

BLACK-AND-WHITE COLOUR SOLUTIONS IN MODERN CINEMA: THEORY, HISTORY, AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

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ЧЕРНО-БЕЛЫЕ ЦВЕТОВЫЕ РЕШЕНИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ КИНО:
ТЕОРИЯ, ИСТОРИЯ И ИХ СОВРЕМЕННОЕ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ

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Abstract – The article examines the aesthetic, theoretical, and narrative possibilities of black-and-white cinematography within the context of contemporary cinema. Initially emerging as a technological limitation, monochrome imagery has gradually evolved into a conscious artistic strategy used to convey historical memory, psychological depth, and philosophical reflection. The study draws on Goethe’s Theory of Colours, David Bordwell’s concept of parametric narration, as well as the cinematic practices of German Expressionism and the French New Wave. It analyzes how black-and-white imagery restructures cinematic perception by emphasizing the interaction of light and shadow, tonal composition, and the deliberate reduction of visual information. Particular attention is paid to the psychological and symbolic mechanisms of monochrome cinema, which intensify emotional tension and semantic density. Through the analysis of *Roma* (2018), *Cold War* (2018), and *Oppenheimer* (2023), the article demonstrates that black-and-white and limited colour strategies function not merely as stylistic devices but as autonomous narrative systems. The study concludes that black-and-white cinematography remains a relevant and powerful expressive language in the digital era.

Ամփոփում – Հոդվածում դիտարկվում են սև-սպիտակ կինեմատոգրաֆի գեղագիտական, տեսական և նարատիվ հնարավորությունները ժամանակակից կինոյի համատեքստում: Սկզբնապես ձևավորված որպես տեխնիկական սահմանափակում՝ մոնոխրոմ

պատկերայնությունը ժամանակի ընթացքում վերածվել է գիտակցված գեղարվեստական ռազմավարության, որը կիրառվում է պատմական հիշողության, հոգեբանական խորության և փիլիսոփայական իմաստավորման արտահայտման նպատակով: Հողվածը հիմնվում է Գյոթեի «Գույնի տեսության», Դեյվիդ Բորդուելի պարամետրիկ նարատիվի հայեցակարգի, ինչպես նաև գերմանական էքսպրեսիոնիզմի և ֆրանսիական նոր ալիքի կինոէսթետիկ փորձի վրա: Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, թե ինչպես է սև-սպիտակ պատկերայնությունը վերակազմավորում դիտողի գեղագիտական ընկալումը՝ շեշտադրելով լույսի և սուվերի փոխհարաբերությունը, տոնային կառուցվածքը և տեսողական տեղեկատվության գիտակցված նվազեցումը: Առանձնահատուկ ուշադրություն է դարձվում սև-սպիտակ կինոյի հոգեբանական և խորհրդանշական մեխանիզմներին, որոնք նպաստում են հուզական լարվածության և իմաստային խտության ձևավորմանը: «Ռոմա» (2018), «Սառը պատերազմ» (2018) և «Օփենհայմեր» (2023) ֆիլմերի վերլուծության միջոցով ակնհայտ է դառում, որ սև-սպիտակ և սահմանափակ գունային լուծումները գործում են ոչ թե որպես ձևական հնարք, այլ՝ որպես ինքնուրույն նարատիվ համակարգ: Ուսումնասիրությունը թույլ է տալիս եզրակացնել, որ սև-սպիտակ կինեմատոգրաֆը շարունակում է մնալ արդիական և արտահայտչական հզոր միջոց թվային դարաշրջանում:

Аннотация – В статье рассматриваются эстетические, теоретические и нарративные возможности чёрно-белой кинематографии в контексте современного кино. Первоначально возникшая как технологическое ограничение, монохромная визуальность со временем трансформировалась в осознанную художественную стратегию, используемую для выражения исторической памяти, психологической глубины и философского осмысления. Исследование опирается на «Учение о цвете» И.В. Гёте, концепцию параметрического нарратива Дэвида Бордвелла, а также на кинематографический опыт немецкого экспрессионизма и французской новой волны. Анализируется, каким образом чёрно-белое изображение перестраивает зрительское восприятие, акцентируя взаимодействие света и тени, тональную организацию и сознательную редукцию визуальной информации. Особое внимание уделяется психологическим и символическим механизмам чёрно-белого кино, способствующим усилению эмоционального напряжения и смысловой насыщенности. На материале фильмов «Рома» (2018), «Холодная война» (2018) и «Оп-пенгеймер» (2023) показывается, что чёрно-белые и ограниченные цветовые решения функционируют не как формальный приём, а как самостоятельная нарративная система. Исследование приводит к заключению о том, что чёрно-белая кинематография сохраняет свою актуальность и в цифровую эпоху.

Keywords – cinematography, aesthetics, monochrome, narrative, modernity.

Հիմնաբառեր – կինեմատոգրաֆ, գեղագիտություն, մոնոխրոմ, նարատիվ, արդիականություն:
 Ключевые слова – кинематография, эстетика, монохромия, нарратив, современность.

Introduction

A new chapter in the history of cinematography began in the 1930s. The advent of Technicolour technology revolutionized the perception of cinema by bringing real-life colours to previously black-and-white screens. Landmark films such as Rouben Mamoulian's "Becky Sharp" (1935), Victor Fleming's "The Wizard of Oz" (1939),

and "Gone with the Wind" (1939) demonstrated the full potential of colour cinema. By the 1950s, colour had emerged from its experimental phase and definitively dominated cinema screens. The trajectory of colour in cinema has been complex and multifaceted. Today, digital technologies offer filmmakers virtually unlimited possibilities for colour solutions, yet contemporary directors continue to return to black-and-white cinematography, reviving an artistic vision that was once common in cinema. Black-and-white cinematography occupies a unique position within film history and theory. Originally dictated by technological limitations, monochrome imagery gradually evolved into a deliberate aesthetic choice, employed by filmmakers to convey psychological depth, historical memory, and symbolic meaning.

This article examines the persistence of black-and-white cinematography in contemporary filmmaking, exploring its functions as a perceptual, emotional, and historical device. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives, historical examples, and contemporary case studies, the study aims to demonstrate how monochrome aesthetics remain a sophisticated and relevant tool of cinematic expression.

Goethe's Colour theory and cinematic perception

Goethe's "Theory of Colours" was a revolutionary work that presented a new paradigm for colour perception. In his work, Goethe proposed a theory wherein colours emerge from the interaction between light and darkness, considering black as darkness, manifesting as the absence of light, and white as the absence of darkness. He wrote that the human eye strives for balance and wholeness – a principle particularly fascinating to examine in the context of black-and-white cinematography, where viewers actively participate in meaning-making based on their subjective perception and experience. Goethe considered black-and-white as opposing, equivalent, and complementary forces that exist only in relation to one another. According to him, while absolute black or white do not exist, in cinematography, particularly in black-and-white films, we encounter a unique manifestation of colour where black-and-white are regarded as colours themselves. Building upon Goethe's theory, one can argue that these are not merely absences of colour but active forces in constant correlation. They comprise an interplay of light and shadow, creating a spectrum from deep black to bright white, encompassing numerous shades of gray that enable the creation of complex and subtle image creation. This approach parallels the chiaroscuro technique in fine arts. In visual arts, light and shadow serve not only as artistic devices but also as crucial compositional elements for conveying depth and volume. However, in cinematography, the role of these elements is more complex and multifunctional. Unlike static visual arts, cinema inherently possesses volumetric qualities due to the dimensions of movement and time; consequently, the role of light and shadow in film extends beyond merely creating volume. Symbolic significance of colour also occupied an important place in Goethe's theory. He asserted that colours carry cultural and

psychological meanings. In black-and-white cinema, this idea is expressed through various lighting techniques. Dark and light segments often carry symbolic significance, expressing the opposition between good and evil, conscious and unconscious. Thus, the fundamental principles of Goethe's theory – the polarity of light and darkness, subjective perception, physiological effect, and symbolic significance – continue to influence black-and-white cinematography even today, helping to create complex visual narratives that unite aesthetic and psychological elements.

Black-and-white cinematography across film movements

A widespread misconception in film studies is the assumption that only black-and-white films represent the "classical" form of cinematography. This notion is rooted not merely in historical facts but in the central role that black-and-white aesthetics played in shaping the fundamental expressive principles of early cinema. In the first decades of the twentieth century, when colour technologies were not yet available, filmmakers refined the cinematic language through experiments with light, shadow, composition, and movement – elements that later became the foundation of both classical and modern film style.

In the 1920s, German Expressionist directors such as Fritz Lang and Robert Wiene transformed black-and-white cinematography into a distinct formal and psychological system. The genre's signature distortions, angular sets, and extreme contrasts were grounded in the use of chiaroscuro lighting and symbolic shadow patterns, capturing the anxiety, trauma, and instability of post-war Germany (Eisner 1969; Kracauer 1947). These films demonstrated that monochrome imagery could function not simply as a record of reality but as a powerful metaphorical and affective tool.

In the 1960s, French New Wave directors – Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, and others – reinterpreted black-and-white aesthetics as a mode of creative rebellion against classical studio conventions. The use of handheld cameras, natural lighting, discontinuous editing, and raw monochrome textures symbolized a modernist rupture from traditional cinematic norms. Here, black-and-white became an emblem of immediacy, authenticity, and stylistic innovation, embodying the cultural and artistic spontaneity of the era.

A deeper analysis reveals that the enduring power of black-and-white cinematography does not lie in an inexplicable "magic", nor solely in nostalgic associations. Rather, its effectiveness emerges from the interplay of aesthetic economy, psychological intensity, and symbolic richness. The reduction of chromatic information redirects the viewer's attention toward composition, gesture, movement, and the sculptural qualities of light – thus creating a focused, immersive perceptual experience.

Consequently, black-and-white cinema should be understood not as a relic of early film history but as a continuously evolving artistic system. Its recurring reinterpretations across film movements demonstrate how monochrome aesthetics me-

diate the relationship between form and meaning, image and interpretation, history and memory. As such, black-and-white cinematography remains a vital part of contemporary film language, retaining its capacity to generate complex aesthetic, emotional, and philosophical resonances.

Aesthetic and Psychological Dimensions

Black-and-white cinematography is not merely a visual simplification but an active modality that reconfigures the conditions of spectatorship. By removing chromatic anchors, the monochrome image redirects perceptual emphasis toward pre-reflective, embodied, and affective processes, modifying how the spectator's attention is organized and how unconscious responses are mobilized. Within this altered perceptual field, specific formal mechanisms play a decisive role in producing the psychological intensities associated with black-and-white film. High-contrast lighting, for instance, uses hard chiaroscuro to carve the frame into zones of revelation and concealment, generating a sense of visual tension that resonates with deeper psychological pressure. Similarly, the use of close-ups and fragmentary framing emphasizes partiality, incompleteness, and the instability of identity – features that align closely with psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity as inherently fractured. Eisenstein's notion of tonal montage further illustrates how shifts in tonal value can generate affective responses independent of narrative content, allowing emotional meaning to emerge directly from the interplay of light, darkness, and rhythm. The presence of negative space and strategically deployed silence intensifies this dynamic still further; areas of visual emptiness invite projection, forcing the viewer to supply meaning from within their own internal landscape.

These mechanisms converge with particular force in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, where stark monochrome becomes a vehicle for visualizing the dissolution and duplication of selfhood. Faces merge with shadows, dissolve into grain and texture, or appear split by the frame, turning the image into an externalization of internal fragmentation. The film's austere mise-en-scène fosters a mode of spectatorship that is simultaneously phenomenological – demanding heightened embodied attention to micro-gestures and tonal shifts – and psychoanalytic, drawing the viewer into processes of identification that unsettle, implicate, and provoke self-examination. In this way, *Persona* exemplifies how black-and-white cinematography can transform the act of viewing into a reflexive encounter with one's own perceptual and psychic limits.

Thus, when examined through the combined lenses of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, black-and-white cinema reveals its distinctive psychological power: it reduces perceptual clutter to intensify embodied awareness while exposing the fissures and ambiguities structured into identity and desire. Monochrome imagery therefore operates not only as an aesthetic restraint but as an active catalyst for deep psychic work, shaping how viewers feel, perceive, and interpret the cinematic experience.

Case Studies in Modern Cinematography

In contemporary cinematography, the choice of black-and-white has long transcended mere technical necessity to become a powerful artistic instrument. This evolution represents a significant shift in cinematic language, where the absence of colour serves as a deliberate aesthetic and narrative device. One of the most notable recent examples is Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma" (2018), which chronicles 1970s Mexico through a masterfully crafted monochromatic lens. The director's decision to employ a black-and-white palette serves multiple sophisticated purposes. Primarily, it reflects the visual aesthetics of the era, but more profoundly, it intensifies the city's somber atmosphere and the characters' challenging existence. Cuarón's Mexico City is presented as a grey metropolis, creating a striking contrast to its typically sunny and colourful depiction in other media. This deliberate subversion of expectations serves to underscore the film's thematic concerns with class struggle, social inequality, and personal hardship. The film's sophisticated use of contrast becomes particularly poignant in parts where bright sunlight pervades dramatic and melancholic scenes. In these moments, the absence of colour combined with intense luminosity creates a unique visual paradox that emphasizes the dualistic elements in the characters' lives. The stark interplay between light and shadow becomes a powerful metaphor for the social and emotional contrasts that define the narrative: wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, joy and sorrow. Moreover, the black-and-white cinematography in "Roma" functions as a memory device, creating a sense of temporal distance while simultaneously making the events feel more immediate and visceral. The monochromatic palette strips away the potentially distracting elements of colour, forcing viewers to focus on composition, texture, and the subtle gradations of light that shape each frame. This approach aligns with both classical cinema traditions and contemporary artistic sensibilities, demonstrating how black-and-white photography continues to evolve as a sophisticated tool for visual storytelling. The film's use of high-contrast black and white photography also serves to democratize the visual space, rendering both grand architectural features and intimate domestic details with equal significance. This visual equality reinforces the film's thematic exploration of social hierarchies and human interconnectedness. In scenes of both quiet domesticity and social upheaval, the monochromatic palette creates a unifying visual language that transcends the boundaries of class and culture.

An additional noteworthy example of the use of black-and-white in cinema is Paweł Pawlikowski's film "Cold War" (2018). In this film, the director employs the absence of colour not merely as an aesthetic choice, but as a narrative device that enhances the emotional tone and historical context, underscoring the stark contrasts of the Cold War era. Paweł Pawlikowski's critically acclaimed film "Cold War" employs monochromatic cinematography not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a sophisticated semiotic system that operates on multiple interpretive levels. The

decision to render the narrative in black-and-white represents a complex intersection of historical authenticity, emotional metaphor, and political commentary. The primary justification for the film's chromatic austerity emerges from a commitment to historical authenticity. Cinematographer Łukasz Żal's assertion that "There was no colour in Poland at that time" transcends literal interpretation to become a profound metaphorical statement about the socio-political atmosphere of post-war Eastern Europe. The black-and-white choice serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the repressive environment of Soviet-dominated communist systems, where personal creative expression was routinely stifled to promote conformity to collective ideals. Pawlikowski initially considered shooting in colour but ultimately rejected this approach, recognizing that it would impose contemporary aesthetic sensibilities on historical material, thereby creating what visual culture might term an "anachronistic dissonance". The director's choice instead reflects a phenomenological approach to historical representation, attempting to recreate not just the visual appearance but the lived experience of the era. The monochromatic rendering thus functions as a form of historical phenomenology, inviting viewers to experience the past through its own visual language rather than through contemporary chromatic expectations.

The high-contrast black-and-white cinematography in "Cold War" operates as a visual correlative to the film's narrative and emotional dynamics. The dramatic contrast between brilliant whites and deep blacks establishes a visual opposition that perfectly reflects the stormy, passionate, and often conflicted relationship between the main characters Zula and Wiktor. Their love story, marked by intense connection and painful separation, finds its visual expression in this stark black-and-white imagery. This technique aligns with film theorist David Bordwell's concept of parametric narration, an influential theory he developed in the 1980s in his "Narration in the Fictional Film". Bordwell's parametric narration theory proposes that formal cinematic elements – such as lighting, composition, camera movement, and colour (or its absence) – can function as primary storytelling means rather than merely supporting the narrative. In traditional filmmaking, these stylistic choices often serve the plot, but in parametric narration, they become equally important or even dominant vehicles for conveying meaning. Bordwell derived this concept partly from the linguistic theories of Roman Jakobson and the film theories of Noël Burch, suggesting that a film's style can operate as an independent system that creates meaning alongside plot developments. In "Cold War", this theory manifests as the high-contrast black-and-white cinematography communicates emotional states, power dynamics, and thematic tensions without requiring explicit dialogue or plot exposition. The visual style doesn't simply enhance the story – it tells a parallel story of its own. When Zula and Wiktor experience moments of harmony, the visual composition often achieves a delicate balance between light and shadow. Conversely, during their conflicts or separations, the contrast becomes more pronounced, with harsh lighting creating distinct boundaries between black and white areas in the

frame, reflecting the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their relationship. Through this sophisticated visual language, the film creates a dual narrative—one told through conventional plot development and another conveyed entirely through formal cinematic techniques, demonstrating Bordwell's assertion that style itself can function as a narrative system.

The film's cinematography is characterized by an almost Manichean contrast that refuses the comfort of middle grays, just as the narrative refuses easy resolution or emotional compromise. This visual strategy creates what might be termed an "affective chiaroscuro", wherein the stark visual contrasts amplify the emotional extremes experienced by the characters. The visual polarization thus becomes an externalization of internal psychological states, rendering visible the otherwise invisible terrain of emotional experience. Perhaps most significantly, the black-and-white palette functions as a complex political metaphor for the Cold War era itself. The binary chromatic scheme visually reinforces the geopolitical binary that dominated the period: East versus West, communism versus capitalism, collectivism versus individualism.

Pawlikowski's "Cold War" demonstrates the continuing vitality and expressive potential of black-and-white cinematography in contemporary filmmaking. Far from being merely nostalgic or retrograde, the film's monochromatic aesthetic functions as a sophisticated visual language capable of conveying complex historical, emotional, and political content. The film illustrates how formal choices in cinematography can transcend mere style to become substantive elements of narrative meaning-making. In an era of digital colour grading and heightened chromatic manipulation, "Cold War" makes a compelling case for chromatic reduction as a means of expressive amplification. The film's critical and commercial success suggests that contemporary audiences remain receptive to monochromatic storytelling when it is deployed with purpose and precision rather than as mere stylistic affectation. Pawlikowski's work thus contributes to an ongoing reappraisal of black-and-white aesthetics in contemporary cinema, demonstrating how historical techniques can be revitalized to address contemporary concerns with historical memory, political division, and emotional extremity.

In contrast, the colour sequences in "Oppenheimer" offer a more subjective view of historical events. These segments move beyond the mere factual recounting of events, instead engaging in artistic and interpretative adaptations that allow Nolan to delve into the psychological depths of his characters, particularly Oppenheimer. The use of colour thus facilitates a more immersive exploration of the emotional and mental states of the individuals depicted, providing insight into their inner struggles, motivations, and contradictions. Rather than serving as an objective record of events, the colour scenes in "Oppenheimer" convey a subjective reality shaped by the characters' personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, making the historical narrative deeply personal and emotionally charged. The interplay between black-

and-white and colour in "Oppenheimer" is far more than a stylistic or aesthetic choice – it functions as a profound narrative device that interrogates the very nature of historical perception and interpretation. Through this complex use of colour, Nolan not only reflects on the dichotomy between objective and subjective realities but also highlights the ways in which history is not a fixed set of facts, but rather a fluid, dynamic process shaped by individual perspectives. The film's innovative visual approach underscores the complexities of understanding the past, reminding audiences that history is not only what happened, but also how it is remembered, interpreted, and represented. This duality challenges viewers to reconsider the boundaries between objective truth and subjective experience, offering a nuanced philosophical reflection on the nature of historical memory and the moral implications of the events that shape it.

Across the examined films, black-and-white cinematography emerges as a powerful contemporary tool because it:

1. Directs attention toward form and symbolism by removing chromatic distractions.
2. Creates historical or epistemic distance, enabling viewers to perceive events as memory, archive, or testimony.
3. Amplifies emotional contrasts, using chiaroscuro to encode psychological states.
4. Functions as narrative structure, consistent with parametric narration.

Thus, the persistence of monochrome imagery reflects not nostalgia but a renewed semiotic and aesthetic sophistication.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of cinema, black-and-white imagery has transformed from a technical constraint into an autonomous artistic choice, acquiring a distinct place within film language. By reducing the image to its essential components – light, shadow, texture, and composition – this format allows for a heightened focus on the structural and expressive qualities of the visual frame. Such reduction not only clarifies the viewer's perceptual experience but also introduces an emotional and temporal distance that can intensify the dramatic impact of a narrative.

The discussion presented in this article demonstrates that the use of black and white operates as a narrative and aesthetic strategy rather than a merely stylistic preference. In various filmic contexts, it functions as a tool for shaping atmosphere, emphasizing thematic concerns, and revealing the psychological dimensions of characters. Contemporary technologies have further expanded the possibilities of monochromatic visualization, enabling filmmakers to produce highly controlled and nuanced imagery that both references cinematic tradition and redefines its expressive potential. The persistence of black-and-white filmmaking in the contemporary era highlights its continuing relevance as a medium for artistic expression. Its capac-

ity to distill visual language, construct symbolic meaning, and offer alternative modes of spectatorship underscores the enduring significance of this format within modern cinematic practice. Consequently, black-and-white cinema remains not only a link to the historical foundations of film but also an active and evolving component of contemporary film aesthetics.

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