

Analytical and Articulatory Animation Analysis
ASIFA Central Newsletter Supplemental Series - January 2026 - Part Two

Color Theory & Art

Vivi Markatos at the November 2025 ASIFA Central Retreat

Video edit from the retreat - 33 minutes - at <https://vimeo.com/1149256346>

It's always nice to share knowledge, tackle some theories, and embrace the world, so let's talk about color theory.

Remember that colors are a dynamic tool in our field.

Colors are a medium of expression. In semiotics, we talk about science and symbols, notions of things that trigger specific meanings and images in our heads. For example, an umbrella.



The Umbrella Example in Semiotics

It's really good to be able to understand acting. I think it's a very useful knowledge to have if you are an animator. Animation includes theater. Chuck Jones once said, "an animator is an actor with a pencil."

An umbrella is a tool to protect us from the rain. That's what we know. Wherever we see, or we read the word umbrella, we are accepting and agree that this is what it represents. However, in our field, an umbrella can signify something new, different.

An umbrella can be a deadly weapon if used by the Penguin against Batman, a partner to dance with in a room, an inanimate object that's a friend in a need, or even Mickey's broom we recall in Disney's *Fantasia*. You can see the potential magic that we have in even a simple object, and that we can use tools to make it represent different things.

Colors are something similar like the umbrella in our field of animation, graphics and in arts, colors are like a vocabulary. They are our alphabet. And with this we can build our texts, our sentences, and when we know how to use it accordingly, we can create dynamic metaphors.

Colors as Vocabulary and Communication

Colors can create poetry or even manipulate our audience. This happens mostly in the world of media and advertising. In our field, we are going to see this alphabet and we are going to recognize its meaning, and we will learn how to read it for our own benefit. Colors can be the perfect tool to communicate your art and your thoughts to your audience.

And in the end, it's important to use colors for a positive purpose and reason. That's about ethics.

Audience Engagement: Favorite Colors

My question is, I want you to think for a second, your favorite color, and by the end of this discussion, I want you to think about if your favorite color as having something to do with your own personality. I remember doing this when I was studying graphics.

Main Colors and Their Meanings

I'll start with the main colors. And of course we have other colors that they are somewhere between these ones, but these are the main colors, and we have accepted that in the Western community. That means that mostly in the Western community, these colors have this specific meaning.

However, culturally, like in Asia, some of these colors have a different meaning. For example, I will start with white. In Asia, the color white is mostly a color for mourning. Mourning, as for people who are dying, and in theater they use it to characters who are kind of questionable characters.

They might be evil, they might not be so. That's about the white color. Unlike in our western society, where the color white is more of a happy color, more of the color of innocence – the color we in bridal clothes. It's completely different based on society.

Yellow: Optimism and Energy

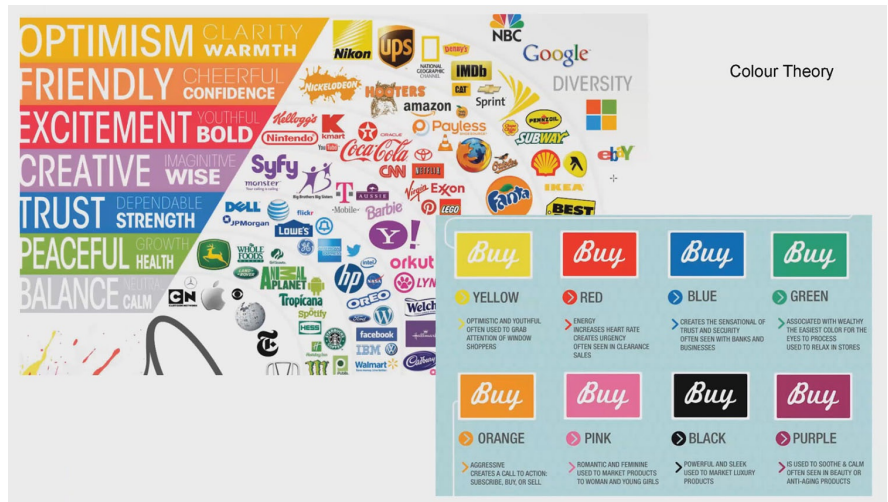
That's the cultural difference. But these colors apply to most of the western society. Show yellow, and we think of super-heroes. We see the yellow color is the color of optimism. In this chart you also see some specific logos, and we're going to discuss the yellow color in the context of optimism, of clarity, of warmth.

Yellow is often used to convey energy, the exuberance of youth, and portray characters with power. Nevertheless, the main colors we see for super-heroes are blue and red. Why? Because they remain the most dynamic colors.

Orange: Friendliness and Confidence

My favorite color is orange, and it is the color of friendly people, cheerful confidence. Nick Lotion, Fanta, Firefox, you can see has the orange color, Amazon. When you try to appeal more to a younger audience and you want to show this energy, you want to say “we are here, we're very friendly.” That's the color you're going to use.

Also, all the colors have their opposite aspect, as a coin has a good or bad side. A lot of colors have good and bad. I asked a student of mine once, what's a bad association with the orange color, because I don't associate anything bad about it. And the student told me, “I think orange color can be tiring.” And I understand why, as a person who is very friendly all the time, can also be a bit tiring. “Why is this person very friendly all the time?” I said, maybe you're right – maybe he or she is asking for something.



So there are a lot of things to question, this seeing some thing differently. The yellow color is, I said, so energetic, but if you see a lot of villains, sometimes they have the yellow color because this energy can be used for a bad purposes, or it can be an energy that cannot be limited – a dangerous energy, if you cannot restrain it.

Red: Power and Boldness

Now look at the red spectrum. That was the main question I ask a lot of my students – what are you thinking when you select the color red? Red is one of the most powerful pigments, and is used by companies like Kellogg, McDonald's, and Netflix – leading companies, powerful ones.

They have been done research and found that red creates internal feelings to make you want to consume more. Therefore, while they often use the color red in the consumption industry, like McDonald's, red is abundant not just in fast food, but in consumption in everything, whether it is watching films, consuming entertainment. It's a bold color. It's a youthful color. It's the color of excitement, and excitement has power.

The same with a person, if you're going to describe a character with a red color, it can mean a very angry person or a person who doesn't change an opinion.

Purple: Creativity and Wisdom

I have a fondness for purple at the moment. I'm turning into a purple color person. In the past, culturally, in Greece, for example, the purple color is used mostly for funerals. It was very difficult for me to wear purple or to embrace it as a result. But now it is said in a group of creative people, there is at least one person whose favorite color is purple.

So purple is the color of creativity, imagination and wisdom. A lot of products are designed for senior people using purple as subconscious for royalty. Princess Diana wore purple, so it is a color of wisdom and creativity. (“When I am Old, I Shall Wear Purple”)

And, more than royalty, they're also the integral people, and they migrate to something between blue and purple, indigo, with a kind of different power and meaning.

Another user of purple in stories are the villains. This is how a color can give an opposite meaning – how wisdom can also portray evil.

Blue: Trust and Dependability

These are some things to think about when you create your characters, because, by using some combination of colors you can actually reveal a character by his colors, the underlying mood actually see his hair actions.

Blue is also the color of trust. A lot of social media are using the blue color – Twitter, Facebook – And why? I mean, have you thought about what they ask you to do? “Give us your information, give us your data,” and at the end of the day, you do that, because you trust them. Why are workers at the businesses you go or in the banks, wear a light blue shirt? “Welcome. We going to provide you services. Trust us. We are going to do this for you.”

So you can see how you can translate these colors. They want you to trust then, they want you to be dependent on them – “It's the color of that Superman! You can depend on Superman!”

That's why Superman's character emphasizes the blue color instead of red or yellow, although those are also present.

Again, you can be persuaded by social media, reducing the sense of the evil they can do, what can they do to your data or how they can sell or share it. Do you actually know when you click on the cookies or consent on things, what is happening? We don't know really. And blue is an influence on that persuasion.

Green: Health and Growth

Green color a peaceful color, the color of growth, of health, whether of body or mind. A lot of books have a green cover, to give a subliminal message of health of growth. A lot of parks, a lot of like health companies, use green.

Gray: Balance and Neutrality

And now we start with combinations of colors. Gray is the combination of white and black. It is the color of balance, the color of neutrality and calm. That's why Mercedes uses gray, as does Apple. Why gray? Mercedes, while a luxury product, wants you to say, "There was a nice advertisement – Mercedes fighting with Jaguar, they might be luxury, but Mercedes also gives balance. They have speed, but also can be a family car because it provides stability." Mercedes is calm, Jaguar is untethered. The same pattern is seen with Apple. They choose gray, the message being, "That's why we're amazing – and expensive – because we are stable. We're very good, and you can depend on us."

White, Black, and Pink Colors

In the west, white is mostly a happy color, a color that can sell innocence. This is how you can symbolize a princess, a fair maiden, a pure soul, et cetera.

However, a lot of colors culturally might have different cultural signals, especially white.

Black is the color of power, of sleekness. It is used in marketing mostly for luxury products. I use it also sometimes for evil characters. Pink is a very feminine color, a romantic color. It is used also for women and young girls, however you can use it also to show some energy and power.

Color Harmonies - An Introduction

In our art, after we learn the alphabet of the basic colors, there are different color harmonies.

Color harmonies are the combination of these basic colors. With the alphabet, you can make texts, and from there, sentences, complete thoughts. So, depending of different combinations, you can create poetry, you can create prose, you can create anything you want.



Monochrome Color Harmony

Monochrome, for instance, is used often in children's books or in graphics to make a statement. In printing, monochrome is cheaper than printing in full color. Apart from that, which alone is very positive, it allows you to create and print a book comparatively inexpensively.

So in this instance, colors don't count as a visual contrast. If, however, you want to make a book about depression, you can use blue.

And the good thing about monochrome is that you can create a whole book using a single color and its tones. And you want it to pay extra for colors, but you can talk about depression, you can talk about mental health, you can talk about health with a green color.

Monochromatic is useful, for instance, when there's tension building, or when a character is feeling something very severe. If changing the mood, you can use monochrome can be very effective.

Complementary Colors

We know the basic colors are yellow, blue, and, red. Complementary colors are the pairing of two main color pairs directly opposite each other on the color wheel (like red & green, blue & orange, yellow & purple). You can use a very dynamic composition, making complementary colors.

For instance, in photography, you can have a ladybug in full growth of green woods. There's a small red dot there. This can be a very dynamic composition. You do with just these colors to show how this small thing fits into this big world. You put these things into a context, into a frame, and the way you frame the colors between them, you can start telling a story, visually.

We mostly use complementary colors to show antithesis. As in the earlier example, a big world, and a small creature – the big thing can be a large and green against a small speck of a red insect. Again, you can create really good dynamics and good antithesis with complimentary colors.

Analogous Colors

Analogous colors are more like, say, a sunset. A sunset is a very classic collection of analogous colors. One color to another, and the color between these two worked in. It can be extremely analogous, and it can be restricted, or it can be expanded to either extreme.

We use it a lot in the decoration of our houses – you can make a whole room based on some colors that are cousins to each other. You want to make a warm room. You're going to use, for example, yellows, reds, and orange auras. So all of these are analogous without knowing the way you design your house, sometimes using analogous colors and sometimes leaving out an analogous hue. Subconsciously, your mind fills this gap, and it helps you feel more comfortable with the combination of colors. Analogous colors can create a feeling of peacefulness. So that's why a lot of people use a lot of analogous colors in their rooms. They want to create the sense of a safe place. You don't need everything to communicate that feeling.

Translating Color Theory in Practice

Now we start translating colors, using some of the concepts, the alphabets, and the sentences we created with some of the color harmonies. You see this in social media, where color harmony is employed, sometimes making a color appear that exists only in your mind, creating visual analogies using the colors in the image.

Analyzing Van Gogh's Starry Night

I want to analyze this famous image of Van Gogh's "Starry Night," based on the color theory. What is happening in this painting, and why this image is so influential, why we talk about Van Gogh, and why Van Gogh is so, so valuable as an artist.

Lighter shades of blue give us a harmonious feeling of calmness. We have the association with blue representing "natural" and "calm."

The yellow of the stars gives us distance and depth. And then black provides form. This is where we obtain this truly calm, peaceful, scenic sense of wind movement, even though it's not moving. The shades of different, changing colors implies movement.

Analyse this
based on the
colour



A good start, but we need to go a little bit deeper.

Apart from the blue and the yellow, you can see that from the blue to the yellow, we have some green. So, visually, we're talking about one color against the other – and then the color between. There is our analogy, as I said, our visual harmony.

It gives a peaceful mind, this work by Van Gogh's work. The combination of the colors in contrast with the technique he has used to paint this setting. You can actually see the psychodrama that exists in this artist.

Van Gogh's Mental Health in His Art

At this point, Van Gogh is still "with us." He's struggling, but he's still with us. And that's why not only you can see a lovely piece of art, with all the combination of the colors, but you can sense from the colors that his actual mental situation is autobiographical in this image.

In addition, yellow is spiritual energy. The white implies cooperative energy. With room for an imbalance, a conflict, between Yin and Yang energies. This is poetry. This is poetry in art.

It's just that in this person, there is a psychodrama happening. There's an autobiography of an era of an art wave, post-impressionism, between impressionism and expressionism, and there's a person there struggling with his mental health and you see him struggling in this art. All of these conflicts converge - trying to be himself, trying to be an artist, trying to be a human living.

And this, we use it a lot, the color theory together with some other theories and ideas to translate drawings into a psychological analysis.

Art as Communication and Healing

You can see how important art can be in healing, if you know the alphabet, and if you know that in the language of color, as here, VanGogh is talking to you. So that's why I think it's very important to explore mental health and to recognize it in art.

Thank you. That's what I wanted to share with you. Please use color for good purposes, cultivate it to access awareness, communication, or even heal. Look into color theory, explore it; there are many references available.



Viva Vivi!

<https://aestheticsofjoy.com/12-essential-books-about-color/>

An Extended Bibliography

Color Theory Fundamentals

Wikipedia — Color theory

A broad overview of the historical and practical principles of color theory, including color mixing, color harmony, and symbolic meaning.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_theory

Basic Color Theory — Color Matters

Explains the core ideas: the color wheel, harmony, primary/secondary colors, and how color relationships are structured.

<https://www.colormatters.com/color-and-design/basic-color-theory>

The Interaction Design Foundation — What Is Color Theory?

A clear, well-structured explanation of how and why color theory matters for perception, aesthetics, and visual communication.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/color-theory>

MasterClass — Color Theory Basics

Practical guide to understanding color wheels, harmony, and why certain combinations work visually.

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/color-theory-basics-understanding-the-color-wheel/>

Canva Color Wheel Tool + Explanation

An interactive implementation of the color wheel with definitions of harmonies (analogous, complementary, triadic, etc.).

<https://www.canva.com/colors/color-wheel/>

Color Meaning & Psychology

Serena Archetti — The Meaning of Colors

Discusses how colors evoke mood and emotional responses, and how artists use this knowledge.

<https://www.serenaarchetti.com/blog/the-meaning-of-colors-how-to-use-colors-in-your-art/>

Academy of Animated Art — What is Color Symbolism?

Frames color meaning in terms of cultural, personal, and emotional associations — great for connecting to animation theory and narrative usage.

<https://academyofanimatedart.com/color-symbolism/>

Art & History Perspectives

University of Chicago Library — Origins of Color Theory

A historical survey from Aristotle's light/dark color philosophy through Newton's color wheel and Goethe's experiential approach.

<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/originsof-color/color-theory/>

Artsy — A Brief History of Color in Art

Explores how pigments and color usage changed across art history — very useful for contextualizing Van Gogh and other artists mentioned by Vivi.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/the-art-genome-project-a-brief-history-of-color-in-art/>

Smithsonian Libraries — The Science of Color

Covers scientific contributions (Newton, Goethe, et al.) that intersect with artistic approaches to color.

<https://library.si.edu/exhibition/color-in-a-new-light/science>

Color Harmony & Combinations

Interaction Design Foundation — What is Color Harmony?

A deeper dive into how harmonious color palettes are created and why they're effective visually and emotionally.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/color-harmony/>

Cascadia Art Museum — Elements of Art: Color

A straightforward art-education breakdown of color elements, schemes, and how they influence composition.

<https://www.cascadiaartmuseum.org/elements-of-art-color/>

Core Platforms for Sarah Renae Clark

YouTube — Sarah Renae Clark

Color Harmony Explained for Artists

<https://www.youtube.com/@SarahRenaeClark>

Website — SarahRenaeClark.com

Houses structured lessons, blog posts, and links to longer courses.

<https://www.sarahrenaeclark.com/>

The notes in this newsletter supplement are based on a presentation of Color Theory by Vivi Markatos, ASIFA Central member and illustrator of over 300 children's books. <https://vmarkatos.wixsite.com/vivi> Illustrations are from her presentation in November 2025 at the ASIFA Central annual retreat. Assembled discussions and layout by Jim Middleton, ASIFA Central Secretary. More information on ASIFA Central available at <https://asifa.org> of ASIFA International at <https://asifa.net/> This and other publications of ASIFA Central are available online in the newsletter archives and at <https://animatingapothecary.blogspot.com>

