

A Provocative Palette: The Role of Color in *Vertigo*

Had Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* been shot in black and white, it would fall among the countless "good" movies that feature not much more than a strong cast, intriguing storyline, and effective soundtrack; however, Hitchcock's masterful use of color sets *Vertigo* apart as one of the most impressive cinematic achievements of the 20th century.

The film surrounds Scottie (John Ferguson), a worn-out detective who resigns after witnessing his partner fall from a rooftop. His ex-fiancé, Midge, takes care of him after this emotional trauma in an almost motherly fashion. Soon after Scottie's resignation, his college friend Gavin Elster convinces him to follow his wife, claiming she's been possessed by her deceased great-grandmother. Judy, as Elster's puppet, pretends to be Madeleine as she lures Scottie around town and has him fall in love with her (when I refer to Madeleine in this analysis, it's to Scottie's idealistic notion of Madeleine developed during these interactions—not to Elster's actual wife). Once Madeleine apparently commits suicide, Scottie loses all hope—that is, until he discovers Judy, someone he believes he can morph into his lost Madeleine.

Scottie is associated with the color red throughout the entire film, representing his infatuation with the woman he believes to be Elster's wife. When we first see Judy at Ernie's, a local restaurant, the walls in the background are embellished with a red floral design. This not only foreshadows how Scottie's obsession ultimately engulfs and overpowers the helpless Judy, but also represents Gavin's anger towards his wife who he murders out of his own greed. These conflicting emotions of love and hatred from the main male characters of the film embody the simultaneous aggression to which Judy is subjected. They also illustrate how Judy is viewed as nothing more than a means to an

end by these men. To Scottie, she is a lump of clay he can mold into his ideal woman. To Elster, she is a cog in the machine of a villainous scheme to get away with the murder of his wife. To both, she is nothing more than a stepping stone in the pursuit of a larger, malicious goal.

In the midst of this sea of red, Madeleine stands out in a lavish green dress. As the film progresses, Madeleine/Judy is continuously surrounded by this color; the luminescent glow in her apartment, her car, and even her eyes are all characterized by their green tint. At the end of Scottie's transformation of Judy, her green aura is so overwhelming that she starts to appear ghastly, almost ethereal. At this point, Judy has reached the point of no return, having completely abandoned her former identity: she is now Madeleine. Scottie's incessant pursuit of his ideal Madeleine is embodied by this hue of green that she can't seem to escape. The other woman in Scottie's life, Midge, starkly contrasts the dependent nature of Madeleine to which he is attracted. When viewers are first introduced to Midge, everything about her is yellow—her clothing, the walls of her apartment, and even the chair (a symbol of support and comfort) she hands to Scottie before his unsuccessful attempt to overcome his acrophobia. Midge is also the only person in Scottie's life that is always there for him; whether it be making him a drink after a long day or catching him when he faints in her apartment, she both figuratively and literally supports him throughout the course of the entire film. Her independence and maturity, represented by this yellow aesthetic, repel Scottie.

So what does this color trichotomy achieve? Hitchcock's synesthetic use of color works to not only *convey* Scottie's struggle to the viewer, but also *draw* them into it. During the peak of Scottie's emotional turmoil, he has a vivid nightmare. Red, green,

and yellow shapes compete on the screen as Scottie's subconscious attempts to reconcile his conflicting emotions about Judy, Madeleine, and Midge—the three main women in his life. Had this scene been in black and white, it would fall flat to audiences, lacking the emotional component engendered through the use of color. Instead, viewers are drawn into the nightmare along with Scottie; the flashing colors and their associations that Hitchcock establishes throughout the film unsettle the viewer to a point that mirrors the inner turmoil of the protagonist. The emotional involvement achieved through Hitchcock's synesthetic use of color adds a personal element to the viewer's emotional experience that few films so flawlessly achieve. Because of this, *Vertigo* isn't just another "good" film—but a great one.

The writing process:

The writing process for this film review was rather difficult. I initially had a very broad claim regarding Hitchcock's use of detail (and how that was unprecedented—which may not have been a very accurate claim either). After meeting with Daniel, I changed it to focus more on Hitchcock's use of color. Additionally, instead of looking at and analyzing *Vertigo* in the context of its era, I chose to focus on the film as an isolated work of art. In my newer version, I also had a more coherent argument; whereas my old version spoke of the use of camera techniques, backgrounds, and color (which don't really relate to one another and lend themselves to the 5-paragraph essay structure), my newer version is a more analytical and streamlined film analysis that has a more consistent argument.

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Writing 5

Five changes from original:

1. More streamlined and consistent argument
2. Moved away from the five-paragraph essay structure
3. Wrote about the synesthetic use of color in addition to the use of color to represent ideas
4. Analyzed the nightmare scene
5. Went more in-depth in my analysis of the use of color and its representative use relating to Midge