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BÉLA BALÁZS

The Color Film

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By the 1920s, there were several systems for projecting films in color. In this article, the screening of Wilhelm Thiele's *Fiat lux* (1923)—which used Emil Leyde's additive process to project frames in three primary colors in rapid succession—provided Béla Balázs with an occasion to reflect on the future of film as a technology and an art form. Underscoring the productive role of the spectator's eye in synthesizing color impressions, Balázs concluded that, no matter how much film technology develops toward the reproduction of nature, there will always be a space for aesthetic interventions. Balázs had reviewed Thiele's film in *Der Tag* ("Der farbige Film") three days before publishing the extended discussion here. He would repurpose this text one year later in *Visible Man* ("Welcome to the Color Film"), only to revise many of these claims in *The Spirit of Film* (1930), in a section entitled "Color Film and Other Possibilities."

"Eureka!" we can exclaim, for we, too, have finally beheld the sea—the sea in its eternally changing play of original, bluish-green colors, with the white foam that splashes over the reddish-brown reefs of the surf. Our march toward the colorful sea on film took longer than Xenophon's *Anabasis*, for as long as there has been any form of photography, color photography was our goal. Now Emil Leyde has invented color cinematography, even before the problem of ordinary color photography was solved. The explanation for this lies in the nature of the invention, that of the so-called additive procedure. The three primary colors are photographed separately out of nature's mixed color image and produce a red image, yellow image, and blue image. With ordinary photography, these partial images would have to be copied onto one another and thus mixed again, which has not succeeded as of yet. With film, however, one does not need to copy them onto one another. They remain next to each other, like the little snapshots of ordinary film, and their impression coalesces *in one's eye* into the mixed colors of the original through quick succession (just as, in ordinary film, the still snapshots coalesce into continued movement).

The press screening in the Eos-Kino failed due to an incidental technical mishap (which was only possible because of a less incidental Viennese sloppiness). However, we had the opportunity to see a good presentation of color film and have to conclude: the invention is here. The joyous excitement that seizes one has various sources. It is partly the naïve pride of victory adopted by contemporaries in a civilization. "We can already fly," everyone feels—even those who haven't yet flown. "We already have color film." The first reports of such inventions sound like triumphant war dispatches from the front line of technological civilization. Aside from that, it is a unique pleasure to see colorful, beautiful nature. For the time being, it is not an artistic pleasure but rather the same pleasure in nature that one has when looking into the country from genuine mountain heights. Is that not enough of a pleasure? Why then split hairs over aesthetic concerns as well? Because to think [Denken] and have second thoughts [Bedenken] is also a pleasure and will not disrupt what has already been achieved.

If one is inclined to quibble, one can still observe the following small imperfections in Leydean color film. The images have a soft, generally reddish tinge, especially the skin tones. The images still flicker a little, just like gray-toned film originally did. For a very trained eye, the values shift a bit, because not all colors appear with exactly the same

intensity. That's about it, though one has the distinct feeling that it will be a very short time before these small defects are also remedied. Our aesthetic concerns do not arise from this. On the contrary: *The perfect color film is that which makes us pensive.* For trueness to nature is not always advantageous to art. No one would claim that waxwork figures (which are so true to nature that one says "pardon" when touching them) are more artistic than white marble statues or reddish-brown bronze figures. Art indeed consists in reduction, and perhaps the gray tones of ordinary film provided the possibility for an artistic style. We know very well that such concerns cannot hinder the development of film, which is dictated by the development of technology. They indeed shouldn't hinder it at all. Even with our aesthetic concerns, we can be confident that there are also paintings that are great art despite their colors. The use of colors does not yet mandate an absolute, slavish imitation of nature. If cinematography ever attains a colorful trueness to nature, it will again become untrue to nature on a higher level. We are thus not afraid.