

CULTURE THROUGH COLOR PERCEPTION IN “WEST SIDE STORY”

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the use of color theory to clearly characterize members of rival ethnic gangs in the 1961 film adaptation of *West Side Story*. Originally a 1957 Broadway musical, *West Side Story* captured audiences with its groundbreaking innovation in choreography and music, while earning praise from critics for delving into contemporary issues like immigration and gang-related violence. While much of the existing research on *West Side Story* focuses on references of vying cultures made explicitly through song and dance, this research instead focuses on the non-verbal representations of these cultures that are expressed through color in the film. By studying the film’s iconic art direction and investigating audiences’ subsequent perceptions of characters and settings, I argue that the colors featured in the costume designs are used to denote a culturally-charged power structure between the Jets and the Sharks. Based on close examination of these various designs, the film’s overall color palette, and published scholarship, I conclude that *West Side Story*’s non-verbal references are uniquely dangerous to its explicit references, as they subliminally promote harmful stereotypes and suggest that gang violence brings life to an otherwise drab city. Studying the connection between color theory and culture ultimately illuminates the historical roots of society’s perceptions of colors and their seemingly inherent associations to certain traits.

COMMON COLOR PERCEPTIONS IN WESTERN SOCIETY

- ✦ **White** signifies innocence, purity, and peace.
- ✦ **Yellow** “is the most luminous of all colors. It is the first noticed, the loudest and brightest”¹.
- ✦ **Orange** “expresses radiation and communication. It is the color of action. Receptive and warm, it characterizes a fire burning the hearth and symbolizes generosity”².
- ✦ **Blue** is likeable color with receptive and calming qualities resulting from associations with clear, blue skies.
- ✦ **Purple** dyes were accessible only to the royal and wealthy and held symbolic importance to Judeo-Christian religions; in modern times, however, it often elicits sentiments of lust and sensuality.
- ✦ **Red** signifies strength, aggression, anger, lust, and even love— due to its presence in the natural world as fire and blood³.
- ✦ **Black** is associated with the lack of light or the consumption of darkness in totality; its darkness implies a sense of mystery towards the unknown, similar to the mystery surrounding the Sharks as the “other”.



ANITA VERSUS MARIA

- ✦ Sharaff uses **purples** and **reds** to clearly separate the Sharks’ girls from the Jets’ girls and also further exoticize Anita and the Sharks’ girls when compared to the softer-colored, conservative dresses of the Jets’ girls.
- ✦ Maria is a bold exception to Sharaff’s own style guide for the Sharks’ girls, as she dresses more like a Jets’ girl with a color palette featuring **whites**, **yellows**, and **blues**, which exude innocence and naivety.
 - ✦ If Maria were to wear a **red** dress like Anita, it would suggest that she has stepped into womanhood with sexual desires looking to be explored, which will not be tolerated by Anita or Bernardo. Still, she wears a **red** waistband, a nod to her coming of age and a clue of her forthcoming loss of virginal innocence.

FASHION AT THE FOREFRONT

During World War II, fashion, and subsequently costume design, changed drastically as manufacturing restrictions were heavily instituted by the United States War Production Board in an effort to conserve and recycle materials needed for the war.

1947

Christian Dior’s “New Look” silhouette revolutionized the fashion industry and led the world into a new era of postwar fashion. Men and women slowly reintroduced a multitude of colors into their wardrobes.

1940S

The strict wartime regulations of the 1940s were a distant memory as rock ‘n roll’s domination of the 1950s seeped into the fashion industry, prompting women to wear full skirts once again, along with ruffled petticoats and brightly painted lips.

1950S



RIFF AND THE JETS VERSUS THE SHARKS

- ✦ The color palette for the Jets’ costumes featured lighter shades of **yellows**, **oranges**, and **blues** that emphasized their boyish looks and their softer side, an affect that is absent in the Sharks’ costumes.
- ✦ Costume designer Irene Sharaff believed the Sharks’ physicality and semblance were naturally more aggressive than the Jets’, so their color palette featured colors that were more visually and psychologically striking, like **reds**, **purples**, and **blacks**.

CONCLUSIONS

- ✦ Sharaff’s choice of color palettes play an instrumental role in creating the film’s iconic images, but the acclaimed status of *West Side Story* in hand with the visual communication ability of colors makes her choices dangerous, as they convey subliminal, biased messages about the Sharks in particular.
- ✦ The contrasting color palettes seen onscreen visually strengthen the me-versus-them narrative between the Jets and the Sharks that is already well-established offscreen before the start of the film’s storyline.
 - ✦ This narrative becomes more dangerous as *West Side Story* continues to become immortalized as a representation of Puerto Ricans who, in truth, are misrepresented in the lens of white American directors and designers as the overtly aggressive, sexually-spirited “other” gang.

SELECTED REFERENCES

1, 2, and 3 - Fehrman, Kenneth, and Cherie Fehrman. *Color: The Secret Influence*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000. Print.
 Photos - “West Side Story (1961) Photo Gallery.” IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web.