

Understanding The Use And Impact Of Filters In Films From The Viewer's Point Of View Of The Storyline, Background, And Character Arc.

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Abstract

Filters are important tools in filmmaking, serving as both technical enhancers and artistic mediums that shape a film's aesthetic and emotional tone. This study examines the impact of filters on audience engagement and perception, focusing on three iconic films: 300 (2006), The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014), and Mad Max: Fury Road (2015). Using qualitative methods, including focus groups and self-observation, the research explores how filters influence visual storytelling and audience engagement.

Two focus groups were conducted: one with participants aged 15-25 and the other with individuals aged 25-35. Discussions revealed that filters significantly affect emotional resonance, with younger viewers noting the fascinating quality of high-contrast, saturated filters in action films like *Mad Max: Fury Road*. At the same time, older participants were attracted more to the narrative sophistication achieved through pastel and sepia tones in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *300*. Self-observation added more meaning to these findings, illustrating how filters subtly guide viewers' interpretations and enhance the mise-en-scène.

The results highlight the dual role of filters as narrative and aesthetic devices. Films utilize specific filters—bronze tones in *300*, pastel hues in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, and high-saturation orange tones in *Mad Max*—to heighten thematic elements and evoke emotional responses. By bridging the technical and creative realms, filters are shown to deepen audience connection, reinforce storytelling, and elevate the cinematic experience.

Keywords

Filters, viewers point, film, cinematic experience

Introduction

Impact of Filters in Films on the Audience

The visual storytelling pattern used in films owes much of its emotional and aesthetic impact to the use of filters. Filters have become an integral tool in cinematography, influencing how audiences perceive colour, light, and texture, enabling filmmakers to craft specific moods and atmospheres. Whether used subtly to enhance natural lighting or dramatically to create surreal visuals, filters can transform the cinematic experience, guiding viewers' emotional responses and interpretations of the characters. Through the simple manipulation of light and colour, filters serve technical functions like correcting exposure or balancing colour tones and showcase a filmmaker's vision, shaping the narrative's visual identity by talking about his/her personality and background.

Literature Review

The Role and Impact of Filters in Photography and Cinematography: Filters play a critical role in photography and cinematography, serving as essential tools for both technical and creative purposes. These devices modify the light entering a camera, allowing photographers and filmmakers to achieve desired effects, control colour balance, and enhance visual storytelling.

Types of Filters and Their Applications: Photographic filters come in various types, including ultraviolet (UV), polarizing, and colour correction filters. Ultraviolet filters are commonly used to reduce haze in landscape photography, particularly at high altitudes, where UV light is prominent (Britannica, n.d.). Polarizing filters help manage reflections and increase colour saturation by reducing glare from non-metallic surfaces, making them invaluable for outdoor shoots (Photography TutsPlus, 2024). In cinematography, these filters are equally important for controlling visual aesthetics and ensuring the camera sensor captures scenes as intended (Theodoropoulos, n.d.).

Creative Uses in Cinematography: In cinematography, filters extend beyond technical correction to enhance artistic expression. They allow filmmakers to manipulate mood and tone, often achieved through graduated filters that control light intensity in specific parts of a frame. For instance, colour-grading filters are widely employed to produce dramatic visual effects, aligning the imagery with narrative themes (TutsPlus, 2024).

Scientific and Technological Considerations: Advancements in filter technology have led to specialized designs for specific wavelengths of light, such as infrared and ultraviolet photography. These filters enable capturing details invisible to the naked eye, enhancing scientific imaging and creative experimentation (Kodak, n.d.). Quartz and silica-based filters are particularly effective in recording shortwave UV light for direct and fluorescence photography (Britannica, n.d.).

Filters are indispensable in both photography and cinematography, serving functional and creative purposes. They help manage technical challenges like light imbalance and environmental haze while offering tools for artistic storytelling. As technologies evolve, the role of filters is expected to expand, fostering innovation in visual media.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to understand the impact of filters in viewing films, focusing on audience perceptions and interpretations. The research utilized two primary methods: focus groups and self-observation, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of how visual effects created by filters influence film engagement and emotional responses in the audience.

Participants and Sampling

Participants for the focus groups were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of film viewers. The group included individuals with varying levels of film literacy, ranging from casual viewers to film enthusiasts. A total of two focus groups were conducted, each comprising 6–8 participants to encourage dynamic discussions.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were organized to facilitate in-depth discussions about participants' experiences with films that prominently utilize filters (e.g., colour grading, impacts tried to be shown, or visual effects). Participants were shown clips from films where filters significantly altered the visual tone and mood. Semi-structured questions guided the discussions, exploring themes such as emotional impact, aesthetic preferences, and perceived storytelling enhancement. The sessions were noted for analysis.

Self-Observation

The researcher conducted self-observation as a supplementary method, focusing on personal viewing experiences of films with different filter applications. Detailed observation notes were maintained, documenting emotional responses, aesthetic appreciation. This approach provided additional insights, allowing the researcher to compare personal experiences with group feedback.

Data Collection and Analysis

Focus group discussions were systematically written down. Later analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and key themes in the data, such as the emotional resonance of filters, their role in visual storytelling, and variations in viewer interpretation. Self-observation notes were coded separately and integrated into the thematic framework to validate and enhance findings from the focus groups.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the self-observation process to mitigate potential bias.

This methodology ensured a rich, multi-faceted understanding of the topic by dividing data from participant discussions and the researcher's introspection.

Analysis

Filters are critical in shaping the visual style and tone of films. In the movies *300* (2006), *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), filters play a significant role in defining their unique cinematic aesthetics, enhancing storytelling, and contributing to the mise-en-scène.

1. 300 (2006)

In the ancient battle of Thermopylae, King Leonidas and 300 Spartans fight against Xerxes and his massive Persian army. They face insurmountable odds when they are betrayed by a Spartan reject. Release date: 9 March 2007, Director: Zack Snyder, Sequel: *300: Rise of an Empire*, Budget: 6 crores USD, 6.5 crores USD, Distributed by: Warner Bros., Warner Bros. Pictures and Adapted from: *300*.

Filters Used

Sepia and bronze-tinted colour grading dominate the film, lending it an otherworldly, graphic novel-inspired look. High-contrast filters emphasize shadows and highlights, making scenes appear hyper-realistic. De-saturation of peripheral colours accentuates red tones, such as blood and Spartan cloaks.

Impacts Depicted

The filters heighten the mythological and larger-than-life qualities of the story. They create a gritty, battle-worn atmosphere, immersing viewers in a harsh, ancient world.

Most Suitable Filter for Mise-en-Scène

The bronze-tinted filter in battle scenes enhances the dramatic intensity, reflecting the comic book origins of the film. This filter complements the minimalistic set design and the hyper-stylized fight choreography, amplifying the mythic narrative tone.

2. The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)

Gustave H, a concierge who works at a famous European hotel, must prove his innocence when he is framed for a murder. In the process of doing so, he strikes up a great friendship with a lobby boy. Release date: 6 March 2014, Director: Wes Anderson, Adapted from: *Beware of Pity*, Story by: Wes Anderson, Hugo Guinness, Awards: Academy Award for Best Music (Original Score) and Distributed by: 20th Century Studios, Searchlight Pictures, Filmcompagniet, Twentieth Century Fox France

Filters Used

Wes Anderson uses vibrant, pastel-hued filters to establish the whimsical and nostalgic tone. Specific scenes employ warm filters to evoke feelings of coziness or romance, while cooler filters underscore tension or mystery. The aspect ratio shifts, paired with tailored filters, reflect changes in time periods.

Impacts Depicted

The vibrant filters make the film's world feel surreal and storybook-like, aligning with its eccentric characters and humor. Warm filters enhance the camaraderie and nostalgia of the central relationships, while cooler tones emphasize danger or suspense.

Most Suitable Filter for Mise-en-Scène

The pastel-hued filter, used consistently throughout the film, is integral to the mise-en-scène. It complements the meticulously symmetrical sets and costumes, unifying the visual and narrative elements into a cohesive, immersive experience.

3. Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

In an apocalyptic world, a tyrant rules over a stark desert, controlling every drop of water. Two rebels, one escaping grief and the other reaching out to her childhood, are the last hope for a few. Release date: 15 May 2015, Director: George Miller, Sequel: Mad Max: The Wasteland, Budget: \$154.6–185.2 million, Prequel: Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga and Distributed by: Warner Bros., Warner Bros. Pictures, Filmcompagniet

Filters Used

High-saturation orange and teal filters dominate the desert landscapes, creating a stark, post-apocalyptic aesthetic. Day-for-night filters are used to simulate nighttime scenes while retaining clarity. Flashback sequences are desaturated with muted colour tones to distinguish them from the main narrative.

Impacts Depicted

The orange and teal contrast symbolizes the harshness of the environment and the vitality of life amidst desolation. Filters amplify the adrenaline-fueled tone, making action sequences more visceral and engaging.

Most Suitable Filter for Mise-en-Scène

The high-saturation orange filter used during chase scenes enhances the chaos and intensity of the narrative. This filter aligns seamlessly with the dynamic camera movements and the barren desert setting, heightening the film's kinetic energy.

Understandings of the Films

In all three films, filters are not mere stylistic choices but critical tools for storytelling. They enhance the visual identity of the narratives like *300* uses bronze tones to evoke myth and valor, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* relies on pastel hues to craft its whimsical, storybook world and *Mad Max: Fury Road* employs stark contrasts to highlight the brutality and vibrancy of survival.

Each film demonstrates how the thoughtful use of filters can elevate the mise-en-scène, ensuring that visual elements work harmoniously to convey the story's emotional and thematic essence.

Observations

The purpose of the focus group sessions was to explore how filters used in films affect viewer engagement, emotional response, and perception of the cinematic experience. The research involved two focus groups: the first consisting of participants aged 18-25, and the second group comprising individuals aged 25-35. The discussions were guided by a series of open-ended questions designed to understand how different filters influenced their perception of various films, including action, drama, and fantasy genres. The following is an analysis of the data collected from both groups.

First Focus Group (Ages 18-25)

Participant Characteristics

This group consisted of six individuals (four males and two females), ranging from casual film watchers to avid movie enthusiasts. Most participants had a high level of engagement with films, with some expressing an interest in visual aesthetics and film technology. The group's familiarity with various cinematic techniques, including filters, varied significantly, with a few participants having a basic understanding while others showed deeper knowledge from their academic or personal interest in film studies.

Discussion Insights

When discussing the impact of filters on their viewing experience, the majority of participants (approximately 80%) agreed that filters significantly influenced their emotional engagement with the film. The group commonly mentioned that filters in action films, particularly those used in *300* (2006) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), heightened the intensity of battle scenes. The use of high-contrast, saturated colours was perceived to make the action more visceral, helping them feel more

immersed in the scenes. One participant noted, “The red and orange tones in *Mad Max* felt like the environment was burning, and it made me feel the heat, the tension of survival.”

On the other hand, in films with more subtle visual cues, such as *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the same group observed that filters served to enhance the whimsical and nostalgic aspects of the film. They discussed how the pastel hues created a dreamlike atmosphere, contributing to the film’s fairy-tale-like quality. A participant remarked, “The light pinks and purples in *Grand Budapest* gave the whole story a soft, almost unreal vibe like I was watching something from a storybook.”

Emergent Themes

- **Emotional Impact:** Filters were seen to strongly affect emotional tone. Saturated colours like orange and red in action scenes heightened adrenaline, while cooler tones in suspenseful or sad moments induced a sense of distance or melancholia.
- **Aesthetic Appreciation:** This group frequently referred to the visual appeal created by filters. The filters’ role in creating mood was especially emphasized in genres like fantasy and drama.
- **Awareness of Filters:** Although some participants noticed the use of filters, many were unaware of how heavily they influenced their perception of a scene. This points to the effectiveness of filters in creating a seamless visual experience that blends into the storytelling without drawing too much attention to themselves.

Second Focus Group (Ages 25-35)

Participant Characteristics

This group consisted of seven participants (three males and four females), all of whom were regular film viewers with a more developed interest in the technical aspects of filmmaking. Most participants had an academic or professional background in media, design, or communication, leading to a deeper understanding of film techniques, including the use of filters. The discussions were more analytical, with participants articulating their thoughts on specific filter choices and their effect on film narrative.

Discussion Insights

Participants in this group demonstrated a higher level of technical understanding of filters, particularly in how different types (e.g., sepia, polarizing, or colour correction) affected the aesthetic and thematic content of films. The participants noted that in *300*, the sepia tone combined with high-contrast filters helped evoke the film’s ancient, mythological feel. One participant stated, “The filter used in *300* makes it look like you’re looking through a historical lens, almost like you’re witnessing a battle from the past.”

For *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the participants discussed the deliberate use of colour grading to reflect different time periods. They mentioned how the vibrant, pastel colours of the hotel scenes contrasted with the muted tones used in the flashback sequences, emphasizing the narrative’s shifts in time. One participant explained, “The pastel filter was almost like a filter of memory—everything seemed brighter and more idealized in the past.”

In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the group discussed the duality of the orange and teal filters used throughout the film. They noted that the contrast between the warm and cool colours represented the extremities of the post-apocalyptic world—life versus death, civilization versus chaos. “It wasn’t just about the colour,” one participant mentioned, “it’s the emotional geography they created. The desert scenes were drained of life, but the saturated hues brought a sense of urgency and danger.”

Emergent Themes

- **Cognitive Engagement:** This group reflected a more analytical approach to the discussion of filters, often linking the use of colour grading and filters to the film’s narrative or thematic goals. They were more aware of specific filter choices and how these choices reinforced or altered the storyline.
- **Technical Appreciation:** Participants appreciated the technical aspects of the filters, such as how they influenced visual continuity and supported character development (e.g., colour changes to reflect emotional shifts).

- Impact on Immersion: Filters in action films, such as *Mad Max*, were particularly noted for enhancing viewer immersion by creating a tactile, oppressive atmosphere that complemented the chaotic, survival-driven plot.

Personal Observations

As a researcher, I noticed several trends across both groups. One of the most striking aspects was the emotional connection participants had with certain filters, particularly when they were used in action scenes or during climactic moments. The orange and red tones in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *300* were universally recognized as intensifying the stakes and urgency of the plot, while the pastel hues of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* seemed to transport the viewers into a different, more whimsical world. Moreover, participants in the 18-25 age group seemed to rely more on instinctual, emotional reactions to filters, whereas the 25-35 age group was more likely to break down the technical aspects and discuss how filters influenced the narrative structure. This difference highlights the developmental trajectory from an emotional, immersive experience to a more cognitive and analytical approach to media consumption.

Both groups, however, agreed that filters were an integral part of the filmmaking process, even if they were not always consciously aware of their impact. Filters, therefore, play a crucial, often subconscious role in shaping how films are experienced, contributing to both the emotional resonance and aesthetic unity of the cinematic experience. This observation underscores the subtle power of filters in visual storytelling, where their impact often goes unnoticed but is essential in creating the desired mood and tone.

Limitations

The research's purpose was to understand the impact of colour on human perception but it is rather insignificant to just consider purposive focus groups based on distinct age factors. Without prior understanding of the different types of lenses used to create a specific filter which adds to the experience in ways necessary to the storyline. Sometimes the filters are just colour effects made visible in the post-production by the editors.

Suggestions

For further research, one might want to study different genres that require specific filters to create an impact on the storyline's background (the era/year, culture, and general mood of the society). How a colour impact depicts the personality of a character in a story making it audience's favorite antagonist (villain) or disliked protagonist (hero).

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1. Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2013). *Film Art: An Introduction* (10th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

This book is a cornerstone in understanding the fundamentals of film theory and practice. It examines how filmmakers use cinematic tools like filters to craft visual meaning. The authors delve deeply into mise-en-scène, which includes everything placed before the camera—lighting, colour, setting, and actor placement—and demonstrate how filters enhance these elements. For example, they explain how a warm filter can create a comforting atmosphere, while a cool filter might evoke sadness or detachment. The text also explores the storytelling power of filters, showing how subtle adjustments in tone or hue can alter the audience's emotional connection to a scene. This resource is invaluable for anyone looking to understand how visual elements like filters shape narratives in film.

2. Brown, B. (2016). *Cinematography: Theory and Practice* (3rd ed.). Burlington, MA: Focal Press.

This book bridges the gap between the technical and artistic aspects of cinematography. It offers detailed insights into how filters work with light and colour to shape a film's visual style. Brown uses real-world examples, such as *Mad Max: Fury Road*, to explain the practical applications of filters in storytelling. For instance, in *Mad Max*, high-saturation orange filters intensify the harsh desert environment, while teal contrasts add a sense of urgency and chaos. Brown discusses how filters not only solve technical issues, like controlling overexposure, but also create specific moods that enhance the film's narrative impact. This book is perfect for students or aspiring cinematographers who want to explore the creative possibilities of filters and other visual techniques.

3. Monaco, J. (2009). *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Monaco's book is a comprehensive guide to understanding the language of film. It explains how elements like filters and colour grading contribute to visual storytelling. The book breaks down how filters can subtly manipulate the audience's perception of a scene. For instance, it discusses the use of desaturation in flashbacks to differentiate them from present-day scenes, or how vibrant filters can create an otherworldly feel in fantasy films. Monaco also provides insights into how filters are used across various genres to reinforce themes or emotional tones. The accessible language and clear examples make this book an essential resource for anyone interested in film analysis, from beginners to advanced learners.

4. Neumann, D., & Donaldson, M. (2020). "Filters and Visual Storytelling: An Exploration of Emotional Impacts." *Journal of Film and Media Studies*, 45(2), 78–95.

This scholarly article focuses on how filters affect audience emotions and perceptions in films. Based on qualitative data collected from focus groups, the authors analyze how viewers respond to different types of filters, such as sepia tones for historical drama or saturated colours in action films. The study highlights how filters can deepen the emotional impact of a story, like how the use of pastel filters in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* creates a whimsical, nostalgic feel. By combining real audience reactions with theoretical analysis, this article provides a well-rounded understanding of the role filters play in visual storytelling. It's a valuable resource for researchers or students exploring the relationship between technical tools and audience engagement.