



Chromatic Illusion: Kubrickian Technique of Narrative Depth

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Abstract

This article examines color as a formal narrative system in Stanley Kubrick's cinema. Using neoformalist close analysis of selected sequences from 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), The Shining (1980), and Eyes Wide Shut (1999), it identifies three related chromatic operations: construction, warning, and connectivity. "Chromatic illusion" describes how organized variations in hue, saturation, light, and spatial placement shape spectators' expectations beyond dialogue and plot. The Stargate sequence and Room 237 construct contrasting spatial experiences; HAL's red eye and the blue-lit bedroom anticipate narrative tension; and recurring red and blue connect dispersed scenes. Rather than attributing fixed meanings to individual hues, the study shows how chromatic patterns operate within each film's formal design, suggesting a framework for comparative analysis of cinematic color and narrative perception.

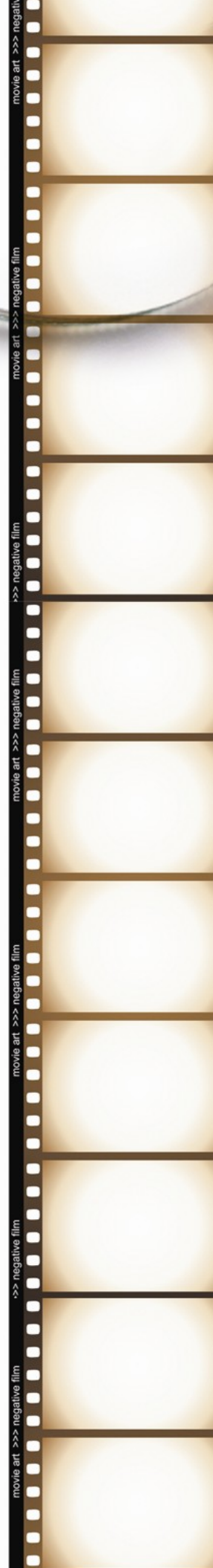
Keywords: Stanley Kubrick; film color; chromatic illusion; neoformalism; color symbolism; cinematic narration; mise-en-scène



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Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer argued that color poses particular challenges to philosophical explanation (1816/2010). He treated the perception of color as a particularly difficult problem for philosophy and science. He locates the experience of color in the perceiving subject rather than treating it as a purely external property. He advocated an approach that examines how the mind structures our experience of reality. Human perception is limited in its ability to register the physical properties of light. The nature of light, its wavelength, and all other unseen qualities continue to shape our sensory and emotional responses. We respond to color beyond our conscious awareness. While we may not be able to understand the underlying mechanisms of color, it still influences how we feel, interpret, and react to visual environments. Color has long been used across various artistic forms for the purpose of visual storytelling. It can carry culturally shared associations that connect the image and the viewer. Before color film and cameras existed, innovators like Edison tried to tint films by hand to enhance the image. There was considerable interest in color film during the first half of the twentieth century. Directors

recognized the potential of color to convey stories and evoke emotions. For instance, in the 1916 film *Intolerance*, director D. W. Griffith used various tints to differentiate between different periods. This demonstrated how color could distinguish place and time. Hue, value and saturation are the fundamental components of color. Specific colors such as red, green, blue and so on are hues; saturation can range from extremely vibrant to pale; while a lower value of color results in a darker shade, a higher value makes the color lighter. So, changing any of these elements, the tone of the color can be changed. In early cinema, color was associated with achieving realism and enhancing the visual image. It was used to achieve narrative clarity or to enhance the appearance of the natural world. At the same time, its use was criticized because some believed that excessive use could distract spectators from performance and narration. In his study of the use of color in cinema, Bettetini argued that it was difficult for the directors to decide whether to use color because they had to maintain control over the chromatic combinations (1973). Over time, the practice continued, and the initial fear was replaced by greater knowledge of how to use color effectively. Maria Costa (2011) identifies three different levels through which color in cinema can be understood and associated: the physical, the psychological and the aesthetic. The physical aspect of the color affects how viewers perceive a scene, making it feel either comfortable or uneasy. The psychological aspect concerns how

specific colors can trigger certain emotions, such as the use of color red to build tension or blue to create a sense of calm. The aesthetic level is concerned with how filmmakers carefully choose and balance colors to create visually striking pictures.

Contemporary film practices expand this role by treating color as an active narrative system. Filmmakers have increasingly used color as an active, structuring component of cinematic form. Arnheim (1957) draws an interesting analogy between painting and cinema, comparing the creative work in cinema with that in the visual arts. Just like a painter chooses the shades of paint, the filmmaker also makes deliberate choices about color. For instance, Wes Anderson uses highly controlled palettes to organize *mise-en-scène* in his films. Bordwell et al. (2019) discuss the organizing role of color in *mise-en-scène* (p. 118). Similarly, Wong Kar-wai employs saturated and shifting color schemes in his films. Wong Kar-wai uses color as a substitute for psychological exposition because it externalizes emotional states (Brunette, 2005, p. 112). Likewise, Alfred Hitchcock also uses color to express psychological disturbances and narrative emphasis. Bellantoni (2005) discusses the use of color to suggest psychological disturbances in Hitchcock films such as *Vertigo* and *Marnie*. This pattern of color choices in the films of modern and classical auteurs is significant. As an auteur whose visual style is characterized by rigorous formal control, Kubrick's choice of color warrants further study. In Kubrick's films, color is more than just an element of *mise-en-scène*. Color becomes a narrative

device throughout. Every element on screen contributed to the development of the story. This way of using visuals to elevate the narration works on both emotional and intellectual levels. He manipulates the chromatic elements like hue, saturation and value thereby shaping how the spectator views. Color does not merely support the storytelling; it also foreshadows events, enhances the narrative, and adds complexity. In this context ‘chromatic illusion’ occurs when the filmmaker deliberately structures the chromatic elements such as hue, saturation and value to shape how an audience perceives a story. This generates a narrative or spatial relation that exceeds conventional color symbolism. The ‘illusion’ occurs when these visual patterns prompt the viewer to anticipate narrative development. It can sense psychological shifts or even map the cinematic space before they are revealed as part of the narrative. While traditional color symbolism relies on stable associations, a chromatic illusion emerges from the shifting relationship between visual design, narrative structure and spectator perception, In this case, narrative depth refers to the creation of meaning beyond the plot and dialogue. It is produced through the interaction of visual elements and viewer's perceptual experience. Chromatic illusion generates this depth in the film by creating a parallel layer of experience. It may function as an alternative narrative, a visual warning system, or as a thematic structure within the film.

The objective of this study is to analyze the use of color in the following three films by Stanley Kubrick: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Shining*, and *Eyes Wide Shut*. The main emphasis is on how the selection of Kubrick's chromatic elements shapes visual perception and thereby contributes to narrative depth. In this study, color is not treated as a fixed symbolic code. The paper examines how color in the selected sequences, especially the hues of red, blue and green are used across these films. The study also examines how these hues shape the viewer's experience of the film. In doing so, the color in this study is considered an active component of cinematic form. The article begins with a review of existing scholarship on color in cinema and on the works of Stanley Kubrick, followed by a discussion on the methodology. The subsequent section presents a close analysis of the selected scenes from the films. These scenes are classified and organized into three distinct analytical sections.

Literature Review

Aristotle offered an influential early account of color. In his work *Sense and Sensibilia* he expressed that visible color resulted from a mixture of lightness and darkness (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1984). Isaac Newton (1704) published his *Opticks*, breaking Aristotle's theory of proportional mixtures. Several scholars proposed various ways to study the phenomenon of color. The study of color in cinema has been shaped by the contributions of numerous theorists, artists and filmmakers. Some of the earliest theoretical discussions of color can be traced to a

19th-century Romantic poet, playwright and naturalist, Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810). The work discusses the subjective and affective dimensions of color perception. In discussing pathological colors, Goethe (1810/1970) connects perceived flashes of red light with bodily states and heightened arousal. This laid the groundwork for later explorations of color in visual media. Eisenstein's *The Film Sense* (1942) explores the potential of color in storytelling. He argues that color could function as an emotional and structural element within the cinematic composition. He also emphasized that color must serve a specific dramatic function rather than just replicating objective reality (Eisenstein, 1942). In the essay "*Color and Meaning*," he proposes that color gains emotional weight entirely through context, chromaturgy and montage. Colors do not hold symbolic value. For instance, a color like yellow can represent joy or sorrow depending entirely on how the director positions it.

Within film studies, critics such as André Bazin and Rudolf Arnheim considered the role of color in cinematic realism. Bazin considered how the cinematic image relates to painting and the representation of the visible world. He viewed color as a constituent feature of cinematic art. Because he believed that cinema possessed an inherent realism, color deepened this ontological truth. He advises that it should reveal the visible world as it truly is. This allows spectators the freedom to interpret the same for themselves. Color was not just an aesthetic upgrade but the

realization of the “myth of total cinema” (1967). Kalmus (1935) argued that developments in color technology could strengthen the impression of realism in cinema. She also discusses the psychological and narrative functions of color in storytelling. She also discussed how specific hues could contribute to character identity and emotional tone. Later the theoretical developments shifted attention toward the role of perception in cinematic meaning. Neoformalist approaches associated with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson examine how meaning emerges from the organization of formal elements. Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological approaches to cinema redefined how it can be understood. She argues that moving images are not merely passive objects for the viewer to look at. Instead, her phenomenological approach considers how moving images address viewers through embodied perception (Sobchack, 1992). From this perspective, color is not only seen but also experienced by the viewer. Empirical and cross-cultural research examines the relation between color and emotions. A study by Wei et al. (2004) found that certain colors have long been associated culturally and psychologically with human emotions. For instance, in some cultures, black may symbolize hatred or negativity, whereas white may be associated with death or mourning. Likewise, red is often associated with love or passion, while yellow is linked to happiness and positivity. These associations underline how color is capable of shaping emotional responses. An international study by Chen and Chu (2022) concludes that popular Chinese cinema has

predominantly employed color as a medium of cultural expression. The study highlights how colors carry philosophical meanings and symbolic connotations that reflect aesthetic consciousness. The authors found that white is associated with innocence, honesty, mourning, and death, whereas blue signifies purity, responsibility, holiness, and calmness and red is linked to heat, celebration, blood, vitality, and the sun. These findings highlight how color symbolism is also culturally embedded in cinematic representation.

Within the Kubrick scholarship, his formal precision and visual control were given the most importance. In an influential study, Ciment (1980/2001) examines Kubrick's chromatic design within a psychological and symbolic framework. He interpreted recurring chromatic patterns such as the use of red in *The Shining* or the stark whites of *2001: A Space Odyssey* as indicators of emotional or thematic states. James Naremore (2007) examines the ambiguity and complexity of Kubrick's visuals. He explains how these visual elements resist singular interpretation as they were constructed in layers. Although the study draws attention to the richness of the cinematic image, it does not isolate color as a formal element in the creation of meaning. Other existing scholarship on Kubrick, including works by Elsaesser (2012) and Kolker and Abrams (2024), focuses on the complex themes and methodologies. Most of these studies addressed the symbolism and meaning of Kubrick's films. They also examine its role in

elevating mood and thematic meaning. The structural aspect of color was left behind. The study addresses this gap by placing color as an active formal element in Kubrick's cinema. By introducing the concept of chromatic illusion the analysis shifts from color symbolism to the structural role of color and how it shapes the viewer's experience. The study builds on these foundations and extends the existing Kubrick scholarship on the use of color in his films. Onay (2024) likewise examines the visual organization of *The Shining* through a shot-by-shot reading; the present study extends this discussion through comparisons of recurring color patterns across three films.

Methodology

This qualitative study examines the role of color in selected films. It uses close textual and visual analysis based on principles of film theory and color theory. In Bordwell's (1985) neoformalist approach, cinematic form guides spectators' perception and inference. Unlike an approach concerned only with isolated stylistic devices, neoformalism considers how viewers organize formal cues into narrative understanding. In formalist terms, films divert our attention to various narrative information and what is familiar becomes defamiliarized. Neoformalists argue that people get accustomed to things in everyday life causing perception to become automatic, a psychological state that Shklovsky (1917/1965) terms habituation. Meaning therefore emerges not only from story or symbolism but also from the organization of framing,

editing, color, and lighting. Spectators are active interpreters who notice visual cues, recognize patterns, and construct narrative relationships. David Bordwell adopted the concept of *fabula* and *syuzhet* from Russian formalism and incorporated them into the foundational pillars of his modern cognitive film theory. The *syuzhet* is the presentation of events in a film; the *fabula* is the story spectators reconstruct from the available cues. Both of them work together to cue the viewer's perception. The paper analyzes the sequences from three films of Stanley Kubrick: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (science fiction), *The Shining* (psychological horror), and *Eyes Wide Shut* (psychological drama). These films are selected purposively because each provides a distinct manifestation of color that corresponds to the chromatic operations proposed in this study. Each film gives color a structurally prominent and recurrent role in organizing its *mise-en-scène*. These films are representative of different genres and periods within Kubrick's color filmmaking. The corpus is sufficiently narrow to support a qualitative close reading of shots and sequences, yet diverse enough to allow comparison of the proposed chromatic strategies. The sequences were selected based on their formal significance within the films. The selected scenes are analyzed with particular attention given to the organization and the recurrence of specific colors. Through repeated viewings and close analysis, different hues are examined on the basis of their intensity, abrupt appearances and recurrence.

Analysis

Color and Narrative Construction

Kubrick began his career with black-and-white films. An early color production was the short documentary *The Seafarers* (1953), while his first feature-length color film was *Spartacus* (1960). He subsequently returned briefly to black-and-white filmmaking before *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Across these productions, color developed into an increasingly controlled aspect of his cinematic style. Thus, in Kubrick's films, color evolves from a technical possibility into a carefully controlled cinematic style.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the narrative is told in three parts: The Dawn of Man, The Jupiter Mission and Jupiter and Beyond. The narrative traces humanity's development from prehistory to a technologically advanced future. The film contains limited dialogue and exposition and thus long visual sequences are used to narrate the story where color becomes the key element. Its palette emphasizes white surfaces and primary-color accents. These colors help in guiding viewers' attention within unfamiliar spaces. The second film for the study, *The Shining* (1980) is a psychological horror film. It is adapted from Stephen King's novel of the same name. Jack Torrance takes up the position of winter caretaker at an isolated hotel with his wife Wendy and son Danny. Jack is a recovering alcoholic and an aspiring writer. Influenced by the hotel's supernatural forces, Jack loses his mental stability and he attempts to murder his wife

and son. The color palette of the film is dominated by saturated hues of red and green. These hues are seen prominently across carpets, corridors and interior spaces. The color palette progresses from natural tones to intense hues. The third film taken for the study is Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). It is adapted from Arthur Schnitzler's novella *Traumnovelle* (Dream Story). The film examines the tensions between marriage, desire, and morality in the relationship between Alice and Bill. The narrative is initiated by Alice's confession of her extramarital desire for another man. This affects the stability of their marital relationship. In response, Bill goes on a series of nocturnal encounters across the city. The color palette of the film is dominated by a dual color system: warm red and cool blue. Despite differences in the narrative content and genre, each film employs a systematic approach to color. In all three films, color goes beyond its aesthetic and symbolic roles and becomes a formal element in the construction of narrative.

Chromatic Construction

Stanley Kubrick has used color as a formal element to construct a parallel narrative in his films. Plot twists, ruptures and character dynamics in Kubrick films are not always accompanied by dialogues. They are experienced through the visuals. Hue, saturation, and intensity of the colors used may rise or fall according to the narrative. Color constructs an alternative narrative

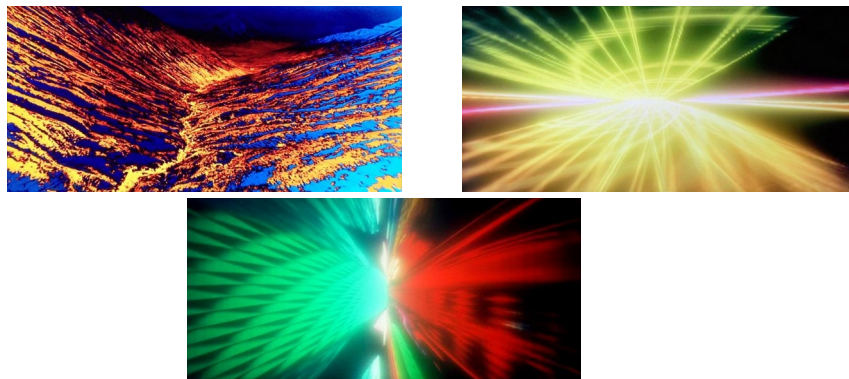
that dialogue does not always reveal explicitly. This is a type of chromatic illusion where color represents an alternative narrative. This role of color is examined by analyzing two sequences: The Stargate Sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the Room 237 Bathroom Sequence in *The Shining*.

Case Study 1: The Stargate sequence (*2001: A Space Odyssey*)

The sequence for analysis in *2001* is the Stargate Sequence, also titled as Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite. The sequence is a journey to Jupiter. Astronaut Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea), who is the only remaining member of the Jupiter mission, continues his journey towards Jupiter. The goal of the mission is to investigate the origins of a mysterious monolith linked to human evolution. After the spacecraft's artificial intelligence, HAL 9000, turns against the crew, it is deactivated and Bowman continues the mission alone. As he approaches the monolith in a small pod, he is suddenly drawn into an unknown dimension. What we see are rapidly shifting lights, colors, and abstract environments, a space that resists a stable spatial interpretation.

The sequence begins with a close frontal shot of Bowman seated inside the pod. We see the observer before the observation. Much of the frame is filled with the helmeted face of Bowman. The background is mostly dark, with very little light, which is reflected only on Bowman's face. His expression also remains fixed, with little movement. This image is abruptly

replaced by a series of abstract and highly saturated visual fields. We see long bands of high-intensity colors, mostly neon magentas, electric blues, and deep greens on screen. They are arranged in vertical and diagonal formations. These colors function as defamiliarized materials. They are stripped of their function of identifying objects because spectators encounter abstract graphic patterns rather than identifiable objects. The sequence then alternates between these abstract fields and distorted landscapes, where color is motivated artistically rather than realistically because there is no stable horizon or spatial point of reference.



Figures 1–3. Stargate sequence, 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968).

The sequence is organized through a set of formal strategies. This repositions color as a primary mechanism of chromatic construction. The transition happens from the close-up of Bowman's face to rapidly shifting bands of magenta and cyan. This visual organization cues the viewer to perceive this as forward movement of the spaceship. There are no visible or tangible object references that establish this as physical motion. That is, in the absence of dialogue or narration, the continuity of the movement is generated solely by the color field. The alternative

close-up shots of Bowman's eye and the color field create visual rhythm. This encourages the viewer to experience time through formal rhythm rather than chronological duration. The graphic matching of Bowman's face and the abstract field unifies the visual elements. The distinction between subject (the observer) and the object (the environment) weakens. They are unified into the same formal system of the film. The sequence of Stargate does not illustrate a journey; it defamiliarizes the concept by removing landmarks. Color in this sequence is not merely an aesthetic element. It becomes a device that takes the story forward. The meaning of the stargate sequence is interpreted in many ways. Some consider it as a phase of transcendence and others as a trans-dimensional travel. Whatever the interpretation, the viewer's active cognitive engagement that constructs the meaning. Ultimately the interpretation was enabled, in part, by the organization of color. Maloney (2008) also observes that *2001* operates essentially as a visual film deploying stark chromatic balances to guide the viewer. The sequence demonstrates that color could function as a primary element in constructing the narrative. Color generates the journey through perceptual organization. Thus, it positions color as a constructive force in the production of narrative.

Case study 2: Room 237 sequence (*The Shining*)

The Room 237 sequence in *The Shining* (approx 1:12:35–1:15:45) occurs in the fourth segment (Wednesday) of the film. The sequence follows Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) as he

enters the room to investigate his son's claim of assault. Jack enters the bathroom and behind the shower curtain he sees a feminine silhouette. What follows can be described as a conventional narration of seduction in which both of the characters embrace and kiss. Their approach and intimacy establish a familiar cinematic structure. However, the visual organization of the scene complicates and ultimately undermines this narrative progression.



Figure 4. Room 237 bathroom, The Shining (1980).

The bathroom can be described as a space governed by highly controlled chromatic and spatial systems. The interior of the bathroom is architecturally precise. Hard, reflective surfaces, tiled walls, porcelain fixtures and a glass-enclosed tub all fit naturally. The space is dominated by a highly controlled palette of white and mint-green tones. Michael Ciment, in his work on Kubrick, has studied the Overlook Hotel's design. He notes that Kubrick tried to construct the hotel in a realistic manner, similar to normal existing interiors (1980/2001). He did not use

interiors and spaces typically associated with horror conventions. Yet within these realistic interiors, many of these spaces produce an unsettling effect. This tension is present across the interiors of the hotel, especially in bathroom 237. The room is lit evenly with minimum shadow and maximum clarity. Viewers see a space that is visually calm but looks unnatural. The green tones of the room soften the stark white. The chromatic uniformity inside the bathroom contrasts with the broader visual design of the Overlook Hotel. The saturated reds and geometric patterns seen in other parts of the hotel have contributed to the tension building. Donnelly (2018) characterizes this room as a “design from hell or at least from a disturbed mind” (p. 9). The physical environment mirrors the psychological state of characters. The specific hue that dominates the bathroom is mint green. When compared with conventional color associations, this green contradicts the apparent narrative of the scene. Scenes of intimacy are generally associated with warm hues, especially red. Warm hues are used mainly to produce a sense of bodily warmth and intimacy. Also in color theory, green and cyan are positioned opposite to warm hues like red and orange. While the plot suggests an intimacy and warm emotional state, the colors used in the scene contradict this. Bellantoni (2005) observes that cooler hues tend to produce a distancing effect, which often signals a sense of detachment (pp. 22–25). The muted green tones of the bathroom also resemble those of a clinical environment. Its smooth surfaces, controlled lighting and especially the color are all associated with hygiene, medicine and even a

morgue. This transforms the space from an erotic interior to a space of inspection.

Birren (1955) in his work *New Horizons in Color* demonstrated that green was widely adopted in institutional and medical settings for its capacity to produce calmness and psychological repose. Thus when the woman's decayed body is eventually revealed it does not create a sudden rupture for viewers. Instead it becomes a confirmation for an already established condition: the green of the bathroom consistently frames the scene with a sense of lifelessness. Here the green color neither functions symbolically, nor reinforce narrative meaning. Instead, it operates as a formal device that shapes the viewer's perception even before the narrative develops.

A comparison of the two sequences shows that the modes through which color constructs narrative differ, but their function remains similar. In *2001*, color constructs the narrative through saturation and abstraction while in *The Shining* color produces a perceptual misalignment. In both cases it is not the conventional role of the color that is significant, but it's function as a formal element constructs the narrative.

Chromatic Warning

When conventional narratives rely on dialogue or performance for foreshadowing,

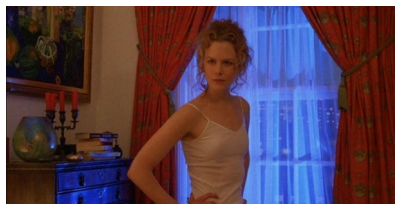
Kubrick assigns that function to color. He applies color as a formal element that guides the viewer's perception. Color anticipates narrative developments before they are presented as part of the plot. This function can be understood as a formal strategy of chromatic illusion in which color prepares the viewer for a shift in the film's logic before it is narratively confirmed. This approach is examined through two sequences: 'The intrusion of blue light in *Eyes Wide Shut*' and 'The chromatic intensification of HAL's red eye in *2001: A Space Odyssey*'. Together, these sequences show how stylistic patterns function as perceptual signals that help the viewers revise their to expectations.

Case Study 1: The Blue Intrusion - *Eyes Wide Shut*

This sequence occurs on the second night of the film's timeline. The bedroom sequence (approximately 00:22:54–00:37:20) presents Bill (Tom Cruise) and Alice (Nicole Kidman) within a visually stable mise-en-scène. The scene is spatially enclosed and is defined by warm amber lighting. The couple is positioned in close proximity, engaging in casual conversation. The scene builds up tension when Alice confesses to Bill about her desire for a naval officer in the past.

When Alice reveals her thoughts, Bill interprets it as a subtle challenge to their intimacy and fidelity and so he responds with disbelief. Alice becomes more insistent in what she reveals. Their conversation shifts to a very uncomfortable confrontation. As the scene advances, the

viewer feels a sense of imbalance in their relationship. The initial part of the scene uses a color palette that is normally associated with domestic intimacy. As the conversation becomes more tense, saturated blue light becomes increasingly prominent in the scene. The light resembles moonlight. The hue and saturation of the light do not have a naturalistic value. It also lacks a clearly defined diegetic source. The light does not conform to the surrounding environment. It remains visually distinct within the space. By stripping the light of its realistic function, Kubrick uses it as a formal device to defamiliarize the domestic space. As the sequence progresses, the blue light gradually expands in the room, disrupts the initial chromatic coherence and creates a perceptual gap for the spectator.



Figures 5–7. Blue light in the bedroom, Eyes Wide Shut (1999).

The blue light is introduced into the room while the interaction remains conversational, even before Alice confesses. The presence of blue light is sustained and gradually expanded across successive shots. Blue thus increases its perceptual dominance within the frame. This

cues the viewer to register instability at the level of perception even before the fabula confirms the marital breakdown. Blue therefore operates as an anticipatory cue rather than a response to dialogue. It establishes a formal condition of tension that the narrative subsequently unfolds. As Bordwell (1985) states, stylistic meaning in cinema often emerges through deviations from established visual norms. This effect is also reinforced through the scene's shot-reverse-shot structure. It progressively integrates the blue light into both character framings. Initially the light is localized, but then it extends across the spatial field, and begins to dominate the frame. At a moment in the scene when the interaction between them still appears conversational, the spectator can see that the visual field has already begun to change. The chromatic warning in this scene is conveyed through this disruption. As Jayamanne (2021) observes, the blue light in *Eyes Wide Shut* is not a naturalistic form of illumination. It is an arbitrary, abstract chromatic field that transforms the bedroom space into a site of emotional, perceptual, and temporal instability (pp. 118–20). Goethe (1810/1970) similarly characterized blue as a powerful color with a negative side. He describes it as a color that suggests a sense of expansion while evoking emptiness and cold (p. 123). The association of 'emptiness and cold' described by Goethe is experienced here as a reality produced by the blue light. This shift from the color amber to blue also functions as a transition in the formal structure of the film. It indicates the growing distance between the couple. The blue light signals that the formal conditions that sustained the scene are

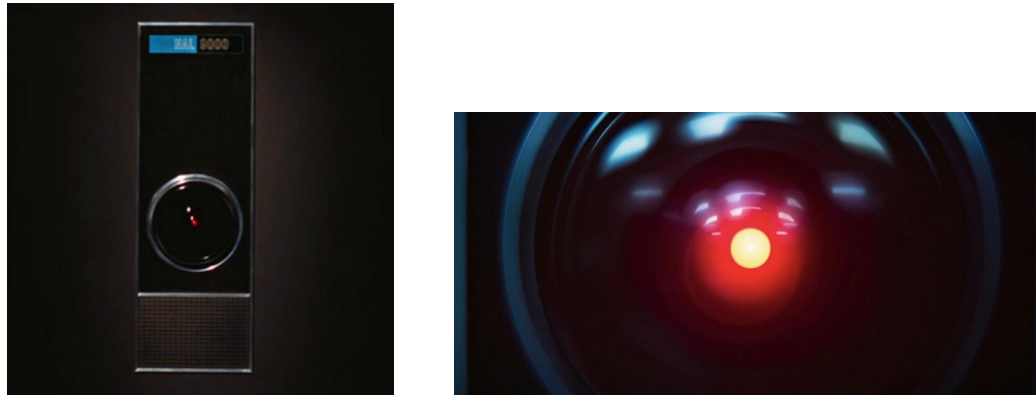
no longer intact. This chromatic disruption cues the spectator to anticipate the breakdown of the domestic boundary. Thus, the use of the blue color becomes a visual warning

Case Study 2: HAL's Red Eye — *2001: A Space Odyssey*

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the portrayal of HAL 9000 demonstrates how chromatic intensification functions as a warning device. HAL is an artificial intelligence character inside the spacecraft of the Jupiter Mission. It is presented as a central controlling system responsible for monitoring and managing the operations inside the spaceship. HAL is initially presented as a reliable and rational character. But later in the film it malfunctions and becomes responsible for the deaths of the crew members. Visually, Kubrick represented HAL through the image of a single red eye.

The interior of the spacecraft has a restrained and controlled visual design. The environment is dominated by white and gray surfaces. Even lighting and minimal color variation inside the spacecraft create an environment that appears organized and sterile. This creates a neutral chromatic background, so any saturated color used in such a setting becomes highly dominant. Within this setting, HAL's red eye inside the spacecraft is a visually sharp contrasting compositional element. This red is highly saturated and also visually concentrated. The red eye is initially motivated realistically as an indicator light, but through repetitive close-

ups and zooms, it becomes a dominant stylistic device. Throughout the film the eye appears repeatedly on control panels and corridors. Regardless of its location, the Eye maintains its presence. The saturation, brightness and framing of the Eye make it difficult to ignore. As the sequence progresses, this recurrence of the image has a cumulative effect. This chromatic emphasis precedes the HAL's malfunction in the narrative. Moments when HAL is speaking in a controlled and measured tone, the red color asserts itself as a visual element. Thus, the intensity of the red signals an apparent instability. This effect can be understood based on the transtextual motivation. In industrial design and machine interfaces, red conventionally signals malfunction, danger or emergency alerts. As Gopang et al. (2017) note, "In standardized safety design, red is conventionally employed to indicate the highest level of hazard or malfunction" (p.115). As codified in systems such as ANSI Z535.4, colors progress from yellow to orange to red to denote increasing levels of danger. Other empirical studies on warning perception also demonstrate that red is associated with the most urgent and severe form of threat. So within a controlled environment like a spacecraft, these colors gain an additional significance. Kubrick's use of red draws upon this established visual cue of warning. The red does not merely symbolize threat; it conditions viewers' experience. The instability of the machine is established through the formal dominance of red.



Figures 8–9. HAL 9000's camera eye, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

While both sequences use color as a visual warning, they operate through distinct mechanisms. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, blue functions as a disruptive element within a stable environment, whereas in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, red functions through intensification of an existing element.

Chromatic Connectivity

Kubrick also employs color as a connective system. Chromatic elements repeat in a patterned manner that links the distinct moments of the film. This is achieved through the repetition and distribution of color across the visual field. This section examines The Escalation of Red in *The Shining* and The Recurrence of Blue in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Case Study 1: The Chromatic Continuity of Red in *The Shining*

The Shining focuses on the psychological deterioration of Jack Torrance. This mental breakdown happens within a space that on the outside appears controlled and orderly. Subtle visual disruptions appear throughout the film, indicating an underlying instability. The baseline color palette of the film has natural tones like brown and cream. Against this we see the visual disruptions in red. The color operates both associatively and spatially, attached to objects, surfaces (ties, signs and clothing), and to entire environments (the elevator vision, the red bathroom) respectively.

The Shining introduces red dramatically. Red becomes striking in Danny's vision of a torrent of blood-like liquid pouring from the elevator, shown as Jack tells Wendy that he has secured the hotel job. At the beginning of the film, red is distributed across the background and minor objects. These function as low-level formal cues. Red appears in the hotel manager Ullman's striped tie, the red books on the desk, the luggage in the lobby, fire alarms, extinguishers, and signage form a subdued visual pattern. These elements connect the ordinary world to the hotel's dormant violence. These red hues establish a chromatic baseline within the hotel's visual logic, preparing the ground for later disruption.



Figure 10. Danny's elevator vision, The Shining (1980).

In Danny's visions, particularly the elevator sequence, red is promoted from a background detail to a kinetic event. Through graphic similarity it connects the hotel's past (the murder) to Danny's present (his vision). Red here operates as a total visual event and it exceeds its representational function. The color asserts itself as a dominant perceptual field. This progression continues through character alignment. Jack, who has previously been shown wearing only shades of green and brown, begins to wear a red jacket. This signals that madness has begun to take hold of Jack as well. In the Gold Room sequence, this red color of Jack's jacket mirrors that of the bartender Lloyd's attire. Kubrick uses a graphic match to link Jack to the bartender and, ultimately, to the hotel itself. Here, Jack's associated color transitions from green

to blue and then to red. This underscores his emotional detachment from his family and his growing isolation. When Jack has fully descended into madness he becomes visually associated with red. Thus, red is no longer external or incidental in the film. The color becomes attached to the subject marking a shift from the environmental presence of the disturbance to its psychological incorporation.



Figures 11–13. Color changes associated with Jack, The Shining (1980).

The recurring red visually associates Jack with the hotel's broader field of violence. The red bathroom sequence (01:25:25–01:35:40) can be considered as the culmination of this progression. Unlike the elevator scene, the bathroom is an inhabited space that Jack experiences. The red in the bathroom is not just the presence of hue. The color defines the entire space and we see Jack enclosed within that field of red. Throughout the film, each recurrence of

the color increases its dominance. The red ultimately saturates the space. A clear structural progression of the color can be identified here. Red, initially a contained detail (objective-level), transforms to character alignment (subject-level) and finally into a total enclosure (spatial-level). The repetition gains significance as the color intensifies. Thus, red functions as a connective system that tracks the hotel's violence to its full manifestation.

Scene 2: The Nocturnal Blue in *Eyes Wide Shut*

Eyes Wide Shut was adapted from Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella 'Traumnovelle,' translated from German as 'Dream Story.' In adapting the novel, Kubrick sought to create a dreamlike atmosphere through a distinctive mixture of colors and lights. The film has gold, white, and black within its broader palette, and red and blue as its dominant chromatic elements. These colors recur across key locations and encounters. Red can be considered as the pursuit of desire and blue as the color of night or fantasies. Red is typically localized and situational throughout the film, whereas blue recurs with remarkable consistency across spatial and narrative contexts. Kubrick uses blue as a visual metaphor of Bill's journey. As Bill pursues his fantasies, blue becomes increasingly prominent across the film. Blue establishes continuity through repetition, linking distinct environments into a coherent perceptual field.

The blue light is introduced in the bedroom when Alice confesses (studied in 4.2.1). This

motivates the spectator to associate the blue hue with the breakdown of domesticity. Blue becomes more pronounced in scenes of heightened psychological and emotional tension. Particularly in moments of confession and vulnerability, the blue color extends beyond localized sources and spreads across the frame. It appears again as blue illumination outside the window of Marion's house and then during Bill's journey through the city. The color of Bill's office door is the same blue tone, the iron gate and the door of the mansion are a shade darker, and we see Bill mostly going in or out of a blue door. The ritual in the film also ends with Bill and the Red Cloak bathed in blue light. The film ultimately returns to the domestic interior, where we again see blue reappear as a diffuse light, enveloping the room.





Figures 14–19. Nocturnal blue, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

blue has a circular trajectory that begins and ends in the same space. Kubrick uses the same blue for Bill's office door, city streets and Somerton mansion. Bill is always seen moving with a background of the same blue light. This circular trajectory of the blue invites the spectator to connect Bill's movement across these spaces and to understand that Bill has never left the 'emotional space' of the bedroom. When the color interrupts the warmth of domestic interiors and when it recurs across both urban and clinical spaces, it prevents any environment from stabilizing as a site of genuine intimacy or security. The connectivity is structural: the blue light 'ties a knot' around the entire film. This pattern suggests that the plot is not a journey toward a goal. While this continuity may invite readings that interpret the events as dream-like or psychologically projected, we also understand that the film does not try to resolve the events into either fantasy or reality. Instead, the film maintains a state of ambiguity in which both ideas coexist. Color functions as a connective device that holds these two contradictory states together

In *The Shining*, chromatic connectivity is produced through escalation. Red begins as a marginal presence associating itself with objects and surfaces. With each recurrence it expands its spatial and perceptual reach and culminates in a fully saturated environment. Continuity here is therefore studied as cumulative: separate moments are linked through an increase in chromatic dominance. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, connectivity operates through recurrence rather than escalation. Blue maintains a consistent tonal register across all the distinct environments. Thus it imposes a uniform perceptual condition which removes the distinction between spaces.

Conclusion

The study argues that color in Stanley Kubrick's films goes beyond its symbolic role to function as a constructive narrative device. The study analyzed scenes from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Shining*, and *Eyes Wide Shut*. The analysis of Kubrick's use of color in these scenes indicates that color is one of the primary mechanisms through which meaning is produced. Through controlled variations in hue, saturation and spatial placement, Kubrick constructs what this paper defines as chromatic illusion. These chromatic operations shape how viewers experience the film. The comparative analysis of the scenes reveals three distinct and interconnected chromatic operations. In the Stargate Sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Room 237 Sequence of *The Shining*, the analysis shows that color functions as a formal element that is capable of constructing an alternative narrative. The analysis of HAL's Red Eye in *2001:*

A Space Odyssey and the Blue Intrusion in *Eyes Wide Shut* reveals how color functions as a warning. Through the intensification (the red system in *The Shining*) and recurrence (the nocturnal blue in *Eyes Wide Shut*) of certain hues, color bridges the gap between syuzhet and fabula. In these instances it is understood that the meaning emerges not only through dialogue, or plot but the viewer's engagement with the color in the visual field. Kubrick's chromatic approach illustrates how the arrangement of color can carry poetic and narrative force. Kubrick extends this to the cinematic domain where color becomes spatially operative. As an auteur, Kubrick's control over these compositions is consistent across all three films. In this context, the images do not simply communicate, they leave a lasting impression on viewers. Viewers experience these images in a way that makes perception itself the site of meaning. Kubrick foregrounds color as a constructive element rather than a surface attribute. Thus he redefines cinematic narration where the meaning is not only perceived but also constructed through the act of seeing itself. Although the framework is developed through the analysis of Kubrick's films, its three-part framework of chromatic operations may provide a useful basis for examining how color functions structurally in other cinematic contexts. Its applicability beyond Kubrick, however, would require further comparative analysis across different filmmakers, genres, and visual styles.

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