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How to Use Color in Film

50+ Examples of Movie Color Palettes

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Color in Storytelling

Considering cinema's origin in black and white, it's not surprising that many filmmakers have an obsession with color in films. From wardrobe choices and color gels to post-production filters and fonts, movie color schemes play a vital role in a director's vision.

Before we begin, we highly recommend viewing Lewis Bond's video Color In Storytelling. It is not only an practical analysis of how movie color palettes enhance storytelling, but also an engaging historical recap on the maturation of color in film.

HOW CAN COLOR TELL A STORY?

Simply put, color can affect us emotionally, psychologically and even physically, often without us becoming aware. Color in film can build harmony or tension within a scene, or bring attention to a key themes.

When telling a story, colors can...

1. Elicit psychological reactions with the audience

2.   Draw focus to significant details

3.   Set the tone of the movie

4.   Represent character traits and more

5.   Show changes or arcs in the story

When chosen deliberately, a well-placed movie color palette evokes mood and sets the tone for the film. The three main components of a color are hue, saturation, and value.
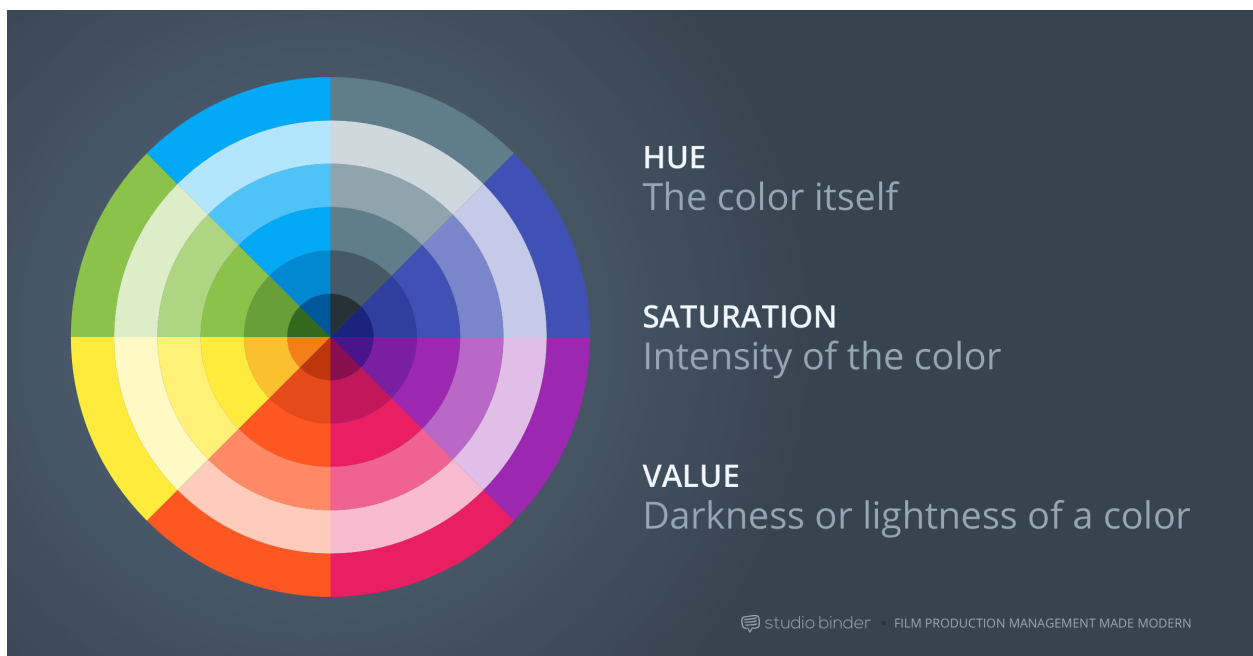
Hue – the color itself.

Saturation – intensity of the color.

Value – The darkness or lightness of a color.

As Bond mentions, many viewers will have predictably similar reactions to certain colors. A strong red color has been shown to raise blood pressure, while a blue color elicits a calming effect.

WARMTH

SOCIABILITY

FRIENDLY

HAPPINESS

EXOTIC

YOUTH

MADNESS

SICKNESS

INSECURITY

OBSESSIVE

IDYLLIC

NAIVE

NATURE

IMMATURITY

CORRUPTION

OMINOUS

DARKNESS

DANGER

COLD

ISOLATION

CEREBRAL

MELANCHOLY

PASSIVITY

CALM

FANTASY
ETHEREAL
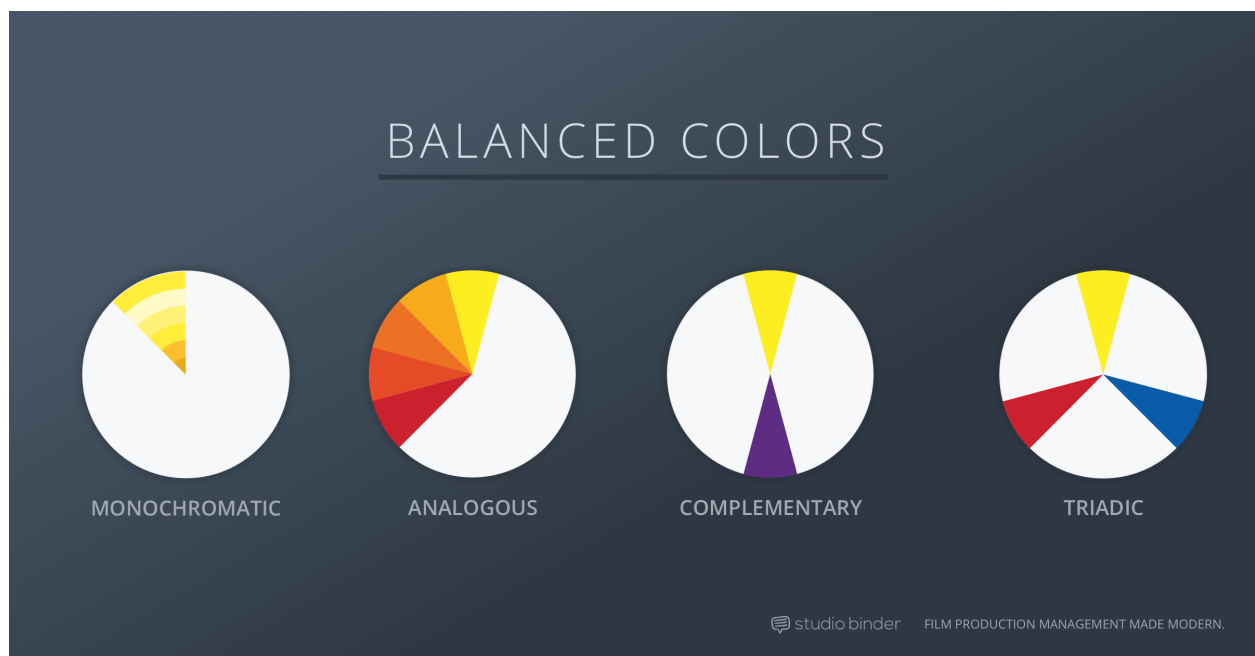EROTICISM
ILLUSORY
MYSTICAL
OMINOUS

A STARTING POINT

Although colors do have associated conventions, it's not dogmatic. There are no absolute rules for color selection. Ultimately, the viewer's reaction to the color is dependent on how it is defined within the film.

For example, in *The Sixth Sense*, M. Night Shyamalan uses the color red to represent fear, dread and foreshadowing whereas in *Pleasantville*, David Lynch uses red to represent hope, love and sensuality. Color theory norms should be understood by filmmakers, but never seen as a limitation.

Balanced Color Schemes

Although single, recurring colors can hold a deeper meaning, a more fleshed out film palette of colors (aka "color scheme") is most effective in communicating the thematic context. Balanced color schemes refer to the harmonious relationships of colors on a color wheel. A balanced movie color palette creates unity and promotes a cohesive tone. The four most common types of color schemes are described below.

BALANCED COLORS

MONOCHROMATIC   ANALOGOUS   COMPLEMENTARY   TRIADIC

studio binder   FILM PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT MADE MODERN.

MONOCHROMATIC

Monochromatic color schemes come in shades of a single color such as red, dark red, and pink. They create a deeply harmonious feeling that is soft, lulling and soothing.

The Matrix is a good example of a monochromatic movie color scheme. Nearly every scene set within the world of the matrix has a green hue. Shades of green permeate everything in the frame to create an unnatural, "lulling" effect (representative of those "asleep" inside the matrix).
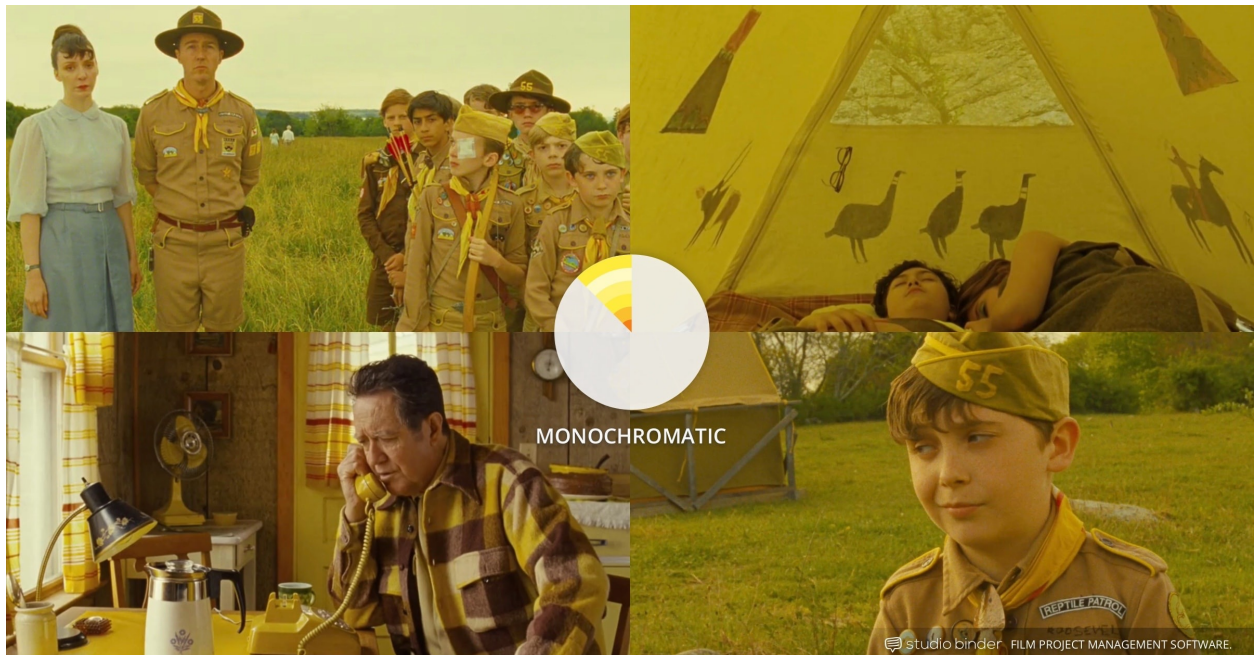

The Matrix (1999)

The Matrix (1999)

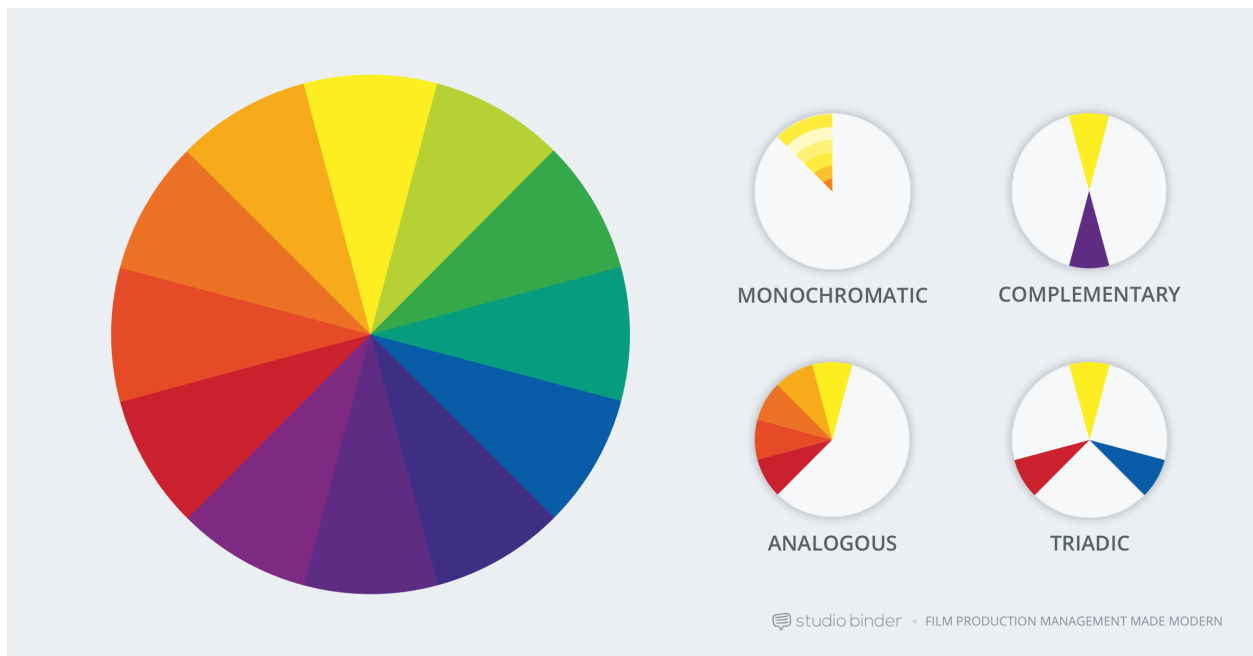

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)

Moonrise Kingdom (2012)

COMPLEMENTARY

Contrasting drama (i.e. warm vs. cool). Complementary colors live opposite each other on the color wheel.

For example, orange and blue are complementary colors commonly used in many blockbuster films. The dueling colors are often associated with conflict, whether internal or external.

No matter the color selection, complementary colors combine warm and cool colors to produce a high-contrast, vibrant tension in the film.

Amelie (2001)

X-Men: Apocalypse, The Island, Max Max: Fury Road, Transformers

ANALOGOUS

Analogous colors neighbor each other on the color wheel (i.e. red / violet or yellow / lime green). Since the colors don't have the contrast and tension of the complementary colors, they create an overall harmonious and soothing viewing experience.

Analogous colors are easy to take advantage of in landscapes and exteriors as they are often found in nature. One color can be chosen to dominate, a second to support, and a third (along with blacks, whites and grey tones) to accent.
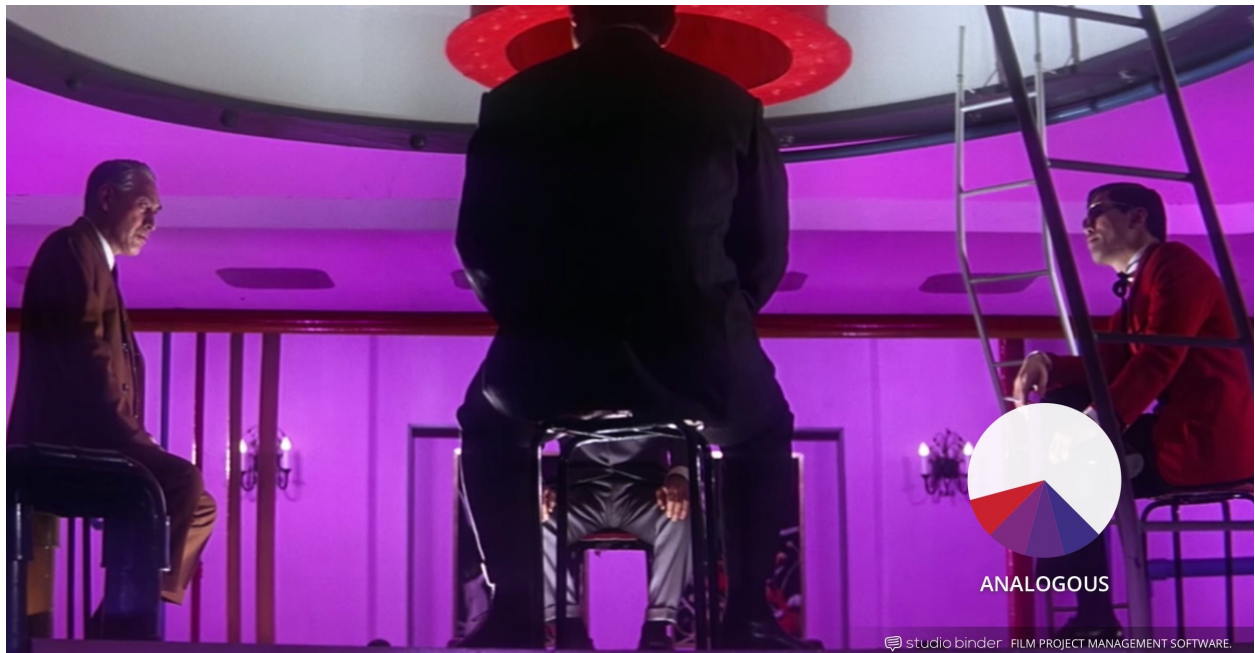

Traffic (2000)

Children of Men (2006)

Tokyo Drifter (1966)

TRIADIC

Vibrant and colorful, Triadic colors are three colors arranged evenly spaced around the color wheel (i.e. red, blue and yellow). One color should be dominant and the others accented.

Triadic is one of the least common movie color schemes, but it can be striking and vibrant even when the hues are unsaturated.

Pierrot le Fou (1965)

Superman (1978)

A Woman is a Woman (1961)

CHAPTER 3

Discordant Color Schemes

Discordance is a deliberate choice by the director to deviate from the balanced movie color schemes mentioned above to refocus attention. Discording colors can help a character, detail, or moment stand out from the rest of the film. For example, the color blue in Amelie, or the color red in the Sixth Sense.

DISCORDANT COLORS

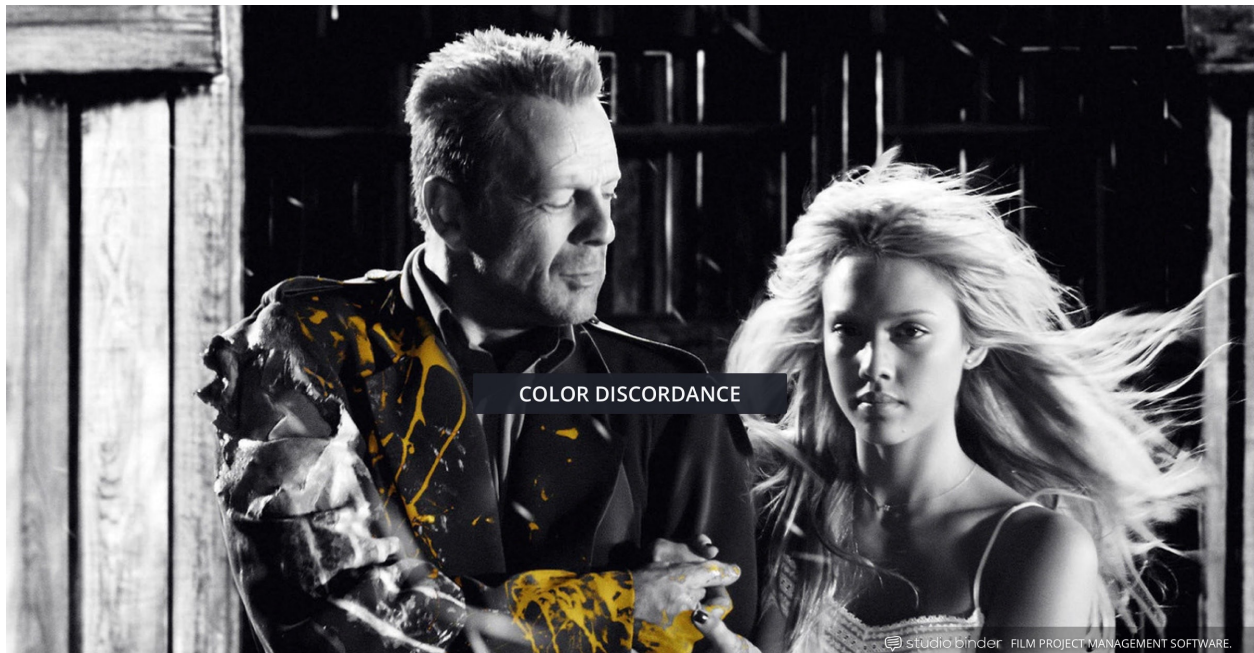Any deviations from the film's color scheme. Often used to refocus viewer attention to a specific person, place, or thing.
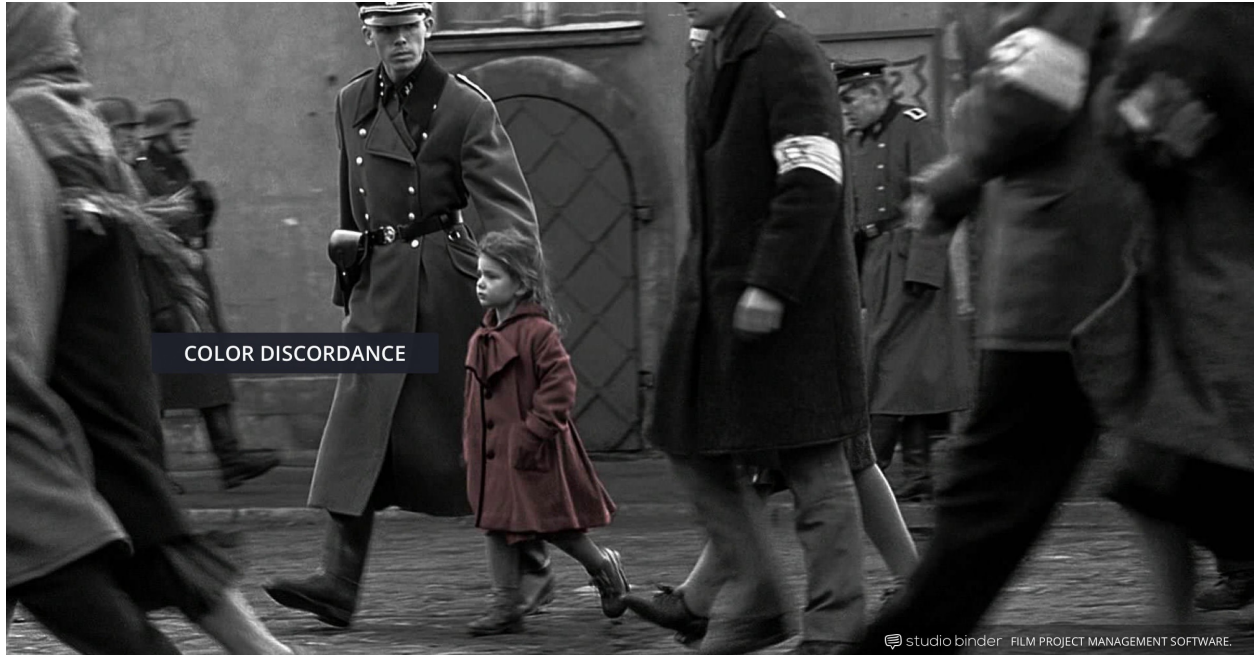
COLOR DISCORDANCE

Pleasantville (1998)

COLOR DISCORDANCE

Sin City (2005)

Schindler's List (1993)

We Need to Talk to Kevin, The Sixth Sense, The Shining, Tokyo Drifter

Using Associative Colors to Represent Characters & Themes

Having considered the various components color theory, we can now look at color selection on a larger scale – not just in a single scene, but over the course of the entire story.

When a color or scheme is recurrently associated with a specific character, object, place or theme, it becomes a symbol. This is seen throughout many iconic films.

ASSOCIATIVE COLORS IN FILM

When a recurring color or scheme represents a theme or character in a film, thereby connecting visual spectacle with emotional storytelling.

ASSOCIATED WITH CHARACTER
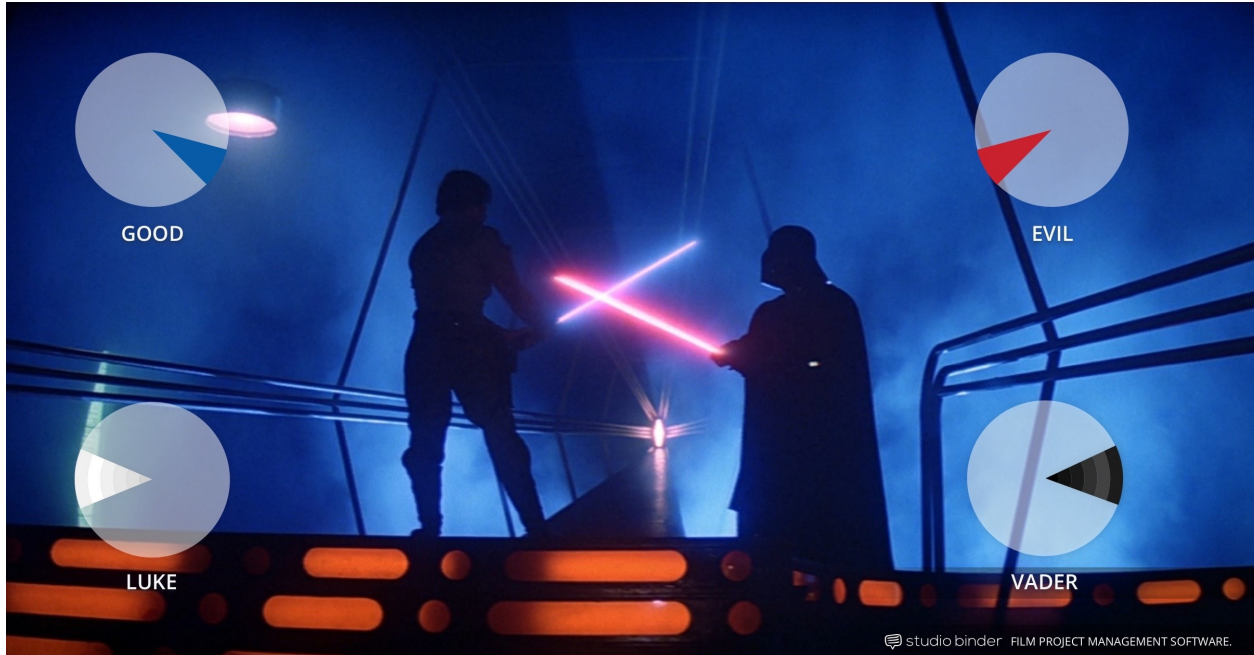
Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003)

COMPLEMENTARY
CHARACTER ASSOCIATIVE

Vertigo (1958)

ASSOCIATED WITH DEATH

The Godfather (1972)

Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back (1980)

The Dark Knight (2008)

Inside Out (2015)

> *"Color theory norms should be understood by filmmakers, but never seen as a limitation."*

Using Transitional Colors to Indicate a Change

When a recurring film palette or color shifts over the course of the film, it often represents a transformation in the character, story, or theme. This is a powerful way to subliminally communicate a character or story arc in a visual manner.
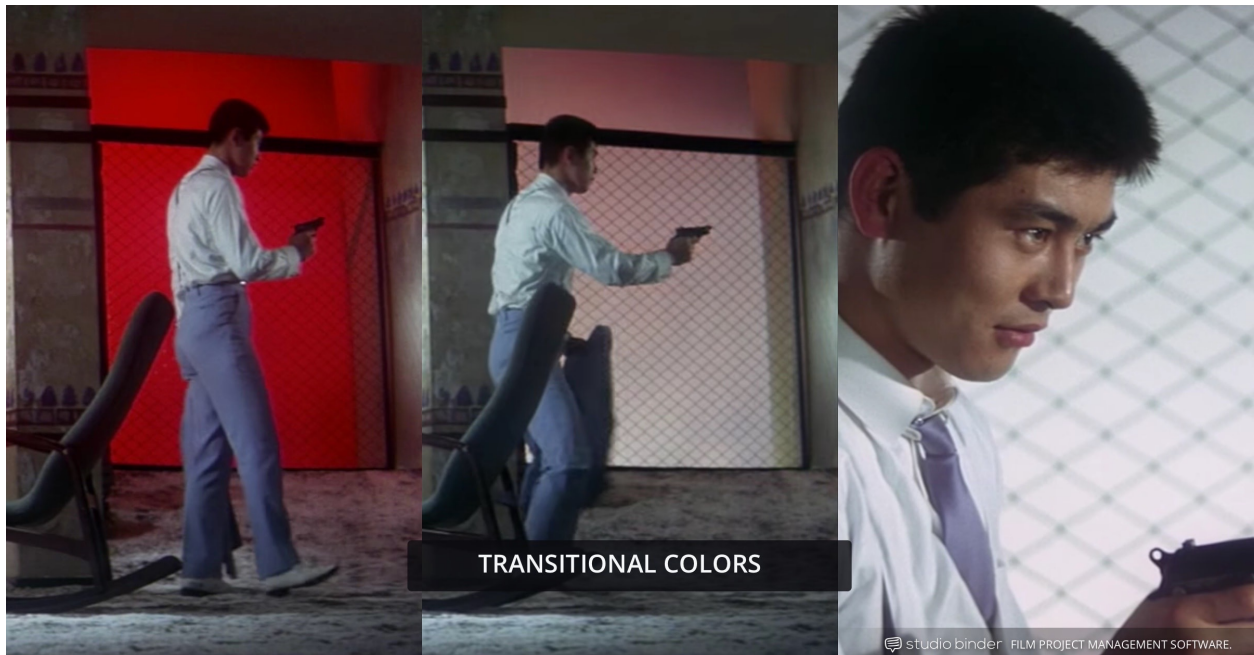

TRANSITIONAL COLORS IN FILM

When a color scheme shifts over the course of the film, it represents a change in the story's characters, story, or themes. A transformation.
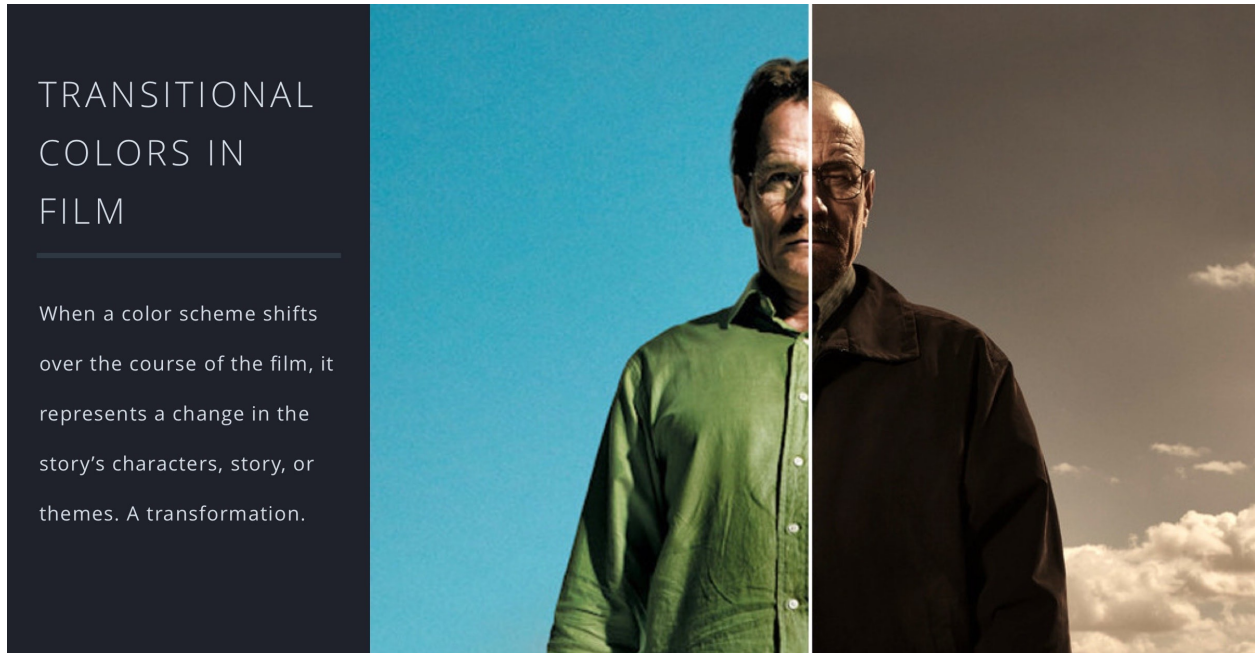
Star Wars vs. Return of the Jedi

Tokyo Drifter (1966)

TRANSITIONAL COLORS

Up (2009)

"

"When chosen carefully, a well-placed movie color palette

evokes mood and sets the tone for the film."

„

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

While many movie color schemes can exhibit a "universal" effect on audiences, there's really no magic bullet or "right" answer when it comes to selecting your movie color palette.

Ultimately it's up to the filmmaker to define the implications of the film palette. With that said, looking to universal color theory is an all important first step.

MORE RESOURCES

Now that you've finished reading this guide, don't stop there! You've established the principles of color theory, and learned what it takes to create an iconic look and feel in your project. Your download of this ebook comes with the image samples for easy viewing and printing.

If you're craving more more resources on filmmaking, film theory and production how-to's, visit the StudioBinder Blog.

SPECIAL EBOOK OFFER

As a bonus for reading this ebook, we want to offer you a special discount off StudioBinder.

StudioBinder is a modern, all-in-one production management service that will help you better manage production contacts, create shooting schedules, script breakdowns, call sheets, and more.

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