

## Book reviews

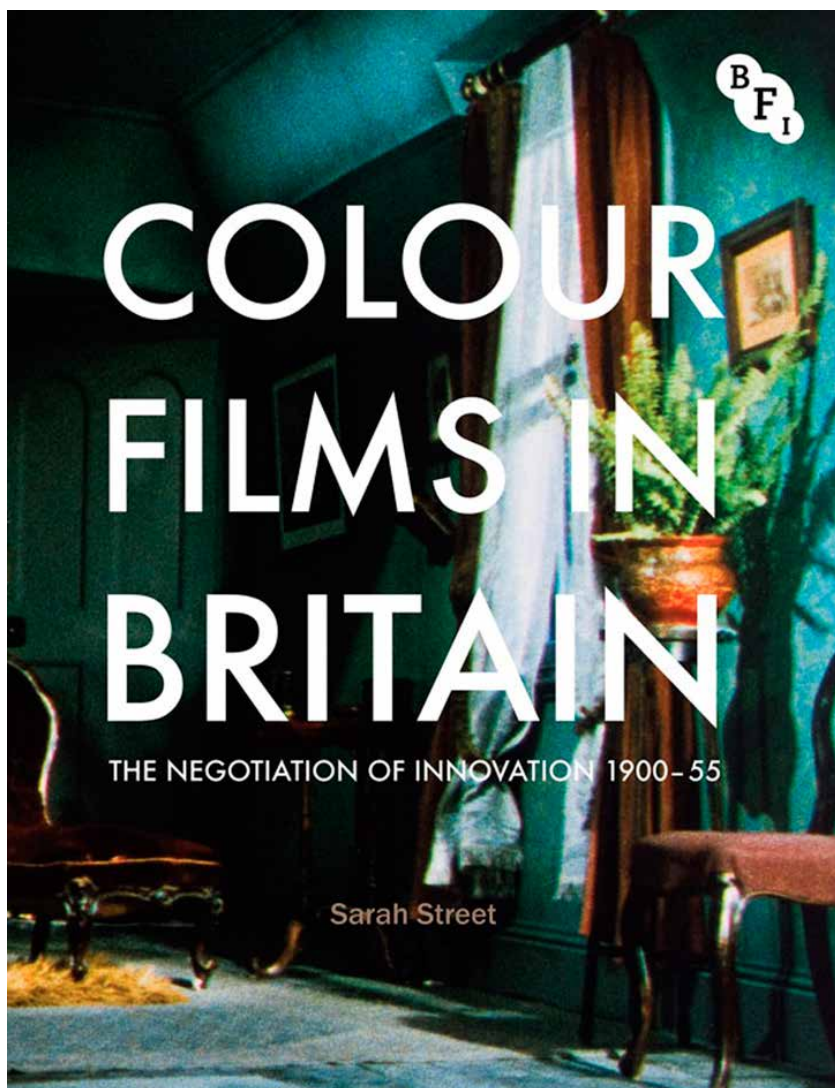
*edited by Lavinia Brydon and Alena Strohmaier of the NECS Publication Committee*

### Colour Films in Britain

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At first glance, the image chosen for the cover of Sarah Street's new book *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation 1900-55* (London: Palgrave/BFI Publishing, 2012) seems to be a somewhat unusual pick for a book about colour in cinema. It displays a discreetly-lit interior scene, an empty room without any people – more specifically, a frame enlargement from Alexander Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers* (1955). The colours are subdued, the room filled with shadows. The delicate composition, formed by the discernable colour grain and materiality of the Technicolor image, is dominated by the soft blue and green tones of the room's wallpaper, occasionally contrasted with dark shadows and small, restrained colour accents produced by the objects in the room: furniture, curtains, a carpet, a green plant.

This is an unusual choice because cover images for books on colour have a tendency to accentuate the drama and splendour of colour, displaying spectacular Technicolor moments and strong colour contrasts. A case in point is the anthology *Color: The Film Reader*, in which the cover image presents the green hands of the Wicked Witch of the West reaching for Dorothy's ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). The cover image of Street's book does not entice us with the drama and splendour of colour; instead, it conveys what might be called restrained colour.



The notion of 'colour restraint' is also a central thematic thread throughout Street's comprehensive study, as well as in discourses on colour in general. In a film historical context, this term is most famously associated with the notorious, influential, and often ridiculed 'Technicolor consultant' Natalie Kalmus, who used this exact phrase in her writings about colour in cinema. It also refers to a general idea of colour as something that needs to be controlled, restrained – associated with a scepticism towards colour (in particular in a Western, Northern European cultural context), a negative attitude which David Batchelor has termed 'chromophobia'.<sup>1</sup> In Street's study, 'colour restraint', although informed by these cultural attitudes,

is not only viewed in negative terms, but rather as an aesthetic project informing the work on colour by British filmmakers, and actually entailing distinct artistic possibilities. Colour restraint can be seen as an experimental practice taking place in both fiction and non-fiction cinema. Street also nuances the established notion that British filmmakers were in opposition to figures such as Kalmus and the directives from the Technicolor company, and shows how the many innovative and creative uses of colour in British cinema were not necessarily against the company's guidelines. The cover image from *The Ladykillers*, which is reminiscent of the chiaroscuro lighting of American Film Noir – perhaps even interior scenes by Hopper and Vermeer – serves as one of many examples throughout the book that remind us that restraint does not rule out, as Street puts it, 'chromatic density, contrast or design' (p. 92).

Often considered one of the most overlooked aspects of film history, there have been a number of books on colour in cinema in the last 5-10 years, as well as several special editions of academic journals and individual articles. The book is the outcome of a larger research project, resulting in two other recently-published books on the subjected co-edited by Street (with Simon Brown and Liz Watkins).<sup>2</sup> Street's monograph certainly stands out as one of the most important recent works in this field. In terms of significance and method, it is comparable to two other books: Scott Higgins' *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow: Color Design in the 1930s*, and Joshua Yumibe's *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture*. All of these books constitute the results of rigid archival research and feature studies of industrial and technological contexts, discourses surrounding film production and distribution (in Street's case, this even includes interviews with cinematographers), as well as careful readings of particular films. However, the two earlier studies feature more explicitly limited delineations: a narrow time frame (Higgins studies the 1930s, Yumibe the 1890s and early 1900s) and specific forms of colour technology (Higgins on Technicolor processes, Yumibe on the applied, non-photographic colour of early cinema). Street's book deals with a very broad time frame (1900-1955) and includes all the kinds of colour technologies and colour film processes that were being used in Britain during these decades. Thus, the main demarcation for Street's study is the national context.

Street's project is to provide a national history of colour film. Apart from Dudley Andrew's brief article on colour in post-war French cinema<sup>3</sup> and Richard Abel's discussion on how colour was correlated with an undesirable 'Frenchness' in American discourses on Pathé during the 1910s,<sup>4</sup> an explicitly national perspective on colour is actually relatively unexplored. Britain proves to be an especially noteworthy case for such a study. Some of the most important technical and industrial developments with regard to colour took place in Britain, in particular before the Second World War, involving extensive experimentation and patents for

numerous colour film processes. After the war, Britain's special relationship with the United States – politically, culturally, and linguistically – becomes important for the development of colour in British cinema. Street refers to specific Anglo-American co-productions in colour and to the already-mentioned collaboration between British film producers and the Technicolor company.

In addition to often being associated with a dominant realist aesthetic, British cinema features some of the most famous, inventive, and interesting uses of colour in world cinema. The colour of British cinema is probably first and foremost associated with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, along with the legendary cinematographer Jack Cardiff. Street's study does not challenge the importance of these figures' achievements. In addition to giving appropriate attention to British canonised colour films, the study draws attention to films that have either been less noticed in general or in terms of their use of colour. The book provides not only a national perspective on colour film, but also a colour perspective on national film history. Colour affords an attention to unexplored details in certain films, sometimes neglected or underrated, re-evaluating them or revealing new dimensions. The excellent close reading of *Blithe Spirit* (David Lean, 1945) is just one example in this regard.

Street identifies her chosen time period as the key years for colour experimentation in Britain – an experimentation both in terms of colour processes being developed (particularly in the first half of the period), and in using colour creatively and artistically within narrative and non-fiction cinema (particularly in the second half). The silent period is touched upon relatively briefly in the book, while the majority of the study focuses on the 1940s and 1950s. For a detailed discussion of colour in silent cinema, one would have to look elsewhere. Nonetheless, the chapters on silent cinema establish a number of themes related to colour in a British context that are extended and developed, refined and challenged, throughout the book. These include aesthetic questions (such as realism and verisimilitude, visual depth, colour 'harmony') and more ideological associations between colour and, for example, empire, gender, and exoticism.

Even though applied colour technologies are discussed briefly in the earliest chapters, colour as a property of British film history is primarily studied here as a photochemical product. The first chapter deals with Kinemacolor (1906-15), the first 'natural' colour film process that actually had a certain (albeit limited and troubled) distribution and commercial success. The history of colour film then is inevitably a history of technical advances in the development of so-called 'natural' colour film processes – and perhaps even more importantly, of cinematography. Consequently, Cardiff is a more important figure in this text than either Powell or Pressburger. The book features interesting readings of several of the lesser-known

films that Cardiff worked on, including the extraordinary *This Is Colour* (Jack Ellitt, 1942) and the underrated *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (Albert Lewin, 1951).

Other consequences of the understanding of colour film in terms of photography are perhaps more striking. Films by Len Lye – certainly one of the more innovative colourists working in the British film industry in the 1930s – primarily serve as illustrations of two of the colour film processes of the decade: Dufaycolour and Gasparcolor. Lye could have been linked to other avant-garde filmmakers of the era, such as Oskar Fischinger, to notions about synaesthesia and colour-music (which is touched upon in later in the book), or later filmmakers experimenting with hand-painting the filmstrip, such as Stan Brakhage. These connections are already well-established elsewhere, so the example serves primarily to illustrate how the emphasis on colour processes (like any analytical focus) inevitably takes the understanding of films in certain directions while disregarding others.

Street is primarily a meticulous historian. Her project combining carefully-researched industrial and technical contexts with detailed stylistic and narrative analyses of films can be placed in the traditions of historical poetics or 'neoformalism', associated with figures like David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (the fact that less well-known films are studied alongside 'exceptional', canonical works also confirms this connection). Street combines this approach with an admirable openness to theory and an ability to integrate certain concepts within an argument that is predominantly historical and empirical by nature.

Colour is a subject that is notoriously tricky to define and describe – aesthetically, perceptually, and scientifically. Thus, general 'common sense' definitions of colour are seldom sufficient; colour is a phenomenon that needs to be problematised in order to be discussed in a meaningful way. The theoretical discussions are far from comprehensive. Theory here is used in line with the Foucauldian 'toolbox': rather than understanding colour through any wide-ranging theoretical perspective, theoretical concepts function as tools that are used in specific contexts. Sergei Eisenstein's complex discussion of colour and cinema is accordingly reduced to a couple of general concepts that are used analytically in the book. For example, his discussion of how colour meanings are not universal but rather specific to each specific context or work (in which they can also be ambivalent and changeable), as well as the notion of colour as an integral part of the artwork as an organic unity (in particular its interplay with sound). One could argue that such an approach to theory is reductive, but Street uses these concepts sparingly and wisely, as ways to provide the reader with useful perspectives on the material.

The book ends with a reflection on the availability of the films analysed in the study – some are widely-available on DVD and blu-ray, in particular the work of Powell and Pressburger, while others, despite their quality and historical interest, are only accessible by viewing film prints at the BFI archive. There is another

aspect to the question of our access to colour films from the past, to colour as a notoriously unstable element: whether the colours we see in film prints (and other 'dispositives') today are identical to the ones that were seen decades ago. Even though this aspect is not examined in detail, it is implied as a problem throughout the text. Street is careful to point out what kinds of prints or materials she has studied – most notably in the case of the DVD *The Open Road*, featuring Claude Friese-Greene's colour travelogues from 1925, published by the BFI. In this case the digitally-restored colour film images are significantly corrected and 'improved' compared to what would be possible in a projection during the 1920s.

In addition to the quality of the research, the book is also beautifully-designed. It features numerous colour illustrations – primarily frame enlargements – which are very helpful in comprehending Street's many detailed analyses of individual films. The book also features two appendices that enhance its value as a reference work: a list of the colour films distributed in Britain between 1938 and 1955 (based on *Kinematograph Weekly*), and a concise and very useful description of the colour film processes and technologies discussed in the book (compiled by Simon Brown). *Colour Films in Britain* succeeds both as a comprehensive national film history and as a reflection on colour in cinema, and will be a valuable and lasting contribution to the field of film studies.

## Notes

1. Batchelor 2000.
2. Street & Brown & Watkins 2012; Street & Brown & Watkins 2013.
3. Andrew 1979.
4. Abel 1999.

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## About the author

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