

YELLOW THE CONTRARY COLOR

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Director Kenneth Branagh moved the location of *Much Ado About Nothing* from dry and dusty Sicily to take advantage of the marmalade-colored Tuscan light.



ellow is a contrary color. It's the color of both jonquils and yellow jackets. That's your first clue, or warning. One of the reasons yellow is the color used for caution signs is that it's visually aggressive. It appears to come toward you. We've built it into our consciousness as a cautionary color. Venomous reptiles and amphibians often are yellow—a warning to all who come near, a big beware built into our genetic code.

It is also the color we identify with the sun. We associate yellow with powerful life energy—exuberance itself. In whatever situation you find it, or wherever it is, bright yellow can be the scene-stealer, always clamoring for attention. Intense yellow, however, has an underbelly. The late Dr. Harry Hepner, Professor of Psychology of Advertising at Syracuse University, claimed, “Yellow is the color longest remembered and most despised.” This is an interesting parallel to the color associated with happiness. Actually, this quality makes yellow a perfect signal for obsession. Steve McQueen, the bored banker looking for a thrill in ***The Thomas Crown Affair***, wears it. So does Tom Ripley (Matt Damon), the twisted romantic in ***The Talented Mr. Ripley***. Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro), one of the greatest obsessives in film history, drives a saturated yellow cab in ***Taxi Driver***. Even Warren Beatty as ***Dick Tracy*** wears it. All of them are, in one way or another, obsessive. Dr. Hepner's claim that the color is most despised probably comes from the fact that bright yellow in large quantities can be very hard on the eyes. Actually, in our experiments, we found an all-yellow environment to be anxiety producing. Yellow was like a visual car alarm trying to horn in on us. Carlton Wagner of the Wagner Institute for Color Research, in the August 1990 issue of *Woman*, said, “People in the doldrums believe yellow is light and sunny and will cheer them up. But yellow creates anxiety and makes you more stressed out. . . . In yellow's presence, you'll be more apt to lose your temper.”

In spite of this, yellow can be amazingly versatile. One key to putting it under your control is to desaturate it. The more it is lightened, the more elegant it becomes. The almost-white yellow of Faye Dunaway's Packard in ***Chinatown*** is the height of sophistication. A pastel yellow (half-yellow, half-white), like the color surrounding Mia Farrow in ***Rosemary's Baby***, mirrors her innocence. When left in a saturated state, like the acid yellow bathing suit Matt Damon wears in ***The Talented Mr. Ripley***, however, it becomes a color that is so visually hostile, you back away from it.

Bright yellow's aggressive quality, when used as light, can also read as threatening. The "Y-rays" in ***The Caveman's Valentine*** are a bright yellow light that Samuel L. Jackson's character characterizes as "cruel."

Something magical happens, however, when the sun's yellow begins its transformation to the color of honey. It is in this golden light, the light of the late-in-the-afternoon long shadows that memories, dreams, and idylls are visually born. Think of how those shimmering golden strands of the fishing line danced in the air in ***A River Runs Through It***, or the how the honeyed world of the young and rich on the Italian Riviera set the stage for ***The Talented Mr. Ripley***.

Think About This:

**Bright opaque yellow can put you on alert.
Warm golden light can lull you into memory.**

