



CINEMATIC LIGHT IN A WORLD OF BLUE

PROJECTION AND REFLECTION

Grant Gill

Laura Palmer, our protagonist, arrives at The Roadhouse, but before she reaches the door, Margaret Lanterman approaches, log in arm, and places her palm to Laura's forehead. Both are bathed in the electric red light radiating from the bar's neon sign that flashes "The Bang Bang Bar." Margaret whispers to Laura, their faces close and intimate, rattling off enigmatic words just as unusual as the log she holds. Laura's tone reads concerned, but she leaves Margaret with a sense of confusion—partly caused by her cocaine-fueled high and partly because of the anomalous situation. As Laura finally enters the bar, she slowly emerges from the sea of red light.

At this point in the film, the audience is confronted by a deeply perceptive and emotional experience as they come face-to-face with Laura herself. She is glassy-eyed and tinted by the faint blues that light The Roadhouse's performing band as they play "Questions in a World of Blue." The atmosphere holds hauntingly still. The audience finds themselves situated just as Laura is, in between the lingering reds and blues. We witness—through the face of Laura—her visceral reaction to something, though we neither fully know, nor understand its cause or meaning. It exceeds what can be perceived visually or aurally in the space where she stands. Instead, her reaction is located in the subtext of what is absent.

I was with a close friend when I watched David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) for the first time back in 2017. Both of us had bonded over the television show's original run (to which the film was a prequel) while sharing an artist studio in the old factory district of Milwaukee. We were at his apartment; the only lights on were the leftover twinkle lights his roommate had put up for Christmas, and his television hummed, filling the room with ambient, white noise. Paired with the wood paneled walls of his apartment and a suede floral-patterned couch, the setting was quite fitting to an early 90s aesthetic. It was a nostalgia I was too young to fully appreciate, but there I was hanging onto the styles and mysteries

of the cult American neo-noir twenty-five years after its original release. The scene of Laura entering The Roadhouse struck me as the critical climax to the film, and while it may have been a brief moment, it created a visual halt so beautiful that it still sits with me as one of the most profound experiences I have ever had.

Film theorist Guiliana Bruno describes the screen as a surface borne "out of a desire to transform space through luminosity and shadow play."¹ I am interested in the surface of the screen as a transformative place of shared experience, one where cinematic light can be projected onto, reflected off of, and back onto an individual and social body. The individual embodies a personal experience, one that could be contextualized by other sensory information, focusing on how cinematic light works, how it is represented, and in what framework. The exchange of light and surface is supported by the ability cinematic light has to emotionally move an individual, while also considering the space of interaction. These interactions are based on the individual's understanding of the real world, and are defined by their haptic and affective associations with light, color, atmosphere, and the screen, many of which are culturally and socially situated.

Atmosphere, a Mood

The screen takes on the form of vast, mountainous terrains, depressingly vile dive bars, and even tense family dinners, yet all exist within that confined, flat space. As a two-dimensional surface, the screen is only made up of light and color. Atmosphere, though, is created in a three-dimensional intervention, supported by these two-dimensional elements. It lives in the shared space between the screen and the viewer and can be found in the emulated colors that mirror the screen space, in the intense gleams of a lens flare, or even in a slow fade into black.

For anthropologist Tim Ingold, atmosphere begins in the realm of the natural world. His analysis responds to the immateriality of air, an abstraction that is haptic because of its necessity: the need to breathe.² Comparing cinematic light to atmospheric air, one can argue that light is likewise a necessary component of life that we recognize most clearly in its absence. The human response to even artificial light for extended periods of time is able to alter emotions in a positive, medicinal way.³ This provides some clinical context for the effect that light has on human quality of life. Cinematic light, however realistic it might seem, is only a depiction of natural light. It is a pictorial likeness that is accessible through the sense of sight, not touch.

1. Guiliana Bruno, "The Screen as Object: Art and the Atmospheres of Projection," in *Dreamlands Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016*, ed. Chrissie Iles (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016), 157.

2. Tim Ingold, "The Atmosphere," *Chiasmi International* 14 (2012): 83.

3. Norman E. Rosenthal, "A Patient who Changed my Practice: Herb Kern, the First Light Therapy Patient," *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice* 4 (2000): 339–41.



The connection between natural and cinematic light lies in its immateriality. It is unable to be physically embraced, massaged in the hand, or felt as it slips through the fingers. If cinematic light is immaterial, I suggest that atmospheric presence must be exhibited in the emotive properties caused by relational perceptions, such as mood. While an individual might not be able to physically touch light, the mood that is created by cinematic light can touch the individual, affecting their emotional condition.

The emotive response to atmosphere is key to my understanding of cinematic light, which also considers aesthetic dynamics in creating space. Ingold describes atmospheric aesthetics as a mixture of concepts including critical theorist Walter Benjamin's "aura" and philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow's adaptation of existential psychologist Ludwig Binswanger's "mood space."⁴ Aura is the radiated energy that an object, or person, creates.⁵ With cinematic light, the interaction of light as it bounces between screen and individual is its aura. It is the light's color, intensity, duration, and application. With these aesthetic identifiers, it is the emotive associations that are fixed, or otherwise informed by referential means.

Taking these aesthetic parameters, we can define mood space by how it is treated through emotive associations and its inherent presence in every space, reflecting the individual who interacts within it.⁶ Philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink writes that within the exchange of experiencing cinema, our associations are defined by what he calls "affective attunement," or the ability to emotionally connect with the content and elements that make up a film.⁷ This connection is how we understand the mood of a film. It, in turn, can be directly applied to cinematic light. The light projected onto a screen utilizes human relationships to color, the understanding of key tones and shadows, its potential to give off heat, or even the intensity of being entirely blinding. Though cinematic light is not rational, it does mimic the real, and these real associations are both psychological and symbolic.

4. Ingold, "The Atmosphere," 79.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in ed., Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 1-26.

6. O.F. Bollnow, "The Concept of Mood Space," in *Mood Space*, ed. Joseph Kohlmaier, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (London: Hyphen Press, 2011), 217.

7. Robert Sinnerbrink, "Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood," *Screen 53* no. 2 (2012): 153.



What is Screen, in What Space

Guiliana Bruno's accompanying catalogue essay to the exhibition *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016* recalls the history of screen and theater and how it predicted the future trajectory of both as immersive and tactile experiences. She frames the concept of alternative theater as ideal theater, where there is an emphasis on atmosphere and the experiences that can be created while watching a film.⁸ The architecture in which we witness cinematic light heightens—or lessens—our personal sensory relationships to the phenomenon. The differences can be immense. Compare, for example, watching a movie in a poorly lit apartment on a CRT television to an IMAX theater with surround sound, or the back of a pickup truck amidst a setting sun at the local drive-in to a Daoist shrine in suburban Bangkok.⁹

The space in which the screen exists is relative to its ability to interact with an individual. In his defining text *What is Cinema?* cinematic theorist André Bazin compares a screen to that of painting: “Just as footlights and scenery in the theater serve to mark the contrast between it and the real world so, by its surrounding frame, a painting is separated off not only from reality as such but, even more so, from the reality that is represented in it.”¹⁰ In this comparison, the space of screen denotes the hard edge of the typical white, rectangular screen. In traditional theater, the auditorium cannot blend into the stage, but with film and the effect of cinematic light, the projected surface bleeds over everything. Suddenly those sitting farthest in the back, closest to the film projector, are casting shadows of their heads onto the screen of the movie theater. The backs of their heads are interacting with the light in the most literal sense, but in the process, the line of contrast between screen and individual becomes blurred. It is the same whether projected onto a traditional screen or onto the flesh of a person.

This can be seen in the art collaborative trio LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner and their performance piece entitled *#ALLMYMOVIES*. The performance consisted of screening American actor Shia LaBeouf's filmography in reverse chronological order, and then live streaming LaBeouf for three consecutive days as he watched these films. The documentation is void of sound, so in experiencing the performance you only see LaBeouf, his reactions, and the cinematic light that flickers across his face. Though LaBeouf experiences his films in floods of memory, knowing the components that went into making each and every one, the audience of *#ALLMYMOVIES* comes to these same memories through seeing the physical interaction between cinematic light and the expressions on his

8. Bruno, “The Screen as Object,” 159.

9. See for example, Richard L. MacDonald, “Projecting Film to Spirits: On Shrines as Conjunctural Space and the Ritual Economy of Outdoor Cinema in Bangkok,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 33, no. 2 (2017): 152–63.

10. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 165.

face. He becomes both the screen and the space, being the surface in which cinematic light is projected onto and the parameters for where the interaction and transformation can be held.

Poetry in Color

As I write this piece in the dead of winter, my schedule has me driving home late on Thursday nights. The drive has been excessively darker than what I am used to, but the electric lights of cars and street lamps have been seemingly brighter. I typically head towards a three-way junction at a stoplight that takes so long you would think to find other routes to avoid it. I have always liked this route though, because for a brief second while I am still stopped, and the right lane is signaled to go with an arrow, I am painted dramatically in the same light that had lit Laura in my memories.

I say this because upon revisiting The Roadhouse scene from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, I realized that my original interaction with its colors were not as I had remembered. The reds had stayed dramatically consistent. Indeed, I do not think my recollection for them could ever change. It is a personal association with danger, the vivid light of a prompt stop. What did change, however, are my perceptions of the bright blues. Blues that merely acted as highlights to Laura's face, radically shifted as I recalled them as intense, electric greens. Forgetting altogether the presence of the staged band, I blended the soundtrack of their smooth and slow jazz with the light. Maybe this is what had amplified the color association and how I perceived it. Perhaps the color truly projected green off of the old television, or maybe the DVD copy of the movie we watched skewed green. Either way, my memory of this moment, paired with my affinity for the scene, can be understood by my psychological associations to colored light, as well as the culturally symbolic ideologies to which I relate.

In separating cinematic color into two components, the psychological and symbolic, we are left with the understanding that symbolic color is culture-specific, and psychological color is universal.¹¹ The latter means that though color can be seen and associated differently by each individual, its impact—in varying degrees—still affects the individual all the same. The atmospheric transfers of reds and blues from inside The Roadhouse are understood as typical neon colors that exist inside bars found in the United States. How these colors fall onto Laura in this specific bar, situated in a small town, is defined by region. The reds

11. Paul Coates, "Theory and History," in *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image* (London: British Film Institute, 2010), 4.



12. Anand Pandian, "Color," in *Reel World: An Anthropology of Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 133.

13. *Ibid.*, 123.

14. *Ibid.*, 126.

she tries to separate herself from are symbolic of danger, urgency, and deviancy. It is the figurative spotlight at the intersection of a road. The blues that confront her radiate off of the cleansing melody situated on the opposite side of the bar. The music and light together act as a lure, not designed to bring her out of the red, but rather to show the complexities of the experience between both colors.

In his book *Reel World: An Anthropology of Creation*, anthropologist Anand Pandian shadows a pair of Tamil film directors, Pushkar and Gayathri, for a chapter dedicated to color. Both directors studied film in the United States, which provided them a flexible cultural and cinematic repertoire from which to draw. In questioning the emphasis on green hues and tones in *Va*, *Quarter Cutting*, the film they were working on at the time, Gayathri responded: "This is not a serious script. You can experiment a little. At night, usually, your most obvious choice will be blue. We wanted to look completely different, not something you're familiar with."¹² Blue light can aid a natural, grounded perception of the world. The blue sky, blue light, or cool light can be found at any given moment outside of dramatic sunrises and sunsets. It can be how we understand mid-day, but also can be the deep, almost black, darkness of night. By manipulating the green hues of the film, Pushkar and Gayathri were able to affect a fantastical element to how the film reads, and in doing so, influence the audience by erasing a serious tone realistic light can replicate.

Our desire to overly personalize color defies its mundane representations. We embellish color as a way to translate our individual associations and experiences to others. Even Pandian describes Tamil cinematic colors in poetic terms to heighten various lighting schemes as "lime-green, blood-red, the orange of a persimmon, the cool green water of some tropical lagoon."¹³ He writes, "Color is a movement of expression, an intensification of what already exists."¹⁴ This understanding of color is effective in eliminating the palette of natural light while still embracing its simulated essence. As the screen lights up with strikingly bold magentas or dramatic oranges, one can understand how an individual can connect with the use of intensified colors.

In Light of Representation

Color in cinematic lighting has resurfaced as a pressing issue in an ongoing conversation on how to properly light actors of color. For HBO's *Insecure*, which consists of nearly an all-black cast, director of photography Ava Berkofsky has been adamant that darker skin tones need to be emphasized and highlighted to different effects and under differing color

combinations.¹⁵ These lighting techniques are becoming more frequent in films that represent black narratives and have black filmmakers at the helm. Such can be found in Barry Jenkins' 2016 coming-of-age film *Moonlight* where there is an exaggeration of blue hues highlighting what moonlight can do when reflected off of dark skin.

The main protagonist, Chiron, interacts with this light in different ways throughout three acts of the film. The deep blue lighting becomes synonymous with the struggles of self-acceptance and identity. A more recent example is Ryan Coogler's Afrofuturistic action adaptation, *Black Panther* (2018). While the plot revolves around preservation of power and culture, the lighting within the movie aids in maintaining the ideal world whom it speaks for. Electric purple became a spiritual anchor for the hero, T'Challa, as he travels to an otherworldly plane that is bathed in these hues. It is here that he ultimately receives support from his ancestors in becoming the new king of the film's fictional country Wakanda.

The inclusivity and representation that this type of lighting symbolizes is transformative. It changes the future of how individuals can interact with cinematic light. To this notion, we can scrutinize the history of the photorealistic processes and its slow progression into recognizing and portraying darker skin tones technically by using what was called a Shirley card, or a skin tone guide that was historically only calibrated for white skin. It is not enough to simply address these faults and filter in people of color into pre-coded, white ideologies and technologies. Instead, a new system needs to be introduced. Gestures to equitably light a range of skin tones signify a basic level of consideration for the individual. This type of "cognitive equity" exists outside of political motivation and resonates as a social practice by normalizing darker skin, broadening the scope of who can interact with cinematic light and to what extent.¹⁶ It expands the audience, not only to those who respond emotionally to specific colors, but also giving power to the affective experiences cinematic light creates.

As film studies scholar Nina Cartier argues, "The ideological power inherent in black screen representations creates possibilities as well, since black audiences' engagement with black characters on-screen is at once a matter of fantasy projection as well as the reification of a collective sense of self."¹⁷ Because the history of American film has been broken institutionally in representing all types of marginalized people, the immense potential of cinematic light to symbolically change within Hollywood is radical and progressive. This evolution of color and light in its most recent depictions relays more of the metaphorical concepts that one can read into and experience in cinema.

15. Xavier Harding, "Keeping 'Insecure' Lit: HBO Cinematographer Ava Berkofsky on Properly Lighting Black Faces," <https://mic.com/articles/184244/keeping-insecure-lit-hbo-cinematographer-ava-berkofsky-on-properly-lighting-black-faces#>. GfRNIg9Uj, (September 6, 2017).

16. Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no.1 (2009): 111-136.

17. Nina Cartier, "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 4 (2014): 152.

For example, bisexual lighting, gaining momentum as a meme in 2017, began mirroring the neon pinks and blues found within the bisexual pride flag. As this gradient was superimposed onto spaces and people within cinema, it created a subtext around sexuality, which provided visibility in character identities not necessary or key to the overall plot. This began as an empty aesthetic gesture that looked appealing and moody, providing no symbolic rationale to movie characters such as Wolverine or John Wick, both who are entirely straight-coded. Because the queer community took ownership of dual-colored lighting, it becomes significantly more important when queer celebrities such as actress/musician Janelle Monáe stylize their content with these relationships in mind. Monáe's recent music video, "Make Me Feel" (d. Alan Ferguson, 2018), breaks down the aforementioned bisexual light specific to pink/blue, and broadens it to be any two-light color combination (e.g., red/gold, gold/green, green/magenta). This music video and how it merges two separate, but not dissimilar thoughts—metaphorical and symbolic light and visual inclusion and representation—shows the rapid transformations of two-colored cinematic light and its potential for future iterations.

Of all places to encounter bisexual lighting, it is the most surprising and peculiar experience from the window seat of my international flight to Iceland. While flying away from the setting sun, the Earth's atmosphere is a gradient of the standard blues you would expect to see in the sky mixed with hard golds emerging from below the clouded scape. Forty thousand feet above the ground would amplify any sunset to its sublime nature, radiating of equal parts beauty and terror. Though, what makes this experience much more poignant is the presence of the neon purple light that envelops the interior of my plane. It is a seemingly alien view: what I have come to know as cinematic light is put up against the realistic colorations of the natural world, separated only by metal and glass. Just as I preserved the memory of Laura Palmer amidst red and green, this too will be forever held as one of the most beautiful sites I have ever seen. Light can have that profound impact on all of us: an impact that can stage an atmospheric mood so frightening, yet so breathtaking you cannot possibly look away; an impact that teases the tensions between reality and fantasy. With these resonating feelings that settle inside memory, set by mood and the space in which they are viewed, we can attest that these emotional experiences are just as informative as they are representational of us as individuals. Such is any cinematic light that can resurface my weightless feelings of soaring over the world bathed in purple.

