Abstract

The Chromatic Narrative: Semiotic Subversion and Identity in *Wicked* and *Anora*

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Colour functions as a powerful visual language in cinema which creates emotional responses and conveys ideological meanings and develops narrative structure beyond spoken dialogue. The project "The Chromatic Narrative: Semiotic Subversion and Identity in *Wicked* and *Anora*" examines the symbolic, psychological and semiotic use of colour in the films *Wicked* (2024) and *Anora* (2024). Rather than viewing colour as a merely aesthetic device, the study situates it within broader philosophical, psychological and cinematic traditions that recognise colour as a carrier of meaning and affect. The project uses ancient and modern colour theories which include Aristotle, Bharata Muni and Goethe and current film theory to study how particular colours like red, green, blue and pink function within the narrative systems of the selected movies. By juxtaposing *Wicked* and *Anora*, the project highlights how chromatic strategies function differently across genre, setting and cultural context. In the end this study demonstrates that colour in cinema is not ornamental but an essential storytelling element in cinema.

THE CHROMATIC NARRATIVE: SEMIOTIC SUBVERSION AND IDENTITY IN *WICKED* AND *ANORA*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled "The Chromatic Narrative: Semiotic Subversion and Identity in *Wicked* and *Anora"* is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Sayoojya C. S., Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "The Chromatic Narrative: Semiotic Subversion and Identity in *Wicked* and *Anora"* by Reba George Mathew is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Introduction

Colour is one of the most fundamental elements shaping human perception and artistic expression. The study of colour in philosophy, psychology, art and cinema extends beyond its material or physical properties, revealing its vast potential for artistic and symbolic meaning. Colour plays a crucial role in structuring human experience and identity, as it establishes emotional atmosphere, reflects psychological states and invests objects and spaces with deeper significance.

Meaning in movies isn't limited to what characters say or how the story is set up. It is actually built into the frame itself. Color is the most visible tool in a filmmaker's toolbox, even though lighting, composition and costumes all have their roles. In the same way, it serves as the main source of mood, an identity for character development and a silent carrier for ideology.

The subject matter of this project deals with the study of the use of colour theory or the use of colour as a tool for story development in the cinema films *Wicked* (2024) and *Anora* (2024). Colour plays a particularly powerful role. Colour has the ability to evoke emotion, suggest psychological states, reinforce themes and guide audience interpretation without explicit verbal explanation.

Color has long fascinated and been analysed by humans. Ancient colour theorists like Aristotle believed that colours resulted from the combination of light and darkness. So an intense crimson might have been produced according to Aristotle by combining black which was equivalent to darkness with sunlight or the lighting of a fire. Another line of thought from the ancient Indian sage Bharata Muni, described the symbolism of colours in his *Nâtyashâstra a*ssigning them to theatrical personas.

The theoretical investigation into colour actually predates cinema itself. Early philosophical discourses go back as far as Aristotle while Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours* marked a significant turn in the understanding of colour as a psychic and emotional rather than a strictly scientific phenomenon. Goethe emphasized that colours affect human feeling and perception in subjective ways an idea that remains highly relevant to film studies (Goethe 302). In modern criticism, theorists like Patricia Bellantoni have continued such notions into cinematic discourse stating that colour in film is intentional, symbolic and closely tied to character development and narrative progression (Bellantoni 6). For Bellantoni colour defines and highlights the character arcs while affecting audience reactions to the film on an emotional level.

Modern understanding treats colour vision not merely as a biological reflex but as a complex integration of retinal processing and learned cultural significance. In psychology, colour vividly reveals human emotional responses as red connotes arousal or importance and blue calmness or tranquillity. These notions coexist at two levels: some are innate, such as the use of red to symbolize alarm and awake responses while others are culturally conditioned as expressed through the Western tradition where white connotes cleanliness or purity. Designers and visual artists acknowledge that colour symbolism emerges from the subjective meaning's humans attribute to different colours enabling colour to communicate complex ideas more immediately and effectively than language alone.

In cinema, the significance of such colour associations is widely acknowledged with filmmakers intentionally using colour to communicate emotion, establish atmosphere and strengthen narrative meaning. Contemporary studies underscore that

colours and editing are deliberately used by directors to shape viewers' emotional perception. In short colour in film is far more than decoration: it is a coded language that filmmakers speak to the audience. With the development in digital cinematography and colour grading today's filmmakers have more control over colour palettes than ever before. This has led to more advanced use of colours in films. As Bordwell and Thompson note, colour in film frequently serves a narrative function by guiding viewer's attention, reinforcing thematic concerns and shaping emotional atmosphere rather than simply providing visual decoration. As a result the analysis of colour theory has become a pivotal element in the understanding of contemporary films.

This project examines the application of colour theory in two films released in 2024: *Wicked*, directed by Jon M. Chu and *Anora* directed by Sean Baker. Even though the films are highly diverse in terms of genre, tone and cinematic approach the application of colours plays an important role in both the films. While Wicked is a fantasy musical film that abounds in stylization and symbolism Anora is a realist film. *Wicked*'s palette, green for Elphaba and pink for Glinda encodes character arcs and underlying themes of friendship and duality. By contrast, Sean Baker's *Anora* a contemporary social-realist drama set in a Russian-American community embraces a mostly muted palette of whites, blacks and grays accented with symbolic reds. In *Anora*, reds accentuate significant moments in the narrative symbolizing emotion and tension.

This project is organised into two analytical chapters. Chapter One examines the theoretical foundations of colour theory and its significance within cinematic studies. This chapter traces the historical development of colour theory from early philosophical thought to modern film criticism.

Chapter Two applies the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier to a close analysis of *Wicked* and *Anora*. It looks at how color improves the story in two completely imaginary worlds. In the analysis for *Wicked*, the symbolic contrast between the greens and pinks will be discussed as a way of creating meaning and reinforcing the themes and concerns of the narrative through the use of the opposing colours by exploring how Elphaba's green signifies otherness, transformation while Glinda's pink represents innocence, privilege and social conformity. In *Anora*, the use and limitations of red and blue in a relatively neutral palette will reveal the way in which the colours represent the themes and concerns of the narrative.

The final goal of this project is to show that color in movies is more than just surface. By comparing *Wicked* and *Anora,* it proves that no matter the genre, color theory is a key. Putting *Wicked* next to *Anora* shows how color theory functions as a vital storytelling tool in all genres, revealing fundamental facts about identity, power and the human state

Chapter 1

Psychological Foundations and the Semiotics of Colour.

Colour is the quality of an object that produces various visual sensations, depending on how it reflects or gives off light. Colour theory is the study of how colours work together to evoke emotions and create meaning. The origin of colour theory can be traced back to Aristotle's work, *On Colors.* In his work he argued that all colours originated from the blending of white and black. He viewed colour as a mixture or blend or juxtaposition of black and white (Aristotle, *On Colors*). According to Aristotle, the four elements - air, water, fire and earth played a major role. He associates simple colours with the basic elements and points out that more complicated colours such as gold can be obtained by mixing the elements with each other. Aristotle viewed colour as a natural phenomenon rather than as an independent entity.

In contrast, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* presents colour as a symbolic and expressive tool in performing arts. Bharata's contribution to colour theory lies in his symbolic and aesthetic use of colour to express emotion, meaning and character. Similar to Aristotle, Bharata did not approach the concept of colour scientifically but rather employed it to convey emotional states or *rasas* (Schechner 3). In his theory he formulated nine rasas, each of which is associated with a specific colour. For instance, the emotion of love (*śṛṅgāra*) was linked to the colour light green while anger (*raudra*) was associated with red.

Isaac Newton's theory of colour presented in his 1704 work *Opticks*, demonstrated that white light is composed of a spectrum of colours. He discovered that

the light from the sun can be bent to varying degrees by a prism and as a result a spectrum of colours ranging from red orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet (*Opticks*). Newton's most famous experiment involved passing a beam of white sunlight through a triangular glass prism. Through this experiment he discovered that the white light can be split into a continuous band of colours. This was called a spectrum. Newton emphasized the complexity of light by stating, *"if the Sun's Light consisted of but one sort of Rays, there would be but one Colour in the whole World"* (*Opticks*). This insight supported his conclusion that white light is not a singular entity but a composite of all the colours within the visible spectrum. Newton challenged Aristotle's view of colour as a product of mixing light and darkness. Newton proved through his experimentation that colour is an inherent property of light itself. This inspired him to devise the first colour wheel. The colour wheel introduced by Isaac Newton, is the circular arrangement of the seven spectral colours - red orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. The colour wheel was the first visual model to represent the continuous spectrum of visible light in a circular format allowing colours to be understood in relation to one another and making their interaction contrast and harmony easier to comprehend. The wheel is divided into primary colours which include red, blue and yellow, secondary colours which consists of the colours green orange and violet and tertiary colours which includes the mixtures of primary and secondary colours. Artists in many fields use the colour wheel to create colour schemes and see how colours work together.

While Newton's work laid the foundation for the scientific understanding of light and colour, the study of colour took on a more psychological and perceptual dimension with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours.* Unlike Newton who approached

colour from a purely physical and mathematical perspective, Goethe focused on how humans actually experience and perceive colour. Goethe challenged Newton's views on colour arguing that colour was not simply a scientific measurement but a subjective experience perceived differently by each viewer (Goethe 10). Goethe's subjective rather mystical theory of colours permits him to speak most persuasively regarding colour harmony and aesthetics. Unlike Newton who considered colour to be a property of light itself, Goethe believed colour emerges from the interaction between light and darkness as perceived by the human eye. He observed that colours appear at the boundaries or "edges" between light and shadow, such as when light passes through a prism or when looking at coloured shadows. This concept suggests that colour is a product of perception and interaction, not just a physical wavelength. He developed his own colour wheel which differs from Newton's in both structure and purpose. This wheel was designed to reflect the psychological and emotional effects of colours rather than just their physical properties. Goethe assigned different emotional qualities to different colours - green suggested harmony and peace, yellow suggested brightness and warmth, red suggested dignity and strength. His ideas about the emotional and psychological impact of colour have influenced filmmakers and cinematographers. Many filmmakers deliberately use colours to evoke emotions and convey themes, reflecting Goethe's focus on the expressive and psychological impact of colour.

Goethe's emphasis on the emotional power of colour is evident in the film industry. Color psychology in film and TV is the strategic use of colours to evoke specific emotional and psychological responses from the audience. Meticulously chosen colour schemes are used by filmmakers to create mood, character development, narrative theme

reinforcement etc. For instance, red functions as a colour that people use to represent their feelings of passion and their perception of danger while blue serves as a colour that people use to show their feelings of peacefulness and their experience of sadness and their need to be separate from others and green represents growth and nature and envy. Various colour combinations and juxtapositions can create different moods, highlight contrasts and bring visual interest to a design. By manipulating the hue, saturation and value of colours in a scene, directors and cinematographers can shape the narrative and deepen the audience's connection to the story.

The historical development of colour in cinema can be traced back to the silent era. In this era, filmmakers applied single hues across entire scenes to suggest the mood or time. Although early films were natively black and white, colour was introduced as early as the late 19th century through labor-intensive manual methods. According to scholar Todd K. Platts, these methods included "hand-tinting," where individual frames were painted by hand and "toning," which used chemicals to replace the silver image with a coloured dye (42). Researchers developed initial techniques which created a "coded language" that allowed viewers to interpret emotional signals through specific colour codes which used blue to show nighttime and red to indicate fire or danger (Platts 45). The major breakthrough came with the advent of Technicolor in the 1930s, the first widely successful colour process. Technicolor is a family of colour motion picture processes.

The early two-colour system was limited but improved upon with the three-strip Technicolor process introduced in the 1930s.

The historical journey of cinema from black-and-white to colour was not merely a technical upgrade but a profound shift in narrative theory and audience psychology. Modern day filmmakers utilize colour theory as their primary visual system which enables them to express complex themes through nonverbal means. Through colour psychology filmmakers use specific colours to create emotional states in viewers while showing a character's dramatic transformation. According to cinematography expert Blain Brown colour functions as a psychological tool which affects how viewers interpret "social vulnerability or emotional withdrawal" (115). Color functioned as a psychological instrument which directed viewer emotional experiences from the moment movies began to use it because colour functions as a fundamental element which shapes cinematic understanding. Modern cinema achieves artistic and realistic colour integration through its transition from early colour systems which created "sensory distraction" to its use of precise digital colour control which enables storytelling to deliver a deeper and more realistic viewer experience.

The visual narratives use colour symbolism through multiple systems which operate together instead of depending on personal interpretation. Human physiology shows that different colours produce different light wavelengths which activate human nerves to create specific physical reactions that range from increased alertness to peacefulness. The body generates physiological responses which create the basis for emotional and symbolic interpretations. Movies use colours to create emotional effects which guide audience reactions because colours affect human mood and emotions and mental processes without needing spoken words or direct storytelling techniques. Human development of colour perception functions as an evolutionary advantage because

humans developed colour sensitivity to detect prehistoric dangers while essential colour groups such as red and green signal threats and safety and vital signs and decay. Cinema uses fundamental visual perception methods because these methods customers use to comprehend visual stories. The meaning of colour arises through its relationships with other elements in a film because its value depends on how it interacts with contrast and saturation and lighting and framing and storytelling elements. The connection between colour and emotional or conceptual elements in movies receives support from three distinct areas which include biological reactions and psychological impacts and cultural understanding of emotions.

In contemporary cinema, colour theory serves as a fundamental tool for directors and cinematographers to communicate mood, emotion and narrative meaning. By applying principles such as complementary colours analogous schemes and contrast, filmmakers guide the viewer's psychological and emotional response. Through colour psychology, filmmakers tap into the viewers' subconscious reactions, intensifying the impact of scenes and narratives. For instance, consider using a burst of colour to enhance the emotional impact on a scene or if one character in your film goes through a dramatic journey over the course of the film, consider giving them an associative colour that transitions over the course of the film. Each colour carries its own associations and connotations, influencing the viewer's perception and feelings. Filmmakers also consider the symbolic meanings of colours rooted in cultural and psychological associations. Red can suggest love anger, passion, desire etc, yellow might signify wisdom, knowledge, relaxation, joy, happiness, optimism etc, further emphasizing certain moods or themes.

To ensure balance and harmony in visual composition, many filmmakers also apply the 60-30-10 rule. In this guideline, 60% of the frame is taken up by a dominant colour. This colour forms the visual base through large surfaces like walls, floors or backgrounds and sets the overall mood and tone. Next, 30% is filled with a secondary colour that supports the main hue. This colour appears in elements like furniture, clothing or set pieces adding contrast and depth. Finally, 10% is reserved for a highlight or accent colour. This colour is used sparingly to focus the viewer's attention on key elements such as important props a character's costume or significant details. This technique is effective in controlling mood, guiding the viewer's eye and strengthening visual storytelling (No Film School).

Colour has well-documented psychological effects on viewers and colour psychology in film refers to the strategic use of hues to evoke specific emotional responses. The warm colour red represents high-arousal energy which people associate with intense feelings of danger and aggressive behaviour because psychological research shows that red increases heart rate and brings about higher body awareness. The colour red has the longest wavelength and that makes it the most visible colour in the colour spectrum. Its ability to instantly grab people's attention is the reason why it's often used to warn people of impending danger (Cherry). Across cultures, people intuitively associate red with the concept of anger. This relationship makes sense given that many people get red in the face from increased blood flow when they're angry.

Beyond danger and aggression, red also functions as a powerful symbol of passion, love and human desire. Psychological research shows that these associations shape how people perceive others especially when they are attracted to someone. A 2008

experimental study established that colour alone determines how people judge desirability. In the study, male participants were shown identical images of a woman, with the only variation being the colour of her clothing. Participants who saw the woman wearing red found her more attractive and sexually desirable than those who saw her dressed in blue. The results show that red serves as a visual cue which increases attraction while maintaining its symbolic connection to desire and emotional intensity.

The colour blue evokes the extensive space of the sky and ocean while representing peace, tranquillity and trust. The colour blue can express feelings of sadness and deep reflection. Blue creates two different emotional states through its various shades and saturation levels which produce calming effects and cold distant feelings (Handley).

The colour pink which people associate with "innocence and sweetness" serves as a tool for directors to create theatrical characters who hide their real selves behind "feminine" cosmetics (Digital Synopsis). The presentation shows a created world which appears soft but actually protects a delicate self-image together with social demands.

Green is perhaps the most complex colour in cinema. The colour green frequently represents "otherness" which also includes "corruption" according to their findings. Handley expands on this because green functions as both "vitality and harmony" according to him. The use of green in a story line indicates that a character either returns to their natural state or experiences complete control through jealousy.

Directors and filmmakers use the idea of semiotic subversion to challenge conventional or culturally fixed meanings of visual signifiers, such as colour and to reshape audience perception in line with a character’s development or the narrative arc. The process of semiotic subversion involves changing established visual signs which

include cultural meaning of colours to create new narrative functions. This technique allows a director to challenge the audience's preconceived biases by evolving a colour's symbolic weight as the story unfolds. In the movie *Wicked*, this theoretical framework is applied to the colour green, which serves as a primary vehicle for the protagonist's transition from a social outcast to a figure of reclaimed authority. The colour green functions as an initial sign of deviance because it serves as the visual representation which shows Elphaba's "otherness" that Hollywood uses to show "corruption, danger or the uncanny". Elphaba's path toward self-actualization causes the colour to change its meaning because it begins to represent what Paul Handley calls "vitality and harmony" (Handley). The green skin which people used to see as a mark of shame now stands for natural power and biological sovereignty. The film shows through its colour changes that meaning exists as a space where characters can turn their excluded status into the core of their identity.

Building on these psychological foundations, the theoretical contrast between pink and blue serves as a primary tool for chromatic gender-coding in cinema. In the movie *Wicked,* the directors use theatrical character development through the colour pink which shows how women in their productions use "feminine" makeup to conceal their authentic selves (Digital Synopsis). The character uses "feminine facade" to create an identity which society accepts but her true self remains hidden. It functions as a visual cage that reinforces a character's position within a dominant social hierarchy. The usage of blue in the movie *Anora* demonstrates the "introspective void" which exists as the actual space beyond the artificial environment that people create to perform their roles

(Handley). The use of blue tones in movies shows filmmakers want to move from a warm visual effect towards displaying their main character's mental condition.

The development of colour theory from Aristotle's basic research of elements to present-day digital cinema technology demonstrates that colour exists as more than an aesthetic choice. The system operates as a detailed system which establishes automatic emotional and physical reactions without requiring cognitive involvement. The combination of Newton's scientific spectrum with Goethe's psychological theories and early film tinting's secret language enables directors to create powerful storytelling methods through non-verbal communication. The theoretical framework establishes the required perspective which will guide the analysis of *Wicked* and *Anora*.

By moving beyond the surface level of visual appeal, colour functions as a storytelling tool which enables character development and supports social themes. *Wicked* uses green and pink to challenge cultural stereotypes because its high-fantasy setting enables character transformations through changing colour meanings while *Anora* uses desaturated colours to show the main character's financial situation in real life.

Chapter 2

Decoding the Narrative Function of Colour and Realism in *Wicked* and *Anora*

Colour theory in cinema functions not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a narrative and ideological system through which meaning is constructed. Rather than functioning as a mere decoration, colour participates in the construction of character identity, emotional tone and ideological meaning. Colour motifs are significant and are used to support how characters view each other and how the readers view the characters. Films such as *Wicked* (2024) and *Anora* (2024) exemplify the deliberate use of colour theory in visual storytelling. *Wicked* and *Anora* present contrasting cinematic worlds, one rooted in fantasy and musical spectacle, the other in social realism. Both *Wicked* and *Anora* use carefully chosen colour palettes to reinforce their stories and characters. *Wicked*'s lighting, sets and costumes all use a vivid, technicolor-inspired colour scheme. *Anora*, on the other hand, emphasizes its themes of aspiration and danger by using a more subdued base of grays and neutrals, punctuated by strategic pops of red and other brights. In contrast, the use of colour by *Wicked* and *Anora* is remarkably different and is related to the respective genres and themes they portray and explore. *Wicked* relies heavily on expressive and symbolic colour aligning with traditions of musical theatre and fantasy cinema.

In *Wicked,* colour functions primarily within the symbolic and expressive framework described by Goethe, where the colours are employed to evoke emotional responses and convey moral and psychological states rather than simply represent physical reality.

Wicked uses colour contrasts, especially pink and green, to show the differences between Glinda and Elphaba. As director Jon M. Chu explains, “I mean, there’s colour all over it. This controlled yet expressive use of colour enables *Wicked* to maintain visual spectacle with realism while remaining grounded, using colour not only to differentiate characters but also to convey themes of belonging, exclusion and moral complexity. *Wicked’s* colour palette is more than just aesthetic. It's integral to the storytelling, representing the contrasting worlds of Elphaba, played by Cynthia Erivo and Glinda, played by Ariana Grande. The movie is rich in symbolic colour contrasts, most prominently expressed through the recurring juxtaposition of green and pink. Elphaba’s green skin marks her as different and misunderstood, showing how she stands apart from society an idea that echoes Aristotle’s view of colour as something that shapes how we perceive the natural world (*On Colors*). It also reflects Goethe’s psychophysical analysis of green, which associates the colour with tension, balance and transformation (*Theory of Colours*). The colour green immediately marks Elphaba as the outsider. As critics note, Elphaba’s green “marks her as ‘other’ from birth” and symbolizes both her alienation and innate magic (Color Institute). In Oz, green has historically signalled villainy as seen with the 1939 Wicked Witch but *Wicked* subverts this expectation. Elphaba’s green transforms into ‘a rallying colour,’ taking on heroic significance when she embraces it.

The cinematography underscores Elphaba’s journey. The distinctive lighting approach undertaken by Brooks is evident in the long sunset sequences that follow Elphaba's journey of self-discovery, such as the forest scene where she sings the song ‘I’m Not That Girl,’ building up to the climactic moment in ‘Defying Gravity’. In the final act, Elphaba ascends the Emerald City tower, discovers her inner strength and soars

into the approaching night, silhouetted in vivid green light against the dark sky, transforming the very trait that others once used to shame her into a source of power. Green here is not merely 'cool and calm', it is saturated with meaning. Even the black dress and hat of Elphaba are accompanied by green illumination and surroundings. Throughout *Wicked,* green follows Elphaba's transformation from an outcast to a hero. Green in *Wicked* is no longer just "the intimidating colour of an outsider" from *Oz*'s perspective, it becomes the colour of transformation and self-actualization for our sympathetic heroine.

Wicked employs complementary colours like green and pink to highlight conflict and friendship. Jon M. Chu defended the film's more desaturated aesthetic, especially when compared to the technicolor vibrancy of *The Wizard of Oz.* Jon M. Chu explained in an interview that "*There's color all over it. I think what we wanted to do was immerse people into Oz, to make it a real place."* (Fisher). The film uses warm and cool tones to mirror the characters' journeys. The colour green is directly linked to Elphaba who embraces her green skin as a symbol of her individuality, strength and resistance against the conformist norms of the land of Oz. On the other hand, the colour pink symbolizes Glinda's polished, popular and traditionally accepted persona while also hinting at superficiality and the illusion of goodness beneath the surface. The sun always sets for Glinda while Elphaba's life is associated with the setting sun. The green vs pink contrast highlights the central themes of the movie - outsider vs insider, tradition vs rebellion, good vs evil etc. In *Wicked*, colour isn't just for aesthetic pleasure but it's narrative.

In contrast to Elphaba's green, which evolves from a marker of otherness into a symbol of power and self-realisation, Glinda's pink remains tied to social acceptance,

privilege and idealised femininity, reinforcing her position within Oz's dominant social order. Glinda's world is suffused in pink; as Brooks notes, "the sun would always rise for Glinda" (Blair). Accordingly, Glinda's arrival in her glittering pink bubble is bathed in soft early-morning light, visually reinforcing her association with optimism, privilege and social approval. Glinda's first appearance is scored in the pink-tinted dawn. As Brooks recalls, when Glinda's bubble lands, "the sun is right behind her early in the morning (Blair). During the 'Popular' number, the cinematography emphasizes a prolonged sunrise, with the sun slowly rising over an extended stretch of screen time and culminating as Glinda ascends a staircase framed by a rosy pink dawn. This extensive use of pink sunrise reinforces her connection to daybreak and new beginnings. On campus, she is surrounded by pastel frills and a whimsical pink palette, underscoring her privileged, "perky popular girl" image. However, Glinda's visual arc is marked by a gradual softening of pink. The bright hues of her early appearances slowly give way to paler, more nuanced shades as she matures. Her pink wardrobe 'evolves from simply decorative to more muted and sophisticated tones,' reflecting her growing compassion.

Cinematographer Alice Brooks further emphasizes a symbolic use of hue. Alice Brooks along with John Chu carefully planned a 'rainbow' motif, in which each major sequence is dominated by a distinct colour (Blair). This approach is evident in the Ozdust Ball a narrative turning point where Elphaba and Glinda acknowledge their bond, which is lit predominantly in blue to signify intimacy and emotional truth. Likewise, sunrise and sunset become narrative colour cues. Brooks notes that the lighting design ensured the sun 'always set for Elphaba and always rose for Glinda'(Blair). This contrast is highlighted by bathing Glinda in warm morning light and Elphaba in deep twilight.

During Glinda's arrival in the bubble and her ‘Popular’ song sequence, the sun is right behind her encompassed in pink whereas Elphaba's scenes such as her forest ballad “I’m Not That Girl” takes place during an extended sunset and her climatic “Defying Gravity” ends as she soars into darkness (Blair)

Wicked also draws on classical associations of colour. Elphaba’s signature green skin serves as the film’s most striking chromatic cue. Color analyst Bellantoni observes that in *The Wizard of Oz*, the face of the wicked witch is completely green and she becomes absolutely virulent, ‘she is evil incarnate’ (Bellantoni). However, the film *Wicked* recontextualizes this. Elphaba’s skin becomes a visual metaphor for her difference and the prejudice she faces. In contrast, Glinda's pink which later softens into pastel tones emphasises traditional girlish innocence and the playful almost bubble-like quality of her early character. Goethe's colour psychology associates pink/ red tones with warmth and passion; pale pink may reflect naiveté. Glinda’s introduction, enveloped in pink light and costume, visually marks her as the initially innocent and socially privileged witch. In contrast, Elphaba’s scenes unfold in encroaching shadows, using darkness to foreshadow her inner strength, moral complexity and growing defiance. Goethe taught that colours gain psychological meaning through contrast and harmony. In *Wicked,* the juxtaposition of green and pink invites constant comparison. Bellatoni's colour semiotics reinforces that these are not arbitrary pretty hues but coded signals.

The sets of *Wicked* are equally colourful and thematic. Production designer Nathan Crowley built fantastical environments that use bold colour and texture to signal place and mood. The key scenes in *Wicked* deploy specific hues to convey emotional meaning. Blue is used to signal intimacy and emotional connection, pink evoke innocence

and new beginnings and Elphaba's green marks her alterity, drawing on long-standing associations of green with otherness, envy and social unease. This approach aligns with Bellantoni's argument that cinema employs colour to reinforce both character and narrative as colour 'can visually help define a character arc or layer a story'(Bellantoni). The use of lighting and colour clearly separates Elphaba's journey from Glinda's, highlighting the film's emphasis on empathy rather than 'othering'.

Unlike the heightened fantasy palette of *Wicked* and *A*nora (2024) uses colours in more subtle yet psychologically complex ways. Sean Baker, the director of Anora, is known both for his work in social realism and his concern with colours in films that emphasize the latter. Anora is structured around a recurring palette of red, white and blue, colours that together evoke the complex and often deceptive promise of the American Dream. The colours in the film articulate themes of desire, labor, class and emotional volatility. It encapsulates Anora's struggle for survival through passion and exploitation in both class and gender conflicts. Director Sean Baker employs a predominantly grey and muted urban palette, reflecting social realism and economic harshness. Against this muted visual backdrop, red emerges as a recurring motif, drawing on principles of contrast and echoing Bellantoni's reading of red as a colour associated with passion and danger. This controlled palette of red and blue colours aligns with Bellantoni's assertion that colour in cinema is most effective when it is driven by narrative purpose and character psychology rather than by decorative excess.

The most striking colour motif in *Anora* is red, which recurs throughout the film in costumes, lighting, interior spaces and urban signage. The colour red becomes synonymous with Ani's identity and struggles. Red symbolises desire, vitality and risk,

marking her emotional intensity within an indifferent urban environment. Although Ani is a sex worker, the film refuses to turn her labour into spectacle. Sex work remains one of the most heavily stigmatised professions, with workers routinely subjected to social, economic and moral discrimination. In 2001, during the 49th Venice Biennale, Italian sex workers protested inhumane working conditions by holding up red umbrellas, turning the colour into a global symbol of resistance and sex worker rights. Red, once simply a marker of the profession, is now a symbol of solidarity. By treating sex work as just another form of labor, the film actively reduces stigma, making the prominent use of red feel like a subtle yet powerful nod to the ongoing fight for sex worker rights. In the United States, red is often associated with contemporary political symbolism, most visibly through MAGA hats and Republican Party imagery. But red has always been politically charged, with meanings shifting across time and geography. It started as a colour of power and authority, worn by emperors and religious leaders. But over time, it became a symbol of rebellion. *Anora* draws on this layered history of red, deploying it within contemporary urban spaces to reflect the tensions between power, labour and defiance that shape Ani's lived reality. At its core Anora is about class mobility, the longing for a life just out of reach. Sean Baker describes *Anora* as a labour film, explaining that "there was a real intention to be intercutting Ani's work with other people's work and showing that there are more similarities than differences with sex work and other forms of labor, which all can sometimes feel menial" (Baker). Ani is repeatedly associated with red across her wardrobe and accessories, from her New Year's Eve dress and Vegas swimsuit to the soft cherry-coloured scarf, scarlet tinsel woven into her hair and the ruby-red flowers she carries at her wedding. These carefully chosen red

accents are far from incidental. The use of red tones across her wardrobe, makeup and props enhances her visual intensity, making the character appear more provocative and magnetic.

Anora introduces a particularly significant red object, the scarf. The director revealed that this prop "began it all" when it came to his colour palette (Baker). Ani's scarf becomes an extension of her character. It first stifles her screams, then later shields her from the cold. It transforms from an object of suppression to one of solace. Embodying Goethe's idea that colour carries emotion, the scarf's red implies both sensuality and suffering. This is particularly brilliant because red is itself a colour that is full of contrasts. It is full of passion and conflict, representing love and hate, unity and struggle alike. *Anora*'s red is not random, it marks Ani's profession, her politics, her desires and her struggles throughout the film. In *Anora*, red is never romanticised. Unlike the glossy warmth of classical Hollywood melodrama, the red in the film is grittier, fake and neon, to reflect the kind of transactional environments Ani moves through.

In contrast to red, blue is used to mark moments of emotional withdrawal, loneliness and reflection. Blue is used to highlight Anora's desire to transcend her circumstances as seen in her blue dresses and its role in the broader American dream symbolism. In *Anora*, blue serves as a counterpoint to red's intensity, subtly highlighting the emotional toll underlying moments of apparent control or exhilaration. The colour blue can often be seen washing over Anora during moments of silence or stillness, visually isolating her from the surrounding world. The interplay between red and blue mirrors Anora's oscillation between performance and selfhood. In the red phase, she is active, public and economically productive. In the blue phase, she is private, weary and

emotionally fragile. Color is here a signifier that stands in for the struggle between the public persona and the private self.

While red and blue punctuate the film, much of *Anora* is grounded in neutral, desaturated tones: greys, beiges, dull greens and browns. These colours permeate the urban landscape, reinforcing the film's commitment to social realism. By saturating the urban environment with these colours, the film underscores its dedication to depicting the emotional and economic realities of Ani's world. *Anora's* neutrality is used specifically to draw attention to economic limitation and emotional stasis. By using such visual restraint, the effect is made even greater when colour is used because it is not just decorative. Another aspect pointed out by Bordwell and Thompson is the limitation of colour saturation in a realist film in order to maintain the sense of reality (Bordwell and Thompson 178). This is clearly demonstrated in *Anora*, where the colourlessness is used specifically to demonstrate the normality of Ani's experience, which is not aestheticized in order to be hardship.

Colour in Anora also has significance as a marker of class and power. Red-lit luxury spaces contrast sharply with the dull tones of everyday life, visually separating aspiration from reality. This transition between the colour markers also indicates transition levels for the characters along the lines of their class and access. Anora's passage through the coloured spaces represents the turbulence of her life in terms of the class structure.

Both *Wicked* and *Anora* illustrate that colour is a narrative tool. Each film's palette aligns with character and theme. In *Wicked*, the dominant colourfulness is such that a burst of bright colour stands out, such as the green of Elphaba, pink of Glinda and

splashes of rainbow colour at strategic intervals. *Anora*, refuses subtlety and paints every frame. The film also draws on historical associations: red signals labour and socialism, desire and sexuality and the stigma attached to sex work while blue, though visually cool, represents everyday struggle and subdued longing. Conversely, the green of *Wicked* has its counterpart in *Anora's* red, both signifying the color-coded participation of the feminine protagonist within the potentially black-and-white surroundings.

While *Wicked* uses excessive colour and contrast to heighten fantasy and moral conflict A*nora* relies on minimalism and selective saturation to emphasise realism and emotional intensity. *Wicked* employs symbolic palettes and dramatic contrasts to externalise inner conflict and transformation while *Anora* uses controlled colour motifs to anchor character and critique social realities. Both films make use of colour as a deliberate tool in cinematography and lighting. While *Wicked* uses anamorphic lenses as well as natural sunrises and sunsets to capture bright and cheerful light and landscape scenes A*nora* uses artificial light and saturation grading to generate artificial and emotionally provocative colour fields.

In both films, colour enhances character development. In *Wicked*, Elphaba's transformation from darkness into light, is echoed in the gradual appearance of colour in the world, culminating in the colourful finale while Glinda's rainbow starts with just a bubble but spreads to include wider colour as she grows up in *Wicked.* In *Anora* ani's palette shifts with her status adopting warmer tones as she gains control. In all these instances, the audience absorbs emotional messages conveyed through colour, echoing Bellantoni's observation that colour influences audience emotional response.

Just as *Wicked* uses green and pink to explore identity and morality A*nora* uses colour to chart a descent from fantasy into reality, critiquing the myth of upward mobility and the emotional cost of chasing a life built on illusion. In both films, colour is not just visual, it is emotional, political and narrative (Goethe). By juxtaposing these two distinct colour journeys, it becomes clear that chromatic subversion functions as a form of visual truth-telling. The director of Wicked establishes a moral examination through his green/pink colour system which compels viewers to recognize that the "ugly" green colour represents true identity while the "beautiful" pink colour serves as an artificial social mask. The red and blue colours which Sean Baker uses in Anora function as his artistic criticism of how capitalism shapes human perception. The theoretical intersection establishes colour as the connector between a character's personal mental state and their political situation.

Both the films *Wicked* and *Anora* show that colour functions as the link between a character's internal identity and their external battle. The final determination of truth comes from colour which exists in both the saturated fantasy world of Oz and the gritty neon-lit streets of present-day Brooklyn. The green colour transformation in *Wicked* represents power restoration to the character while *Anora* uses red colour desaturation to show how the protagonist experiences an overwhelming encounter with reality.

Conclusion

This project aimed to investigate the role of colour theory in contemporary filmmaking by conducting a thorough analysis of the films *Wicked* (2024) and *Anora* (2024). Through the incorporation of both traditional and contemporary approaches to colour theory, this project has proved that the inclusion of colour is an essential part of cinematic narratives that assist in character development as well as influencing the perception of films. Colour not only acts as a tool in enhancing aesthetics but also in influencing narratives.

Colour is deeply tied to story and ideology. Neither *Wicked* nor *Anora* treats colour as a neutral backdrop. In *Wicked*, Elphaba's green skin and costume immediately mark her as "other," while Glinda's pastel pink costume and surrounding light communicate innocence and warmth. Such palette selections also embody the movie's storyline of the coming together of two very different witches. In *Anora*, the lack of colour in the city settings makes the red colour stick out even more. This planned use of colour in a movie provides an interpretation of symbols and meanings in the movie that alter the audience's interpretation. *Wicked* employs the full colour spectrum to dramatize the ambiguity of good and evil. On the other hand A*nora*'s monochromatic colour scheme captures the protagonist's world with a documentary-like realism, yet the strategic reds introduce intensity and danger. In both films, directors use colour composition (paintings, props, lighting) as a storytelling mechanism, demonstrating that colour is an active element of the cinematic narrative. *Wicked* and *Anora* demonstrate how colour functions as an integral narrative instrument.

Wicked's world is lush and highly stylized. It follows a tradition of Hollywood musicals and fantasy in which even the environment is saturated: fields of flowers, bright Oz skies and flamboyant costumes. These colour choices align with character arcs; as director Jon Chu intended, Glinda's world is suffused with sunrise pinks and golds (reflecting her optimistic personality) while Elphaba's journey unfolds through twilight blues and emerald greens (reflecting her outsider status and growing self-empowerment). Conversely A*nora'*s palette is deliberately "grounded," echoing its social-realism heritage. This corresponds with the dark, hard-scrabble environment of its urban New York bases. While *Anora* employs bright colours like the soft pink club lighting present in its dance club sequence, this strongly literal sampling of colour is obviously linked with *Anora's* sensuality and the danger that she faces. This comparison also connects to colour theory. Aristotle viewed colour as a mixture of light and darkness a concept *Wicked* visualises through its recurring dawn and dusk imagery, sunrise for Glinda and sunset for Elphaba. Goethe's focus on the 'psychological effect of colour' relates to the character of *Anora* as the use of the colour 'red' in what is otherwise a grey environment creates a powerful emotional response that corresponds to the Goethe theory of the 'psychological' effect of 'colour.' Even Newton's 'colour wheel' is referenced in *Wicked's* production design, where they literally tried to 'use every colour in the rainbow' in different places for different reasons, corresponding to Newton's 'primaries' and 'the spectrum.'

In Chapter One, the theoretical basis of this project was established through an examination of colour theory from its earliest philosophical roots through to modern times and the development of the way colour has been employed by filmmakers in contemporary cinema. The discussion of Goethe's emphasis on the emotional effects of

colour highlighted how colour operates subjectively, influencing mood and perception (Goethe 302). According to Bellantoni, the view that colour has a significant position in this visual language in cinema outlined the role by which colour shapes character development in films.

The concepts introduced in Chapter Two were applied to show how colour theory is used in *Wicked* and *Anora* through a specific analysis. The way in which green and pink symbolically represent conflict in the ideological and emotional realms in *Wicked* was explored. The green of Elphaba symbolizes the othering and marginalization of the character until she appropriates it as a symbol of power herself. The colour green according to Bellantoni often carries dual meanings of growth and danger in film a duality that Wicked consciously employs. The emotional and moral development of the character of Glinda originally symbolized by the colour pink, symbolically linking her with innocence and advantage, develops as the story progresses in response to emotional growth and moral understanding.

In the same way, the ideas covered in the previous chapter were used to examine the role of colour in the film *Anora*. Likewise, the set of notions that were introduced within Chapter Two were used for the purposes of analysing the role that colour theory has within *Anora*. The subtle but deliberate use of red colour and blue colour within the movie has thus been explored for the purposes of illustrating the role that these colours play within Anora as emotional markers rather than visual showpieces. Red, closely associated with Ani, symbolises desire, labour, risk and visibility, reflecting both her economic agency and social vulnerability. On the other hand, blue colour often presents

the moments within Ani's experience where she withdraws from experiencing her own emotions as well as is drained from her own longings.

This project demonstrates the relevance of colour theory in film studies. The project clearly explains the colour theories and shows their relevance in *Wicked* and *Anora.* We see that, no matter how big or small, color in movies always gives the story more depth. Color plays an important part in how movies are understood, mixing reality and art to create something more creative.

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