Color and/is narration. The narrative role of color in Wes Anderson's filmic images

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ABSTRACT

American Director Wes Anderson's films are an interesting case study on the use of representation and visual language as elements capable of implementing the narrative underlying the film plot. His films, in fact, are constructed according to a logic similar to that of architectural representations. The combination of geometries, perspectives, textures and colors generates a code of signs capable of mediating between the intelligible and the sensitive, between the idea and the image. In particular, chromatic aesthetics constitutes a carefully curated component in the image sequences. The balanced and perfect color compositions, however much they may seem a decorative whim, represent a clever narrative device that, designed according to logical patterns, is able to embody symbolic and communicative values. This research, therefore, aims to investigate the language of color in Anderson's films, with the aim of analyzing its narrative potential. The color is investigated both as a narrative content of the filmic atmosphere and as a narrative container of emotions and symbols. The double register of analysis used for Anderson's films can become a trace of a general methodology of analysis, applicable not only to the works of other directors, but also to other forms of visual narration.

1. Introduction

The visual representation constitutes a communicative tool that accompanies the history of man since his birth, as clearly demonstrated by the examples of wall painting found in the *Lascaux* Caves, dating back to the Paleolithic period. The language of images, in fact, for its characteristics of conciseness, immediacy and universality, allows the observer to understand the underlying messages only through the use of sight, the sense he has most developed and experienced. As Scott McCloud also argues, the visual code has the ability to be understood by a generic individual without he has developed a specific formal education to interpret it, unlike what happens with the writing. The latter, in order to be understood, requires him to use a special vocabulary in order to decode the symbols of its language (McCloud, 1994). The role of visual narratives - already embedded in the same root "*idein*/to see" of the words "*eidos*/idea" and "*eidolon*/image" - is a topic of great interest, especially in today's society, where the concept of information culture is parallel to that of visual culture (Manovich, 2005). In recent years, in fact, visual media have experimented and investigated the narrative potential of images, whether they are static (painting and photography) or dynamic (video games and cinema). In the latter, in particular, the relationship between representation and narration is fundamental. The visual experience, in fact, is the dominant means of communication, so much so that it can acquire perfect narrative autonomy, as demonstrated by the first silent films. The story is an essential element, because each film sequence has its corresponding one that, mounted to the others, goes to configure the overall narrative. Among the formal elements of visual language used in cinema, color is certainly one of the most effective tools, because, in addition to contributing to the determination of tones, atmospheres and rhythms of the narrative, it is endowed with great psychological power, able to convey messages by leveraging emotional and perceptual factors of the audience. With the aim of analyzing the narrative potential of color in cinema, the research focuses on the films of American director Wes Anderson. In his films, in fact, the color is used both as content and as a narrative container, responding to the Kandiskyan idea according to which "color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with its many chords" (Kandinsky, 1996).

2. Visual storytelling in Wes Anderson's cinema. A methodology of investigation

Wes Anderson is an American director, screenwriter and film producer, who became famous for the great attention paid, in each of his films, to the definition of a precise and structured "aesthetic guideline" (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015), able to make itself immediately recognizable to the viewer. The logic through which Anderson constructs filmic images is similar to that of architectural representations. The combination of geometries and perspectives, as well as the care and attention in the composition of patterns and colors, in fact, generate a code of signs capable of mediating between the intelligible world and the sensitive one, transforming every idea into an image and every image into a story. Although the scenes are in motion, the compositional characteristics adopted by the director instill in the viewer the feeling of being in front of a painting. The camera, in fact, placed perfectly central and perpendicular to the scene, seems to move slowly along an imaginary grid of vertical and horizontal lines, thus building the story through prolonged sequence plans. When it is necessary to take a break in the montage, the camera, while changing its position, maintains its perpendicularity to the frame, giving the observer an ideal, symmetrical and perfect point of view. In particular, Anderson's style is distinguished by the role given to chromatic composition which, carefully crafted, confers an aesthetic logic to the visual compositions of each film (Seitz, 2013). The balanced and perfect color compositions, however much they may seem a decorative whim, represent a clever narrative device. The attention to the lights, to the chromatic combinations and to the calibration of the tones becomes for the director an element of support in the determination of the overall narrative atmosphere. The colors, moreover, are used in their emotional and symbolic component, with the aim of stimulating the mind of the audience, creating specific impulses and feelings necessary for the interpretation of the contents of the story. Wassily Kandinsky, theorizing about color in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", states that it acts simultaneously on two levels: the first is physical, based on the concrete visual sensation obtained from the observation of the chromatic phenomenon; the second is psychic, in which color, once processed by the brain, defines its role on the allegorical and perceptual level (Kandinsky,1996). Starting from these considerations, it is interesting to investigate the color of Anderson's films through this double register of analysis: on the one hand, it will be investigated as a tool to support the narrative in which it is inserted; on the other hand, we will focus on its ability to trigger a series of emotional and symbolic relationships in the viewer.

3. Color and Narrative. The construction of the filmic atmosphere

In the films of Wes Anderson, color is one of the main elements in the implementation of the narrative. As set

designer Adam Stockhausen explains, color is first studied to determine a general atmosphere, common to all his films, and then modeled on the individual narrative sequences, thus defining a specific palette for each of them (Grobar, 2015) (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015). Anderson's filmic narrative is always composed of particular, undefined and enigmatic plots. The characters do not specifically belong to the categories of protagonists/antagonists, because both dark and delicate aspects of them are shown. The film genre is never well defined, having comedies with nostalgic tones and dramas with bittersweet endings. This condition of indeterminacy is also communicated through color: the chromatic choices, the brightness and the calibration of shades, in fact, contribute to the construction of a stylized aesthetic (Zettl, 2011), aimed to communicate a narrative world explicitly fictitious and deliberately artificial (Lee, 2016). At the beginning, in fact, the color palette is reduced to a few essential colors, generally pastel tints, able to introduce the unrealistic and fairy-tale atmosphere. To the succession of scenes, then, corresponds a chromatic transformation increasingly synthetic: from pastel colors, soft and dusty, we pass to defined and saturated colors that, making each frame more artificial than the previous one, emphasize the story of a theatrical and surreal universe (Bartolomei and Ippolito, 2016). In "The Grand Budapest Hotel", for example, the ethereal tones with grey dominants of the initial scenes are transformed, as the narrative continues, into strong and distinct oranges and browns, until the insertion, in the final scenes, of shades of blue and violet (Fig.1). The sensation of a dreamlike and timeless world is also reinforced by the relationship between the chromatic choices of the filmic photography and those of the costumes and sets which, combining, generate retro atmospheres characterized simultaneously by nostalgic tenderness and jovial fun. One thinks of the yellow/blue patina that permeates skies, buildings and clothes in "Moonrise Kingdom", capable of recalling old family photographs, as well as the orange/brown lens of "The Darjeeling Limited", capable of creating oriental atmospheres inhabited by vintage characters. The synchronic composition of all the colors of the representation unifies the characters to their worlds, almost as if they could only live in that particular context. Moreover, even when darker events occur, the colors are kept bright and brilliant, ensuring that the viewer always has in mind that the one observed is a representation of a fantasy (Austerlitz, 2010). The perception of unreality is also communicated through the lighting: the light, always warm and soft, brings out the particular chromatic contrasts. The position of the light sources, often frontal to the scene, does not create strong shadows even in interiors, where the lights are diffused, determining a

further flattening of the images. The color, therefore, serves to support the director's message to the audience: by explaining the artifice, in fact, Anderson makes the viewer aware that what he is observing is not a faithful reproduction of reality, but a fictitious story that is located in a different world.

Fig. 1. The transformation of color in the narrative sequences of "The Grand Budapest Hotel".

Although the general definition of chromatic features is similar in all of Anderson's movies, the color is able to diversify each of his films. According to the director, in fact, every film needs a dominant color that, combined with a specific palette, allows to identify each story as different from the others (Fig.2). It is due to this reason that only one or a few colors are used in an overwhelming manner, thus monopolizing the "projective foreground" of the viewer (Yumibe, 2012). From the beige of "Isle of Dogs" to the yellow of "Moonrise Kingdom", from the blue of "The Life Aquatic" to the orange of "Fantastic Mr. Fox", each film presents itself as a vivid memory reduced to a single color, emblematic of the microcosm it wants to narrate. The revelation of the process of emphasizing a single color is once again revealed by Stockhausen. Talking about pink, the predominant color in "The Grand Budapest Hotel", he states that if only its tones had been used, its presence would have been cancelled in the eyes of the observer. He, becoming accustomed to the uniqueness of the chromatic stimulus, would stop seeing it (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015). For this reason, the addition of shades such as yellow and blue was necessary, so as to "cut" the dominant color, making it stand out more clearly (Grobar, 2015). Many studies show that the audience has little memory of color when reflecting on digital media (Block, 2008). Anderson, therefore, decides to increase

the intensity and saturation of the main color in relation to those of secondary colors. In this way, the viewer can create an immediate association between color and film, thus transforming the chromatic signal into a factor of differentiation of the narrations (Fig.3).
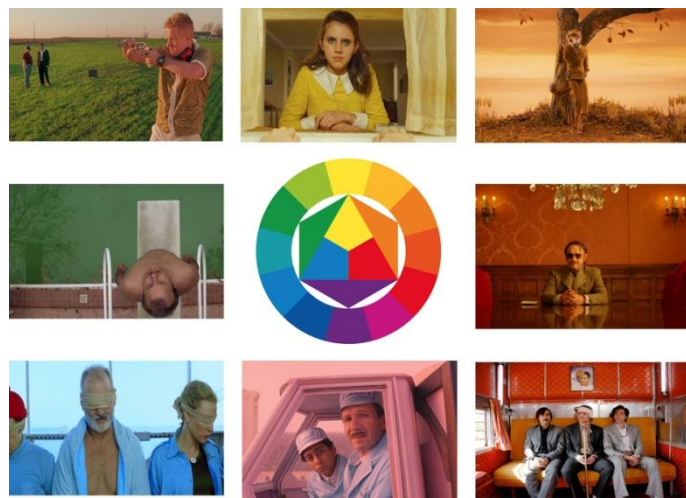

Fig. 2 Color palettes in Wes Anderson's films

Fig. 3. Dominant colors in Wes Anderson's films

4. Color is Narration. The chromatic associations between emotions and symbolism

The studies on color perception, the neurosciences and the biology all agree that color can influence certain moods or can trigger specific psychological reactions in people (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015). These perceptions that color is capable of establishing are assimilated by the human mind according to the images formed over time in the collective memory and culture. According to Yumibe, in fact, "through its sensual appeal, color can move the mind and emotions of a spectator. This understanding of

the interconnection of the senses, intellect, and emotions is also, broadly construed, synesthetic in nature" (Yumibe, 2012). Prolonged exposure to a specific color, therefore, creates reactions in the viewer, capable of connecting to specific symbols and emotions (Gegenfurtner and Sharpe, 2000). It is possible to diversify the sensations produced by combining and mixing tones (Itten, 1974). The psychological potential of color can be fundamental within film narratives, because the chromaticity of the images can itself be a story. In the works of Wes Anderson, in fact, color has become a real language through which to interpret themes and feelings of the characters and of the space they inhabit. Saturation and color mixing create different environmental perceptions and psychological impacts (Itten, 1974), while lighting and temperature establish relationships between characters and spatial contexts (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015). Anderson balances the chromatic weight in different ways with the aim of generating a sense of environmental stability or instability (Hurbis-Cherrier, 2012). In this way, he determines two types of scenes, those that are harmonious and those that are alienating. The visual result is pleasant, communicating security, calm and peace to the viewer, when the colors used in a scene are similar or close in color wheel, and the colors of the costumes and accessories of the characters blend with those of the furniture and of the architecture. On the contrary, if complementary colors are used, the contrast between the tones, becoming jarring and disturbed, causes feelings of tension and discomfort (Fig.4). The colors of the scene set in the elevator in "The Grand Budapest Hotel", for example, show a clearly caricatural situation. The saturated red of the elevator seems to incorporate the characters inside it, suggesting a feeling of tension. This feeling can be seen on the face of Madame D. who, not surprisingly, wears hat, gloves, dress and lipstick which are also of an intense red. The other characters are in contrast. The concierge and the lobby boys, in fact, wearing purple clothes, create a strident contrast with the red, emphasizing their feeling of discomfort and resignation towards the rich and impudent woman. On the contrary, the scene of the Mendl's sweet boxes is substantially monochromatic. The pastel tones of pink and light blue make the contrast less accentuated, expressing a harmonious situation of intimacy and rediscovered love, in which even the chaos of the boxes is perceived as positive and delicate. Color, moreover, becomes a symbol in Anderson's films to introduce a certain theme or emotion to the audience (Lee, 2016). The choice of specific colors and the variation of saturation scales of the tones, in fact, become emblematic in the construction of underlying meanings

Fig. 4. Comparison between contrast and chromatic harmony in "The Grand Budapest Hotel".

(Itten, 1974): the warm tones, from yellow to red-violet, symbolize humanity and life, contrasting with the cold tones, from purple to green, which are a metaphor of brutality and dehumanization. When Richie decides to commit suicide in "The Royal Tenenbaums", the director does not show the action, but he uses color to narrate the event. The thematic opposition between death and life is in fact represented by the contrast between the soft blue that occupies the entire visual scene, and the bright red of the blood that flows in the arms of the main character. In contrast, the scene is colored with warm yellows, oranges and browns when Richie himself discovers that his tormented love for Margot is reciprocated (Fig.5). The representation of color, moreover, often coincides with the emotional states of the characters, adding depth to their characterization, as happens with the pink of the young love between Zero and Agatha in "The Grand Budapest Hotel" or with the orange of the rediscovered communion between the brothers Francis, Peter and Jack in "The Darjeeling Limited". Red, for example, seems to be a color associated with male characters' desire and issues with the father figure (Vaughn Vreeland, 2015) (Fig.6). The young Max, in "Rushmore", wears a red hat in the moments in which he has the

desire to have the affection of his father Herman; Chas, in "The Royal Tenenbaums", wears a red jumpsuit since his adolescence, when he develops a conflictual relationship with his father, and his children also wear it; the vintage red car in "The Darjeeling Limited", is the only object that connects the three protagonists to the father figure, with whom they wished to have a relationship, no longer possible due to his death. Yellow, on the other hand, is often used by Anderson as a color of optimism and union (Fig.7). The sky is always tinged with yellow when the foxes are happy in "The Fantastic Mr.Fox"; the yellow submarine is the only source of joy for the protagonist of "The Life Aquatic of Steve Zissou"; the boy scouts wear yellow neckerchiefs in "Moonrise Kingdom" when they start a collective exploration.

Fig. 5. Warm tones and cool tones as symbolic and emotional expression in "The Royal Tenenbaums"

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the cinematographic images of Wes Anderson is an interesting starting point to understand how color is an integral part of filmic narration. The specific case of the films of the American director, capable of creating a symbiotic relationship between aesthetics and narrative, highlights the different communicative potential of color. Hues, saturations and tones allow to make explicit the director's intentions and ideas, differentiating the tone, rhythm and plot of each story. The different relationships between the colors, able

to generate contrasts, harmonies and different chromatic weights, stimulate instead the perceptions and feelings of the viewer in relation to the stories told. The color is investigated both as a narrative content of the filmic atmosphere and as a narrative container of emotions and symbols. The double register of analysis used for Anderson's films can become a trace of a general methodology of analysis, applicable not only to the works of other directors, but also to other forms of visual narration.

Fig. 6. The color red as an expression of the conflictual relationship with the father figure. From top to bottom: "Rushmore," "The Royal Tenenbaums"," The Darjeeling Limited"

Fig. 7. The color yellow as a metaphor for union and optimism. From top to bottom: "Fantastic Mr. Fox", "The Life Aquatic", "Moonrise Kingdom"

6. Conflict of interest declaration

The author declares that nothing affected her objectivity or independence and original work. Therefore, no conflict of interest exists.

7. Funding source declaration

8. Short biography of the author

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