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Conversations with the Pool Table: Use of Color in Selected Kubrick Films

Stanley Kubrick, the enigmatic director, infused his unmistakable style and careful attention to detail into each one of his films. Kubrick deliberated over every sound, every editing cut, and every placement of every object before approving it for the scenes he filmed. One of the many aspects of his films that Kubrick paid particularly close attention to was his complex use of color. Just as Kubrick never made two films alike, always-varying setting, time-period, and genre, he also never used the same color scheme. One of the primary sources of Kubrick's inspiration was Sergei Eisenstein, especially his book on color, Film Sense (Walker 233). In Film Sense, Eisenstein theorizes that rather than a "fixed catalog of color symbols... the emotional intelligibility and function of color will rise from the natural order of establishing the color imagery of the work, coincidental with the process of shaping the living movement of the whole work" (Eisenstein 151). Taking Eisenstein's teachings to heart, Kubrick developed a unique color structure for every color film he made, particularly in The Shining, Full Metal Jacket, and Eyes Wide Shut. These films, rather than having common symbolism for each color, or simply having color to create mood, each have a color structure that complements the thought structure of the film: progression of time and space in The

Shining, ironic contrast and reversal in Full Metal Jacket, and indication of emotions in Eyes Wide Shut.

His fourth color film but one of his most visually developed, Stanley Kubrick's The Shining is a cult classic, featuring the shocking transformation of Jack Torrance from man to monster. Kubrick intensifies the feelings evoked by this transformation by associating the progression with several other progressions of the plot and of the characters. By calibrating all of the major elements of the film with one thought structure: progression, Kubrick intensifies the horror of the movie. One of the most powerful progressions is that of the color scheme, and Kubrick matches this color scheme with the other progressing elements. The primary uses of color in The Shining are to distinguish the progressions of time and space in the film, and to parallel the internal progressions of the major characters.

Known for his inimitable treatment of space and time, Kubrick draws attention to these unique structures. His time structure is particularly note-worthy, as it accelerates quite quickly. Thomas Allen Nelson explains that “the progression of events goes from months to days to hours, a process of reduction and intensification that moves toward a single moment in time when insanity breaks loose from the restraints of rational order” (Nelson 2008). Everything in The Shining has this progression, and an accelerating time frame holds the plot together. The story begins with light, natural colors and broad, open spaces: “The Shining immediately announces that its visual style is of crucial importance. It opens with expansive, aerial photography... landscape images (earth tones, rusts, greens) allude to both autumn and a fecund environment” (Falsetto 70). Although the color symbolism by no means begins in optimistic colors, the spatial structure and color

schemes quickly deteriorate into something more sinister. As the film progresses, the scenes begin to take place increasingly at night, which in addition to making the outdoors an alien, hazy blue, changes the interior to a degree as well.

In addition to using exterior tools such as a lack of sunlight to darken the hallways, Kubrick also uses the hotel's physical setup to his advantage. After initial scenes in fairly wide, open areas of the hotel, the film begins to spend significantly more time in tight corridors and the passageways of The Shining's famous maze (The Shining). Also famous are the several shots following Danny, Jack Torrance's gifted son, as he travels through the hotel's hallways by tricycle. One downside of the complexity of the hotel is its ability to disorient; disorientation is crucial for the characters, but can be disastrous for the film. Kubrick's solution, unsurprisingly, is color. Using color uncharacteristically in a highly functional way, Kubrick makes the hallways surrounding the family apartment yellow, the hallways in the kitchen area white, the hallways in the upstairs areas blue, the hallways in the basement green, and colors the hallways surrounding room 237 white and brown (The Shining). In a movie where "sheer terror becomes the emotional and physical momentum of the film", the terror of Danny approaching room 237 would be largely wasted if it was not clear that he was, in fact, approaching room 237 (Walker, Taylor, and Ruchti 302). In order to maintain the horrific integrity of the scene and of the film, Kubrick uses color both to differentiate between important physical locations and to parallel the progressing time, just as he uses color to parallel the evolutions of the primary characters.

In a movie centered on one character's descent into madness, Kubrick matches the color schemes to these progressions, primarily in the progression of the colors

surrounding each character. Wendy and Danny begin the movie wearing blue, white, and a red highly unlike the ominous dark reds of the latter half of the film. Of note is that Danny's outfit is dominated by the blues and whites, a contrast to his later outfits increasingly dominated by red. The amount of red on Danny's clothing steadily increases until Tony calms Danny down from his experience with the Grady twins (The Shining). As Danny's premonitions and sightings get more serious, so do the manifestations of his terror through his clothing. For a time, red is largely absent from Danny's clothing, until it resumes in full force in Danny's first clothing change following his room 237 experience (The Shining). Kubrick wastes no space on his canvas, utilizing each character's clothing to match their progression of terror. Most important is the transformation of Jack Torrance. Unlike his son's progression from childlike whites and blues into reds, or his wife's progression from bright, optimistic colors to browns and greens, Jack progresses from the muted colors of a mature adult into a dull red evocative of the blood that gushes from the elevator. The progression does not only apply to his clothing, however.

“In Kubrick's film, Jack's 'colors' begin in the warm part of the spectrum (brown, green, yellow) but inevitably move toward red (e.g. he wears a maroon-colored jacket in the last part of the film, he talks with Grady in the red bathroom, and Danny's blood elevator/REDRUM shinings are associated with his father's unconscious)” (Nelson 216).

Kubrick matches the progression of Jack's madness and the increasing appearances of the hotel's ghosts with a color scheme that deteriorates into the red color that Faber Birren associates subjectively with blood, intensity, and rage (Birren 143). Although red has many interpretations, only Birren's mental and subjective associations make any sense to use, since the red is a manifestation of Jack's mind to begin with. As always, Kubrick

finds a suitable color scheme for his film, using a blend of both subjective and purely functional color uses to highlight the evolution and transformation that occurs in a film of sinister progression.

Following The Shining, Kubrick turned his efforts to a decidedly different fare, and naturally found an entirely new thought and color structure. Kubrick's 1987 film, Full Metal Jacket, is a study in contrasts, and his color scheme enhances and punctuates these contrasts. The film features two distinctly separate sections, one portraying the rigors of Parris Island, and one portraying the actualities of Vietnam. These separate sections are different in both style and substance, and the second section neatly reverses the lessons of the first section (Walker, Taylor, and Ruchti 332). Kubrick uses this fragmented narrative to frame a story filled with other contrasts and ironies, and he uses color to explicitly mark these reversals and paradoxes.

These reversals and paradoxes are, without fail, matched with either black and white or complementary colors. In Goethe's color theory, the complementary colors are the color pairs which 'demand each other', and those pairs are yellow and blue-red, blue and yellow-red, and red and green (Goethe 174). These colors are complementary because they are exactly opposite the other on the color wheel, and Kubrick uses these opposite colors to indicate contrasts and reversals. One major instance in which this occurs is in the barracks, when Sergeant Hartman instructs the men to sleep with their rifles, and to give them girls' names. Because of lighting differences, the floor of the barracks looks significantly redder in this scene than in the previous scene, and this red contrasts with the green of the men's uniforms (Full Metal Jacket). In a world without

girls, Sergeant Hartman explicitly substitutes killing instruments for females, and Kubrick explicitly marks the occasion.

Sergeant Hartman again makes substitutions in two similar scenes, substituting Private Joker for Private Snowball, and substituting Private Pyle for the rest of the platoon. In the first of these scenes, Private Joker makes some bold statements to Hartman, which Hartman considers a demonstration of courage. For this, Hartman promotes Joker by demoting Snowball, effectively making a substitution. In parts of Joker's actual speech that changes Hartman's mind, Private Joker is framed directly in front of a white-trimmed window, the glass made completely black by the night. The final time that Hartman makes a substitution is when he forces the entire platoon to take Private Pyle's punishment after discovering an illicit jelly doughnut. The scene is distinct in that the men are wearing shockingly white undergarments, and stand on pitch-black footlockers (Full Metal Jacket). Randy Rasmussen states that "Hartman's crowning victory over Pyle... is achieved when he transforms an object of desire into one of disgust. He forces Pyle to eat the forbidden jelly doughnut while the rest of the platoon is punished for it" (Rasmussen 299). Almost a reverse Christ-figure, Pyle defies conventional ideals of fairness by transferring punishment for his sins to everyone but himself. Kubrick's uses of shockingly contradictory colors complement these substitutions and contradictions that take place in the film's plot and in the characters' minds.

In addition to substitutions, Kubrick also uses conflicting colors to mark transformations, ironies, and perversions reminiscent of an earlier work of his, A Clockwork Orange. One of the grandest ironies of the film occurs during one of the

many group runs the platoon takes. The men run several times in their green uniforms, always with the red flag of the platoon, but there is only one run in which a static element of the surroundings creates a frame of red around the green men. The men pass a stop sign, while the camera has a rare straight forward shot of the group, and the red flag has perfect symmetry with the stop sign and the green-clad men for only a moment. In this moment, the men repeat the call of Sergeant Hartman “Uncle Sam... lets me know just who I am” (Full Metal Jacket). In an environment designed specifically for overcoming personality and transforming many individuals into a homogenous group, this call is highly ironic. A tribute to Kubrick’s color scheme, the call could easily remain hidden among the endless military refrains if not for the instantaneous contradiction of colors. These moments only continue: red and green marks a speech in which the villains Lee Harvey Oswald and Charles Whitman are lionized, purple haze and yellow fire mark the soldiers’ first fight and thus transformation into real soldiers, and blue and orange mark Joker’s first kill and transformation into a man (Full Metal Jacket). This last transformation is particularly important, as the complementary colors actually occur on the two sides of Joker’s face in a scene where he kills a suffering Vietnamese sniper. Nelson writes, “Joker is Persona and shadow, Eros and Thanatos, and in that duality Kubrick found a paradoxical space...” (Nelson 237). After killing the sniper, who is, in a reversal of expectations, a woman, Joker’s face is no longer light and ready to make a joke: his face is now dark and brooding, and incidentally, half orange and half blue. Although the transformation is apparent and marked by a physical act, Kubrick still maintains the color structure, placing opposite colors where a transformation of opposites takes place. In a film of irony and contrasts, in both content and structure, Kubrick

matches a corresponding color palette of complementary colors to mark each occasion of substitution, reversal, and transformation.

Kubrick's final film, which he completed shortly before his death in 1999, was not released until 12 years after Full Metal Jacket. Considered by many to be his most visually striking film, Kubrick reused some elements of past color structures, but largely created something entirely new. This film, Eyes Wide Shut, is similar to Clockwork Orange in its strong basis in color symbolism, similar to The Shining in its subjective plot, and similar to Full Metal Jacket in its use of color to mark transformations. Despite these similarities, Eyes Wide Shut is assuredly a work of its own, fairly unique in its subject, and highly unique in the nature of its very ambiguous plot. Like a selection of other films, the plot is very ambiguous, but unlike most conventional films, exceptionally little physical change occurs in the story. As Randy Rasmussen describes, "time and again, our imagination runs wild with speculation about what *might* have been or even with revised interpretations of what actually was. The human inclination to reconfigure reality for its own ends is a notion that fits in well..." (Rasmussen 330). It was these characteristics of his final film that found Stanley Kubrick using a bold, explicit palette of colors to complement his implicit style. In Eyes Wide Shut, a highly ambiguous story where the vast majority of change is internal change in the characters, Stanley Kubrick anchors the film in a color scheme that physically frames characters in order to unmistakably mark their transitions from one emotional or mental state to another.

In a color structure dominated by framing, the scenes fall primarily into two categories: those where characters share frames in significant ways and those where this does not occur. There are some major uses of color functioning as traditional color

symbolism, such as the “stark crimsons and livid purples (that) signal the danger of trespassing on forbidden territory” in the orgy sequence, but most color is used as a frame to indicate emotions (Walker, Taylor, and Ruchti 230). Despite the breathtaking colors of the orgy, its dream-like sequence is patently different in its color use than most scenes, which have colors directly backing or framing characters. The first of these uses is in the very first shot of the film: Alice Harford slips off her clothes in preparation for the party in which she will edge towards infidelity, and as she slips off her clothes, she is framed by scarlet curtains (Eyes Wide Shut). A counterexample to the need to use subjective colors while analyzing The Shining, this scene is certainly real (presuming that at least a portion of the film is real), and therefore requires what Faber Birren calls an “objective impression” of the color. In the case of red, the objective interpretations are active, passionate, fervid and exciting (Birren 143). The scene is meant as a stark contrast to the scene the next day when Alice redresses: the shot is close enough to Alice that only one curtain is within the frame of the shot, and Alice’s body is placed so that it directly covers this one source of passionate scarlet and leaves only pure white walls (Eyes Wide Shut). In the beginnings of an ambiguous film, Kubrick distinctly marks Alice’s descent into temptation, and he again marks her ascent out of it.

This reversal of emotions for two incredibly similar scenes directly precedes the conversation that initiates the primary plot of the film, where Bill is inspired to be unfaithful in response to his wife’s experience. This sequence begins with a high Alice on the red bed, seductively inquiring about whether Bill had sex at the party the night before. Bill becomes defensive, and is framed by an unnatural blue (Eyes Wide Shut). Goethe associates cool colors, particularly blue, with coldness and distance, and this

interpretation becomes increasingly relevant (Goethe 254). As Alice continues to inquire, and as Bill attempts to calm her down, they begin to oscillate together between the blue and the relatively neutral yellow (Eyes Wide Shut). It is unlikely, however, that this yellow is simply a neutral space. Most of the conversations that take place in yellow in this scene have strong ties to envy, a theory supported by Eisenstein, who Kubrick was known to read (Eisenstein 126). Bill enquires who Alice was dancing with, and is the one closer to the yellow lamp. This placement changes, however, once he calls it “understandable” that a man wanted to have sex with Alice, at which point she gets up in an incredulous fury, backing herself into a perfect frame of cold, unnatural blue (Eyes Wide Shut). Until the scene ends with a telephone call, this movement continues for several more color and emotion changes. Kubrick combines camera movement, character movement, and deliberate color to clearly indicate emotional changes, giving legitimacy to the remainder of the plot, which largely results from this conversation. Following this conversation, Bill leaves to console Marion Nathanson, in one of the scenes in which shared color becomes very significant.

In an already long film, Stanley Kubrick uses color in several instances to explain the state of character’s emotions when little to no back-story is available due to time constraints. In the case of Marion, her reasons for kissing Bill in the presence of her dead father are relatively enigmatic without the color structure. It becomes clear soon enough that she thinks she loves him, and her emotions are, of course, vulnerable. Kubrick’s color use, however, delves into the actual thoughts and emotions at the time. Once seated, Bill and Marion begin in separate melancholic blue frames of their own (Birren 143; Eyes Wide Shut). Marion explains her father’s death from the blue, and then Bill

consoles her from a new frame in which he is backed by the wisdom of gray. Marion remains in blue, appearing to want to say or do something, until Bill actively moves into the same blue frame as Marion, and she kisses him (Eyes Wide Shut). Without the color, Marion's actions require guessing; with color, it is apparent that for a moment, Marion and Bill share a moment of sadness together, grieving together instantaneously, although not for identical reasons. With the intoxication of voluntarily shared emotions, Marion initiates a kiss, and Bill does not initially back away, actions difficult to fully comprehend without Kubrick's color structure.

In addition to explaining a plot consisting primarily of convoluted emotions, Kubrick's color structure also parallels emotion transitions in order to give structure to a very long scene. Similar to Alice and Bill's conversation following the party, Bill's final conversation with Ziegler concerning Bill's actions is exceedingly long, and would be a muddled chaos without a color structure pointing to something definite in the midst of plot and emotional ambiguity. Bill and Ziegler begin the conversation sharing the frame of the red pool table, while Bill does not understand where the conversation is going. Once Ziegler begins the core of the discussion, the two do not share the pool table for a few minutes. Ziegler begins to rant about what Bill has done, and once angry, moves into the blue of the window, going back to the pool table when he mentions that another character, Nick, made a complete fool out of Ziegler. As soon as Ziegler first brings up consequences of Bill's actions, he moves into the frame of the pool table, a red that can only be interpreted as the red of retribution that Eisenstein describes (Eisenstein 132; Eyes Wide Shut). Still in the red frame, Ziegler continues talking about what happened, but Bill stays completely out of the pool table frame, outwardly repentant, but not coming

to terms with consequences until he mentions that Nick's face was bruised during the chain of events that Bill began. At this point, Ziegler acquiesces, and moves into a shared red frame with Bill (Eyes Wide Shut). Without color, Bill's internal thoughts are hidden from view, but with Kubrick's color structure, we see what concerns Bill, what doesn't concern Bill, and what matters to Ziegler: dealing with the consequences. The conversation continues with these patterns, revealing the true extent of Kubrick's color structure in the film; revealing intentions, revealing emotions, and giving a rigid structure to a conversation without a natural one of its own.

Kubrick's Eyes Wide Shut is a highly ambiguous film, in both plot and emotions. Falsetto articulates the consequences of these choices: "In *Eyes Wide Shut*, we never know who to believe, and the status of the narrative remains unclear throughout the film. Truth and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, the public and the private are intermingled to such an extent that the viewer remains in a constant state of uncertainty" (Falsetto 79). Under many directors, such ambiguity would be enough to inspire apathy, as would the conversations. Kubrick does not compromise, however, and uses a highly unique color structure to give concrete indications as to the state of characters' minds, and to give structure to sequences that otherwise would have no structure.

Kubrick's use of color is a carefully considered device matched perfectly to the actual work, never basing itself to single palette of meanings. Ranging from progression to indication, reversal to transformation, Kubrick supplements his already complex thought structures with a color structure that has no ambiguities as to its functionality. Sometimes symbolic, occasionally purely practical, these color structures implement themselves into many elements of the film, as Kubrick takes artistic control of the acting,

editing, set direction, and cinematography in order to fully realize these structures. Under Kubrick's careful direction, all of these elements combine in order to form a signature driving force in his films, visually and thematically redefining the work unmistakably and unequivocally as a Stanley Kubrick film.

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