



Backstory

THE BEGINNING

The genesis for this book goes back to a day more than twenty years ago at the School of Visual Arts in New York when I observed that my design students were making arbitrary color choices in their work. In order to investigate the conceptual possibilities needed to inform their color decisions, I asked them to bring to class what they thought was “Red.” There was no further instruction and no discussion.

On the day of the appointed class, the students appeared wearing red, and predictably brought in paint chips and color swatches, along with wrapping papers and fabrics. They even flooded the room with red light. What also arrived, however, were things no one had anticipated: hot peppers, muscle balms that made the skin feel hot, toy fire engines with blinking lights and sirens, red hot cinnamon balls, and rock ‘n roll music. What everyone experienced that day forever changed our awareness of how we *see* color.

We became aware that there was a “Red” behavior happening. The students compulsively gulped down salsa, talked louder, and turned the volume up on the rock music. The males in particular became sweaty and agitated. (One year later on Red Day, I had to break up a screaming match between two young men who normally were great friends.) After twenty minutes in the red environment, the students were ready to leave. What had happened here? Everyone agreed to try the experiment again the following week, with a different color. They chose blue.

As word of this experiment spread, students from other disciplines asked to participate, and they came to class. The class of roughly twenty-five people divided into several groups. There was only one rule: concepts and decisions were to be kept within the confines of each group until Color Day.

Blue Day clinched that we were on to something. This time, what the students brought was completely different. There were big

pale blue pillows, cooling mints, and new age music. Within minutes, those loud, boisterous students from the week before stopped talking, laid back and became almost listless. A sense of calm permeated the room. As opposed to racing out the door, as they had done previously, they didn't want to move. Clearly, whatever was happening needed to be explored further.

The following year, I incorporated this experiment into my curriculum and made the project more specific. The class was to select a color and then build an environment that explored the color's association with the five senses. Students divided into four groups, each with four to five members. They were encouraged not to disclose their plans outside the group so their solutions to the assignment would be kept secret until Color Day. When the assignment became more specific, the solutions became more revelatory. As students began to explore the sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and, of course, "sight" of a color, they discovered, for example, that what smells, feels, or tastes a certain color may not *be* that color (e.g. strawberries do not taste red). Because of this, the students began to blindfold each other during their explorations of the color's smell, touch, and taste. Although their environments were filled with the color, not being able to see what they were smelling, touching, or tasting for those few minutes led them to a heightened awareness of their visceral responses. It also freed them to seek out sense associations other than sight, which, in turn, gave them a deeper understanding of that color's effect on their perception. It also inspired the students to go beyond the superficial. If red's taste, for example, inspired students to bring in white raw garlic and not red strawberries, then there is more to consider than surface observation. For example, cinnamon was consistently perceived as a red taste, but cinnamon sticks are brown in their natural state. However, the cinnamon-flavored candies called "Red Hots" are artificially colored red. Similarly, artificially colored mint candies and cough drops are often blue—a decision that seems to be based on what the taste of mint looks like. It appeared to us that product marketers were exploring something that our research validated.

During this twenty-five-year period, patterns in the solutions to the color problems began to emerge. In our experiments, red environments indeed nearly always included the tastes of jalapeño peppers, the smells of spicy sauce, and the feel of hot muscle balm.

There were sounds of cap pistols and those red balls of caps that make sharp noises when hitting the floor. One of the reddest sounds I have ever heard was a bullwhip that cracked like thunder inside a kettledrum. The color indeed often inspired loud, compulsive, and aggressive behavior. The following, written by former SVA student Peter Coleman, is in response to my request to write a paper on Red Day. Comments like these surfaced year after year:

It's important to note that I'm not a "red" person. If I had to guess, I'd say I'm more blue . . . violet, maybe. But not red. Definitely not red. Which makes it all the more peculiar that I petitioned so vehemently in favor of the color in the first place. (Author's note: Students selected which color to explore by majority vote.) In the process of campaigning for "Red," I became louder, more aggressive, and, in short, a bigger, more cartoon-like and obnoxious version of my usual self, challenging my classmates to "Screw the underdog" (being any color other than red) and to ask themselves if they had "the mettle" to choose red. Indeed, it took more guts for me to choose this color than I had imagined.

After the "Red Experience," Coleman continues,

Somewhere between the erotic and the ridiculous lies the explanation for our demonic and bizarre behavior on Red Day. Red comes at you. It's in your face. That element of the color seemed to possess the group. I fed off the adrenaline created by the participants' reactions . . . A heat seemed to be generating in the room, and I guess I just went with it.

What began as a simple experiment became a revelation of a force far more powerful than we had imagined, or really noticed. The listlessness of Blue Day and the otherworldly atmosphere of Purple Day, described next, reinforced my belief that color influences our choices, our opinions, and our emotional state. Our feelings of euphoria or rage, calm or agitation can be intensified or subdued by the colors in our environment. This is powerful information in the hands of a filmmaker.

WHY THIS TITLE?

Perhaps it is a reflection of our times—of our living on the edge of the unexplainable—but each semester at least one class chose to investigate purple, a color often associated with the mystical and

the noncorporal. The color resonated with the students in ways that were consistent. The designs for their environments often dealt with ritual, magic, and the spiritual. Every year at least one group built an altar.

I had anticipated a royal interpretation of purple, but interestingly enough, interpretations of a royal connection to purple were outnumbered by the mystical, spiritual, and paranormal by approximately ten-to-one. The association with the royal and regal comes from the fact that purple is the most difficult color to come by in nature. Its very scarcity associates it with the rare trappings of emperors, kings, and queens. But altars are in a different genre altogether. Altars are in the province of something beyond the material. The altars the students designed for purple often used religious associations as a springboard. There were even altars to chocolate (a taste, we discovered, they associated with the color) and to the smells of lavender. There were psychics, fortunetellers, and witch doctors. The most pervasive interpretations of purple, however, dealt with vigils, wakes, and funerals. One funeral was complete with a tombstone for each member of the class.

These experiments led us to become more aware of the use of purple in popular culture in general (ads for yoga are often purple) and, of course, the use of purple in movies.

Films as varied as **Cabaret**, **Dick Tracy**, and **The Sixth Sense** all use purple to foreshadow death. Purple, however, doesn't always signal a literal death of someone. It could mean *something* is going to die. For example, Max Fisher, the adolescent rogue in **Rushmore**, climbs a ladder to the purple bedroom of his teacher, only to lose his delusion that he will sleep with her. In **Tootsie**, Dustin Hoffman's character Dorothy Michaels wears purple when she reveals her character's true identity as a man, thereby "killing" Dorothy.

Both colleagues and students tell me they were not previously aware of how often the title *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* manifests itself in movies. Investigate it for yourself. The next time you see purple in a film, watch carefully for what it reveals. Start with **Far from Heaven** or even **Chicago**.

Out of more than a dozen potential titles for the book, my students chose *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* because they felt this title captured both the spirit and content of my color seminars in Visual Storytelling at AFI.

THE BOOK'S LANGUAGE

You will find I often tend to attribute characteristics to a color. For me, after years of investigation, colors indeed have distinct personalities. For example, hot reds are “lusty.” This does not mean the color itself has that inherent emotional property. It means that it can elicit that physical and emotional response from the audience. Both Gwyneth Paltrow’s bedspread in *Shakespeare in Love* and Nick Cage’s bedspread in *Moonstruck* are a hot orange-red, and they certainly accompanied lusty activity in those films. Does it mean that that particular red is restricted to lusty activity? No, but it’s a valid description of one of the activities the color can trigger. A strong color elicits a strong visceral response. This, in turn, can set up an audience to anticipate a particular action (in this case, a lusty one).

Colors indeed have their own language, which can visually help define a character arc or layer a story. In *Malcolm X*, for example, bright, “look at me” red is the color that defines Malcolm’s cocky small-time hoodlum years; blue, the contemplative years in prison; and gold, his enlightened time in Mecca. Each of those colors layers the journey of this man and has a different (and cumulative) effect on the audience. Red is energizing, blue affects introspection, and golden light inspires the spiritual or enlightened. Wynn Thomas, production designer for *Malcolm X*, describes how he envisioned the film in three acts, each defined by a particular color, on page 14.

WHY THE TERM “PURPLE”?

For years, I advised my students to use the term “violet” to define the color that is midway between red and blue (in the additive system). But “purple” kept creeping into our day-to-day vocabulary, especially in communicating color names in the commercial world. Indeed, a 1992 press release from Pantone, Inc. (a color system for designers and printers), refers to purple as “a blend of the excitement of red and the tranquility of blue.” The word “purple” in this book is used in that context. In the interest of communicating clearly, I have chosen terms for colors that are most consistent with our day-to-day living experiences: red, yellow, blue, orange, green, and purple.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is divided into six parts, one for each of these major colors in the spectrum: Red, Yellow, Blue, Orange, Green, and

Purple. Each part has a home page, which describes the emotional and psychological influences we discovered about the color, and contains two chapters, each of which explores films that best illustrate those influences. Within these chapters, the color is divided into six characteristics that help to influence our emotional responses to the films.

Some films use a color's transformation, or its flow, to support the evolution of the characters and story throughout the movie. Others have one brilliant scene that captures a color's role in defining a character or expanding the story. Consequently, some of the chapters are longer than others. If more than one color is explored in a film, the film is listed under the color that is the major influence in the story and the other color(s) will be keyed under "supporting color" icons in the margin of the page. As well, "cross-reference" icons will appear in the margins of the pages of the films where the same color appears. Please note that, because my film commentaries follow the order of the script, sometimes a supporting color may precede the major color in the film.

Films are indexed by movie title, color, and emotional state, allowing easy access to a wide range of information. Or, led by the moment, the book can be read beginning anywhere.

WHY THESE FILMS?

If *It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* explores big studio films and limited-release indie films, Oscar winners and films that at the time were critically dismissed and are just now being revisited. Each of the films was chosen because it illustrates a brilliant use of color, either in just one crucial scene or sequence in a movie or thematically throughout the entire movie. A film like Ang Lee's ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** uses color to define the story and the characters' arcs so completely that it appears under four colors.

There are some films where the visual storytelling is so rich, particularly with visual metaphor, that it could become a seminar unto itself. Accordingly, in keeping with our goal to expand the way we *see* movies, I have chosen at times to explore in more detail elements like subliminal symbols (***The English Patient***), visual irony (***Unforgiven***), and visual politics (***My Family/Mi Familia***).

THE SIX CHARACTERISTICS: AN IMPORTANT NOTE TO THE READER

The six characteristics listed for each color (e.g., Powerful, Lusty, and Defiant Reds) were selected because these emotional

LEGEND

SUPPORTING
COLOR



CROSS
REFERENCE



associations repeated themselves over and over again in our research. These are simply examples of how a color can be used. In no way are they meant to limit you, but rather to act as springboards from which you can go off and test further interpretations on your own. Please remember, just because blue might appear under Passive Blues, for example, does not mean it cannot exhibit characteristics like Melancholic or Cerebral as well. By the same token, both green and purple are listed as having the characteristic of Ominous. It all depends on the context in which they are used. All the more reason to think for yourself and not try to turn these categories into rigid formulas for color selection. Get a group together and have them create a color environment and observe how behavior will change (see page xxii). You will find that if you don't try to skew the results by giving your audience clues as to what you want, your research will be amazingly consistent.

My goal is to facilitate your reliance on nonverbal information. I want to encourage you to exercise your visceral muscles. *Seeing* a movie demands skill that *watching* a movie doesn't.

A CAVEAT FROM THE AUTHOR

There are times when I hear a filmmaker say, "Color can be whatever you want it to be." My experience tells me this is a dangerous misconception. It's the cart before the horse, really. In fact, my research suggests it is not we who decide what color can be. After two decades of investigation into how color affects behavior, I am convinced, whether we want it to or not, that it is *color* that can determine how we think and what we feel.

One of the reasons color influences us is due to a phenomenon called *resonance*. MaryAnn Kilmartin, a bio-resonance expert in San Diego, talked to me about the ideas of Carlo Rubbia, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1984. According to Kilmartin, Rubbia calculated that we are one billion parts light to one part matter. She explains, "Human beings are basically all light. We look like we are all matter because we are hard-wired to see the particle nature of light. As you recall, light has two forms: particle (solid) and wave (frequency). We 'feel' light however because we are in resonance with light in its wave form. That is what we mean when we talk about feeling red/anger/energy, etc."¹

¹ *Bio Resonance and Multi-Resonance Therapy*, Vol. 1, ed. Hans Brugemann, Carlo Rubbia, Hague International, Brussels, English Edition, 1993, pp. 208–209.

So our perceptual nature is unable to see the wave nature of light that affects how we “feel.” The irony is that color impacts us in ways we cannot see, but it affects how we feel and how we behave. When we walk into a red room, for example, it is as if the color red and the human body become two resonating tuning forks. Like a note, our whole system begins to “hum” red—physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Each color affects us uniquely. Even the slightest variation of a single color can have a profound influence on our behavior. In wise hands, color can become a powerful tool for filmmakers to subliminally layer a story—to make a situation ironic, or absurd. In ***Philadelphia***, as the dying Tom Hanks clings to his IV stand, translating the lyrics to an opera whose theme is love and loss, he is slowly enveloped by an intense red light from nowhere. It is like visual salt rubbed into an emotional wound. Hanks speaks of love and life, but the red belies his emotional reality. We are powerless to ignore it. The red is the visual counterpoint to the words and music. It is his unspoken rage and mortal pain, as well as a visual adjective that supports and sustains Hanks’ brilliant performance.

On the other hand, the pale red (pink) in ***The Royal Tennenbaums*** makes an enormous difference in the audience’s attitude toward the title character. Royal Tennenbaum does incredibly despicable things, but because he’s surrounded by bubble-gum pink, we know instinctively not to take him seriously. The color has rendered him silly.

Color is one of the elements rarely recognized by the audience as manipulating them. This subliminal quality can be magic in the director’s hands—or not. This much is clear: if we remain unaware of this power awaiting our command, we relinquish a large part of our control to chance. Color will continue to resonate, to send out signals, irrespective of our intentions. So, whether it’s on or off-screen, it’s essential for us to know what we are doing.

GOING BEYOND THE VERBAL

How do you develop this facility with color? How can you use this powerful force to layer a story? How can you create the magic?

First and most importantly, you select your left-brain and click “Quit.” You have to relinquish control of your thinking self and give it over to what you are *seeing*. This is not easy in a culture that prides

itself on hard-nosed reason and in which our softer perceptual skills are often dismissed. Most of us love to analyze films and love to talk about what we analyze. Indeed, we are often so busy analyzing the plot points that we are unaware of how we are being affected by what we see. We've evolved into a generation of talkers with lazy vision. We "watch" but we don't *see*. And we miss out on an experience that enriches our emotional core.

It will maximize your experience if, after reading this section, you first see a film before you read the book. For example, if you want to explore the emotional influence of blue, you might screen ***About Schmidt***. The film opens with one of the bluest offices in the history of cinema. Don't just register that as an idea and move on. See how blue follows Warren Schmidt wherever he goes and pay very close attention to what the blue is doing to *you* both physically and emotionally. Of course, it has layered Schmidt's character, but it has also allowed you to have a *visceral* understanding of who he is. That is a very different experience. If you use the book in this way, you can compare and contrast your observations and discoveries with mine. It will be more like a seminar than a lecture.

Another way to begin is to choose a film you are familiar with, run it on fast-forward and look for how a color or colors propel the story or modify the characters (color is, after all, a visual adjective). In ***Elizabeth***, for example, the color of Cate Blanchett's costumes defines her character arc as it morphs from innocent pale coral to powerful blood red.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Filmmakers should be careful not to make color choices based solely upon an intellectual or abstract notion. If, for example, a director chooses blue to symbolize "hope" because the sky is blue when the sun shines, he or she may find it is possible for an unwanted reaction to occur. Instead of feeling hopeful, the audience may involuntarily respond to blue by feeling tired—even melancholy.

This is a true story: An executive decided on his favorite pale blue as the color for his office reception area. As the months wore on, he found himself complaining about the passivity, complacency, and lack of curiosity among his current crop of job candidates. He attributed it to the millennium and seriously contemplated initiating a seminar called "Initiative for the 21st

century.” My research has suggested that pale blue makes people passive and introspective. Without knowing it, he spaced out every person who sat more than five minutes in his waiting area. They hummed to the tune he visually played for them.

Of course, it depends on which blue is used, but what one director thinks of as sky blue, another would call azure. Adjectives for color are subjective. The experience of reading or hearing a word and the physical sensation felt by seeing the actual color is not the same. Actually, Jasper Johns, in an exhibition in the early 1960s at the Jewish Museum in New York, “illustrated” the dichotomy between a word and the thing that a word describes by hanging an actual teacup on a canvas and then writing the word “cup” on the painting with an arrow pointing to the cup. There was a lot of dialogue that took place about this piece, but the consensus seemed to be that Johns was pointing to the fact that the two are not equal. The same is true for color and the description of a color.

Interestingly enough you already possess the information you need in choosing a color. It is simply stored in your own perceptual depository. Only recently a young designer, unknown to me, asked me what a particular color meant. I asked her to close her eyes and remember a time when she felt afraid and to tell me what colors her feelings were. The colors she chose were exactly the colors that my students had chosen over and over again in our color experiments.

This book encourages you first to approach both filmmaking and film viewing viscerally. Still, your intellect will always be waiting. Sometimes it will want you to put a round peg in a square hole because it wants the story to be more linear. Just demand that it be patient. Once you’ve trained yourself to really *see*, your intellect will be back to weave its own brand of magic.

ARE COLOR CHOICES REALLY PLANNED?

At my seminars in Visual Storytelling, the first question often asked is, “Is all this really planned?” The answer is not a simple yes or no. Color may play a role in weeks of planning in preproduction. Sometimes, however, plans are supplanted by gut decisions for which a color simply “feels right” on the spot. Oscar-nominated cinematographer Roger Deakins explains how he works with both the planning and the instinctive in filming ***The Shawshank Redemption***:

I was involved in *Shawshank* from very early on and had time to discuss all (production designer) Terry Marsh's plans for his sets and how they would work in conjunction with the location. As our choice [of color] had to work in varied lighting conditions we tested paint colors on film many times before settling on the final tone. The warm brown tones that I was intending to use for the night lighting had a different effect on the gray we chose for the cooler daytime lighting. It is simply that warm light hitting a bluish gray wall will create a brown color, whereas cool daylight striking the same wall will often bring out the blue in the color to a degree that can appear too extreme on film. Film will often enhance blue anyway so it is important to test colors of paint and costumes when a particular "look" is sought.

However, Deakins also talks about how he likes to work from instinct when he shoots:

It can be an analytical process but I think it is more often instinctual. It is usually a "feeling" that something is right or "it just looks right" and what might have "looked right" in preproduction may not be right on the day of the shoot. The instinctive may overcome the analytical . . . That is the only way I work and many such choices are made as the camera is being set and, maybe, after I have seen a rehearsal.

Filmmakers can pragmatically verify a desired emotional response to a color. An excellent example of wise decision making is the way director Kasi Lemmons chose a particular green light, which played a key role in ***The Caveman's Valentine***. In the script, writer George Dawes Green had specified a "pernicious" (wicked) green. Lemmons and cinematographer Amy Vincent tested the effects of different greens on actor Samuel L. Jackson and gauged his physical and emotional reaction to each one.

Color-flows that track the emotional arcs of a story are appearing on walls of studio art departments. More and more, colors are being digitally altered in order to emotionally emphasize a scene. So, yes, it is often planned, not just on the set but also in both preproduction and postproduction. Consideration of how a color will manifest in a film is essential.

It's obviously impossible that David Hand, the director of ***Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*** (1937); Sofia Coppola, director of ***The***



ROGER DEAKINS

As our choice [of color] had to work in varied lighting conditions, we tested paint colors on film many times before settling on the final tone.



Ultimately, it is your relationship with what is there in front of you—the actors and the set—that counts. It is a gut reaction to these elements and not some thoughts you bring with you.—Roger Deakins



AMY VINCENT

We wanted the green “Z-Rays” in *The Caveman’s Valentine* to affect Romulus (Sam Jackson’s character) negatively in his very core. “Z-Rays,” according to Rom, are “the color of a rich man’s bank account.” There are many different rules of the game in business and finance, and Rom doesn’t live in that world at all, so the green “Z-Rays” are terrifying to him. When Sam reacted to it strongly, we knew it was the right green.

—Amy Vincent

Virgin Suicides (2000); and Kasi Lemmons, director of *The Caveman’s Valentine* (2001) met and decided unanimously to choose green liquid as a metaphor for poison. But choose it they did. What inspired these decisions? We do not know for certain, but imagine how you would feel if someone offered you a tall glass of bright green liquid. Maybe our knee-jerk response lies deeply buried in our unconscious. Perhaps it’s a fear reaction lodged deep in our genetic memory since we crawled up out of primal pond scum. (See the opening scene in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*.)

In the air or in liquid form, green can effect an association with the poisonous or toxic. Green in the atmosphere, for example, often precedes a violent storm. This is an important consideration in choosing to use green light. In both the African American and the gay bars in Todd Haynes’ *Far from Heaven*, green light signals to the audience that something is being perceived as not acceptable in the social environment. The audience responds to this viscerally. Their interpretation depends on how carefully the context is established.

Throughout this book, you will find anecdotes from award-winning cinematographers and production designers whose comments will underscore the essential interplay between the technical and the esthetic and between the planned and the instinctive. In choosing a color, one thing is for certain: Each without the other can leave the end result to chance. And that is not, whether it’s onscreen or off-screen, where you want it to be.

AN INVITATION

You are about to begin an exploration of more than ninety selections from films in which color influences your perception of who is a villain, who is a victim, who is about to fall in love, and, sometimes, who is about to die. *If It’s Purple, Someone’s Gonna Die* is written the way I teach: in an informal style and in accessible language. It is important that your visual processing not be interrupted by the need to digest unfamiliar terms. The concepts presented in this book will demand your complete visual attention. Using film after film as a reference, you will be building an awareness of how color affects your attitudes toward the character and story. I hope you will use this book as a springboard to jump off on your own. If you’re not sure a color will give you the effect you want,

test it on your audience. Whatever you do, don't just talk about color. Have swatches, photos, fabrics—whatever you like—to illustrate what is in your head. *Feel* what the color is doing to you physically.

It's sneaky business, this thing called color. It's right there in front of you, but more times than not you don't notice what it's doing. This book is written to heighten that awareness. Consider it an invitation to join in our Visual Storytelling Seminars.

Patti Bellantoni