

Talking Colour: Remembering the Eastmancolor Revolution

Paul Frith and Keith M. Johnston

Supporting research statement

This videographic essay arises from the AHRC-funded project ‘The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955-85’. Investigating the impact of Eastman Colour monopack film stock on British cinema, the project explored the interplay of different production aspects, most notably the intersection of aesthetic, industrial, and intermedial elements.

One aspect of the project included interviews with a range of British creatives and technicians whose expertise had a direct impact on the historical production of colour film, or its subsequent preservation. Eight of those interviews are featured in this essay, and foreground the contribution made by cinematographers, laboratory staff, and media archivists to British colour film history. The choice of these eight was led by the coding of all twelve interviews and the identification of recurring and consistent themes that tied these eight together: the problematic nature of colour reproduction in analogue and digital eras; the overlooked relationship between cinematographer and laboratory, and the responsibility placed on the archivist to recover the ‘original’ look of the film that emerged from that relationship.

Those eight interviews are:

Cinematography: Chris Menges, Peter Suschitzky.

Laboratory: Paul Collard (audio only), Colin Flight, Alan Masson, Brian Pritchard.

Archive: Tessa Idlewine (audio only), Kieron Webb (audio only).

When we began to produce this essay, it was in the hope of using a documentary-based approach to illuminate some key issues around colour within British cinema history. During production, we realised the finished essay – and the different perspectives offered by these interviewees – would also function as an advocate for more academic work on the overlooked production relationships within British cinema studies, beyond the role of the director or the studio. ¹ Cinematographers have received some academic coverage, although even that remains partial. ² The interaction between cinematographer and laboratory technicians is mentioned in Petrie, but remains a historical lacuna, with the latter expertise most often overlooked. It is hard to argue against the claim from 1961 that the “contribution of the film laboratory to the production of a film goes largely unrecognised”. ³ The work of film archivists is also rarely connected to either of the other two professions, despite the crucial interplay between those areas (this is identified by Kieron Webb in the essay), and the importance of archival work to the broader field of film studies.

Filming these interviews, and then contrasting the content through thematic coding and video editing (which cut down over eight hours of material into twenty minutes), has allowed us to foreground a particular discourse around how films and filmmaking practices were affected when the possibilities unlocked by Eastmancolor collided with the prevailing principles of restraint and realism within British cinema. We sifted and edited the material around this discourse into three key areas of interest:

1. The industrial and aesthetic politics around the relationship between Eastmancolor and Technicolor;
2. The efforts of British cinematographers, directors and laboratories to explore (and, crucially, control) the aesthetic opportunities this new film stock offered;
3. The digital technologies that are now being utilised within media archives to unlock the now-faded state of many British Eastmancolor productions.

From industry politics and aesthetic challenges to ethical debates around the use of digital tools to produce an authentic chromatic record, and claims of ownership of the ‘accurate’ version of a film, our videographic essay aims to use the voices of these industry workers to offer a different and potent perspective on colour as a disruptive force within British national cinema. ⁴

Within the essay, Menges and Suschitzky discuss the various techniques employed during filming to manipulate colour reproduction in the negative, how these properties were maintained during printing in order to recreate the desired image in theatres, and whether or not subsequent reissues of their work (analogue and digital) have remained faithful to those original intentions. Both cinematographers champion the often-neglected work of the laboratories in British film production, signalling how the final product is as much reliant upon the laboratory teams as those involved with the production itself: Suschitzky comments on how the final look of the film could be altered dramatically within the laboratories during processing and printing, a theme taken up the laboratory professionals consulted here. They state how the laboratories offered a blank slate for filmmakers, a ‘black box’ where cinematographers (more often than directors) could get the aesthetic effect they wanted. The laboratory specialists in the essay argue that the experience of a finished film is shaped as much by the laboratory as the filmmakers on set: an opinion echoed by Idlewine and Webb when they discuss the efforts of restoration work intended to reflect the legacy of each production, well after the time of its original release. Both archivists acknowledge the difficulty of the options open to film restorers, where consulting key original personnel (when available) is one possible route to construct an ‘original’ colour aesthetic; while also noting that different changes may have been made to historical re-releases due to contemporary tastes, limited materials, and new technology.

Like many interview-based documentaries, our videographic work is one construction of the history of British colour films, privileging particular views and memories over other creators and technicians: many of whom are no longer with us, or did not respond to our request for an interview. ⁵ What we have created, however, is an essay that reflects on the temporality of colour in the moving image, through the words of archivists, technicians, and cinematographers: not to follow the archival desire for the ‘original’ history, but to show how Eastman Colour – as the leading colour film stock from the 1950s on – changed how colour worked within British cinema.

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Notes

1. This expansion would also include the work being done by Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery, and others, on film editing; although that filmmaking craft was not central to our project, or interviews.
2. For more on British cinematographers see, for example, work by Duncan Petrie, Simon Brown, Sarah Street, and Liz Watkins.
3. R.H. Cricks, ‘Denham is 25: From camera to screen’, *Kinematograph Weekly* (30 November 1961): 4.

4. This debate resembles the work of Giovanni Fossati, in *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

5. The focus of this essay does not include interview contributions from production design (Peter Lamont) and costume design (Evangeline Harrison). Full versions of all twelve project interviews will be made available via the British Entertainment History Project (historyproject.org.uk) in early 2021, allowing broader access to these unique voices and their historical contribution to Eastman Colour and British Cinema.

References

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