

"In Any Circumstance...Freshness to Live": Storyline, Dialogue, and Cinematography in *Rouge*
Emily McIntosh

How much power do we really have over our lives? Do chance circumstances determine how our lives will be, who we will love, and whether we will be happy? Can we ever turn our lives around? Can people ever act without their best interest in mind? Krzysztof Kieslowski investigates these and many other important questions in *Rouge*, the final installment of the *Trois Couleurs* trilogy. *Rouge* explores the themes of compassion, cynicism, love, heartbreak, and the forces that affect our lives often against our will. This magnificent film uses a rich and complex storyline, loaded dialogue, and stunning cinematography to tell the story of chance circumstances that affect the lives of some unknowingly related characters.

Rouge is the story of Valentine, a beautiful, young model and dancer who accidentally runs over a dog while driving one evening. Without hesitation she returns the dog, Rita, to the owner whose address is on the collar. The owner is a cynical retired judge who, Valentine later realizes, taps into people's private phone conversations. The owner, whose name is never disclosed, shares three main conversations with Valentine in which their initial confrontation between idealism and cynicism develops into a mutual bond. Valentine begins to understand the retired judge's bitterness while the retired judge begins to gather hope for his own life and for the human race. This basic story-line is greatly enhanced by more minor characters, the older man's back story, and the events that connect these characters.

Rouge has a clever and interesting storyline that connects many characters together in unexpected ways. It exhibits how chance encounters can deeply affect people's lives. The storyline also uses parallel strings of events between two characters, the retired judge and Auguste, to show the similarities between their lives. Auguste is young lawyer who is in a happy relationship with a beautiful blonde woman. He is often seen, but it is unknown at first what relevance his story holds for the plot. As the viewer gets to know more and more about him, as well as the retired judge, they realize the striking similarities between their lives. Auguste serves to show what happened to the retired judge in his past. Auguste's girlfriend leaves him rather unexpectedly, leaving him heartbroken. When the retired judge tells Valentine why he is so unhappy, because of his loss at love when he was a young man, the audience realizes how Auguste's life is almost identical to his. This unexpected parallel between these characters serves to show how easily and unexpectedly the retired judge's life changed forever through chance circumstance. The audience is able to see the cause of the judge's sorrow firsthand, as well as the pervasive effect this has on him, even in old age. The subplot of Auguste shows how easily chance circumstance can cause an event in your life that will change you forever.

Another connection between the characters is the judge's relation to Valentine and her relation to Auguste. The retired judge admits to Valentine that she might be the woman he never met who could have given him a second chance at love. This seems evident through the intimate emotional connection, or fraternal love, that they seem to share. At the film's climax Valentine boards a ferry (the mode of transportation the judge recommended) that will take her down the English Channel to visit her brother. At the same Auguste takes the same ferry as Valentine in order to follow his ex-girlfriend and her new lover, exactly what the retired judge did in his past. At home the retired judge watches his TV to find out that the ferry had a terrible accident in

which all but seven passengers died. Each of these survivors are characters that were in the trilogy, including Valentine and Auguste. Valentine is shown huddling for warmth near Auguste. This chance meeting perhaps foreshadows a potential relationship between the two, a way for Auguste to have the extra chance at love that the retired judge never had.

This final scene is the ending to a great screenplay. Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* says, "Everything is arranged like a falling-domino scheme. Characters and events tip gently into one another, until—by the end—Kieslowski's grand design becomes clear" ("Red"). This final scene brings all of the characters and subplots together in the same moment, while relating to theme of how chance circumstances can drastically change your life. Throughout the film there are subtle hints that something big is going to happen. The viewer also gets the feeling that Auguste and Valentine are destined to meet because of their numerous nearly-close encounters and the relationship that builds between her and the retired judge, someone who is so close of a character to Auguste that it is unclear where one ends and the other begins. The storyline brilliantly weaves these hints into the plot, so that the ending seems shocking, while at the same time inevitable. It seems impossible that every event is mere coincidence. There seems to be some force, perhaps God, affecting these characters lives and bringing them together.

Other, more minor characters and their stories play an important role in the storyline. For example, Valentine has a few phone conversations with her long distance boyfriend throughout the film. He is very jealous and paranoid that she is having an affair while she is away. However, Valentine still feels lonely and needs him. She waits for him to call sometimes and sleeps with his jacket. This part of the plot contributes to Valentine's character. It shows how she is unhappy in her love life and is in need of something more. Although her image is perfect on the outside she still feels loneliness inside, something that the retired judge picks up on. This is why the retired judge's cynicism strikes Valentine so strongly. This minor part of the storyline actually adds a lot to the dynamics of the characters and their relations with each other. This brilliant storyline is even more enhanced by the meaningful dialogue between characters.

Valentine and the retired judge share three main conversations between each other. This dialogue is how the differences in philosophy of the characters really comes out and how the themes of the film are explored. Prior to these main conversations is a brief introduction when Valentine comes to the retired judge's house to return his dog. Valentine asks if she should take the dog to the veterinarian and he replies, "As you wish." Valentine asks, "If I ran over your daughter would you be so indifferent?" The man coldly replies, "I have no daughter, miss", before yelling at her to go away. Valentine takes the dog with her. This first encounter gives us a glimpse of how bitter and uncaring this man is and how deeply this offends Valentine, an idealist.

The first main conversation occurs after the dog runs away from Valentine and she goes back to the retired judge's house in hopes of finding it. This is when Valentine catches him listening to a private phone conversation between a married man and his secret gay lover. When the judge sees how outraged she is and asks her why she does not do anything about it, she defiantly says, "I will." But after she realizes the potential consequences of telling the man's family about the affair she decides not to. The judge says, "Sooner or later he'll jump out of a window or she'll find out everything...What can we do about it." This shows the retired judge's

pessimistic nature. It is quite obvious that he has somewhat given up on life and hope for the human race. The retired judge then asks Valentine why she really saved the dog-- because if she did not she would have to deal with guilt. This shows his philosophy that all people are selfish and only do good deeds in their own interest. To this Valentine replies, "You're mistaken...about everything. People aren't bad. They may be weak sometimes...I can only feel pity for you." This shows her relentless idealism. This heated confrontation highlights one of the film's main themes: the nature of human beings.

After Valentine sees an article in the paper about the retired judge and his spying she goes to his house again to let him know that she did not tell anyone. He tells her that he turned himself in. They admit to each other that they both cried after their last encounter. They were both deeply affected by it. The retired judge regained a moral conscience and perhaps began to gain some hope because of Valentine's idealism, while Valentine seemed to realize that she did not entirely believe that people are intrinsically good. During their encounter a brick is thrown through the retired judge's window. To this he says, "I wonder what I'd do in their place? The same thing." In regards to the people he tried when he was a judge he says, "Given their lives I would steal, I'd kill, I'd lie. All that because I wasn't in their shoes. I was in mine." This brings up another theme: empathy. He seems to be more understanding of people and, in turn, loses some of his cynicism. He now realizes that people only do bad things under bad circumstances.

The final dialogue between these two characters occurs after the retired judge watches a fashion show that Valentine is in. She knows that she is leaving to visit her brother for a few weeks, so they say goodbye. He tells her about a dream he had of her in which she has aged about twenty or thirty years. In this dream she wakes up in a bed and smiles at the person next to her. Perhaps this foreshadows the relationship she can have with Auguste. The main purpose of this dialogue is for the retired judge to tell her the story of his heart-break and why he gave up on love. This dialogue shows how far the characters have come in their own lives and in their relationship with one another. Because the judge forced her to take a critical look at what really makes her happy she gained the potential for a happy future. Because Valentine taught him that people really do have heart he was able to get close to her through sharing his painful feelings. These three dialogues investigate the truth about the nature of humans, while fostering growth and closeness between these two characters who, in the beginning, seem like complete opposites.

These themes that have so far been discussed are even more emphasized through the unique cinematography. This element also makes the film look more interesting and appealing. Something that stands out is that shots often string different characters together. The first shot shows a man's hand dialing a phone. The shot runs down the phone wire, through the wall, into a bundle of red cables that runs through a pipe, into the sea, into the center where calls are managed, and back into the man's phone where Auguste is shown hanging up. During this long shot murmuring sounds are heard of people's conversations. This shot ties in the importance that the telephone has in the plot, while relating to the theme of human relatedness. Lisa Nesselson of *Variety* says, "'Red' the beautifully spun and splendidly acted tale of a young model's decisive encounter with a retired judge, is another deft, deeply affecting variation on Krzysztof Kieslowski's recurring theme that people are interconnected in ways they can barely fathom" ("Three Colors: Red"). This shot encapsulates the constant connections that are being created between characters within the film. It seems to suggest fraternity-- the virtue that red represents

of the French flag. Similarly, one of the first scenes follows Auguste in the street, up the wall of Valentine's apartment, into her window where it zooms in on her ringing phone. Other shots often show one of these two characters through the window of the other's apartment. These types of shots connect these and other characters and suggest that perhaps they are destined to meet.

The most important image that is repeated throughout *Rouge* is Valentine's profile. At a photo shoot for a gum advertisement, Valentine, with wet hair, a gray woolen shawl wrapped around her shoulders, and a bright red billowy backdrop, is looking to her right. She is directed to look extremely sad. When picking out her favorite shot from the shoot she immediately chooses the sad profile. Perhaps this seems to have the most genuine emotion to her. Similar sad profile shots are repeatedly seen through the movie, usually of Valentine, but sometimes of other characters. These shots seem so intimate, like they are showing the depth and sadness behind every character. When she is shown on TV after being rescued from the ferry a freeze-frame reveals an identical image to the ad. This is the final shot of the film. James Berardinelli of *Reelviews* says, "It is this moment, more than any other, that crystalizes everything that the *Three Colors* trilogy is attempting to convey about life and destiny" ("*Three Colors: Red*"). The final shot ties everything together. Not only does this repeated image suggest that it is Valentine's destiny to get in the accident to meet Auguste, but it also shows the sadness that hides behind her perfect appearance and idealism.

Rouge is a fantastic film that blends three main elements together: a complex story line that relates characters together, serious dialogue that develops characters and explores themes, and unique cinematography that ties everything together while looking interesting. All three elements contribute to the message that there is great power in circumstances. An image that sums up the film's message is the advertisement featuring Valentine's sad profile with the words "En toute circumstance. Fraicheur de vivre", which roughly translates to "In every circumstance-coolness to live." *Rouge* seems to be showing in every scene how much power circumstances have in your life, but that there are always opportunities to turn things around. In the end Valentine and the retired judge are both right. People do often act terribly, but you have to understand how events lead them there.

Works Cited

- Berardinelli, James. "Three Colors: Red." *Reelviews*. 23 Feb. 2009. <<http://www.reelviews.net>>.
- Howe, Desson. "Red." *Washington Post*. 16 Dec. 1994. 5 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>.
- Nesselson, Lisa. "Three Colors: Red." *Variety*. 19 May 1994. 23 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.variety.com>>.
- Rouge*. Dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski. Perf. Irène Jacob, Jean-Louis Trintignant, and Jean-Pierre Lorit. Miramax, 1994.

**Commentary by Alex Rosenberg
'09, Philosophy and Political Science**

This is a paper that weaves together three elements of a film – storyline, dialogue, and cinematography – into a cohesive whole. Emily McIntosh aptly identifies the themes of the film Rouge both in itself and within the context of the greater trilogy of which it is a part. She identifies a number of crucial themes on differing scales and in different elements of the film; visual themes in cinematography, the conflict of optimism and cynicism in dialogue, and what it is to be human through the film as a whole. While this alone would comprise a strong analytic paper, the author goes further in her conclusion. McIntosh pushes her analysis one step further into a consideration of a more subtle message in the film about the power of circumstances. This conclusion not only ties together the themes McIntosh discusses earlier in the paper, but keeps the conclusion from reading as a simple recapitulation. The deep discussion of themes, capped off by a cohesive and thoughtful conclusion, makes for a paper that is both academically strong and a pleasure to read.