

The Use of Color in Film

*To what extent is there a relationship between *The Matrix* and *The Wizard of Oz*'s use of color and their ability to convey their major themes to viewers?*

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Abstract

This extended essay investigates the question, “*to what extent is there a relationship between The Matrix’s and The Wizard of Oz’s use of color and their ability to convey their major themes to viewers?*” This question was chosen in order to address one of the ways in which a film attempts to communicate with its viewers. The method of focus for this essay is color choice. *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Matrix* are two well-known films that made significant use of color.

In analyzing each film's use of color, attention was given to costumes, props, background structures (e.g. the buildings of a city), the physical color of characters themselves when appropriate, and the tints of different scenes. Such aspects were identified then analyzed for meaning, based on the commonly accepted concepts and/or feelings associated with certain colors. What the colors represent are for the most based on western culture as these films are American and were exposed primarily to American audiences.

Analysis of these films show a strong relationship between their use of color and their ability to convey their major themes. The analysis acts as proof of the ways in which films are able to convey messages using methods that are not always obvious to the viewer, like color choice.

Word count: 214

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Introduction

The research question of this extended essay is, *to what extent is there a relationship between The Matrix and The Wizard of Oz's use of color and their ability to convey their major themes to viewers?* The use of color plays a significant role in a film's ability to convey its major themes. Screenwriters often have themes, ideas, and/or concepts that they desire for their audience to understand. Color can be a useful medium for expressing them because it can reach the audience on both conscious or subconscious levels. It is important for those involved in filmmaking to have a well developed understanding of the best way to reach their viewers in order for the film to be successful. Two well known films that exhibit wise use of color to convey their major themes are *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Matrix*, making them ideal examples for analysis.

Understanding Color

According to Crayola, "Color is the aspect of things that is caused by differing qualities of light being reflected or emitted by them."¹ Our eyes have light receptors that send messages to our brain about what color we are experiencing the sensation of. Objects themselves have no color. What we see is how light is being reflected off the object. Colors like violet, green, and orange reflect specific wavelengths of light. White reflects all of the wavelengths while black absorbs all wavelengths.

¹ Crayola. "Color – What is Color? | crayola.com." *Crayola*. Crayola, 2015. Web. 29 Nov. 2015.

Colors can be associated with different feelings and ideas for humans. These feelings and ideas can be evoked in a way that a person is not fully aware of their source. The fact that it is a color that is the source of those feelings may not be obvious but the feelings and thoughts

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can still be successfully evoked. Four colors that can act as examples of this are yellow, red, blue, and black. The color yellow can bring about feelings of happiness and joy.² The color red can bring about feelings of anger and rage.³ The color blue can be calming and bring about feelings of tranquility.⁴ The color black, which can also be defined as the absence of color, can bring about feelings of depression.⁵ What a color can represent is not limited to one single meaning. A color's meaning can vary depending on the context in which it is used. Black may represent death⁶ in one context and elegance⁷ in another. A color's meaning is also dependent on the culture within which it is being presented. Going back to the example of black, in Western culture it is common to wear all black to a funeral to signify one's mourning. However, in African culture the color red is worn to signify mourning instead.⁸ Having knowledge of the effects a color may have on the brain and what meaning it carries with it allows you to have a better understanding of why you feel a certain way when presented with different images. It also allows you to make an educated decision when choosing what types of images to present to

² Digital Skrtach. "Color Psychology, What Do Colors Mean and Represent." *Web Design Agency That Builds User Friendly Sites*. Digital Skrtach, 2015. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.

³ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

⁴ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

⁵ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

⁶ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

⁷ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

⁸ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

other people if you are trying to evoke a specific emotional response and/or convey a certain idea.

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A Brief History of Color in Film

The first known films ever made were created during the late 1800s. For the most part, these films were styled as documentaries.⁹ They lacked color and sound. Color was first introduced to film during the nineteenth century, not long after photographers started adding color to their black and white photos. Early in the introduction of this concept to film, painters would color each frame by hand. It was not until 1906 that this process became easier with the invention of Kinemacolor by George Albert Smith, a British inventor.¹⁰ The success of this invention can be considered a pivotal part of film history with it being the world's first film system for natural color.

The Wizard of Oz

The story of *The Wizard of Oz* is about a girl named Dorothy Gale who finds herself in a “magical” land known as Oz. Each character has a goal they hope to achieve by going to see the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy is trying to find a way home, the Scarecrow wants to have a brain, the Tin Man wants to have a heart again, and the Cowardly Lion wants to gain courage. The 1939 version of *The Wizard of Oz* was filmed in technicolor. The use of this type of cinematography

⁹ Patmore, C. "History." *Movie making course: Principles, practice, and techniques : the ultimate guide for the aspiring filmmaker*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's, 2005. 8-9. Print.

¹⁰ Abel, Richard. "Urbanization." *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005. 651. Web. 29 Nov. 2015.

caused the colors within the film to appear brighter and more intense than they actually were. For example, Dorothy's iconic ruby red slippers, which had originally been silver, were actually maroon with burgundy sequins. The decision to design the shoes this way was based on an idea of screenwriter Noel Langley.

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Figure.1



Telegraph Media Group. One pair of the ruby red slippers worn by Judy Garland in the Wizard of Oz. photograph. *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 23 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

The color red can represent power.¹¹ The change of the shoes from silver to red not only made the shoes more physically attractive to the audience but also allowed the shoes to be portrayed as a symbol of power. The shoes were magic, though it is not explicitly explained what makes them so magical and the only example of their magic at work in the film is when they exhibit the ability to transport Dorothy home. The magic they possess makes them a source of power for whoever is wearing them. The theme of this aspect of the film is using power for good versus using power for evil. The Wicked Witch of the West terrorizes the people of Oz and has an intense desire for more power. If she had been successful in her quest to get

¹¹ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

the shoes she would have used their power for evil. Dorothy on the other hand, used the power of the shoes for good. She simply desired to return home to be with her family and friends, where she belonged.

Dorothy's ensemble, apart from her shoes, involves the colors white and light blue. Light blue is often linked with the concept of youth while white can be used to represent purity and

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innocence.¹² Judy Garland herself was sixteen-years-old during the making of the film. Her character Dorothy is supposed to be around the age of twelve. One of the ways the costume designers tried to make her look younger was through the use of colors that the audience was likely to think of as youthful and innocent. The colors of Dorothy's outfit therefore contributes to the film's theme of youth.

Figure. 2



Awesome Inc. The character Dorothy Gale from the Wizard of Oz. photograph. {Wizard of Oz}: Dorothy. The Joy of Disney. N.p., 2014. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

¹² Sandbox Networks Inc. "Color Meanings and Moods." *Infoplease: Encyclopedia, Almanac, Atlas, Biographies, Dictionary, Thesaurus. Free Online Reference, Research & Homework Help*. Infoplease, n.d. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.

The Wicked Witch of the West wears an all black dress and hat. The color black can represent evil in some contexts,¹³ especially when it is contrasted with the color white. Having the Wicked Witch dressed in black and Dorothy dressed in white and light blue connects to the

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theme of good versus evil. The Wicked Witch is presented as the evil force while Dorothy is presented as the force of good.

Figure .3



IMDb. The Wicked Witch of the West from the Wizard of Oz. photograph. IMDb. IMDb, 14 Dec. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

The color yellow is known as an optimistic color.¹⁴ The brick road Dorothy and her friends travel on being yellow has the ability to make both the characters and the audience feel optimistic about the journey ahead of them. Yellow can also make one feel cheerful and energetic. This idea is expressed through the characters dancing as they travel along the road.

¹³ Digital Skatch. "Color Psychology, What Do Colors Mean and Represent." *Web Design Agency That Builds User Friendly Sites*. Digital Skatch, 2015. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.

¹⁴ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

The theme of the excitement that can come with life's journeys are connected to this aspect of the film. The yellow color of the road stimulates those feelings of excitement.

The famous quote from the film, "there's no place like home"¹⁵ acts as a theme. The scenes of Dorothy's home in Kansas have a sepia tone, creating a seemingly bland atmosphere for the setting. Oz in contrast is very colorful, making it more attractive to Dorothy and the

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audience. Dorothy feels that no one understands or appreciates her where she lives and desires to explore new places. It is not until Dorothy actually experiences the land of Oz that she begins to value her home. By making Oz appear more physically attractive, it initially comes across as the more desirable place to be in comparison to Dorothy's town. This connects to the theme with how even though you may travel to somewhere seemingly more exciting, which in this case would be the land of Oz, you will eventually come to find that it cannot compare to home.

Figure. 4



Mount Hollywood Art School. The state of Kansas as presented in the Wizard of Oz. photograph. Mount Hollywood Art School. WordPress.com, 7 Mar. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

¹⁵ *The Wizard of Oz*. Screenplay by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allen Woolf. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, and Ray Bolger. MGM, 1939.

The color green, like yellow, is known as an optimistic color.¹⁶ It can also represent hope.

¹⁷ The architecture within the land of Oz is for the most part green. Its people are dressed in green and the Wizard himself is a green-skinned being. Associating the different aspects of Oz with the color green presents the city as a place that has much to offer to those like Dorothy. The sight of Oz may fill Dorothy and her friends along with the audience with a sense of hope,

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that Dorothy and her friends will in fact find what they are looking for in this city. After making it through the woods, seeing the beautiful, green city of Oz could renew the characters' and the audience's optimistic attitude toward the Wizard that was established in the film during Dorothy's encounter with Glinda the Good Witch in Munchkin land.

Figure. 5



Village Voice LLC. Dorothy and her friends on their way to the emerald city of Oz. Still image. the village Voice. Village Voice, 18 Sept. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

¹⁶ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

¹⁷ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

Green can also be associated with jealousy and greed.¹⁸ This is portrayed through the Wicked Witch of the West whom, like the Wizard, is a green-skinned being. The Wicked Witch is jealous of Dorothy because she was able to get hold of her sister's, the Wicked Witch of the East, ruby red slippers that she wanted. She then expresses her greed by going after Dorothy and her friends in order to get her sister's shoes from them, and going to extreme measures to complete this task. The themes connected to this aspect of the film are the dangers of pursuing greed and the dangers of acting out of jealousy. The Wicked Witch meets her demise as a result of her greed and jealousy.

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The Wizard of Oz was made ten years after the beginning of the Great Depression. The economic turmoil of the Depression affected more than just the citizens within the United States. The ability for United States to trade with other countries was hindered. This along with other factors had a negative effect on the economies of countries like Great Britain, Germany, and less developed countries of that time period.¹⁹ With the turmoil being spread so widely, one could experience feelings of hopelessness as there seemed to be no escape from the effects of the Depression. The Great Depression was coming to a close in the U.S. by the time the film was released but many Americans were still in a state of struggle. The Wizard of Oz acted as an escape from the harshness of their reality.²⁰ The film transitioning from sepia to bright color could represent escaping from the troubles of life during the Great depression to a happier world, or possibly the end of the Depression all together. The use of color in the Wizard of Oz contributed to its ability to convey the themes connected with its settings and major characters.

¹⁸ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

¹⁹ Romer, Christina D. "Great Depression | Economy | Britannica.com." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 7 June 2015. Web. 31 Jan. 2016.

²⁰ Moje, Sarah D. "Heading "Over the Rainbow" to Escape the Depression with 'The Wizard of Oz'." *Bright Hub Education*. brighthubeducation.com, 6 Sept. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

The Matrix

The Matrix was released in the year 1999, sixty years after *The Wizard of Oz*. The film is about a man named Neo who finds out the world he has been living in is simply a false reality created by artificially intelligent machines. The machines figured out a way to harness the bioelectricity humans produce and began “growing”²¹ them as an energy source.

The primary use of color in the film is in relation to the tints of certain scenes. During the time period in which the film was made, some computers monitors were known to have greenish

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tints while others would have somewhat of a brownish tint. The different worlds presented in the film are modeled after this concept, distinguishing reality from virtual reality.

Scenes taking place in the matrix have a greenish tint. The greenish tint indicates that the world in these scenes are occurring within the false reality created by the machines. Green is a calming color²² that can engender a sense of safety.²³ The matrix having a greenish tint shows that the machines wanted to induce a false sense of security for the humans in order to prevent them from suspecting that anything was off about what they thought was reality. They knew that if the humans began to question the reality they had created they might come together and rebel, which would mean the machines would no longer have an energy source.

Figure. 6

²¹*The Matrix*. Screenplay by Andy and Lana Wachowski. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Ann Moss. Warner Bros., 1999.

²² Sandbox Networks Inc. "Color Meanings and Moods." *Infoplease: Encyclopedia, Almanac, Atlas, Biographies, Dictionary, Thesaurus. Free Online Reference, Research & Homework Help*. Infoplease, n.d. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.

²³ Digital Skratch. "Color Psychology, What Do Colors Mean and Represent." *Web Design Agency That Builds User Friendly Sites*. Digital Skratch, 2015. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.



Peters, Chris. Neo in his cubicle within the matrix. Still image. *Quora*. Quora, 20 May 2013. Web.

Scenes taking place in the computer generated worlds Morpheus trains Neo in have a brownish tint. The color brown can be a relaxing color.²⁴ Such scenes having a brownish tint

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acts as indication to the audience that though they are in fact in a computer generated world, the characters are not at that moment in as much danger as they would be in the matrix. The audience's awareness of this allows them to relax somewhat for those periods of the movie with the brownish tint and possibly give more of their attention to what is being revealed about Neo, Morpheus, and the other characters through those scenes.

Figure. 7

²⁴ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.



Killing Time. The fight scene between Neo and Morpheus. Still image. *Killing Time*. WordPress, 14 Mar. 2014. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

Scenes taking place in reality have a bluish tint. The bluish tint indicates that the world in these scenes are occurring in the true reality. Blue is sometimes viewed as a depressing color as it is associated in some cases with sadness.²⁵ By the reality scenes having a bluish a tint, Neo along with the audience is able to get a feel of how grim life is actually is for the characters in the film. The theme of this aspect of the film is the harshness of reality.

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Figure. 8

²⁵ Bourn, Jennifer. "Meaning of The Color Blue |." *Bourn Creative*. Bourn Creative, LLC., 15 Jan. 2011. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.



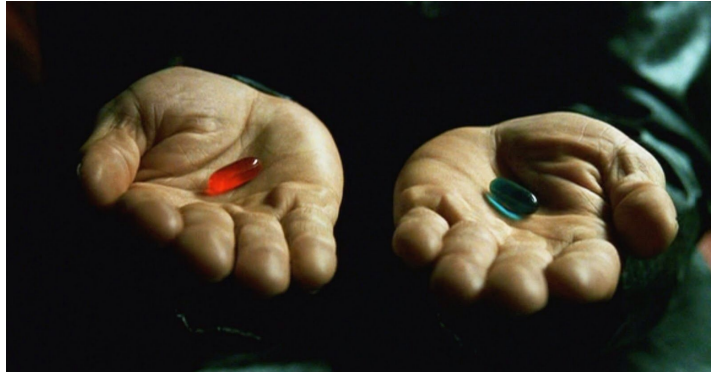
IMDb. Neo and Trinity in reality. Still image. *IMDb*. IMDb, 9 Sept. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

Morpheus presents Neo with two pills, a blue pill and a red pill. Taking the blue pill would allow Neo to continue living the life he had before meeting Morpheus, leaving his mind open to believing that the world he is truly reality. The color blue can mean peace and tranquility²⁶ which correlates with the blue pill's effect in how believing that the world he lives in is reality could give him peace of mind. The theme here is that ignorance is bliss. Taking the red pill allowed Neo to come out of the virtual reality and find out the truth about what has happened to humanity. The color red can mean power, as it did in the *The Wizard of Oz*, and danger. The pill can be viewed as a source of power in how it led to Neo gaining the knowledge necessary for contributing to

²⁶ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

the fight against the machines. The theme introduced here would then be that knowledge is power.

Figure. 9



Reddit. Morpheus holding the red pill and the blue pill. Still image. *Reddit*. Reddit, 1 Nov. 2014. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

The majority of the rebels that enter the matrix wear mostly black along with other dark colors. The color black, as stated before, can signify knowledge and power. The rebels have the knowledge of the truth about what has happened to humanity. They know that the world they were formerly a part of is not reality, but a false idea that the machines depended on the humans believing in order for them to maintain their energy source. Knowing the truth gave them power whenever they would re-enter the matrix. Knowing and accepting that none of it was real allowed them to overcome the restraints of that false reality that their minds would usually tell them existed. They exhibited seemingly superhuman power as a result of this. In reality they wear different shades of blue and gray. The color gray can represent seriousness.²⁷ The predicament the characters find themselves in is quite serious with their lives constantly being under threat from the machines.

²⁷ Changing Minds. "The Meaning of Colors." *Changing Minds and Persuasion -- How We Change What Others Think, Believe, Feel and Do*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

Figure. 10



IMDb. The Matrix poster. poster. *IMDb*. IMDb, 7 Feb. 2014. Web. 8 Jan. 2016.

The theme of the consequences of gaining knowledge is addressed through the character Cypher. He wears a red tank top in reality. As aforementioned, the color red can represent anger and hatred. It can also indicate danger.²⁸ As the plot progresses we find out that Cypher has been building up anger and hatred towards Morpheus for bringing him out of the matrix. He believed that he would've have been better off not knowing what had become of the world, going as far as saying that "ignorance is bliss." Cypher's strong desire to regain his peace of mind combined with his anger toward Morpheus made him a threat, or danger, to the rest of the rebels. Therefore, having Cypher dressed in a red tank top acted as indication that would be one of the antagonist of the film.

²⁸ QSX Software Group. "Color Wheel Pro: Color Meaning." *Color Wheel Pro: See Color Theory in Action!* N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

The Matrix was made during the late 1990s. The “Y2K Scare”²⁹ took place during this same period of time. As the world was about to begin a new millennium, the 2000s, an increasing amount of attention was being given to computer systems. People became concerned about the fact that most computers were known to abbreviate the year, using only the last two digits. For example, the year “1997” would be read by the computer simply as “97.” This being the case people were worried that the year 2000 would not be recognizable to computerized systems as it would be read as “00.” It was predicted that this would lead to the failure of such systems around the world, thus resulting in mass chaos. Some even believed that worldwide computerized system failures would lead to the apocalypse. The theme of the dangers of technological advancements in *The Matrix* could be considered well fitting for the time period in which it was released. With computers being a major aspect of societies during that time period, making references to this technological advancement through the use of colors associated with it gave the film the opportunity to better connect with its audiences.

Conclusion

The use of color in not only film but also other forms of visual expression is a practice used within different cultures that can be quite effective. Colors having various meanings is what makes the use of color in film so powerful. The various meanings associated with each color used in a film adds to its depth, allowing for it to be rich in meaning. *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Matrix* are only two quality examples out of the many films that have made use of color to convey their major themes, ideas, and concepts over the years. It is important for film viewers to

²⁹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Y2K Bug | Computer Science | Britannica.com." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

be aware of the potential effects a film may have on them mentally and emotionally so they can enjoy it to its full capacity, or at least have a better understanding of it.

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