

Institute Of Art, Design And Technology Dun Laoghaire

The Importance of Colour in Dystopian Cinema: Costume Design Perspective.

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



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Abstract

This thesis examines the use of colour and costume design as tools for world-building in dystopian cinema. It details the origin and nature of dystopia and why it offers an opportunity for designers to explore a wide range of topics like social unrest, economic crises, and authoritarianism. The thesis emphasises how colour and costume can guide or shape audiences' experience. Chapter one discusses the journey of dystopian film from the black-and-white “Metropolis” to the colourful “A Clockwork Orange”. Chapter two analyses three dystopian films, “Equilibrium”, “The Hunger Games”, and “Blade Runner 2049” and how each film uses colour to enhance their themes, ideas, and mood. Chapter three deals with the choices in fabric and colour made by costume designers. It also describes many of the original techniques for colouring films. The thesis concludes that designers and dystopian films consider colours very carefully and deliberately to ensure that every detail and choice of colour carries the precise meaning and association that will accurately convey the themes and messages of the work. The same also applies to costume designers and their choice of fabrics, silhouettes and colours within each costume.

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Introduction

My thesis discusses the importance of colour and costume design in dystopian films from the 20th and the 21st century.

As Mario Vrbančić says in “The Future of Dystopia” (2022), dystopia is an image of a society that is oppressed and dehumanised, and subjugated by superior technology, corporate supremacy, dictatorship, or degeneracy. Unlike utopias, pictures of an ideal society, dystopias describe worst case situations in which individuals experience fear, alienation, and powerlessness.

Classics like “1984” (United Kingdom, sci-fi, 1984) based on George Orwell novel from 1949, “Fahrenheit 451” (United Kingdom, sci-fi/thriller, 1966), and “Brave New World” (USA, sci-fi/fantasy, 1998) act as cautionary tales about the future and explore themes introduced by Sir Thomas More's utopian vision.

Dystopian themes offer artists and creatives opportunities to explore this rich landscape. By blending social issues with imagination, it creates thought-provoking and emotionally resonant films that encourage viewers to reflect on the humans' dilemmas. Filmmakers, writers, and visual artists use dystopia to dive into the darker side of human nature. These exaggerated worlds critique contemporary society while creating immersive environments representing societal collapse and oppression. Dystopian fiction fosters a critical examination of contemporary trends while imagining alternative futures through literary, cinematic, and artistic creations.

The aesthetics of dystopian cinema can be traced back to the film “Metropolis” (sci-fi/thriller), which was released in 1927 and paved the way for dystopian storytelling in cinema. Fritz Lang's use of architecture and expressionistic visuals in “Metropolis” provided a major influence on future filmmakers. The emergence of colour in dystopian films like “Time Machine” (USA, adventure/sci-fi, 1960) and “A Clockwork Orange” (England, crime/sci-Fi, 1972) greatly enhanced different aspects of visual storytelling and demonstrates the importance of colour in creating dystopian atmospheres.



Figure 01: Weena leads George to the “Palace of Green Porcelain” in the *Time Machine*, 1960
(IMDB, 2024)

Technological concerns have greatly influenced the visual style of dystopian cinema, with films such as "The Matrix" (USA, action/sci-fi, 1999) redefining the genre with a distinct cyberpunk flair. Colour has a tremendous impact on the mood of films.

Colours like green, pink, and red evoke different emotions and associations, affecting viewers' perceptions. The strategic use of colour in costumes, settings, and lighting communicates themes and character subtleties, and colour palettes are carefully chosen to match the film's narrative. In dystopian films, grim, de-saturated colour palettes represent hopelessness, dehumanization, and oppression, whereas bright hues may represent technological domination or fake societal order.

Costume design in dystopian films is often used to depict rigid social structures or the depressing reality of controlled futures. Functional clothes, uniform colour palettes, tech wear, material reuse, and historical inspirations are all important considerations when creating costumes for dystopian scenarios. Such clothing can reflect the realities of survival, social systems, and the effect of technology, all of which contribute to dystopian films' immersive world-building.

I chose to focus on three films that present a spectrum of aesthetic choices in dystopian cinema.

"Equilibrium" (2002) envisions a future society where emotions are suppressed by a daily dosage of Proziom. After missing his dose, John Preston, a top government agent, assumes the role of protagonist. The film's monochrome colour scheme of blacks, greys, and whites represents this emotional repression. Warmer tones thus represent an awakening of human feeling. The fascist-inspired architecture of Libria promotes notions of control and conformity, symbolising what Preston must overcome to gain his emotional freedom.

"The Hunger Games" (2012), based on Suzanne Collins' novels, contrasts the rich Capitol with the poor districts of Panem. Katniss Everdeen offers herself as a Tribute to save her sister. Philip Messina, the production designer, employs subdued, monochrome tones for District 12 and, in contrast, the brilliant, dazzling hues of the Capitol with its extravagant decorative elements depict the difference between oppression and pleasure. The shift from Districts to the Capitol are represented by contrasting materials and styles, emphasizing the story's disdain towards excess and injustice.

"Blade Runner 2049" (2017) is set in a dystopian version of Los Angeles and focuses on K, a replicant blade runner who resolves a mystery concerning replicant reproduction. The cinematography by Roger Deakins perfectly merges cyberpunk and post-apocalyptic visual styles, using custom colour palettes that mirror the emotional conditions of the characters. Director Denis Villeneuve makes sure that every aspect of the environment conveys the story's complex mood, ranging from desolate landscapes to advanced urban settings.

Costume designers play a key role in shaping characters' identities and establishing the aesthetic direction of the dystopian movie. They research extensively to ensure their designs align with the story's themes and contexts. Deborah Nadoolman Landis says: "We're really giving the actor a second skin, something to interact with." (Landis Nadoolman, D. (2024) "Q&A: Costume designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis talks career, impact of work". Interviewed by Natalie Ralston, Daily Bruin, 15 December) The thesis includes analysing cultural studies, historical references, or previously made dystopian works. This genre of movie gives costume designers an immense opportunity to reflect upon political, economic, and social issues.

Costumes often reflect ideals such as rebellion, authoritarian control, or survival. These are achieved by the use of specific fabrics, colours, textures, and designs.

Costume designers find fabric solutions to serve specific purposes. For instance, heavy canvases, leathers, wool, or denim highlight the bleak, practical or possibly postapocalyptic nature of the movie. Synthetic fabrics with technological elements reflect advancement in technology, whereas natural fabrics show the difference between the artificial and real world. Manufactured fabrics inform viewers about hierarchical control. Fabric manipulations convey stark differences between the wealthy and the poor. It is important to identify the role of colour choices in dystopian films. This factor is also crucial to building the dystopian aesthetic. To learn more about colours, I researched the symbolic meanings of various colours to understand better the impact that different hues have on humans.

“Color Psychology and Color Therapy; A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life” (1950) by Faber Birren was very informative. He mentions the symbolic and spiritual meanings of colours, like in Ancient Egypt and Greece, where they used colours to represent different concepts and gods. The perception of colours evolved with the scientific revolution in the 17th and 18th centuries. Robert Boyle believed white light containing all colours and later Newton was the one who established it to be fact. Subsequently, psychologists studied the effects of colours on people’s moods and the colours that they found the most impactful were deep orange, bright red, and yellow-orange. Another useful resource was “Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism” (2012) by Joshua Yumibe. As the title may suggest, she focuses on the silent cinema era where techniques like hand colouring, tinting, toning, and stenciling were used to draw viewers’ attention to important details or changes in the story.

The use of colour in cinema is based on a fundamental understanding of how people perceive colours as well as their historical and cultural associations. Different colour palettes build various emotional impacts. The ones that I focused on are:

Vibrant Colours- create symbolism, draw attention to themes, or emphasize a film's fantastical nature.

- "The Grand Budapest Hotel" (2014), pastel shades convey whimsicality and nostalgia, while muted colours represent melancholy. Red and gold accents draw attention to quintessential scenes.
- "Amélie" (2001) features warm, saturated hues to create a nostalgic, romantic atmosphere, with red symbolising passion and love.

Muted Palettes- suggests despair, detachment, or desolation.

- "The Road" (2009) uses muted browns and greys to convey post-apocalyptic desolation.

- "Saving Private Ryan" (1998) uses a subdued colour scheme to reflect war's bleakness and historical authenticity.

Warm and Cool Tones- representing calmness, detachment, or unease, while warm tones evoke romance and happiness.

- "The Shape of Water" (2017) uses cool tones to mirror the underwater setting and the mysterious creature, contrasting with the warm human world.
- "La La Land" (2016) uses warm tones to create a romantic atmosphere.

Monochromatic Colours- use various shades, tones, and tints of a single colour.

- "Her" (2013) settings, costumes, lights are full of pink and red tones to convey intimacy.
- "Schindler's List" (1993) uses monochromatic schemes to emphasise historical authenticity and avoid glorifying dark subjects.

Complementary Colours- opposite each other on the colour wheel, create stark contrasts, adding visual interest and evoking strong emotions.

- "Joker" (2019) - red and green to contrast Arthur Fleck's internal struggle and societal collapse.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Dystopian Aesthetic

1.1. What is dystopia?

Dystopias present a vision of an imagined future universe where society is oppressed or dehumanized by advanced technology, corporate control, authoritarianism, or totalitarianism. Unlike utopias, which depict a perfect, harmonious society, dystopias stand in stark opposition. In “Dystopia: A Natural History”, Claeys suggests that fear is a natural state for humans. He first conceived of dystopia in terms of the cruelty of nature in all its most violent forms, but as time progressed, humans began to conceive of dystopia in political or technological terms.

Across all these dystopian settings, people face fear, alienation, and powerlessness. Dystopias reflect worst-case scenarios, and modern dystopia of the 20th century onward tends to use hyperbole and exaggeration to critique current societal norms, political systems, and cultural trends.

Social and historical context:

The idea of a "utopia" first emerged in the work of Sir Thomas More, who created the term in his 1516 book “Utopia”. More was an English humanist and statesman, who was executed for refusing to recognize King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England. In his book, More described his ideal vision of a society, touching on concepts like communal property while questioning the intrinsic value of money. Many classic dystopian works have been published over the years, such as George Orwell's “1984”, Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451” (1953), and Aldous Huxley's “Brave New World” (1931). They act as warnings and prognostications about the future and explore ideas More mentions in his utopian vision.

The term "dystopia" was first used in 1868 by philosopher John Stuart Mill during a speech in which he condemned the government's Irish land policy. It's interesting to note that Mill's speech has specific reference to the failure of authority when needing to resort to violence (in this case flogging) to maintain its authority. The use of fear or the threat of violence in this way, whether overt or subliminal, is a cornerstone of modern dystopia. It is also important to note here that the

context of Mill's speech also suggests that the emergence of dystopia is often the result of those who may consider they are actually creating utopia.

Creative and cultural context:

Writers, directors and artists consider dystopia a rich area to explore. The unpredictable nature of a dystopian future allows artists to push the boundaries of their imagination. Writers, filmmakers, and visual artists are drawn to the challenge of depicting themes such as power, rebellion, control, and corruption.

Through these exaggerated worlds, they can critique contemporary society while also constructing intricate, immersive, and often visually stunning worlds. Dystopian narratives provide unique opportunities for world-building, where creatives can design complex societies, layered characters, and atmospheric environments that visually and thematically represent societal collapse or oppression.

As a specific example, Claeys also mentions Michel Foucault's belief that behavioural conformity and the loss of individualisation were specific tools that could be used to usher in political utopia for those in control so their citizens could be more easily managed and governed. Visual mediums and particularly film offer perhaps the best medium to convey the impact of this loss of visual identity and conformity. Some authors mention how uniforms in concentration camps were used to ensure easier control of prisoners (Pantouvaki, S. (2023), "Costume Research" [Lecture] ELO-E6513: Costume and Research. Aalto Arts) Films and costumes can immediately and powerfully portray this loss of individualism.

Whether through novels, films, or visual art, dystopian narratives inspire people to think more critically about their world and the direction society might be heading, providing both warnings and opportunities for reflection.

1.2. Dystopian aesthetics in cinema.

The beginning of dystopian cinema was marked by the release of “Metropolis” in 1927. The film was a science fiction masterpiece in black and white and made in Germany based on the book of the same name released two years prior. At the time, the film presented a shocking image of a future world, which captivated audiences with its portrayal of a society divided by extreme class differences and dominated by technology. Fritz Lang, often referred to as the “Master of Darkness,” (“‘Mise-en-Scène’ and Fritz Lang: The Invaluable, Short-Lived Magazine’s Article on the Master of Darkness”, Cinephilia Beyond, 2017) was the Austrian American film director, screenwriter, and producer behind this iconic work. “Metropolis”, an Expressionistic science-fiction masterpiece, set the stage for dystopian storytelling in film. Lang drew inspiration from architecture, stating:

I looked into the streets—the glaring lights and the tall buildings—and there I conceived “Metropolis”. The buildings seemed to be a vertical sail, scintillating and very light... suspended in the dark sky to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize.

(Shire Wolfe, Artland Magazine, 2020)

This architectural vision became a visual signature of the film, reflected in its majestic skyscrapers, sprawling cityscapes, and mechanical world. Lang’s film used innovative special effects by Eugen Schüfftan like “miniatures of the city, camera on a swing” (Wolf. Z, 2023, “Metropolis and the SchüfftanProcess”) and mirrors to “create the illusion that actors are occupying the city” (Wolf. Z, 2023). Even though the movie is noir, Lang’s Atmosphere was gripping. Would that mean then that colour is not necessary in dystopian films?



Figure 02: Image of the city in the *Metropolis*, 1927 (IMDB, 2024)

As time progressed, colour made significant impact in films like “Time Machine” (1960), “Planet of the Apes” (1968) or “A Clockwork Orange” (1972). In black-and-white classics like Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis” (1927), cinematography relied heavily on sharp lighting and stark contrasts to emphasize the angular architecture, advanced technology, and the division between rich and poor. These visual techniques were groundbreaking at the time, but colour opened new directions for filmmakers to deepen their storytelling.

In “Time Machine” (USA, sci-fi/adventure, 1960), an American sci-fi film based on the work of HG Wells, cinematographer Paul C. Vogel used colour to distinguish between the warmth of the Victorian era and the cold, dystopian future. The lush, warm tones of the Victorian set, complete with wood-paneled decoration and rococo furnishings, illuminated in amber light to create a gentle, utopian atmosphere. This provided a stark visual contrast to the harsh, futuristic world that followed, where muted, cooler tones dominated. Through these colour contrasts, Vogel enhanced the viewer’s understanding of utopian ideals clashing with dystopian realities.

Similarly, “Planet of the Apes” (USA, sci-fi/ adventure, 1968), another American film based loosely on a novel from 1963, utilized earthy, natural tones to highlight the dystopian reversal of humanity’s dominance. The earthy, washed-out colour palette emphasizes the idea that nature had taken over, underscoring the gloominess of this future society. The muted colours gave the film a grounded, almost primitive feeling to portray the human species' loss of control. “A Clockwork Orange”, on the other hand, in bringing Anthony Burgess' famous work to life, embraced vibrant, flashy colours to embody its violent, dystopian narrative. The use of bright, lurid colour schemes stood in obvious opposition to the violence and moral depravity depicted on screen. This extreme

contrast became a signature aesthetic of the dystopian genre, reflecting both societal breakdown and the dark attraction of a hyper stylized world. Notice in particular in the image below the hypnotic black and white ceiling fixture and the leftmost character's sharp crimson jacket with square shoulders and tall collar giving an austere and formal appearance.



Figure 03: Malcolm McDowell, Gillian Hills, and Glenys O'Brien in the *A Clockwork Orange*, 1971
(IMDB, 2024)

In these films, colour evolved into a vital tool for filmmakers. It offered a new, visual means to enhance how audiences perceive and engage with the grim realities presented on screen.

Technological advancements and growing societal anxieties greatly influenced the aesthetics of dystopian films. A key example is "The Matrix", an extremely popular film from 1999 directed by the Wachowski brothers. The Matrix redefined the genre for the modern era, using monochromatic surroundings, sleek black costumes, green tint, and a cyberpunk aesthetic. This visual style emphasized the evident contrast between reality and the virtual world. The film used a muted, toned-down real world, compared with the polished, high-tech design of the Matrix itself, offered a striking visual metaphor for humanity's suppression and control by technology, making it a crucial influence on the future of dystopian cinema.

1.3. Colour matters

Colours make a considerable difference in shaping how we perceive the movie, so it is important to know how various colours affect the viewer and why they evoke certain feelings.

Every colour carries a variety of symbolic meanings.

For instance, the colour green “(...) green tends to conjure up comforting images of countryside and environmentally friendly politics. Despite its association with envy, it is generally seen as a peaceful colour and is often associated with luxury and style” (St. Clair, 2017) or pink, traditionally associated with girls, became a colour of youth, beauty and delicacy.

Bright red is like visual caffeine. It can activate your libido, or make you aggressive, anxious, or compulsive. In fact, red can activate whatever latent passions you might bring to the table, or to the movie. Red is power. (Bellantoni Patti, 2005, p.2).

Bellantoni also mentions that the usage of colour depends on the needs, if the character must be shown as powerful, red is useful but can equally be used for a good guy (“After all, both the Wicked Witch and Dorothy wore the ruby slippers.”). Yellow, a visually aggressive colour that is meant for working on roads, however, can be desaturated so that the elegant shade that Mia Farrow in “Rosemary’s Baby” (1968) can be worn to reflect her innocence.

In contrast, there is the Anthony Minghella's thriller “The Talented Mr. Ripley” (1999) that presents Matt Daemon in a saturated bathing suit, “like the acid yellow” to highlight the unpleasant aspects and hidden motives of Tom Ripley. Notice below how the effect of this choice of colour gives Ripley's character a highly energetic appearance and makes him stand out, while the colours of Mia's costume from Rosemary's baby in combination with style of dress gives her a very calm, gentle appearance. This demonstrates how certain colours have a vast scope to be used for any given thematic need.



Figure 04: Mia Farrow in light yellow dress in the *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968 (IMDB, 2024)



Figure 05: Matt Damon on a beach scene in the *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 1999 (IMDB, 2024)

Oftentimes, colours are put in contrast to focus on the differences between characters. In “Billy Elliot” (2000), the main character Billy is defined by bright yellow while his father wears a deeper, more subdued blue palette distinct from his son. Another example which makes a contrast visible

is “A Little Princess” (1995) where Sarah’s costume is an orange saffron dress, but the rival character, a headmistress, has a “muddy green dress”.

When designing costumes, sets, and lighting a colour palette needs to be carefully selected to reflect the movie themes. In costume design, the designer takes into consideration inner changes, social status, or the environment of the character. In “Legally Blonde” (2001), the main character Wears initially a lot of pink, but it becomes dimmer as she tries to fit into law university. Sophie de Rakoff, the costume designer who stands behind this memorable “pink” costume, smartly plays with shades or additional pieces of clothing to distract from bright pink fits. One of the best-known green dresses designed by Jacqueline Durran for the movie “Atonement” (2007), “symbolises both the internalization of feelings between the two protagonists and the jealousy felt by Briony (Saoirse Ronan) who surprises her sister with the man she is in love with”. (eyesneverliechico, Instagram post, 2024)

In the case of dystopian films, the colours are often de-saturated and bleak. However, films like “Hunger Games” (2012) or “Blade Runner 2049” (2017) are known for bright, lively colour palettes to illustrate technological dominance or a superficial sense of order. In these instances, colour becomes a tool to emphasize the stark contrast between the artificial, controlled environments and the underlying decay or societal turmoil.

1.4 Costume Design in dystopia

Costume design in visual storytelling is crucial in conveying the characters personalities and relations with one another. It answers questions that viewers might ask themselves: who, where, when and why. In the case of dystopian films, it is important for designers to focus on portraying the societal structures and living in a broken, controlled future. (Miles Socha, 2020, “Movies Tell Us How to Dress for Dystopia”, WWD)

1. Functionality

Functional clothing in dystopian films is an essential element that must be considered. People in these films must survive harsh weather conditions, oppression, or dangerous technology. Pieces of costumes like masks and respirators, armor, or layered clothing are there to protect characters from the world they live in.

2. Uniformity

In dystopian cinema, clothing is often used to suppress individualism. Characters wear Uniforms or colourless costumes. Costumes also convey hierarchy, where authority wears clean, sleek designs while poorer classes wear dirty, over-used outfits

3. Colour Palette

As I mentioned before, in this type of movie the colour palettes are typically bleak, de saturated, and dull. This same rule applies to costumes, which are designed to reflect the overall mood and tone of the dystopian universe. Matching aesthetics across all aspects of the production—from sets to costumes—is essential to creating a cohesive, immersive world.

4. Techwear

When technology is in question, costumes contain mechanical parts, modular pieces, or synthetic fabrics to convey a sense of connection between people and machines.

5. Reusable Materials

Lack of resources “pushes characters” (costume designers) to repurpose objects into clothing. Leather straps, metal pieces or any other usable elements would be applied to costumes to portray the survival atmosphere. What is often seen in survival films are patched fabrics, armor made of the elements of cars/ mechanical objects, or gas masks.

6. Historical Influences

Costume designers often take inspiration from historical characters or period clothing. They blend futuristic elements with historical eras like Baroque or Renaissance. On the other hand, the clothing that will remind us of today might make viewers realize that we are already part of a given dystopian reality.

Chapter 2

Analysis of dystopian films

2.1 Equilibrium

In this part, I want to discuss the 2002 science fiction film *Equilibrium* directed by Kurt Wimmer, and I want to analyse how the film uses colour both in its broad aesthetic design as well as costume design.

Equilibrium presents a futuristic world where a society suppresses emotion. Anything that could awaken emotions such as books, music, or art are forbidden. Citizens are required to take a daily dose of Proziom, an emotion-suppressing drug. Those in authority ensure that everyone is following the rules in Libria, the film's location. These individuals are called clerics, and the main character is one of them. John Preston played by Christian Bale is a top-ranked government agent who misses his daily dose and his emotions return. Preston realizes that the administration of Proziom is morally wrong, and must overthrow the regime.

As seen in my first image, the colour scheme of *Equilibrium* mostly features blacks, greys and whites to enforce an emotionless conformity. These unsaturated colour choices are used in sets, costumes and cinematography and here we can observe the coordination between different departments to build a coherent world.



Figure 06: The city of Libria in *Equilibrium*, 2002 (Google Images, 2024)

In ‘Equilibrium’, the use of colour subtly underscores the characters' emotional journey, with cold hues representing the oppressive control of Libria. This monochrome world is shattered during key moments when protagonist John Preston begins to experience emotion, marked by an introduction of colour.

In the “music scene”, where Preston hears Beethoven’s piece for the first time in years, he gets emotionally carried away. The scene is tinted with warmer colours and symbolises the inner change that he experiences.

Another important moment is the “awakening scene”, seen in image 5. In this scene, he peels the blurry label from his bedroom window, revealing a vibrant, colourful world outside. As he sees a rare burst of colours, possibly a rainbow, it becomes a visual metaphor for his reawakened senses and emotional freedom. A greater volume of warm hues reflects Preston’s personal journey toward rediscovering the full spectrum of human existence.



Figure 07: Images of “awakening” scenes of Preston in *Equilibrium*, 2002 (Google Images, 2024)

It is important to mention the resemblance of the film settings and fascist architecture. In an article from 2020 by Islam Abohela, “The Height of Future Architecture: Significance of High versus Low Rise Architecture in Science Fiction Films”, there is a paragraph that discusses the inspiration for the film.

In *Equilibrium* (2002), the role of verticality comes with a political significance. Visual effects Tim McGovern worked alongside Kurt Wimmer and Wolf Kroeger to formulate the look of the walled Librian metropolis. McGovern, who won an Oscar for *Total Recall* (1990) started with a theme of grandiosity. He explains: "The whole idea of fascist architecture is to make the individual feel small and insignificant so the government seems more powerful, and I continued that design ethic in the visual effects. For example, Libria is surrounded by a seventy-five feet high wall, the walls just keep going on and on and use vertical and horizontal lines in a Mondrian-type way.

Abohela refers to verticality, fascist architecture, and Mondrian linearity. The inspiration is also from neoclassical buildings, where there is no ornamentation, the architecture is raw and concrete. It depicts even more the lack of emotions in Libria. On the costume design side, the same rules apply. The costume designer, Joseph A. Porro, known for “The Mandalorian” (2019) or “Independence Day” (1996). He designed costumes that have linearity, toned-down colours, and solid silhouettes to cooperate with the world that the characters are in. For instance, black, priestlike, clerics outfits fit into this minimalistic reality that Libria embraces as seen in image 6.



Figure 08: Joseph Porro, Sketches of Preston for the film *Equilibrium*, 2002 (Pinterest, 2002)

Costumes have a pivotal role in the film. Librian citizens wear monotonous, muted clothing that lacks individuality and personal expression. There are mainly used colours like greys, blacks, pale blues, and whites- symbolizing suppression of emotions (just like in set and light). The lack of variation communicates uniformity.



Figure 09: Clerics in *Equilibrium*, 2002 (IMDB, 2024)

Clerics, as seen in image 9, wear sharply delineated, tailored clothing, meaning order and restraint. The minimalism of these costumes focuses on the calculated nature of the world and highlights oppression. Their costumes are militaristic; however, they do not have typical military “decorations”. High-collared black coats and leather details give an intimidating presence to the characters

Preston begins the film with a black tailored suit which gradually transforms to a white uniform to symbolise his change.

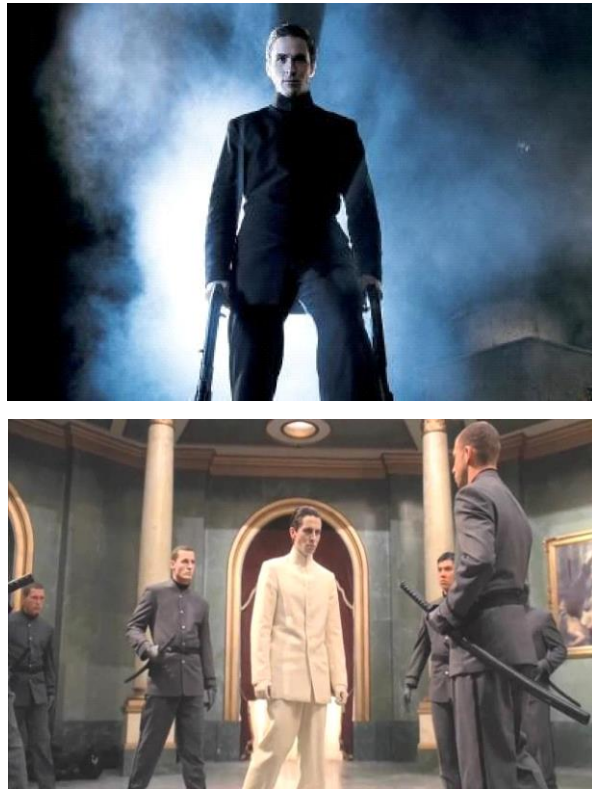


Figure 10: Christian Bale as Preston in *Equilibrium*, 2002 (IMDB, 2024)

Some costumes are very strong visually in comparison to the rest of the characters. We see Emily in a long brown, flowy dress with a deeper neckline and barefoot when Preston meets her for the first time. Then in a pale pink sleeveless, shorter dress that she wears when he starts remembering how he felt about his wife. Lastly, Emily dresses in the most vibrant costume in the whole movie, a red gown to symbolise passion, love, and intimacy. It is her death that impacts him so strongly that he stands against the Librian authorities.



Figure 11: Emily Watson as Mary O'Brien in *Equilibrium*, 2002 (Pinterest, 2024)

2.2 The Hunger Games

Next, I want to discuss my observations from watching *The Hunger Games*, a film released in 2012 based on Suzanne Collins's novels.

The Hunger Games depicts a dystopian world divided into the Capitol of Panem (a place for the rich and “chosen ones”) and the twelve impoverished districts. Every year they choose Tributes, one girl and one boy from each district to compete in a televised national event called Hunger Games. Citizens are obliged to watch the “show” until the one remains. The main character Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) volunteers to be a Tribute to save her younger sister Primrose. Katniss has hunting skills and sharp senses but has never fought another person. To survive she chooses love as a tactic (for instance viewers help them to survive by sending gifts like food, medicine, etc.). Thanks to her strategy, she saves not only herself but also another Tribute from district 12, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson). The director of this well-known young adult dystopian film is Gary Ross, an American screenwriter and director. He is famous for writing for television series like “*Dave*” (1993), and “*Seabiscuit*” (2003) but a movie in cast with Matthew McConaughey, “*Free State of Jones*” (2016). “*The Hunger Games*” was a large success and the film series continued until 2015.

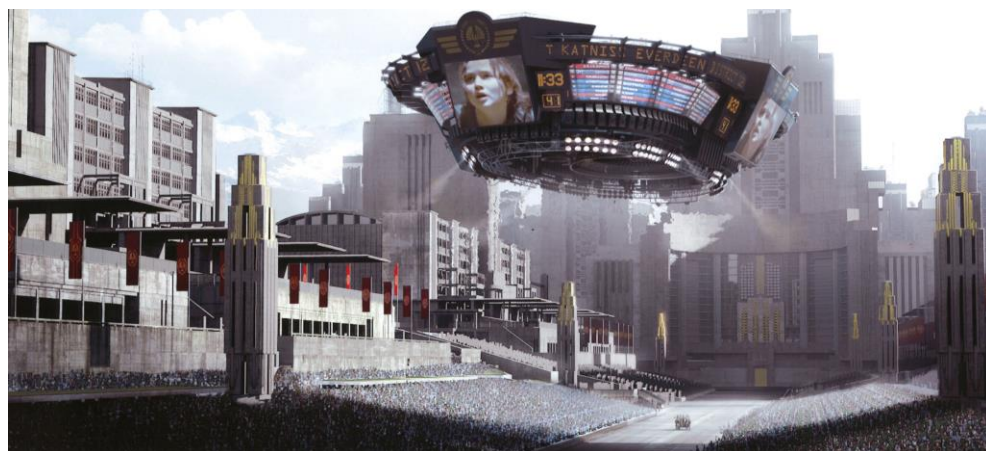


Figure 12: Capitol city in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (pushing-pixels.org, 2024)

The Hunger Games is a movie where colour is visible almost everywhere, especially in costume design.. The production designer, Philip Messina, who has worked before with Ross on the movie “Free State of Jones”, made a good enough impression that he worked on each movie set in “The Hunger Games” franchise.

In "Production design of ‘The Hunger Games’ – interview with Philip Messina", an article on pushingpixels.org, Messina mentions, there was much work with digital/CG environments:

Digital is everywhere, even in movies that you would not expect them to be. They’ve really embedded themselves into the DNA of filmmaking at this point.”. The virtual team “produced a complete CG Capitol environment, and sprawling CG views of the magnificent central city.



Figure 13: Capitol city in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (Google Images, 2024)

A lot of set design choices were borrowed from the Latin phrase, “Panem et circenses” (bread and circuses) (Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, 2025). It highlights the difference between the fancy Capitol and the starvation in districts (Katniss district one of them). District 12 was inspired by Hooverville-style.

In the article "Invoking the Past to Warn of the Future: Interpreting The Hunger Games' Set Design", Suzanne Collins, the author of The Hunger Games, says:

In the novel, electricity is unreliable in District 12, so I focused on the power of oil lanterns and plenty of natural light. The rugged, natural aesthetic of District 12 would be heavily juxtaposed by the Capitol's artificial atmosphere.

The colour scheme there is as to be expected toned-down, pale, monochromatic colours like black, greys dominate.



Figure 14: Images of the *Hoovervilles*, 1931 (depts.washington.edu, 2024)

The train set is meant to be a transition between these two worlds. They used natural materials (mahogany dining table) with mod furniture. And then finally the Capitol was inspired by the mod subcultures. “The fluorescent colours, rich fabrics and geometric patterns”. For the Tributes all the crazy plastic, weirdly shaped furniture would be an absurd concept but for Capitol citizens it was normality. Extraordinarily colourful Panem in comparison with sad colourless districts presents what the author, Suzanne Collins was aiming for, “a potent political allegory of a totalitarian state”.

Costume design similarly worked for the same purpose as a production design, it was there to embrace a disparity between Capitol and districts. Judianna Makovsky, an American costume

designer who worked for classics like “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone” (2001) or “Avengers: Endgame” (2019). What Judianna says about the book in an interview with Vogue is:

“You don’t think of it as science fiction. And I always say: A suit’s been around for over 100 years; what makes us think it’s not going to be there for another 100 years?”. It is fair to say that after this statement she would not be designing ultra sci-fi like costumes but clothing that already existed or exists.

The movie begins in District 12 (the poorest of all), a coal mining district where people are mainly dressed in muted clothing. As Makovsky said “color was very important—to keep it mostly gray or blue . . . very cold because coal leaves black dust everywhere. But we didn’t want it so overly stylized that it wasn’t a real place”. In a reaping scene, we can see all of them gathered. The shirts that are meant to be white have this grey hue which makes them look poorer and for comparison, there are Capitol security who wear flawless white suits.



Figure 15: Reaping day in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (IMDB, 2024)

As Makovsky said, much costume inspiration comes from Schiaparelli and Italian fascist architecture. To blunt vibrant colours in Capitol, they used black and to make vicious characters add more funny-looking costumes, added ruffles and flowers. Makovsky had a say when it came to makeup, she suggested powdered faces and having no eyebrows, to bring this ghostly but high fashion look. She relied also on historical references, especially Elizabethan times. However, all in all, the major influence on her designs was Schiaparelli's works. She says: "The woman was a genius. I have to admit, I used a lot of color. Schiaparelli pink." (Vogue, 2012)



Figure 16: Background characters in Capitol in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (The Fashion Commentator, 2024)

Elaborate, bold, and theatrical costumes of Panem's residence evoke extravagant luxury. A character like Effie Trinket presents all the above in her outfits, lavish dresses, exaggerated silhouettes, and detailed accessories. Citizens' extravagant looks perfectly reflect the detachment from the struggles in districts and focus on more shallow aspects like beauty and entertainment. When the Games start, we see how a change of clothing and makeup can make you look like you are one of the "chosen ones", who can lead a fancy lifestyle. Tributes who needed to advertise themselves were going through a transformation. From grey, sad clothing they became part of fashionable Panem's madness which was dressed by personal designers for each player. Katniss's metamorphosis is most striking, in "The Girl of Fire" dress which becomes later the symbol of rebellion. This look is crafted to simulate flames and show the main character as a powerful, dynamic, and fiery figure who can stand against the rulers in the Capitol. The dress is striking in colour but somewhat less striking in terms of design. Only when the dress ignites is the symbolism clear, perhaps as a symbol to suggest the outwardly understated and modest District 12 where Katniss comes from, which nonetheless holds a powerful and unexpected secret. The fire motif from this point becomes her signature and she keeps it throughout the

Games. When there is the Tributes Parade scene, Peeta and Katniss are in spotlight thanks to the fire costume but also due to contrast with other tributes. They wear black and have more neutral, minimalistic looks when the rest of them have colourful, staged outfits.

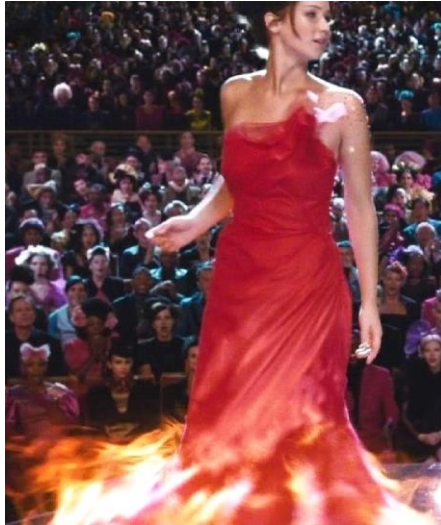


Figure 17: “Girl on Fire” dress in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (Google Images, 2024)



Figure 18: Peeta and Katniss on a Parade of Tributes in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (Google Images, 2024)



Figure 19: Tributes images from Parade in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (The Fashion Commentator, 2024)

It is important to mention tribute costumes during the Games. During the 74th Hunger Games, tributes wear cargo pants, dark-coloured buckle boots, and a black hooded jacket with silver lines (looks like a rain jacket). Upper wear (jackets and shirts) had various colours; it depended on the district you were from.



Figure 20: Tributes on arena in *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (Google Images, 2024)

2.3. Blade Runner 2049

“Blade Runner 2049” (2017) was directed by Canadian filmmaker, Denis Villeneuve who is known for one of his most recent works, “Dune” but also the critically acclaimed movie “Arrival” (2016). Blade Runner 2049 is a sequel to Ridley Scott’s 1982 classic Blade Runner.

Based in dystopian Los Angeles in 2049, “30 years after the events of Blade Runner, bioengineered humans known as replicants are still used for slave labor”. The story follows K (Ryan Gosling), the new replicant and ‘blade runner’ who is employed by the LAPD to get rid of older replicants. During one of his missions, he discovers a woman replicant who died in childbirth suggesting replicants are capable of reproduction. He suspects he might be the child of the dead woman and becomes personally involved in the case.

This dystopian universe is well-crafted, inspired by cyberpunk, film noir, and post-apocalyptic aesthetics. The visuals of a movie are crucial components; each scene is like a masterpiece of photography. Colours and way of shooting scenes were essential to get the most out of the film. The cinematographer, Roger Deakins, who collaborated before “Blade Runner 2049” with Denis on “Sicario” (2015) and “Prisoners” (2013), and all three of them were nominated for Oscars. These strikingly beautiful pictures would not have happened for the production design team and the head of it, Dennis Gassner.

As can be seen in the below images, Rex Provost writes on studiobinder.com:

The buildings are sharp and geometric, the futuristic technology is sleek but textured, the landscape is barren and foreboding.

Deakins highlights the harsh building with his camera framing.



Figure 21: Cinematography in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (studiobinder.com, 2024)

Another important element is lightning, Provost also writes: “This is a dystopian techno-future where the primary source of light is no longer the sun: like everything in this world, light is manmade.” For instance, the lighting is reflected from a pool or holograms that are used often in a movie. Factors like the usage of fog and mist also build a dream-like atmosphere, not only that they create a focus point for viewers to pay attention to the chosen part of a scene.



Figure 22: Cinematography in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (studiobinder.com, 2024)

We cannot forget about the colour palette, designed for each scene. Cold blues and greys, in the majority of Los Angeles, evoke feelings of isolation and show the detachment between the main character and the industrialized city.

As mentioned in the article “Mastering the Movie Color Palette: Denis Villeneuve”, “Villeneuve believes that Every aspect of a character’s environment should reflect their emotional state”, and that the colour palettes are there for “ideal for enhancing the mindsets of their characters”.



Figure 23: Joi characters as hologram in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (studiobinder.com, 2024)

Costume design is not as often mentioned as cinematography or set design when it comes to *Blade Runner 2049*. The costume designer for this project was a Canadian designer Renée April who as cinematographer worked previously with Villeneuve, she designed costumes for “*Arrival*” (2016), “*Sicario*” (2015), and “*Prisoners*” (2013).

In an interview for *Vogue* April says:

I made costumes for the dark, wet, polluted, miserable world that Denis [Villeneuve] created. I had to hold myself back and remove anything too avant-garde or outré because it didn’t help the story. There were no superhero suits because the world needed to be realistic, and the characters relatable. (*Vogue*, 2017)

She looked for inspiration in the original sci-fi version from 1982, however, the search evolved to Eastern and Western cultures. On her mood board, she also found Rick Owens (“because of his dark clothes”). As in cinematography and production side, costumes contributed to the cyberpunk atmosphere. The practicality and skillful symbolism of costumes speak to the character’s role and psychological dilemmas. Designs highlight the social hierarchy, themes of identity (replicants), and artificiality. Starting from the highest in-rank characters: Wallace and Luv. Niander Wallace, a film antagonist (Jared Leto) wears a long robe, as April says that she could not dress him in anything else but pyjama kimonos.

He is like the Steve Jobs of that world, he owns hundreds of those louche pyjamas and day after day he puts them on so he doesn't have to think about it. The contact lenses that Jared wore visually impaired him for the entire time he was on set. He never saw how anything looked! I had to warn him when I made adjustments to his outfit so he wouldn't jump when I touched him. (Vogue, 2017)



Figure 24: Niander Wallace in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (IMDB, 2024)

The simplicity of his robes is noticeably cold, it emphasises his authoritarian position and philosophical nature. The neutral tones (darker robes and white) are understandable and align with Wallace's Corporation aesthetic, which is like a clinic, sterile. Luv's outfits are like Niander's, minimalistic. The fitted, monochromatic dresses present her efficiency and emotionlessness as Wallace's agent.

Once you see Wallace's base you understand that Sylvia Hoeks's costume had to be very clean and fuss-free. Wallace calls her his angel, so I got the high collar and clean lines from that reference even though it seemed clichéd. I drew Luv's harsh fringe in my first sketch when Sylvia hadn't been cast yet. Once she was a part of the team we dyed her blonde hair dark to make her look stronger. (Vogue, 2017)

She works as a weapon of control for Wallace, and it is visible in her copy-like clothing in comparison to him. Luv's wardrobe brings a resemblance to the female dystopian authoritarian characters that also wear white, sterile, and flawless costumes, for instance, Ava Paige in "Maze Runner" (2015), Chief Elder in "The Giver" (2014), or Olivia Theissen in "Paradise" (2023).



Figure 25: Luv in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017(British Vogue, 2024)

Officer K (Ryan Gosling), as a replicant of *Blade Runner* is dressed in muted, functional clothing. These are only grey, dark green, black, and brown (neutral-toned) it is so to reinforce his status as a part of a system, he needed to blend in urban, isolated settings. What is characteristic of K is his jacket, and coat with a high collar as protection against the environment.

We made at least 15 coats for Ryan Gosling, as he wears one costume for the whole film. I work a lot with Denis, and I know that he moves scenes around which alters the chronology. It helps him when my costumes don't change too much! Everyone thinks his military coat is made of shearling, but it's laminated cotton that we painted and then attached cheap, ugly faux fur to the collar – it was \$2 a yard! Leather would have become wet and very heavy in that environment, and his character is poor, he has a miserable existence in that basic apartment. The collar - pretty cool, eh? – is so he can hide himself from the pollution. We've seen hoods thousands of times on-screen, so I came up with a high collar that closed magnetically. I wanted the audience to just see his eyes at the beginning of the film. (Vogue, 2017)

As seen in the images below, as the character progresses, his costumes become worn and dirty-looking to reflect his inner turmoil.



Figure 26: Officer K in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (Google Images, 2024)

Now to Joi's costumes, the character who was programmed to please Officer K. Her outfits were influenced by Eastern and Western cultures as April says in *Vogue*. The yellow-plastic jacket is inspired by yellow roll of plastic that the designer spotted in Italy.

The yellow plastic coat that Ana de Armas's character wears originated in Italy. I saw big rolls of pink, yellow and orange plastic when I was researching and I knew that I had to do something with the fabric. The silver-flecked Eastern dress she wears during the now-famous bedroom scene was because I wanted something that had a reflection in it. It was important for her to look different to Mackenzie's character, who showed a lot of skin, but for her to be able to remove the dress easily. It became all about functionality for both characters. (*Vogue*, 2017)

Her costumes are fantasy, she goes from cooking outfits to more feminine, sensual dresses. April says: "She's there at home, just like his little secret". Joi's wardrobe is a mishmash of inspirations from the 1960s to the 70s that could suggest the nostalgia of 'good, old times' to manga, see-through, artificial clothing that reminds them about her intangible, holographic existence. She is one of the contrasted elements in this bleak, desaturated world.

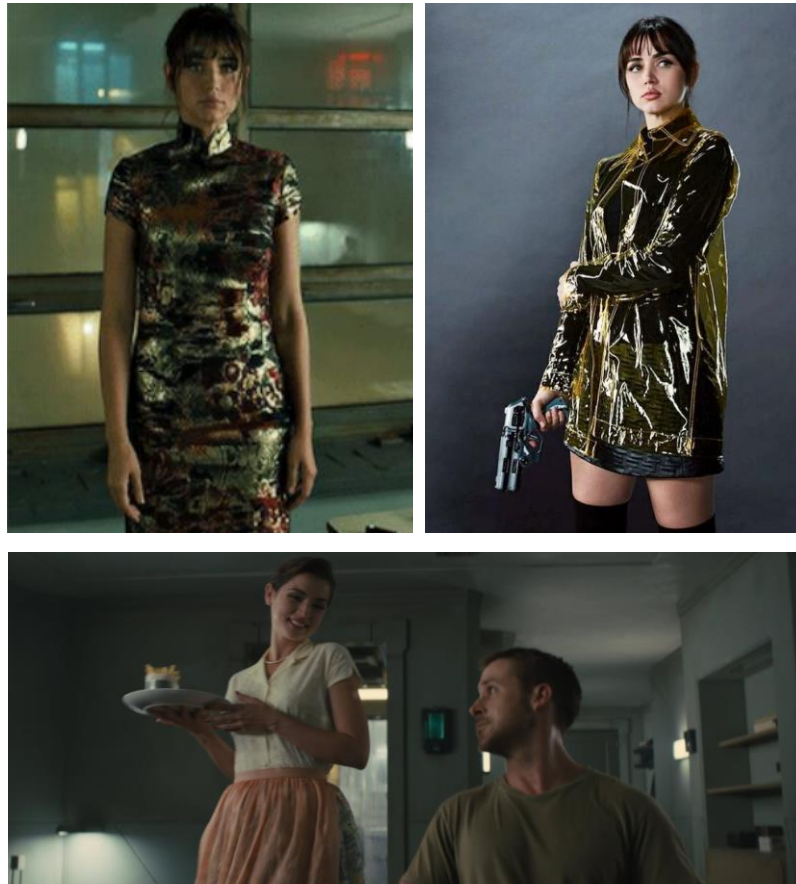


Figure 27: Joi's character in various costumes in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (Google Images, 2024)

There are also more post-apocalyptic costumes that have this rugged, weathered look. Deckard (Harrison Ford), the older replicant wears very practical and sturdy clothing so that he matches the surroundings of abandoned Las Vegas. We see him in simple, neutral coloured T-shirt, vintage jacket and boots. His outfits most probably are built on an idea that he is the comparison of Wallace Corporation where everything is sterile and artificial. Deckard costumes are the reflection of his detachment to the current world, he left it behind and now he is there to survive.

We weren't sure if it was too casual," April said. "But a T-shirt like that has been around for a hundred years and is still going to be there for another 50 years. I bought it in Vienna. It's a heather gray, simple cotton. Everything had to go through a long process in the aging and dying. But the rest we made sure looked worn and a bit more real. (IndieWire, 2017)



Figure 28: Deckard in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (IMDB, 2024)

To sum it up with more second planned character, Mariette, a replicant prostitute. Her costumes were inspired by another character from original “Blade Runner”, Darryl Hannah’s Pris. As April says in *Vogue*:

I can’t tell you how I decided on the fur and plastic that make up Mackenzie Davis’s costume, because, between you and me, it doesn’t make sense. If it’s cold you wear fur, if it’s wet you wear plastic but you don’t wear them together! The rain on the fur makes Mariette look like a drowned rat, and shows that her life as a replicant is harsh. There’s something very sad about her character. She has to show off her body as her job is an escort, so originally her outfit was a lot skimpier, but Mackenzie wasn’t comfortable wearing it. (*Vogue*, 2017)

When we look at the image of Mariette in mentioned “rat look”, we can see the sadness April talks about in an interview. Also, the pink that Mariette wears is just the reminder that even if we are placed in the future, the colour palette that would be recognisable as sexual symbol (for prostitutes) would not change. As Makovsky said in an article in *vogue* in 2012 about sci-fi films: “And I always say: A suit’s been around for over 100 years; what makes us think it’s not going to be there for another 100 years?”



Figure 29: Pris in *Blade Runner*, 1982 (Google Images, 2024)



Figure 30: Mariette in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (Google Images, 2024)

Figure 31: Mariette in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (British Vogue, 2024)

Chapter 3

Costume design and Colour – How Important are they?

3.1. Colours as a tool in cinema

Every filmmaker knows how important colour is in film, however, to understand fully, it is crucial to understand how colours, in general, affect people's perceptions. In the past, colours had mystical or spiritual associations. As Faber Birren says in his book "Color Psychology and Color Therapy; A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life":

Man at the dawn of civilisation recognised that sunlight was essential to life. Colour, being a manifestation of light, held divine meaning. Historical records of colour show little interest in the physical nature of colour, nor yet in its abstract beauty, but in a symbolism that attempted to resolve the strange workings of creation and give it personal and human meaning. (Birren, page 19,1950)

Ancient civilisations worshipped the Yellow Sun. In Egypt, the sun represents masculine values, and the moon represents feminine ones. They had a wide colour symbolism that spread through art and culture. "Temples, talismans and charms, burial trappings, all were rich in the color tokens prescribed by the magicians who wore blue breastplates to mark sacredness of their judge of their judgements." (Birren, page 20, 1950) Similarly in Ancient Greece a goddess of wisdom, Athena wore a golden robe, the red poppy was dedicated to Ceres, and purple in "The Odyssey" symbolised "the sea wanderings of Ulysses". (Birren, page 20, 1950)

Buddha's figure is associated with yellow and gold, but Birren corrects this vision and mentions that "the Blessed One, putting on a tunic of double red cloth, an on his girdle".

In Christianity, green was an important colour because emerald was the colour of the Holy Grail.

Radical changes in thinking about colours took place in the 17th and 18th centuries brought on when scientists started seeing the connection between colour and light. Robert Boyle, Irish natural philosopher, chemist, and alchemist, believed that white light contained all colours, however it was Newton, “the father of modern physics”, who created a new doctrine that said:” white light was not simple; it was a mixture of rays which the prism separated”.

Subsequently, Psychologists began research to discover how colours affect people’s moods. It was found that deep orange had the biggest effect on people, then bright red and yellow-orange. Hues like yellow-green, and green had a very relaxing influence.

At Stanford University, Dr. Robert R. Ross attempted to explore colours with “dramatic intensity and emotion”. It says that: “Gray, blue and purple are best associated with tragedy; red, orange, and yellow with comedy.” Even though colours can be given specific meanings they can also have contradictory meanings, everything depends on the observer’s views.

Birren says:

While warm colors are not greatly different objectively and subjectively, cool hues may be antithetical. Red, however, may seem far more intense as applied to one’s self than it does as applied to external objects. Blues and greens which appear peaceful in one aspect may be terrifying in another.

Knowing the basics about how people perceive colours, we can “dig into” colour in cinema. Unsurprisingly, “the beginning of the cinema, colors shaped the way medium was thought of”. (Yumibe, page 38, 2012)

Theorists like Thomas Edison, Eadweard Muybridge, and C. Francis Jenkins, developed much of the technology of the cinema.

In fact, the 19th century was the time when colours were everywhere; street signs, wallpapers, fabrics, and of course art by Picasso, Van Gogh, Goya, Monet, and many others. Yumibe says in his book:

From Plateau to the flickering movement of still images, the cinema is fundamentally a color medium, and from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, color continues to raise questions about the mechanics of the saturated eye. How do we experience color physiologically, sensually, and emotionally? How do our eyes react when we are immersed into a colorful worldview? (Yumibe, page 22, 2012)

During the era of silent cinema (1890s-1920s), colour was a revolutionary tool used to enhance storytelling and create atmosphere in a medium otherwise limited to black-and-white visuals. Filmmakers of the time realised that adding colour can draw viewers' attention to important details or change the tone of the story. The colouring techniques adopted were time consuming but highly effective (hand colouring, tinting, toning, and stenciling).

Hand-coloring- "each frame were manually colored on the emulsion side of the print, which is porous enough to absorb dye" (Yumibe, page 24, 2012).

Tinting- "With tinting, a section of a film was dyed a specific color usually by running it through a bath of aniline dye so that the emulsion would absorb the colorant." (Yumibe, page 25, 2012)

Toning- "involved manipulating the silver in a print's emulsion, either by replacing it chemically with a colored compound or with a mordant that would absorb dye more readily, or by bleaching the silver in the emulsion and then coloring the film with a dye that would only adhere to where the silver had been." (Yumibe, page 25, 2012)

Stenciling- "With this technique, each color had its own stencil that was made by cutting out holes into a positive, black-and-white print of a film, frame by frame, in the spots where color was to be added to the film." (Yumibe, page 26, 2012)

The 1930s brought an important transition due to the development of Technicolor. The first examples of films made with this technique were "The Wizard of Oz" (1939) and "Gone with the Wind" (1939). Cinematographers and directors started using colours as a narrative and symbolic device. In dystopian cinema, it played a crucial role for world-building and thematic exploration.

Currently, filmmakers use colour to shape viewers' emotional response, to create contrasts, and underscore themes.

3.2 Colour Palettes as Narrative Device

Colour palettes are also an important tool narratively, helping establish themes and convey emotions. Even with subtle differences in shades, the viewers' interpretation can be affected and thus filmmakers pay immense attention when it comes time to choose colour schemes. As the Videomaker magazine (the foremost magazine for professional and hobbyist videography and filmmaking) says:

Your color palette should be an integral part of your storytelling, helping to evoke emotions, create atmosphere and convey meaning. It's important to ask yourself how your chosen colors support the story and its message. (Kieran Fallon, Videomaker magazine)

- **Vibrant Colours**

Vivid, bold colours help with establishing symbolism, drawing attention to themes, or emphasizing the fantastic nature of a film.

- “The Grand Budapest Hotel” (2014, dir. Wes Anderson)



Figure 32: Agatha and Zero in *Grand Budapest Hotel*, 2014 (IMBD, 2024)



Figure 33: Lift scene in *Grand Budapest Hotel*, 2014 (IMBD, 2024)

The pastel palette is eye-catching and symbolic. It creates a visual language to convey the film's absurdity and nostalgia. The light blues, lavender shades, and cotton candy pinks capture the whimsicality of fairytale-like settings. When the movie changes time period, the colours become more muted, intending to show the melancholy. In “The Grand Budapest Hotel”, red and gold accents of hotel staff costumes draw attention to the pivotal scene on the pastel background.

- “Blade Runner 2049” (2017, dir. Denis Villeneuve)



Figure 34: Officer K in *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 (IMBD, 2024)

The striking neon, orange, blue, and purple are present for a powerful contrast with the muted, earthy tones, emphasising the difference between the natural and artificial environments of the film. These neon colours symbolise the high-tech reality of holograms and replicants coexisting with humans.

- “Amelie” (2001, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet)



Figure 35: Amelie in *Amélie*, 2001 (IMBD, 2024)

Warm, saturated hues in “Amélie” create a nostalgic, romantic atmosphere that mirrors the protagonist's journey. (Filmustage, 2023)

The colour palette in this movie is very vibrant. The main colours seen throughout the film are red, green, and yellow. Red stands for passion and love, in “Amélie”, the titled character is wearing this hue or is surrounded by it. It spotlights her vibrancy and warmth.

- **Muted Palettes**

More muted colours are found in films where the film has a reflective quality or contains more dystopian themes. These de-saturated shades bring despair, detachment, or desolation.

- “The Road” (2009, dir. John Hillcoat)



Figure 36: Man, and Boy in *The Road*, 2009 (IMBD, 2024)

This film uses muted browns and greys to convey the post-apocalyptic world. Lack of vivid colour highlights the desolation and hopelessness in the story. These visual images submerge the audience in the story's climate, emphasising human survival in the harsh environment.

- “Saving private Ryan” (1998, dir. Steven Spielberg)



Figure 37: Main characters still from *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998 (IMBD,2024)

Like you've seen in war movies like Saving Private Ryan, directors often used a desaturated color palette to portray the gritty and harsh reality of war.(Suite, 2023)

This subdued colour scheme (gray, brown, green) reflects the bleakness of the war. It attempts to strip away any potential glamorised portrayal of war, instead immersing viewers in the chaotic, depressing atmosphere of a battlefield. The washed-out tones evoke a sense of historical authenticity, just like old photographs that are fading over time.

- **Warm and Cool tones**

These two opposite tones help to create contrasting moods or tones.

- “The Shape of Water” (2017, dir. Guillermo del Toro) - cool tones



Figure 38: Elisa admiring the Amphibian man in the “Shape of water”, dir. (IMBD, 2017)



Figure 39: Elisa and Amphibian Man in “The Shape of Water” (IMBD, 2017)

Blues and greens suggest calm, detachment, or perhaps unease. These cool tones mirror the underwater setting, the mysterious creature at the heart of the story, and the film's central themes of isolation and communication across boundaries. The cool tones contrast with the warm tones of the human world. It highlights the separation between the cold reality and the fantastical world.

- “La la land” (2016, dir. Damien Chazelle)



Figure 40: Lovely Night dance in *La La Land*, 2016 (IMBD, 2024)

Cinematographer Linda Sandgren used warm tones to evoke a romantic atmosphere. She uses golden yellows, oranges, and reds throughout the film to present a dreamlike story and to show the emotions of characters as they navigate a world of relationships and desires. In the scene above, “A Lovely Night” dance piece, we can see Los Angeles at sunset, full of warm lights, oranges, and pinks presenting that happy feeling that accompanies the characters and the excitement of the blossoming relationship between them. Behind all of it, the sunset is the perfect backdrop to this fleeting moment.

- **Monochromatic colours**

In a monochrome colour palette, a single colour dominates any scene, with various shades, tones, and tints of the same colour creating the necessary contrast. Black-and-white films are a classic example of this style, despite the fact that it came from necessity. Directors nowadays may choose a monochrome palette to direct the audience's attention toward the composition, lighting, and the emotional nuances of the scene. (Suite, 2023)

- “Her” (2013, dir. Spike Jonze)

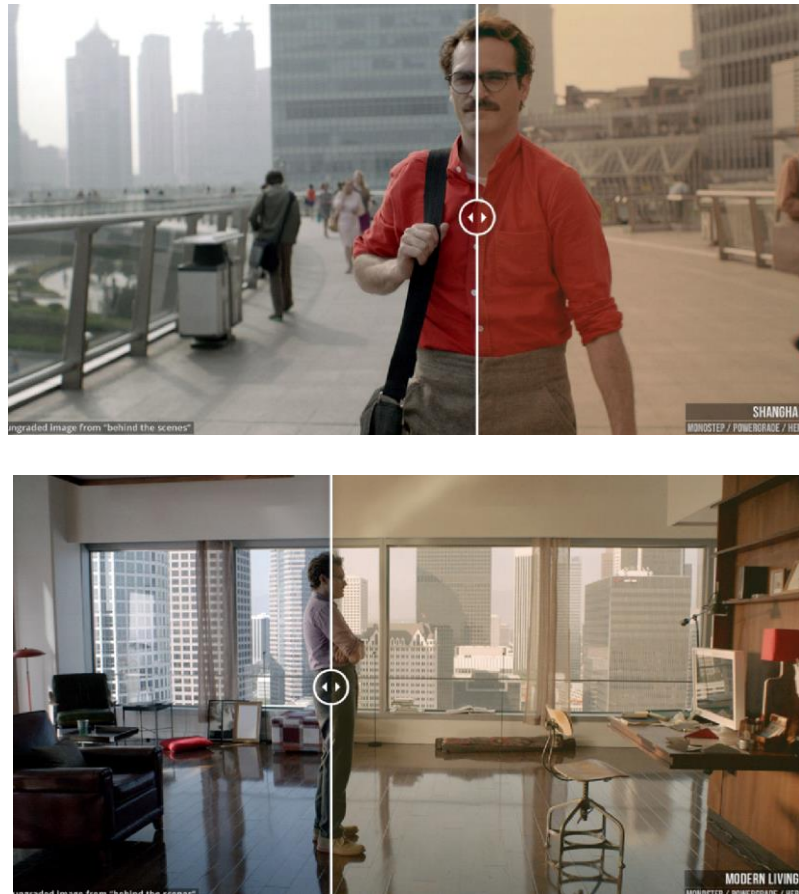


Figure 41: After colour grading, Theodore in *Her*, 2013 (MONONODES, 2024)

Jonze uses mainly pinks and red tones to convey intimacy and to spotlight the isolation in a technologically driven world.

The intention for *Her* was to create a futuristic and dreamy look of Los Angeles. Looking at the picture right off the bat we can notice quite a heavy warm color cast and low contrasty look. What I like to do is to open the frame grabs in resolve and have a look at the scopes. (timeinpixels, 2015)

- “Schindler’s List” (1993, Steven Spielberg)



Figure 42: Girl in a red coat in *Schindler’s List*, 1993 (IMBD, 2024)

Spielberg highlighted that to remain realistic and to not beautify the holocaust the movie needed to remain monochromatic. The colour found in the second image, the red coat, symbolises the “hope, humanity, and the transformation of Oskar Schindler” (screenrant, 2024). He says also that: “I was accused of beautifying Color Purple because it had such a bright palette for such a dark subject,”, about the “Color Purple” from 1986. He emphasised in interviews that he wished to avoid glorifying the subject o thef Holocaust.

- **Complementary colours**

This palette uses colours that are opposite each other on the colour wheel, creating a stark contrast that can add visual interest to a scene. These high-contrast colours can evoke strong emotions, build tension, or highlight conflict within a scene: A director might use a complementary palette to highlight the stark differences between two characters, settings, or worlds, or use it to draw the viewer's attention to specific elements in a scene by colouring a key object or character in a way that stands out against the background. (Suite, 2023)

- “Joker” (2019, Todd Phillips)



Figure 43: Arthur Fleck in *Joker*, 2019 (IMBD, 2024)

The bright, bold reds contrast with the dark, muted greens of Arthur Fleck's world, emphasising his internal struggle and maybe even his descent into madness. The green is symbolic of sickness, both mentally and physically, while red represents violence, chaos, and the Joker's distorted view of reality. This colour scheme perfectly mirrors the film's exploration of societal collapse and personal turmoil.



Figure 44: Arthur Fleck in *Joker*, 2019 (The Lightning Lab, 2024)

The blue and red contrast is most striking during Arthur's transformation into the Joker. When he finally becomes the character, he's been fantasising about, the contrast between blue (representing his former, isolated self) and red (his violent alter ego) is vivid. Blue might also highlight the tension between Arthur's humanity and the Joker persona.

Conclusions

When designing dystopian films, filmmakers focus on mirroring contemporary societal fears of technological dominance, issues of dehumanization, or authoritarian control.

Films like “Equilibrium”, “The Hunger Games”, and “Blade Runner 2049” demonstrate how visual and aesthetic choices – with special attention to colour, costume, and set design – contribute to building thought provoking worlds that can become vehicles for analysis of the present and future.

The use of colours is crucial to shape the atmosphere and emotional resonance of dystopian films. Monochromatic palettes, as seen in “Equilibrium”, support emotional suppression and conformity. Contrasting colour schemes, like in “The Hunger Games”, highlight inequality and excess. Customised palettes in “Blade Runner 2049”, represent characters feelings and the difference between humanity and technology.

Costume design plays an important role in defining characters, social structures, and survival settings.

Through consideration of choices of fabrics, textures, and styles, designers communicate to viewers the themes of control, technological control, and rebellion.

Costume designers like Renée April build authentic characters. She designed some of the characters in a more minimalist way to embrace their sterile, inhuman nature and others like Officer K in wet, leather jackets to make him look undoubtedly more human.

Judianna Makovsky, on the other hand, acknowledged the fact that the future does not need to be all about unrecognisable clothing, no one ever said that corsets from the Victorian era cannot appear in the future. She acknowledges the possibility of bringing back historical references to the “Hunger Games”. Makovsky designs extravagant costumes and also muted, poor garments that can emphasise the economic inequality between the rich and poor.

Joseph Porro, on the other hand, cooperates perfectly with set designs. The fascist architecture, verticality, and Mondrian linearity is reflected in his costumes. Solid silhouettes, black, priest-like looks for clerics, and muted monochromatic colour schemes work as one with the surroundings. However, at the moment of transformation for the character, Porro embraces it by changing his wardrobe from black to white. Due to this change, we see a radical metamorphosis of the character.

Written works like Faber Birren's "Color Psychology and Color Therapy", present how colours influence human perception and emotions. After years of cinema, filmmakers can learn from previous works how to affect viewer's understanding of the character, genre, or narrative. Red is the colour of passion, love, or anger, while blue symbolises faith, wisdom, or cleanliness. During the preproduction meetings there are long discussions between the director and designers about how to portray the world for the viewer to recognise the underlying messages. Films like "La La Land" use bright and contrasting colours to embrace the romantic theme. For instance, the initial hue is blue in the beginning of the story but then we move to red, green and yellow, each of which means something different. Sometimes designers or directors decide to add a single, striking colour element, either as a part of set or as it happened in "Schindler's List" where a girl who wears a red coat is put in contrast to the background of black-and-white costumes). Amongst a monochromatic world full of suffering emerges a symbol of innocence represented by the aforementioned red coat. It is a powerful visual tool to draw attention to the theme.

In dystopian films, colour is essential to world-building. Through intricate colour palettes, dystopian films not only critique societal issues but also invite viewers to explore the spectrum of emotions and meanings hidden in every frame. Would the viewer understand "Blade runner 2049" without neon colour schemes? Or would an audience differentiate the poor from the rich in "The Hunger Games" if not for the colour contrasts?

By employing colour psychology, historical references, and artistic innovation, filmmakers build narratives that resonate with the viewer. Designers' choices not only entertain but also challenge viewers to reflect on their world and imagine alternative futures. Dystopian films remind audiences that despite their fictional nature, these "realities" show the truths that echo through the history of humankind. These subjects demand attention and conversation that are eternally relevant.

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