

II The Meaning of Red in Movies

Or Red: Fire and Blood, Life and Death

Intro: Pop The Question

In 1993, Stephen Spielberg directed *Schindler's List* (1993) the film he considers (Does he still feel this way?) the most important of his career. The movie shows his mastery of visual imagery. Perhaps the most famous symbol in this movie is the little girl in the red coat wandering aimlessly during the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto. Spielberg said she symbolizes how obvious the Holocaust was, yet nobody did anything to stop it. It was all as obvious as a little girl wearing a red coat, walking down the street.

When he talks about the scene, he mentions the impact of having a color show up in the middle of a black and white movie, but he doesn't mention the color itself.

Which begs the question - why does Red work so well in this scene? If all that matters is having color show up in black-and-white, the symbolism would be the same if her coat was blue. But blue drastically changes the feeling of the scene, as would any other color.

Each color is packed with its own symbolism. Filmmakers may not know all the nuances of a color's history and meaning, but they understand each color's emotional payoff. So what symbolism is unique to the color red? Why do filmmakers use Red? Why do some filmmakers make such pointed, careful use of Red?

Red is Unique

The color definitely has a very unusual Biological effect on humans. It evokes all sorts of passionate emotions. When we feel angry, embarrassed, or flirtatious, we literally get Red in the face. If two boxers of equal skill fight each other, the one in Red is actually more likely to win. Several studies suggest that it's the color people look most attractive wearing.¹ There's even an urban legend that red cars are more likely to get pulled over.

Standing Out in the Movies, too!

Red stands out amongst other colors, and filmmakers have always understood this phenomenon. The screenwriters of *The Wizard of Oz* wanted to show off the beauty of Technicolor, so they had to change the plain Silver slippers from the novel. The sought after and powerful slippers did not become emerald green or bright yellow. One color suited them best.

If something is important, Red seems to get the job done on it's own.

We used the color red to indicate anything in the real world that has been tainted by the other world... red is used specifically to connote really explosively emotional moments in situations. Anytime there was red by mistake I was like get it out, get it out!²

It's no surprise that Red is mankind's original color. Not only was it the first color used in art in cave paintings³, but nearly every Western language had a name for it before any other color. Before Newton's Rainbow, early philosopher's put Red in the middle of the color spectrum⁴, directly in between Black and White.

Red, White, and Black

So it's no surprise that many filmmakers have an instinct to place black, white, and red together. It seems like reducing the color spectrum exponentially enhances the symbolic weight of these three colors.⁵ Snow White, the evil queen dressed in black, the red apple.⁶ ~~Or the Red of life pitted against a cold machine.~~⁷

¹ [Study 1](#) and [Study 2](#), and let's use a clip from [the woman in the red dress from The Matrix \(1999\)](#)

² *The Sixth Sense*

³ Cave painting

⁴ Crop out the DaVinci one

⁵ *Raging Bull; Do the Right Thing*

⁶ *Snow White*

⁷ *2001: A Space Odyssey*

But I think to really get at the *meaning* of such a unique and important color, and why a scene like in *Schindler's List* would use it, we have to look at it's historical significance.

Fire and Blood

The perception of color is not just a biological phenomenon but a cultural one, and it's symbolic power comes from two objects: Fire and Blood, two elements always associated with Red and universally encountered by every society throughout history. Even today, whenever a dictionary defines Red, they typically use Fire and Blood in their explanation.⁸

The relationship between Red and Blood makes sense, since all living vertebrates have Red Blood. But the association of Red with Fire is less clear. After all, Fire isn't exactly Red but more of an orange or yellow.⁹ Why do we culturally link Red with the color of Fire?¹⁰

Historians argue it's because many ancient societies saw Fire as a living being. It's domestication was the symbolic birth of civilization, and like the sun, it is a source of life by providing light and heat.

Blood and Fire were always at the center of early religious traditions. Animal blood sacrifices were thought to lead to good harvests, and many believed fire was passed down from the Gods, like when Prometheus stole it in Greek mythology.

A key component of these two elements is their symbolism of both life and death. On one hand, Fire keeps you warm, protects you from predators, and lights up your home. **But once out of control, Fire leads to death and destruction.** Similarly, Blood is a source of human life, but the sight of blood indicates injury and too much means death.

Christian stories clearly reflect our ancient contradictory relationships with Fire and Blood. On one hand, God used Fire to communicate with Moses through a burning bush, but Fire also symbolizes the eternal tormenting of hell, explaining why Hell is always painted Red. Blood does represent Jesus' gruesome crucifixion, but Cardinals reappropriated that meaning into something positive by wearing Red as a symbol of Jesus' Blood sacrifice.

⁸ Google "red definition"

⁹ Stock footage fire, or what's a good fire in a movie?

¹⁰ A picture of Pokémon: FireRed

Red symbolism varies wildly depending on the time and place, but it always ties back to these core elements. Red is a symbol of love and passion, but it also became a symbol of prostitution and illicit sex in the Middle Ages, showing the pitfalls of *too* much passion, of getting too close to the Flame, so to speak. Red was the symbol of the French Revolution, and from then on the color became a sign of extreme political upheaval, oftentimes violent, always passionate, aggressive, and filled with life.¹¹

The point is, If a critic looks at Red through the lens of its origins in Fire and Blood, then the symbolic power of Red becomes much more obvious.

Red in Movies: Basic Fire and Blood

Many movies use red to tap into these powerful historical roots...

“Positive” Red

Red is heat,¹² it is a symbol of life and light in an otherwise desolate and cold world.¹³ It adorns energetic youthful characters.¹⁴ Wes Anderson loves it because it injects visual life into his scenes.¹⁵ Red often sexualizes female characters¹⁶ echoing its association with love and lust.¹⁷ But sometimes Red goes to far.¹⁸

“Negative” Red

As much as Red indicates life, it just as easily signals death¹⁹ and horror.²⁰ What was once passion becomes obsession to the point of self-destruction.²¹ No color better captures youth and sexuality, and the boys of *A Clockwork Orange* represent this sexuality to a dangerous extreme.

¹¹ The USSR the flag of China

¹² [Do the Right Thing](#) (1989) -- 16:57 mark

¹³ *The Red Balloon* (1956)

¹⁴ [Amélie as a child](#)

¹⁵ [The Grand Budapest Hotel](#) (2014)

¹⁶ [Moulin Rouge!](#) (2001)

¹⁷ [Who Framed Roger Rabbit?](#) (1988)

¹⁸ *The Matrix* (1999) “Were you listening to me, Neo? Or were you looking at the woman in the red dress? Look again. Freeze it” ← transition to negative red using this quote, fade in to the line after the woman in the Red dress passes

¹⁹ [Goodfellas](#) (1990)

²⁰ *The Shining* --- Hallway scene

²¹ *Whiplash* --- putting his hand in the ice scene

Red Cars

Sometimes, a Red car is just an easy way to indicate speed, but it sometimes goes deeper than that.²² Cameron's dad loves his Red car to the extreme, more so than even his own son. The car in *Boyz N The Hood* is a looming sign of death that appears out of nowhere. The idea that there is no escape for these character gets reinforced in the opening shot, an example of Red as the color of warning and danger.

Religious Red

Movies also channel the religious significance of the color. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie holds his hand over flames in a form of personal penance, a nod to his fear of the flames of hell. It's no coincidence that Tony's bar is bathed in Red, an indication that the place contains sex, blood, and violence, a world Charlie wants to escape.

Intertwining Red Imagery

Perhaps the most powerful use of Red is when filmmakers can juxtapose it's positive and negative symbolism, showing the two kinds of Red side-by-side.²³

The ending of *Don't Look Now* (1973) has a bizarre montage revealing the true identity of the girl in the red coat. Part of the horror of the finalé is the contrast of different classic Red images: the youthful coat followed by his blood, then sex, and even flames in a church. All these images mixed together disorients the viewer through the unusual pairings of Red.

Schindler's List: Blood, Fire, and Red

Schindler's List perfectly embodies all the symbolic uses of Red: it's origins in Fire and Blood, the religious significance developed from Pagan rituals all the way to Christianity, and the harnessing of the color's dual meanings.

Schindler's List: Fire

The movie begins with the lighting of a flame as a Jewish family celebrates the Sabbath. Color fades away when the fire goes out, and the story descends into the Kraków, Poland during WWII. Right from the beginning, the film establishes Fire as a symbol of Jewish tradition, and the extinguishing of the flame foreshadows the end of Jewish life in Poland.

²² *Baby Driver* (2017)

²³ *American Beauty* (1999) --- Right before Lester gets shot, we see Red roses, followed immediately by his Red blood.

The recurring flames throughout the movie symbolize both danger and life.²⁴ In one scene, Spielberg superimposes a burning flame onto Oskar Schindler's chest to symbolize his gradual transformation from a greedy businessman to a benevolent savior.²⁵ The flames of his factory are a source of life as he saves Jewish people from extermination.

In contrast, the flames from the Plaszow labor camp burn bright and harsh in the foreground as the Nazis visually walk into the factory, a reminder of the death and destruction they bring with them.²⁶

At their most extreme, flames are associated with horrific mass graves. But when Schindler invites his Jewish workers to practice the Sabbath, the flames become color once again. In Schindler's factory, the Jewish tradition can continue, he provides light in a world surrounded by darkness. Flames are at the same time a symbol of the Jewish people surviving *and* a symbol of their destruction.

Schindler's List: Blood

In this movie, blood and death also go hand in hand, with the numerous gruesome executions and murders. One scene uses blood in a more subtle but equally disturbing way. When the Nazis want to separate the healthy from the sick, a group of women in the camp apply their own blood as makeup. They are using blood to try to appear more alive. It's such a cruel irony that they have to bleed to look more lively, so they can in turn avoid a bloody death. Self-harm is a form of self-preservation.

In comparison to the rest of the movie, this moment may seem benign, but it perfectly captures the absurdity of the holocaust, how life and death were so disturbingly intertwined. **Blood is death and life all at once.**

Schindler's List: Red Coat

The Red coat is an incredible summation of all these ideas. On one hand, the little girl is youth, life, and innocence. The Red calls attention to her **fiery** warmth and young **blood**. But once she hides under the bed, her red coat loses its color, and we see it later in a whole new, deadly context. The coat is now presumably red with **blood**, to be disposed of in **flames**.

Schindler's List and the girl in the coat are the story of the color Red. They are a story of death and life coexisting together. The Red of Oskar Schindler is the Red of Life. Surrounded by his Red is the Red of the holocaust.²⁷

²⁴ Jewish workers burning themselves on the pots 31:42

²⁵ 1:34:10

²⁶ 1:26:08

²⁷ The red rose on top of Schindler's grave at the end of the movie.

Itzhak Stern: "The list is life. All around it's margins lies the gulf."

Conclusion

Not every instance of the color is as extreme as *Schindler's List*, but in overt uses of Red, the same symbolic principles apply. It has a powerful and primal response for the viewer, coming from the human understanding of Blood and Fire. Filmmakers don't necessarily have knowledge of the actual symbolic history of different colors, but the best ones definitely know how to use it.

Description

The first 500 people to click this link will get 2 months of Skillshare for free:

<https://skl.sh/nowyouseeit7>

Alternate Title: Red: Fire and Blood, Life and Death

Red is without a doubt the most symbolic color. So how do filmmakers use it to elevate the visual impact of their movies? Through the lens of the symbolic masterpiece Schindler's List, let's explore all the history and power packed in such a vibrant color.

A special thanks to my Patreon supporters!

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Notes

25th Anniversary Special Features

- 00: talkback after 25th anniversary showing, nothing about Red
- 01: Holocaust testimonies, nothing about Red
- 02: 3 minutes of the flame of the candle, could be useful
- 03: another holocaust testimony
- 04: testimony ad
- 05: testimony, of course the foundations logo is in black, white, and red
- 06: nothing

“This list is life...”

Jewish workers burning themselves on the pots 31:42

Spielberg clearly understands the relationship between flames and Red.

Fire extinguished is the extinguishing of the Jews, also a religious symbol, also a symbol of life later in the film.

Blood to represent the extermination of the Jews. Also the scene where they try to use blood to liven themselves up.

“This is life.”

Conclusion

Ending — Spielberg said the girl was obvious, and she is. And just like the girl, all these symbol meanings of the red are hidden in plain sight.

Somehow linked to Red cars in real life, their counterpart in the movies seem reckless and dangerous, almost too colorful, they are themselves a target.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off
Boyz in The Hood

Red in Movies: Advanced Fire and Blood

Of course, directors don't consciously pick out Red

This scene is the purest example of Red.

The perception of color is not just a biological phenomenon but a cultural one. Human civilization has historically given Red an almost magical power.

Whenever a dictionary defines Red, they almost always explain it as the color of Fire and Blood, and it's these two substances that form the basis of all the symbolic power of Red.

Bible fire burning bush and the fires of hell

Blood to drink for salvation and representing the death of Jesus. People later wore red and it became a Christian symbol

“Blood” and “Fire” in the Movies

Schindler's List: Blood, Fire, and Red

When screenwriters wanted to show off Technicolor, they had to change Dorothy's slippers from

In this video, I want to talk about the symbolism of the color red in movies. Many iconic movie moments boldly use colors to enhance the visuals of their scene, but few videos .

I want to talk about the symbolism of the color red.

Red: The History of A Color

Red follows in its image [Fire], often beneficent, sometimes malefic, but always stronger symbolically than any other color. (25)

Blood and fire — universal

The most symbolic color

Blood to wine in symbolism and religion

Very red flames, which were rare, heralded important events/ 45

Roman saw the most symbolism in red. 49

Here again, Red appears as a dangerous and foundational color that leaves an especially powerful mark on events and plays the role of a veritable driving force in history. 49

Fire and blood considered according to its good and bad aspects 58

Burning bush, fire as benevolent 61

Red fire Holy Ghost 61

...that is why no one must wear this color who is not a noble 79

The deadly sins 98

Red in horoscopes --- pseudoscience

All these practices associating red with punishment by appealing to fire and bloodshed have a long history 100

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.huffpost.com/us/entry/7933450/amp>

Little red riding hood chapter and schindlers list

Red flag

Red pops on screen
But it goes deeper than that
Definition red and blood

White black red relationship

Red flag originally as a warning that force would be used 163
Red complete upheaval of society 170
Red color of prohibition 180
Fire extinguishers red 181

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7CondgaFVw>

The story of the little girl in the red coat
The Trial of Adolf Eichmann

“It was a cliché of old-master painting to place a dot, a splash of red in the foreground to draw the eye, to force the perspective. Spielberg leaves nothing to chance.”

Furthermore, one image in the film stands out when Schindler faces his office window overlooking the factory: on his chest, on his heart, is reflected the dazzling radiance of the furnace's fire.

Introduction

Schindler's List --- Why Red?
There is an interview of him somewhere

Ideas

We use red for bullfights, the bull doesn't care what the color is because they are color blind

Examples

The Shining - blood spilling out the door
Schindler's List

The red car in Boyz N The Hood, because its always scared me when I was younger as it was that looming sign of death that was inescapable & that would appear out of nowhere at times.



I really like how it's used to convey heat and intensity in DO THE RIGHT THING, specifically this shot

American Beauty -- The red door

The Sixth Sense -- recurring danger objects

The Last Jedi

The Eye of Hal

Amélie

Wes Anderson

Goodfellas

Her

Baby Driver

The Place Beyond the Pines when Gosling is at the stoplight on his bike

Red in Moulin Rouge

The one paper machette in 500 Days of Summer

Cameron's car in Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Three Colours: Red

"You've got Red on you"

Vertigo intro

Perfect Blue

Menace II Society?

Driver?

We Need to Talk About Kevin

The Matrix

Blade Runner

Trainspotting

Don't Look Now

The Red Balloon

Apocolypse Now

<https://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2011/11/15/film-review-we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-201>

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