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THE COLOUR FANTASTIC

Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema



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THE COLOUR FANTASTIC



FRAMING FILM is a book series dedicated to theoretical and analytical studies in restoration, collection, archival, and exhibition practices in line with the existing archive of EYE Filmmuseum. With this series, Amsterdam University Press and EYE aim to support the academic research community, as well as practitioners in archive and restoration.

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Introduction

This book is dedicated to colour in silent cinema before 1930, and it features a selection of essays originally presented at the conference, *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema*, that took place in 2015 at EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. It was convened by Giovanna Fossati (EYE Filmmuseum and University of Amsterdam) and the Leverhulme Trust-funded research project *Colour in the 1920s: Cinema and Its Intermedial Contexts* led by Sarah Street (University of Bristol) and Joshua Yumibe (Michigan State University).

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The conference celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the groundbreaking Amsterdam Workshop *Colours in Silent Film* by providing a new forum to explore contemporary archival and academic debates around colour in the silent era. The use of colour in silent cinema was, for many years, a neglected aspect of film history but thanks, in large part, to the 1995 workshop, the last twenty years have seen the topic receive increasing attention from scholars and archivists. During this period, the importance of colour in silent cinema and the extent of its presence have been revealed to be of a much greater scale and significance than previously thought. This book reflects on the *Colours in Silent Film* workshop, revisiting key topics from the original event and looking at how more recent research sheds light on these issues. In addition, it considers the new directions research into silent colour has taken by exploring a diverse range of archival and academic topics.

The examination of colour in cinema during the silent period remains significant today, particularly in light of the digital revolution that has seen not only an explosion in colour in new digital media, but has also digitally transformed the options for preserving and restoring the chromatic elements of film and media. By examining colour in silent cinema, its uses, and the contemporary discourses surrounding colour's power and function, we can better understand the chromatic developments of the 21st century's digital age.

THE AMSTERDAM WORKSHOPS

Since the opening of the EYE Filmmuseum in 2012, it has provided an international forum for archival and scholarly research through its annual EYE International Conference, which hosted the Orphan Film Symposium in 2014 and *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema* in 2015. The structure of these conferences has been explicitly modelled on the earlier Amsterdam Workshop programme that was initiated by Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk in 1994. These international gatherings offered an international platform for sharing ideas amongst film archivists and scholars from various disciplines on aspects of the Filmmuseum's collections, which, up to that time, had received very little attention. The Amsterdam Workshops focussed on 'issues and themes prominent in the museum's preservation and programming activities, concentrating on areas that are relatively new or neglected in film history'.¹

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These included *Nonfiction from the Teens* (1994). This was followed by three additional workshops, respectively *Colours in Silent Film* (1995), *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film* (1997), *The Eye of the Beholder* (1998) on film and anthropology, and *Re-assembling the Programme* (2004) on film programming formats in silent cinema.²

The second workshop, on colours in silent film, was held 26–29 July 1995. As '*Disorderly Order*', the resulting book publication based on the Workshop explains, colours in the plural were conceptually very important because of:

the variety of colours that adorned the films and film programmes of the silent era, by the various ways in which these colours were applied to the film material, and (no less importantly) by the various transformations these colours have undergone and are still undergoing'.

Twenty years later, we still insist on using the plural for the present book: *Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema*. Perhaps even more than was appreciated in 1995, the variety of colours is evident as are the different worlds with which they interacted.

What emerged from the 1995 workshop has profoundly influenced colour research for the past two decades, including the work of this book's editors. For instance, Giovanna Fossati's involvement in organizing the colour workshop – by researching films, handbooks, and journals from the Filmmuseum's collections and co-curating the programme – determined in part her future career as film curator, restorer, and scholar. Similarly, the workshop proceedings inspired Joshua Yumibe to take up colour in early cinema as a PhD project, which eventually culminated in his book *Moving*

Color.³ The workshop has also been a guiding influence on the collaborative research project, *Colour in the 1920s: Cinema and Its Intermedial Contexts*, carried out by Yumibe, Sarah Street, Bregt Lameris, and Victoria Jackson. It has also been a vital context for the illustrated publication *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* that Tom Gunning, Jonathon Rosen, Elif Rongen-Kaynakci, Guy Edmonds, Fossati, and Yumibe worked on and officially launched at the The Colour Fantastic conference.⁴

Indeed, what the 1995 workshop did so remarkably well was to expand and deepen the work of the famed Brighton conference in 1978, which brought together archivists and scholars to grapple together with films from 1900 to 1906.⁵ It is the interdisciplinarity of that collaborative and sharpening work that has guided us in how we put together both the conference and this collection of essays – moving back and forth from a historical archive of chromatic riches to our present day engagement with it – to examine both what the cultural and technological world was that produced moving colour images a century ago, and how those hues can still speak to our contemporary and increasingly digitized environment.

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The fantastic images of silent cinema emerged during a momentous epoch in colour history. Colour waves are cyclical, caught between the pleasures and displeasures of *chromophobia* and *-philia*. What ‘*Disorderly Order*’ presciently engaged was a new sense of colour’s medial life. Looking back to the intermedial media environment of silent cinema has suggested a critical pathway into the chromatic world of our shifting environment today, something that the research of the last twenty years has continued to grapple with as is evident in the pages of this current book.

For a long time, the worlds of silent cinema seemed distant, almost lost, as Peter Delpout’s film *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) memorializes. But advances in the recovery, preservation, and restoration of silent films since 1995 perhaps make those worlds a little more familiar. We still have much to learn from them, but, through the work of many present in the pages of this book, we can celebrate what survives of colour’s infinite varieties.

The contributions to this book are organized in the following themes.

PROLOGUE

Peter Delpout’s ‘Questions of Colours: Taking Sides’ revisits the turbulent years when the author was appointed as Artistic Deputy Director of the Netherlands Filmmuseum (1988–1995). In a personal style, Delpout recalls the reasons that led a new generation of film archivists purposely to break with

archival tradition by unearthing hidden aspects of film history such as the colours of silent cinema. The author also revisits the circumstances around his seminal found footage film *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) and how he aimed, with this film, to unclothe the richness of silent colour films to a wider audience.

NONFICTION AND AMATEUR CINEMA

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Elena Gipponi's 'Fireworks and Carnivals: Applied and Natural Colours in Italian Home Movies' focusses on emerging discourses on colour cinematography in instructional manuals and handbooks for small-gauge films shot by amateur filmmakers. Drawing on examples from the surviving Italian collections of Baldassini and Portaluppi, she demonstrates how amateur filmmaking played a strategic role in technological research into chromatic reproduction processes. The films depicted spectacular events such as firework displays, carnivals, and nature, and documented the social life of the period.

In 'Liminal Perceptions: Intermediality and the Exhibition of Non-fiction Film', Liz Watkins explores the use of intermedial colour in polar expedition films of the 1910s and 1920s. Against the frozen white landscape of the poles, colour plays a profound yet liminal role in the experience of these extreme environments, which, as Watkins traces, the multimedia spectacle of films of the time seek to reproduce.

Jennifer Peterson's 'Rough Seas and Waterfalls: Lyrical Colors in Silent-Era Nonfiction Film' dwells on early colour films depicting water. Questions she asks are: 'How do these films draw upon Romantic aesthetic traditions to shape a sense of water as poetic? And what is the relationship between realism and the spectator's affective, emotional response to these films?' For her analysis, Peterson restricts herself to one particularly strong type of water imagery: rough seas.

NATURAL-COLOUR PROCESSES: THEORY AND PRACTICE

In "'Taking the color out of color": Two-Colour Technicolor, *The Black Pirate*, and Blackened Dyes', John Belton addresses the anxieties surrounding the use of two-colour Technicolor in Douglas Fairbanks's *The Black Pirate*. Belton's thorough research in the correspondence among the film's director and Herbert Kalmus, President of Technicolor, and other parties involved, illustrates how the ongoing debate on the use of colour and its (supposedly) distracting effect on the audience led to very original and fairly subdued colour effects for this title.

In 'Why Additive? Problems of Colour and Epistemological Networks in Early (Film) Technology', Benoît Turquety examines the challenges of restoring early additive colour systems by framing the historical context out of which these methods were developed. The complexity and yet popularity of these systems in the early twentieth century must be understood, Turquety argues, in relation to the technological and epistemological cultural models out of which they emerged.

Hilde D'haeyere's 'Ziegfeldized Slapstick, Useful Comedy: Mack Sennett's Slapstick Comedies under the Influence of Natural Colour' explores the ways in which colour was used in Mack Sennett comedies by examining three moments in the studio's history: colour in the late silent films of the studio, in Depression-era talking films, and finally considering colour as an element of Sennett's legacy after the closure of the studio at the end of 1933.

Frank Gray's 'Kinemacolor and Kodak: The Enterprise of Colour' compares the development of two colour systems, the additive colour system known as Kinemacolor and the subtractive colour-film processes by Kodak. He investigates both their shared vision, to bring colour to the motion-picture screen, and their very different technical solutions, business models, and commercial perspectives.

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INTERMEDIALITY AND ADVERTISING

In her essay 'Rainbow Ravine: Colour and Animated Advertising in Times Square', Kirsten Moana Thompson writes about the colourful electrical billboards, positioning them as 'electrical animations' that turned the sidewalks into 'outdoor theaters with free entertainment'. Following the development of the technology and design of the neon signs through pioneers such as Oscar Gude and Douglas Leigh, Thompson discusses the mutual influence between these advertising signs and popular culture, or more specifically, the film industry.

Natalie Snoyman's 'Kodachrome's Hope: The Making and Promotion of McCall Colour Fashion News' examines eight fashion shorts filmed in Eastman Kodak's Kodachrome process between 1925 and 1928. Made in conjunction with *McCall's*, one of the most popular women's magazines published throughout the 1920s, the spectacular colour films feature well-known actress Hope Hampton modelling the latest Parisian fashions. Using this striking example, Snoyman examines the mutually advantageous promotional relationship between fashion, film stars, and colour film.

Federico Pierotti's 'Chromatic Objects: Colour Advertising and French Avant-garde Films of the 1920s' illustrates the possible connections between

the emerging science of advertising and a selection of French Dada films made during the 1920s. The connections between advertising and avant-garde films provide an opportunity to reflect on the function of colour and black and white in the visual culture of the 1920s.

ARCHIVING AND RESTORATION: EARLY DEBATES AND CURRENT PRACTICES

In *'La Ligue du Noir et Blanc: French Debates on Natural Colour Film and Art Cinema 1926–1927'*, Bregt Lameris unearths a debate against colour and for black and white in late 1920s French film discourse. Promoted by the critic Bernard Brunius at the time, the polemic in part targeted the growing dominance and 'vulgarity' of U.S. Technicolor films and promoted a medium-specific argument about silent film being inherently black-and-white that would have a lasting effect on film preservation.

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Barbara Flueckiger, Claudy Op den Kamp, and David Pfluger's 'A Material-Based Approach to the Digitization of Early Film Colours' presents three innovative research projects on colour films, which all share the interdisciplinary goal to bridge a wide variety of fields of research with different approaches and questions. These include chemistry, physics, IT, aesthetical, and historical approaches to film studies, and questions of colour perception and colour appearance.

Edited transcripts of the two Archival Panels, the first on 'Preservation, Restoration, Presentation and Policy' with Sonia Genaitay (BFI), Ulrich Ruedel (BFI and HTW / University of Applied Sciences, Berlin), Bryony Dixon (BFI), Annike Kross (EYE), Tina Anckarman and Tone Førelund (National Library of Norway), Thierry Delannoy and Benjamin Alimi (Digimage-Classics), Fumiko Tsuneishi (Austrian Film Archive), moderated by Giovanna Fossati; and the second on 'Digital Restoration' with Michelle Carlos (National Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart), Barbara Flueckiger, Claudy Op den Kamp, and David Pfluger (DIASTOR project, University of Zurich), moderated by Giovanna Fossati.

SCREENINGS DURING CONFERENCE

With the Colour Fantastic conference, besides celebrating the 20th anniversary of the 'Amsterdam Workshop 1995: Colours in Silent Film', we also intended to revisit two aspects of that earlier workshop that have been of great importance for the collection and archival practice at EYE, namely the richness of colour present in its silent film holdings and its commitment to research and

restoring these chromatic works. Such commitment was advanced by the pioneering team that led the museum in the late 1980s and 1990s – in particular, former director Hoos Blotkamp, together with artistic directors Eric de Kuyper and Peter Delpout, and curator Mark-Paul Meyer. Since then, the colour restorations carried out by the Nederlands Filmmuseum, and now by EYE, have been presented at countless festivals around the world.

The films screened during the conference had been programmed from the EYE collection, primarily by Elif Rongen-Kaynakci and Giovanna Fossati, and entailed short compilation programmes ranging from 10 to 25 minutes each morning before the first panel, then, after the lunch break, and after the last panel of the day. These films, as well as Jonathon Rosen's compilation film *Bivalve Stereo-Opticon Presents: Aurora Goes to Holland* (2015), were selected as they are connected to the publication *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema*, and they engage with the book's themes (e.g. dreams in colour, fairy tales, metamorphoses, voyages, and our chromatic fancies). Bregt Lameris also had a hand in the programming, specifically for the films from the 1920s. A number of the films programmed during the conference were also shown during the 1995 workshop. In some cases, the same print was screened that was shown at the time. However, at other times, when a more recent restoration was available, the newer version was favored – as in the case of the digital restoration of *Maudite soit la guerre*. All films were screened with original – mainly Dutch – title cards.

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SCREENING OPENING NIGHT, 28 MARCH 2015

Bivalve Stereo-Opticon Presents: Aurora Goes to Holland (Jonathon Rosen, US, 2015)

SUNDAY, 29 MARCH 2015

First Screening

L'Album merveilleux (FR, Gaston Velle, 1905, Pathé Frères)

Het Tovertoneel [a.k.a. *Les Tulipes* or *El Iris Fantastico*] (FR, Segundo de Chomón, 1907, Pathé Frères)

Visions d'art: 3. La Fée aux étoiles (FR, 1902, Pathé Frères)

Second Screening

Bloemenvelden Haarlem (NL, Albert & Willy Mullens, 1909, Alberts Frères)

Danses Cosmopolites (FR, Segundo de Chomón, 1901, Pathé Frères)

La Peine du Talion (FR, Gaston Velle, 1906, Pathé Frères)
Bits & Pieces Nr. 275: 'Een prisma'. ([D],[1930])
Fragment from Pathé-Revue: [Hongarije] (FR, 1926, Pathé)
Pathé-revue: [Mode] (FR, 1926–1927, Pathé Cinéma)
Fragment from The Lady of Victories (US, Roy William Neill, 1927, MGM – Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

Evening Screening

Maudite Soit la Guerre (BE/FR, Alfred Machin, 1914, Belge Cinéma)

MONDAY, 30 MARCH 2015

First Screening

16 | *Le Voyage sur Jupiter* (FR, Segundo de Chomón, 1909, Pathé Frères)

Second Screening

Dutch Types (FR/GB, [1915], Gaumont)

Bout-de-Zan et le Crocodile (FR, Louis Feuillade, 1913, Gaumont)

Third Screening

Les Parisiennes (US, 1897, American Mutoscope Company)

[Narren-grappen] ([US], [1908], Joker Film)

Les Pyrénées pittoresques a.k.a. *Een Autotocht in de Pyreneëen* (FR, 1910, Pathé Frères)

The Beauty Thief (GB, [1920–1929], Pathé Pictures)

Opus III (D, Walter Ruttmann, 1925, Ruttmann-Film)

Pathé Revue no. 46: De mode der taschjes te Parijs (FR, 1924, Pathé)

Fragment from The Glorious West Country (GB, [1925], HAL – Holland Amerika Lijn)

Evening Screening

Lyrical Nitrate a.k.a. *Lyrisch nitraat* (NL, Peter Delpout, 1990, Nederlands Film-museum)

TUESDAY, 31 MARCH 2015

First Screening

La Chenille de carotte (FR, 1911, Pathé Frères)

Le Charmeur (FR, Segundo de Chomón, 1906, Pathé Frères)

Second Screening

Conway Castle – Panoramic View of Conway on the L. & N.W. Railway (GB, William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, 1898, British Mutoscope and Biograph Syndicate)

Santa Lucia (IT, [1910], Ambrosio)

Les Grandes eaux de Versailles (FR, 1904, Pathé Frères)

Third Screening

Danse des Ouled-Nails; Danse du ventre; Danses Algeriennes (FR, 1902, Pathé Frères)

Rêve à la lune (FR, Gaston Velle, Ferdinand Zecca, 1905, Pathé Frères)

Buona sera, fiori! (IT, Giovanni Vitrotti, 1909, Ambrosio)

NOTES

- 1 Daan Hertogs and Nico De Klerk, Eds. *Disorderly Order. Colours in Silent Film. The 1995 Amsterdam Workshop* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1996), 5.
- 2 The proceedings from these workshops were published as: Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk, Eds., *Nonfiction from the Teens: The 1994 Amsterdam Workshop* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1994); Hertogs and de Klerk, 'Disorderly Order' (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1996); and Hertogs and de Klerk, *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997).
- 3 Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism, Techniques of the Moving Image* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- 4 Tom Gunning et al., *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).
- 5 On the Brighton conference, see the materials collected in Roger Holman, Ed., *Cinema 1900/1906* (Brussels: FIAF, 1982).