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Title: How the colour enhances suspense films

Abstract

This essay aims to study how the colour improve suspense films. The essay includes the introduction and analyzation about colour symbolism to explain how colours affect the audience and how colours links with cultures to make them be meaningful. Some suspense film examples which are representative in the use of colour elements will also be provided to support and prove the importance of colours for the suspense film.

Barely over twenty decades ago, the world's first black and white film '*Exciting the Factory*' was made and directed by Auguste Lumiere and Louis Lumiere in 1862. Since '*Exciting the Factory*', the black and white film had been in a dominant position around forty years until the first colour film '*Becky Sharp*' that took the Battle of Waterloo as the background was presented and published by Rouben Mamoulian in 1935. The '*Becky Sharp*' is not only the milestone in the history of the film, it is also the first film that started using colour as an element, a method and a style into the world of the screen and it began the age of colour film production. According to the effect of the upsurge of colour film, Alfred Hitchcock who is regarded as the "Master of suspense" in 20th century published the world's first colour suspense film '*Rope*' in 1948. It was not only the first time that Hitchcock applied colour element in the suspense film but it is also the first colour suspense film in the history of film production. Hare (1942) claims that Hitchcock not only created a new film theme but he also opened a new age in the use of colour and the movement of camera. According to Humbert (2017), the use of colour element in the suspense film has become a trend since the publish of '*Rope*', directors believed that the colour could be a positive role in the rendering atmosphere, shaping the character and

elaborating the psychological status of the character. This report will analyze examples of the suspense film and introduce basic theories of colour symbolism to resolve how the colour enhances suspense films.

Colour Symbolism

Colour can be referred as one of the external factors that can make a range of influences with the emotion of human. Colour symbolism was first applied extensively in painting art and clothing dyeing during the feudal period. Colour symbolism claims that the colour can be meaningful in the different psychological and cultural background. Colour is one of the visual elements, it can give the audience the most direct sensory stimulation and therefore it affects the psychological and emotional status of the audiences. When the audience see the colour, the visual information will be converted and transmitted to the cerebral cortex then the cerebral cortex will excrete hormones as response and therefore the hormones will impact the emotion of audiences. Such as, red is the symbol of excitement; blue makes people feel healing and relaxing; black brings the emotion of fear or sad. O'Connor (2010) claims that the visual stimulation of colour can cause a series of psychological, biological and behavioral impact. And Wagner (2009) also suggests that a range of psychological, emotional and cognitive responses related to one particular colour. According to this, the suspense film maker should use the proper colour to create an appropriate atmosphere to the scene then the film will be able to have a positive interactive with the audience to arouse right psychological reactions and the audience can be more adequately into the scene of suspense films.

The interpretation of the meaning of colour also depends on cultural differences. The cultural differences can lead to the different educational background of people and it will cause the difference in the way of how the audience read and understand the meaning of colours. Lu (2012) points out that the way of using

and understanding colours in cultures depends on how they understand and respect the nature. The culture makes the audience form a kind of inertia thinking so when the people see colours, they will instinctively relate them to specific elements in their life or concepts in cultures. Such as, in Asian cultures, red is always referred as the symbol of good luck, joy and happiness but it also has the meaning of sex, blood, love, danger and passion in Western cultures; orange is associated with autumn, warmth, energy and balance in Western cultures but it symbolizes health, happiness and love in Eastern cultures; white is the representative of peace, purity, birth and marriage in Western cultures but white is also considered as the symbol of death, mourning and bad luck in some Asian cultures. Gage (1938) points out that the colour can be divided into warm and cold and the way of people distinguishing and interpreting colours is inseparable from human experiences. Such as black means black night, yellow represents sunshine and green symbolizes leaf. Shanes & Gage (1994) suggest that due to the influence of the Renaissance, the relation of colours with four elements (water, air, earth and fire) and four seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter) has been a cognitive system. The suspense film should not only focus on using colour to make the atmosphere of scenes but it is also important to form characters and foreshadow clues that lead to the truth of suspense events in the film so it can be more effective for the audience to clearly understand the characters and understand the progress of the story.

Colours in Suspense films

In suspense films, directors focus on how to fashion a unique character and the way to render the atmosphere of scenes. The costume is regarded as the most intuitive visual element that is able to reflect characters' features. Davis (1988) said a unique image of character and typical behavioral characteristics are the two key elements to fashion a character. In '*Vertigo*' that was directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Hitchcock used two different colours of costumes to

contrast Marlene and Judy to reflect their two different character features. Marlene is a woman who is sentimental, mature, grave so Hitchcock asked the costume designer Edith Haide to use grey that symbolizes sadness, maturity and dignity to be the representative colour of Marlene's costume. In contrast, Judy is positive and lively and she is regarded as the symbol of the renaissance of Marlene. Due to this characteristic, green that represents spring, life and energy in Western culture was chosen to be the iconic colour of Judy. According to the above view, the audience can clearly identify the relationship between characters by the style of costumes with different colours.



The suspense film makers tend to use bright and cold colours to render and make a mysterious and strange atmosphere to provide the audience strong sensory stimulation. The visual impact will affect the emotional status and therefore the audience can be more adequately into the scene and make the visual impact turn to psychological effect. Everett (2007) claims that colour is a part of the language of the film, the colour in the frame can be used to express different emotions and feelings. In one of the scenes in *'The Shining'* that was made by Stephen King, Jack was talking to a strange old server in the rest room that is painted with bright red paint. The bright red created a horror and creepy atmosphere to make the audience feel scared and uncomfortable from inside. The red symbolizes temptation, blood, danger so this scene can be understood as a sign that Jack wanted to kill his wife and son or the temptation from that old strange server who encouraged Jack to kill his families. In *'Vertigo'*, when Judy was walking out of the bath room in the same dress as Marlene, Hitchcock used green light to represents the rebirth of Marlene because green is associated with renewal, spring, fertility. However, the green light also brings audiences the feeling of strange and mystery. According to Lippe (2016), Hitchcock has already been quite proficient in the use of colour and movement of camera to render the atmosphere.





In conclusion, colour is not just one of the simple elements in people's life, it can make a range of influences with emotion, behavior, biology and psychology. The differences of cultures also affect the way of people understanding the meanings of colours. In suspense films, the proper colour can create an appropriate atmosphere and make the film be more interactive with the audience to enhance the authenticity of the emotion and atmosphere that the suspense film wants to express. The colour elements also can be used in costumes to highlight characters' features and distinguish the relationship between characters.

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