

# A Study on the Meaning of Colors in Films: Taking Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Blue, White, and Red Trilogy* as an Example

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## Abstract

As an important element of cinematic art, color not only aids in storytelling but also shapes the visual style of a film and reflects its themes and emotions. This paper aims to explore the meaning of Kieslowski's use of color by analyzing the color styles in the *The Blue, White, and Red Trilogy* and examining how the symbolic meanings of these colors are conveyed. This article is divided into three parts, which are a deep analysis of the color symbols and meanings in the three films *Blue*, *White*, and *Red*. The theoretical analysis and practical exploration of the deep value meanings of freedom, equality, and universal love represented by the colors in the three films are carried out.

**Keywords:** film color, color narrative, *The Blue, White, and Red Trilogy*

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## 1. The Blue of Liberty: Color Enhancing Emotional Expression

In the book *Art and Visual Perception*, it is proposed that the role of color in film is to express emotions and feelings, influencing the psychological and emotional responses of the audience. In the film *Blue*, director Krzysztof Kieslowski skillfully uses color to convey emotions, with blue becoming the dominant color throughout the film. Blue not only illustrates the emotional changes of the protagonist, Julie, but also reflects her psychological journey towards seeking freedom and reconciliation. This chapter will analyze the emotional expression of blue in different stages based on the three parts of the film.

### (1) Release

In the beginning of the film *Blue*, blue as the dominant color sets the tone for the film. The opening of *Blue* features a sudden car accident in which the protagonist, Julie, loses her husband and daughter. Following this tragedy, blue becomes the main color throughout the film, serving as a crucial vehicle for Julie to release her inner grief and pain. At this point, blue symbolizes sorrow, pain, and loss. Surrounded by blue, Julie is engulfed in deep sorrow and despair. The director uses blue hues, such as blue light spots and a feather, to depict Julie's psychological state after the tragedy and her inner strength. She attempts to break through the blue glass and takes sleeping pills to escape reality, seeking to alleviate her inner suffering

and release her pain. Blue not only symbolizes Julie's inner grief but also portrays her struggle and self-redemption in the face of sorrow.

Whether in the decorations of Julie's home, the clothes she wears, or her surrounding environment, blue is omnipresent. Blue serves both as the shackle that binds Julie in her quest for freedom and as the remedy that heals her sorrow. From the beginning, blue establishes the emotional tone of the film, intensifying the conveyance of the protagonist's emotions and subtly reinforcing the theme of "liberty." As viewers watch Julie release her inner grief, they see how she gradually seeks inner peace and freedom. This not only presents a genuine and touching emotional world but also lays the groundwork for the film's theme and sets the stage for the development of the subsequent plot.

### (2) Healing

In this section, blue becomes the backdrop when Julie discovers her husband's infidelity, serving as a symbol that intensifies the emotional expression of the film. When she learns of her husband's betrayal, Julie's emotions are profoundly shaken. Blue, typically used to express sadness, melancholy, and loneliness, now symbolizes confusion, anger, and disappointment. Blue depicts Julie's inner pain and struggle. However, it also hints at Julie's awakening, as she begins to recognize the many issues in her life that she must confront and resolve. Julie starts to seek out the "shackles" that bind her, uncovering the truth about her husband's infidelity. Through this process, she undergoes inner self-healing, with the deep blue tones in the scenes gradually lightening, signifying the beginning of her emotional healing and her pursuit of inner "liberty."

Overall, in this part of the narrative, blue becomes an important tool for emotional expression, intensifying the film's emotional impact. The blue that Julie perceives gradually turns cold and melancholic. This depiction of color change vividly illustrates her emotional journey from trust to disappointment and then to anger. It allows the audience to deeply feel her inner pain and struggle. The director skillfully uses the visual symbol of blue to link the plot, enabling the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the protagonist's inner world. This, in turn, facilitates a better comprehension of the story's overall theme and emotions.

### (3) Acceptance

In this section, after experiencing the pain of losing her husband and daughter, the protagonist Julie begins to seek inner freedom, with the theme of this part being "acceptance." Blue becomes a symbol of Julie's quest for inner freedom. She starts to let go of past pains and seeks a new life, looking for freedom in her existence. At this point, blue symbolizes hope, release, and freedom. Against a blue backdrop, Julie gradually finds inner peace, learns to accept her past, and bravely moves forward. In the film *Blue*, Julie is shown swimming in a pool three times. In the first two instances, she struggles against the blue water, but in the final scene, she chooses to dive into the water, bravely facing her pain. Here, blue again becomes a symbol of her quest for rebirth. This method of using blue to express emotions makes the film's emotional expression more profound and rich.

In this part, the appearance of blue light symbolizes both the birth of hope and a new beginning. This contrasts sharply with the pain and struggle Julie experiences in the first half of the film. This change in color allows the audience to more deeply feel Julie's emotional transformation, thereby enhancing empathy for her character.

In the film *Blue*, director Krzysztof Kieslowski skillfully uses the color blue to intensify the emotional expression of the protagonist, Julie. Blue represents different emotions at various stages, including sorrow, pain, confusion, anger, hope, release, and freedom. Through the changing shades of blue, the audience can clearly perceive Julie's psychological journey toward seeking freedom and reconciliation. Ultimately, against the backdrop of blue, Julie finds inner peace and freedom, achieving true healing and growth. Throughout this process, color becomes the vehicle for the film's emotions, guiding the audience to more profoundly experience and understand the protagonist's inner world.

## 2. The Equality of White: Color Extending Inner Information

The film *White* is Kieslowski's exploration of the theme of equality through a love story. Compared to the prominent use of large color blocks in *Blue*, the director's use of color in *White* is more restrained. This deliberate choice allows the audience to gradually perceive the characters' psychological feelings through their

external actions, rather than directly showcasing their psychological activities in a realistic manner. In *White*, the color white assumes the function of a color symbol and a dialogue with the characters. This chapter will elucidate the symbolic meaning of white in the film by analyzing the three life stages of the protagonist, Karol, through the lenses of “confusion,” “transformation,” and “redemption.”

### (1) Confusion

In the film *White*, the color white becomes a symbolic representation of the protagonist Karol’s impotence. On his way to the court, white pigeon droppings fall onto Karol’s dark green coat. He helplessly tries to wipe it off with a white handkerchief, but the white stain remains. These white images hint at Karol’s inner anxiety and turmoil. The impurity and abruptness of the white bird droppings starkly contrast with Karol’s inner purity and repression.

In the courtroom, when Karol makes his desperate plea, the scene transitions into his flashback. In this flashback, Dominique is shown running outside the church in a white wedding dress. The director reduces the saturation of the white dress, conveying a sense of pallor and powerlessness. After the divorce, Karol is ruthlessly thrown out of the house by his wife. At the street corner, a white plaster statue resembling his wife stands. The statue, lacking any sheen, appears rigid and cold. The white color here has dual connotations: it symbolizes Karol’s confusion and an invisible force oppressing him, while simultaneously representing his inner purity and fidelity to love. It also signifies Karol’s longing and nostalgia for his ex-wife, Dominique. However, this purity and fidelity become the shackles of his confusion.

Additionally, a white bedsheet appears in the film, symbolizing Karol and Dominique’s last attempt to resolve their sexual issues. This attempt ends in failure once again. The creases and stains on the white bedsheet symbolize the conflicts and struggles within their marriage, as well as the inequality in their love.

### (2) Transformation

Color theorist Johannes Itten once said, “No matter how the art of shaping develops, color

will always be the primary shaping element.”<sup>1</sup> Color is an important element in film aesthetics, closely tied to the overall narrative. In the film *White*, there are two significant scenes featuring white snow. In one scene, after losing his passport, Karol places a plaster statue resembling his wife and himself in a suitcase, asking a friend to transport it to his hometown. During the journey, the suitcase is stolen and taken to a mountainous area to be divided among thieves. The thin layer of snow on the mountain reveals dirty black soil and withered grass. When the suitcase is opened, Karol is beaten and pushed down a slope. As he opens his bloodied eyes, he touches the broken plaster statue. Undoubtedly, Karol deeply loves his wife, Dominique. Even though she abandoned and humiliated him, he still loves her. The pristine white snow symbolizes Karol’s search for return and equality. In another snowy scene, Karol goes ice skating on a frozen lake. In the warm winter sunlight, he sees boundless hope. Here, Karol undergoes a transformation. The winter sunlight and the white ice surface symbolize a state of peace and the impending arrival of equality.

In the middle part of the film, white is mainly used to depict Karol’s vengeful mindset after his transformation. Here, white becomes a symbol of Karol’s desire for revenge, indicating his hatred and anger toward his wife. During this process, white symbolizes the darker aspects of Karol’s inner world. For instance, when carrying out his revenge plan, Karol often wears white clothes. These white garments starkly contrast with his black hair, suggesting his inner conflict and struggle, as well as his coldness and hatred. Additionally, there are fleeting white flash scenes after Karol proves his restored sexual ability. These few seconds of white flashes symbolize Karol’s transformation and his attainment of supreme equality.

### (3) Redemption

At the film’s end, there is a flashback to the church wedding scene. In this moment, Karol appears as the groom, and his wife steps out of the church, turning back to smile at him. This is followed by a white flash. Here, the white symbolizes that through his efforts, Karol has successfully exacted revenge on his wife and achieved equality, but he is not happy.

In the final part of the film, the color white

<sup>1</sup> [German] Johannes Eaton. (1999). *Color Art*. Beijing: World Book Publishing Company, 18.

signifies Karol's release from the past and his hope for the future. After experiencing revenge and self-destruction, Karol finally finds inner peace, lets go of the past, and begins to re-evaluate his relationship with his wife. In this section, white becomes a symbol of Karol's inner redemption and rebirth. At the end of *White*, a white sheet of paper appears, representing a letter Karol writes to his wife. This letter not only expresses Karol's apology and remorse but also symbolizes a new beginning in their relationship, where both find redemption. The theme of the film is "equality," and white symbolizes equality. However, we see that in the pursuit of equality, people often unconsciously lose the most basic sense of equality. The pacing of *White* is relatively light-hearted, with an element of black humor, which prevents the audience from focusing too much on its use of color. Kieslowski once said, "I don't think anyone really wants equality; everyone wants to be 'more equal.' There's a saying in Poland: some people are equal, but some are more equal." Love is conditional, and equality is conditional, just like the white in the film. The so-called equality is a dynamic balance presented through the push and pull between both sides.

### 3. Red of Universal Love: Deepening the Color and Symbolizing the Meaning

The movie *Red* is the final installment of the trilogy, with the theme of the symbolic meaning of the red French flag — universal love. But the red in *Red* questions the existence and continuation of universal love. The film tells the story of the protagonist who strives to love, but is hurt by love, using red clues. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the film, which is divided into three parts: interpretation, imagery, and sublimation. It respectively elaborates on the symbolic significance of red in the film, the emotions and thoughts conveyed by red, and the sublimation role of red in the film.

#### (1) Interpretation

In the film *Red*, the color red serves as a primary element throughout, elucidating the film's underlying themes. Red carries multiple symbolic meanings within the movie, the most prominent being the representation of fraternity and redemption.

First, red in the film symbolizes fraternity. The red in *Red* is so exaggerated and eye-catching

that it is used continuously from the first shot. The extensive use of red elements throughout the scenes highlights the importance of fraternity. For example, when Valentine helps an abused elderly woman, many red elements appear in the frame, such as a red coat and a red carpet, hinting at Valentine's spirit of fraternity. Second, red symbolizes redemption. In the final scene, the ferry capsizes due to strong winds, and the people rescued are the main characters from the "The Blue, White, and Red Trilogy." It is at this moment that the director reveals the underlying theme: only fraternity can save those in distress, and only fraternity can bring true freedom and equality to those facing bondage and inequality, offering redemption and hope. In *Blue*, the protagonist's inner healing is achieved by bestowing love upon others, gaining freedom in return. In *White*, the protagonist's pursuit of spiritual equality is realized by forgiving his wife through Universal love achieving equality. In *Red*, Auguste decides to leave for England to escape his suffering, and Valentine resolves to find Michel. Ultimately, they survive due to fraternity. Fraternity is what Kieslowski aims to promote; only fraternity can bring true freedom and equality.

#### (2) Imagery

The color palette of the film *Red* is filled with red imagery, which can sometimes be seen directly, sometimes only briefly, and at other times subtly. The director continually analyzes and interprets the various layers of meaning within the red elements in the film. If we limit the interpretation to just "Universal love" the connotation might seem too simplistic and not rich enough. According to the director, while fraternity is primarily symbolized by red, the color red cannot encompass all its meanings.

Red represents loneliness. Although the theme of the film *Red* is Universal love the strongest and most primal feeling it conveys is not fraternity but loneliness. "My only virtue is that I am pessimistic," Kieslowski described his character. In the film, you will find that all the characters are lonely; all the main characters have a dog, whether it's the eavesdropping old judge, the suspected female protagonist, or the betrayed young judge. The film uses the imagery of lonely red colors to express the theme of fraternity. Moreover, red itself represents passion. In *Red*, when the protagonist is shooting an advertisement, she stands in front of a bright red background, with her expressions

and body language being very dynamic—playful at times, sorrowful at others, and occasionally deep and heartfelt. Through the perspective of the protagonist, Valentine, Kieslowski conveys the genuine inner state of contemporary young people to the audience without reservation—full of enthusiasm for life, passion for living, and anticipation and hope for the future, mixed with confusion and unease. Finally, red also represents danger. In *Red*, red as a symbol of danger appears twice. The first instance is when the camera is dominated by the red taillights of a car, after which Valentine hits a small dog. The second instance is during sunset, with a red staircase, followed by the news of the ferry capsizing.

### (3) Sublimation

Color itself does not possess any inherent meaning; it is merely an objective existence.<sup>1</sup> Once the director integrates it into the film, transforming it into a subjective presence, color is no longer one-dimensional and can play a significant role. In *Red*, the director consistently maintains red as the dominant color. By harmonizing it with other colors, the film's overall emotional expression is sublimated.

In the film *Red*, the color red serves as an important element, not only rich in symbolic meaning but also elevating the film. The depth of the audience's understanding of *Red* depends on how many red elements they capture. The red elements, intentionally emphasized as the primary color in the film, mostly appear at the center of the frame. Examples include red signs, red taillights, a red Jeep, a red sweater, and the advertisement she shoots. Although these red elements are limited in number, they repeatedly appear throughout the film, constantly interacting with other colors and emphasizing the underlying thematic imagery. In the film, red, although not the primary color tone, is very striking, visually contrasting with the cold gray tones of the autumn and winter seasons. The combination of red and other color tones creates an atmosphere of mystery and a sense of fate, while also drawing the audience into a deeper exploration of the film's themes, leading to a contemplation of human destiny. In *Red*, red as an important expressive element is analyzed through the aspects of interpretation, imagery, and sublimation, revealing the film's rich

emotions and themes. Red symbolizes not only love but also humanity and hope, further elevating the themes of freedom and equality presented in *Blue* and *White*.

### 4. Conclusion

Color, as an element of cinematic art and cinematography, forms a comprehensive and unique language system. The use of color in the "The Blue, White, and Red Trilogy" is not only a unique and beautiful form but also a deeper expression of a spiritual state, acting as a symbol and a metaphor. It establishes a mysterious connection between the inner spiritual world and the entire external world, fully exposing the inner self. Kieslowski does not use color merely for direct symbolism; instead, he organically integrates the characters' inner psychology with color. Thus, color gains meaning and becomes "emotion with significance."

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<sup>1</sup> Liang Ming, Li Li. (2008). *Film Color Studies*. Beijing: Peking University Press, p. 68.