

## **Dorothy Opens the Door: Technicolor and its development in 1930s Hollywood**

by Christian Hayes

Although there were many companies vying for dominance in the colour field, it was Technicolor that emerged as the supreme colour company of Hollywood. It was during the 1930s that Technicolor would develop its craft significantly and from then up until the 1950s would retain a tight grip on its position.<sup>1</sup> But the use of colour film is an idea that had been conceived from the very beginning.<sup>2</sup> Handcolouring, toning and tinting were commonplace in silent cinema (look at features such as *Joan the Woman* (1917) by Cecil B. DeMille or *Intolerance* (1916) by D.W. Griffith to name two of many American examples) and the Technicolor company had already been around since 1916 when it was founded by Herbert Kalmus and his colleagues. But it was the two-strip Technicolor process, having already been used in black-and-white films of the twenties, that brought about Technicolor's first successes during the years 1929-31 when an improved version of the process was used for features such as *On With the Show!* (Alan Crosland, 1929) from Warner Bros, but this success was short lived. A three-strip method was developed in 1932 that produced a better rendition of colour (red, blue and green each had its own separation negative) and this was the method that would see Technicolor eventually flourish in the 1930s. Technicolor tested the new three-strip method firstly on Walt Disney cartoons (the first being *Flowers and Trees* (1932)), then a short, *La Cucaracha*

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<sup>1</sup> David Bordwell, "Technicolor" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (eds.), *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999) p.353

<sup>2</sup> Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (eds.) *The Cinema Book 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (London: bfi Publishing, 2001) p.49

(1934) and then a feature, *Becky Sharp* (Robert Mamoulian, 1935). It was this process that would lead Technicolor to such successes as *A Star is Born* (William Wellman, 1937), and in 1939, both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* (both directed by Victor Fleming).<sup>3</sup>

But the arrival of colour actually met with many criticisms at the time. Edward Branigan writes, ‘Many critics of early natural color processes spoke of the dangers of the “gaudy,” unrealistic color (“garish” was another favorite word)’.<sup>4</sup> This points us towards a problem that contemporary critics had with the new technology. Whereas one would assume colour to have an immediate and positive appeal, it appears to have been met with much apprehension. Edward Buscombe writes:

No new technology can be introduced unless the economic system requires it. But a new technology cannot be successful unless it fulfills some kind of need. The specific form of this need will be ideologically determined, in the case of cinema the ideological determinant most frequently identified has been realism.<sup>5</sup>

So whereas the shift from silent to sound pictures was a relatively quick process of only a few years, it took much longer for colour cinema to be accepted because ‘it could not be

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<sup>3</sup> Bordwell, “Technicolor” pp.353-4

<sup>4</sup> Edward Branigan, ‘Color and Cinema: Problems in the Writing of History’ in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods Volume II* (Berkeley University and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) p.128

<sup>5</sup> Edward Buscombe, ‘Sound and Color’ in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods Volume II* (Berkeley University and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) p. 83

instantly accommodated to the realist aesthetic'.<sup>6</sup> This had a significant effect on Technicolor. Edward Branigan writes, 'Technicolor soon recognized the important investment they had in realistic uses of color. They insisted that anyone renting their color equipment also hire a color consultant from the company in order to "properly" orchestrate color combinations.'<sup>7</sup> This role of 'color consultant' was taken up Natalie Kalmus, Herbert Kalmus's then ex-wife, who worked on all the Technicolor films of the 30s including *The Wizard of OZ*.<sup>8</sup> This highlights Technicolor's strict mediation of their colour in the films. David Bordwell tells us that 'Film procedures became standardized. To make Technicolor film, a producer had to rent the cameras, hire a Technicolor cameraman (eventually to be called a 'camera optical engineer'), use Technicolor make-up and have the film processed and printed by Technicolor.'<sup>9</sup> This strict mediation was fuelled only by the realist aesthetic, and because it was so strictly mediated, did not allow for more symbolic or Expressionistic lighting. Edward Buscombe tells us that 'color, it seems, did not connote reality but the opposite.'<sup>10</sup> Talking about *Becky Sharp*, the first Technicolor feature film, David Bordwell writes:

Complaints about *Becky Sharp*'s 'overripe' and 'scarletina' skin tones made Technicolor ask Max Factor to devise pancake make-up. Throughout the 1930s, Technicolor calmed cinematographers' fears that color would aggravate facial

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Branigan, 'Color and Cinema: Problems in the Writing of History' p.135

<sup>8</sup> Bordwell, 'Technicolor' p.356

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.354

<sup>10</sup> Buscombe, 'Sound and Color' p.88

blemishes. The film was at pains to compromise between developing a treatment of the human face that would accord with classical requisites of beauty and narrative centrality.’<sup>11</sup>

This highlights both the danger that the film may appear unrealistic and that Technicolor came to have such strict control over the colour in their films. It is true that in *Becky Sharp* the colours are particularly bright and saturated and even though this adds a certain other-worldly quality that is quite a spectacle, it was going against the realist aesthetic.

After fears that this kind of coloring would be distracting for an audience, Technicolor came to be used in only certain genres. Buscombe writes, ‘by the 1930s the original objection to color, that it would detract from the narrative, had given way to the extent that color was permissible in *some* films... Yet it was still considered sufficiently unrealistic to be taboo for films with “realistic” subject matters.’<sup>12</sup> So Technicolor was unofficially assigned to only certain, “unrealistic” types of film, with colour being seen as too fantastical to depict real life. David Bordwell tells us that ‘Technicolor was identified with the musical comedy, the historical epic, the adventure story, and the fantasy – in short, the genres of stylization and spectacle.’<sup>13</sup> This bright saturation of colours work more appropriately for fantasy films. Quoting from *Elements of Color in Professional Motion Pictures* (1957), Edward Buscombe highlights: ‘Musicals and fantasy pictures are open to unlimited opportunities in the creative use of color...our imaginations can soar.’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bordwell, ‘Technicolor’ pp.355-6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.89

<sup>13</sup> Bordwell, ‘Technicolor’, p.354

<sup>14</sup> Buscombe, ‘Sound and Color’ p.90

This is immediately apparent in *The Wizard of OZ*, with “reality” being shot in black-and-white and only the fantasy sequence being shot in Technicolor.

Technicolor was not instantly commercially viable. This was down to the fact that it was a very expensive process and that some studios were reluctant to invest in it. It could increase a film’s budget by \$100,000 to \$300,000 due to increased electricity needed to power the huge number of lights as well as a greater number of workmen.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *The Wizard of OZ* cost \$2,777,000 and did not regain its losses until a subsequent re-release in 1949.<sup>16</sup> Still, it was nevertheless one of the MGM’s big earners of 1939 with *Gone With the Wind* being the big success for David O. Selznick that same year. These two films are probably the biggest of the 30s colour-era. With the first colour feature, *Becky Sharp*, being only four years earlier, the end of the thirties heralded two triumphant examples of Technicolor. Bordwell writes:

It is probable that two films of 1939 played a central role in defining color’s generic range: *Gone With the Wind*, a historical spectacle, was credited with having proven that color could add to a film’s box-office appeal, and *The Wizard of OZ* used Technicolor only for the central Oz fantasy, not for a rendering of Dorothy’s everyday life in Kansas.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Evan Swartz, *Oz Before the Rainbow* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000) p.254

<sup>17</sup> Bordwell, ‘Technicolor’, p.355

It is this use of both black and white (or in some prints, sepia) alongside Technicolor that makes *The Wizard of OZ* the most appropriate film to illustrate the significance of the technological shift from black and white to colour in cinema. It is the moment when Dorothy opens the door of the twister-swept house to reveal a Technicolor Oz that the film plays out an on-screen allegory of this transition whilst at the same time defining its significance in a single experience for the spectator every time this moment is seen.

Working with a source-text such as L. Frank Baum's original book *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ* (1900) seems an especially appropriate basis for a Technicolor film since many key images and ideas are based upon different colours. For instance, 'the road... paved with yellow brick' that came to be known as 'the Yellow Brick Road', 'the Emerald City' and 'the Silver Shoes'<sup>18</sup> which came to be 'the Ruby Slippers' for the film. This presents us with an example where an original textual detail had been altered for a more visual one. The red of the Ruby Slippers that readily celebrates the colour of Technicolor wherein the silver of the Silver Shoes would almost suggest black-and-white again. In many shots of the film, the sparkling, primary rich-red of the Ruby Slippers are set off against the saturated yellow of the Yellow Brick Road. So already the film has an inbuilt use for colour and the screenplay and songs emphasize this with effects such as 'the horse of a different colour' in the Emerald City and lyrics such as 'You can even dye my eyes to match my gown?'. This plays alongside a more basic coordination of colour, with dark suggesting danger or evil such as the Wicked Witch herself, her castle, and the haunted forest sequences; and light representing good, with the good witch Glinda

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<sup>18</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ* (1901)

wearing pink, descending in a pink bubble into Munchkinland which is filled with many bright colours and costumes.

This perhaps highlights some interesting ideas about early Technicolor cinema. Now that films were available in colour and were such a spectacle, perhaps these 1930s Technicolor films immediately emphasize a certain unreality, that what we are watching is unmistakably a film. Edward Buscombe writes:

color in early Technicolor pictures operates as a celebration of technology: “look how marvelous the cinema is!” Color, far from providing a recognizable portrait of the real world, lifts us out of that world, above its mundane problems and unreconcilable contradictions into a new world where limitations of the old are swept away and its difficulties transcended... Early Technicolor functions as a form of self-reflexiveness<sup>19</sup>

and therefore early Technicolor pictures also operate as a celebration of cinema itself. *The Wizard of OZ* turning from black and white to colour in many ways reminds the audience that what we are watching is indeed a film, and almost as if taking this onboard from that point on allows the film to continue with a fantastical, almost carefree tone. When we are presented with talking trees or flying monkeys they do not come as a surprise since we are fully aware that this is cinema we are watching. The unspoken yet passionate energy that *The Wizard of OZ* has for cinema itself allows a deeper submergence in the fantastical diegesis of the film for the viewer.

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<sup>19</sup> Buscombe, ‘Sound and Color’ p.91

It is perhaps possible to say that out of all of the films of the thirties that *The Wizard of OZ* is perhaps the ultimate colour film since it is a production that was geared towards the use of colour in such an overt and celebratory way, evident immediately in the intricate and lavish set designs as well as the many different costumes. It's use of colour is different to that of, say, *Gone With the Wind* because it uses colour as an ideological aesthetic to portray the dream-state of a young girl and create a dream-state for its viewer. It is also interesting to note that *The Wizard of OZ* is a film of such unique vision yet it does not fit into any category of authorship, especially since four different directors worked on the film. The film has such coherence that everything seems to have been measured exactly, from the performances, to the inventive dialogue and lyrics, to the production design, and in the same vein, its use of Technicolor never seems out of place. Ideologically and aesthetically its use of colour ties perfectly with the other elements of the film and gives it a freshness that it would otherwise have lacked in black and white. Indeed, one gets the sense that *The Wizard of OZ* would not have been made if it not for the coming of Technicolor.

*Gone With the Wind* would herald the arrival of a new faster colour film stock that was more susceptible to the methods of black-and-white cinematography.<sup>20</sup> This is perhaps where the short "movement" of almost innocent Technicolor films ends. What we are left with is a string of feature films from 1935 to 1939 in which the colours are somewhat saturated, dazzling and unique. Even though Technicolor would reign up until the 1950s when Eastmancolor would primarily take over,<sup>21</sup> it is these earliest films, from

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<sup>20</sup> Bordwell, 'Technicolor' p.356

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.357

*Becky Sharp* to *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* that not only encapsulate the excitement and novelty of the coming of colour to film but also demonstrate and justify the colour aesthetic in cinema more widely.

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