

University of Theater and Film Arts
Doctoral School

THE HISTORY OF COLOR FILM IN HUNGARIAN CINEMA AFTER 1945
– The three waves of color film –

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation (Ph.D.)

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Color permeates the history of cinema, but at the same time, the study of color in Hungarian cinema has only been partially completed until now. While writing my thesis, I examined the changing use and meaning of color in Hungarian film history, from the release of the first color film to the 1989 regime change, particularly regarding the eras dominated by color film.

As part of the research work, I set the goal of locating the (transitions to) color film in time and marking the boundaries of its different eras. My motivation for this can be traced back primarily to the need to differentiate the boundaries of the eras in film history. Indeed, the milestones and era boundaries of universal film history can typically be associated with style, institutional and social historical events, and technological changes. Regarding the latter, it can be observed that the canon of film history links the time of the transition from silent to sound technology, and thus the border of the silent and sound film eras, to the release of the first sound film. This can be explained by the fact that two years after the release of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a complete change in technology took place; the dominance of silent films turned into the dominance of sound films, and at the same time, we move into the era of the sound films. That is why it can be stated that the transition from silent to sound film coincides with the release of the first sound film. Furthermore, it can be noted that this milestone in film technology is also an era boundary in film history. It is all the more remarkable that the change from black and white to color technique is not included at all among the stages and era boundaries of international or Hungarian film history. In universal film history, the transition between black and white and color films is typically not interpreted as a turning point linked to a specific film or year but rather as a transition period. The failure to establish the moment of transition and to mark the boundaries of the era can be traced back, on the one hand, to the lack of consensus regarding which is the first color film. On the other hand, this can also be explained by the transition from black and white to color technology - in contrast to sound film - taking place during a lengthy process burdened with interruptions and fluctuations. The trajectory of the transitional period can be broadly described as the tendency from black and white dominance to color dominance. The international literature, therefore, does not mark the era boundaries of black and white and color film but merely makes statements about their transitional nature. But this does not mean we cannot attempt to draw the boundaries of the eras of Hungarian black and white and color film. In my interpretation, black and white and color permeate each other and interact throughout film history. Color film emerged from black and white, defined itself as a response to black and white, and developed in symbiosis with it. Accordingly, when examining era boundaries, I do not focus exclusively on color film but on the interplay between

black and white and color film, which includes the undulating presence and flow of color in film history.

For the timing of (the transition to) the color film, first, I use quantitative methods to examine the evolution in the number of color films in Hungary. Then, based on the graph constructed from the data, I try pinpointing the era boundaries of color film. Subsequently, while verifying the partial results, using comparative methods, I analyze how the occurrence of color films correlates with the historical changes in technique and style and how all these aspects interact with each other. The research conducted using comparative methods has many potential elements that can be compared. For my criteria system, I chose the historical components of technique and style. This is because the central narrative emerging from the historical reports about color films is primarily based on the joint discussion of these two. Thus, the changing use of black and white and color is motivated by technological development and different aesthetic perceptions and stylistic trends. The practical application of the various procedures and the aesthetic perceptions are inextricably linked in a continuous cycle of mutual influence.

An unavoidable key question in the history of color film is how exactly the color seen in the film image interacts with the technologies used to create it. Within my thesis, I have made a deliberate decision not to delve deeply into the various early color processes initially introduced in the early years of filmmaking, only to quickly fade away. Instead, my focus will be directed toward the technologies that have had a long-lasting impact on the aesthetic qualities of color film. I approach the evolution of color film regarding film technology primarily from the perspective of color processes of the film stock raw material. These comparative analyses show - and this is one of the basic fundamentals of the thesis - that the potential availability of color processes greatly influenced the number of color films. Moreover, the analyses testify that the change in the trend from black and white dominance to color dominance can be traced back to the appearance of a particular color process in Hungary. I am referring to the emergence of Kodak Eastmancolor technology, which gained traction in the 1960s. Adopting this color technology led to a significant transformation in domestic film production, as the industry shifted away from black and white production in favor of color. Consequently, the ratio between black and white and color films reversed, leading to a full-scale transition to color film.

When examining the changing use of black and white and color, it is also necessary to consider the aesthetic concepts influencing their use. According to this, one of the main goals of the

thesis is to reveal the ideological, cultural, and aesthetic tendencies that shape the use of color. In my review of stylistic history, color film's international evolution is only broadly drafted, while its domestic aspect is more detailed. In addition to creating the context, the overview is essential for showing the interactions between Hungarian and universal trends. This chapter, which provides the main corpus of the thesis, is divided into three larger subsections. Here, I focus primarily on those periods of Hungarian film history that can be described with the dominance of color film and which influenced the aesthetics of color film in the long run. From the number of color films in Hungary, the following trends emerged: the first color wave (1949–1954), the second wave (1968–1974) that appeared simultaneously with the transition period, and the third wave (1980–1984), which can be dated to the first half of the 1980s. When analyzing the eras, I describe what determined the leading views on using color in that period. In this chapter, I argue that the first wave of color film was primarily ideological; the second was driven by the authors, while the third wave, with the overlapping trend of New Sensibility, was motivated by fine art and intermedial aspirations. After overviewing the stylistic history of the different eras, I move toward form-centered film analyses to explain the stylistic characteristics of Hungarian color films through specific case studies. During the analyses, I also discuss how the above aspects can be demonstrated through the use of color in the films.

Based on the ten film analyses, my main claim is that in the history of Hungarian cinema, color film appeared in three waves dating from the beginning of state socialism to the 1989 regime change.