



The Poetics of Costume and Color in Cinema: Visual Dramaturgy in “Love in the Flower of the Skin” and “Hero”

The Poetics of Costume and Color in Cinema: Visual Dramaturgy in the “Mood For Love” And “Hero”

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ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the relevance of costumes and the use of color in cinema as resources for dramatic and symbolic construction. Based on an analysis of the films "In the Mood for Love" (2000), by Wong Kar-Wai, and "Hero" (2002), by Zhang Yimou, the article seeks to understand how costumes and color palettes go beyond a merely aesthetic function, acting as extensions of the characters' desires, conflicts, and transformations.

The work engages with film theories that address *mise-en-scène* and visual dramaturgy, such as those of Ismail Xavier (2005), David Bordwell (1997) and Roland Barthes (2004).

Keywords: Costume; Colors; Visual dramaturgy; Art direction; Cinema.

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This article discusses the role of custom design and color use in cinema as narrative and symbolic devices. Through an analysis of Wong Kar-Wai's *in the Mood for Love* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), it examines how clothing and chromatic palettes exceed mere aesthetics, functioning as extensions of desire, repression, and spiritual transformation. Drawing upon theories of *mise-en-scène* and film semiotics (Barthes, Xavier, Bordwell), the study highlights how costumes and colors shape visual dramaturgy, creating atmospheres that embody inner conflicts and emotional intensity.

Keywords: Costume design; Color; visual dramaturgy; *Mise-en-scène*; Cinema.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as a visual art, finds in *mise-en-scène* one of its main expressive elements.

Within it, costumes and color take on functions that go beyond aesthetics: they are narrative signs that reveal subjectivities, suggest emotional atmospheres, and articulate the relationship between characters and film space.

According to Xavier (2005), *mise-en-scène* should be understood as a writing of the scene, in which every detail—lighting, color, costumes, set design—is part of the construction of meaning. In this sense, Bordwell (1997) reminds us that film analysis cannot neglect the visual dimension, as it acts as a discourse as powerful as the verbal.

This article therefore proposes to analyze the visual dramaturgy of two films that use costumes and color paradigmatically: Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002). In both, these elements become fundamental to understanding the characters' intimate drama and the symbolic narrative constructed by the directors.

COSTUMES AS A METAPHOR IN “LOVE ON THE SKIN”

The film is enchanting. It has texture, color, heat, and humidity. Its aesthetic is saturated and exaggerated, which contrasts with the two main characters, who act more restrained, using smaller but quite sensual gestures.

They move with great sensuality, to which the soundtrack also contributes.

they seem to dance, especially in the scenes where they pass each other on the street, coming and going.

The film is also somewhat claustrophobic; the spaces are small and always crowded, whether with people, as in the place where they live, or in the offices, with small spaces filled with papers. This claustrophobia extends beyond the spaces themselves. It's felt by the main characters, who have to stifle their love for each other throughout the film. Even at the end, when he returns to the place where they met, and even knowing she's there, he doesn't knock on her door, or when he shares the secret of his love in a temple, where it will be sealed for eternity.



The three images above are of the main character, Mrs. Chan, wearing the same outfit. She changes outfits often, but some are repeated throughout the film, like this dress. The impression is that the outfit conveys a joy she doesn't have. She's an unhappy woman; her husband cheats on her, leaving her alone for long periods of time. We only see him from behind, as in this photo above, or hear his voice. The outfit reflects what she wishes she were to society, but internally, she isn't.

Her costume is characterized in the first part of the film by a unique, well-shaped, body-hugging dress that showcases her contours, exposing her arms and legs. It has a slit that, when seated, reveals a sensual and restrained portion of her thighs. Her neck is always covered. She wears floral and abstract prints, typical of the 1960s, which perfectly match the setting, especially aided by the scene's lighting. The costume is as shown in the images.

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above becomes part of the whole plan.

In Figure 1, it's patterned like the curtains, but it "stands out" from the wall because it's a different color and has different lighting. In the dinner scene, it matches the other character's shirt, creating a connection with it and the other character, standing out but still integrating into the scene. In the office, with more natural light it matches the walls.

The costume also conveys the impression that she belongs to those places, integrating her, but giving the perception of what she would like to be and is not, deep down.

Below is an example of a costume with an abstract print.



Regarding the male character, Mr. Chow, he is almost always dressed in a suit and tie, well-groomed, well-tailored to his physique, and well-adjusted. Both are almost always impeccable, with their hair, beard, and clothes neatly arranged, even when it's raining. However, he sometimes gets "out of place," which is caused by the anxiety that love provokes in people, especially when it's something forbidden and hidden, where the characters have to maintain their appearance. Because they won't be like her husband and his wife. There's an interaction and integration in the costumes of both characters; they "talk" to each other. There's a bond between them. And even though they can't touch and experience their love for each other, this connection is felt in their costumes. They are the same height, the same physique, everything perfectly matching, except for the moment and situation in which they met and fell in love.

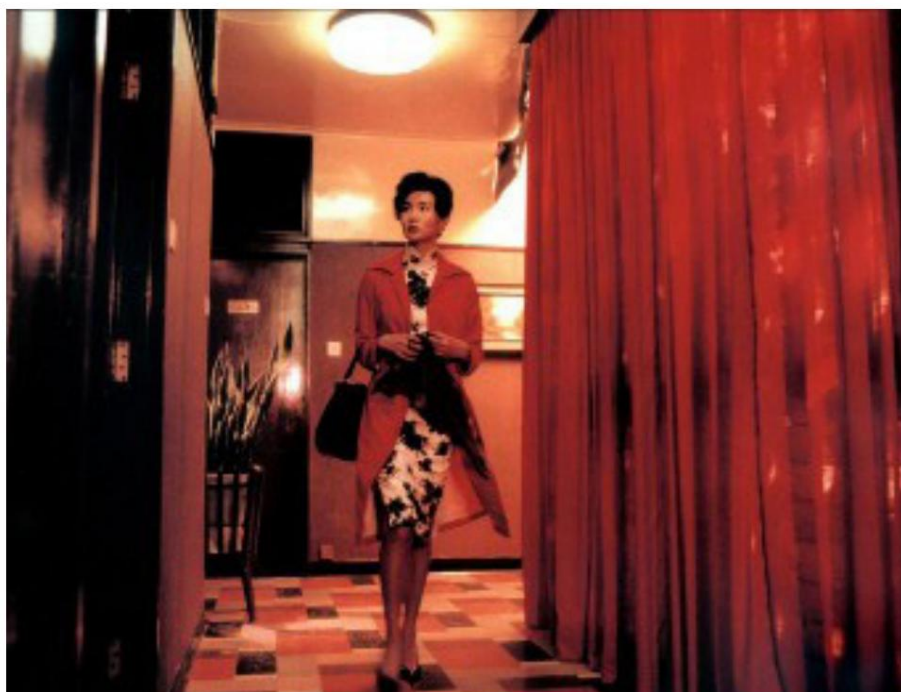


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In this picture above, for example, both of them "detach" themselves from the scene. She's wearing a colorful, patterned outfit, and he's wearing a brown suit. His tie also detaches him from the scene. The costumes convey the message that there, in that moment, they don't belong there, they don't interact with anything around them. For them, there's only the two of them and nothing else. His tie forms the link that connects him to her, detaching him from the scene and connecting him to her.



About the presence of red. It's a hue that constantly presents itself as the color of passion. It's striking how it's present in almost every scene involving the main characters. In the picture below, she's going to meet him at a hotel; they haven't seen each other in a while. And when he contacts her, she runs out to see him. She's wearing a black and white outfit, the same style she wears throughout the film, but the coat is red. The curtains are red, and the light draws everything red. Symbolizing love, the passion that grows ever stronger, as well as the excitement and anxiety the characters feel for each other.



The black and white dress contrasts with all the red around her. It's what connects her to her normal, external life as a married woman, but we see the predominance of red, of her feelings, of her inner self.

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CONCLUSION

Wong Kar-Wai's film is often described as a film of desire and restraint. Set in Hong Kong in the 1960s, it builds its atmosphere through saturated colors, claustrophobic spaces and choreographed movements that suggest a dance between the protagonists, Mrs. Chan

(Maggie Cheung) and Mr. Chow (Tony Leung).

Mrs. Chan's costumes play a central role in this play. Her form-fitting dresses, floral and abstract prints, evoke the aesthetics of the period, but function as a metaphor for her intimate life. Despite her elegance and cheerful appearance, the costumes reveal the dissonance between what the character shows to society and what she truly feels. Married to an absent and unfaithful husband, Chan wears clothes that function as a social mask: they express a nonexistent joy, a promise of unfulfilled happiness.

This duplicity is intensified in the details. The discreet slit in the dresses suggests restrained sensuality, while the always-covered neck denotes rigidity and repression. As Barthes (2004) observes, fashion is a semiotic system that communicates social and subjective values. In "Love in the Flower of the Skin," the dresses communicate both the character's social adequacy and her unfulfilled desire.

Furthermore, Wong Kar-Wai integrates costumes and scenery into highly impactful visual compositions. In some scenes, the patterned dresses blend in with the curtains or walls, diluting the character within the environment and reinforcing the feeling of imprisonment. In others, the costumes create a connection with Chow, with colors that contrast with his tie or shirt, highlighting the invisible connection between the two.

The presence of red deserves special mention. In decisive moments, such as the scene where Chan runs to find Chow again, red dominates the scene: curtains, lighting, and the overalls create an atmosphere that symbolizes latent passion. The contrast with the black and white dress evokes the character's duality—on one side, her married life; on the other, her forbidden feelings. Thus, the costume not only dresses the character but also dramatizes her existential condition.

THE DRAMATURGY OF COLORS IN "HEROES"

Zhang Yimou's film "Hero" opens with dark, cold tones, particularly the presence of black and blue, which characterize the power of the Empire, in which the emperor is a despot, holding sole power over the people. It also highlights the coldness, intelligence, cunning, and perspicacity the emperor must possess to command an entire empire. However, there is also the presence of red, which symbolizes the deaths—the thousands of deaths, the violence—that the empire commits to maintain or attempt to unify its territory.



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Jet Li's character dresses in black, which symbolizes his connection to the empire. At first, we don't know his true story, but the color of his costume doesn't clash with the surroundings, leading us to believe he's not opposed to the emperor, but rather an ally.



After this initial moment, the director begins to tell the story with a predominance of colors. The first is red, which characterizes love, passion, jealousy, violence, and death. This part of the story is charged with passion; we see characters who symbolize the deepest feelings, such as desire, anger, passion, hate, revenge, death, and jealousy. Red is present in every scene and throughout the artwork.

We see the betrayed man who, driven mad by jealousy, betrays his partner, who kills her for this reason. We see the disciple who loved and desired her master confront his companion, who killed him. In a beautiful scene, very well choreographed and with excellent effects.





M. 2000.01.02

In the images below both characters wear red and while they fight we see the landscape of autumn in the background, with its leaves and golden light, which contrasts and further beautifies the scene.





The red, charged with feelings, warmth, and passion, contrasts directly with the black and blue of the empire's austerity and coldness. However, the emperor discovers that this story is not true. And the director goes on to tell another version of the story and uses another color: blue.





As the film nears its conclusion, the director reveals the true colors that characterize both characters: Flying Snow and Broken Sword. They are initially characterized by the color green, which symbolizes nature and hope. They symbolize the hope that the conquered peoples have in fighting the emperor. They are like two forces of nature, representing them. Because, in addition to being depicted in natural settings, which contributes to this conclusion, unlike the previous settings, Asia has a very strong presence and connection with natural elements. The film features three characters that evoke nature: Sky, Snow, and Moon.





Green also characterizes the confrontation scene between Broken Sword and King Qin. The empire hall, painted in shades of black, is filled with flowing green fabrics, representing strength and the presence of resistance. It also indicates that the emperor will be defeated.



However, Espada decides against killing him when he understands his and the king's true mission. At this point, Neve and Espada's characters change color once again, becoming white.

As they become white, we realize the evolution that Broken Sword has gone through, his renewal, understanding and spiritual growth. He understands that he should not kill the emperor, because he will be the only one to unify the territory and the Chinese people, but at this moment, Snow has not yet reached the same level. She still wants revenge.



She begins a fight with Espada, who, failing to defend himself, is struck by her and dies for his ideal, and so that Neve may understand him. Only at this moment does Neve's evolution take place, and she understands his actions. She also decides to end her life, as their swords should always be together. Their deaths also symbolize the beginning of peace, represented by the white, which they achieved together, as they returned home, where only they would exist. Furthermore, the emperor managed to unify the lands and peoples, who began to refer to China as "our land."



CONCLUSION

Zhang Yimou, for his part, uses color as a structuring principle of the narrative in "Hero." The work presents different versions of the same story, each marked by a specific chromatic palette that carries emotional and philosophical meanings.

The film begins in cool tones—black and blue—associated with empire, rationality, and authoritarianism. The protagonist (Jet Li), dressed in black, seems to blend into this universe, suggesting complicity. However, as versions of the story unfold, new colors emerge as narrative guides.

The first is red, the color of passion, violence, and death. In an iconic scene, two warriors fight amidst an autumnal landscape, where golden leaves intensify the expressiveness of the struggle. Red, here, conveys the most extreme feelings: desire, jealousy, hatred, and revenge.

In the following sequence, the predominance of lighter blue symbolizes lightness and spirituality. Although still marked by conflict, the characters reveal another dimension, less passionate and more reflective. Green, in turn, emerges as the color of nature and hope, especially in the scenes involving Broken Sword and Flying Snow. It evokes the strength of resistance, evoking the connection between human beings and the natural cosmos—a recurring element in Asian aesthetics.

Finally, white marks the narrative's conclusion. Associated with purity and spiritual renewal, it symbolizes the death of Broken Sword and Snow, but also the birth of peace, albeit achieved through sacrifice. Here, the drama of color transcends the diegesis and takes on an almost metaphysical dimension, with each hue serving as a metaphor for a stage of the emotional and spiritual journey.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In both films analyzed, costumes and color are not illustrative props, but narrative agents that expand the dramatic dimension of the work. In "Love in the Flower of Love," Mrs. Chan's dresses reveal the contradiction between social life and intimate desire, while red conveys repressed passion. In "Hero," colors structure the narrative itself, becoming a symbolic language that guides the viewer's reception.

These examples confirm Xavier's (2005) observation that *mise-en-scène* should be read as writing, as visual dramaturgy. Costumes and colors, when considered conceptually, are capable of conveying invisible tensions, subjectivities, and inner transformations.

Thus, understanding its function in cinema is recognizing that, often, it is on the visible surface of the screen — in the cut of a dress, in the intensity of a red or in the serenity of a white — that the deepest drama resides.

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