GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP

Notes following the Eighteenth Meeting, 14th November 2012

The eighteenth meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Carole Biggam, who acted as master of ceremonies, and to Christian Kay and Carole Hough who organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was Dr Joshua Yumibe who holds a joint appointment as Lecturer in Film Studies, University of St Andrews, and as Assistant Professor and Director of Film Studies at Michigan State University.

Joshua Yumibe spoke on 'Silent Colour Cinema and its Intermedial Contexts'

His abstract is as follows:

"Though little known, originally the majority of silent films were coloured in part or in whole through the applied colouring techniques of tinting, toning, hand-colouring, and stencilling. With these methods, colour was added manually to the filmstrip to create a wondrously chromatic world. Even at Thomas Edison's first public screening in April of 1896, two of the films were hand-coloured — the Leigh sisters' *Umbrella Dance*, which opened the screening, and a serpentine dance which ended it — and prior to this, there were Lumière as well as Kinetoscope films in colour. Colour has thus existed in the cinema since its inception, yet this early history of colour in the cinema has remained largely unknown, mainly because preservation of the colour in these films was for the most part unfeasible until recently.

       The paper will examine this overlooked history of colour cinema by focusing on how these filmic practices emerged out of a broad, intermedial horizon of colour practice and theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Particular attention will be paid to the types of claims made across various media regarding the aesthetic influences of colour. Such discussions frequently invoke claims about the sensuality of colour's emotional, spiritual, and/or moral effects that resonate with various modern theories and practices of colour, ranging from Goethe, physiology, and theosophy to painted photographs, chromolithographs, and print culture. Though emerging from these prior and concurrent discourses, historical writings about colour in early film raise questions particular to the cinema. They coincide with a growing discourse on the cinema as a new, powerfully influential form of mass entertainment, at once potentially utopian and dystopian. I will work to unpack how discussions of colour, both from within and outside the film industry, interact with these media debates to shape colour practice in silent cinema."

Commentary (by Carole Biggam, checked by Joshua Yumibe):

Dr Yumibe described the early technique of hand-colouring, that is, colouring the film (or parts of it), frame by frame, with dyes. This approach was used in the 1890s but, as films became longer, from about 1903 onwards, this method became more difficult on an industrial level. Tinting was then employed, which involved running the film through a vat of dye, and unexposed, pre-tinted film could also be acquired from

companies like Kodak. Tinting was the commonest form of colouring to the end of the 1920s. The various colours were used to clarify important situations or events, such as blue for darkness and red for fire. They also expressed emotions and feelings, such as blue for coldness and red for passion, but these codes varied.

Toning also became popular in the early 1900s, and involved the chemical replacement of silver in the emulsion with colour salts. Stencilling, introduced in 1903 by Pathé, lasted into the 1920s, and involved cutting out shapes in the film, and then painting over them onto a second copy of the film underneath. This had to be repeated for each colour used. In 1908, Pathé introduced a pantograph system, but the work was still labour-intensive. It is possible to combine processes in one film, for example, tinting and toning. Other systems aimed to reproduce all colours by means of combining two or three recordings, each using different-coloured filters, as seen, for example, in the 1913 wedding of Princess Victoria Luise of Prussia filmed in Gaumont Chronochrome. A large number of early film clips, collected by the Italian film historian Davide Turconi, have been digitised for the Davide Turconi Project, of which Dr Yumibe is Co-Director. To find the website, google 'progettoturconi'.

Dr Yumibe also placed these early films in the colour context of the time, discussing: the invention of synthetic dyes, beginning with mauve; colour on magic-lantern slides and stereoscopic images; innovative lighting used by, for example, the dancer Loie Fuller; colour printing as used for William Morris wallpapers, the art of Alphonse Mucha, and much more. Colour printing appeared in children's books in the 1890s, popular magazines, adverts, postcards, cartoons and even newspapers. The famous 'Yellow Kid' cartoon appeared latterly in the *New York Journal*. This 'colour culture' shared by printing and cinema became a large industry in which companies like Pathé employed many female workers, such as Germaine Berger, as hand-colourers, often working across the various media. These skilled workers were in demand, so were well paid to stop them moving to competitors. The company of Scott & Van Altena did similar work in the U.S.

After c.1910, there was a change of colouring style linked with new interests in historical, educational and travel films. Colouring became more restrained and genteel, producing a more natural look, described as 'painterly'. This raised questions of taste in colour, and these cultural and social aspects are now being researched. Details of Dr Yumibe's book are given below.

News

- Joshua Yumibe's book is *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism*. (Rutgers University Press, 2012). Available in hard cover or paperback. **The contents list is given at the foot of this page.**
- The last Progress in Colour Studies conference, PICS12, took place in the University of Glasgow in July 2012. The GCSG committee is currently working on editing and publishing the proceedings.

Contents of *Moving Color* by Joshua Yumibe (for publication details, see under 'News' above)

Introduction.
1. The colors of modernity.
2. Hand-coloring and the intermediality of cinema.
3. Transformation and uplift: stenciling, tinting and toning.