

*We see color—Patti Bellantoni feels color. She is passionate about how we (the audience) are affected by the use of color as an emotion in film. This book pulls me back into my favorite films and helps me look at them in a new way.*

—Judy Irola, ASC, Head of Cinematography, USC School of Cinema-Television

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IF IT'S

# PURPLE, SOMEONE'S GONNA DIE

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**The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling**



PATTI BELLANTONI



Praise for  
**IF IT'S PURPLE, SOMEONE'S GONNA DIE**

Patti Bellantoni's *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* has given us a highly entertaining exploration of the world of color and its impact on our emotions. Told through a careful analysis of motion pictures that have used color to enhance or define their characters or dramatic needs, we are given a lively and insightful view of our reactions to the film experience.

Leading us gently but firmly through places we may have taken for granted, we find revelations that can be of real help to readers who use color to shape emotional responses to concepts, as well as physical environments. We can never again take the world of color for granted.

—Robert Boyle, four-time Oscar-nominated Production Designer:  
*North by Northwest, The Birds, The Thomas Crown Affair, Fiddler on the Roof.*

A wonderful idea and very impressive! Patti's book shows the importance of color in developing both character and story.

—Henry Bumstead, two-time Oscar-winning Production Designer:  
*To Kill a Mockingbird, The Sting, Unforgiven, Mystic River.*

We see color—Patti Bellantoni *feels* color. She is passionate about how we (the audience) are affected by the use of color as an emotion in film. This book pulls me back into my favorite films and helps me look at them in a new way. The book is a first of its kind and a great asset for our students on the impact of cinematography and production design.

—Judy Irola, ASC, Head of Cinematography, USC School of Cinema-Television

Bellantoni's evidence is confident and her examples are authoritative. Like Robert McKee's Story Seminars, hers is a breakthrough concept.

There comes a point, as Bellantoni spins example after example, where it all suddenly clicks—the use of color in motion pictures is not just a happy coincidence, but a conscious artistic choice that wafts with concrete meaning through all of the film's language. Unconscious and primitive in many respects, conscious and sophisticated in many more, the use and choice of color in motion pictures depends on the filmmaker's instinct and intellect—the pillars of all great art.

No one can ever look at moving pictures the same way after steeping themselves in this excellent book of discovery.

—Sam L. Grogg, Ph.D., Dean, AFI Conservatory

Color remains one of the filmmaker's greatest assets—and opportunities. With the new arsenal of digital tools available, the range of options for color has grown dramatically in the last three years. For filmmakers, Patti Bellantoni's new book is a great resource for what is now possible.

—Robert Hoffman,  
Vice President, Marketing, Technicolor Entertainment Services

Patti Bellantoni has opened our eyes to the power of color in our lives. Her book is an invaluable resource not only for film professionals but also for artists, writers, designers, psychologists, educators, healers, and all who seek a deeper understanding of visual experience.

—Judith Searle, Author,  
*The Literary Enneagram: Characters from the Inside Out*

A fascinating exploration of how color affects our emotional perception of the world. Although Patti primarily discusses the impact of color in film, her book is an indispensable resource for all visual artists.

—Ralph Funicello, Tony Award nominated Set Designer,  
Don Powell Chair in Set Design, San Diego State University

Patti does a wonderful job of dissecting color and its presence in film. She makes us aware of the visual path in our brain and how a film touches us. This is a critical concept as we contemplate the digital medium in filmmaking!

—Beverly Wood Holt, Executive Vice President,  
Technologies & Client Relations, Deluxe Laboratories

IF IT'S PURPLE,  
SOMEONE'S GONNA DIE



### **About the Cover**

Why the image from *Chicago*?

There is something about the presence of deep purple while singers sing and dancers dance that makes the message more serious. Rich purple is not only associated with death and delusion, it is perceived as having weight. Underneath all the singing and dancing, there is killing going on.

# IF IT'S PURPLE, SOMEONE'S GONNA DIE



The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling

**PATTI BELLANTONI**



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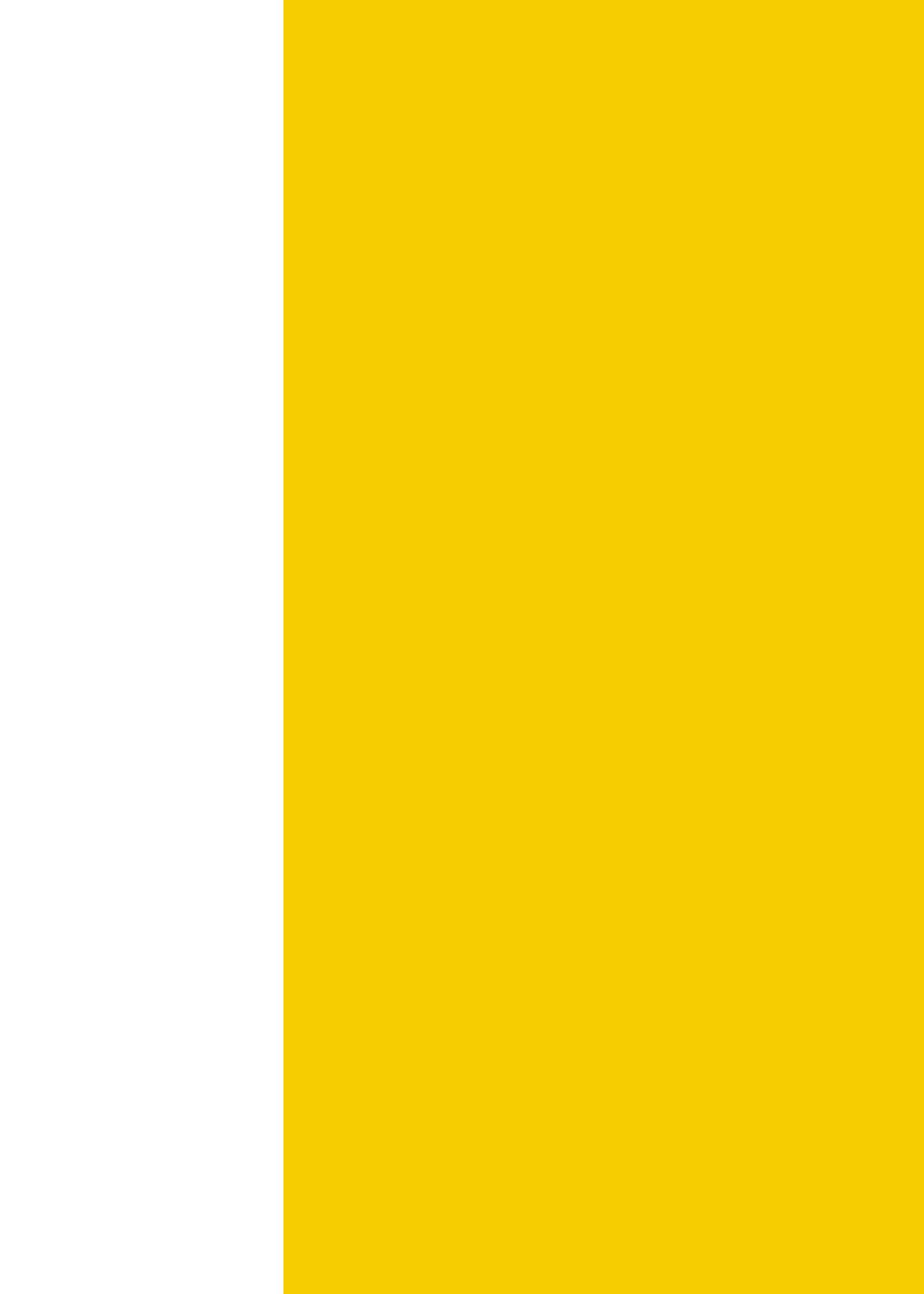
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FOR MY DEAR FRIEND AND MENTOR

ROBERT BOYLE

whose commitment to making it human is my greatest guide







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## Filmographies

Following are filmographies of cinematographers and production designers who are featured in *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die*. Each of these filmmakers has done many superb films. These are the ones that are, at this moment in time, the most relevant to this book.

Robert Boyle:

*The Shootist, Fiddler on the Roof, The Thomas Crown Affair (Original), Marnie, The Birds, North by Northwest*

Henry Bumstead:

*Million Dollar Baby, Mystic River, Bloodwork, Unforgiven, The Sting, Slaughterhouse-Five*

Roger Deakins, BSC, ASC:

*House of Sand and Fog, A Beautiful Mind, The Man Who Wasn't There, [O] Brother, Where Art Thou?, Kundun, The Shawshank Redemption*

Edward Lachman, ASC:

*Far from Heaven, Erin Brockovich, The Virgin Suicides, My Family/Mi Familia, Mississippi Masala, Desperately Seeking Susan*

Larry Paull:

*Escape from L.A., Naked Gun 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ , Another Stakeout, Born Yesterday, City Slickers, Blade Runner*

John Seale, ACS, ASC:

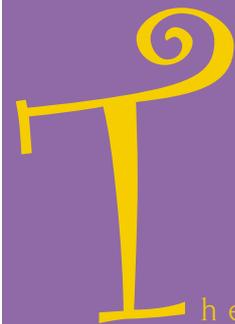
*Cold Mountain, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, The Talented Mr. Ripley, The English Patient, The Firm, Witness*

Wynn Thomas:

*Cinderella Man, A Beautiful Mind, Analyze This, Wag the Dog, Malcolm X, Do the Right Thing*

Amy Vincent, ASC:

*Hustle & Flow, The Caveman's Valentine, Way Past Cool, Freedom Song, Some Girl, Eve's Bayou*



he magic of movies, a phrase often coined but seldom defined. Maybe we call it magic because it affects us in ways we've never taken the time to analyze. We talk about script, performance, and in my field, how the cinematography impacts (supports) the script. We probably feel the importance of color viscerally but we haven't brought it to the table to talk about.

*"The interior of the Lisbon house is permeated by a sickly yellowish green, the kind of green that comes from not being exposed to enough light. In essence, it is a guardhouse of five virginal, about to bloom, young sisters. The house becomes a metaphor for the parent's obsession with not allowing any light to come inside. The film is very much about not seeing."*

—Patti Bellantoni on *The Virgin Suicides*

Yummy. This book opens up new ways of looking at films we love. It allows us to revisit and appreciate our romance with movies. It's like looking at a Vermeer when one is 20 years old, and then again at 50. It only gets better and more intimate for the viewer.

—Judy Irola, ASC  
*Head of Cinematography*  
*USC School of Cinema-Television*



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To the brilliant and talented cinematographers and production designers whom I interviewed for this book, I give thanks from the heart. You have enriched the tone and texture of the book. Above all, you have humanized it. *Un abrazo* to Bob Boyle, Henry Bumstead, Wynn Thomas, Larry Paull, Roger Deakins, Ed Lachman, John Seale, and Amy Vincent.

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To my Production team, headed by Kyle Sarofeen, who was always willing and available to patiently explain the production process to me.



# B ackstory

## THE BEGINNING

The genesis for this book goes back to a day more than twenty years ago at the School of Visual Arts in New York when I observed that my design students were making arbitrary color choices in their work. In order to investigate the conceptual possibilities needed to inform their color decisions, I asked them to bring to class what they thought was “Red.” There was no further instruction and no discussion.

On the day of the appointed class, the students appeared wearing red, and predictably brought in paint chips and color swatches, along with wrapping papers and fabrics. They even flooded the room with red light. What also arrived, however, were things no one had anticipated: hot peppers, muscle balms that made the skin feel hot, toy fire engines with blinking lights and sirens, red hot cinnamon balls, and rock ‘n roll music. What everyone experienced that day forever changed our awareness of how we *see* color.

We became aware that there was a “Red” behavior happening. The students compulsively gulped down salsa, talked louder, and turned the volume up on the rock music. The males in particular became sweaty and agitated. (One year later on Red Day, I had to break up a screaming match between two young men who normally were great friends.) After twenty minutes in the red environment, the students were ready to leave. What had happened here? Everyone agreed to try the experiment again the following week, with a different color. They chose blue.

As word of this experiment spread, students from other disciplines asked to participate, and they came to class. The class of roughly twenty-five people divided into several groups. There was only one rule: concepts and decisions were to be kept within the confines of each group until Color Day.

Blue Day clinched that we were on to something. This time, what the students brought was completely different. There were big

pale blue pillows, cooling mints, and new age music. Within minutes, those loud, boisterous students from the week before stopped talking, laid back and became almost listless. A sense of calm permeated the room. As opposed to racing out the door, as they had done previously, they didn't want to move. Clearly, whatever was happening needed to be explored further.

The following year, I incorporated this experiment into my curriculum and made the project more specific. The class was to select a color and then build an environment that explored the color's association with the five senses. Students divided into four groups, each with four to five members. They were encouraged not to disclose their plans outside the group so their solutions to the assignment would be kept secret until Color Day. When the assignment became more specific, the solutions became more revelatory. As students began to explore the sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and, of course, "sight" of a color, they discovered, for example, that what smells, feels, or tastes a certain color may not *be* that color (e.g. strawberries do not taste red). Because of this, the students began to blindfold each other during their explorations of the color's smell, touch, and taste. Although their environments were filled with the color, not being able to see what they were smelling, touching, or tasting for those few minutes led them to a heightened awareness of their visceral responses. It also freed them to seek out sense associations other than sight, which, in turn, gave them a deeper understanding of that color's effect on their perception. It also inspired the students to go beyond the superficial. If red's taste, for example, inspired students to bring in white raw garlic and not red strawberries, then there is more to consider than surface observation. For example, cinnamon was consistently perceived as a red taste, but cinnamon sticks are brown in their natural state. However, the cinnamon-flavored candies called "Red Hots" are artificially colored red. Similarly, artificially colored mint candies and cough drops are often blue—a decision that seems to be based on what the taste of mint looks like. It appeared to us that product marketers were exploring something that our research validated.

During this twenty-five-year period, patterns in the solutions to the color problems began to emerge. In our experiments, red environments indeed nearly always included the tastes of jalapeño peppers, the smells of spicy sauce, and the feel of hot muscle balm.

There were sounds of cap pistols and those red balls of caps that make sharp noises when hitting the floor. One of the reddest sounds I have ever heard was a bullwhip that cracked like thunder inside a kettledrum. The color indeed often inspired loud, compulsive, and aggressive behavior. The following, written by former SVA student Peter Coleman, is in response to my request to write a paper on Red Day. Comments like these surfaced year after year:

It's important to note that I'm not a "red" person. If I had to guess, I'd say I'm more blue . . . violet, maybe. But not red. Definitely not red. Which makes it all the more peculiar that I petitioned so vehemently in favor of the color in the first place. (Author's note: Students selected which color to explore by majority vote.) In the process of campaigning for "Red," I became louder, more aggressive, and, in short, a bigger, more cartoon-like and obnoxious version of my usual self, challenging my classmates to "Screw the underdog" (being any color other than red) and to ask themselves if they had "the mettle" to choose red. Indeed, it took more guts for me to choose this color than I had imagined.

After the "Red Experience," Coleman continues,

Somewhere between the erotic and the ridiculous lies the explanation for our demonic and bizarre behavior on Red Day. Red comes at you. It's in your face. That element of the color seemed to possess the group. I fed off the adrenaline created by the participants' reactions . . . A heat seemed to be generating in the room, and I guess I just went with it.

What began as a simple experiment became a revelation of a force far more powerful than we had imagined, or really noticed. The listlessness of Blue Day and the otherworldly atmosphere of Purple Day, described next, reinforced my belief that color influences our choices, our opinions, and our emotional state. Our feelings of euphoria or rage, calm or agitation can be intensified or subdued by the colors in our environment. This is powerful information in the hands of a filmmaker.

#### **WHY THIS TITLE?**

Perhaps it is a reflection of our times—of our living on the edge of the unexplainable—but each semester at least one class chose to investigate purple, a color often associated with the mystical and

the noncorporeal. The color resonated with the students in ways that were consistent. The designs for their environments often dealt with ritual, magic, and the spiritual. Every year at least one group built an altar.

I had anticipated a royal interpretation of purple, but interestingly enough, interpretations of a royal connection to purple were outnumbered by the mystical, spiritual, and paranormal by approximately ten-to-one. The association with the royal and regal comes from the fact that purple is the most difficult color to come by in nature. Its very scarcity associates it with the rare trappings of emperors, kings, and queens. But altars are in a different genre altogether. Altars are in the province of something beyond the material. The altars the students designed for purple often used religious associations as a springboard. There were even altars to chocolate (a taste, we discovered, they associated with the color) and to the smells of lavender. There were psychics, fortunetellers, and witch doctors. The most pervasive interpretations of purple, however, dealt with vigils, wakes, and funerals. One funeral was complete with a tombstone for each member of the class.

These experiments led us to become more aware of the use of purple in popular culture in general (ads for yoga are often purple) and, of course, the use of purple in movies.

Films as varied as **Cabaret**, **Dick Tracy**, and **The Sixth Sense** all use purple to foreshadow death. Purple, however, doesn't always signal a literal death of someone. It could mean *something* is going to die. For example, Max Fisher, the adolescent rogue in **Rushmore**, climbs a ladder to the purple bedroom of his teacher, only to lose his delusion that he will sleep with her. In **Tootsie**, Dustin Hoffman's character Dorothy Michaels wears purple when she reveals her character's true identity as a man, thereby "killing" Dorothy.

Both colleagues and students tell me they were not previously aware of how often the title *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* manifests itself in movies. Investigate it for yourself. The next time you see purple in a film, watch carefully for what it reveals. Start with **Far from Heaven** or even **Chicago**.

Out of more than a dozen potential titles for the book, my students chose *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* because they felt this title captured both the spirit and content of my color seminars in Visual Storytelling at AFI.

## THE BOOK'S LANGUAGE

You will find I often tend to attribute characteristics to a color. For me, after years of investigation, colors indeed have distinct personalities. For example, hot reds are “lusty.” This does not mean the color itself has that inherent emotional property. It means that it can elicit that physical and emotional response from the audience. Both Gwyneth Paltrow’s bedspread in *Shakespeare in Love* and Nick Cage’s bedspread in *Moonstruck* are a hot orange-red, and they certainly accompanied lusty activity in those films. Does it mean that that particular red is restricted to lusty activity? No, but it’s a valid description of one of the activities the color can trigger. A strong color elicits a strong visceral response. This, in turn, can set up an audience to anticipate a particular action (in this case, a lusty one).

Colors indeed have their own language, which can visually help define a character arc or layer a story. In *Malcolm X*, for example, bright, “look at me” red is the color that defines Malcolm’s cocky small-time hoodlum years; blue, the contemplative years in prison; and gold, his enlightened time in Mecca. Each of those colors layers the journey of this man and has a different (and cumulative) effect on the audience. Red is energizing, blue affects introspection, and golden light inspires the spiritual or enlightened. Wynn Thomas, production designer for *Malcolm X*, describes how he envisioned the film in three acts, each defined by a particular color, on page 14.

## WHY THE TERM “PURPLE”?

For years, I advised my students to use the term “violet” to define the color that is midway between red and blue (in the additive system). But “purple” kept creeping into our day-to-day vocabulary, especially in communicating color names in the commercial world. Indeed, a 1992 press release from Pantone, Inc. (a color system for designers and printers), refers to purple as “a blend of the excitement of red and the tranquility of blue.” The word “purple” in this book is used in that context. In the interest of communicating clearly, I have chosen terms for colors that are most consistent with our day-to-day living experiences: red, yellow, blue, orange, green, and purple.

## HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is divided into six parts, one for each of these major colors in the spectrum: Red, Yellow, Blue, Orange, Green, and

Purple. Each part has a home page, which describes the emotional and psychological influences we discovered about the color, and contains two chapters, each of which explores films that best illustrate those influences. Within these chapters, the color is divided into six characteristics that help to influence our emotional responses to the films.

Some films use a color's transformation, or its flow, to support the evolution of the characters and story throughout the movie. Others have one brilliant scene that captures a color's role in defining a character or expanding the story. Consequently, some of the chapters are longer than others. If more than one color is explored in a film, the film is listed under the color that is the major influence in the story and the other color(s) will be keyed under "supporting color" icons in the margin of the page. As well, "cross-reference" icons will appear in the margins of the pages of the films where the same color appears. Please note that, because my film commentaries follow the order of the script, sometimes a supporting color may precede the major color in the film.

Films are indexed by movie title, color, and emotional state, allowing easy access to a wide range of information. Or, led by the moment, the book can be read beginning anywhere.

## LEGEND

SUPPORTING  
COLOR



CROSS  
REFERENCE



### WHY THESE FILMS?

If *It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* explores big studio films and limited-release indie films, Oscar winners and films that at the time were critically dismissed and are just now being revisited. Each of the films was chosen because it illustrates a brilliant use of color, either in just one crucial scene or sequence in a movie or thematically throughout the entire movie. A film like Ang Lee's ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** uses color to define the story and the characters' arcs so completely that it appears under four colors.

There are some films where the visual storytelling is so rich, particularly with visual metaphor, that it could become a seminar unto itself. Accordingly, in keeping with our goal to expand the way we *see* movies, I have chosen at times to explore in more detail elements like subliminal symbols (***The English Patient***), visual irony (***Unforgiven***), and visual politics (***My Family/Mi Familia***).

### THE SIX CHARACTERISTICS: AN IMPORTANT NOTE TO THE READER

The six characteristics listed for each color (e.g., Powerful, Lusty, and Defiant Reds) were selected because these emotional

associations repeated themselves over and over again in our research. These are simply examples of how a color can be used. In no way are they meant to limit you, but rather to act as springboards from which you can go off and test further interpretations on your own. Please remember, just because blue might appear under Passive Blues, for example, does not mean it cannot exhibit characteristics like Melancholic or Cerebral as well. By the same token, both green and purple are listed as having the characteristic of Ominous. It all depends on the context in which they are used. All the more reason to think for yourself and not try to turn these categories into rigid formulas for color selection. Get a group together and have them create a color environment and observe how behavior will change (see page xxii). You will find that if you don't try to skew the results by giving your audience clues as to what you want, your research will be amazingly consistent.

My goal is to facilitate your reliance on nonverbal information. I want to encourage you to exercise your visceral muscles. *Seeing* a movie demands skill that *watching* a movie doesn't.

#### **A CAVEAT FROM THE AUTHOR**

There are times when I hear a filmmaker say, "Color can be whatever you want it to be." My experience tells me this is a dangerous misconception. It's the cart before the horse, really. In fact, my research suggests it is not we who decide what color can be. After two decades of investigation into how color affects behavior, I am convinced, whether we want it to or not, that it is *color* that can determine how we think and what we feel.

One of the reasons color influences us is due to a phenomenon called *resonance*. MaryAnn Kilmartin, a bio-resonance expert in San Diego, talked to me about the ideas of Carlo Rubbia, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1984. According to Kilmartin, Rubbia calculated that we are one billion parts light to one part matter. She explains, "Human beings are basically all light. We look like we are all matter because we are hard-wired to see the particle nature of light. As you recall, light has two forms: particle (solid) and wave (frequency). We 'feel' light however because we are in resonance with light in its wave form. That is what we mean when we talk about feeling red/anger/energy, etc."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Bio Resonance and Multi-Resonance Therapy*, Vol. 1, ed. Hans Brugemann, Carlo Rubbia, Hague International, Brussels, English Edition, 1993, pp. 208–209.

So our perceptual nature is unable to see the wave nature of light that affects how we “feel.” The irony is that color impacts us in ways we cannot see, but it affects how we feel and how we behave. When we walk into a red room, for example, it is as if the color red and the human body become two resonating tuning forks. Like a note, our whole system begins to “hum” red—physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Each color affects us uniquely. Even the slightest variation of a single color can have a profound influence on our behavior. In wise hands, color can become a powerful tool for filmmakers to subliminally layer a story—to make a situation ironic, or absurd. In ***Philadelphia***, as the dying Tom Hanks clings to his IV stand, translating the lyrics to an opera whose theme is love and loss, he is slowly enveloped by an intense red light from nowhere. It is like visual salt rubbed into an emotional wound. Hanks speaks of love and life, but the red belies his emotional reality. We are powerless to ignore it. The red is the visual counterpoint to the words and music. It is his unspoken rage and mortal pain, as well as a visual adjective that supports and sustains Hanks’ brilliant performance.

On the other hand, the pale red (pink) in ***The Royal Tennenbaums*** makes an enormous difference in the audience’s attitude toward the title character. Royal Tennenbaum does incredibly despicable things, but because he’s surrounded by bubble-gum pink, we know instinctively not to take him seriously. The color has rendered him silly.

Color is one of the elements rarely recognized by the audience as manipulating them. This subliminal quality can be magic in the director’s hands—or not. This much is clear: if we remain unaware of this power awaiting our command, we relinquish a large part of our control to chance. Color will continue to resonate, to send out signals, irrespective of our intentions. So, whether it’s on or off-screen, it’s essential for us to know what we are doing.

#### GOING BEYOND THE VERBAL

How do you develop this facility with color? How can you use this powerful force to layer a story? How can you create the magic?

First and most importantly, you select your left-brain and click “Quit.” You have to relinquish control of your thinking self and give it over to what you are *seeing*. This is not easy in a culture that prides

itself on hard-nosed reason and in which our softer perceptual skills are often dismissed. Most of us love to analyze films and love to talk about what we analyze. Indeed, we are often so busy analyzing the plot points that we are unaware of how we are being affected by what we see. We've evolved into a generation of talkers with lazy vision. We “watch” but we don't *see*. And we miss out on an experience that enriches our emotional core.

It will maximize your experience if, after reading this section, you first see a film before you read the book. For example, if you want to explore the emotional influence of blue, you might screen ***About Schmidt***. The film opens with one of the bluest offices in the history of cinema. Don't just register that as an idea and move on. See how blue follows Warren Schmidt wherever he goes and pay very close attention to what the blue is doing to *you* both physically and emotionally. Of course, it has layered Schmidt's character, but it has also allowed you to have a *visceral* understanding of who he is. That is a very different experience. If you use the book in this way, you can compare and contrast your observations and discoveries with mine. It will be more like a seminar than a lecture.

Another way to begin is to choose a film you are familiar with, run it on fast-forward and look for how a color or colors propel the story or modify the characters (color is, after all, a visual adjective). In ***Elizabeth***, for example, the color of Cate Blanchett's costumes defines her character arc as it morphs from innocent pale coral to powerful blood red.

### **PITFALLS TO AVOID**

Filmmakers should be careful not to make color choices based solely upon an intellectual or abstract notion. If, for example, a director chooses blue to symbolize “hope” because the sky is blue when the sun shines, he or she may find it is possible for an unwanted reaction to occur. Instead of feeling hopeful, the audience may involuntarily respond to blue by feeling tired—even melancholy.

This is a true story: An executive decided on his favorite pale blue as the color for his office reception area. As the months wore on, he found himself complaining about the passivity, complacency, and lack of curiosity among his current crop of job candidates. He attributed it to the millennium and seriously contemplated initiating a seminar called “Initiative for the 21st