

Becoming the Empty Formalism Coping with Color-Violence in *Upstream Color* and *Red Desert*

Through class discussion of *Suspiria* with its plurality of violence, we came up with the fundamental idea that "violence is the reduction of a human into a form," turning the human actor into an object that can be displayed and acted on, as emphasized by *Suspiria*'s extremely aestheticized murder-tableaus. By noting how the intense colored lights dominate a shot, entangling bodies and frustrating causal explanations, we go beyond Schulte-Sasse's observation that "*Suspiria* is about intense color as much as it is about anything" and instead posit that color is the driving source of violence in the film - that women are murdered not by forces of evil, but by color and aesthetics, culminating in Suzy's victory by killing the form / outline (not the body) of Helena Markos.

When we bring this idea of "color as a violent formalism" to other films, we note less of an interest in how color commits violence, but more in how to cope with its aftermath. While *Suspiria* ends with Suzy leaving the burning academy and not dwelling on the witches, we focus on the protagonists of *Upstream Color* and *Red Desert* as they attempt to gain some sense of normalcy from their traumatic experiences. Indeed, *Upstream Color* and *Red Desert* tend to elide their most violent moments - cutting away from Kris being tasered, having Kris kill the Foley artist off-frame or never showing Giuliana's accident - forcing viewers to stay and contend with the characters' present trauma from color-violence. While *Red Desert* claims that trauma comes from color's role as a formal element / method of production, *Upstream Color* sees trauma stemming from the "empty formalism" of color, a pure aesthetic force devoid of narrative meaning. Despite these differences, both films claim that the only way to fully recover from the trauma of color-violence is to become complicit with the system; one is only able to move on from their personal trauma by inflicting color-violence on others.

First, we establish that color in *Red Desert* and *Upstream Color* works similarly to the color-violence in *Suspiria*; colors in both films serve as aesthetic forces that reduce living bodies to forms,

thus creating "violence." The monochrome landscapes in *Red Desert* illustrate this property well. From the blackened trash piles where Giuliana eats her sandwich to the white factory smoke of the factory pouring over Corrado and Ugo, we are constantly being forced to reconcile with the excess color as it subordinates the people in the frame. Although some of these color-fills can be explained diegetically, they mainly serve as casting the humans in frame as Zizek's "Hitchcockian blot". The gray-painted fruit cart is not the uncanny object: it's Giuliana. This lends credence to Schrader's assertion that "I don't know why the woman [...] is sick, but I know it has something to do with that green coat." (55); by serving as the blot on the landscape, Giuliana and the other people are the ones that don't belong in these scenes dominated by color-force and are thus subject to violence.

Although there are similar scenes of monochrome color in *Upstream Color* (ex. the film's heavy desaturation is a blanket of whiteness, the connection between blue and the parasite), most of *Upstream Color's* color-violence comes from emphasizing the discontinuity between color and its source. Similar to how Argento floods a scene with colored lights to emphasize the shift from the causal world to an aesthetic-dominated world, Carruth frequently cuts between narrative scenes to scenes of unexplained color. These colorful shots only make sense with future information, ignoring causality for an aesthetic or affective effect. For example, we cut from the white-dominated scene of Kris lying peacefully on the bedsheets to a completely red shot with a channel cut through it. We have no context for these red images, even when we see some tendrils moving inside of different channels, until we cut back to the narrative sequence and see horrifying bumps crawling under Kris' skin. We then have to backtrack and realize that those previous red images were from inside Kris' body, a violent penetration mediated by color.¹ This same set of red-white contrasts is repeated when Kris attempts to cut the worms out with a knife, leaving red stains on her white skin, and also evokes earlier red / white symbols of her

1 This set of shots also shows how Carruth's color-violence is perhaps more insidious than Argento's color-violence. While Argento was "annoyed" by audiences looking away from his gory sequences (Hunt, qtd. 326), Carruth instead keeps the grotesqueness easy to watch; much like the parasite, Carruth tricks his audiences to consume first and realize the pain later.

imprisonment (the colors of the worm pill-capsule, the poker chips and yarn used to keep Kris busy). This intentional separation of cause and effect via color once again give color the sense of violence, forcibly acting on unwilling human participants.

Now that we have established that color-violence is present in both films, we now analyze what makes this color-violence so traumatizing to the characters in each film. For *Red Desert*, we find that color-violence is intrinsically linked with industry. Color, as a formal element, is a key part of the methods of production for film, just as *Red Desert's* factories are the means of production for commercial objects, a connection which is noticed and constantly enforced. Revisiting the monochrome black landscape scene, we see that shots of the black trash piles are intercut with low angle shots of Giuliana eating her sandwich while a factory tower periodically shoots out fire. The fire grabs our attention since it is the diegetic sound source, the orange flame sticks out even more in the monochrome landscape and it is the only moving object. By displacing Giuliana as the central focus of this scene, and by reminding us as its role of "source" thanks to the diegetic sound and the smoke rising from the blackened landscape, Giuliana and the audience never can forget the origin of the violently-black landscape: factory and industry. Indeed, as Antonioni points out, "it is not [Giuliana's] environment that causes her crisis. [...] Our lives are dominated by industry. [Its] products are brightly colored, and they chase after us everywhere." (Schrader, 55). Giuliana's trauma thus comes from her inability to cope with this color-violent / industry hybrid. She attempts to open up a shop to take part in this culture, even thinking about which colors will not clash with the merchandise - another clear display of color working in concert with industry. However, she is ignorant and is unable to open the shop, while Ugo demures that the shop "wouldn't look right" - an aesthetic evaluation about an industrial activity. Giuliana's isolation is underscored by the fact that her trauma is expressed in terms of industry. Ugo states that for her, "the gears still don't quite mesh together", while she screams at Corrado that she is "scared of streets, factories, colors, people, everything".

Meanwhile, *Upstream Color's* color-violence is traumatizing because of its state as an empty formalism - the logical extreme of the idea that "color is a formal element / method of production". We define "empty formalism" via Barthes' suggested definition². By repeating the signifier until it loses meaning - in this case, by constantly repeating color in a violent, anti-causal separation - we succeed in "degrad[ing] the sign's tripartite nature in order to make notation the pure encounter of an object and its expression." (148). The film highlights its interest in empty formalisms most prominently in the Foley artist character. As a master of formal elements, he takes normal occurrences (a rock sliding down a tube, the 60 Hz thrum of the power line) and defamiliarizes them in sacrifice to the aesthetic. His soundtrack envelops the entire movie, and even after the audience learns the sources of the creepy ambient music, we still become lost and disoriented, prey to the sound-violence. Similarly, the Foley artist is master of Kris and Jeff's lives, traumatizing them as they are unable to understand what is happening to them. Notably, Jeff digs up the foundation of his house to find the source of Kris' mystery sound, showing the frustration, violence and trauma of the empty formalism.

Analogues for this "empty formalism" idea occur in color throughout the film as well. For example, *Upstream Color's* opening sequence, the worm farmers pour yellow-brown tea through the worm, which somehow produces a yellow liquid with blue flecks and a shot of white circles floating and popping in purple liquid (as traditional editing techniques would lead us to believe). Combined with the Foley music throughout this sequence, we realize that we're not supposed to attribute any narrative meaning to this sequence, and is instead a study in the aesthetic power of color which can and will forcefully cause actions to happen. This style of "empty formalism" shot is repeated throughout the film, such as the shots of blue seeping through pink / yellow / green tendrils intercut with the dead

2 Alternatively, if we interpret "empty formalism" to mean dealing with pure aesthetic qualities without a backing narrative, we see further instances of this within the film. Kris' druggie provides a story to justify his questions and Kris' actions (ex. "my face is made of the sun, so that's why you can't look at me). When he leaves, all that's left for Kris to go back to is aesthetics, an unsatisfying solution that compounds her trauma.

piglets decomposing or the constant repetition of blue in situations of worm-violence (blue smiley face for "good worms", blue water of pool where Kris relives her trauma, blue marker limits for liquid, etc.).

Interestingly, despite these different forms of color-violence trauma, both *Upstream Color* and *Red Desert* offer the same solution for mastering the traumatic event - become complicit with the same color-violent system that traumatized you in the first place. For most of *Upstream Color*, Kris and Jeff attempt to comfort one another to deal with the trauma of their worm-drugging. All of these efforts are ineffective as they assume a causal world and not the empty formalist color-violent world that they live in. This misunderstanding actually leaves them vulnerable to more trauma - causing Jeff to fight with his coworkers and for Kris to suffer more nervous breakdowns. The turning point of when Kris and Jeff finally come to terms with their trauma is when Kris grabs the yellow orchid in the pool. After grabbing the yellow orchid, Kris suddenly becomes a force of yellow. In nearly every scene after this point, she is tinged with yellow - whether listening to the Foley artist's soundtrack, wearing a yellow scarf at the pig farm or painting a yellow fence. If blue is the empty formalism correlated with the color-violent worm lifecycle workers, then yellow is correlated with Kris coming to peace with her trauma.

But, how does Kris assert control of her post-trauma life? She murders the Foley artist (!), thus ensuring that the same color-violent cycle continues. In the murder sequence, Kris even shares the same clothes scheme as the Foley artist - a light collared shirt with a dark sweater with Kris' shirt being light blue, further emphasize how she now becomes the next gatekeeper over empty formalisms and color-violence. By using violence to deal with her trauma, Kris and Jeff still remain complicit and comfortable with the idea of empty formalisms and aesthetics governing the world rather than the meaning-based causal world. Even though the blue violence cycle may have ended, as Kris herself quotes from *Walden* in her final pool trip, the "prevailing blue mixed with the yellow of the sand", raising the possibility of another yellow violence cycle being reborn.

Red Desert confirms *Upstream Color's* assertion of "escaping color-violence trauma by becoming complicit in the color-violent system" by providing case studies in both Corrado and Giuliana. Both characters feel listless and do not completely buy into the industrial methods of production or the color-violent narrative. Corrado is a restless traveler who notes that "one doesn't really know what one believes in", while Giuliana's trauma is that she forgets how to love and must relearn. These joint feelings of trauma and doubt are what draw them close in the first place, similar to Jeff and Kris. However, Corrado is willing to set aside his doubts and just become part of the capitalist color-violent empire. After giving a speech about his business plan, he disappears "in a sea of desirable commodities" with the smoky atmosphere neutralizing his black and white suit against the dull green bottles (Dalle Vacche, 186). Despite his doubts in the system, Corrado is able to ignore his misgivings and become part of the means of production, hence his advice to Giuliana that she "mustn't think about" her existential trauma. This is unacceptable to Giuliana, who completely recognizes that she cannot fit in this world of industrial color-violence; she's "tried everything", even attempting the commercialization enterprise of opening her own shop and caring about the colors. Instead, Giuliana dreams of a naturalistic relationship with color, with "pink sand and blue water" rather than this production-based model. She is unable to express this desire though and is thus unable to overcome her trauma. By the end of the film, Giuliana only knows that the yellow is "poisonous" and that "little birdies know not to fly there anymore", revealing that she knows that the color-violence continues to hurt her as well as her inability to go anywhere else to escape it.

Through our analysis of these two films, we realize that color-violence does not need to be as strident as *Suspiria*; instead color-violence can permeate insidiously by disrupting our notions of causality as in *Upstream Color* or by forcing humans to serve industry via intertwined means of production. These aesthetic choices have real narrative consequences and traumatize the characters; as Corrado summarizes, "You wonder what to look at. I wonder how to live. Same thing." The two films

also suggest that the only way to deal with trauma is to become complicit in the trauma-causing color-violent system. Although this conclusion is the same of *Suspiria* (Suzy is only able to free herself by killing Helena Markos), it is a very different message than other post-traumatic film, especially the Holocaust films, *Night and Fog* and *Schindler's List*, where complicity is an absolute abomination. Further exploration is needed to determine whether this is a difference between historical-based post-trauma films and fictional post-trauma films or a difference between personal trauma and national / ethnic trauma.

From this analysis of different forms of color-violent trauma, we note that both *Upstream Color* and *Red Desert* have their trauma closely associated with the idea of work. Although we have closely linked *Red Desert* to industry production, *Upstream Color* has a similar close tie to jobs. The immediate aftermath that Kris and Jeff face from their worm drugging is of job loss; Kris is fired, while Jeff is forced to do white-collar embezzlement. Indeed, as Jeff notes as both he and Kris ride the train,, "only homeless people ride the train", highlighting their impoverishment. Following this chain more deeply may reveal some intrinsic connection between color / ornamentation with capitalism. We also note that *Upstream Color* has a huge focus on film-related jobs in particular. Kris' original job is a film editor, and the Foley artist character plays a huge role in the film. If these people are related to the methods of production for media, this means that we may be able to tie them in with the trauma highlighted in *Red Desert's* industrial-based color-violence as well as further implications for trauma performed on the audience.

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