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MSP 4701: Producing and Directing

Prof. Zaylea December 12, 2022

Lights, Color, Symbolism! How We Used Lighting Design to Evoke Empathy in *Juniper Spring*

Cinematography is a language communicated through many different aspects. The shots are the vocabulary, the angles are the syntax, the lighting is the mood, and the color is the tone. When you bring these all together, you create meaning in a film. As Director of Photography on *Juniper Spring*, I tried to do exactly that. *Juniper Spring* is a short film that challenges ideas around autonomy, freedom and the morality of people. It is about a young woman who becomes pregnant in a dystopian fascist world. She doesn't want to have this baby but abortions are illegal in her time. Ultimately, our film is an approach to showing how one woman gains the freedom to make her own choices about her life. This piece isn't just about women having the right to abortions but it is also about people having rights and fighting for what they believe in no matter what side. It is a dramatic reflection of our world today, what it could be in the near future, the polarity of our opinions of each other, and a statement that no one is inherently good or evil. Throughout the film, I tried to show these themes symbolically through lighting and color. Color in combination with the contrast in lighting helps evoke certain emotions we want our audience to feel in addition to symbolic themes we are trying to portray. These elements aid in the art of visual storytelling. In this paper, I will discuss three key strategies of lighting and

how we used them in our film, *Juniper Spring*, and why – high contrast lighting, symbolic lighting, and use of color.

High Contrast Lighting to Increase Emotional Connection

Lighting for cinema is much different from lighting for broadcast television or studio productions. It is much more symbolic and has more depth. For *Juniper Spring*, we played around a lot with high-contrast lighting. This approach to lighting is said to evoke the most emotion in audiences. Voodla et al. (2020) wanted to further understand the connection between audience empathy and high-contrast lighting. They conducted an experiment to determine whether high contrast lighting would increase the sense of affective empathy that audience members felt towards characters on screen. According to their research “high-contrast lighting in fact increased the immersiveness of both negative and positive stimuli, leading to the increased intensity of the empath in affective experience” (Voodla et al., 2020, p. 12). As they explain, “Affective empathy was assessed through the extent of the facial mimicry of actors’ emotional expressions.” (Voodla et al., 2020, p. 1) Why are they measuring audience members’ facial muscles? Because imitating actors’ facial expressions is one way in which audiences express cinematic empathy. This “mimicry” as a physical response is one part of cinematic empathy, called the “low road to empathy” (Voodla et al., 2020, p. 3). Their study finds that “...high-contrast lighting can be an effective means for influencing film viewers’ empathic reactions” through this physical “low road to empathy” response (Voodla et al., 2020, p. 1). In all, Voodla et al. found that high-contrast lighting does in fact increase effective empathy for the audience through facial mimicry of the characters on screen. Throughout *Juniper Spring*, we used high-contrast lighting to evoke emotion in our audience. There are certain scenes where this strategy is

more prominent than others, like in scene five when Amara and Camila decide to go their separate ways.



Scenes such as this one are lit a certain way to ensure the audience will feel empathy for the characters. And of course, there are certain scenes where we used more high-key lighting, like in scene twelve when Amara becomes her own person and decides to join the Juniper Collective.



These scenes are lit intentionally to draw more attention to the dialogue and connect with the audience on a deeper level than just dialogue. This is Amara's moment where she decides her future, so we decided to light the scene with high-key lighting to bring attention to her decision but also to represent her freedom. In addition to high-contrast lighting, we used symbolism contrasting colors in our lighting design to evoke even more certain emotions we wanted to bring out in certain scenes.

Symbolic Lighting

Magrin-Chagnolleau (2013) explains that, in most films, "...the perceived colors are the results of a combination of filters put on the camera and fine-tuning made by the colorist at the end of the post-prod chain" (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2013, para. 4). We decided to take a different approach. In *Juniper Spring*, we decided to use colored lighting instead of color correcting at the end of post-production. We used color this way so we could have more creative control on contrasting colors and the symbolism behind using different colors in one scene. When we decided to use color and lighting in a contrasting way, we saw we could create lots of symbolism visually throughout the film.

Even when subtle, symbolism through lighting can be extremely powerful. There are moments in *Juniper Spring* where we played with symbolic lighting for several takes. As Brown explains, "In visual storytelling, few elements are as effective and as powerful as light and color... They have the ability to reach the viewers at a purely emotional gut level. This gives them the added advantage of being able to affect the audience on one level, while their conscious brain is interpreting the story at an entirely different plane of consciousness." (Brown, 2020, p. 69). One component of symbolic lighting we integrated into our film was "a side-lit close-up may reveal a face half in shadow, half in light, at the precise moment of indecision" (Brown, 2020, p. 69).

A prominent example of this symbolic lighting is in the opening scene when Amara finds out she is pregnant. In this scene, we have heavy shadows on the left side of her face with the right side of her face lit up. This conveys her indecision on what to do about her pregnancy.



Another component of symbolic lighting we decided to play around with was heavy use of shadows and little light. This idea of lighting has been heavily adapted in thrillers and horror because “light is an aggressive liberating force. A small amount of it is enough to reveal the spiritual opportunities that lie hidden,” (Brown, 2020, p. 68). We used this strategy of lighting in scene ten when the Watcher finally gets a hold of Amara and is ultimately killed.



This scene is important in Amara's character development because she is forced to come to terms with the fact that she wants to make her own choices in her life and makes the decision to have the abortion once and for all. The lighting is minimal in this scene but is focused on Amara as she is the one making the spiritual discovery of herself and her desires. This is the moment where she finally comes into her own as a character. While lighting is a very important component in visual symbolism, we decided to combine it with the symbolic meaning behind color.

Lighting with Color

Our experimentation with color in *Juniper Spring* is just that, a symbolic experimentation.

"Colors are components of light and therefore, each color has a different energy. So each color has a different feeling, acts differently upon us, and there are various ways to draw a typology of colors..." (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2013, para. 9).

With our background knowledge of basic color theory and guided by our own stylistic preferences, we decided to integrate colored lighting in shots we thought impacted our audience

the most emotionally. Using this practice, we decided to use more cool colors at the beginning of the film and warmer colors toward the end. Cool colors usually evoke loneliness and sadness in audience members.



During the opening scene, in addition to our high-contrast lighting, we used a violet-blue fill light to portray sadness and isolation. Warmer colors usually suggest comfort or intensity. Knowing this, in scene ten, we used red as our sole light on the watcher. In this scene, we wanted to convey anger but also passion.



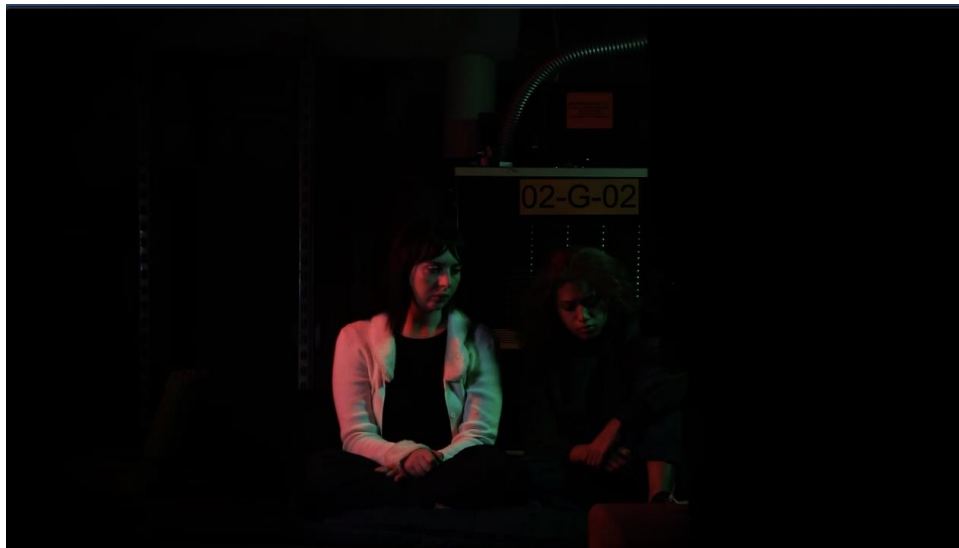
Every character in that scene is standing for what they believe in. After the Watcher is shot down the first time, the color green is introduced into the scene. This was purposefully done as red and green are complimentary colors, but we wanted them to feel jarring, almost as if Amara was being pulled two different ways in beliefs. The red symbolizes passion but also anger while the green symbolizes action and freedom.



In the final scenes of the film, we used soft tones of orange and yellow to signify Amara's acceptance of herself and her position as a new Juniper. Color was used in a particular way in almost every scene but also symbolically in the film as a whole. Amara is introduced in a place of isolation and sadness with tones of blue and purple but is finally in a place of comfort at the end of the film in tones of orange and yellow.



Another use of symbolically contrasting color is with Cypress after killing the Watcher. Amara and Cypress are sitting next to each other on the boat and there is a source of green light coming from Amara's side on the right, and a source of red light coming from Cypress's side on the left.



The red light is on Cypress's side to symbolize her anger she has against the world they live in and the Watchers. The green light is on Amara's side contrasting of Cypress because Amara believes in freedom. This is a moment where we wanted our audience to question Cypress's morality as a Juniper. Do we fully believe she is morally good or not? Is anyone fully morally

good? These are the questions we hoped our audience to ask themselves through our symbolism of lighting and color.

Conclusion

Before shooting *Juniper Spring*, we knew we wanted to experiment with lighting and color but we never expected to go as deep into the symbolism of color and lighting as we did. Lighting is a major component of evoking emotion from an audience. Minimal lighting creates a sense of fear but opportunity, one-sided lighting creates a sense of indecision, and high-contrast lighting most effectively brings out all types of emotions from the audience. In regards to color, we knew we wanted to symbolize Amara's emotions throughout the film. What we didn't realize was the depth of the other characters as well. Through the symbolism of color, we were able to give the Watcher more depth and background. Being side-lit in red during the climax, he represents anger from the current world to people who believe differently. Cypress is interesting because her symbolism came from both lighting and color. Her character was lit in red and green for most of her time on-screen to symbolize passion and freedom. When combined with high-contrast lighting, the audience had to decide for themselves if she took things too far or if she is justified for her actions because she is fighting for liberation. Cypress inherently has a light side but also a dark one. Finally, Amara was our conduit of symbolic lighting through the entire piece rather than just individual scenes. She evolves from a sad, lonely woman washed in tones of blue into her own person who is accepted and makes her own decisions when washed in tones of orange.



Juniper Spring was a production of many moving themes, beliefs, and emotions. We were able to capture major emotions and themes symbolically through our strategic choices of lighting and use of color throughout the film. Our hope is that the audience sees these efforts and asks themselves important questions about autonomy, freedom, and when something has gone too far.

Works Cited

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