
Research Article

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Beyond Aesthetics: Color as Narrative Sign in a Barthesian Reading of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

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Abstract

This study is about color as a narrative sign in Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. It aims to see how denotative and connotative meanings are constructed through repeated color pattern and how color-based connotation operates as cultural myth concerns with nostalgia, cultural memory, and the decline of civilization order pre-war in Europe. The data are the visual elements of the movie happening at pre-war and are selected purposively representing four temporal frames, the film's present-day, 1985, 1968, and 1932 temporal frames, as well as the imprisonment-and-occupation sequence. Using Roland Barthes' model of denotation, connotation, and myth, the study analyzes purposively selected scenes. The analysis identifies two related but distinct operations of color. First, the film establishes a gradual shift from saturated, warm palettes to faded, muted tones, allowing color to narrate *The Grand Budapest Hotel*'s institutional and cultural decline over time. Second, the film interrupts this gradual process with a complete transition to black-and-white during the occupation sequence, marking a historical rupture rather than an ordinary decline. Recurring motifs, including the pink Mendl's pastry box and the purple hotel uniforms, further connect color with institutional identity, continuity, and remembrance. The findings demonstrate that color does not simply decorate Anderson's carefully constructed visual world. Instead, its recurrence and transformation produce a narrative system through which the film translates a literary memory of a lost Europe into visual form.

Keywords: semiotics; narrative; connotation; myth; nostalgia

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1. Introduction

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) is explicitly credited as “inspired by the writings of Stefan Zweig.” The film incorporates elements associated with Zweig’s fiction and memoir, particularly the memory of a European cultural order that has disappeared amid historical violence (Anderson, 2014; Dille, 2017; Li, 2022; Sbarra, 2026; Zweig & Anderson, 2014). Zweig’s literary world is important to this study because the film’s nostalgia is not directed simply toward an attractive historical setting. It is directed toward a social and cultural order whose disappearance is experienced as a form of loss. Anderson transforms that literary concern into a visual narrative in which the appearance of the Grand

Budapest Hotel changes together with the historical period in which it is remembered (Dilley, 2017; Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013; Sanders, 2006; Sbarra, 2026; Stam, 2005).

Color is particularly important to this transformation since it represents the domain of natural language, social and individual cultures, and tastes (Almalech, 2025). Anderson is widely associated with symmetrical compositions, carefully controlled production design, and distinctive color palettes. Recent scholarship has argued that his chromatic compositions can function as narrative devices rather than merely decorative features. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, however, color is especially significant because its meaning is not produced by isolated colors alone. Meaning emerges through recurrence, contrast, temporal change, and the relationship between color and narrative events. The same visual world that appears vivid in the 1932 storyline becomes increasingly muted in later historical frames, while the occupation sequence abandons color altogether. This stylistic recognizability has also been discussed in relation to Anderson’s auteur identity and carefully controlled visual construction (Ashby, 2013; Dilley, 2017; Kunze, 2022; Pohl, 2018).

Previous discussions of Anderson’s visual style have established the importance of color, symmetry, production design, and visual harmony to his filmmaking (Attademo, 2021; Deb & Shariff M., 2025; Kunze, 2022; Pohl, 2018). Attademo (2021), for example, demonstrates that color in Anderson’s films can function as a narrative language that conveys emotional and symbolic meaning. Deb and Shariff (2025) likewise emphasize the connection between visual harmony and narrative structure in Anderson’s cinema. Research specifically addressing *The Grand Budapest Hotel* has also connected the film to Zweig’s literary memory of Europe. Li (2022) argues that the film retains the central thrust of Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday*, particularly its nostalgia for classical European culture, its depiction of refugee displacement, and its condemnation of fascist violence. Dilley (2017) specifically examines Stefan Zweig’s literary influence and memory in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, while Sbarra (2026) further describes the film as a reinterpretation of several Zweig works rather than a straightforward adaptation of a single text (Dilley, 2017; Li, 2022; Sbarra, 2026).

These studies provide an important basis, but they leave room for a more systematic semiotic account of how color itself constructs meaning across the film’s temporal architecture (Attademo, 2021; Dilley, 2017; Li, 2022). A stylistic description can demonstrate that the film uses different color palettes, while an adaptation study can establish its connection to Zweig. What remains underdeveloped is an explanation of how recurring colors shift from literal visual features to culturally meaningful signs. This study addresses that gap by treating color as a narrative sign and by distinguishing between gradual chromatic fading and sudden chromatic erasure. The distinction is important because the film does not represent all forms of historical loss in the same way. From an adaptation perspective, the movement from literary source to film can be understood as a creative and interpretive transformation rather than a simple reproduction of an original text (Dilley, 2017; Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013; Li, 2022).

This study addresses two research questions, namely denotative and connotative meanings that are constructed through recurring color patterns in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and the way color-based connotations operate as cultural myths that shape the film’s concerns with nostalgia and the decline of a particular civilizational order. The objectives are, therefore, to identify the recurring chromatic patterns that carry narrative meaning and to interpret their broader cultural significance through Barthes’ semiotic framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

Barthes’ semiotic model provides the central analytical framework. At the first level of signification, denotation concerns the observable sign as it appears; in this study, this means identifying the actual

color, palette, object, costume, or environmental surface visible in a scene. Connotation concerns the additional emotional, social, or characterological meaning produced by the sign in a particular context. Myth operates at a broader cultural level, where an already meaningful sign becomes associated with an apparently naturalized cultural idea (Barthes, 1972). Barthes describes myth as a second-order semiological system in which an existing sign becomes the signifier of a further concept (Barthes, 1972). This makes the framework useful for examining how a repeated color can shift from a visual property to a symbol of memory, civilization, or historical loss. Importantly, the framework does not require that every color has a fixed, universal meaning. It can be reinterpreted and produce new meaning. Connotation is interpreted through context and recurrence; myth is established only when the accumulated pattern supports a broader cultural claim. This approach also aligns with broader accounts of semiotics and representation in which meaning is produced through cultural codes and signifying practices rather than through inherent properties of signs (Chandler, 2007; Hall, 1997). Because the present study treats color as a formal element that participates in storytelling, it also draws on film-form approaches that understand visual choices as organized components of cinematic meaning (Bordwell et al., 2020; Branigan, 2018).

3. Methods

This study employs descriptive qualitative design using film textual analysis. The primary text is Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014). The film is treated as a cultural and narrative text, in which its visual elements can be read as signs. Treating film as a narrative text is consistent with approaches that distinguish cinematic narration while attending to the organization of story and discourse (Chatman, 1990). The data consist of purposively selected scenes representing the film's four temporal frames, the present day, 1985, 1968, and 1932, as well as the imprisonment, frontier, and occupation sequences in the second half. The selection emphasizes temporal transitions, recurring color motifs, and major narrative disruptions accompanied by substantial chromatic changes.

A scene was selected when it met at least one of three criteria: (1) it marked a significant temporal transition; (2) it contained a recurring color motif such as Mendl's pastry box, hotel uniforms, or the hotel façade; or (3) it contained a major narrative disruption accompanied by a notable change in palette. The timestamps reported in the analysis follow the working scene log used in the draft data. They are intended as locational references rather than claims about universal time codes across releases.

The analytical procedure adapts the qualitative sequence of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Each selected scene was coded at three levels. First, denotation records of what color or chromatic pattern is visibly present. Second, connotation interprets the emotional, social, or characterological association produced by that color in relation to their position in the narrative structure or context. Third, myth considers whether repeated connotations support a broader cultural idea across the film. Interpretations were retained as tentative when the available scene evidence was insufficient to support a stable connotative or mythic claim.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings are organized by temporal color progression, recurring chromatic motifs, contextual color shifts, and the distinction between gradual fading and complete desaturation.

4.1 Color, Temporal Structure, and the Narrative of Decline

As shown in Figure 1, the strongest pattern concerns the relationship between temporal transition and chromatic intensity. The present-day frame (01:18) opens in pale, desaturated tones, creating a visually subdued register. At 01:42, the saturated pink book cover produces a sharp chromatic contrast.

At the denotative level, the change is simply a movement from pale surroundings to a vivid pink object. At the connotative level, however, the pink cover functions as a threshold into a remembered narrative, because it immediately precedes the movement into an earlier temporal frame (Attademo, 2021; Barthes, 1972).



Figure 1. Temporal color progression across the film's four narrative frames.

Panel A: Present day (01:18); Panel B: 1985 (03:24); Panel C: 1968 (03:33); Panel D: 1932 (11:51). Note. Timestamps are taken from the supplied viewing notes

The 1985 frame (03:24) continues this movement through soft pastel pink, blue, and orange. These colors are less forceful than the saturated palette associated with the hotel's 1932 period, but they remain warm enough to distinguish the remembered past from the muted present. The 1968 frame (03:33) produces a more visible reduction in chromatic intensity through a faded orange-amber palette. The film's description of the hotel as "*lusuh*" and "in need of repair" reinforces the interpretation of fading color as a sign of institutional decline. The 1932 frame (11:51 onward), by contrast, restores saturated red, pink, and purple, presenting the hotel and its staff at their greatest visual intensity.

As these frames are taken together, they construct more than a sequence of attractive palettes. More than that, they establish a chromatic chronology. Saturation becomes associated with the remembered vitality of the hotel, while fading corresponds with the later condition of the institution (Attademo, 2021; Branigan, 2018). At the level of myth, the accumulated pattern contributes to an idealized image of a European cultural order that appears more complete in memory than in the historical present. This reading is consistent with the film's relationship to Zweig: the past is not simply represented as old, but as a lost cultural world whose disappearance is mourned (Barthes, 1972; Dilley, 2017; Li, 2022; Sbarra, 2026).

4.2 Recurring Color Motifs: Mendl's and the Hotel Uniforms

Figure 2 presents the recurring chromatic motifs discussed below. Recurring objects strengthen the relationship between color and cultural memory. Mendl's pastry box is consistently rendered in pale pink. Denotatively, the pink identifies the packaging of a specific bakery product. Its repeated appearance, however, gives the color a connotative function beyond the object itself (Attademo, 2021;

Barthes, 1972). Because the box returns across scenes and temporal contexts, the pink becomes associated with craftsmanship, refinement, and continuity. The motif, therefore, operates differently from a one-time color accent: its meaning accumulates through repetition.



Figure 2. Recurring chromatic motifs associated with institutional identity and continuity.

Panel A: Mendl's pastry box; Panel B: purple hotel/lobby uniform. Note. The supplied viewing notes do not give exact time codes for these recurring motifs.

The purple uniforms of the hotel's lobby boys and concierge staff function similarly. At the denotative level, purple is simply part of an institutional uniform. Connotatively, the uniform communicates belonging, professional identity, and the highly ordered social world of the hotel (Barthes, 1972; Pohl, 2018). The contrast between the uniform's stronger appearance in 1932 and its diminished presence in 1968 connects the motif to the broader temporal pattern. The hotel's colors consequently function as markers of institutional continuity while also registering the weakening of that institution.

At the mythic level, these motifs allow the Grand Budapest Hotel to stand for more than a physical building. Through repeated color, the hotel becomes a sign of an idealized social order characterized by refinement, ritual, service, and continuity (Barthes, 1972; Dilley, 2017). The cultural meaning does not reside in pink or purple independently. It emerges because these colors repeatedly accompany the institution that the narrative remembers as having existed before its historical disappearance.

4.3 Color and Emotional Disruption: Context Rather Than Universal Symbolism

As shown in Figure 3, color also changes in response to individual narrative events. Following Madame D.'s death, the bridge-and-frozen-river sequence (18:52) uses a subdued palette, with blue as the dominant accent. The following scene (19:05) continues the reduced contrast in Gustave's clothing and surroundings. Denotatively, the sequence differs from the saturated world of Part One. Connotatively, the muted palette can be read as melancholic because it accompanies mourning and narrative suspension (Attademo, 2021; Barthes, 1972). The important point is that blue is not treated as inherently equivalent to sadness. Its meaning is produced through the relationship between color, event, character, and surrounding palette (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2007).

A similar caution applies to the isolated red accent in Zero's socks during the train sequence (21:07). The socks are visually distinct from the surrounding uniforms, making them a plausible characterological sign (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2007). However, the available evidence does not establish that the red definitively signifies resistance, anger, or rebellion. It is therefore more methodologically sound to retain the observation at the level of a tentative connotation. This restraint is important because a Barthesian analysis becomes weaker if every visible color is assigned a predetermined symbolic meaning (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2007).



Figure 3. Color and narrative disruption in the post-death and train sequences.

Panel A: bridge and frozen river after Madame D.'s death (18:52); Panel B: Zero's red socks during the train sequence (21:07). Note. The interpretation of red socks remains tentative.

The brightening of the train compartment when Albert enters, at approximately 21:44, should be handled similarly. The change may accompany the arrival of protection or narrative relief, but the interpretation is persuasive only when connected to Albert's action in the scene. Color here functions relationally: the visual change becomes meaningful because it occurs alongside a change in narrative tension.

4.4 From Gradual Fading to Historical Rupture

Figure 4 visualizes the transition discussed in this section. The most significant finding occurs during the sequence of imprisonment and occupation. As Gustave's imprisonment and the closing of the frontier unfold, the palette becomes dominated by cold greys, white, and reduced contrast. Prison uniforms appear in grey-and-white stripes, while the checkpoint is characterized by grey concrete and pale snow. These colors denote a visual environment radically different from the saturated hotel of 1932. Connotatively, the reduction of chromatic variety corresponds with confinement, bureaucracy, and institutional uniformity (Attademo, 2021; Barthes, 1972; Branigan, 2018).



Figure 4. From chromatic decline to historical rupture.

Panel A: grey-and-white checkpoint/imprisonment environment; Panel B: occupied hotel with ZZ banners; Panel C: "17 November: Start of the Lutz Blitz"; Panel D: black-and-white train sequence. Note. Exact occupation timestamps are not supplied in the viewing notes.

The pattern intensifies when the occupying force takes control of the hotel. Black ZZ banners are placed against the hotel's characteristic pink façade, creating a direct visual collision between the institution's established identity and the imposed identity of occupation (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1997). The most decisive transformation occurs in the sequence introduced by the title card "17 November: Start of the Lutz Blitz." Viewed through a train window, the sequence is rendered entirely in black and white. This is not a continuation of the gradual fading observed across the temporal frames, but it is an abrupt withdrawal of color.

This distinction is central to the study's argument. Gradual desaturation represents decline: the institution remains present but loses vitality, intensity, and cultural force. Complete desaturation represents rupture: the visual system that previously organized the remembered world is itself removed (Attademo, 2021; Branigan, 2018). The film, therefore, differentiates between a world becoming old and a world being historically destroyed. In relation to Zweig's preoccupation with the disappearance of European civilization under historical violence, the black-and-white sequence can be understood as the visual equivalent of historical erasure rather than simply another stage of nostalgia (Dilley, 2017; Li, 2022; Sbarra, 2026).

Table 1. Summary of Major Color Findings

Scene/Pattern	Denotation	Connotation	Mythic implication
Temporal palettes	Saturated 1932; softer 1985; faded 1968; pale present	Vitality → fading → loss	Memory of a declining cultural order
Mendl's box	Repeated pale pink packaging	Craftsmanship, refinement, continuity	Cultural memory preserved through ritual objects
Hotel uniforms	Purple institutional clothing	Belonging, order, professionalism	Hotel as emblem of an idealized social order
Post-death sequence	Muted palette with blue accent	Contextual melancholy	Loss experienced within personal memory
Occupation	Grey/white, then complete black-and-white	Confinement and rupture	Historical erasure of the remembered world

Note. The table synthesizes the denotative, connotative, and mythic readings developed in the Results section.

In response to the first research question, the findings demonstrate that color constructs narrative meanings through both individual scenes and cumulative patterns. At the denotative level, the film repeatedly establishes identifiable palettes, objects, uniforms, and environmental colors. At the connotative level, saturation, fading, recurrence, and contrast become associated with prosperity, memory, institutional identity, melancholy, confinement, and rupture (Attademo, 2021; Barthes, 1972; Branigan, 2018). These associations are not treated as universal color codes. Their meaning is generated by their position within the film's narrative structure.

In response to second research question, the recurring connotations develop into a cultural myth of a lost European order. The Grand Budapest Hotel becomes a condensed sign of that order because its visual identity is inseparable from the rituals, uniforms, objects, and saturated colors that characterize the world of 1932. The hotel's later fading does not merely show physical deterioration. It turns visual deterioration into a narrative representation of cultural disappearance. This interpretation extends previous scholarship that identifies color as a narrative resource in Anderson's cinema by explaining how the narrative function of color can be read through a second-order semiotic process (Attademo, 2021; Barthes, 1972).

The distinction between decline and rupture is the study's principal contribution. A purely stylistic account could describe the changing palettes as evidence of Anderson's visual control. A Barthesian account asks what those changes signify within the film's cultural narrative. The gradual fading across

temporal frames and the sudden black-and-white occupation sequence do not perform the same narrative work. One mourns a world that is disappearing; the other marks the historical violence that ends it. Color, therefore, does not simply illustrate the film's engagement with Zweig. Moreover, it participates in the construction of that engagement. This reading is consistent with approaches that treat cinematic color as a formal and perceptual system whose meanings can be shaped by narrative, memory, and context (Branigan, 2018; Dilley, 2017; Li, 2022).

The analysis also demonstrates why interpretive restraint is necessary. The red socks and the brightening around Albert's entrance may invite symbolic readings, but the evidence does not support treating those readings as equally secure with the broader temporal pattern. A semiotic reading is more persuasive when it distinguishes strong recurring structures from isolated visual coincidences. This distinction prevents the analysis from reducing Barthes' framework to a color-symbol dictionary (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2007).

5. Conclusions

This study has argued that color in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* functions as a narrative sign rather than as mere decoration represented by each scene of the movie. Through Barthes' levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, the analysis demonstrates that color participates in the film's construction of temporal memory, institutional identity, nostalgia, and historical loss. The recurring palettes of the film's temporal frames create a chromatic chronology in which the saturated 1932 world represents the remembered vitality of the Grand Budapest Hotel, while later muted palettes register its institutional and cultural decline.

At the same time, the film distinguishes gradual decline from historical rupture. The complete withdrawal of color during the occupation sequence cannot be understood simply as a more extreme version of the earlier fading. Furthermore, it marks the destruction of the historical world represented by Gustave and the hotel. In this sense, color becomes a visual language for two distinctive meanings, that is, between losing a world through time and losing it through violence.

The study is limited to a single film and does not claim that the identified denotation-connotation-myth pattern applies uniformly across Anderson's entire filmography. Future research could compare *The Grand Budapest Hotel* with other Anderson films or with Zweig's literary works to determine whether the distinction between chromatic decline and chromatic rupture is specific to this film's adaptation of cultural memory. Nevertheless, the present analysis shows that a semiotic approach can move the discussion of Anderson's color from aesthetic description toward an interpretation of how visual form of the movie's scenes constructs narrative and cultural meaning.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author(s) Contribution

The corresponding author is the sole contributor to this manuscript, including the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing of the study.

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