

Dreamlike: Exploring the Art of Color Expression in The Grand Budapest Hotel

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Abstract. Color is the perception of the world by the human eye and the human brain. With the emergence of color films, color has become one of the most intuitive and important audio-visual languages in films. Color theory has been developing and perfecting in modern times, providing theoretical support for the color expression of movies. American director Wes Anderson's masterpiece *The Grand Budapest Hotel* won many awards including Oscars. Even though it's been ten years since its release, its unique color expression is still celebrated. To study the representative picture of film, this paper first starts from the fundamentals of color harmony, with the help of the color palette tool, this paper explores the way of color harmony of representative pictures under the framework of Deane B. Judd's color harmony principle. On the other hand, combined with color psychology theory, which explains how films can drive the narrative, guide the mood, and deepen the theme through color changes. Eventually arriving at Wes Anderson connects colors with theme, background, and plots, while realizing color harmony in the dynamic and static modes. The deep relationship between color, film theme, and background of the times is explored, and the balance between personal artistic expression and audience emotions is also perfectly achieved, which provides an excellent reference example for later generations.

Keywords: The Grand Budapest Hotel, color wheel, color harmony, color psychology.

1. Introduction

The development of modern color theory is accompanied by the revolutionary transformation of film from black and white to color, and the continuous breakthrough and innovation of digital color technology has brought great convenience to film color selection and adjustment. How to set the color of movies so that audiences from different cultural backgrounds can better understand "color" is a test of the color aesthetics and shooting techniques of directors and editors. After years of precipitation, Wes Anderson's color expression finally became its own school, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* has also become the representative work of Wes Anderson's color aesthetics. In the film, the director uses dreamlike colors to tell the story of Gustave, the concierge of the hotel, and Zero, the doorman, who was involved in a legacy struggle in the 1930s. The film features an embedded narrative that is set in four different time zones. They are, respectively, a girl reminiscing about the writer, the writer's confession at his old age, the writer befriending Zero at the Grand Budapest Hotel at his young age, and Zero reminiscing about the past. Among them, the fourth layer Zero recalls the past as the main part of the narrative, which contains five stories. This study combines color theories with picture analysis and illustration and analyses both the ways in which colors are toned and the role of color movement. The current research on the color of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is mostly stuck on the macro interpretation, and the research on the color harmony of the film is insufficient. Therefore, in the first half of this study, we begin by analyzing color harmony from a static perspective in relation to the principles to illustrate Wes Anderson's style of color expression. Here, the color palette will be introduced as an auxiliary tool to extract the colors in the picture onto the color wheel, and visually present the individual attributes (HSB attributes) of different colors and their interconnections. Then, in the second half, from a dynamic perspective, combined with the psychology of color, analyses how Anderson uses color movement to serve the narrative, direct the mood, and express the theme. This study aims to explore the rationality and feasibility of Anderson's

color expression style, to enhance the audience's color literacy, and to provide a practical reference for film production.

2. Color Analysis

2.1. Static Perspective-Color Harmony and Pleasant Vision

Deane. B. Judd, an American colorist, generalized four principles of color harmony based on the traditional color harmony theories of Ostwald, Munsell, and others, i.e. order, closeness, similarity, and clarity [1]. Based on Judd's four principles, studying the color expression of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is helpful to better understand the color harmony of movie pictures and enhance personal aesthetic accomplishment.

According to the traditional theory of color harmony, the colors that form geometric relations on the color wheel constitute color harmony. In the film, when Gustave and Zero are waiting for Mrs. D's housekeeper Serge to be received (Fig. 1), the director uses a picture-in-picture composition, chooses low-purity orange as the main color, and Gustave and Zero wear purple uniforms in the center of the picture, green colors such as cactus and vegetables form a triangular composition together. Through color selection, orange, purple, and green in the picture form a triangular harmony on the color wheel. Low-saturated orange is the dominant color, with purple and green as the two accent colors. Although pairs of the three colors constitute contrasting colors, the director reduces the purity and makes the expression softer. At the same time, the insertion of such weakly contrasting color combinations in the continuous plot advancement can better match the flattened images as well as the characters' semi-static and comical demeanor and demonstrate the director's ability to control the pace [2].

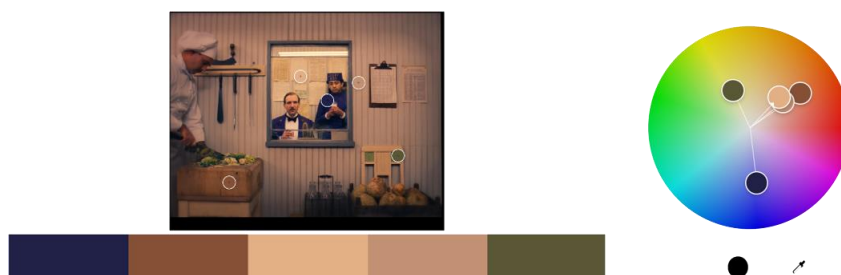


Figure 1. Triangular harmony

Secondly, it refers to the natural or familiar color scheme that will form harmony (naturalness or closeness). The exterior scene of the hotel in the 1960s on the third floor of the film adopts Wes Anderson's iconic axisymmetric composition (Fig. 2), Brown tone accords with people's subconscious experience of the main color tone of autumn in nature. Cut shots directly from the pink, cake-like hotel to the brown, naked hotel with its sugar-coated shell falling off. It intuitively shows a sense of gap after the collision between dreams and reality, which is a metaphor for the decline of civilization.



Figure 2. Natural colors harmony

Furthermore, the color scheme with commonality and similarity is harmonious. Similar colors and adjacent colors are used in many pictures of the film. The similarity could be the most common way

of color harmonization in this film, which effectively matches the change in plot tone. The interior of the hotel at the end (Fig. 3) creates a transition from pink to yellow to bright red from top to bottom. After taking the color you can find that the maximum angle between the color and the line connecting the center of the color wheel is about 30 degrees, which constitutes a similar color taking.



Figure 3. Similar colors harmony

Finally, Moon and Spencer divided colors into harmonious areas and disharmonious areas (ambiguous areas) and believed that the combination of "clear" colors in the harmonious areas were harmonious. However, color contrasts can be composed by rendering large areas of primary colors and dabbing small areas of complementary colors to increase clarity when mixing colors. Take the plot of a lawyer being killed as an example (Fig. 4), the director uses a gradient cyan with decreasing brightness difference to render the main color and form a harmonic area. In addition, the director set up several high-purity yellow lights to form a green-yellow contrast. In addition, the overlap of gradient cyan forms a perspective effect, which increases the layering of the picture, increases the three-dimensional movement of the picture while ensuring the balance of composition, and also indicates the plot turning point (the lawyer is about to be assassinated) [2].



Figure 4. Contrast color harmony

2.2. Dynamic Perspective-Driving Narrative, Channeling Emotion, Deepening Theme

Johannes Itten believed that color effects should be understood not only visually, but also psychologically, and that a person's understanding of the qualities and effects of color depends largely on his or her individual psychology and conditioning [3]. Jean Mitry believes that the essence of film color is to "tell stories with different colors". Color can show various forces in the scene and "explain" or "prompt" the audience's psychological state [4]. Wes Anderson's excellence is that he makes good use of color changes to achieve large-scale tone changes. He can flexibly use color to divide time periods and guide the audience's emotions. The typical representative is the development process of the five stories in the fourth embedded layer (Fig. 5).

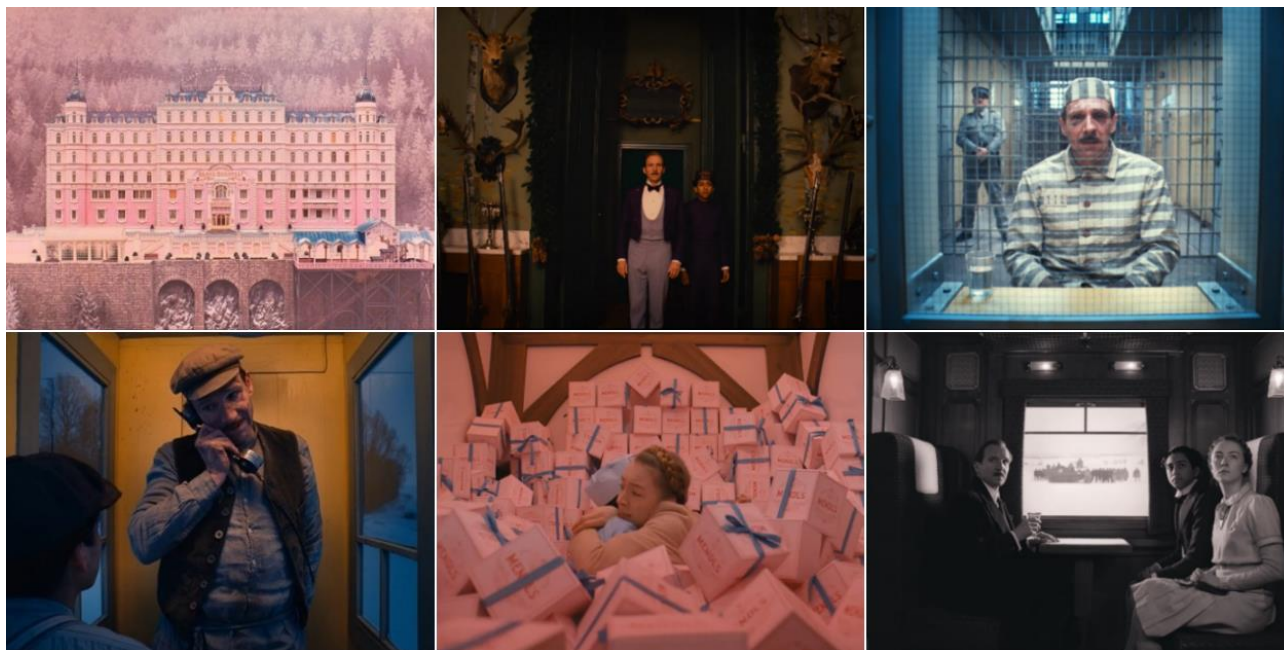


Figure 5. Tone changes between chapters

The pink color tone is used in Chapter 1 Mr. Gustave, making the audience feel peaceful and healed at the beginning; The color red, which in European culture signifies expensive and luxury, is used in the hotel in a high saturated red color to increase the visual impact. The hotel uniforms use the color purple, which represents mystery, nobility, and sensuality, and it also fits the characterization of the protagonist Gustave [5]. The three colors derived from red together impregnate the audience with the luxurious background color of the hotel, the luxurious scenes also pay tribute to the chivalry and literary feelings of people in that era [6].

In chapter 2, after Mrs. D's death, the movie ushered in a turning point. Mrs. D's mansion is gloomy and mysterious, even slightly terrifying, and its tone has changed to a serious and solemn jungle color. Black symbolizes darkness and negation in most cultures, and the darker scene here not only metaphors the dark ambition of Mrs. D's family members to compete for heritage but also casts a shadow over the direction of the story [7].

In color psychology, warm tones of long waves are progressive and diffuse and can visually draw objects closer, while cool tones of short waves are the opposite. After Gustave is framed and imprisoned in Chapter 3, the tone changes to blue-gray, the director uses the Morandi color system, which complements the macaroon color system in the first chapter. The director also inserted two subplots in this chapter, using warm tones when explaining the love story between Zero and Agatha, and using low brightness and cool tones in the lawyer's assassination plot.

In Chapter 4, Gustave, who has successfully escaped from prison, goes with Zero to find the key witness, Serge, and the director adds a sky of snow to the gray tones to create a misty background. It should be noted here that Wes Anderson tends to use gray or black-and-white tones in his filming to deliberately minimize the violence. For example, gray police uniforms, Zero pushing the killer off the cliff, etc. At the same time, Wes Anderson will set contrasting colors in small scenes against the macroscopic sad background, all to maintain the main idea of the storybook motif. The pale-gray tone of this chapter also plays a transitional role in the tone movement through the chapters.

The scene returns to the hotel again in chapter 5. The director uses an atmospheric perspective when shooting the hotel interior. Flooding the picture with large colorless elements creates a grayish-pink tone, which can be understood as the continuation of the gray-white tone in Chapter 4 [8]. Gray character uniforms symbolize the "power violence" represented by police and military; gray tones can stabilize the picture and reflect the depressed background of the times [9]. However, this will not affect the "faint glimmers of civilization" represented by Zero and Agatha flickering in the dark night. For example, in the plot of two people falling into the pink cake truck, the director sets up a narrow

pink space of the cake truck against the gray background. Zero's light blue and Agatha's light khaki collide but blend, and the pace of the story is slowed down again.

When the truth came out and the tone returned to a warm tone, the audience once thought that the movie was over when Zero and Agatha got married, but the director suddenly cut to black and white and explained Gustave's ending. The audience's emotions plummet toward the bottom of the cliff at the moment of climax, profoundly revealing the theme of human nature, and showing the feeling of happiness being easy to pass away and the powerlessness of civilization's decline.

3. Discussion

The Grand Budapest Hotel presents the audience with a beautiful world where fairy tales and reality are intertwined with dreamy colors. Movies tell stories to the audience, and Wes Anderson, who pursues the perfection, told a good story to the audience with *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Color can be used both for content expression and as a narrative container. This film is a successful example [10]. Wes Anderson, with extremely high aesthetic taste, gives full play to the role of color, truly combining color aesthetics inside and outside, influencing people's color aesthetics, and refreshes people's understanding of movies and leaves a unique pink memory in the hearts of everyone.

4. Conclusion

This study found that in terms of color harmony, Wes Anderson tends to use similar color scheme in most pictures in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, emphasizing the macro dominance of the main color. In terms of color psychology, Wes Anderson will select corresponding colors according to plot functions, such as "moderate color scheme" for transitional plots and contrasting colors for turning plots. Besides, Wes Anderson's color metaphor is also worthy of scrutiny. He adjusts the relationship between color area and brightness, so that color can represent different forces, hinting or confronting the theme and background. From the audience's point of view, this study is conducive to guiding the audience to understand the positioning and significance of colors used in movies and improving personal color literacy. It can also make filmmakers experience Wes Anderson's way of stimulating color and provide reference value for film practice.

In short, Wes Anderson successfully opened up the connection between color and film theme, background, and plot stage in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. While completing the "horizontal leap" from a static harmonious picture to a dynamic plot, it also explores the "vertical relationship" between color, theme, and background of the times. It perfectly achieves an excellent balance between personal aesthetic expression and audience emotional experience, providing an iconic reference example for later generations.

This study focuses on the fundamentals of color harmony, but essentially, "color" in this study is still relatively confined to the concepts of hue, tone, and saturation, and the concept of "color" in this study is still relatively confined to the concepts of hue and saturation. There is a relative lack of exploration of the relationship between light and shadow. To better appreciate the nature of color, subsequent in-depth exploration of aspects such as film color brightness can be conducted.

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