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Mafia in Film

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13 December 2024

The Importance of

Color in Cinema

Martin Scorsese's film *Casino* (1995), derived from Nicholas Pileggi's novel, "*Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas*," color structures the film's visual narrative and impacts the viewer's emotional response. A subtle yet crucial element in creating mise en scène influences the viewer's perception of the world and each character within it. The film generously employs color psychology to reflect the action and the shifting dynamics of power, loyalty, and chaos within the Las Vegas Mafia gambling empire. In this analysis, color will be examined to see how *Casino* employs it as a storytelling device, showing its importance in establishing the tone, themes, and characters, highlighting examples like Ace's suit evolution, the casino's psychological design, Ginger's wardrobe, and Saul Bass's title sequence to prove the underappreciated genius of color psychology in film.

Color did not start as an aesthetic in film but rather an element that locked our eyes into a particular character or scene. It was used to show importance, like in William Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938), a black-and-white film where **Julie (Bette Davis)** arrives at her ball in a red dress, rather than the standard color the rest of the young girls expectedly show up in, which was white. "The dress photographs as nonwhite...showing Julie's act of rebellion," exemplifying that color helps add another layer to metaphorical meanings and complexities of characters (Anatomy of Film, 95).



Once film transitioned from black-and-whites to the preferred color film in the late 1960s, color became even more natural. While it was not as synonymous with realism, it was used to build concepts, bring effects to life, and become a place for the imagination's gateways to open. The colorful world in Victor Flemming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) uses color to "represent the world of the imagination, as distinct from the real world" (Anatomy of Film, 97).

Alternatively, certain directors adapted color to their visual styles, creating an ambiance and adding another element to the film's central themes and tones, like the one and only Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is arguably his most creative and colorful work, honing in on specific color symbolization, such as green and red. In this case, red "symbolizes danger, passion, and death; green symbolizes life, growth, and particularly rebirth" (Anatomy of Film, 98).



One last great example to emphasize how much color can do for a film is Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999,) which takes the color red and exploits its ambivalence. It starts right from the beginning: "Red imagery begins with the title in red lettering against a background that looks like a home movie...with red symbolizing passion and vitality on one hand and death on

the other” (Anatomy of Film, 100). This is a perfect example of color aligning with the film’s visual narrative and storytelling, and I think Scoreses’s mission with **Casino** also aligns with that goal.

Casino starts with a theatrical explosion sequence with **Sam “Ace” Rothstein (Robert De Niro)**, based on Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal, getting into his car as the car’s bomb detonates. Transitioning into the film’s title sequence, which we will explore later. The tone is established with hints of betrayal and inevitability as a metaphor for Ace’s eventual takedown, defining the plot. Throughout the film, we follow the highs and lows of Ace’s rise as a sports handicapper interested in the Chicago mob to be the Tangiers Casino’s floor manager in 1970s Las Vegas. We get a **long tracking shot** of Ace as he walks through the casino floor, explaining the environment in a voiceover and transitioning into a **bird’s eye shot** of the casino’s crowdedness. Only after a little time is he immediately seen as a success, as his betting skills prove him well. He even has a philosophy that keeps him there: “In the casino, the cardinal rule is to keep them playing and keep them coming back. The longer they play, the more they lose, and in the end, we get it all” (Casino). As he grows more powerful, we see a physical and egotistical change. The moral corruption of power starts to take over from his professional life to his personal. We see this with the people he holds close in his life, as they juxtapose his stability and capabilities when working.

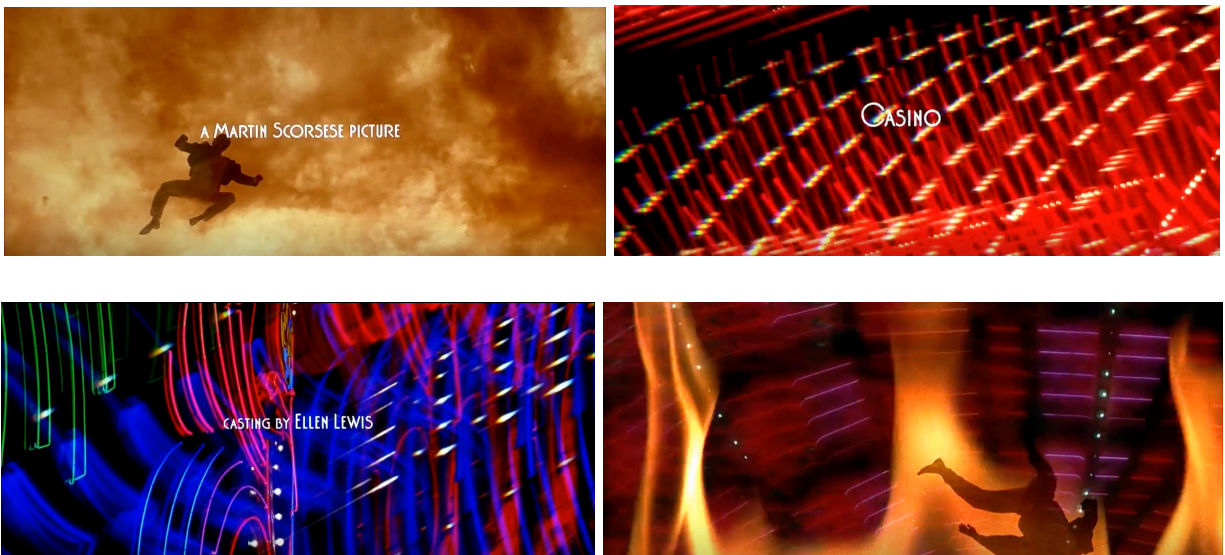
First is his childhood friend, **Nicky Santoro (Joe Pesci)**, who eventually follows him to Las Vegas from Chicago as he sees an opportunity to expand his influence in the Mafia world. And so he does, but he justifies the move initially as a way to watch Ace’s back; we, as the audience, learn Nicky’s true intentions very early on, as he violently makes his name known. It is clear that Nicky and Ace differ in how they function with power. Nicky wanted this power to be

known, not caring what he says or who he threatens, having this self-awareness of the mob world that puts a chill down your spine. In a **close-up shot** of Nicky's face, he says coldly, "You put my head in a vice? I'm gonna remember it. I don't give a fuck who I have to kill" (Casino). It is clear that Nicky is a powerful character, and when he and Ace have a confrontation in the **desert sequence**, I was nervous for him as the viewer. We get **wide shots** to capture the empty, barren desert around them, symbolizing their growing isolation as Nicky brings too much heat on them in the public eye. As their friendship strains more and more, between the heat and Nicky and Ginger hooking up, he eventually is met with a tragic ending: being murdered in a cornfield with his brother **Dominick (Philip Suriano)** as a result of being this liability to everyone, most notably the mafia.

The other person is the uncontrollable force of **Ginger McKenna (Sharon Stone)**, who comes from a manipulative nature, a woman who shares an abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend **Lester Diamond (James Wood)**, who aided in her drug addiction that leads to a spiraling chaos ruining her marriage with Ace, and effecting both their lives. When first meeting Ginger, there is a **slow-motion close-up shot** of her in a sparkling, glowing dress that shines under the casino lights. A golden aura that highlights her and Ace's initial and instant attraction to her. We witness firsthand her crashing out as she becomes more and more erratic in her drug problem. A sequence of **jump cuts** that look like they were filmed on a **handheld camera** show Ginger ripping her closet out of her closet, trashing the place. Showing us a very different woman from the one Ace met in the beginning. Ginger is also met with a tragic ending, much like Nicky, as she attempts to escape it all, leaving with a stash of Ace's money and jewels he gave her in a suitcase. She does not make it as she gets caught by associates and beaten, leading her to go to a motel and overdose all alone. We do not see the actual death, but Scorsese makes what is

happening very clear by using the art of suggestion. After all this death, we finally cut back to the beginning explosion sequence and see that Ace makes it out alive, although with little left to live for. We see him return to working as a sports handicapper, as he now lives in San Diego. It is a bittersweet ending underscored by loss rather than a win.

Now, honing in on the use of color when analyzing *Casino*, the role of graphic designer Saul Bass must be considered. His title sequence emphasizes the casino's world of sophistication and bright lights, with the visual transformation mirroring and foreshadowing the rise and fall of Ace's empire. This energy is depicted using bold, deliberate colors, shapes, and fonts that enhance and add to the story's aesthetic and creative depth. The sequence opens with flames from a car explosion, accompanied by Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. The fiery imagery symbolizes Ace's downfall, with the flames transitioning into neon lights and abstract patterns that evoke the glitz and chaos of Las Vegas.



The use of red, black, and gold in the title sequence also reflects the film's central themes of greed, danger, and moral corruption. Red signifies the violence and passion we feel from Ace's opening monologue about trust and love. "When you love someone, you gotta trust them.

There's just no other way. You've got to give them the key to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point" (Casino). Saul described the scene saying, "Think of Dante's Inferno and Hieronymus Bosch, set against Bach's St. Matthew Passion... Ace's body or soul rises and falls within a fiery Las Vegas Purgatory. Between his ascent and descent, the flames dissolve into a montage of surrealism that captures the city's throbbing assault on the senses" (Kirkham). Bass's minimalist, graphic-heavy style amplifies the psychological and aesthetic depth of the film, reinforcing this concept of the highs and lows of power which eventually leads to destruction.

The mise en scène in *Casino* is created by the colorful livelihood of Las Vegas, with most of the film taking place on brightly colored sets, with characters dressed in their most oversized, loudest outfits. The strategic use of color in the casino environment is put there to evoke specific emotional and psychological responses from the viewers. According to casino color theory, colors are chosen to induce these specific moods while gaming. Physical casinos will use "bright colors on their main gaming floors such as red and gold to energize and activate their patrons into action" (New Wave). Red is a classic color to use because of its urgency, raising one's heartbeat by just looking at it, bringing in this excitement that pushes players to make quick, not thought-out decisions. You see this in the film, with red all over the staff's uniforms, the interiors of the casino, gold on the outside, and the slot machine's blinking lights.



Blues and greens are then used in all the restaurants and lounges as a place of relaxation. "Documented to reduce heart rates and promote a sense of calm, which becomes important in longer, high-stake sessions" (New Wave). It is all meticulously planned out to work

subconsciously, making it a very stimulating environment that keeps them coming back. Funny enough, with that in mind, the film works very similarly with characterization, starting with Ace's suit design.

Sam "Ace" Rothstein's suits are one of the fundamental visual motifs used within the framework of color balance in the film, with his color palette changing in unison with his fortunes and gain of control. Initially, we start with vibrant and confident hues to underscore his authority and organization when he receives the job as a casino manager. As he starts to lose grip due to a combination of his personal and professional life unraveling, the color tones begin to darken, mirroring his foreshadowing descent. Similarly, the casino as an environment itself transforms over time. At its start, the palette exudes this luxury and order. However, as corruption and mismanagement begin, the colors grow harsh, reflecting this moral and institutional decay.

Ace's diligently curated wardrobe is a visual meter of when he is in control and when his life is unraveling. His suits start simple and plain. As he starts the film living his life in Chicago, helping place bets, he does this while looking professional yet boring. Gray suits, light-colored shirts, browns, light blues, yellow, and pink ties—he was the man in the back, not on the front lines. There wasn't this added element of the glitz and glamour of Las Vegas.



Thus, he arrives in polished whites with gold or a bright solid color like green, signifying his newfound power over the casino, and his obsession soon starts to grow with perfection. These new colors in his suits align with his role as a disciplined, detail-oriented manager who thrives on order. You can feel the sense of control and Ace's need for perfection, especially in the blueberry muffin scene where he complains to the chef that every muffin needs to have 15 blueberries exactly, no matter what. It is in his prime, and he will not do it another way other than concise and precise.



However, we see this change as cracks form in his life and his suits become louder and more conspicuous, too ambitious for his own good. Suits like the bright orange suit with the matching orange tie when he confronts Ginger about where she has been for the first time, knowing about her and Nicky's affair. Or this navy sparkly suit when he started his entertainment show after he got booted from being casino manager because of all the heat on Nicky. It is the manifestation of his ego, which is shown in the flashiness of his clothes, making him more and more evident.

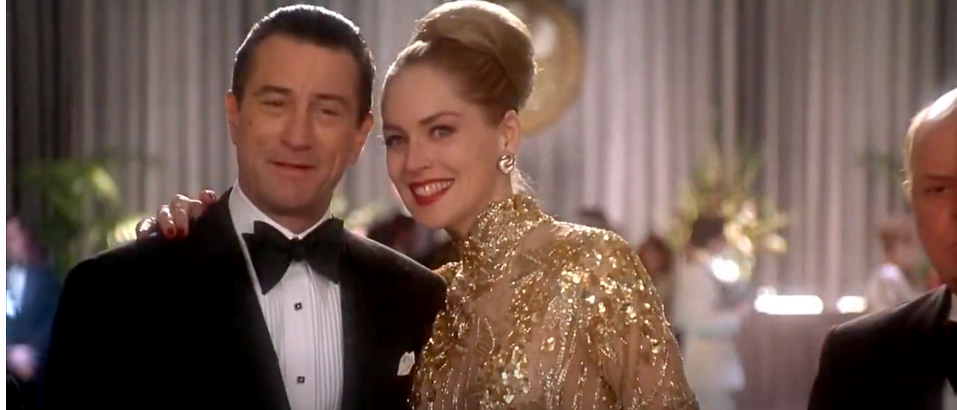


This leads us to the brightest suit of all: the coral jacket he wears during the car explosion scene. This flamboyant choice metaphorically represents his overreach and, because of it, his end of reign. As the audience, we see “Ace has gone too far. He’s no longer behind the scenes; he’s no longer just manipulating things behind the screen. He’s being very, very upfront and very in the face of the mob”, stated by the co-costume designer, John A. Dunn (The Ringer). The evolution of his wardrobe mirrors his journey from control to chaos, illustrating the psychological toll of his ambitions and the pursuit of material success.



Meanwhile, Ginger's wardrobe is a visual extension of her character arc, shifting from glamorous tones to darker, more chaotic shades as her life spirals out of control. In her prime, she is covered in sparkles, gowns in metallic hues paired with her impeccable makeup projecting this confidence and sophistication. This allows her to be marked as a calculated femme fatale who easily manipulates those around her.





As she becomes involved with Ace, her clothes soften to baby blues and whites, reflecting her transition into the role of wife and eventual mother. These tones symbolize her attempt to fit into Ace's world, more through his control than her own free will.



As their relationship deteriorates, her wardrobe grows bolder and more provocative. Reds, blacks, and animal prints dominate, showing this rebellion and unhappiness within her and her desire to reclaim her independence. This shift in costume design highlights Ginger's internal

conflict as she wants more and more materialistic things from him and her own space. Her self-destruction aligns with her visual journey as she cuts her hair, sabotages her relationship with Ace as she starts getting with Nicky, and her eventual doom ending her journey in life.



Color is more than just a visual component in *Casino*, it is the standing tool that influences the viewers' emotional and mental reactions to the film. Every color is carefully picked to represent the character arcs, themes, and the chaotic atmosphere of Las Vegas, from Ace's suits and Ginger's attire to the casino's changing color scheme. *Casino's* status as a formative work in Scorsese's filmography is cemented by its quintessential use of color, which exemplifies the profound influence of color in cinema.

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