Sin City: an object lesson in colour

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(3057 words)

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Abstract:

Film noir's appeal as a film genre has been enhanced by the use of modern chiaroscuro techniques derived from computer algorithms. For *Sin City* (2005), this has resulted in the addition of colour to the mix of monochrome differentials, and thus punctuates parts of the narrative with added visual emphasis. Colours used in this way are highly symbolic, and both emphasise the symbolism inherent in the film's genre as well as provide associations with 'real' life for the viewer. As presented in this paper, colour also offers emotional impacts that aid in the communication of Sin City's reputation as an exemplar of filmic violence, by distracting attention away from violence's graphic presentation.

 Key Words: colour, symbolism, film noir, chiaroscuro

(3057 words)

Introduction

Colour films are the mainstay of contemporary cinematic offerings, so when a film is made in 'old-fashioned' monochrome, it often elicits curiosity. Film noir has monochromicity as its staple environment, and *Sin City* (2005) is one such film despite its unusual inclusion of colour into its narrative. This paper examines that use of colour, and argues that the colour has a dual function – to offer additional explication of the narrative, thereby enhancing its impact, and as a distraction from the graphic violence that seems to be the film's major genre distinction.

Film noir and *Sin City*

Film noir has long fascinated writers and audiences alike, and it is no surprise that its appeal continues into the. Christopher (2006) considers film noir's twenty-first Century 'renaissance' to be due to increasing contemporary social anxieties arising from rapid, seemingly uncontrollable change. Film noir presents the viewer with a chiaroscuro medium which simplifies issues of utmost irrationality and existential dread into simple black and white 'truths' (Murphet 1998). The technical devices of film noir create a world of shadows in which the urban labyrinth, cynicism and misogyny are primary features (Bergan 2006). Moreover, because their representation of deviant acts is antipathetic to mainstream social values, they help construct a social law-and-order consensus amongst viewers that helps to preserve society by offering this antithesis as a perverse attraction (Murphet 1998; Palmer 1973b:136-138). Film noir takes its inspiration from the thriller narrative (Palmer 1973a), many adapting from the graphic thriller novel (McAllister, Gordon & Jancovich 2006;

O'English, Matthews & Lindsay 2006). This systematic reversal of Hollywood's saccharine myths launched an 'artistic cachet' of 'spectacular opportunities' (Naremore 2000:111), however screen adaptations are not permitted the visual latitude of the descriptive words or illustrations they seek to recreate. Film-makers thus developed alternative methods of portraying the sex and violence required of film noir in a search for what Lavery (1997: 23) calls "a kind of self-censorship-for-profit". One such opportune method is the use of comic-book framing (Taylor 2004), and it is this method that predominates in the contemporary film *Sin City* (Maciuszek 2006).

Sin City's adherence to the graphic novel presentational style is enhanced by the monochrome film stock used to accentuate highlights and shadows. A 'mood' generative of fearful expectation is supported by the noir-style voiceovers, and there are numerous narrative twists that ensnare the viewer. The noir audience understands the film's narrative and its laborious uncovering of clues as a series of multiple surprises for the heroes to which it responds in a genre-related manner. There are no convenient side-stories to give the viewer more information than is available to the hero, so the audience suspense and expectation arise through identification with the hero. The hero's quest is dangerous, illuminating, and ultimately, non-satisfying, as the only legitimate escape from this bizarre world is ever-present death.

Sin City (2005) encapsulates three (potentially four) separate stories (Hefford 2005) – Hartigan's, Marv's and Dwight's - that have as their common link the ubiquitous night spot, Suzy's, where all three heroes and some of the villains gather. The men do not interact outside Suzy's, a linkage that flashes past in screen time, for seemingly milieu rather than narrative purposes, and never made clearly evident. Further, each storyline, with its own

(anti-)hero, features a limited number of women who may interact with two or more of the heroes. These female connections are loose, and they are present because their lives intertwine with the thrust of each hero's quest.   The film's title encourages expectations of lasciviousness and murder, which are plentiful. A scantily-clad or nude woman is the common adult feminine form throughout. These women are presented as the cause around which each man must meet his challenges, and are the pawns of the narrative as well as the targets of the assassins sent to find and destroy them. The stories do not resolve themselves into a united narrative, so each hero faces his personal and noir demons alone. Like all film noir, the heroes are the men whose thoughts are narrated over the action of the film, and like noir, the women are sexualised in their use of clothing and mannerisms, and through this, the connection between sex and violence is played out.

Violence is the most frequent and memorable narrative offering in *Sin City*, despite most of it occurring as symbolic rather than through literal forms. What is most memorable about this film, however, is its use of colour in its otherwise black-and-white noir chiaroscuro. For *Sin City*'s use of monochrome is not so much a holding true to the traditions of the film noir genre, as it is a foil for the colour provided to enrich and enliven the narrative and to underscore the film's inherent violence. Nuances of shade and hue are nonetheless missing, a minimalist palette sparingly applied – red, blue, yellow, orange and green – of variable luminescence. Moreover, each colour appears in a very specific way, making a statement that forms an integral part of the narrative to be translated at an emotional level by the viewer.   Some of those 'statements' will be examined here.

Black and White as colours in *Sin City*

Sin City's use of digital technology has enabled a contemporary chiaroscuro presentation that conveys the conventions of comic-book illustration. In monochrome film, white denotes visible things and black invisible things, so noir's juxtaposition of light and shadow perpetuates emotional states of uncertainty, positioning the audience between the extremes of knowing and not-knowing, and thereby mirroring the psychic positioning of the portrayed hero. In *Sin City* however, the rotoscoped inversion of black and white created anomalies of use and association. Blood and shadows can be white, just as lurid descriptions of violence accompany a black screen. White, luminous blood is specific to the enemies of the film's heroes, and its appearance contrasts markedly with the dark environment in which dark deeds are conducted. Similar luminescent white also appears as the heroes' silhouettes in life-threatening situations – Dwight's drowning in the oil-pond, and Hartigan's suicide. White's appearance therefore differs for the heroes versus the villains. White life blood leaks from the bodies of the villains, adhering to the heroes from outside of their bodies. Similarly, white shadows distance the heroes' bodies from their essence, supporting their continued existence. The villains' white signals the end of their lives, but for the heroes white signals a removal to a different plane of existence.

Black appears as a distinct signalling colour in the way it is used to abstract the violence in *Sin City* according to its origin and intention. Twice in the film a woman is assaulted by a villain – Jackie-Boy punches Shelley; Manute hits Gail – and in both scenes the violence is delivered as a shadow event rather than a visual reality. Both women are seemingly knocked to the floor, and the black shadow records the assault, but it is never seen at its most lurid. Black shadow is a symbol of this physical contact just as black circumscribes the extent of the heroes' violence against the villains. Most notable is the black screen that accompanies Marv's monologue about his torturous elicitation of information from his villainous victim.

In this way the use of black for villain and hero are differentiated, with black used to identify the villains' cruelty and to disguise the heroes' cruelty.

Red – Taker of Life

The first hue to appear in *Sin City* is red - the dress and lipstick worn by the woman in the opening sequence. She is killed by an assassin who holds her as she dies, and so red is immediately and inextricably linked to death, her blood invisible but symbolised by her lips and dress. The assassin, disappearing from the film, returns in a re-run of his intended and implied actions at film's end – to a different colour (thereby implying that a different outcome may be possible?).

Red is the most prolific and significant colour in this film. Its appearance heralds violence, both actual and implied, and it adheres to the heroes. Marv meets red in the form of the bedding upon which a prostrate and very dead Goldie lies. From hereon the narrative attaches red to Marv in the form of blood – his own as well as that of others. Marv is red-bespattered through four major scenes of his story, and his red blood covers the surgical team as they prolong his life. With each appearance of red in these contexts, Marv is physically weakened whilst his resolve is strengthened. His encounters with red are in correspondence with his desire – for information and for love - and represents a threat to the lives of the men Marv assaults, but it is the correlation of red with his memories of Goldie that strike the most potent chord.

Red also adheres to Dwight but not so intimately. Dwight's red is removable - his sports shoes and his car. Both items return to the monochromatic background from whence they

were isolated by the camera's focus, once they have serves their symbolic purpose. Dwight's monologue informs the viewer that he too is a murderer, but he is not seen to engage in violence per se – certainly his assault on Jackie Boy is violent, but seen from the toilet's perspective, the scene lacks identification with a humanist perspective. Moreover, Dwight's red allows him to follow Jackie-boy to ensure he does not kill anyone else in revenge. Thus the violence highlighted by red in Dwight's story emanates from objects rather than from his persona, although the link with death and destruction is clear.

Hartigan's only red appears when he is bashed by the police following his recovery from cardiac surgery. He is not meant to be killed by these actions, but they ensure that the scene is set for Hartigan's confession and subsequent incarceration. In this way, he is nonetheless robbed of life in a way no less effective than the life-destroying methods presaged by red in the other narratives. For all the stories red accompanies destruction of a life-drive.

Blue – Giver of information

Blue's most startling appearance is in the eyes of Becky, the informer, but this is not blue's first appearance, nor is it the only one. Jackie-boy's blue car is used to accost Becky. Her 'blue-eyed honesty' denial of his demands and her subsequent warning are ignored by Jackie-boy to his cost. Later, Becky's blue eyes help her identify and warn about the bomb in Jackie-boy's head, and to seek out safety during the gun-battle that follows. She escapes only to be found at the end of the film by the film's original assassin – and steps into an uncertain future as she steps into the elevator. Will her blue offer her redemption not available to the film's opening red-wearing victim?

Blue also signifies for Dwight who is distinctly discomforted by the necessity of travelling with Jackie-boy's cadaver alongside him in the car. A series of red, orange-yellow, blue and green lights had alternated over the anxious Dwight and his mordant passenger. Dwight's voiceover enhances the mood of anxiety associated with the changing colours, but it is during a blue phase that the corpse begins to speak, answering Dwight's fears with psychotic delight. Blue light also accompanies the police car that interrupts his journey and forces Dwight to prepare for murder.

In each occasion, blue has associated with information passing from one to another. Jackie-boy's car informs Dwight of its passage just as it signals Jackie-boy's expression of his desire. Becky's blue eyes isolate her as the only female character to subvert the status quo – through the information she supplies to others. Dwight's blue-lit encounter with his imagination serves to supply the audience with information about his mental state. The blue light accompanying the police encounter also provided an exchange of information – broken tail-light for non-drinking party-goer.

Yellow – Clash with Nightmare

Yellow's most prominent use is its association with Manute (as his eyeball) and with Hartigan's nemesis, the deformed Roarke (whose entire body is yellow). Manute's yellow eye represents the powers of evil incarnated, because his intentions to subdue the women and force them back into the darkness of past regimes is so horrible that it is only alluded to verbally. His alluded-to cruelty and ability to subvert the tightly-knit group of warrior-whores is sufficient justification for his subsequent slaughter. For Manute, yellow

accompanies both his roles as *being* nightmare to the whores and *having* nightmare as his schemes are nullified.

The yellow of Roarke's body is Hartigan's clash with nightmare. Roarke goads and follows Hartigan to reclaim the object taken from him prior to his yellow transformation – Nancy. Hartigan is the innocent Nancy's saviour, yet yellow Roarke is prodigiously inventive in his intentions. The yellow Roarke is a grotesque monster, whose perverted ambitions are under the apparent protection of the established order of the larger society. Hartigan's eventual shredding of Roarke's corpse lacks the depth of implied horror due to the surrealistic yellow splatter around the environment, nevertheless the natural conclusion of such an unnatural assault leads directly to Hartigan's suicide.

Colour as Signifier

Colour is an unusual element of film noir as it has the potential for distraction from the chiaroscuro effects of monochrome, yet in *Sin City* colour projects an enhanced thriller element, because the colour is specifically intended for the audience, not for the characters portrayed upon the screen. It matters not to Hartigan, Marv, Dwight or the unnamed assassin whether the blood they spill on themselves is white, red or yellow because each character is intensely involved in the drama and colour is the least of their considerations. But for the audience, the colour added to *Sin City* has the potential for signifying more than the noir elements of the film in their vibrant aberration. It is not expected in film noir that colour would intrude, yet intrude it does in *Sin City*, and this intrusion is accentuated by the camerawork which lingers on the colour elements as they emerge from the drama.

The colour appears to carry a message, but just what this is cannot easily be ascertained in terms of logic. That the monstrous Roarke should be a yellow creature places his body outside the parameters normally allowed for film noir, and repositions it into the realm of horror fiction, yet in *Sin City* the yellowness of this villain helps to accentuate his evil whilst it accentuates his presence as monstrosity. Yellow is the most easily visible of the colours, and there is no mistake just who the evil character is at any stage in the narrative. High visibility, however, is insufficient reason for the attachment of colour symbolism to a character, nor does it explain why it should be only certain aspects of the film that are given this treatment.

Williamson's (1978) discussion of colour's use as a signifying entity in advertising is apt here. At no time within the film is this phenomenon of colour inclusions explained, but it is much remarked-upon by viewers as a stylistic focus of some significance, although just what that significance might be is less clear. Williamson (1978:21) argues that placement of colours that attract attention will create associations between different objects that assist in the production of meaning. Yet familiarity with the coupling of colour with an emotion-state does not provide entirely for the symbolism inherent in the colour presentation in this film. Yellow, for example, has traditionally been regarded as a 'positive' colour, symbolising happiness and joy, yet in *Sin City* it demarks the most evil and non-human of all the characters. As Williamson (1978:24) points out, "(t)he use of colour is not significant in itself, it is the significance of the correlation it makes". Instead of joy and happiness, the noir world changes the symbolism of yellow into something akin to disgust and thus justifies the utterly crude and horrific destruction of the yellow body by Hartigan.

Connected together, the colour inclusions of *Sin City* provide emotional 'punches' that accentuate the noir narrative, and distract from the fact that very little of the violence is presented directly on the screen to the viewer. The shock of the colour inclusions present a puzzle to the viewer's perception that seems outside the logic of the noir genre and the individual film.   The object lessons are nonetheless simple – aggression leads to reduced life expectancy (red); information should be carefully attended (blue); and nightmare (yellow) is the principle motivator for staying alive. As signifiers of the type of psychic world that produces film noir, these colours enhance rather than detract from the intensity of the narrative. Their symbolic meaning however is linked to pre-existing social concepts, so can be as important as discursive symbols to representations.

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