

**EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTIONS
THROUGH THE COLOUR BLUE:
ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *SOLARIS* AND
ANDREI ZVYAGINTSEV'S *THE RETURN***

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Abstract: Russians are a very particular kind in cinematography. The way they express themselves will never resemble the West and it has a lot to do with visual choices. The way our souls perceive their work will always be related to the way our eyes register colours and textures, and those colours will be a second character to the story. There are many studies that believe that colours and emotions are directly linked, yet we need to face the fact that many of these correlations happen due to the hundreds of years of associations between a certain colour and a certain emotion. However uncertain this link may be, what remains a fact is that Russian and former USSR countries give birth to an expressionism of colour in their movies that is undisputable. In fact, in their films in many ways storytelling is so related to colours that sometimes we forget that other methods exist, and we let ourselves completely submerged in their *Blue*.

Keywords: colour blue, anguish, emotion, cross-cultural study, storytelling, soviet cinematography.

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Introduction

In these troubled times we are experiencing at the moment³ it is very difficult for one to admit out loud that one is a fan of Russian cinematography, or of Russian literature, or of Russian ice-skating, for that matter. In these troubled times it is easier to support any other cinematography. However, it is their cinematography that embodies the sense of loss and tragic more than anything or anyone else. I will never forget reading Chekov for the first time, just as I will never forget seeing *The Last Station*, an English-German production depicting the last days of Tolstoy's life. Even though it is an English-language film, which might seem a blasphemy in itself, the film splendidly captures that very Russian tragic sense that I mentioned before. There is no greater anguish expressed in literature or cinema than the Russian seem to evoke, and it is accomplished visually with the help of colours.

What does blue mean for each of us, and more specifically for the two Andrei: Tarkovsky and Zvyagintsev? What separates blue from all the other

³ At the time of writing this article, there is an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

colours and why does it seem to be such a favourite of filmmakers? Is it the strictly a physics/chemistry issue or is it more a psychological one? Does blue's appeal find its roots in the wiring of our brains or in the ventricles of our souls? This article sets itself on the path of trying to answer a few (or all) of those questions and to bring an update on the subject colour-emotion. In this endeavour I have chosen two Russian films to analyse and to dissect visually in the hope that they will help answer those initial questions.

Cinema in particular is an extraordinary piece of human creation that combines arts, architecture, chemistry, physics, literature and music, and it succeed to do more than printed art since it appeals to more of our senses. An image that is moving is a completely different, life-changing visual experience than a static one. Maya civilization thought that blue had healing powers and was the colour of the divine entity, Christians picture heaven in white and blue, Orthodox believe that blue can be a safe guard against the devil. Representations of blue in printed art has always been quite explicit. When it comes to representations of blue in cinema, things become a tad more tangled. A blue moving image will have an accelerated effect as opposed to the static one, an effect guided and orchestrated by the perfect manipulator of emotions: the film director.

It was one of Tarkovsky's wishes that some of the film's scenes, particularly the black and white ones, be colourized in blue, once it was technologically possible. It was done so when the movie was released on Blu-ray (such a wonderful little coincidence there between the media format and the colour). *Solaris* (1972) is a film presenting the story of an astronaut sent to analyse why there are bizarre manifestations on the space station meant to orbit the homonym planet. There is a fine line with which Andrei Tarkovsky plays, the one between hallucinations and actual memories, along with the meaning of memory itself. The past and the visions of the main character, Kris Kelvin, are pictured in hues of blue, making it impossible for both the viewer and the characters to distinguish between the two. Gradually, hallucinations of his dead wife become Kelvin's new reality, melting the concept of visions into the one of reality by switching constantly between colour and black and white.

Andrei Zvyagintsev, on the other hand, has a more palpable approach to colour in his film *The Return* (2003). He presents the story of two young boys reunited with their father, who has been absent for the last 12 years. The three of them embark in a journey under the pretext of fishing to help bond, but shortly realize that there is little to do to bind the wounds of him leaving in the first place.

There is a considerable amount of uncertainty here too, just as there is in *Solaris*. And just as Tarkovsky keeps both the viewer and the character in the dark, so does Zvyagintsev, who doesn't want to share what the father's intentions are or how the boys are feeling regarding his sudden return. Zvyagintsev surrounds them with water, during mostly cloudy days, in some scenes even bringing more water to the screen with rain. There are a lot of elements that the viewer needs to decode and interpret in their own way, but what seems relatively clear is that this story is about more the relationship between the two brothers and how they need to decide what type of person they wish to grow into, rather than the paternal relationship. Their father appears in their lives to fast forward their evolution as humans, not to mend broken family ties. The boys' father has the same purpose as Kelvin's wife, a catalyst for Kelvin, and Andrei and Ivan respectively.

Methodology

For this research construct I have used analysis of texts from the field of psychology, sociology, art history and neuroscience. In addition, I have performed an analysis on the two works, processing framing, composition, and chromatic attributes. The result was structured in this article, along with a personal view on the psychological theory that links colours to emotions.

Discussion

We need to establish from the very beginning that there are multiple theories on this link between emotion and colour. Some studies claim that there is an irrefutable energy that a colour has and that imprints in our emotional being. In this sense, it seems that shades of blue, purple, green bring a sense of calm and relaxation, whereas orange and red put the brain in gear mode and start the engines of fight response. Furthermore, Dr. Melissa Hughes states:

Results from a 2009 study conducted by Ravi Mehta and Rui Zhu at the University of British Columbia confirmed the impact of red and blue on brain function. They found that if the task required vigilant attention such as memorization or comprehension, red is more effective. However, if the task requires creativity and imagination, the color blue opens neural pathways and enhances those cognitive processes. Color psychologists maintain that orange stimulates critical thinking and pink has a calming influence and reduces heart rate. Some teachers have experimented with this by covering students' desks with orange and pink paper during exams. (Hughes, 2017)

Out of the blue, green with envy, grey area, green thumb, black sheep, to paint the town red, feeling blue, to see red, they are all idioms in the English language that are already norm for expressing a certain emotion or feature. Not only are colours handier and more effective for people to express their affective spectrum, but they are also weapons used by various industries, from marketing and cinema. Most pharmaceutical companies adopt a blue or green logo to push us to forget the chemical component and make us think of nature and health, most food chains use red because it is supposed to encourage appetite, most anti-aging products will use a shade of purple because it is supposed to be linked to royalty, beauty and respect, most products that are partly poisonous have yellow or orange somewhere in their label to show caution. But just as marketing appeals primarily to the buyer as a being who has very little to say in the decision-making process, the film industry appeals through colours to a different demographic. A film will not only use (or even abuse) colours as means of conveying emotions, but they will twist and turn them, they will change the paradigm and turn the viewer's world upside down. Yes, it is true that our brains tend to make automatic connections between blue and sad, between yellow and happy, red and mad, but there is a lot more than meets the eye. Despite the fact that blue has always been seen and portrayed as a 'cold' colour in visual arts, it is most recently believed that this was a misconception. Blue seems to be, according to some studies, the warmest colour, a bold statement backed-up by the example of fire, in which we do not see shades of red, but of blue. Blue is linked in numerous occasions with positive emotions in various countries around the globe and is the preferred colour for an impressive percentage of the population.

In such cases, visual colour perception may play a more important role than language. These associations might be rooted in repeated perceptual associations between a colour and an emotional situation, such as feeling joyful when the sun is shining or feeling good when looking at clear blue water. (Jonaskaite et al., 2020)

And it is precisely this new view on colour symbolism that nurtures the efforts of both directors chosen for this article, for this is particularly what they both did: play with old perceptions of the colour blue. Blue is for both Tarkovsky and Zvyagintsev means to express anguish and relief, pain and freedom. Furthermore, the majestic feature of both films is how they make use, how they manipulate the colour to best fit their story.

Blue is probably the most common colour in nature as a whole. After all, the Earth is called the Blue Planet. However, there is very little blue found as a

pigment on Earth. Despite the fact that we see it in enormous quantities in oceans, seas and sky, blue is one of the rarest of natural colours, one of the forms of blue found in nature being the mineral lapis lazuli, a deep-blue rock that is very cherished and very rare. The rareness of blue in nature depends on two factors: one regards the way we see colours and the other one the structure of things and beings on Earth. The first one will refer to the physics behind the perception of colour:

Light's formal name is electromagnetic radiation. All light shares three properties. It can travel through a vacuum. It always moves at a constant speed, known as the speed of light, which is 300,000,000 meters (186,000 miles) per second in a vacuum. And the wavelength defines the type or color of light. Humans have evolved to sense a small part of the light spectrum. We know these wavelengths as "visible" light. Our eyes contain cells known as rods and cones. Pigments in those cells can interact with certain wavelengths (or photons) of light. When this happens, they create signals that travel to the brain. The brain interprets the signals from different wavelengths (or photons) as different colors. The longest visible wavelengths are around 700 nanometres and appear red. The range of visible light ends around 400 nanometres. Those wavelengths appear violet. (Look, 2020).

Blue is at around 450 nanometres.

The other factor that makes blue so incredibly rare is the composition of matter on Earth. Bright colours in nature can mean either 'don't eat me' or 'look at me, I'm so good-looking'. One example is the poison dart frog, which has an extremely colourful body to alert other animals that it is useless to attack it or to eat it, given their high toxicity. Another example is the peafowl, especially the Asian one, a bird possessing an extravagant train of feathers that is used to court and attract the females of the species. In both cases, we could see the bright colours as a form of advertising, and it is fair to say that nature uses colours to draw attention to something and to communicate with other members of their ecosystem, which is what film directors often do. In our particular case, Zvyagintsev uses colour to accentuate the deep angst and sadness and to infuse us into a sense of mistrust and uneasiness. He, along with his cinematographer, Mikhail Kritchman, work hard not to allow us any moment of comfort or hope for a happy ending. They both struggle to find all shades of blue to make us *feel blue*, to make us wonder if/when the father will disappear again, if/when the boat will float away, if/when the real fight between the three male characters will begin. Tarkovsky, on the other hand, uses blue to transport us to the imaginary, in his

case being the colour used primarily for memories and fantasies. However, Tarkovsky does not have a simple map for deciphering colour-schemes and colour-palettes, his use of colours is not conventional and ordinary, but he is *true-blue*⁴ to making use of colours as a mean of storytelling.

While Stanley Kubrick in *2001: Space Odyssey* found his outer space aesthetics in bright colours, fluid interior design, Andrei Tarkovsky imagined for *Solaris* a different side, one made of cold and stark colours. Space is for Tarkovsky the opportunity to shift us through different colour conventions, always messing with the perception he imprinted before: the aircraft is presented in the colour palette of steel, but he inserts yellowish glows in the frame, deep red frames for the windows of the ship to contrast, permanently forcing the viewers to ask themselves which is the primary colour scheme of a certain scene. In *Solaris*, as opposed to *The Return*, we see Tarkovsky playing with the shades of blue and red. We can never say for sure that blue is in *Solaris* a visual manifestation of sadness and anxiety, because he switches so suddenly between red representing life to red representing danger. In one scene we see red to bring a bit of life to the stale steel ship, in another we see the Ocean of Solaris coloured in different shades of red and orange, not knowing what consistency, what temperature it is, whether it's as liquid as the Earth's ocean. In the Ocean of *Solaris*, we see uncertainty when we see red, in *The Return's* Sea we see uncertainty where we see the clear blue.

There are so many theories and opinions nowadays on the subject of family that we barely have time to read them all. There is the debate nature vs. nurture, which speaks of whether what makes a human being is the genetic luggage they come with or they are the product of their home and upbringing, there is conflict theory, which states that conflict is a normal part of life (inside a family or society), there is father complex, and many more. If there is one thing that is certain is the fact that dysfunctional families and troubled family ties make for an amazing raw material for films. And in this aspect, the Russians excel. Andrei Zvyagintsev's *The Return* is such an example. This film deals with the very delicate, yet somehow worn notion of the broken family, along with the subject of defective fatherhood. Zvyagintsev colorizes his entire film in perfect hues of blue, and if the entire tint wasn't enough, he adds insult to injury by placing a lot of the film near water. His entire film is as if we were shrouded in a wet cold blue wool blanket. As opposed, for example, to Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*,

⁴ True-blue is an American expression to mean that someone is loyal, committed

where the dysfunctionalities between father and sons are marked by hues of sienna and ochre and oranges, *The Return* is scarred with this blue, overwhelming shade that remains with the viewer well after the viewing. The two sons in *The Return* are, on the one hand, asking themselves how long their estranged father will remain around, and on the other hand resenting him for leaving in the first place. In fact, the blue in which Zvyagintsev dresses the movie is also a representation of how fluid the relationships between the three male characters are. Just as water, they flow, they clash and they stand still, they are not linear. What seems to surround both filmmakers analysed in this article is the ambiguity, the stubbornness to push the viewer to make all the assumptions, all the conclusions, all the deliberations by themselves. This is once again stated clearly by Andrei Zvyagintsev during an interview in 2004:

I'm afraid there is no clue. You either perceive it or not. There are things which are without answers, and there is nobody who can explain them. Either we feel them and sense them, or not. Sometimes we just give up and carry on. That's normal. I can't do much to help the members of the audience who don't understand certain things in the film. It would be like telling another person what that person is already seeing by himself. Art is not some sort of guideline for understanding. It's a thing unto itself. The most important thing for me is the image, not the thought. (in Abeel, 2004)

And perhaps as an extra tragic sense to the story comes the behind-the-scenes event of Vladimir Garin (the boy who played Andrei) drowning, not long after the film was shot. I would say this is simply so typically tragic for the Russians that I sometimes wonder if there is not something in the water there. The manner in which they speak their language, they eat bread, they love without a textbook, they live their pain and anguish, the manner in which they slam the glass on the table, they cover you in a blanket near the stove or sit in silence, all this makes their cinematography one to adore and yearn for.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to find the reasons why our brains respond the way they do to the visual stimuli of the colour blue and to find a possible link between anguish and blue. After having analysed the two films in question and studies on the neuroscience of colours, I can state that blue is an expression of anguish only if the filmmaker decides it so. This study has observed the fact that, when it comes to cinematography, unlike pure psychology, there is a more

powerful link between colours and emotions due to decades (or even centuries) of associations and conventions. There is a less strong connection between blue and sadness in cinematography (and visual arts in general) due to the fantastic feature of filmmakers to manipulate the viewer's emotions and previous chromatic memories. There is no direct link between blue and anguish for example, but there is a powerful story that can maneuver blue into expressing what it needs.

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