

Tableaux of Absorption: Staging the Pictorial through Colour and Light in Derek Jarman's Feature Films

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Abstract:

Marshall McLuhan considered the electric light the perfect example of a medium without a message because it simply went undetected as a technical vehicle (1964:8-9). Light, however, is cinema's most essential quality; the main condition for films' creation, visibility and aesthetic and affective appreciation (Thompson, 2015:1). Yet, light doesn't exist alone; rather, it needs other filmic materials, or else it remains latent itself. In general light needs bodies and its reflective properties (i.e. masses with texture); in cinema, light requires colour because pitch black and absolute white negate the existence of objects and/or bodies. In cinema, therefore, colour is an integral part of the experience, even if it is to be lived in a scale of grey.

According to Lars Elleström's model (2010), both light and colour are part of the category of "the visual", which is one mode of the sensorial modality pertaining to basic media, plus they are the technical means on which the qualified medium of cinema is anchored. Additionally, colour can be considered a class within a medium (Clüver, 2007:31). In this presentation, I propose to study the way that light and colour intrinsically operate in film: colour being shaped by light in a perfect combination of intramedia that I propose to juxtapose into the term "*light coloration*", alluding to what cinematographers usually refer to as painting with light. This combined visual property is a cinematic representational element in its own right, but in some films it acquires an added importance and an intermedial relevance, as it becomes part of an intended relationship with other art forms. Indeed, light is a sculpting tool in space and is part of the theatrical apparatus (on and offstage); colour may be considered one of the fundamental elements of painting. This is particularly notable in some arthouse films that have a predominant expressive quality and goal. One can safely say that some film directors turn the medium of cinema into its own message, by focusing not only on its intrinsic properties, but also on what it has in common with other art forms. The late Derek Jarman is just one such director.

Jarman's cinematic *œuvre*, especially some of his features, are a good testing ground for the cross border analyses between cinema and the other arts (understood as qualified media), since the two most specifically pictorial medium properties that film contains — light and colour — are used to establish a full cinematic appropriation of theatre and painting. Indeed, by using the *tableau* format (that Brewster and Jacobs call “tableau-like shots”, 1997), with or without similarities to actual *tableaux vivants*, Jarman taps on the viewers' senses while conveying an intramedial discourse on cinema itself alongside an intermedial reflection on other art forms from a simultaneously aesthetic and technical perspective. In doing so, paradoxically, he breaks the frame of narrative engagement, while nevertheless triggering such a strong coenasthetic response from film viewers that the result is absorption.

Key-words:

Intermediality, *tableau*-like shot, colour, light, theatre, painting, Derek Jarman.

Shot bio:

Fátima Chinita has a PhD. in Artistic Studies (Film and Audio-Visual Media), an MA in Communication Sciences and BA's both in Literature and in Cinema. She is an Associate Professor at the Theatre and Film School of the Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon, but is currently on leave in order to pursue a joint post-doctoral research in Intermediality and Inter-arts studies at IMS – Intermediality and Multimodality Centre at the University of Linnaeus, in Sweden (Växjö) and Labcom - Communication and Arts Centre, in Portugal, for which she obtained a personal grant from FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Cinema and Technology. She is preparing a book on the subject of cinema and the other media and art forms.