Original Paper

Color Disappearance: Medial Storytelling and Signification in Chinese Realist Film

Zimu Zhang[1]

[1] Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract

The present article focuses on Chinese realist cinema produced between 2014 and 2025 to examine the functions of color in film narrative and meaning making in the digital media era. Whilst the aesthetic dimension of color has been the focus of much existing scholarship, its potential as an independent narrative system has received insufficient attention. Adopting a media-narrative perspective and drawing upon literature review and case study methodologies, this study investigates how color—through the coding of cool and warm tones, the construction of metaphorical symbols, and the application of digital technologies—facilitates emotional resonance and thematic depth in the film. The findings demonstrate that, within the context of Chinese realist cinema, using grey-yellow palettes to depict grassroots adversity and high-saturation reds to symbolize conflict serves to underscore the narrative function of color as a cultural code. This approach perpetuates indigenous aesthetic traditions and expands the dimensions of realist expression. The study posits that color and realist cinema form a symbiotic relationship; rather than diminishing its narrative capabilities, digital technology has further amplified the expressive potential of color.

Keywords

Chinese realist cinema, color narrative, emotion, technological ethics, metaphor

Introduction

The fundamental principle of realist cinema is grounding its narratives in objectively existing facts. These films employ authenticity and the emotional resonance of the audience to amplify the impact of narrative expression. The image shaping of the film characters, particularly the depiction of emotional color, is pivotal in this process. As Vittorio Storaro has observed, "color is part of the language of cinema" (Franklin, 2017). This is reflected in the significant role that color plays in film's emotional narrative and characterization. From this standpoint, the literal expression of color and its metaphorical

use become significant avenues for the audience to engage with and accept the aesthetic. Concurrently, Eisenstein emphasized that color amplifies emotion, facilitating a more comprehensive depiction of characters' images and emotions within the narrative framework (Tikka, 2004). Indeed, the film under scrutiny has already incorporated a variety of character emotions in the creative process, integrating the director's and screenwriter's comprehension of the actual events of the narrative. This underscores the notion that the creation of realistic movie themes is not solely contingent on the authenticity of the narrative events but also on the aesthetics of the movie narrative production and the audience's multifaceted appreciation, which engenders a novel narrative effect.

Nevertheless, the emotional expression of color in cinematic narrative has long been debated. André Bazin, a seminal figure in the field of film theory, famously asserted that "cinema is an asymptote to reality" (Bazin, 2004), thereby underscoring the notion that realist films should be grounded in a "return to reality" and placing a premium on authenticity. Within this theoretical framework, the utilization of color is frequently regarded as a secondary aspect, with the fundamental essence of cinema being attributed to narrative techniques that restore reality. However, this standpoint is at odds with the post-structuralist school of thought, which asserts that color has evolved beyond its role as mere representation, becoming an independent system of signification within the cinematic narrative (Baudrillard, 1993). From an objective standpoint, this establishes the autonomy of color in cinema, rendering it a vital tool for directors in shaping emotion. It is noteworthy that, although realist film narratives may be constrained in terms of subject matter, this does not preclude the emotional expression inherent in character construction. Indeed, the multiplicity of character portrayals has been shown to elicit a more effective emotional resonance among audiences. Consequently, the richness of cinematic narrative and the audience's aesthetic reception are not necessarily directly aligned; instead, the expressive use of color and emotion in a film can profoundly captivate viewers and foster emotional identification—indisputably a hallmark of cinematic success.

It is important to note that technological and realistic aesthetics influences the persistence of color. However, this does not negate its role in the film's emotional narrative. Despite the programmability of digital technology rendering the erasure of color technically feasible, it more frequently functions as a novel medium and mode for color expression. As a crucial element of cinematic storytelling, color communicates emotion and theme through visual language. Despite the evolution of technology, color continues to serve as an indispensable medium for emotional expression within the cinematic medium(Thompson & Bordwell, 2002).In complex narrative structures, such as flashbacks and embedded narratives, color is a crucial element in encoding the unfolding of time and bridging emotion through alternating warm and cool tones. Warm hues are frequently employed in memory sequences to reinforce the authenticity and continuity of emotion. At the same time, cool tones are reserved for present-day scenes, highlighting the harshness and alienation of social reality. In realist cinema, color functions as a visual element and a metaphorical tool for deepening thematic concerns (Thompson & Bordwell, 2002). For instance, grey-yellow palettes are often used to depict the existential struggles of

2

the underclass, while highly saturated reds symbolize social conflict and tension. This metaphorical use of color enables cinematic themes to resonate more profoundly through visual language, intensifying the narrative's emotional impact.

Furthermore, the programmability of digital technology has not diminished the expressive power of color; instead, it has introduced new media and modes of engagement. A case in point is the use of dynamic color temperature systems in VR (Virtual Reality) technology to immerse viewers in the emotional shifts experienced by characters(Manovich, 2002). The argument is made that, were color to be entirely stripped from the cinematic narrative, the emotional expressiveness of film would lose its visual foundation, resulting in a diminished narrative depth and a sense of emotional distance for the audience. The conclusion is thus drawn that, in realist cinema, color, and emotional narrative exist in a mutually reinforcing, symbiotic relationship. The removal of color has a detrimental effect on the overall aesthetic structure of the film and the efficacy of its emotional expression. Color is not merely a tool for visual embellishment but an integral component of emotional storytelling; its removal would entail the loss of the film's aesthetic value(Li Rui, 2024). Consequently, as a fundamental element of cinematic language, color has evolved from a conventional visual embellishment into a vital medium for emotional narrative and thematic development. The symbiotic relationship between color and emotion in the realm of film narrative is mutually beneficial, coalescing to form an indispensable facet of the aesthetic presentation of realist cinema.

The present article adopts a close examination of Chinese realist cinema (2010–2024) as its primary object of study, focusing on the multifaceted functions of color within the context of narrative structure. The study explores how the alternation of warm and cool tones, the metaphorical deployment of color symbolism, and the interplay between the real and the virtual act as visual strategies to achieve two objectives: the articulation of emotion and the thematic deepening of the narrative. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative research through a literature review and data analysis to emphasize the mediating role of color in the narrative and emotional expression of Chinese realist film. The article integrates literature-based analysis with statistical data, offering an in-depth discussion of the emotional dimensions of cinematic color. This is achieved by utilizing both quantitative data and case studies to investigate the narrative and semiotic functions of color in Chinese realist cinema. This research aims to elucidate the cultural mediating role of color in this context, thereby providing methodological guidance for the creative practice of Chinese realist filmmakers and fostering innovation and enrichment in cinematic emotional expression.

In essence, color on screen is endowed with the capacity to reproduce natural reality and – more crucially – functions as a conduit for conveying the filmmaker's creative intent (Xu Enyu, 2008). From this perspective, the notions of "color as thought" and "spiritual color" fully underscore the significance of color in cinematic expression. The present study takes Chinese realist cinema as its subject, centering on the core question of whether color can be lost. It discusses the traditional narrative styles characteristic of Chinese realist film. Secondly, it analyses the pivotal role of color within a narrative

3

structure, highlighting how diverse emotional palettes reflect the film's engagement with social phenomena. The article then examines how cinematic narrative, through color and other non-verbal elements such as body language, employs metaphor to resonate with audiences, forging collective understanding and shared values across boundaries. The article concludes by arguing that color, as a medium, is an essential means for realist cinema to articulate emotion and intention and a crucial channel for audience aesthetic reception. It is, therefore, vital for the public to remain attentive to the multiplicity of color's mediating functions and to approach the film's emotional palette with discernment, thereby ensuring that the narrative of realist cinema remains faithful to the authentic expression of emotional color.

1. Narrative Shifts from Tradition to the Present and the Construction of Emotional Authenticity

As a significant genre within cinematic art, Chinese realist cinema has undergone a notable transformation in recent years, with the infusion of scientific and technological advancements and multicultural influences gradually reshaping public modes of perception and fostering a trend toward narrative diversification. At the narrative level, Chinese realist films continue to uphold the traditional principle of representing reality while innovating through flashbacks and embedded narratives to achieve new forms of visual expression. This approach not only preserves the authenticity of emotional expression but also reflects the distinctive characteristics of the contemporary era. As scholars have observed, Chinese narrative cinema has been significantly influenced by the classical literary tradition of "interwoven time and space," with the combination of flashback and embedded narrative being regarded as a "genetic feature of indigenous narrative aesthetics" (Taubman, 2006).

Similarly, contemporary films utilize multi-strand narratives to reconstruct cinematic fiction's temporal and spatial logic while retaining the traditional core of "emotional retrospection" and employing nonlinear structures to intensify social critique. A notable illustration of this is the employment of interwoven temporal structures, a technique that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. This is exemplified by films such as *Hi, Mom* (2021), where the interplay of dual timelines facilitates emotional retrospection and prompts audiences to reflect on social injustice. Comparable narrative strategies can be observed in Caught in the *Web* (2012). This "temporal folding" technique has been shown to preserve dramatic tension while offering a panoramic view of contemporary mediated society. This allows viewers to develop a more profound self-awareness and critical judgment within diverse aesthetic standards. This, in turn, fosters a desire for narrative authenticity. Integrating traditional narrative with modern technology is consistent with Seymour Chatman's "story-discourse" theory (Jarvis, 2023) – the use of classical narrative structures to accommodate new forms of expression. The employment of a modular structure, wherein characters interweave unrelated events, enables these films to transcend the limitations of linear storytelling, thereby affording audiences a multidimensional space for comprehending cinematic imagery and narrative. The combination of flashback and embedded narrative in Chinese realist cinema has been shown to convey the authenticity of emotion to

4

viewers, enhancing the affective power and artistry of the narrative mode. This method holds considerable promise for future application.

It is important to note that, despite lacking "visual foresight," filmmakers have, through narratives focused on ordinary lives, established a collective technical bond, placing greater emphasis on the presupposition of the "implied reader" in the process of aesthetic reception. In recent years, Chinese realist cinema has constructed an aesthetic of grassroots narrative through documentary techniques, with its emotional authenticity grounded in Kracauer's theory of "material restoration of reality". This theory posits that film should restore the social fabric by employing "raw, unprocessed natural material." A paradigmatic example of this theoretical approach is *Dying to Survive* (2018), which was inspired by the real-life experiences of leukemia patient *Lu Yong*. The film employs handheld camerawork and natural Lighting to authentically depict the struggles of those seeking affordable cancer medication. Through the use of close-up shots and narrative shifts, the film elicits a profound sensory experience, allowing viewers to engage with the concept of "embodied empathy" through a technique known as "zero-degree performance." This approach effectively merges the film's virtual narrative with the tangible experiences of the audience. Indeed, the emotional dimension of realist film narrative has always been anchored in the aesthetics of the "public". At the same time, there may be distortions in the process of dissemination, its ultimate aim remains to serve the public. Furthermore, it is evident that the film's narrative context and emotional tenor are also shaped by technological means of production.

In the digital era, audiences' pursuit of cinematic authenticity has gradually evolved into "new documentary aesthetics." A notable illustration of this evolution is the film *Chinese Doctors*（2021）, which utilized 5G technology to transmit real-time ICU footage. This technological advancement enabled the actor portraying the hospital director to synchronize his movements with those of his real-life counterpart, who suffers from ALS-related tremors. In instances where the protective suits appear obscured by condensation, viewers can immerse themselves not only in the frontlines of the pandemic but also, through a sense of "phenomenological reality," to perceive the profound weight of the medical profession(Chen Xiaoyun, 2019). This strategy of emotional construction propelled the film to a Douban rating of 8.9, setting a new benchmark for critical acclaim in the medical drama genre (Ding Yaping, 2024).Furthermore, contemporary filmmaking has facilitated intergenerational dialogue through the establishment of "emotional communities," utilizing dual-coding strategies to initiate subjects such as "*My Childhood Guardian*" on short video platforms, which have amassed over 500 million views. Evidently, the interactive efficacy between "story" and "discourse" in film narrative facilitates a truthful representation of cinematic subject matter and empowers audiences with discursive agency in narrative dissemination. The fusion of narrative effect and meaning-making reinforces the representational potency of cinematic discourse.

In the context of cinematic narrative, the disruption of linear logic has been shown to facilitate the articulation of both the intricacies of social reality and the profundity of historical depth while

concomitantly preserving the authentic expression of emotion. In its pursuit of contemporaneity, this narrative approach has resulted in an increasingly diverse and democratized audience. The employment of visual symbols, with the metaphorical function of color, is pivotal in balancing the "authentic reproduction" of emotional experience and the "artistic signification" within the narrative. This demonstrates that in nonlinear storytelling, visual encoding reconstructs the audience's cognitive framework of reality(Thompson & Bordwell, 2002). The emotional expression of cinematic narrative and the construction of its surrounding environment occur in tandem, with the interplay of color and intentionality generating specific emotional narratives that are communicated to viewers, thereby enabling new interpretations through a pluralistic audience. Indeed, the fragmented nature of flashbacks and embedded structures in film requires active viewer participation in the reconstruction of meaning, with color serving as a visual guide to bridge the logical gaps created by temporal discontinuity. By Kracauer's "material restoration of reality," color should serve the narrative's authenticity rather than merely pursue aesthetic spectacle (Kracauer, 1997) .

In summary, through the symbolic translation of material reality, color strategies construct a visual rhetoric system endowed with the function of ideological reproduction (Dai Jinhua, 2022). In the narrative innovation of realist cinema, this strategy relies not only on the combination of flashback and embedded narrative but also on the use of color as a crucial visual medium to achieve a balance between emotional expression and artistic representation. This balance becomes especially significant in the context of digital technology's intervention in image production. The strategic selection and deployment of color can effectively bridge the logical gaps created by temporal discontinuity while also guiding audiences toward deeper ideological interpretation. In this way, viewers are encouraged to actively reconstruct meaning actively when confronted with fragmented narratives, resulting in multiple story interpretations. Consequently, narrative strategies such as these enhance the film's affective power, enabling a dialectical unity between the authenticity and artistry of emotional color. Moreover, they avoid the pitfalls of formalism and elevate the overall artistic value of Chinese realist cinema. As Deleuze emphasizes, the "structure of textual invocation" establishes channels of embodied perception at points of temporal rupture, both filling logical gaps and reinforcing cognitive engagement within his theory of the "time-image" (Deleuze, 1986).

2. Reconstructing Emotion and Generating Social Mirrors through Narrative Deconstruction

Recent years have seen a departure from the conventional linear narrative structures historically characterized Chinese realist cinema. Instead, there has been an embrace of diverse narrative forms, using narrative contradiction to present characters to the audience and intensify dramatic conflict. This approach serves to underscore the tragic interweaving of fate. For instance, *a Little Red Flower* (2020) employs a parallel universe narrative framework, juxtaposing the real-life struggles of cancer patients with an imagined world. This temporal and spatial dislocation disrupts the conventional pathos of illness narratives, allowing viewers to perceive the intensity of human dignity more viscerally within

6

the fissures between reality and the surreal. A similar narrative strategy is employed in *Lighting Up the Stars* (2022), where intertwining a professional timeline and a familial ethical thread constructs a polyphonic emotional matrix. Indeed, the narrative innovations of contemporary Chinese realist cinema are characterized by a distinctive "emotional topology," in which nonlinear storytelling is no longer confined to formal experimentation but has gradually evolved into a spatiotemporal apparatus for emotional expression.

Furthermore, the structural innovations in Chinese realist cinema are not merely pursuing formal aesthetics but rather intensifying audience immersion through temporal and spatial dislocation – a technique that theorist Christian Metz has termed the "autonomous semantic segment" structure (Metz, 1986). By emphasizing the audience's profound engagement with the text, this approach facilitates a more profound understanding of the complex interplay between characters' inner cognition and social environment. This narrative innovation provides Chinese realist film with a multidimensional authenticity of perspective, elevating its thematic presentation from a singular "event narrative" to a broader "symptom of the times." In terms of concrete narrative models, these films adopt a "polycentric" approach, breaking away from the traditional hero-centered narrative. This narrative shift is indicative of the ethical evolution of contemporary Chinese cinema from "myth-making" to "human-making," wherein nonlinear structures no longer serve epic tales of heroism but instead become incisive tools for the examination of the predicaments of ordinary people. This evolution has the consequence of engendering a plurality of narrative and aesthetic standards whilst concomitantly attracting a more expansive and heterogeneous viewership.

It is evident that, over the past decade, this narrative shift has become particularly pronounced in China's new mainstream cinema. By creating "anti-hero" characters, these films utilize the moral struggles of ordinary individuals to reflect more profound structural contradictions within society, thereby effecting a transformation from "divine worship" to "human resonance." This theoretical shift is supported by Roland Barthes's concept of the "death of the author," which posits that the meaning of a text is constructed through audience participation rather than imposed by the director or any authoritative will (Manghani, 2020). This perspective provides a philosophical foundation for the legitimacy of anti-heroism in cinematic narrative. Moreover, film narratives employ symbolic expression to deconstruct the construction of the "hero," thereby echoing Judith Butler's theory of "body politics," in which vulnerability is used to subvert the gendered symbolism of heroism (Judith Butler, 1993). Within this dual-contradiction narrative framework, films seek to reconstruct the notion of the hero in collective narratives while avoiding the idolization of heroic figures, thereby achieving a narrative balance that affirms the cultural ideal of the "homology between family and nation." In recent years, Chinese realist cinema has increasingly embraced the aesthetic principles of Western film theory while simultaneously responding to local audiences' cultural and aesthetic expectations, thus shaping a distinctive set of indigenous cinematic values. This narrative reconstruction prevents Chinese cinema from falling into the traps of technicism and homogenization and opens up new possibilities for

7

diversifying cinematic expression in China.

In contemporary mainstream Chinese cinema, directors frequently adopt a micro-narrative perspective rooted in the experiences of society's lower strata. They utilize ordinary events from everyday life as a means of shaping character and forging emotional resonance between the audience and the narrative. This approach often prompts reflection on broader social issues. A case in point is *Dying to Survive* (2018), in which the protagonist, *Cheng Yong*, transforms from a profit-driven drug dealer to a figure of self-sacrifice, navigating the ethical dilemma between breaking the law to save lives and upholding legal justice. This narrative exposes the flaws of the medical system. This narrative perspective, grounded in ordinary people's experiences, can evoke profound empathy in viewers. At a thematic level, contemporary film narratives frequently foreground the tension between emotion and legality, using this contradiction as a metaphor for the individual's struggle against institutional structures . This narrative shift has garnered widespread audience recognition and fundamentally addressed the dialectical relationship between collective values and individual experience within China's modernization process, marking a breakthrough in the paradigm of "structural realism." The abandonment of the conventional hero-worshipping trope in favor of exploring emotional connections through fragmented scenes enables cinematic narratives to transcend the superficial layers of conventional hero character construction, resonating directly with Chinese audiences and guiding them towards a profound emotional identification.

On this basis, the innovation of narrative strategies is seen to signal the emergence of a distinctive "structural realism" paradigm in Chinese realist cinema. Specifically, this approach avoids the emotional explicitness often associated with traditional linear narratives and transcends postmodern storytelling's nihilistic pitfalls. Within this process, the fusion of color, narrative, and emotional expression becomes a unique artistic device, positioning color as an emotional compass within the narrative. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of "body-world" interaction suggests that color, as a cultural signifier, not only constitutes a visual dialectic but also transforms emotional predicaments into tangible perceptual experiences through the temperature differentials of color (Merleau-Ponty, 2012a). A notable illustration of this is in *Lighting Up the Stars* (2022), where the juxtaposition of the grey-white tones of the funeral home and the vibrant colors of everyday street life generates narrative tension. This multidimensional deployment of color narrative ensures that the theme of death is no longer an isolated event but rather embedded within the complex tapestry of intergenerational family relations in contemporary China. This cinematic practice, through the topological reorganization of narrative structure, transforms Kracauer's "asymptote to material reality" into an "asymptote to emotional reality" imbued with Eastern characteristics, thereby achieving a dialectical unity between technological spectacle and humanistic concern in the ongoing evolution of China's film industry.

In contrast, contemporary cinematic color practice is challenging the boundaries of traditional aesthetics, leading to the development of a visual methodology grounded in critical realism (Rose, 2001). Contemporary Chinese cinema, too, constructs visual arenas of social contradiction through

8

color coding, employing the cultural symbolism of mirrored images and objects to map a chromatic cognitive landscape. These cultural signs and their specific connotations are metaphors for the film's emotional value, generating visual metonymies of particular social forces within the audience's aesthetic experience. This mode of cultural signification resonates with Foucault's theory of "micro-physics of power" (Foucault, 1995),transforming invisible institutional oppression into perceptible chromatic antagonism and positioning color as a crucial medium for reconstructing realist aesthetics in contemporary film. In this sense, such a practice not only inherits the realist tradition of cinema as "an asymptote to reality" but also achieves a topological deconstruction of social structure through the symbolic system of the color spectrum. This "structural realism" paradigm denotes a transition in Chinese cinema from pursuing technological spectacle to a more philosophically engaged visual politics. This is exemplified by the interplay of warm and cool tones in Dying to Survive, which ultimately dissolves into the chaotic spectrum of urban neon, gesturing towards the dynamic contestation of multiple forces within the reform process. In this regard, cinematic color is no longer merely an aesthetic choice but has become a spiritual barometer for measuring social temperature and collective emotion (Chen Xuguang, 2023) .

In essence, the nonlinear narrative techniques that have emerged in recent years within Chinese realist cinema are explorations of the phenomenology of emotion through film. By disrupting the conventional continuity of physical time and space, directors construct a phenomenological temporality and spatiality grounded in emotional authenticity. As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuzehas observed, the "time-image" of cinema enables the rupture and reassembly of perception, "liberating sensation from linear logic and reaching directly into the topological structure of feeling" (Deleuze, 1986:177). Within this reconstructed spatiotemporal framework, color becomes a repository for emotional memory, mapped into a topological diagram of affective logic, ultimately achieving a dialectical unity between the "asymptote to material reality" and the truth of emotion. Furthermore, integrating color narrative and emotional expression establishes a distinctive artistic idiom within Chinese realist cinema. This idiom functions not solely as a medium for visual exposition but also as a compass for emotion, guiding audiences to identify resonances within intricate social realities (Thompson & Bordwell, 2002). This suggests that, through the reconstruction of time and space and the strategic use of color, the film can probe the phenomenology of emotion while simultaneously offering profound social reflection and humanistic care. This narrative innovation challenges traditional storytelling methods and offers a profound response to contemporary social phenomena. This "structural realism" paradigm indicates that Chinese cinema has achieved a new equilibrium between technology and the humanities, thereby propelling cinematic art's further development and enrichment.

3. Color Metaphor and Virtual Interaction in Constructing Collective Cognition in Realist Film

As a fundamental component of visual art, color possesses the potential to transform abstract social issues into concrete forms through multimodal metaphorical mechanisms (Zhao Haoran, 2024). In

recent years, Chinese realist cinema has developed a distinctive artistic language through color coding, employing the metaphorical qualities of color symbolism to convey cultural references that diverge from those of everyday life. Within specific cinematic images, color manifests in emotionally charged shots encompassing costumes and environments. A notable example is *Dying to Survive* (2018), where the thematic concerns are primarily deepened through environmental color, with a dominant palette of cool tones (blue, grey, and black) intensifying the oppressive atmosphere of realism. A notable example is the scene in which the protagonist, *Cheng Yong*, first enters the community of leukemia patients. The use of grey-blue hues here suggests his alienation as an outsider, while the dim, warm light in the home of the patient, Lü Shouyi, symbolizes the lingering warmth of life.

Furthermore, scholars have noted that the "punctum" - a detail in a photograph, such as an object, gesture, or shaft of light - can pierce through the conventional framework of cultural interpretation (the '*stadium*'), directly wounding the viewer and eliciting a robust emotional response (Jie, 2020) . This suggests that the juxtaposition of oppressive cool tones and hopeful warm tones in film serves to disrupt the audience's numbness towards social issues, with the clash of colors acting as a punctum. This narrative mode is also evident in *Hi, Mom* (2021), where the red walls of the factory compound contrast with the beige uniforms at the green train station, and the gentle interplay of colors softens distinctions of era and identity, creating a utopian sense of familial nostalgia. Of particular note is the emotional pairing of colors, which is meticulously synchronized with the depiction of the film's narrative events. This enables the film to achieve a profound sense of immersion within its historical context. In this manner, the color signifier and its corresponding signification, as cinematic symbols, are transcended, constructing a harmonious visual narrative.

Indeed, the "memory soft-focus" effect created by the application of warm color filters has been shown to simulate what Walter Benjamin identified as the "aura" of traditional art (Benjamin, 1997). The concept of the "aura" refers to the authenticity and irreproducibility of an artwork in a specific time and space. The employment of low-saturation warm tones and hazy lighting effects, akin to soft-focus lenses, enables the cinema to dissolve the temporal and spatial distance between the image and the viewer. This process enables digital-era images to regain a sense of ritualistic "presence." Consequently, the use of color in the narrative enhances the artistic expressiveness of visual storytelling and fulfills a deeper cultural function by facilitating emotional transmission and intergenerational resonance.

In contrast, while reinforcing the texture of reality through color narrative, Chinese realist cinema also deepens emotional expression by employing virtualized cinematic language. This interplay between the real and the virtual continues the traditional realist commitment to authentic depictions of narrative situations. It leverages technological empowerment to transcend the limitations of a purely documentary mode, ultimately constructing a more compelling "artistic authenticity" through the fusion of reality and imagination. For instance, spectators cannot only perceive the tangible textures of real life but also experience an elevation of emotion through the dynamic interplay of light and color, resulting in an aesthetic characterized by the symbiotic integration of narrative and setting. Meanwhile,

10

Dziga Vertov's "kino-eye" theory, which advocates for the authenticity of filmed content—capturing "life as it is" through systematic recording—and emphasizes the importance of montage in reconstructing reality (Lee, 2020), finds a parallel in Chinese realist cinema, where it has inspired a diversity of narrative strategies. A notable example is the juxtaposition of impoverished scenes rendered in cool tones with hope illuminated by warm light in *Never Say Never* (2018). This employs the contrast between virtual and real in cinematic language to reframe the dialectical relationship between "reality and ideal" characteristic of new realism. Contemporary Chinese realist cinema has been shown to construct artistic authenticity through the dialectic of reality and virtuality, thus breaking free from the singular model of the traditional "social problem film." Instead, a sense of "realist gravity" is established through multidimensional narrative approaches. The emotional authenticity of realist film narrative is closely linked to the expansion of cinematic language, with the perspective of grassroots reality serving as one of the most vital approaches. This vantage point not only provides more excellent emotional value within reality itself but also effectively evokes profound emotional resonance among the public, enabling realist cinema to achieve broad influence and significant cultural impact in its screen dissemination.

Building on this foundation, Chinese cinema has established a new paradigm of "emotional color realism" through strategies of the interplay between the real and the virtual, thereby creating a distinctive field of emotional tension within its expressive framework. The collision between a foundation in reality and the possibilities of virtual expression creates this tension. It also manifests in the symbiotic relationship between technological mediation and humanistic concern. Ultimately, this generates a powerful emotional resonance at the psychological level of the audience. Digital color grading, in this context, serves not only to actualize the medium-specific quality of "film as an extension of reality" but also, through the interplay of the virtual and the real (Henry, 2008:54), evokes audience empathy for experiences of solitude and isolation. This process of "emotional color" thus establishes a novel mode of realist expression, wherein the interplay between the virtual and the real engages in a dialogue with the aesthetics of Eastern lyricism. Furthermore, symbolically juxtaposed warm and cool tones extend Siegfried Kracauer's theory of the 'material restoration of reality' into the emotional domain (Kracauer, 1997) . The intensification and reconstruction of color via digital grading enable contemporary Chinese cinema to effectively reflect the public's distinctive psychological aesthetics of color.

Within the symbolic system of visual culture, color is pivotal in constructing collective memory, serving as an anchoring element that facilitates a network of emotional resonance that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. Mechanisms of metaphorical encoding and decoding facilitate this phenomenon. According to the cultural memory theory, color symbols become embedded in the codes of group identity through "repetitive practice" (Assmann, 2011:78-82). In recent years, Chinese realist cinema has demonstrated a profound exploration of color aesthetics at the level of visual expression, with color serving not only as a narrative function but also as a crucial vehicle for the

11

construction of collective memory. From a semiotic perspective, the mnemonic function of color depends on the stability and reproducibility of its symbolic meaning. For instance, Zhang Yimou's *Cliff Walkers* (2021) utilizes black, white, and grey tones in combination with cool hues to evoke the historical sense of oppression characteristic of the espionage era, while the "punctum-like" presentation of warm color symbols – such as the red "scarf" and "blood" – awakens the audience's emotional identification with the revolutionary spirit. This suggests that such a color-coding mechanism closely aligns with Assmann's notion of the "solidification of cultural memory": cool tones, as the foundation of the historical context, construct an atmosphere of emotional repression, while warm color symbols act as triggers that activate memory, achieving a balance in the film's emotional register. Consequently, the recurrent utilization of color symbols can establish a coherent system of cultural memory. Through the persistent repetition and intensification of these symbols, individual memory is elevated to a celebratory emblem of the national community.

In contrast, recent Chinese realist cinema has achieved a contemporary translation of historical memory through color symbolism. A notable example of this can be seen in Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* (2015), where the gradual desaturation of color is used to distinguish between three eras: the warm yellows of 1999, the cool blues of 2014, and the black-and-white palette of 2025. This creates a visual coordinate system of temporal memory. Research indicates that this stratification of color serves a narrative function and subtly alludes to the alienation and reconstruction of collective emotion amid urbanization. The film's low-saturation, cool-grey tones establish an intertextual relationship with the characters' emotional detachment, exemplifying the "repressed image" theory (Li Zhenlin & Chen Ling, 2010). This theory posits that color, by reducing brightness and purity, reflects the collective psychological trauma of a society in transition. In *Dying to Survive* (2018), the stark contrast between the pallid whites of hospital settings and the dim yellows of urban alleyways constructs a symbolic opposition between institutional discipline and the struggle for life. The blue surgical masks worn by leukemia patients become a visual marker of marginalized identity, with the intrusion of cool tones into warm environments producing a visual rupture that echoes the principle of "oppositional encoding between the signifier and signified of color" in film semiotics (Deleuze, 1986). It is also worth noting that although *I Am What I Am* (2021) is an animated film, its translation of realist subject matter through color is highly instructive. The interplay between the turquoise hues of Lingnan's water towns and the magenta of urban neon, mediated by virtual color symbolism, prompts audiences to reflect on the persistence of traditional culture. This approach aligns with the theory that "artistic color actively reflects reality."

In essence, Chinese realist cinema employs a "cognition-emotion-value" transmission chain among audiences through the utilization of color coding and, by employing a composite narrative system of "color-body-environment," effectively establishes an emotional community that bridges the virtual and the real. The utilization of a pathological palette in *Dying to Survive*, juxtaposed with the dynamic lion dance sequences in *I Am What I Am*, exemplifies the capacity of these visual languages to convey

12

warmth and individual sentiment while concurrently inscribing the temporal markers of the era. Within the domain of cinematic narrative, specific color palettes and bodily gestures collectively articulate silent emotions, engendering emotional resonance with viewers through metaphorical expression. This process enables diversified virtual interaction across temporal and spatial boundaries while simultaneously generating collective cognition and shared values in reality—ultimately exemplifying a realist cinematic paradigm imbued with the distinctive qualities of Chinese aesthetics. The concept of "cognitive resonance" encapsulates this phenomenon, signifying the visual manifestation of Chinese cultural subjectivity. This innovation in narrative employs color as a functional tool, contributing to the cinematic experience (Hao & Yin, 2023) .

4. Contractual Aesthetics and Pluralism in Color as Cinematic Medium

In recent years, Chinese realist cinema has engaged in cultural signification by establishing distinctive systems of color symbolism, thereby forging a reciprocal aesthetic contract with its audience. From the perspective of structuralist semiotics, color, as the immediate vehicle of visual imaging, not only embodies the physical properties of the cinematic medium but also extends the image's meaning through its function as a cultural signifier. As Robert McKee observes, "The audience's perception of authenticity arises from the internal logic of the story world, not from a mere replication of reality" (McKee, 1997:89) . For instance, in *Dying to Survive* (2018), the director employs a "clinical cold green" color scheme that authentically reproduces the physical environment of the hospital, while simultaneously transforming the greenish hue into a visual metaphor for institutional indifference. In the context of the narrative, the utilization of warm yellow tones and deliberate contrast in color temperature symbolizes the warmth of humanity, particularly in the context of the protagonist's journey to India to acquire medicine. The alternating visual rhythm of "cold and warm" enables the audience to perceive the conflict between capital logic and humanitarianism without reliance on dialogue. Through the interplay of color temperatures, the conceptual boundaries of "human warmth" are extended (Wang & Li, 2022).

The utilization of chromatic "blank space" within the narrative functions as a strategic device, effectively facilitating the establishment of emotional respite for the audience. This approach enables the audience to perceive fleeting glimmers of hope despite the prevailing oppressive storylines. This phenomenon resonates with Roland Barthes's concept of the "punctum effect" – disrupting the regulatory order of the overall symbolic system by a fragment of heterogeneous color, which pierces the viewer's emotional defenses (Barthes, 1966). For instance, the film *Better Days (2019)* employs a dominant palette of "cement grey" to evoke the suffocating atmosphere of campus violence yet deliberately preserves the warm glow of tungsten lamps in scenes shared by *Chen Nian* and *Xiao Bei*, thereby elevating the film's thematic resonance. From this perspective, such moments exemplify "signification without linguistic intervention" (Metz, 1990). Collectively, these strategies reaffirm the core propositions of film semiotics, demonstrating how color, as a cultural signifier, can covertly

13

transmit ideology through the alternating interplay of signifying chains – cold versus warm, grey versus yellow.

In cinematic art, however, color is not merely a means for creators to convey emotion and intent; it also serves as an indispensable conduit for the audience's aesthetic experience. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of film semiotics and reception aesthetics, contemporary Chinese realist cinema has developed a "bidirectional interaction" mechanism of audience aesthetic reception through the utilization of color coding. This mechanism aligns with local culture's decoding logic and activates the audience's capacity for creative interpretation. This interactivity manifests as a dynamic "encoding–decoding" cycle: the filmmaker translates specific cultural symbols into visual imagery, while the audience, drawing on their own aesthetic experience, completes the reproduction of meaning. As scholars have observed, color constitutes an integral element of cinematic language; it conveys diverse emotions and sensations, akin to the utilization of light and shadow to symbolize the conflict between life and distance (Franklin, 2017) . This assertion has been extensively substantiated in recent Chinese realist films. In the film *Cliff Walkers* (2021), this bidirectional interaction is embodied in the film's 'cold color symbolism' empathy mechanism. The visual oppression created by icy whites and steely blues (that is, the encoding of the physical harshness of the environment) triggers an embodied perception of the revolutionaries' predicament. At the same time, the occasional warm yellow glimmer in the snow becomes a visual response to the audience's psychological expectations. Indeed, the film juxtaposes cold and warm color palettes to establish a dialectical relationship between law and human sentiment, with the cold blue tones of judicial spaces and the warm yellows of domestic scenes forming a "color polyphony." In the decoding process, this enables the audience to perceive both the system's rationality and humanity's warmth.

In the context of globalization, such bidirectional interaction has evolved into a system of mutual exchange between local symbols and international aesthetics. The theory of "embodied perception phenomenology" posits that color, understood as the "flesh of perception," possesses the capacity to elicit cross-cultural emotional resonance through visual stimulation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012b) . This suggests that, in the cinematic visual experience, the audience's emotional response can harmoniously echo the imagery expressed by the film, with this interaction constructing a map of power metaphors recognizable to international viewers through narrative media. In the specific creative practice of Chinese cinema, filmmakers employ the cyclical interplay of yin and yang in "Taiji" tableaux, transforming the "five shades of ink" in traditional Chinese painting into a contemporary visual grammar. This facilitates a convergence of Eastern dialectics of reality and illusion with Western symbolic conventions, thereby achieving an aesthetic consensus on screen. This phenomenon precisely echoes Fredric Jameson's assertion that Third World art, through the translation of "national allegory," can negotiate between local experience and global discourse (Fredric Jameson, 2007),thereby facilitating cross-cultural communication and demonstrating a profound fusion of national cultural genes with global aesthetic aspirations. The fundamental mechanism of color interaction in Chinese

14

cinema constitutes a dialogic arena between national cultural heritage and contemporary aesthetic demands. Creators construct frameworks of meaning through a "color grammar system," while audiences, in decoding, complete the transformation from visual reception to cultural identification. This bidirectional interaction indicates a continuation of the tradition of "word-image-meaning" aesthetics, in which the viewer participates in the generation of the text. Furthermore, it is also notable that, through digital technology, this interaction has been realized.

Furthermore, within the contemporary process of industrialization in Chinese cinema, the dialectical relationship between the use of color and narrative depth has become a significant aesthetic issue. Nevertheless, pursuing visual spectacle in a commercial context frequently leads to a dissociation between form and content. For instance, in certain youth-oriented films, creators deliberately employ candy-colored filters and high-key set designs to cater to market preferences, constructing a suspended "Tiny Times" fantasy. This phenomenon indicates that "contemporary Chinese cinema has only reality—too much reality—but lacks realism". Concurrently, while certain films persist in prioritizing their distinctive color aesthetics, an overreliance on visual spectacle can compromise narrative depth, illustrating the creative quandary wherein "form overwhelms content". It is also important to note that an overreliance on color symbolism may result in an emotional expression that remains superficial. In the pursuit of an elevated sense of "artistry," certain films have been observed to employ an excessive use of highly saturated reds to symbolize concepts such as "violence" or "passion." This practice often disregards the profound psychological associations that underpin the interplay between color and character in the film. This tendency frequently emphasizes the spectacle of power and desire; however, it does not successfully establish an intrinsic resonance with character psychology. For instance, in *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019), although the film's visuals are striking, the use of red as a symbol lacks an internal correspondence with the protagonist *Zhou Zenong*'s sense of despair, making it difficult for audiences to achieve genuine emotional identification. This "labeled" use of color reduces emotional expression to mere sensory stimulation, falling short of achieving deeper artistic value.

This phenomenon of creative alienation stems from a one-sided understanding of the "grammar of color." In classic works of realism, color has always served as a crucial vehicle for emotional narrative, and the color aesthetics of Chinese cinema have consistently sought a balance between formal exploration and social concern. For instance, *Better Days* (2019) utilizes a cold, bluish-grey palette to construct a visual landscape of school violence and social oppression, with its minimalist color experiment serving to intensify the sense of isolation experienced by marginalized individuals. When Chen Nian is seen curled up in a dimly lit street corner, the desaturated treatment does not detract from the film's critical edge; on the contrary, the visual oppression amplifies emotional resonance (Hu Jianli, 2021). From this perspective, the traditional "shadow play" function of color as an "emotional catalyst" finds a direct echo in the new wave's pursuit of "hardcore realism." Concurrently, the diversification of color in Chinese realist cinema is indicative of artistic progression; nevertheless, it is imperative to circumvent the reduction of this diversification to mere visual spectacle or a game of symbols. It is

suggested that achieving a balance between form and content is contingent on anchoring the exploration of color as a medium in emotional authenticity and cultural context. In the context of technological advancement, 4K restoration has revitalized *Chang'an's Tang Dynasty ink-wash palette* (2023), with digital rendering infusing the city walls and poetic landscapes with an Eastern sensibility characterized by fluidity. A similar approach is evident in *I Am What I Am* (2021), where the "ochre red" and "dark green" associated with Lingnan's lion dance culture are transformed into a vibrant visual representation of youthful aspiration through the utilization of high-saturation warm tones. Indeed, technological innovation has not diminished the aesthetic value of color; rather, precise control has expanded the expressive dimension of realism. This practice can be seen as a continuation of the Indigenous color aesthetic system established by the Fifth Generation directors (Li Zhenlin, 2012) and the construction of an "emotional spectrum" that serves to bridge tradition and the contemporary in Chinese cinema (Wang Yichuan, 2023). Therefore, cinematic color's aesthetic value is rooted in the unity of its dual dimensions. As an "emotional signifier," it should be anchored in social concern and humanistic depth. As a "cultural code," it should carry the genes of national aesthetics and philosophical character. In future creative practice, filmmakers should harness the emotional power of color with care, always respecting the essence of realism so that the diverse expression of cinematic color truly becomes a powerful tool for deepening thematic exploration.

Conclusion

In Chinese realist cinema, color language and symbolism have historically functioned as pivotal mediators of film narrative, transcending the confines of the physical realm of visual presentation. The employment of color in the context of both psychological perception and cultural representation facilitates the articulation of emotional narratives and thematic expression. Research indicates that color in the film has transcended its original physical properties, evolving into an indexical sign through which audiences interpret cinematic emotion and acquiring pronounced metaphorical significance. Technological innovation has further amplified this quality, particularly in realist cinema, where the narrative logic of grassroots culture – articulated through "de-heroization" and "decentralization" – has fostered a plurality of aesthetic standards and attracted a broad spectrum of viewers. This shift signifies an evolution in filmmaking from mere technical mediation to the enrichment of aesthetic narrative, thereby underscoring the communicative value of color as a form of "visual grammar." Symbolism in color has become a vital conduit between the emotional value of Chinese realist cinema and its audience. This development represents a departure from the limitations of traditional image analysis, and symbolism in color has emerged as a preferred mode of cinematic storytelling for contemporary viewers. This trend is anticipated to become increasingly evident in the context of the ongoing development of Chinese society and economy.

A nuanced analysis of color encodes social issues into the narrative, transforming abstract narrative tensions into emotionally resonant experiences for the audience. Through dynamic color grading and

16

the innovation of virtual environments, new modes of emotional interaction have emerged, establishing expressive mechanisms for color symbolism. This phenomenon illuminates the symbiotic emotional characteristics of Chinese realist cinema and offers audiences novel avenues of expression, thereby propelling the digital narrative trajectory of Chinese realist film. These findings contribute to the ability of Chinese cinema to break free from the normative frameworks of Hollywood. Within the strategic context of "art–technology resonance," Chinese cinema explores modes of cinematic expression attuned to the sensibilities of Chinese audiences. However, as Chinese cinema continues to evolve, technological advances and shifts in audience aesthetic perception will profoundly influence the emotional expression of realist film. This finding suggests that color expression is not static, but rather, it is inherently dynamic. In accelerating technological iteration, the challenge of investigating algorithmic mechanisms through the lens of technological ethics—and of balancing the tension between textual narrative and aesthetic reception—will become increasingly significant. The present study proposes a novel methodology for using color in filmmaking in the digital age through multidimensional theoretical integration. This methodology is intended to offer new directions for future research.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have received no funding.

References

Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Cambridge University Press.

Barthes, R. (1966). *Critique et Vérité*. Seuil.

Baudrillard, J. (1993). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Bazin, A. (2004). *What Is Cinema?* (H. Gray, 译). University of California Press.

Benjamin, W. (1997). *Charles Baudelaire* (H. Zohn, 译).

Chen Xiaoyun. (2019). Genre consciousness and value construction in contemporary Chinese cinema.

Chen Xuguang. (2023). The "world imagination" and "Chinese solution" to the common crisis of human destiny: A review of the film The Wandering Earth 2. *Contemporary Cinema*, *02*, 26-29+184.

Dai Jinhua. (2022). Contemporary cinema: Ways of imagining China and the self.

Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.

Ding Yaping. (2024). New quality productivity and the construction of Chinese film databases. *Contemporary Cinema*, *06*, 4-12.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline & Punish*. Vintage Books.

Franklin, I. (2017). BBC2 and World Cinema. *JOURNAL OF BRITISH CINEMA AND TELEVISION*, *14*(3), 344-360.

Fredric Jameson. (2007). *The Modernist Papers*. Verso.

Hao Wanquan, & Yin Hong. (2023). Film studies and pan-film studies: A review of major international academic topics in current film studies (2020-2022). *Global Media Journal*, *10*(01), 107-128.

Henry, M. (2008). Henri Agel 1911-2008. *POSITIF*, *572*, 54-54.

Hu Jianli. (2021). Strategies and development directions for the overseas dissemination of Chinese film and television works.

Jarvis, B. E. (2023). Prioritizing Narrative Structure in Large-Scale Film- Music Analysis: A Case Study of Dramatic Irony in Barton Fink. *MUSIC THEORY ONLINE*, *29*(1), 29.1.1.

Jie, F. (2020). Clothing Degree Zero: A Late Reading of Barthes' Fashion "System". *THEORY CULTURE & SOCIETY*, *37*(4), 97-118.

Judith Butler. (1993). *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge.

Kracauer, S. (1997). *Theory of Film*. Princeton University Press.

Lee, M.-Y. (2020). Re-Discovering Liu Na'Ou and His Man with a Camera: Authorial I, Written Diary, and Cinematic Writing. *CONCENTRIC-LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES*, *46*(2), 195-215.

Li, R. (2024). Color and melody: The symbiosis of visual aesthetics and music in Zhang Yimou's films. *Film Literature*, *14*, 112-116.

Li Zhenlin. (2012). The cultural responsibility of film and television criticism. *Fujian Art*, *05*, 4-7.

Li Zhenlin, & Chen Ling. (2010). On the color aesthetics of films in the new era. *Qilu Art Garden*, *04*, 32-37.

Manghani, S. (2020). Neutral Life: Roland Barthes' Late Work - An Introduction. *THEORY CULTURE & SOCIETY*, *37*(4), 3-34.

Manovich, L. (2002). *The Language of New Media*. The MIT Press.

McKee, R. (1997). *Story*. ReganBooks.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012a). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012b). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

Metz, C. (1986). *The Imaginary Signifier*. Indiana University Press (February 1986).

Metz, C. (1990). *Film Language*. University Of Chicago Press.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual Methodologies*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Taubman, J. A. (2006). Nikita Mikhalkov: Between nostalgia and nationalism. *SLAVIC REVIEW*, *65*(2), 414–415.

Thompson, K., & Bordwell, D. (2002). *Film History*.

Tikka, P. (2004). (Interactive) cinema as a model of mind. *DIGITAL CREATIVITY*, *15*(1), 14-17.

Wang Jiya, & Li Binjuan. (2022). On the use of color symbolism in film. *Audio Visual World*, *11*, 66-68.

Wang Yichuan. (2023). A colorful artistic landscape of television art. *Shanghai Art Review*, *04*, 19-21.

Xu Enyu. (2008). *The expressive function and artistic characteristics of film color language* (CNKI) [Master].

Zhao Haoran. (2024). The Twentieth Article: Color metaphors in reality-themed films from a

multimodal perspective. *Color*, *05*, 43-45.