

## **COLOUR: Chromatic Worlds**

*Cooke Gallery, London*

What is colour?

Colour is how we visually perceive our reality and how we react to different wavelengths of light. But how do you explain what a certain colour looks like or how it feels?

In cinema, colour is more than just an aesthetic choice. It's a powerful storytelling tool, an emotional guide, and a vehicle for meaning. Every hue, every shade, and every contrast within a film can be carefully chosen to craft a particular mood, invoke specific emotions, or symbolise deeper themes.

In filmmaking, colour is collaborative, the director must be a conductor bringing together the efforts of the cinematographer in lighting and the colourist in grading. Along with the crucial input of the costume and production designers.

In this exhibition, we invite you to explore the intricate role that colour can play. Here, you will find films and explainers, presented chronologically, in which colour plays a critical role. Each film showcased uses colour to build atmosphere, set a tone, or manipulate our perception of the story unfolding on screen. Colour can transcend words, speaking directly to the viewer's subconscious and shaping our experience of the narrative.

The use of colour is far from universal - it is highly subjective and open to interpretation. What one filmmaker envisions as a symbol of hope, another may see as a representation of despair. A single shade of yellow may signify warmth and nostalgia to one audience member, while to another, it may evoke anxiety or discomfort.

As you move through this gallery, consider not only the choices of the filmmakers but also your own emotional response to the colours on screen. Why does a particular hue resonate with you? How does it make you feel, and what memories or associations does it stir within you? This exhibition is not just an exploration of cinematic techniques but an invitation to engage with your own interpretation of colour, memory, and emotion.

## Screen 1 - The Beginnings of Colour

Colour first added to the dreamlike quality of cinema but soon it became an essential instrument of storytelling. From hand painting to stencils and full frame tinting the beginnings of colour in film were their most powerful once filmmakers began to explore the meaning of certain hues.

"Annabelle Serpentine Dance" (1895)

*Directors: William K.L. Dickson & William Heise, Cinematographer: William Heise*

"Le départ d'Arlequin et de Pierrette" (1900)

*Director: Alice Guy*

"A Trip To The Moon" (1902)

*Director: Georges Méliès, Cinematographers: Théophile Michault & Lucien Tainguy*

"Intolerance" (1916)

*Director: D. W. Griffith, Cinematographer: Billy Bitzer*

"The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" (1920)

*Director: Robert Wiene, Cinematographer: Willy Hameister*

"Häxan" (1922)

*Director: Benjamin Christensen, Cinematographer: Johan Ankerstjerne*

[Reading: Élisabeth and Berthe Thuillier - Women Film Pioneers Project](#)

## Screen 2 - Glorious Technicolor

Post Great Depression America saw cinema rise to prominence as a cheap source of populist escapist entertainment. Technicolor's newly developed three-strip colour process would prove to be unlike anything moviegoers had seen before.

*Chapter 1: Over The Rainbow "The Wizard of Oz" (1939)*

*Director: Victor Fleming, Cinematographers: Harold Rosson ASC & Allen B. Davey, ASC*

*Chapter 2: Powell & Pressburger "A Matter of Life and Death" (1946) & "Black Narcissus" (1947)*

*Directors: Emeric Pressburger & Michael Powell, Cinematographer: Jack Cardiff OBE, BSC*

*Chapter 3: The Three Strip Camera*

*Produced by George Eastman House as part of their Technicolor 100 Website*

## Screen 3 - Eastman Kodak

Kodak's Eastmancolor stock largely displaced Technicolor by the 1960s. Colour film was truly democratised, and manufacturers no longer had jurisdiction over the images created. Filmmakers were quick to begin experimenting.

*Chapter 1: The Colourful Costumes of Love "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" (1964)*

*Director: Jacques Demy, Cinematography: Jean Rabier*

*Chapter 2: Don't Let Red Lead You Astray "Don't Look Now" (1973)*

*Director: Nicolas Roeg CBE BSC, Cinematography: Anthony Richmond ASC, BSC*

*Chapter 3: Vittorio Storaro ASC AIC - Colour Immersion*

*Apocalypse Now (1979) Director: Francis Ford Coppola*

*The Last Emperor (1987) Director: Bernardo Bertolucci*

*Chapter 4: Colour as an Observer "In The Mood for Love" (2000)*

*Director: Wong Kar-wai - Cinematographers: Christopher Doyle & Ping Bin Lee*

#### **Screen 4 - Digital Pandora's Box**

From the 2000s onwards the Digital Intermediate (DI) process would proliferate the film industry. This digital process allowed filmmakers much greater control and over the years this technology has rapidly advanced. Modern systems are incredibly powerful and offer almost unlimited possibilities.

*Chapter 1: Dusty, Digital Mississippi "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" (2000)*

*Directors: Joel & Ethan Coen, Cinematography: Sir Roger Deakins CBE, ASC, BSC*

*Chapter 2: Heroic Colour "Hero" (2002)*

*Director: Zhang Yimou, Cinematography: Christopher Doyle*

*Chapter 3: Resurrecting Extinct Looks "The Aviator" (2004)*

*Director: Martin Scorsese, Cinematography: Robert Richardson ASC*

#### **Screen 5 - Colour in Recent Years**

With digital capture and colour grading the possibilities to create unique looks are more accessible to filmmakers than ever before. Despite this, some of the most powerful uses of colour in the modern day still come from the mise-en-scene elements that have been available from the dawn of cinema.

*Chapter 1: Symbolism in Costume "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" (2019)*

*Director: Céline Sciamma, Cinematography: Claire Mathon*

*Chapter 2: The Horrifying Hues of Jordan Peele*

*"Get Out" (2017) Cinematography: Toby Oliver ACS*

*"Us" (2019) Cinematography: Michael Gioulakis ASC*

*"Nope" (2022) Cinematography: Hoyte van Hoytema ASC*

#### **Screen 6 - Cooke Optics Interviews**

Over the years Cooke Optics have spoken to many talented creatives about their craft and thought process. Please find a selection interviews related to Colour on this screen.

*Chapter 1: Using Colour to Evoke Emotion with cinematographer Seamus McGarvey ASC, BSC*

*Credits include: Atonement, Nocturnal Animals, We Need to Talk About Kevin and The Greatest Showman*

*Chapter 2: Extreme Colour Techniques with cinematographer Natasha Braier ASC, ADF*

*Credits include: The Neon Demon, The Rover, Honey Boy, Somers Town*

*Chapter 3: Understanding Light and Colour with cinematographer Vittorio Storaro ASC AIC*

*Credits include: Apocalypse Now, The Last Emperor, Reds and Wonder Wheel*

*Chapter 4: Building the Worlds of Wes Anderson with production designer Adam Stockhausen*

*Credits Include: Moonrise Kingdom, 12 Years a Slave, The Grand Budapest Hotel and Ready Player One*

## Screen 7 - Featurettes

If you've made it this far here is a selection of pre-existing featurettes that offer a more in-depth look at particular moments in film colour history.

### *Chapter 1: How Technicolour Shaped Movies*

As a companion to our second screen this eleven minute documentary from Vox centred around the 'Wizard Of Oz' explores the history of Technicolor along with the wide reaching influence of colour consultant Natalie Kalmus.

### *Chapter 2: Colour Film was Built for White People. Here's What it did to Dark Skin*

This five-minute documentary from Vox explores the history of film and its bias towards lighter skin tones highlighting the importance of equality in technological advances.

### *Chapter 3: Januz Kaminski on Schindler's List*

Speaking to the AFI Kaminski talks in detail about several sequences from Schindler's List (1993)

### *Chapter 4: Colour Grading 'O' Brother Where Art Thou'*

Expanding on screen four is this DVD featurette. A nine minute documentary from 2000 on the groundbreaking DI processes used for this Coen Brothers' film shot by Sir Roger Deakins CBE, ASC, BSC.

## Sources & Further Reading

Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Colour, *Written by Richard Misek*

Colour Consciousness, *Written by Natalie M. Kalmus*

Colours of Film, The Story of Cinema in 50 Palettes, *Written by Charles Bramesco*

Colour, The Film Reader, *Written by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price*

Filmcolours.org - Timeline of Historical Film Colours, *Curated by Barbara Flueckiger*

Harnessing the Technicolor rainbow: colour design in the 1930s, *Written by Scott Higgins*

If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Colour in Visual Storytelling, *Written by Patti Bellantoni*

Interaction of Colour, *Written by Josef Albers*

Painting with Light, *Written by John Alton*

Stories in Colour, *Eight Part Podcast series by The National Gallery*

Theory of Colours, *Written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

The Cinema Cartography, *Curated by Lewis Michael Bond and Luiza Liz Bond*

The Dawn of Technicolor (1915-1935), *Written by James Layton and David Pierce for George Eastman House*

Writing with Light (3 Volumes), *Written by Vittorio Storaro*

## Credits

Curation by Kit Mackenzie

Video Essays Edited by Ben Sullivan

Voiceover by Andrew Dickinson