

SOME PROBLEMS IN DIRECTING COLOR PICTURES*

ROUBEN MAMOULIAN**

Summary.—A brief discussion of whether color in the motion picture is here to stay, pointing out that black-and-white was a convention that had to be accepted because of technical limitations at the beginning of the art. Had color-pictures been invented first, a black-and-white picture would now seem flat and inadequate—although there are beauties in the unreal shadows that can not be denied nor be destroyed. The paper concludes with a few remarks upon the use of color for enhancing and emphasizing the emotional situations of a picture, and the effects to be achieved by carefully selecting the colors of the clothing or uniforms of the actors and of the backgrounds and lighting.

No art has ever depended so much upon science as the art of motion pictures. In that sense it is truly the most modern of arts. It begins where science ends and it has a hard time, and not always a successful time, in artistically keeping up with the progress of the scientific and technical achievements that are taking place constantly in motion pictures.

Seven years ago motion pictures were revolutionized by the advent of sound. Theretofore silent, the screen acquired the gift of speech. Today, as another result of scientific achievement, color comes to the screen, and to my mind, it is just as much a miracle as sound was. I should like to pay my most respectful tribute to those persons whose names one does not hear but who work in the silence and solitude of their laboratories. I refer to the scientists that compose the body of Technicolor, whose destinies are guided by Dr. Kalmus.

The main question today is, "Will color last or will it not?" I have no doubt that color upon the screen is here to stay. I have also no doubt that there will be as much skepticism for the first few months in regard to color as there was in regard to sound.

They say that what we do not have, we do not miss. No one

* Presented at a meeting of the Technicians Branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood, Calif., May 21, 1935.

** Director of *Becky Sharp*, the first three-color feature motion picture produced in Technicolor.

ever missed electricity until it came to replace oil and gas. No one missed dialog upon the screen while the screen was silent. However, let a dumb man, after thirty years of life, acquire the gift of speech; would he want to give it up and go back to his silence? Speech came to the screen and stayed—victorious. Now, let a man with ailing eyes wearing black glasses through which the world looks gray, suddenly recover his sight, throw away his glasses, and see the luxury of color of the sky, the earth, and the flowers; would he ever want to go back to his black glasses? We never missed color upon the screen because the very art of the cinema was born black and white. It was a convention that had to be accepted. But once real color comes to the screen, we shall feel its absence as forcefully as we feel the absence of sound when looking at a silent film made some years ago.

I do not mean to say that necessarily all the films will have to be in color, but certainly the great majority of them will be. As in the art of painting, while we admire and love black-and-white drawings and etchings, could we ever do without paintings? So far, the screen has been using a pencil; now it is given a palette with paints.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I do not want to imply that the black-and-white film is not beautiful, nor that the color-film completely displaces the black-and-white. As a matter of fact, the black-and-white has a beauty of its own that could never fade away. The very unreality of those pale shadows moving upon the screen, and that remote quality of a dream, constitute the attraction and the spell of the black-and-white film that could not be destroyed. There will always be room for certain subjects to be treated in terms of these fascinating gray shadows. But color comes to the screen now as a new spring to the earth. It comes as an inspiring and exciting gift, which opens new horizons of creation for the artist and enjoyment for the onlooker.

I am stating this now not merely as a theoretical point, but as a result of an actual experience I went through recently. This experience was directing *Becky Sharp*, the first full-length feature in color. That was a new and wondrous adventure. It had all the thrill and excitement of pioneering in a new field and discovering a theretofore unexplored fairyland.

Color is one of the most powerful and fascinating attributes of nature. Imagine what the world would look like if you took color out of it. What would life be if we were forced to spend it among

sky, trees, flowers, and all things black, gray, and white? Having known the living joys of color, we should probably die of melancholia.

Love of color and susceptibility to color are among the strongest instincts in human beings. If you want to discover the most organic, basic elements of the sophisticated human being of today, go to children and to savages. You will find that next to food, they love things of vivid color, which sparkle. That instinct is alive and strong in every one of us.

In relation to motion pictures, our need for color has so far been ungratified. We accepted the situation just as we had accepted the fact of moving upon solid ground, until we learned to fly. But once color comes to the screen, we shall be unhappy without it. It brings a new terrific power to the screen. Our strongest impressions come through vision. So far, visually, we are dealing with light and shade and compositions upon the screen. Now we have an additional element of color. This, not merely superficially to adorn the images in motion, but to increase the dramatic and emotional effectiveness of the story which is being unfolded to the spectator.

Color, like all power, can be harmful and destructive when used badly; life-giving and creative when used well. Animals and human beings have always been and are unconsciously subject to the influence of color. How many times have you walked into a strange house and felt depressed because of the color of the wallpaper? How many times have you found consolation in the rich riot of shades of a gorgeous sunset?

Apart from the pure pictorial beauty and the entertainment value of color, there is also a definite emotional content and meaning in most colors and shades. We have lost sight of that because, as with all important and inevitable phenomena, it has become subconscious with us. It is not an accident that the traffic lights of a city street today are green for safety and red for danger. Colors convey to us subtly different moods, feelings, and impulses. It is not an accident that we use the expressions "to see red," "to feel blue," "to be green with envy," and "to wear a black frown." Is it for nothing that we believe that white is expressive of purity, black of sorrow, red of passion, green of hope, yellow of madness, and so on? The artist should take advantage of the mental and emotional implications of color and use them upon the screen to increase the power and effectiveness of a scene, situation, or character. I have tried to do as much of that in *Becky Sharp* as the story allowed. To quote an example,

I would refer to the sequence of the panic that occurs at the Duchess of Richmond's ball when the shots of Napoleon's cannons are heard. You will see how inconspicuously, but with telling effect, the sequence builds to a climax through a series of intercut shots which progress from the coolness and sobriety of colors like gray, blue, green, and pale yellow, to the exciting danger and threat of deep orange and flaming red. The effect is achieved by the selection of dresses and uniforms worn by the characters and the color of backgrounds and lights. There is a little homecoming feeling in this for me, as the use of color and colored lights was one of my main joys and excitement in the theater. Surely, the effectiveness of productions like *Porgy*, *Marco Millions*, and *Congai* which I have done in the theater, would have been sadly decreased if I were forced not to use color in sets, costumes, and lights on the stage.

Of course, in each art different subjects are expressed best through different forms. Undoubtedly, there are some stories that beg for color on the screen more than others do. Off-hand, a story of a historical period, when life and clothing were much more colorful, or stories with the backgrounds of countries like Spain or Italy, even of today, would ask for color more than some stories of our own modern age and civilization. The black-and-white films will still have their place upon the screen, but most assuredly as time goes by there will be less of them and more of the color pictures. For even though our life today is gray (and because of that), we have a great love and longing for color, is it not to be more attractive that women dress their bodies in beautifully shaded gowns and touch their faces with the subtle magic of a discriminating make-up? Is it not the same impulse that drives the gray and tired families of workingmen out to Sunday picnics, where there is a touch of blue sky, a green blade of grass, a tree, or a flower?

Everything that is beautiful to the eye is a great gift to humanity. Color upon the screen is such a gift. The only danger of it that I can see during the first stages of the color picture, would be the danger of excess. Talking pictures did not avoid excess during the first months of their existence. There was too much talk and too much noise coming from the screen. The cinema must not fall into such another trap, and must not go about color as a newly-rich. Color should not mean gaudiness. Restraint and selectiveness are the essence of art.

DISCUSSION

MR. K. MACGOWAN:* I'm going to start by repeating something I said at the Society of Motion Picture Engineers' luncheon yesterday. I'm not repeating it for my own benefit but because I want to say it to the members of the Technicians Branch as well as of the Society. I feel a great deal of envy for you people who work on the technical end. As a producer I'm always running up against questions like these: Is it safe to do this story? Can I do this story as well and as uncompromisingly as it ought to be done?

So often in the producing end we find that we are restricted by the public, or at least by what we think the distributors think the public thinks, and we end by doing a lot of things not nearly as well as they ought to be done.

I noticed, however, in the first three months I was out here that the technicians always seem to do their job just as well as it could be done. They aren't up against the problem of what some picture owner thinks the public wants. Nobody says that what Ray June is doing is over the public's head. Nobody says that the sound in *One Night of Love* is too good for the motion picture audience, nor does anyone say that *Roberta* is too well cut for the masses to understand.

I envy the fact that you are always allowed to take as your motto, "perfection pays."

Probably you are laughing up your sleeves because you find your equipment a little antiquated or you are up against financial difficulties, but you never have that horrible bug-bear—"what the public wants," "the public won't stand for perfection." I know now that two major companies are debating whether or not they can make the greatest play in the English language, and that's a pretty disheartening idea.

I want to tell you roughly the history of RKO's contact with Technicolor. About two years ago Merian Cooper persuaded Jock Whitney to make motion pictures in the new Technicolor process. At that time he was the head of the studio and I was lucky enough to be assigned the first picture in color. Then Mr. Cooper was taken ill. While he was away we determined not to make a long picture but a short. That was *La Cucaracha*. This fall when Mr. Cooper recovered and was ready to go to work again, he had to make two pictures in black and white, and again I had the good luck to be on the job and to do *Becky Sharp*. I'm boring you with this history only to give a bow to Merian Cooper as the father of three-color production on the screen.

Another thing I want to say about technicians is that it seems to me they are wonderful people to deal with. I've found that true in the studio and particularly true at Technicolor. As soon as I went to work on *La Cucaracha* and *Becky Sharp* I came more and more into contact with these people and I found them quite as intelligent, quite as far-seeing as I had found them twenty years ago in Philadelphia when, as a motion picture editor, I first came in contact with Dr. Kalmus and his co-workers. I could name half a dozen men at Technicolor who have done wonderful work, not only in devising this new process but in cooperating with and understanding the rather screwy people connected with production.

* Associate Producer, RKO-Radio Studios. Producer of *Becky Sharp*.

Before you see the reels of film that we have here to show you, I should like to point out one thing that seems quite significant to me. There is some resistance to color due to the fact that we discovered black-and-white photography first.

Suppose there had never been black-and-white photography or black-and-white halftone reproduction. Suppose we had been used to color photographs and colored pictures for the past fifty or seventy-five years. Then if someone invented the black-and-white photography and black-and-white halftones, the result would, I am sure, be frightfully disappointing and definitely puzzling. We should have to translate all the tones almost as we translate a foreign language mentally when we hear someone speaking it. We should have to figure out mentally what actual color was represented by the gray of a face, the black of a tree, *etc.* I found somewhat the same effect after I saw a two-color picture, *The Wax Museum*. When a normal black-and-white picture came upon the screen it gave me a curious psychological shock and the thought, "What is this—a painting in mud?" Experiences like this are going to beat down our instinctive resistance to color.

One thing that is going to push color very far ahead is television. I was in the theater a good many years as a producer, and I saw the road destroyed by the movies. The silent screen was destroyed by the talking picture. Then the talking picture had to meet the competition of the radio. Now they tell us television is coming, and motion picture producers are beginning to worry about it. People can turn a little button and sit at home and be entertained, but they are going to get that entertainment in black-and-white for a good many years. Color television will come undoubtedly, but it will come late, and in the meantime the screen will be able to use color against the competition of television. There will be an added sense of vividness in the theater that will not be apparent upon the home screen.