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*Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the
1930s (review)*

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Beyond this, the concepts that Auerbach presents throughout this work plant a useful seed that incites the reader—film historian or archivist, scholar of American or Performance studies—to reexamine the role of the body in contemporary media and take into account the surprising similarities and critical differences that might be found. *Body Shots* makes an exceptional contribution to current debates by doing more than simply drawing on previous theories, but opening up another dialogue on early cinema and the scholarship that surrounds it.

Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s

BY SCOTT HIGGINS

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS, 2007

Zack Lischer-Katz

For the first time in the history of the moving image, the full spectrum of visible light could be effectively reproduced. While earlier photographic systems of color reproduction had some

success projecting “natural” colors (Kinemacolor in 1908, as well as the various two-color Technicolor processes between 1917 and 1932, to name a few), these were only able to reproduce a limited range of the color spectrum, and technical problems often discouraged industry adoption. Successfully demonstrated in 1932 in Disney’s animated short, *Flowers and Trees*, the three-strip Technicolor process was a milestone in cinematic color. However, as Scott Higgins points out in his new book, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s*, the deployment of three-strip Technicolor within the context of the feature-length Hollywood narrative film had to overcome a complex array of technological, economic, and aesthetic concerns before it could be widely adopted. Higgins suggests that, at its inception, the three-strip process felt the tension between the need to show off its new found chromatic ebullience, allowing producers to rationalize the high cost of the new process, and the need to harmonize color with the existing structural elements of the classical Hollywood form, thereby ensuring critical and popular success.

Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow offers a bold examination of the concerns of early three-strip color designers, directors, and producers through a careful analysis of industrial discourse, scientific development, and the films themselves. In this sense, there is something for both the archivist interested in the history behind Technicolor technique, perhaps hoping to gain some insight into how the colors in a restoration project are “supposed to look,” as well as the film scholar interested in the economic, technological, and aesthetic imperatives shaping Technicolor color design in the 1930s. While the lack of color in many of the illustrations can cast a pall over the writing, the thirty-three color plates in the middle of the book are adequate for driving across many of the author’s points. It is also encouraging to find an appendix devoted to the problems associated with projecting old Technicolor prints, color balanced for carbon arc projectors, on cooler xenon arc projectors. A considerable degree of care is taken to discuss the types of prints referenced and the color temperature of the viewing illumination used for each print.

Prior to beginning his analysis of these early Technicolor films, Higgins lays out the

rudiments of color theory. He covers enough color terminology—explaining how color can be described using “hue, value, and chroma” analysis, how various theories of color harmony have shaped the use of color in art, and how color is represented using a color wheel—to outfit the average reader with enough basic color concepts to understand the analysis employed throughout the book. This is not to say that the analysis tends toward the technical, but the book does use terms like “value” to describe color, making this primer indispensable for ensuring that every reader is prepared. In this regard, *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* shows much more precision in describing color than many other works on the subject of color in film.

Throughout the book, Higgins uses a standardized color vocabulary and references each color term to a specific Pantone color code. While the book includes an index of Pantone color codes as an appendix, color samples are not included. This may be intentional, as he explains in the introduction that, “printed inks are more limited than even video in the range of hues that they can reproduce, and the gamut of color in a Technicolor film would certainly overwhelm the list of Pantone standards” (14). Using Pantone names as a reference point for color analysis appears to be an imperfect solution, but the adoption of a color vocabulary, no matter how limited, seems to allow for more precision in analyzing color design in film.

In the midst of this brief color primer, Higgins begins to chart the discourse surrounding the implementation of three-strip Technicolor by examining a variety of primary sources. These range from the lectures and technical notes by Technicolor technicians and designers, like the pamphlet “Color Consciousness” by Technicolor’s head Color Consultant, Natalie Kalmus, as well as memos from producers and reviews from trade publications, such as *Variety*. The diverse array of primary material, in conjunction with a clear and concise introduction to the basics of color theory, helps to develop the key issues in the debate surrounding the three-strip Technicolor process in the 1930s.

Beginning with a quick explanation of the three-strip color process—featuring a diagram

of the three-strip Technicolor camera, the only technical drawing in the book—chapter 2, “Forging a New Aesthetic: From Opera to Color Consciousness” charts the tension between “full-color” three-strip Technicolor and monochromatic filmmaking techniques through a close analysis of color design in a selection of early three-strip films released between 1934 and 1939. Higgins lays out four modes of color design in this era, with each mode offering a solution to the problem of integrating color into the classical Hollywood narrative. These modes of design are roughly defined as a process of sequential development starting with the *demonstration mode* (e.g. *La Cucaracha* in 1934), moving to the *restrained mode* (e.g. *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* in 1936), then to the *assertive mode* (e.g. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* in 1938), and finally, to the *fully integrated mode* of color design (e.g. *Gone with the Wind* in 1939). The analysis stays away from the genres of animation and fantasy (e.g. *The Wizard of Oz*, also released in 1939), and focuses on films that better demonstrate the problem of wedding color to the classical Hollywood form. A close analysis of *The Goldwyn Follies* (Marshall, 1938) is somewhat puzzling at first, but Higgins utilizes this musical, with its subdued hues and chromatic harmonization, as a telling example of the *restrained mode*, showing an example of worried producers toning down chromatic intensity and variety, even in a genre known for its opulent design.

In chapter 3, “A Feature Length Demonstration: *Becky Sharp*,” Higgins provides an in-depth analysis of the Duchess of Richmond’s Ball scene in *Becky Sharp* (Mamoulian, 1935), a feature-length film that operates in the *demonstration mode*. This mode is concerned with foregrounding color at all costs, through contrasting monochromatic figures with scenes overflowing in a wide variety of saturated hues. For example, Higgins describes how an almost black and white shot of Napoleon’s silhouette against a gray wall dissolves into a garish display:

Officers in their Fiery Red coats and gentlemen in black tuxedos dance with women in gowns of deep saturated Meadow Green; lighter Tarragon Green; bright Flame Scarlet; somewhat deeper Chinese Red;

Radiant Yellow orange; deep, almost purple, Olympian Blue; lighter, less saturated Cobalt Blue; white; and Turtledove silver. (67)

This listing of opulent on-screen colors is followed by a description of how color foregrounding continues throughout the scene, becoming increasingly distracting to the viewer as the colorful dancers in the background guide the eye away from the significant dramatic scenes unfolding in the foreground. This section of the book makes it clear that a rich color vocabulary is indispensable for describing early three-strip Technicolor productions.

In chapter 4, "Unobtrusive Design: Introducing Three-Color to Conventional Production," Higgins examines the movement away from the *demonstration mode* to a *restrained mode* of color design, claiming that this movement may have been fueled by *Becky Sharp*'s poor reviews and lackluster box-office receipts. *The Goldwyn Follies* (Marshall, 1938), *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (Hathaway, 1936), and *A Star is Born* are used as examples of films of this era that attempt to "subdue" color by utilizing very tightly orchestrated arrangements of color that restrict the variety of hues and levels of saturation. Higgins describes this time period as one of "cautious experimentation," noting that momentary lapses into the *demonstration mode*, like the "California, Here I Come" montage sequence in *A Star is Born*, are still acceptable. For the most part, he claims that filmmakers in this time period relied on "Aesthetics of Restraint," limiting the palette of hues, and relying instead on textures and highlights to create visual interest.

Throughout *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow*, technical history melds with aesthetic analysis to simultaneously chart the rhetoric behind the implementation of the three-strip technology and the state of the technology itself. For example, the analysis of statements by Technicolor technicians and spokespeople, often times amounting to little more than industry propaganda, suggests that a major concern of the Technicolor office was to promote the dynamic range of three-strip process as on par with black and white filmmaking. Higgins provides a thoughtful example of how Technicolor worked to situate the three-strip process along-

side black and white, particularly in regard to low-key effects, shadow detail, and facial modeling. In comparing the shadow-drenched shots of the suicide scene in *A Star is Born*, with the famous low-key shot of Scarlett's vow at the end of *Gone with the Wind*'s first act, Higgins shows how, from 1937 to 1939, a rapid development in the ability of the three-strip process to render shadow detail is evident. Whereas the shadow detail in *A Star is Born* disappears into inky black pools, just two years later, faster film stock and more efficient filters allow *Gone With the Wind* to render Scarlett's facial details even as she is silhouetted against the sky.

The in-depth analysis of *Gone with the Wind*, in chapter 7, suggests that the successful emulation of monochromatic lighting techniques in some of the film's key scenes occurs at the very edge of the three-strip process's capabilities. It seems that David O. Selznick's forceful influence on the many directors and cinematographers he hired and fired during the production of this film was only matched by the demands he made of the Technicolor organization. Here, Higgins provides an interesting analysis of how Selznick's demands for low-key detail left Technicolor technicians no choice but to pour considerable time and effort into working with negatives that did not conform to their laboratory standards. Through a close examination of memos from Selznick, it becomes clear that the producer and his company were pushing back against the prescriptions of Technicolor's contractually requisite "Color Consultants," while attempting to drive technological development from the film lot, rather than from the lab.

Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow successfully weaves together close textual analysis and industrial-technological history. The final chapter, "Beyond the 1930s: The Legacies of Three-Color Aesthetics," could certainly be extended. This chapter begins to compare the current trend of digital color management in film to the lessons of three-strip Technicolor's early years, but it only skims the surface. While a brief analysis of recent films like *Pleasantville*, in which digital color manipulation is foregrounded in a manner similar to the *demonstration mode*, and *The Aviator*, in which the color gamut of three-strip Technicolor is artistically "emulated," there is still much room

for further research on this topic. In addition, while the textual analysis in this book is thoughtful and precise, and is integral to supporting the author's model of early three-strip Technicolor color design, the passages that examine the internal memos and other documents that circulate within the production companies and Technicolor labs during this time are particularly interesting from a restoration point of view. One hopes that future color restorations of classic three-strip Technicolor productions would take into account such materials. Understanding the "look" of a Technicolor film resides not merely in examining the filmmaker's intent, but also, as *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* demonstrates, in considering the color philosophies at play in the industry and the technological constraints of the color process itself.

Films

Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY FLICKER ALLEY, 2007

Hideaki Fujiki

From 1914 through 1926, Rudolph Valentino became an eminent star whose image created fanaticism and sensationalism in America and beyond. Female fans' fervent devotion to him

was an extraordinary social phenomenon as many male critics openly placed on him "the stigma of effeminacy."¹ Yet, his screen persona was not forged overnight nor was it monolithic and unequivocal. Providing digital reconstructions of four silent films accompanied by newly arranged music scores, plus a variety of bonus features, *Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film* is an exceptional opportunity to explore how the attractive and sensational images of him onscreen were represented and transformed.

This DVD collection consists of two discs: one contains *The Young Rajah* (1922), *Stolen Moments* (1920), and *A Society Sensation* (1918), and the other *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1922). Each film is supplemented with a slideshow of promotional materials and still photographs. Besides these, there are a variety of supplements, which are both entertaining and informative. The supplements on Disc One are saturated with visual and audio materials, including documentary films on Valentino's funeral and on the activities of his fan clubs, recorded songs related to his films, and an interview with fans. Disc Two offers two types of supplements: "Landmarks" and "Who's Who in Hollywood." The former displays a map marked with four locations where Valentino lived and worked, including the Famous Players-Lasky Studios. We are guided through each location with ample stills, clips, and written text. The "Who's Who" section furnishes biographies of Valentino and other twenty people associated with him (including Jean Acker and Natacha Rambova, his first and second wives) as well as many actors, directors, and scriptwriters who worked on the four films presented here. Liner notes by Emily W. Leider, author of *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino*, provide synopses on the four films, production background, as well as a profile of his career—all of which are valuable resources about Valentino and Hollywood at that time.

These four films chart significant moments in Valentino's career. Born in southern Italy in 1895, he immigrated to New York in 1913. Moving from one low-wage job to another, including as a tango dancer, Valentino made his screen debut as an extra in the 1914 Vitagraph film, *My Official Wife*.² Appearing in more than thirty-six films