



The Color of Fear

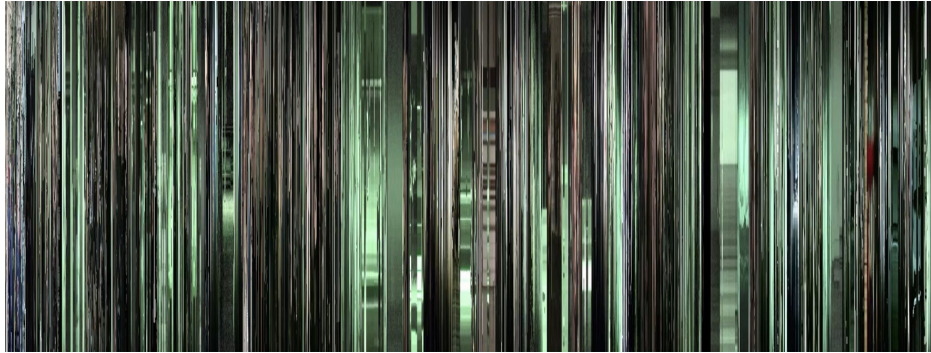
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"The Color of Fear" connects the use of green tint in silent-era cinema to the use of green-tinted night vision in found footage horror. The essay includes color bar analysis with linked video timelines and summed frames to better understand the impact of green on the subgenre.

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Creator's Statement

By 1931, the connection between horror and the color green was so well established that Universal Pictures purportedly marketed the green tint in *Dracula* as “the color of fear”.¹ A decade earlier, German expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *The Golem* (1920), and *Nosferatu* (1922) had adopted green tint as the preferred color for forests, night, intertitles, and most strikingly, atmospheric dread, monstrosity, and horror. Although the early history of color monochrome has been largely forgotten by the general public and has passed into the recuperative domain of scholarly researchers and archivists, the embodied experience of black-and-green thrives today in found footage horror thanks to night vision technology. While the ancestors of tinted cinema can be found in the color gels of stage lighting and magic lantern shows, the unheralded heir to technologies of gothic green affect can be found in one of horror’s lowliest subgenres.

This videographic essay features the results of a mentored professor/graduate student project that connects the use of green in silent-era tinting to the use of green-tinted night vision in found footage horror. Our project employs tools for color analyses inspired by the summed frames technique of Kevin Ferguson as well as movie color bar codes synched to live frame-by-frame timeline scrolling to better examine links between the overall tint profile of a film and the specific diegetic and connotative uses of color within any given sequence.² Those color visualizations map similarities between early tinting and night vision green (ostensibly in-camera, but often tinted digitally in post-production). Thanks to color bar codes, we can trace the evolution of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise from blue to green as night vision reclaims its role as

¹ Sara Street and Joshua Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s*, (Columbia University Press, 2019), 267.

² See Kevin L. Ferguson, “Digital Surrealism: Visualizing Walt Disney Animation Studios,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11 no. 1 (2017).

the color of fear in the twenty-first-century. More than two dozen visualizations of digital found footage horror films informed our research into not only how black-and-green monochrome dominates the horror subgenre, but also more importantly how green tint functions when fused with technologically mediated vision. Our analysis considers how the aesthetic, affective, and physiological phenomena associated with night vision work in concert to align the embodied human eye with its technological counterpart.

As a mentored project, this project represents the possibilities of faculty-student collaboration and co-authorship. Funding for student compensation and materials were provided by a mentoring grant from the BYU College of Humanities. We met twice a week over the course of nearly two semesters (a stretched timeline due to Covid). We did background research on early color and night vision technology. Michael reached out to cinematographers and directors for practical information about the use of in-camera night vision and post-production tinting. We watched a selection of 29 films, including silent classics and found footage horror. We ran those films through scripts to create the summed frames and bar code representations as well as a script to make the bar code a scrollable video file. That link between bar code and video helped us easily identify the precise images associated with each strip of color, which ensured that we would not conflate a night vision green scene with a non-night vision shot of the outdoors or of a room with green walls. Once we had the finished summed frames images and the video timeline bar code files, we were able to make useful comparisons such as the use of green in *[REC]* (2007) and its remake *Quarantine* (2008), or the chromatic evolution of the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007–2021). After gathering all of our video assets, we used the Milanote app to group stills by theme and create a collaborative storyboard. The process was therefore collaborative and dynamic at every stage. Once complete, we co-presented our project at the 2022 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference. The feedback from reviewers at *[in]Transition* led to improvements and revisions that rounded out the valuable mentoring journey from conception to publication. We believe that faculty-student co-authored videographic essays present a model for mentorship that is more engaging and collaborative than traditional written scholarship. Our hope is that this essay will not only give new insight and context about color in a horror subgenre but will also serve as a proof of concept for the videographic essay as a viable pursuit for academic mentoring.

Biography

Marc Olivier is Professor of French at BYU, where he teaches European cinema, photographic cultures, critical theory, and French literature. His recent book, *Household*

Horror: Cinematic Fear and the Secret Life of Everyday Objects (IU Press, 2020), draws on philosophies of the nonhuman to promote readings of cinematic objects as actors that transcend traditional notions of props and decor. He is series editor of the forthcoming *Icons of Horror* series with Indiana University Press.

Michael Ashman recently graduated with his MA from the Comparative Studies program at BYU. Though his research interests range from literature to photography, his real passion is film, and his thesis is about representations of frontier wilderness in Brazilian cinema and American westerns. He plans on applying to PhD programs in film studies this year.

Review by Richard Misek, University of Bergen

This is a thoroughly researched, well-told, and visually engaging video about the use of green tint as a trope in early cinema and monochrome green night vision in found footage horror movies of the 2000s and 2010s, evocatively connected by reference to a World War II German night vision device code-named “Vampir.”

It feels to me like a video of two halves—the first half provides evidence from early cinema and classical Hollywood to suggest that green tinting is historically a “colour of fear,” while the second half goes more deeply into the use of green night vision in found footage horror. Each is fascinating, but leaves something unresolved. The first half is broad enough in scope to be able to argue for green’s privileged role in early 20th century horror film. However, the question of why fear should historically have been green and not any other colour (notably, blue) remains elusive. What precisely was the interplay here between technology and cultural association in shaping horror film aesthetics?

The second half of the video focuses on a particular sub-genre of horror and clearly establishes the technological foundation for night vision green. However, its discussion is specific to particular sequences in particular films, and so isn’t broad enough to develop the initial argument that green has a privileged role as a colour of fear in horror. And again, the relation between technology and cultural association isn’t quite resolved. Was there some residual connotation from early cinema that resurfaced in found footage horror? Or was it just that early night vision technology generated a green image, and gradually the cinematic association between night vision, green, and horror became so repeated as to develop into a cliché? Ultimately, it feels that—like the film-maker who comments that he used night vision green simple because it “looked scary”—the authors aren’t quite able explain this renewed generic association between green and fear.

Review by Joshua Yumibe, Michigan State University

Color connotations vary widely and can be so technologically and culturally specific at any given historical moment. What a particular hue might mean in the eighteenth century, versus the early twentieth, versus now can be radically different across the world, even as historical understandings frequently resurface, especially as new technologies loosen the sediments of history.

The attention “The Color of Fear” gives to green’s dynamic history within the moving image is fantastic, particularly with regards to the horror and thriller genres. Its opening analysis of *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) expertly lays out the video essay’s concerns with how night-vision technology that turns the image green has become a recurrent trope in contemporary cinema. Specifically, the use of night vision in *Silence of the Lambs* invokes green as monstrosity and “resurrects the power of tinted monochrome from the silent era and anticipates the aesthetics that now dominate found footage horror.” The way in which the essay lays out the lineage of horror films that deploy night vision to visualize hidden monstrosity is dynamic, especially in its use of “movie color bar codes” to track the formal narrative patterns in which these green inserts arise. The essay’s historical cross-cutting is also to be lauded for how it puts these contemporary effects in dialog with the history of silent film coloring, when films were by and large colored by hand through a variety of techniques including tinting and toning.

Specifically through tints and tones, the color green in silent and early sound cinema was remarkably varied in meaning. As the essay explains, green was used for “forests, night, dark spaces, intertitles, and most strikingly, atmospheric dread, monstrosity, and horror.” Depending on the particular tonalities of the hue, woodsy scenes, night scenes (particularly in the blue-green spectrum), and intertitles were the most common uses of green in U.S. and European silent cinema. Indeed, as a Kodak guide for its pre-tinted “Sonochrome” filmstock claims at the end of the 1920s, its green “Verdante” stock was meant to be “refreshing” and invoke connotations of “sunny green of vegetation in spring and early summer. Simply furnished interiors.”³

But also, as the “The Color of Fear” documents, green’s connotations of horror and monstrosity erupt on the silent screen, especially in Weimar expressionist films—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *The Golem* (1920), and *Nosferatu* (1920). As Sarah Street and I have traced, these films may also have been referents for the use of

³ *New Color Moods for the Screen: A Spectrum of Sixteen Delicate Atmospheric Colors, Keyed to the Moods of the Screen* (Eastman Kodak Company, 1930).

green in the early Universal horror cycle, which “The Color of Fear” also examines. Original cutting continuities for *Dracula* (1931) suggest the use of green tinting in the film, and indeed, one of the film’s surviving original negatives has printing directions (“frame slugs”) spliced in, which call for the use of Kodak’s “Verdante” green stock on portions of the film. Whether Verdante was used on the initial release prints in 1931 or for later re-release prints is unclear, but green is part of Universal’s horror cycle in significant ways.⁴

First, Bela Lugosi initially came to the role of *Dracula* in 1927 through the Broadway stage production written by Hamilton Deane and revised by John L. Balderston, which was later adapted for the screen by Tod Browning. In his stage performances, Lugosi reportedly wore green tinted makeup to extenuate his monstrous visage.⁵ Secondly, for different reasons on Browning’s film, make-up artist Jack Pierce applied green tint again to Lugosi’s face, specifically to make his face appear more ghastly pale when reproduced in black and white, or on green tinted film stock, and Pierce also did the same for Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein*.⁶ Purportedly, it was Pierce’s extraordinary make-up work on Karloff that led to the association of green with Frankenstein that has persisted ever since, though it is yet uncertain if prints of *Frankenstein* were also tinted green, like *Dracula*.

In consort with such technical considerations, green resonates as the color of fear across these silent and early sound works, and certainly through the contemporary found-footage genre, as “The Color of Fear” so dynamically demonstrates. What is interesting across these juxtapositions of history is the way in which such connotations resurface, particularly through new technological practices, from expressionist tints to green face paint to our recent night-visioned, digital terrors.

⁴ See Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 267–269.

⁵ David J. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 85.

⁶ On Lugosi’s green face paint for the film, see Frank Taylor, “Jack Pierce: Forgotten Make-up Genius,” *American Cinematographer* 66, no. 1 (January 1985): 34.

