

*As soon as a piece of nature becomes an image,
we consider it with different eyes. – Rudolf Arnheim*

Cinematic Color as Likeness and as Artifact

[2001]

I.

It is a common belief that colors can be reproduced in photography and film with utter naturalness, that they can remain legible as in reality itself and reveal the beauty and meaning of nature. But whereas the colors of the world are generally regarded as an embellishment, albeit a superficial one,¹ the color photograph that captures them is often less beautiful. What is the reason for this failure? What are the factors that so often make color photography – and even more so color film – aesthetically unsatisfying? Why is it so much easier to take a good black-and-white photograph? As if nature, which quite obviously comes in color, were resisting the chromatic reproduction of its charms.

With just a modicum of skill or with a little luck, black-and-white images succeed. One need only compare old-fashioned passport photographs with their color counterparts from a photo booth.² Although reduced to graphic values, the black-and-white face is of a more essential, more delicate, artful, and yet fascinating similarity, while the color photograph is blotchy, slightly bloated, less flattering, and also less similar. Shouldn't color be truer to life and more expressive, as it conveys more information about the circumstances recorded than a black-and-white image? But paradoxically, the additional information rarely seems an improvement and is more often a tiresome excess. Monochrome photography, as Gerald Mast has noted, selects visual beauty "of necessity, since it 'sees' shapes, shadows, forms, and

1 The superficiality of color, its lack of substance, has led to it being regarded in Western culture as an incidental, inferior quality of objects – an assessment that was reinforced by puritanical ideas and even today has not completely receded: see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000). The influence of this attitude on the study of art is described in Max Imdahl, *Farbe: Kunsttheoretische Reflexionen in Frankreich* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987), using the example of the "primacy of drawing", a view that values the conceptual over the sensory.

2 Similar questions are already pursued in Rudolf Arnheim, "Remarks on the Colour Film", trans. F.G. Renier, *Sight and Sound* 4, 16 (1935/36): 16off, reprint in Rudolf Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 19f.

textures that the human eye cannot.”³ By contrast, the color photograph captures much of the insignificant and ephemeral that we have learned to overlook in reality, and it tends to exaggerate the phenomena.⁴ Moreover, the incidental and the essential are mixed in such a way that we are unable to subtract one from the other. Color portraits have to be conceived very carefully in terms of lighting and composition in order to create a successful image we can accept as a likeness.

The group photograph offers a good example of the problem in question. In a black-and-white class photo, all the children are lined up more or less equally, only individualized by their specific features of face and form. At most, a position in the center or on the end of a row creates privileges, and strong contrasts of brightness can seem unfairly eye-catching. In most cases, however, the composition takes on a nice “democratic” uniformity. In color, many disruptive elements threaten to break up the image. A red sweater can attract the eye as if it were the most important thing and the child wearing it the main character. If the color red appears at the margin, the whole image is thrown out of balance; if red appears in the background, it seems to push its way forward, because red is perceived as closer to the viewer than blue or green. Moreover, irrelevant connections are established: clothes of the same color seem to signal friendships, while clashing shades express antipathies – a dramaturgy of the accidental, which suggests false hierarchies and interferes with the meaning of the photo. We read the photograph as intentional, even though we know it is a snapshot, and we tend to blame random features on the subject matter depicted. In the words of Rudolf Arnheim: “As soon as a piece of nature becomes an image, we consider it with different eyes.”⁵

Both examples, the passport photo and the class photo, indicate that color photography is afflicted with visual data difficult to control and plan. The sheer number of hues – and the human eye can discriminate between thousands of them – represents a challenge that can easily become too much to handle. Other parameters include the degree of saturation, brightness values, contrasts, harmonies and disharmonies, effects of warmth or cold, effects of proximity or distance, matte versus glossy, primary colors versus mixed colors, balance within the composition, transparency versus

3 Gerald Mast, *Film, Cinema, Movie: A Theory of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 96.

4 See Hans J. Wulff, “Die Unnatürlichkeit der Filmfarben. Neue Überlegungen zur Signifikation und Dramaturgie der Farben im Film (Zwei Werkstücke),” *Europäische Zeitschrift für Semiotische Studien* 2, 1 (1990): 177-197.

5 Rudolf Arnheim (see note 2), 161.

opacity, restraint versus chromatic richness, or vibration versus steadiness. Compared to the two basic parameters of black-and-white – the dualistic polarity of brightness versus darkness on the one hand, and the continuum of gray shades on the other – this represents a bewildering abundance.⁶

Alongside Western culture's general skepticism about color, two conflicting reasons may have been responsible for the neglect of color photography in the art world: the belief that the "automatic" reproduction of all natural data is an aesthetic mistake – it is too simple and too uncreative – and the fact that the aesthetics of color photography are as complex as they are. While fathers had been taking family snapshots in color for decades, most art photographers stuck with black-and-white for a remarkably long time.⁷ The aesthetic bonus that black-and-white photography offers – the bringing out of textures, the illusionary effect of space, the graphic unity of the image, and the impression of abstraction – weighed more heavily than the challenge of overcoming the aesthetic handicaps of color.

It goes without saying that the difficulties of color photography are multiplied when movement is added to the composition, and when the image is projected. In film, the composition changes over time, and with every moment the balance of the colors shifts, needing to be readjusted or ceasing to correspond to its subject. It is difficult to maintain the optimal lighting, which in color is incomparably more relevant than in black-and-white, as cinematic color is crucially tied to the quality of the light. The position of the sun already affects the color temperature as a warmer or colder cast, and white surfaces or even a white shirt can reflect the surrounding hues and distort the intended values. Whenever objects move from one light zone to another, undesirable fluctuations of color may result. With the advent of the digital age in recent decades, there has been enormous technical progress, especially in color photography, but problems still exist – and viewing films from earlier times makes us fully aware of them again.

Whereas our brain usually ensures that we perceive the color of an object as stable despite changes of light, sitting in the darkness of a cinema we lack the points of reference for such a correction. Although we have learned to deal with the inconstancy of color in film without being conscious of this effort, unexplained fluctuation tends to cause a slight uneasiness. And although some lighting mistakes could always be compensated for in

6 See again Arnheim, and also Gerald Mast's brief but lucid description of the differences between color and black-and white (see note 2), 87ff.

7 See Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), who notes that the art photograph in color only gained acceptance in the 1960s.

postproduction, until recently many problems of color persevered. We are all familiar with the disturbing effect when a dress seems cherry red at one instant and orange the next. Even the color of an actor's eyes can change from moment to moment.

The introduction of the three-strip Technicolor process⁸ in the mid 1930s was not greeted with undivided enthusiasm.⁹ Unlike color photography in the art world, it was however taken for granted by the American film industry that this was a new sensation that had to be exploited, no matter how costly or how intricate. At first, one of the main concerns was that color might come across as too vulgar, too garish to conform to the standards of good taste. Many strategies to escape "vulgarity" were developed in the 1930s and 1940s: reducing the number of hues per scene, avoiding large zones of primary colors, withholding certain colors in order to play them out at a climax, meticulously harmonizing the costumes of the ensemble, or even copying the palettes of established painters to prove an affinity to high culture.¹⁰ At the same time, the wonders of "glorious Technicolor" had to be exhibited.

The first projects considered for color were costume spectacles, musicals, and fairy tales – films of opulent decor, where fantasy and escapism could reign – rather than realistic material such as war and gangster dramas, or psychological conflicts and social problems.¹¹ Obviously, it had been decided that color was not a way of conveying naturalistic information, but could be treated as a pleasant and more or less extravagant addition. This view only began to change over the course of the 1950s, as color gradually became the norm, and it is interesting to see how one bastion of the black-and-white film after another fell, until black-and-white became a creative option only rarely chosen today.

8 See especially Richard W. Haines, *Technicolor Movies: The History of Dye Transfer Printing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003; orig. publ. 1993), also available on Google Books.

9 On Hollywood's hesitant transition to color, see Gorham Kindem, "Hollywood's Conversion to Color: The Technological, Economic and Aesthetic Factors," in *The American Movie Industry. The Business of Motion Pictures*, Gorham Kindem, ed. (Carbondale etc.: Southern Illinois University Press), 146-158. On the critical reservations and theoretical proposals made when the new color system was introduced (and also later), see Wulff (see note 3). Julia Schmidt/Hendrik Feindt describe how skeptical European authors were initially about color in "Farbe im Film – ein traumatisches Verhältnis?," *Frauen und Film* 58/59 (1996): 59-75.

10 One early and spectacular example is Rouben Mamoulian's *BLOOD AND SAND* (1941), a bullfighter film in which many scenes cite the palette and style of a famous Spanish painter.

11 On the problems relating to color and realism, see Edward Buscombe, "Sound and Color," *Jump Cut* 17 (1978): 23ff.

During the 1950s, Hollywood began to drop its precautions, at least in the lighter spectrum of entertainment. As will be shown below, the color schemes of musicals and comedies were quite flashy, although still following a set of rules. For the western genre, different conventions applied – landscape colors would dominate, while color stimuli would be reserved for saloon scenes or an occasional necktie or bandana handkerchief. And for more serious subjects like social dramas or gangster films, black-and-white still prevailed.

In the course of the 1960s, styles in Hollywood as well as in other film-making traditions became more variegated. The many parameters that color offers led to a general proliferation of approaches, some films relying on strong differences from scene to scene, while others created color chords that would function selectively and independently of the subject matter.¹² In some cases during this period, color was used symbolically, or to provide leit-motifs throughout the entire work. Some films employed color to set off their characters against each other or from the background, while others attempted to fuse them with the ambiance. Colored lighting and filters that produce a particular color were also used to affect the mood of a scene or to establish a stylish look. In general, color values are very much subject to fashion, though the audience may not be too aware of these ephemeral styles. But copying nature has not been a priority in the color aesthetics of the fiction film: “No program of realism is evident,” as Hans J. Wulff has noted.¹³ Michelangelo Antonioni went so far as to have the landscape and objects in *IL DESERTO ROSSO* (1964) painted in order to achieve the appropriate atmosphere.¹⁴

As the above should have made clear, there is no one-to-one translation of natural color values, no mimetic reproduction of color. Even if the palette of a film seems rather authentic, it has often been created with great care and artifice. Where control or sensitivity are lacking, cinematic color quickly becomes unattractive, arbitrary, or straining. Color is a very delicate factor, and many directors, cinematographers, and set designers have capitulated to the problems, satisfied with a cautious middle ground.

12 On the films and traditions mentioned, and others with interesting use of color, see James L. Limbacher, *Four Aspects of the Film* (New York: Brussel & Brussel, 1968); William Johnson, “Coming to Terms with Color,” *Film Quarterly* 20, 10 (Fall 1966): 2-22; Frieda Grafe, *FarbFilmFest: Begleitheft der Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek zu einer Berlinale-Filmreihe* (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1988); and especially Jacques Aumont, ed., *La couleur en cinéma* (Milan: Mazzotta; Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1995).

13 See Wulff (see note 4), 183.

14 See Thomas Meder, “Michelangelo Antonionis *IL DESERTO ROSSO* und seine Überlegungen zur Farbe,” in *Natur und ihre filmische Auflösung*, Jan Berg/Kay Hoffmann, eds. (Marburg: Timbuktu, 1994), 71–78.

II.

Of the many approaches to and stylistic possibilities of cinematic colorization, two contrary practices will be taken up and juxtaposed in what follows. My first example is a melodramatic backstage musical produced in Hollywood in the late 1950s, at a time when light entertainment stood out for its pointed use of color. The second example is an auteur film from Hong Kong situated in the urban subculture and intensifying a modern cinematic tradition that is based on virtuoso camera movement, a rapid action tempo, and visual effects.

PAL JOEY, the American example, was directed by George Sidney in 1957, based on the eponymous stage musical by Rodgers & Hart. George Sidney specialized primarily in musicals and had been shooting in opulent color since the early 1940s. In the history of film, he is regarded as an old hand with no particular personal features: "If he has a special characteristic, it is his skill at deriving an extra, animated voluptuousness from such as Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Kim Novak and Ann-Margret."¹⁵ In the case of *PAL JOEY*, the stars were Rita Hayworth, Kim Novak, and Frank Sinatra. The director of cinematography was Harold Lipstein, Walter Holscher took care of the art direction, and an experienced color consultant from Technicolor, Henri Jaffa, supervised the color scheme. In those days, Technicolor only provided its services if a representative of the company was hired along with the camera to safeguard that the production displayed the Technicolor process to its best advantage.¹⁶

At the time *PAL JOEY* was produced, a Technicolor style had evolved in Hollywood that was observed from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s mainly in musicals and comedies, but not exclusively so. Many features of the style can also be found in melodramas and other genres, though they were not as consistently and obtrusively employed as in light entertainment.

One of the priorities of the style concerned the natural colors of the actors and the way these could be matched and heightened by the ambiance. Whether a star was a blonde or a brunette, what color her eyes were, and

¹⁵ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), 519. See also Alain Masson, "George Sidney: Artificial Brilliance/The Brilliance of Artifice," trans. Liz Heron, in *Genre: The Musical*, Rick Altman, ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 28-40; orig. publ. in French in *Positif* 180 (1976): 48-54. Masson laments that little had been written about Sidney, and what little there was appears not to be especially flattering. But he claims that the director's specific talent lay in the *mise-en-scène*, which he orchestrated opulently, albeit sometimes at the cost of good taste.

¹⁶ On color consultants, see Haines (see note 9), 27.

which male star she could be paired with were often crucial factors for a career.¹⁷ Doris Day may have set standards with her deep blue eyes and golden hair; and Rock Hudson, with his black hair and bronze skin, offered himself as a perfect partner. Kim Novak also met exacting demands, thanks to her green eyes and her bright and even complexion. Rita Hayworth had already been effective in black-and-white as an erotic actress and dancer, but her chestnut hair provided an additional attraction. Sinatra was less rewarding in this respect, as his hair was bland and scarce, and at best his blue eyes – which could also look brown – could be exploited as an accent. His charms lay elsewhere, more on the graphic level of individual lines and edges (his face was better suited for black-and-white).

The overall color style in question can be described as follows.¹⁸ The background of a scene (and most scenes would take place indoors) was usually rather restrained – all variations on off-white, dove blue, silver gray, beige—so that the costumes could be set off against it. Particularly for a male ambiance, these hues could be inverted, so that walls would be chocolate brown, anthracite, or a deep blue. Against these backgrounds, the characters would be wearing relatively vivid clothing, preferably single-colored and slightly off the pure, saturated primaries, which would be reserved for special use. Among the most popular mixed colors were tomato red, rust, sorrel or cinnamon, porcelain blue, turquoise, chartreuse, and corn yellow, and they would reappear over a variety of films. Diffused but strong top lighting ensured a luxurious, high-key brightness. Shadow zones were largely avoided, so that the characters stand out like colorized figurines. To enliven this palette, smaller objects or clothing accessories would often display clashing, contrasting colors. So-called “split complementaries”¹⁹ were the rule here: for example, a bluish mauve and a variation on orange

17 See Stephen Neale, *Cinema and Technology: Image, Sound, Colour* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), especially the brief chapter “Colour and the Female Image.”

18 Alongside PAL JOEY, the following Hollywood films are examples of this style: TORCH SONG (Charles Walters, 1953), LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME (King Vidor, 1955), DESIGNING WOMAN (Vincente Minnelli, 1957), THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT (Frank Tashlin, 1957), LES GIRLS (George Cukor, 1957), ASK ANY GIRL (Charles Walters, 1959), PILLOW TALK (Michael Gordon, 1959), BACHELOR IN PARADISE (Jack Arnold, 1961), BOYS' NIGHT OUT (Michael Gordon, 1962), LOVER COME BACK (Delbert Mann, 1962), SUNDAY IN NEW YORK (Peter Tewksbury, 1963), STRANGE BEDFELLOWS (Melvin Frank, 1964). Melodramas were occasionally produced in the style as well: BUTTERFIELD 8 (Daniel Mann, 1960). See my essay “Chords of Color” (2006) in the present volume.

19 See Leatrice Eiseman/Lawrence Herbert, *The Pantone Book of Colors. Over 1000 Color Standards. Color Basics and Guidelines for Design, Fashion, Furnishings...and More* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 18.

would sit next to red – the hue between them on the color wheel²⁰ – or chartreuse would pair with light turquoise in the proximity of a true green.

The characters could thus be marked in terms of narrative similarity or difference; in terms of past, present, or future liaisons, of antitheses or antipathies, and, where brightness is concerned, of importance. Much like film music, color sometimes anticipates what is coming in order to express, for instance, that two people belong together or that the protagonist will fail in his or her endeavor. Often color conveys subjective states of mind, and in that, too, it is related to music. In this tradition, the characters were not clothed consistently according to a leitmotif, but rather according to the particulars of mood and situation or to the coloring of the other characters on screen. As mentioned above, much attention would be directed to the personal colors of the actors and actresses, which could be picked up in the details of their costumes or brought out by means of complementary colors. This program may sound simple, yet it achieves quite striking results, and in spite of its obvious points allows for a subtle orchestration of the story.

As a backstage musical, *PAL JOEY* alternates between nightclub sequences – sometimes featuring song-and-dance numbers, sometimes altercations between the protagonists – and sequences in apartments or outdoors. The plot revolves around a love triangle between the shady entertainer and nightclub proprietor Frank Sinatra, his more mature lover and financial backer Rita Hayworth, and the young bar singer Kim Novak. As it gradually escalates into a conflict, the color is staged accordingly. After a number of initial sequences, kept mainly in shades of ivory, beige, and gray, the scenes become increasingly vivid. Rita Hayworth reaches a color climax around the sixtieth minute, in a private moment after a night of love, while her rival, Kim Novak, builds herself up color by color until she succeeds in outplaying Hayworth during the final sections of the film. Hayworth's scene is narcissistic and glamorous, and it takes place in the simultaneous harmony and contrast of an elegant selection of the spectrum. But Novak's gradual victory, develops step by step, and her costumes mark this development in a series of successive colors.²¹

Rita Hayworth's morning after begins as she wakes up at home (fig. 1a). She is alone, and her solitary presence anticipates her later fate: although

20 See the color wheel on page 74 in the present volume.

21 On simultaneous and successive contrast, see Hilmar Mehnert, *Film, Licht, Farbe: Ein Handbuch für Filmschaffende und Filmfreunde*, 2nd. ed. (Halle: VEB Fotokinoverlag, 1963), 251 and 268.



Fig. 1 a-d: PAL JOEY

erotically successful at this point, over the course of the plot she will lose Frank Sinatra's love. A luxurious bed, its headboard padded with shimmering lime-green silk, stands next to gathered curtains in shades of a gentle green that inclines toward turquoise, and a gentle olive with a shimmer of greenish gold. The lime green of the headboard seems to support and refresh these shades, and its organic hue establishes a connection with the fruity colors of the actress, mediating between the areas. Spread out on the bed we see creamy white silk bedclothes and Hayworth herself, putting on an alluring, peach colored negligee, against which her complexion stands out delicately and to which her chestnut hair corresponds elegantly. Saturated primary hues – especially red – are avoided, as are dark shadows. All the various shades of the ambiance combine to create an ensemble in pastel. Rather than intense contrasts, faintly clashing background notes give character to the composition – adding just the bite it needs to avoid looking sweet.

Hayworth is preoccupied with herself and slightly melancholy. Taking a shower voluptuously (fig. 1b), she sings the famous song “Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” all to herself – PAL JOEY is, after all, a musical – while a series of details of her room come into view. Depending on the lighting, her hair looks sometimes almost blonde, sometimes dark or chestnut, and, depending on the mood, rust-red, dark brown, and corn yellow pieces of furniture appear, so that the initial chord of colors shifts and intensifies from moment to moment. However, the colors remain within the selected scheme, and red, green, and blue exist only as mixed values. There is not a single moment in which the colors do not conform to Rita Hayworth's person; everything is coordinated to flatter her beauty. Later in the film, Hayworth's wardrobe will lose its vividness to the same extent that her rival asserts herself through the coloring of her clothes.

Kim Novak wears monochromes almost exclusively. If all her dresses were lined up in one shot, they would produce an Easter-egg effect. Progressing by way of a subdued red, a porcelain blue, a clear purple, at a decisive point in the plot she finds herself in a brilliant emerald green and then moves on to its complementary color, an equally brilliant primary red, as will be described below (figs. 2b and c). At the very end she is dressed in a creamy white; a raincoat tailored from the same fabric as Frank Sinatra's coat, with whom she will now remain together (fig. 2d).

The crisis around Kim Novak arises when Sinatra's business partner, Rita Hayworth, becomes jealous. At first the color green appears to be assigned to Hayworth. In front of the green chairs of the nightclub (fig. 1c), which she



Fig. 2 a-d: PAL JOEY

and Sinatra designed together, Hayworth is involved in conversation with Sinatra as Novak performs her next number onstage. Novak, inserted in occasional close-ups (fig. 2a), conforms to a reddish color scheme – healthy and contrary to the cool subtlety of Hayworth, whose greenish-beige costume fits into the decor in the way described above, rounded off with ivory-white trimmings and a small hat. Sitting on a chair between her and Sinatra is his shaggy little dog, also ivory in color, suggesting a family of three. But the conversation is hostile; Hayworth demands that Novak be fired immediately.

Sinatra joins Novak in her dressing room. She has changed into a green dress that fits around her body like a case. After all the green upholstery in the nightclub, we associate her retrospectively and subliminally with the furniture. In her proper dress, she appears respectable and rather buttoned up. It is therefore particularly out of place when Sinatra, who has come to humiliate her, proposes she do a striptease number as her new act. Novak agrees with a forced smile but breaks out in tears as soon as he has left. The little dog, who had slipped in with its master, jumps on her lap to console her. And we realize that its fur and her hair are identical in color – if only in this shot (fig. 1d). Apparently the family relationships are not what the previous scene has led us to suppose: not Hayworth but Novak is “the right one,” even though for the moment she will have to content herself with the dog. When she subsequently enters the nightclub, we get the message spelled out clearly: her colors fit better than those of Hayworth, and it is unmistakable that she belongs there.

After a few more complications, the striptease number is being rehearsed, with pastel rococo costumes and Mozart’s *A Little Night Music*. Novak, whose unexpectedly plump legs suit neither striptease nor Mozart, works with valiant determination, until Sinatra’s better impulses take hold and he cancels the number. In response, out of anger and disappointment, Hayworth decides to close the nightclub. Defiantly, Novak chooses a triumphant red for her next performance. It is as yet undecided what her prospects will be – she is still fighting – but her dress betrays the outcome. It may seem the wrong choice for her emotional state, but it expresses her dramatic potential, especially in contrast with the green dress of the previous crisis scene. In the succession of the two complementary colors that clearly dominate all the other hues, she develops into the center of energy. The subtlety of the nuances that connote Hayworth’s wealth and cosmopolitanism succumb to the simple, loud color scheme of the little singer from a small town – the “mouse with the build,” as Sinatra puts it appreciatively.

III.

CHUNGKING EXPRESS (Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong 1994) is probably one of its director's most famous films, even though it was made spontaneously and with a low budget during a lull in the production of Wong's ambitious *ASHES OF TIME*.²² An unconventional auteur filmmaker who writes his own screenplays and ensures maximum control over his films, Wong Kar-wai has often been called a postmodernist and an "Asian Godard."²³ He prefers to work with a long-standing team which includes, along with the production designer William Chang Suk-ping, the Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle, who at that point was active mostly in Asia.

Among the favored expressive means of Wong and Doyle are a handheld camera driven to the extreme and moving so rapidly that often only blurred shreds and strips can be made out; selective racking of focus; lighting that alternates between neon brightness, colored filters, and glimmering residual light; slow motion; and accelerated motion. In particular, their style is characterized by an eccentric manipulation of time. The actors sometimes move before the camera at reduced speed – in a kind of natural slow motion – but will be accelerated by the camera to a degree that their gestures look almost normal on screen, while other people in the image seem to be moving much too quickly. Sometimes acceleration, with its correspondingly longer exposure times, is also employed so that movements blur,²⁴ and this effect is later combined with another technique, so-called step printing. This involves copying individual frames several times, thereby extending the material until once again twenty-four frames per second are reached. The result is a visual paradox in which the image carries the signs of long exposure but the actions seem to correspond to real time. Wong and Doyle refer to these techniques as their "signature style," and its nervous surreality lends visual flair to the film and to its strangely convoluted, erratic—at once halting and explosive—narration.²⁵

22 Thanks to the intervention of Quentin Tarantino, who brought the film to the United States, *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* became a cult film.

23 By contrast, Curtis K. Tsui, "Subjective Culture and History: The Ethnographic Cinema of Wong Kar-wai," *Asian Cinema* 7, 2 (Winter 1995): 93-124, works out the director's Chinese roots and the atmosphere in the British colony of Hong Kong.

24 One has to keep in mind that the accelerated-motion effect results when *fewer* frames per second than normal pass through the camera, and the slow-motion effect when *more* than 24 frames per second do. Both techniques affect the exposure time.

25 On narrative structure and especially the approach to time in the work of Wong Kar-wai, see Jean-Marc Lalanne, "Images from the Inside," trans. Stephen Wright, in *Wong Kar Wai*, Jean-Marc Lalanne et al., eds. (Paris: Dis Voir, 1998), 9-27.

CHUNGKING EXPRESS consists of two episodes – two short stories, so to speak – which are linked by the common location of Hong Kong, by casually recurring visual motifs, by the same snack bar with a paternal proprietor (who anchors the events in each case), and by the fact that both episodes feature a young policeman as the main character. A third episode had been planned, which would have balanced out the narrative while making it more conventional, but the script for it was reworked and extended for the film *FALLEN ANGELS* (1995). Now the two remaining parts stand in an interesting, unresolved tension to each other. In addition, there is an unusual soundtrack with a first-person voice-over that at times narrates the story and at times articulates the thoughts of a protagonist; unlike mainstream cinema practice, it can belong to different characters, characters who appear in parallel stories and only occasionally meet. The camerawork and the jittery editing with abrupt cuts and jump cuts is so dynamic and autonomous that the narrative structure seems almost natural in comparison.

The two stories are told with a similar point of departure. Each of the two compliant, sentimental, rather passive young policemen (Takeshi Kaneshiro and Tony Leung Chiu-wai) has recently been left by his girlfriend. Each pursues different strategies to get over this loss: lonely monologues, absurd commemoration programs, forced new encounters, playing with chance, excessive alcohol, or self-imposed rituals of liberation. Each of the policemen is assigned a female counterpart. In the first story, she is a drug dealer with a blond wig and sunglasses (Brigitte Lin Chin-hsia), who is the head of an Indian gang. She solves her conflicts with a gun, and seems to belong in a different genre of film. In the second story, she is a young waitress from the snack bar (Faye Wong) who falls in love with the protagonist but does not receive much attention. In an effort to be close to him anyway, she gains access to his apartment, cleaning it with abandon and redesigning it step by step behind his back. Each woman lives in her own world, which they arrange with imagination and autonomy, although in very different ways. In both cases, the encounter leads to nothing, but without leaving behind any bad feelings or regrets. We get the impression that everyone involved will manage to deal with his or her daily life in an entertaining and satisfying way.

In what follows, I will examine only the first of the two episodes, since its coloring is more extravagant. Fig. 3a, with its blurred background, illustrates the “signature style” – unfortunately, it is hardly possible to capture the dynamics of the image in a screenshot. Wong and Doyle employed slow motion plus step-printing in combination with a blue filter, turning all



Fig. 3 a-d: CHUNGKING EXPRESS

colors into cloudy, glazed hues of blue, from a man's originally white shirt to the rear wall. A considerable portion of the film is in this blue, which serves to announce not so much the time of day as a sensuous atmosphere; night scenes in *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* can also be tinted purple or brownish. The blue comes across as more peculiar than the conventional day-for-night coding of classical Hollywood film, which merely served to indicate that a scene is taking place at night. In recent global cinema, especially in police and action genres from the United States, France, and East Asia, the use of filters to level out the colors of the image is not unusual. But the films often stick to a gloomy indistinctness and only occasionally achieve the sensuous effects the filters have in Wong Kar-wai's film.

The filters affect the whole image. As most objects appear to be the same color, they can easily fuse together. Fig. 3b shows a moment from a sequence where this is particularly noticeable. The drug dealer, lingering in a murky lane, appears almost non-chromatic, her silhouette emerging only faintly against the background. A green shine, which does not come from any visible source, seems to swim over her head without illuminating her at all. The woman's golden wig and khaki trench coat combine into a continuous dark form that fuses with the actress's complexion. The glow of a cigarette that flashes for a fraction of a second provides the only warming accent.

Fig. 3c shows the drug dealer in the light-flooded terminal of the airport. The filter has been changed to yellow, which makes the yellow of the signs stand out as unusually saturated and pure. The coloring of the woman in the trench coat is affected in a different way: she has now almost totally transformed into a gentle beige. The bright yellow of the destination board behind her competes with her, but also flatters her, heightening and supporting her own coloring. Her sunglasses, which were previously as dark as the wall, now stand out distinctively. They seem almost justified in this gleaming brightness. The exotic character of the drug dealer, otherwise a mysterious shape in the dark, now asserts itself clearly: a Chinese woman masking her ethnicity.

The parallel plot about the lovesick policeman also takes place in the artificial light of downtown Hong Kong, a city in which the streets look like interiors. Again, the filters create distortions of color in which the characters only assert themselves through movement. At the snack bar (fig. 3d), the mustard-colored ceiling panels attract attention, as does the Coca-Cola logo, which has taken on an unhealthy bluish red; both hues are echoed in the sauce bottles on the counter, which stand like horizontal columns within the vertically articulated image. The watery blue light has usurped nearly all the other objects. Basically, filter effects are easy to achieve. But in the work of Wong and Doyle, the filters are superimposed on a color scheme that



Fig. 4 a-d: CHUNGKING EXPRESS

interacts with the lighting and is tailored to the composition of the scenes. The many whites in the image, which never look white in this film, and the meticulous approach to color accents results in a very special style with an appeal of its own. Large zones of the image are leveled out, while some objects emerge as strangely sculptural and establish new affinities with each other.

Figs. 4a and 4b are bathed in a shimmering, fluid green. The protagonist is at home, ready to spoon out his cans of pineapple, all of which have his birthday as their expiration date – a philosophical idea that elegantly runs through the film. He has opened the first can sitting next to his fish tank, which fills the screen during the opening of the sequence and in which the young policeman is now reflected, glassy and watery among the fish. The green coloring denatures the pineapple, making it appear strange and inedible. The viewer's attention shifts to the expiration date, to the process of eating, and to the young policeman's state of mind. In the remainder of the sequence – after he has spoken to his (green) dog – he moves to the back of the room, balances on a kitchen stool, and wedges himself against the wall as he empties more cans: an image of melancholy, thought-filled isolation in a space that seems to glow from within like a neon lamp.

In the next sequence, the two main characters are brought together. Determined to meet an attractive woman, the policeman approaches the drug dealer, who is sitting alone and similarly displaced at the same bar. Fig. 4c shows the two of them in a long, rather one-sided interaction – in a two-shot drenched in golden light that seems part gloomy, part intimate. The lighting is now more conventional than before; the faces are photogenically modeled by shadows, and the ambiance of the bar could realistically account for the color of the light. However, after all the filter scenes thus far, the scene looks like another variation on artifice. The difference between the two main characters, their contrary professions, their incompatible mood and nature, is bathed for a moment in a golden light, shown as a shared but tenuous experience.

Fig. 4d is an example of the shots that occasionally punctuate the film and show objects not assigned directly to one of the characters. The jukebox with dancing records appears several times throughout *CHUNGKING EXPRESS*, filmed from different angles. Pointing self-reflectively to the score and source music of the film, it also contributes to its overall pop atmosphere and alien coloring.²⁶ The golden light of the bar, though in this motif more

26 The film's soundtrack corresponds to its narrative style: "The soundtrack by Frankie Chan and Roel A. Garcia out-pastiches their previous work [...]. The score is an almost discordant mix of up-to-the-moment synthesizer cues, wailing electric guitars, source music from various ethnicities, Hindi chanting, and various pop songs," Curtis K. Tsui (see note 23), 114f.

transparent and shot through with yellow neon spots, fills the juke box with a vivid glamour. The records, with their sheen and glitter, appear to be from another world. Subliminally, we sense that they look like the slices of pineapple that we briefly saw in the scene with the expiration date.

IV.

CHUNGKING EXPRESS makes us aware of a fact mainstream films usually avoid disclosing: the dependence of the image on lighting and camera technique. Whereas PAL JOEY employs defused light that is “invisible” for the viewers in order to produce an almost shadowless brightness that results in constant, solid color surfaces, the film from Hong Kong operates with unstable light and the manipulation of color filters. Whereas the Hollywood camera of PAL JOEY behaves conventionally and hence transparently, not drawing the viewers’ attention to itself, Christopher Doyle’s camera proceeds dynamically and surprisingly, to the limits of its capability. A constant excess of clarity in the one film is contrasted with blurring, confusion, and virtuosity in the other.

In its color scheme, PAL JOEY sports Easter-egg effects and pleasant, single-colored costumes. Each color event is either echoed or has a complementary contrast in the ambiance. The primary hues of the spectrum are never all united in one composition; but there are always as many present as necessary to make the scene look fresh and lively. CHUNGKING EXPRESS, by contrast, avoids clear, saturated hues over long stretches of film. By using color filters, each shot obtains a dominant basic color, and most hues exist only as muted mixed tones. The result is frequently a kind of underwater effect in which the colors appear to be wet or seen through glass, and the boundaries between objects are largely eliminated.

Whereas PAL JOEY regards the characters as the main issue, so that they stand out against the background in every scene, the characters in CHUNGKING EXPRESS often fuse with their surroundings. They are treated as part of the ambiance. Whereas the characters in PAL JOEY keep their colors as constant as possible while moving around, in CHUNGKING EXPRESS they are in permanent chromatic metamorphosis. PAL JOEY is largely organized by object colors, CHUNGKING EXPRESS by fluid movement and colored light, and even skin color is subjected to flux. In the classic Technicolor films of Hollywood, skin color was sacrosanct. It was the most sensitive element in each shot, and all the other elements had to resonate with it. Consequently and without exception, the complexions of the actresses in PAL JOEY look

rosy, milky, and delicate. Often the background is in neutral, inorganic colors in order to bring out this effect even more. By contrast, *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* shows no qualms about making its characters look green or purple, and it does not seem to matter if their faces blur in the filtered light.

Both films structure color for narrative ends. In the case of *PAL JOEY*, this is expressed, on the one hand, by particular color chords for different locations, so that each place radiates a specific atmosphere and corresponds to the characters assigned to it. On the other, the costumes are changed frequently, so that the characters are constantly being redefined in their mood and status within the constellation of the ensemble. Each protagonist is systematically and individually emphasized. At the same time, each new costume renders a new dramatic impulse. The green costume calls out for red, as it were, and the colors gear into one another and intertwine in the course of the action. In the case of *CHUNGKING EXPRESS*, clothing remains rather constant from scene to scene, and when it is changed, the color is not the main motif. It does not serve to mark the characters as individuals, since they are all subjected to the same filter effects. In this film, too, the shots and sequences are contrasted with one another successively, but this is mainly achieved through the changing color cast. Moreover, the color does not follow a continuous, incremental arc; rather, the film often returns to a filter already used previously. The changes of color are based on variations of the segments, not on a goal-oriented, linear progress of the action.

As to the relative verisimilitude of the two color systems, both are probably equally far removed from the real world, but they achieve their artificiality in contrary ways. *PAL JOEY* attempts to present a prettified, over-determined reality. Everything is as visible and clearly defined as possible under the best lighting conceivable. But the preference for bright colors and their spreading across large expanses with few shadows seems artificially exaggerated. Also, the clothing obtains all too much presence and tends to overpower the characters. As certain objects in their surroundings correspond with the characters, the images look coordinated, staged, and devised in advance. More so than in *CHUNGKING EXPRESS*, the actors emerge as players of a role they have put on along with their costumes. And many of the images resemble comic strips with their fixed and solid object colors and their intensification in terms of significance.

At first glance, *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* seems much more distorted: the changing of filters is exhibited so obtrusively that the technical aspect is unmistakable, and the way the filters attack all the other colors represents a strange leveling out of the spectrum. On the other hand, the muted quality of the colors is certainly in keeping with everyday urban experience, just

as much as its opposite – harsh points of neon lighting – is in keeping with night in the city. The way the characters blur with their ambiance is another phenomenon familiar to us from dim lighting in which the objects no longer assert themselves against their surroundings. On the whole, what counts in *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* is not the consistent quality of certain objects, but the flow, the color of the moment that manifests itself like an aroma.

Translated by Steven Lindberg