

The Visual Color Language Framework in Seasonal Storytelling of La La Land

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Abstract: This paper examines the dynamic visual color language in *La La Land* (2016) through a seasonal narrative framework. Combining color psychology and film semiotics, it analyzes how shifting color systems—particularly blue, red, yellow, purple, and green—externalize the protagonists' psychological evolution and relational transformations across five seasonal chapters. The study reveals that color transcends decorative symbolism to become an active narrative force, where recurring hues acquire layered meanings. This 'same color, different meaning' mechanism deepens the film's exploration of artistic dreams and reality.

Keywords: *La La Land*; Visual Color Language; Film Semiotics; Seasonal Narrative

Color, as one of the core elements of film language, not only shapes visual beauty, but also carries rich symbolic meanings and emotional expressions. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the film begins with a deep blue hue, symbolizing the mystery and vastness of the universe; in *In the Mood for Love* (2000), the director boldly employs a variety of highly saturated colors to express the emotions of the protagonists. These color languages are all used to convey themes, depict psychological states, and guide audience emotions. *La La Land* (2016), as a model of modern musical films, has particularly exquisite use of colors: Director Damien Chazelle, with the seasons as the narrative framework, externalizes the struggles and growth of the main characters Mia and Sebastian between dreams and reality through the contrast and gradient of colors such as blue, red and yellow (Gan 78).

Most existing studies have focused on the symbolic nature of a single color in *La La Land*, such as yellow representing hope and blue metaphorically representing real pressure (Lei 40),

or analyzing color contrast and the lightness and purity of colors (Gan 78). However, few scholars, starting from the integrity of seasonal narratives, explore how the color system dynamically responds to character relationships and psychological changes.

This article combines the theory of color psychology and film semiotics, and through the method of close reading of the text, analyzes the color grammar under the five-segment structure of winter, spring, summer, fall and winter in *La La Land*. This article not only deepens the understanding of visual poetry in films, but also provides a new case analysis for the theory of color narrative.

I. The Visual Color Language Framework in Winter

The winter section of the film constructs a visual world dominated by blue. This color choice not only serves the aesthetic presentation but also aligns with the classic association of blue with

‘melancholy, rationality, and depression’ in color psychology. It can serve as a visual metaphor for real-life predicaments and create strong psychological implications in multiple scenes. Mia’s audition scene is highly representative: she stands in front of a blue background wall wearing a blue coat (Chazelle 00:07:30-00:08:56). This superimposition of the same tone not only intensifies the sense of oppression, but also implies through the homogeneity of colors that she is being swallowed up by the reality system, pursuing her dreams but not achieving them. After Mia and her roommates left for a party, when the camera switches to Mia walking alone on a blue street, the cold light projected by the street lamps and the dark-toned murals further materialize the psychological space (Chazelle 00:15:40-00:16:41), giving a concrete expression to the abstract state of ‘frustration’. This color treatment externalizes the character’s inner loneliness and loss into a perceptible visual experience.

It is worth noting that the appearance of red elements in winter scenes often has a turning point significance. When Mia was attracted by Sebastian’s improvisational jazz, the red door (Chazelle 00:16:42) burst into the blue-dominated scene in a striking visual posture, with its color saturation far exceeding that of the ambient color. This design echoes the theory of ‘liminal space’ in film semiotics. The red door serves as a critical point for transition and transformation. It is not only a physical entrance but also a symbolic channel from reality to ideal. The intervention of red broke the dominance of blue, suggesting a brief breakthrough of artistic passion from the predicament of reality. This narrative technique of color confrontation is vividly presented in the storylines of both main characters.

Sebastian’s winter color trajectory is equally

intriguing. When he was playing the piano at home (Chazelle 00:20:54-00:21:25), the curtain in the picture is white, symbolizing Sebastian’s purity of his dream, the faint blue tones emerging in the picture suggested the heavy pressure of life behind his artistic pursuit. What is even more dramatic is the performance scene in the bar: forced to play Christmas songs, he is dressed in a blue suit (Chazelle 00:22:18). This color choice reveals the embarrassment of an idealist. In Sebastian’s home, when he talks to Laura (Chazelle 00:18:37-00:20:45), who represents the real world, Laura’s blue outfit echoes the scene’s tone, forming a complete color narrative loop. Blue here is not only an color, but also a visual representation of the oppression of reality.

The color grammar of winter presents a rigorous systematicness: blue serves as the dominant color to construct the fundamentals of real-world predicaments, while red becomes the visual spark of dreams. This color ratio not only serves to create the atmosphere of the scene, but also implies the narrative state where the main characters are still mired in the quagmire of reality. The moment Mia passed through the red door (Chazelle 00:17:13) and Sebastian’s fingers flowed out of improvisational jazz (Chazelle 00:24:11-00:25:12), the white light symbolizes Sebastian’s purity and love for his dream, and these flashes of red lights in the blue main tone precisely foiled the dynamic evolution of color relationships in the subsequent seasonal sections.

II. The Visual Color Language Framework in Spring

The spring segment of the film vividly presents the budding and development of the emotions between the two main characters through a series of warm and bright colors. Mia was wearing a

bright yellow dress and Sebastian was wearing a red coat. They met again by the swimming pool (Chazelle 00:27:16-00:29:34). This high-brightness color combination not only broke the cold tone of winter, but also hinted at the first emotional collision between the two through the visual impact of the colors. Yellow, as a symbol of hope, and red, representing passion, blend perfectly here, laying the groundwork for the subsequent emotional development. The emotional changes of mutual affection between the two are reflected through the symbolic use of colors (Lei 41).

As the plot progresses, the color language becomes increasingly rich and delicate. In the scene of dancing on the mountain top (Chazelle 00:32:46-00:36:34), the gradual transition of the sky from purple to pink and then to orange forms a natural emotional spectrum. Meanwhile, a large area of the picture is purple, which is a blend of red and blue. This carefully designed color change externalizes the process of two souls attracting each other into a visible visual experience. The café reunion scene (Chazelle 00:39:33), where both characters are dressed in white, employs the color's innocence to symbolize the nascent stage of their romantic connection.

The street stroll section (Chazelle 00:39:54-00:43:29) demonstrates the director's exquisite control over color details. Along the way, from coffee shops to green plants, there were shades of green of different purities, creating a harmonious yet not monotonous scene (Gan 78). In color psychology, green is often associated with growth and change. This is reflected in the fact that the frequent appearance of green elements in the environment contrasts sharply with the red bag on Mia's shoulder. The use of this complementary color implies the flow and change of emotions. When they passed by the red-tinted theater, this

strong visual symbol directly pointed to Mia's deep-hidden dream of performing. Then, the faint yellow street scene, through a gentle color change, foreshadowed a subtle emotional evolution. The two truly entered each other's hearts and listened to each other's dreams.

It is worth noting that the blue background in which Sebastian talks about his jazz dream forms an interesting contrast with his passionate words (Chazelle 00:43:49-00:45:44). This counterpoint of color and content ingeniously reveals the tension between his beautiful ideals and the harsh reality. Although jazz is very interesting, fewer and fewer people like it nowadays. Meanwhile, Mia's dress choices for important occasions are also quite meaningful: the red coat she wore during the second audition (Chazelle 00:48:31) demonstrated her determination to pursue her dream, while the green dress she wore during the meal with her boyfriend Gray (Chazelle 00:50:32-00:54:55) indicated the life choice she was about to make, which was to leave the restaurant and watch the movie with Sebastian.

The spring chapter reaches an emotional climax with a dance under the violet night sky in the planetarium (Chazelle 00:57:24-00:58:52). Purple, as a blend of red and blue, not only creates a romantic atmosphere, but also symbolizes the ultimate fusion of two souls with dreams, embodying boundless possibilities. This elaborately designed color metaphor perfectly echoes the seasonal theme and sets the tone for the subsequent emotional development.

III. The Visual Color Language Framework in Summer

The summer episode of the film, through a series of highly saturated color applications, brings the emotional development of the two main

characters to a climax, while also setting the stage for a turning point in their relationship. Mia's attire at this stage showcases a rich variety of colors, ranging from the romantic purple and pink to the dynamic deep blue and light blue, and then to the passionate red. These highly saturated clothing colors not only reflect her abundant emotions but also symbolize the mutual pursuit of two free souls in their artistic endeavors.

The key turning point occurred in the scene where Keith, dressed in yellow, invited Sebastian to join the band (Chazelle 01:02:48-01:03:28). The sudden introduction of the bright yellow disrupted the original color balance and became an important signal to change the course of their relationship. Of course, yellow is not entirely a positive color; it represents a two-sided 'hope'. For Sebastian, it is a career opportunity, but for the romantic relationship between Mia and Sebastian, it is indeed the beginning of separation and conflict.

In the scene of planning the future in the bedroom (Chazelle 01:03:36-01:05:31), the interwoven color composition of red and blue is highly meaningful. Although red dominates, the faint appearance of blue implies the subtle tension between ideals and reality. This color confrontation is intensified when Mia is on the phone with her family. Wearing a blue outfit, she chats with her family about her and her lover's current situation, mentioning economic pressure and dream pressure (Chazelle 01:05:32-01:06:22). This scene presents the pressure of real life through both auditory and visual aspects.

Sebastian's career choice has been exquisitely interpreted through the language of color. When he decided to join the band, the figure walking outwards the blue light background and the blue suit he wore during the performance (Chazelle 01:06:23) clearly indicated his mental journey

of compromising with reality, demonstrating the realistic shift of an idealist.

In the choral scene part of *City of Stars* (Chazelle 01:08:53-01:11:06), its color design is particularly wonderful. The collision of the yellow wall and the green curtain not only creates a visual impact but also implies a subtle change in the relationship between the two through the color symbol. When the picture is eventually completely occupied by the green curtains, this single-color enhancement treatment marks that their relationship has reached the depth of soulmates.

The color gradient at the end of summer is highly dramatic. The visual change from the bright and highly saturated tones to the dark blue tones vividly presents the process of estrangement in the relationship between the two people. There is a scene with a 'red-yellow-green' three-color composition (Chazelle 01:12:17). Especially the picture where Mia is in a yellow background has already indicated the approaching of a major change. The intense contrast of red and blue lights in the performance scene of Sebastian's band (Chazelle 01:13:29-01:16:33), with Sebastian enveloped in red and Mia in blue, ultimately completed a visual statement of the differences in their values, setting the stage for the conflict that erupted in the fall chapter.

IV. The Visual Color Language Framework in Fall

The autumn chapter precisely depicts the process of estrangement in the relationship between the two main characters and their respective growth trajectories through a series of profound color transitions. When Mia was on the phone with Sebastian under the blue street lamp (Chazelle 01:16:58-01:17:36), the entire scene was shrouded in a single blue tone. The continuous use of this

cool tone suggested a gradual decrease in the emotional temperature between the two. The moment she pushed open the door of her home (Chazelle 01:17:46-01:24:39), the scene suddenly shifted to a gloomy green. This abrupt color change created a strong visual warning, foreshadowing the intense conflict that was about to break out beneath the calm surface. What we need to pay attention to is that green can also symbolize jealousy, immaturity or unease in color psychology. And in the fall chapter, this color points more strongly to crisis, unease and the impending imbalance of the relationship between the two characters.

Mia's one-man show stage performance marked an important growth node. She wore black for the first time in the film (Chazelle 01:26:22), announcing the maturity of her artistic personality at the level of color symbolism. It is particularly worth noting the composition of the scene when she is about to take the stage: the figure in the center contrasts sharply with the red background on the left, and this color layout implies that she is firmly moving towards her dream. Meanwhile, Sebastian was shooting a magazine (Chazelle 01:26:43-01:28:00). His black and white look, combined with close-ups of the red and black piano keys, formed a set of exquisite color metaphors. The external black and white outfit shows his compromise with reality, while the red on the keys reveals the unextinguished artistic passion deep in his heart.

The quarrelling scene at the entrance of the theatre (Chazelle 01:29:05-01:30:45) presents the ultimate breakdown of the relationship through the interweaving of complex colors. Purple, green, blue and other colors alternate in appearance. Especially the final frozen scene of black, purple and blue side by side forms an emotional dissection picture: the past warmth represented by purple is crushed to pieces by the black contradiction and the blue

reality. This elaborately designed color montage visually presents the essential contradiction of the relationship between the two people.

When Mia returned home (Chazelle 01:31:05-01:31:24), the entire room was in blue, and she was also wearing a low-saturation green, hinting at her inner frustration. However, fall is not all about the bitterness of separation. When Sebastian brought the news of the audition (Chazelle 01:32:25-01:36:28), the warm yellow tone briefly returned, like a ray of sunshine in the gloom, suggesting a turning point in their relationship. In the subsequent audition scene (Chazelle 01:36:29-01:43:46), the use of light blue tones is quite meaningful. Unlike the oppressive deep blue of winter, this bright light blue symbolizes Mia's lightness and anticipation of regaining her original dream, laying the groundwork for the subsequent emotional release. The entire fall chapter completes the narrative transition from conflict to reconciliation through the ups and downs of color emotions.

V. The Visual Color Language Framework in The Final Winter

The final winter chapter of the film concludes the emotional journey of the two main characters through restrained use of colors. In the last chapter, Mia made her debut in a brand-new black and white outfit (Chazelle 01:44:26). This color choice marked her complete transformation—black highlighted maturity and stability, while white retained artistic purity. The combination of the two perfectly presented the image of an artist who had achieved self-actualization. This minimalist color scheme implies that the character has completed the entire process from greenness to maturity.

In the scene of reunion at the club (Chazelle 01:48:11-01:58:48), the deep blue lights create a calm and restrained atmosphere. This kind of blue

is no longer the cold tone symbolizing oppression in the last winter chapter. Instead, it has been endowed with a new connotation. It represents the two souls' calm acceptance of reality and their peaceful release of the past. When Sebastian played their theme song, the color language reached its final elevation.

The most profound part is the treatment of the purple light when Mia leaves the bar (Chazelle 01:59:22-01:59:57). Purple, as the fusion of red passion and blue rationality, transcends the limitations of time and space at this moment, solidifying their love into an eternal artistic existence. The color handling in this part, just as the protagonists once said, 'I will always love you' (Chazelle 01:43:18-01:43:23), echoes the words the two said to each other on the mountain at the end of autumn, as well as the purple night sky on the mountain in spring (Chazelle 00:34:08), forming a perfect narrative loop. This evolution—retaining the same color while altering its meaning—reflects the characters' psychological transformation from passionate love to maturity and release. It suggests that although their real-world relationship has ended, in the realm of art and memory, their emotions attain a form of permanence.

The winter chapter elevates the epilogue of a love story to a philosophical level through this highly condensed color grammar. The maturity of black and white, the relief of blue, and the eternity of purple together form a visual allegory about growth, compromise, and the eternity of art, drawing a profound conclusion to the film.

VI. Conclusion

The color system of *La La Land* is the core visual language of its seasonal narrative framework. Each main color carries specific symbolic meanings (Chen 34) and undergoes significant different meanings of the same color

evolution process with the change of seasons and the development of character relationships. Blue has evolved from symbolizing real predicaments and repression to representing differences in values, and ultimately has been elevated to rational relief and calm acceptance of the past. Red originally represented the outburst of artistic passion and the call of ideals. Throughout the film, it symbolizes enthusiasm, love and dreams. Yellow mainly symbolizes hope, vitality and opportunity, but its involvement also brings about a turning point in romantic relationships. Purple, as a blend of red and blue, initially symbolizes the integration of souls and infinite possibilities. Eventually, it completes the closed loop and elevates to an eternal artistic existence transcending time and space at the end of the film. Green symbolizes the integration of change and flow during the growth period of emotions, but points to unease and contradiction at the critical moments of a relationship between two people. Black and white symbolize the maturity of the character and the purity of the artistic dream.

In this film, color is no longer merely a simple visual decoration, but a dynamic language that deeply participates in the narrative, portrays the characters' psychology, and implies changes in relationships. This can play an effective role in expressing and emphasizing the completeness of the content and narrative of the play (Yan an Li 158). The contrast, gradient, saturation change of colors and the transformation of the main tone all precisely correspond to the encounter, passionate love, conflict, separation and growth that Mia and Sebastian experienced on their journey of pursuing their dreams. What is particularly crucial is that the film vividly presents the complex changes in the inner world and emotional relationships of the characters under the changing seasons through the evolution of 'same color but different meanings'.

In conclusion, the color system of La La Land has successfully constructed a unique visual poetry language with its rigorous systematicness, profound symbolism and dynamic evolution. It not only serves the structural framework of the narrative of the four seasons, but also profoundly reveals the struggles, choices and growth of individuals under the interweaving of dreams and reality. Color, here, has become the core force of narrative that transcends words and touches the heart directly.

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