limited to a specific

palette; rather, it is used to expressively indicate the very active mind of Hawking.[62]

Though this approach to color in film could easily become chaotic in the wrong hands,

the filmmakers expertly handled the vibrancy of the colors in certain moments by

breaking up the film with sections of neutrals.

Cinematographer, Delhomme, stated, "I wanted to show his brain was so alive.

For me, it's not about a man who cannot move. His brain is going so fast, it can imagine

so many things. I wanted the emotions to be there on screen."[63] In fact, conveying the

mood of Hawking is a largely important factor in the color choices made in the film.

Below, the color choices are broken down by mood and meaning.

Yellow

A large majority of the film takes on a yellow hue. Yellow is indicative of

happiness and warmth.[64] This color is most often seen when Hawking and Wilde are

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[62] Kristopher Tapley, "How *Theory of Everything* DP Benoit Delhomme Told Hawking's Story with Color and Light," *Hit Fix*, October 27, 2014, accessed December 31, 2015, http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/how-theory-of-everything-dp-benoit-delhomme-told-hawkings-story-with-color-and-light.

[63] "Benoit Delhomme Q&A: *The Theory of Everything* Cinematographer," *Gold Derby*, October 27, 2014, accessed December 31, 2015, http://www.goldderby.com/videos/77/952/benoit-delhomme-qa~-'the-theory-of-everything'-cinematographer.html.

[64] Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 307.

together. Not only does yellow represent love and friendship, it is also a helpful color

when trying to convey the 1970s, which audiences associate with vintage yellow tones.

(See Figure 32)

Figure 32. Theory of Everything- Yellow

Green

Green is typically seen as the color of nature, but in the case of Hawking's life it

is representative of energy, youth and new ideas. The color is used in scenes that exhibit

new creation or problem solving, as well as when he is surrounded by his children. It is

not often that such bright greens are used in film, making *The Theory of Everything*

unique in that aspect. (See Figure 33)

Figure 33. Theory of Everything- Green

Red

Red is used the least amount in the film. It is only utilized when Hawking is feeling anger or detached from those he loves. Delhomme made a point to make red seem like Hawking was retreating inside of himself, almost like the color of a womb.[65] (See Figure 34)

Figure 34. Theory of Everything- Red

Blue

Blue is used as often as yellow in *The Theory of Everything*. Though it predictably represents depression or fear, what makes the use of blue in the film interesting is the heightened chroma. It is used several times when Hawking's health is at its worst. (See Figure 35)

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[65] Ibid.

Figure 35. Theory of Everything- Blue

Neutrals

As previously mentioned, though the vast amount of color in the movie could easily become overwhelming, it is not due to the use of strategically placed neutral scenes. Natural colors most often occur in the academic environment, which not only gives the audience's eyes a break from highly saturated colors but also represents academia as some of the calmest moments of Hawking's life. (See Figure 36)
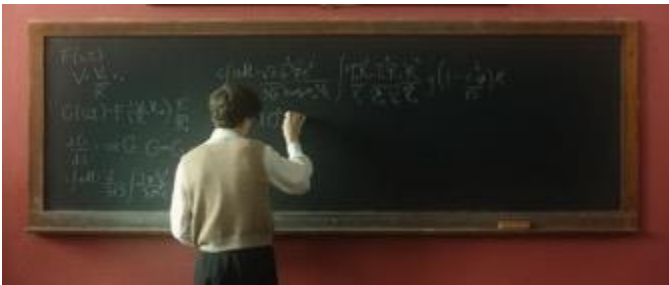
Figure 36. Theory of Everything- Neutrals

<u>Composition and Image Systems</u>

      The compositional framework of *The Theory of Everything* is much more traditional in comparison to its unique color scheme. Using mostly the rule of thirds to give the frame the appropriate breathing space and making certain moments centered are the typical strategies for composition throughout the film.

      The image system throughout *The Theory of Everything* is found in particular scenes that are centered. Most often this occurs when the universe is mentioned or Hawking has discovered a new idea. They are also some of the only extreme close-ups found within the entire film. Extreme close-ups of this sort are used to bring attention to small details in the film that no other style of shot could bring about.[66] By choosing to show seemingly ordinary milk swirling in a cup of coffee and the utter beauty of the human eye, the audience is given insight into the active universe that is Hawking's mind. Because these shots are of such a different composition, it is easy for audiences to recognize their importance in the overall narrative of *The Theory of Everything*. (See Figure 37)

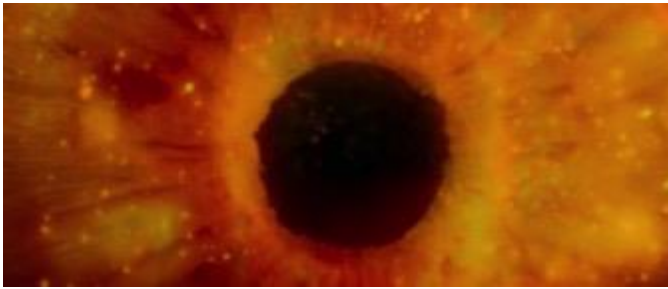[66] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 30.

Figure 37. Theory of Everything Central Compositions

Whiplash

A college freshman at the prestigious Shaffer Conservatory in New York City, Andrew Neiman, shows extreme talent and prospect as a future professional musician. When chosen to join a selective group of jazz musicians lead by Terence Fletcher, an overbearing master conductor, Andrew finds himself subject to verbal abuse and mental torment by the professor in search of perfection. *Whiplash* portrays the time Andrew spends with Fletcher and the irreparable damage it has not only on his health, but also his personal relationships with friends and family.

Whiplash was one of the most impeccably filmed Best Picture nominees. It exhibits every factor that leads a film to its full potential visually. The movie never slows down, much like the jazz music that drives its force. Part of this steady momentum is the way in which the cinematographer decided to color and frame the narrative. Bouncing back and forth between grimy blues, warm golds and extreme close-ups,

cinematographer, Sharone Meir, creates an intense environment in which the characters can interact.

<u>Color</u>

Color in *Whiplash* serves to narrate the two parts of Andrew's story: his normal life and the young musician's search for the ultimate glory. By extensively utilizing blues and golds, the filmmaker subconsciously allows the audience to register what events are occurring and why. Perhaps most unusual for a film, the role of the cool and warm colors are reversed. Cool colors are mostly reserved for scenes that indicate depression, fear or aloofness. Warm tones, on the other hand, are a source of comfort for the character, often used in romantic situations or scenes within the home. In *Whiplash*, cool and warms tones are used in the opposite manner to allow insight into Andrew's point of view.

Blue and green tones are used in *Whiplash* to indicate the home or outside environment for Andrew. The city, time spent with his girlfriend, and practice rooms are all coated in dingy blue. For viewers, this color scheme represents moments that would cause fear or harm to the character. In Andrew's eyes, however, anywhere outside of Fletcher's grip and the promise of musical glory is melancholic. This coloring suggests how much apathy Andrew displays for normal life that is displayed through the dialogue of the film. (See Figure 38)

Gold and warm hues are reserved for the music rooms, concert halls and any area in which Fletcher is present. Oftentimes, the camera angle is focused so lights create a golden halo over Fletcher's head. The warm color choice shows the audience the high regard in which Andrew holds his oppressive teacher. The deep golds, which dominate these scenes, reflect the colors of the brass instruments surrounding Andrew. It is in this

way the viewer comes to understand the love Andrew has for jazz music, if not question

his worship of Fletcher and becoming a jazz deity.[67] (See Figure 39)

Figure 38. Whiplash Cool Tones

Figure 39. Whiplash Warm Tones

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[67] Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 306-312.

Composition and Image Systems

        To respect to the rhythmic music featured throughout *Whiplash*, the camera movement and composition is instrumental in reflecting this central theme. Variations between medium shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups keep the audience's eye moving along with the music. In this aspect, *Whiplash* creates intense sequences fueled by music and Andrew's determination.

        Extreme close-ups in the film serve to heighten the anxiety the audience should experience whilst watching the nuances of the powerful performance sequences.[68] These shots often focus on the most minute details of the film to aid in the storytelling of exactly what stresses Andrew is experiencing. Extreme close-ups of drops of blood dripping from cymbals and band aided hands cause the viewer to cringe at the sight of the pain Andrew is putting himself through by obsessively practicing. Several shots zoom in to include the beads of sweat pouring from Andrew's forehead as he is giving the most passionate performance of his life at the end of the film. The extreme close-ups also show communication between the two main characters, Andrew and Fletcher. By choosing to only display the characters' eyes in certain moments, the filmmaker gives the audience a style of communication that Andrew is experiencing in real time. Throughout the film, these shots are edited in a way that close-up stacks upon close-up. This is a unique technique used to show the intensity of the moment. Most filmmakers opt to give the audience a rest from such detail. The quick quality of the shots, however, reinforce the

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[68] Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 29.

fast paced music and heighten the anxiety experienced by Andrew as well as the

overbearing aspect of Fletcher's mentoring. (See Figure 40)

Figure 40. Whiplash Close-ups

The next factor of the image system used throughout *Whiplash* is an obvious

pitting of character against character. Rather than show a normal relationship of mentor

and student, Fletcher and Andrew are featured through several shots in the film as

opponents. This setup of the image system supports the strain of the relationship

throughout the film, as well as it never allows the audience to become comfortable.

Though the composition is balanced, by placing the main characters opposite each other

on each side of the frame, the director of photography is creating tension that is further

exaggerated through dialogue.[69] In ways, *Whiplash* becomes a battleground of jazz greats rather than simply a story of a new musician and his teacher. (See Figure 41)

Figure 41. Whiplash Image System

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Filmmaking is heavily dependent on structural practices commonly found in graphic design. The analyses of the 2015 Oscar Nominees for Best Picture reveal that filmmaking and graphic design are thoroughly connected at the base of every arts education, even though both mediums operate within a different set of technical skills. Once research was finalized, it was easy to understand how successful each of the 2015

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[69] Ibid., 8.

Oscar Nominees were depending on their attention to design principles. Although each film tackled the concept of design based on its narrative, certain films are far more successful as pieces of art. Below, I will discuss which films were the most creative and effective based on design techniques.

Each nominee presented was beautifully filmed and represented the story at hand; however, *Whiplash*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Birdman* and *The Theory of Everything* were impeccably experimental in their approach to storytelling through design elements, making them standouts among 2015 films. Use of color, compositional strategies and image systems separate these films from traditional storytelling methods in filmmaking.

Color usage in the aforementioned films takes the opposite direction of standard practices. By fitting color palettes to each individual story, *Whiplash*, *Grand Budapest*, *Birdman* and *The Theory of Everything* make the experience unexpected and more subversive. Experimentation with extreme color and limited palettes allowed the filmmakers to speak to audience members on a purely visual basis. Therefore, the dialogue becomes supported by graphic stimulation and color cues in unique ways.

Both composition and image systems found in these four films create the same effect as their color schemes. *Whiplash*, *Birdman* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* feature the most experimental approach to composition. Much like a designer's grid that keeps elements within the picture plane cohesive and organized, the image systems within these particular films serve a similar purpose. Their image systems and compositional strategies give each story a foundation built upon visually meaningful imagery. Whether in terms of extreme angles or an obsessive attention to symmetry within the frame, these

films exemplify the methods that can be used in filmmaking to bring cinema closer to the world of design.

  In conclusion, graphic design is a form of art whose sole purpose is to communicate a message to audiences large and small, utilizing visual techniques such as color and composition. If done properly, the piece of design has a lasting effect on viewers and becomes recognizable throughout lifetimes. The same principles are true of filmmaking. A film based on the essential elements of design has a base to become a cinematic masterpiece that will be watched and appreciated for several years to come.

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