



The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale

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"*The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale*" explores red in Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell's 1948 film. Though shaped by shifting materials and technologies, red remains potent and spellbinding, echoing Hans Christian Andersen's haunting spell of the red shoes that we can never escape.





Creator's Statement

“*The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale*” is an audiovisual essay in which I attempt to untangle my personal fascination with the film *The Red Shoes* (1948) by Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell, particularly the Technicolor color profile captured by Jack Cardiff, at a time when monochrome was the standard for most other British films (Mundy 2007: 115). More precisely, it is the color red that preoccupies me: the film is saturated in it, and yet this chromatic abundance repeatedly slips through my fingers, refusing to settle into a stable object of analysis. In response, the desktop documentary offered itself as a methodological way of following color in motion rather than fixing it in place. As Anger (2024) argues, color, here exemplified by red, must be understood through its mutability across analog and digital forms. Within this framework, the desktop operates simultaneously as a research method and as an interface through which multiple media and user gestures converge, making the contemporary conditions of viewership visible (Anger and Lee 2023). What began as a personal quest to understand why I am drawn to this audiovisual work has transformed into research on color profiles across technology and materiality in order to grasp the elusive Hans Christian Andersenian spell of *The Red Shoes*.

The primary motivation behind creating this piece was a desire not simply to look at color but to touch it—red—itsself (Binotto 2020), thus seeking to materialize my cinephilic fascination, transforming it from watching to sensing, from observing to participating, from glancing to owning. Yet, as Patti Bellantoni (2005: 2) warns, “bright red” functions like “visual caffeine,” a quality that renders analysis perilously close to addiction, raising the uneasy question of whether my impulse was to interpret red or to give in to it. In conducting the analysis, there is always the danger of being

absorbed by the research artifact itself, of being pulled into the current of red—a color charged with danger, desire, power, and defiance (Williams 2017). In this chromatic pull, the shoes come to embody narratives of female transgression and its punishment (Young 1994: 116), marking the cost of ambition for a woman who refuses to choose between love and artistic aspiration (Street 2005: 163). To be drawn toward the red shoes is to desire entry into a fictional world, one reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz* (Moor 2005). Driven by this fascination, I wanted to buy my own pair of red shoes, to translate cinematic desire into a tangible, offline object. My own attempt to acquire the “right” red pair ultimately failed. At first glance, this failure underscored the color’s resistance to fixation, revealing red less as a stable commodity than as a historically charged (Coates 2010), affective force that continually slips beyond possession. This failure would mean making a step back from trying to touch the red shoes offline, to touch them digitally, aligning the project with videographic research on film musicals (Oyallon-Koloski 2024).

I dissected the film and reassembled it through virtual clippings (GIFs) on Tumblr, where they continued to circulate and, through reposting, entered the broader virtual space (Cain 2014; Menarini 2016; Malkowski 2020). However, Tumblr was not merely a hosting platform but an active agent in shaping my cinephilic journey: it functioned as a site where cinephilic fragments could be shared, remixed, and recontextualized within broader digital communities (Hannell 2021). The platform’s infrastructure of reblogging and tagging facilitated the GIFs’ afterlives, enabling them to participate in an evolving discourse that blurred the boundaries between fan practice, critical analysis, and artistic experimentation. The GIFs found themselves situated within the realm of *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967), *Donkey Skin* (1970), *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (1973), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *Daisies* (1966), *Inspiration* (1949), *Green Gold* (1964), and others, as is visible in the audiovisual essay. The reposting and looping of GIFs was almost akin to the necessity to dance and dance, to remain caught in a perpetual spin, unable to stop, just like the heroine in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Red Shoes*. It is precisely this compulsion toward movement and repetition that Michael Powell gestures toward when he describes *The Red Shoes* as a “Freudian film-ballet” (629), designed to “directly address the subconscious in a way that verbal narrative might not” (Aldred 2005: 192). Yet this very pull toward the subconscious also unsettles the act of seeing itself: even though the red shoes were always within reach, I found myself compelled to confront a disquieting question: had I ever truly seen this film, if I could not even say with certainty what chromatic configuration of red it presents?

Originally shot on Technicolor, what I saw was a digitally restored version of the film. But the film has also circulated on Technicolor prints, Eastman Kodak prints, negatives, VHS quality, DVD quality, Blu-ray quality, and various codecs from YouTube and other platforms. Some digitally available versions are sourced directly from the Technicolor original, while others derive from Eastman Kodak prints; consequently, smudges, mold, or scratches may be visible. Today, thanks to restoration, it is most likely a digitized and restored version that we encounter. Each of these instances has a slightly different color profile; some approximate the original, others deviate from it. In the digital emulation of Technicolor in a recent restoration, Martin Scorsese's team employed color scientist Josh Pines's look-up tables (LUTs) as algorithmic filters that translated contemporary footage into new color spaces, thus reproducing the chromatic logic of two- and three-strip processes within a digitally graded and materially reproducible form (Higgins 2007: 218). To put it differently, the team "can now emulate a look created with film stock and processes that no longer exist using today's stock and digital technology," as Ron Ames, Robert Legato's partner on the project, explains (Higgins 2007: 219). In this instance, the critical term is emulation: the process of generating a functional duplicate from an analog or obsolete digital file within the current digital environment (Newman 2012). Creating a digital double is thus a task of imitation under different technological conditions, which requires identifying what can be transferred, what must be reconstructed, and what cannot be reproduced and must instead be replaced. Even though the final version may appear similar to the original, its material and technological foundation has fundamentally changed.

It seems that the redness has been emulated without any shadow of doubt, as the shoes' redness remains prominent across all digital copies; nevertheless, preserving the presence of red does not appear to have been a problem even for the analog copies. As Martin Scorsese (2009) reflected, even if you have only seen *The Red Shoes* on black-and-white television, you have still sensed the colors. This persistence suggests that red in *The Red Shoes* operates not merely as a chromatic value, but as an affective and perceptual force that survives technological translation. It is precisely this quality that Caryl Flinn (2013) identifies in her account of the musical. She argues that, rather than stabilizing form, the genre's inherent fragmentation enables it to mutate across media and exhibition contexts. As a result, color remains experientially vivid rather than fixed. This position is echoed by Williams (2017: 20), who characterizes color as inseparable from motion and suggests that the film's red acquires meaning through kinetic dispersal rather than chromatic stability. This might be a cinephilic wishful belief, yet it underscores that color in cinema is not a stable instance, as we might assume, but rather an unstable, mutable quality dependent on the materiality

of prints, copies, and projection technology. While the question of analog color (and emulating analog color in digital) has been addressed in accompanying material on *The Red Shoes*' restoration (UCLA Film & Television Archive 2009) and is present in the academic debate around restoration and preservation of analog material (Fossati 2018; Flückiger, Hielscher, and Wietlisbach 2020), addressing and preserving digital color remains largely unarticulated, even though we watch, consume, and appreciate audiovisual culture (mostly) through the contemporary digital dispositif. Scorsese may have watched *The Red Shoes* on black-and-white television, while I first saw it on my laptop, a Lenovo (unfortunately, I do not recall the exact type). The screen (or any other medium through which we view audiovisual works) today is likely digital: a smart television, a computer monitor (probably with a Retina display), a tablet, or even a smartphone. Yet relatively little attention has been given to the materiality and technological aspects of our screens: Shane Denson (2020), for instance, highlights the crucial position of test patterns on Netflix and smart televisions in relation to digital materiality. But what possibilities for color configuration does my own screen have?

This question motivated me to view the film through various color profiles on my current computer: the default Mac profile, Wide Gamut RGB, ACES CG Linear (Academy Color Encoding System AP1), ROMM RGB (ISO 22028-2:2013), and SMPTE-C. However, capturing these different color profiles revealed yet another instance of the fluidity of digital color. A screen recording at a given moment captured the color profile in use at that time, but once I reverted to the default profile, the recording itself was transformed to fit the profile that was then in use. To put it simply, colors are adjusted according to the active color profile. Recordings on my phone, due to brightness levels, often failed to capture the color profile accurately enough to highlight nuanced differences. Consequently, the color profiles presented in the audiovisual essay are imitations; they are visualizations of color adjusted by exposure, contrast, highlights, shadows, whites, blacks, saturation, vibrance, color wheels (mid-tones, shadows, highlights), and tweaks in hue and saturation curves. Digital color surrounds us every day, yet it is variable, fluid, and ephemeral. Even the effort to record a screen with a distinct color profile proved challenging. How much more complex, then, is the task of archiving and preserving the digital dispositif itself? While I have never seen *The Red Shoes* on a Technicolor print, I will also never see it again on the screen of my old Lenovo computer. Since then, the development of color screens on laptops has advanced significantly: 4K displays, Retina technology, OLED panels, and other cutting-edge possibilities that contemporary screens offer (Leslie 2017). Digital color is not a singular instance. It appears differently depending on resolution, color space, display calibration, and platform, shaping how contemporary viewers encounter it. The desktop approach

may thus serve as a strategy for capturing (or, if not capturing, at least simulating) the fleeting digital artifact of color, preserving it as part of the broader effort to maintain and archive our ever-shifting audiovisual landscapes.

The audiovisual essay “*The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale*” simultaneously prolongs the gestures of the film and of Hans Christian Andersen’s original fairy tale. It is mesmerized by the red shoes and seeks to grasp them, yet through this obsessive endeavor, it also reveals the contemporary digital dispositif, an aspect we often overlook. Colors, after all, have always been present and will remain so. But can we truly say they retain the same chromatic configuration? What kind of red were the red shoes, really?

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Biography

Veronika Hanáková (Charles University) is a PhD candidate in new media and digital culture, focusing on the materiality, memory, and preservation of digital artifacts, particularly DVD interfaces. Her work has appeared in journals like *NECSUS*, *[in] Transition*, and *Tecmerin*. Notable videographic projects include *Cycles of Labor: In the Metaverse*, *We Will Be Housewives* (with Martin Tremčinský and Jiří Anger), which won the BAFTSS 2025 Award for Videographic Criticism. She was a guest editor of a special

issue of *Illuminace* (2/2024) titled *Configuring Computer Labor in Film and Audiovisual Media*. Together with Jiří Anger, she curates the Audiovisual Essay section at the Marienbad Film Festival. She is a member of the editorial team at *Screenworks*.

Reviewed by Desirée J. Garcia, Dartmouth College

Hanáková's desktop fairy tale is a videographic inquiry into the nature of color, reproducibility, and cinephilic viewing practices. Taking the red shoes in the eponymous 1948 film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger as her inspiration, the author creatively engages her own desire to "touch" the shoes, so alluring in their red pigmentation, as a means to critique the ways that color in cinema and its many digital reproductions is ultimately unknowable; as Hanáková writes, "I can touch the screen, but the image slips through my fingers." Using excerpted text onscreen, Hanáková establishes how the film is a touchstone of cinematic artistry for many, including Martin Scorsese, but also reveals its mutating materiality from analog to digital forms, prompting her to question, "Have I ever truly seen this film?"

The question pertains not just to *The Red Shoes*, a film that owes much of its hallowed place in film history to the Technicolor artistry of Jack Cardiff, but to all of cinema. As videographic scholars, we endeavor with editing software to truly see, or at least see differently, the films we think we know. Hanáková narrates this impulse to capture the image, to touch it, splice it, layer it, slow it down, and reverse it by using the self-reflexive tools and conventions of the desktop documentary. Failing to capture the "red" of the red shoes, however, Hanáková ultimately demonstrates how, like the magic spell in the film, color in cinema is uncanny and unknowable.

The desktop fairy tale's reliance on visual collage as an aesthetic is particularly effective for the ways that it gestures toward the materialities of color and digital reproductions. Layering image and text, Hanáková replicates the endless reproducibility of digital color, through different platforms, copies, and projections. She uses Tumblr's endless reposting and looping of GIFs from the film (and others) as an example of the many digital encounters that reframe and reconstitute both color and narrative. Extracted, excerpted, and explored anew again and again, these GIFs pose a challenge for the cinema scholar who seeks to thoughtfully encounter and carefully contemplate their subjects. As Hanáková beautifully demonstrates, videographic scholars might not be able to truly touch the picture, but we can document our sincere efforts to do so.

Selected by the Digital Humanities & Videographic Criticism Scholarly Interest Group, SCMS.

Review by Allison Cooper, Bowdoin College; Andrea Comiskey, Carnegie Mellon University; Jenny Oyallon-Koloski, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Veronika Hanáková is a video essayist for our era. “*The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale*” playfully activates legacy and new media to understand how film color might transcend the vagaries of technology and of human memory. The desktop documentary form effectively stages a confrontation between, on the one hand, the film archive and its attendant authority and, on the other, the individual spectator, whose subjective experience is revealed to be just as authoritative. Mediating both archival and subjective interpretations of film color are the numerous technologies through which we see it. The videographic form itself, leveraged beautifully here to explore the variability of color and memory of the screen, makes this piece wonderfully teachable, particularly as a way of demonstrating to students some fundamental principles of cinematic color and the many color variations that result from film transfers and restorations.

Any film shot in Technicolor could be an interesting case study for a video essay about color, but *The Red Shoes* allows for a powerful blend of affective, technological, and historical lines of inquiry. The desktop form effectively balances some of the core tensions of the piece: the specificity of color profiles against the unreliability of memory, the impacts of technology on artistic creation and its reception, and the stark reality of the world versus the mythology of fairy tales. Hanáková cleverly blends these contrasting impulses to show how we can simultaneously know and not know the true color of the red shoes from the Andersen tale and Powell and Pressburger film. The persona she builds in the video essay is one that is both in command of the technology yet susceptible to the mythological lure of the red shoes’ magic, luckily protected because she has yet to find the ideal pair. Particularly effective is the intervention of the black & white hands “touching” the colors onscreen. One of the video essay’s strengths is how it uses the medium to explore and celebrate synesthesia and also to re-materialize classic film in the digital and online contexts in which they’re typically experienced.

Another pleasure of this video essay is its recourse to media archaeology to assert the power of material qualities. Tumblr’s appearance is a surprise and so is the way that Hanáková asserts her own cinephilic authority over its algorithmic logic. Simultaneously, she acknowledges and rejects the consumerist logic underpinning the digital marketplace: all her searches for the perfect red shoes are in vain, because not only does their original color resist being captured or defined via digital reproduction, but none can substitute for the cinephilic experience of watching the film for the first time. This is underscored by the aesthetic of bricolage that characterizes the video essay.

The joyful curiosity that drives this piece is infectious, and we are thrilled to inaugurate the annual SCMS graduate student video essay award with Hanáková's "*The Red Shoes: A Desktop Fairy Tale*."

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Author Information

Veronika Hanáková, Winner, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Student Video Essay Award, 2025.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

