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## INTRODUCTION: BEYOND THE LANGUAGE OF COLOUR

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Something red can be destroyed, but red cannot be destroyed, and that is why the meaning of the word 'red' is independent of the existence of a red thing.

(Wittgenstein 1963: 28e)

When I was young, I laughed a lot at Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He opens it with these words: 'At the outset of the study of perception, we find *in language the notion of sensation ...*'. Isn't this an exemplary introduction? A collection of examples in the same vein, so austere and meager, inspire the descriptions that follow. From his window the author sees some tree, always in bloom; he huddles over his desk; now and again a red blotch appears – it's a quote.

(Serres 1995: 131–2)

Wittgenstein and Serres express in their different ways the problematic relationship between colour as a visual sensation and colour as an object of language. Wittgenstein's aporetic writing fretted over the sense of what 'red' meant according to the language game in which it appeared ('Red' as a metaphysical entity? 'Red' as a piece in a board game? 'Red' remembered but indistinguishable as a colour to someone recently suffering brain injury? 'Red' existing as a word?). His idea of red as part of a complex of games about words, world and mind was a significant philosophical turn in the study of colour as phenomenon, quality, concept, experience and language. Despite the attempts of such a philosophy to escape the constraints and contradictions of logical positivism, one might conclude that the

game Wittgenstein played still erred on the side of polite language. The immediacy of sensations was not for him.

No fan of the Word's hold on the senses, Serres even finds humour in those philosophers of perception, such as Merleau-Ponty, who imagine they are more in the world than Wittgenstein: 'intellectualized, chained to their library chairs, and tragically stripped of any tangible experience. Lots of phenomenology and no sensation – everything via language.' But even so, and as Serres admitted, colour and language are in analytical terms intricately related: language gives us words for colours, yet for other senses such as smell there are only words for things: we say 'red' rather than 'it is the colour of blood', but we do say 'it smells of lemons'. Language and colour have an intimacy not present in the other senses.

*Cultures of Colour* acknowledges this 'language of colour', yet reaches beyond the analytical or philosophical strictures outlined above so as to recognize in colour its 'uncanny ability to evade all attempts to codify it systematically'(Riley 1996: 1). As a study of its various expressions in visual, textual and material culture, the following chapters draw on a wide range of disciplines, though these are largely aligned under the rubric of the humanities and in part the social sciences rather than the natural sciences. Recent research in the study of colour has seen the rise of multidisciplinary approaches, where the ambiguities inherent in the study of colour are accountable or containable using a battery of methods and approaches to net colour in its different complexions. These perspectives are often drawn under the umbrella of a general subject area, such as art history, which brings its own methodological assumptions according to the job at hand (Gage 2000: 34). The present book has a broader remit. Certainly, some contributions herein have this art historical and theoretical basis, but others operate in other terrains, where the methodology and objects of study lie beyond that discourse, relating for example to the sociology of everyday life or the historiography of biography. With this in mind, it is symptomatic of the diverse approaches to the subject that any meaningful engagement should attempt to avoid writing a history of colour, or even proposing histories of colour, and try instead to provide some sense of its transdisciplinary character.

For the purposes of this book, research on colour is the traversal of disciplines and histories – including histories of colour. Colour in a sense is a sedimentation and stratification of ideas and views on knowledge, consciousness, perception and world stretching back to early philosophy and finding its scientific and empirical form in Enlightenment science and philosophy. While certain chapters refer in some ways to key moments in this history (and of course there are other histories in other cultures of colour) the present volume goes beyond them. In extending our study of colour beyond its definition as an objective property, as perceiver-dependent, as dispositional

(peculiar to specific lighting and observer situations) we encounter colour as a socio-cultural construction. Our understanding of the physical, symbolic and metaphysical properties of colour alters over time as well as across cultures.

This is perhaps obvious enough, but this should not mislead us into relativistic or postmodern readings of colour's meaning or symbolism across cultures or through time; rather, it should enable us to reflect on its historical and epistemological contingency in terms of its iterability, or ability to be repeated in different contexts ('red', 'redcoat', 'red-skin', for example). Colour is constructed discursively from the discipline speaking it; the question remains how to maintain this constructionist view of colour without reducing colour to simply a socio-cultural construct. Part of the answer lies in recognizing how colour functions in language not simply as symbolic constructions but as constructing acts: colour is a textual or speech act, which not only organizes language around the world, but organizes the world around itself, making the context as much as inhabiting it. More importantly, these variations are the product of real material and historical conditions and forces, in which colour is structured, mobilized and defined as an effect – sociologically, technologically, culturally – of knowledge and power. Colour is not simply constative – a true or false statement such as 'the carpet is red' – it is performative, an act of naming that makes an action in that naming. This has obvious relevance to issues of class, race and gender, and certain chapters in this volume discuss this aspect, in the construction of discourses on black albinism, or working-class colour preferences in back gardens.

The recent study of colour may be broadly mapped onto the tendency, over the last century, to bring language and, more recently, sensation and body to the forefront of philosophy, and to understand the role of colour in science as increasingly technologically orientated and determined. Colour was once the province of philosophy and science; in recent decades it has become the terrain of language, desire and difference, in the fields of psychoanalysis, linguistics and sociology. For every discipline or combination thereof there is a range of methodological assumptions about colour, about what it is and what it does. Under the current rubric, colour 'works' visually, materially and textually, and its meaning shifts between the literal and the metaphorical according to context. Thus, the meaning of colour in the phenomenology of computer graphics is quite different from understanding the role of colour in postcolonial studies. 'White', 'black' and 'yellow' are linguistically and perceptually value-laden. This book tries to accommodate the wide spectrum of approaches to colour and mobilizations of colour's meanings, linking these perceptual, experiential, aesthetic, technological and socio-cultural dimensions of colour to the practices and media of the arts, and to colour (as a racial and class index) in everyday life. The emphasis

here is on the visual, the material and the textual ranges of colour, and is largely centred on the discussion of specific cases, drawing from painting, film and writing. These sit comfortably enough under the 'visual' and 'textual'. The 'material' is more difficult to distinguish, but it serves to accommodate the sociological and ethnographical responses to colour in social life, and the technologies that pertain to colour's manifestation as material and materialized. The contributors draw on a wide range of studies: psychoanalysis, psychology, continental philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, literary theory; but they are inflected according to the subject area of colour research: painting, film, gardening, computer technology, literature and biography.

Serres' criticisms aside, it attends to the inscription of these in writing, whether historical, ethnographical or philosophical, as much as to colour in its visual and material cultural instances.

### **Colour and Visual Culture**

The chapters in this section approach colour in postwar painting, drawing on the modernist links to philosophical and theological currents. The role of colour in the context of modern abstraction and the theme of colour's excess – either in terms of its sublime or poetic dimensions, or its psychological and psychoanalytic register – operate here. The figures of Lyotard, Kristeva and Wittgenstein present the line between colour, abstraction and language walked by artists such as Philip Taaffe, Barnett Newman, Francis Bacon and Damien Hirst. The chapters constitute a path from modernism's monochrome, through the fragmentation of colour in postmodernism, and on to the technological and embodied colour spaces of recent artists such as James Turrell.

Michael Corris situates his study of monochrome painting within the historiography of modern art to reconsider the role of philosophy and religion in the history of postwar abstract painting. He focuses on the considerable oeuvre of Ad Reinhardt in order to assert the centrality yet negativity with which such painting signals a challenge and an ironically poetical approach to the apparent impasse of modern painting. For Corris it is poetic because it ushers forth discourses of spirituality, transcendence and healing. The monochrome represents not simply the materialization of asceticism but a provocative evocation of the limits within the signifying practices of modern art. Since 1945, arguably the period when modernism, colour and abstraction have found a philosophically and aesthetically distinct form and language in the modern monochrome, the seemingly endless possibilities of interpretation stand in dynamic relation with the limits placed on meaning by the apparent austerity or restrictiveness of the format. Corris argues that Reinhardt's monochromes are 'constructive, in that the possibility of painting,

rather than its utter negation, prevails', allowing him to concentrate more on the issue of colour. Corris accounts for the gradual development of the artist's solution of using black hues in order to leave behind criticism of abstraction as art without meaning to combat the alternative problem of such works being choked with associative meaning. Thus Reinhardt's progression absorbs the lessons of Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism in order to foreground the role of detachment in the first instance and 'emptying out' in the second, all the while avoiding the annexing of colour by the 'inflated metaphysical claims' of the Abstract Expressionists.

Antony Hudek places colour in abstract painting squarely in the field of the philosophy of the sublime as the term reasserted itself problematically in contemporary postmodern art of the 1980s onwards. He begins by linking the sublime with a reemergent interest in the postmodern tropes of fragmentation, excess and displacement (rather than modern notions of lack and loss), particularly in the performance art and the 'spectating', feeling, sensate body: Lyotard's 'somatography'.

Hudek's concern is to interrogate this emergence as a double version of the sublime: positive – the possibility of a sublime art; and the negative – its impossibility. These modes are lodged within the difficult matrix of postmodern 'campy recycling outré abstraction'. Hudek argues that closer reading of Lyotard's sublime offers a more supple and inclusive reading of forms of 1980s abstract painting. He chooses the term 'anal sublime' as a contestatory, heteronomous sublime that refuses nostalgia for the unattainable and rejects the consensus of universal good taste or, in the case of Taaffe, the production of 'readymade' taste. Hudek interrogates the opticality and embodiedness of Duchamp's later, impure ('anal') work (*Étant Donnés*) in relation to this discourse on the sublime, beauty and the senses. The 'violence to the judging eye', which is a feature of both 'good' and 'bad' sublimes, is best exemplified by the role of colour in the work of Taaffe, Hafif and Mosset. The latter two's paintings neither abandon the pictorial sublime nor celebrate it – they mime its excess in a Lyotardian matrix 'inevitably inadequate to the task of presentation'. Here, colour possesses painting and invokes increasing cycles of transposition between eye, nose, ear and anus – a veritable chromatic economy of excess.

Nicholas Chare adopts a psychoanalytic approach to colour in the paintings of Francis Bacon, or rather, to the sound or voice of that colour. Beginning with Roland Barthes's 'The Grain of the Voice', he sets out to distinguish between what the paintings express and how they express it, the latter being connected to the body 'speaking its mother tongue'. Whereas Barthes promotes this distinction in relation to song, the writer here applies it to colour, and draws on Kristeva's analysis of colour in Giotto's art to do so. Chare performs a close analysis of the function of line as colour and colour as expansive

application in the Pope paintings of Francis Bacon in order to foreground the artists's view that there is something in oil colour that is uncontrollable, and to describe the textures, mediums and tools that expressed and materialized this aspect. In his concluding observations the writer sees in Bacon's depictions of dying and death the absence of contour and a formlessness in the formal execution of certain marks, and the articulation of this voiding in the context of sound and orality. This connection raises the possibility of an interpretation based on the phenomenon of synaesthesia, where colours for example can be heard, or sounds seen. For Chare, Bacon's paintings induce this experience, and there is evidence to indicate the painter was exploiting this quality, one which refers us back to the gradual emergence and differentiation of the child's senses as it separates from maternal plenitude. In Bacon's work colours are not sound, but in the realm of the Real, are fused with noise, or semiotic excess.

Mary Pearce focuses on the work of three contemporary artists to provide a discursive description of the role of colour as a 'bridge' between philosophical, historical and technological aspects of art, with particular emphasis on space and sound. She suggests in the examples of Damien Hirst's and David Hill's work that this technological dimension is accompanied by an increasing preoccupation with colour's linguistic and conceptual character, and by extension its cultural dimension. Implicit here is the contention that colour continues to draw on philosophical and scientific foundations laid in the nineteenth century. Aesthetics once associated colour with both human emotion and later with Gestalt's psychology and physiology of perception. Recently, however, the study of colour has become the subject of artistic interrogation within the world of new media. Hill's 'electronic linguistic' reworking of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is one example, and adumbrates the slippage that occurs when perceptual and intellectual (linguistic) regimens and approaches demonstrably fail to match each other or the phenomena they attempt to describe. Hill adds another dimension, by highlighting the role of acquiring colour through either understanding or misreading a text. This slippage becomes a feature of the work – from misinterpreting colour linguistically to 'missing' or 'non-existing' colour in the psychology of perception, and the disorientating effect colour exerts in some conditions. Pearce argues that this shift necessitates a different role for the viewer of colour: since Barnett Newman the relationship of viewer to painting for example is one of isolation and immersion.

## **Colour and Material Culture**

The definition of material culture here incorporates notions of colour in the everyday, ranging from perspectives on class and gender relations in the ethnography of gardening practices and values,

through the mixing of colour and its application to colour theory and practice, to the materialization of colour in the technology of computer screen from a phenomenological perspective. It also includes the study of time-based materializations, in this case film.

Beverley Lear focuses on the relationship between the role of colour in contemporary English domestic town gardens and in social class. Lear presents her ethnographic description and analysis of colour in gardens in the context of the literature and theory of colour, which stem from the impact of Goethe and Chevreul on horticulture, and the successive aesthetic models that developed since the Victorian period. The reversal in preferences for colour arrangements since the 1880s – gardeners now deem the pairing of reds and oranges harmonious, while the Victorians did not – are applicable to class and gender distinctions in the ‘ethnographic present’. For Lear the orchestration of garden colour comprises a ‘symbolic field’ in which action and duties are inseparable from the social context. Lear’s contribution places in historical context the living and lived material of her research with the gardeners of ‘Whitelynch’, a county town in Wiltshire. Lear then refers this history of increasing differentiation in form and colour to her ethnography of front and back gardens – the ‘everyday territory of contrasting public and private spaces’. Lear then offers a set of opposing principles which orientate gardening styles with class background and a range of factors including the longevity of displays and the relative visibility of signs of labour or proximity to nature. This taxonomy enables her to construct an ethnography of gardening in Whitelynch, one concerned to signal the contradiction between determining gardening values and styles according to class and gender and the need to establish individuality within this matrix.

Kiki Karatheodoris’s practice grounds itself in the historically problematic ontology of the ‘middle ground’ of colour in order to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in creating, describing and explaining a third ‘overlapping’ colour generated from two others. Embarking from the historical given of oppositions between colour and form – the latter standing for line, shading, representation and illusion, Karatheodoris argues that since ancient Greek philosophy the formal has been privileged over the abstract value of colour itself. Colour, at best, is a supplement, repressed and relegated in favour of modelling and perspective. The relatively recent enquiry into the properties of colour, both in philosophy and art practice, culminated in the breakthrough of early twentieth-century painting, whose artists had done more than shatter the picture plane; they had also ‘punctured’ the object’s boundaries, and one might say colour ‘seeped out’. Colours can unite through ‘equality of value’ – something form (line, shading, tone) cannot do owing to its dependence on ‘the divisive boundary line’. This profound diremption between values that make boundaries and colour values that elide them means that

painting enjoys or suffers an infinitude of combinations of values, from hierarchical form to the 'flatland' of pure colour.

One way through this complexity is to focus on a 'middle ground'; a space where the opposing forces of colour and value might interact in a controlled and repeatable manner. These investigations, which form the bedrock of Karatheodoris's paintings, offer a mode of colour use that moves beyond traditional colour mixing – a mode that engages with the hierarchical conditions and oppositions to which colour has been subordinate, has lately emerged from, and now meets on its own terms in the thought-provoking arena of the 'middle ground'.

My (Chris Horrocks's) chapter focuses on the ambiguous identity of the pixellated element, or 'pixel', to establish a phenomenology of digital colour as it relates to its precursor and counterpart, analogue colour. Arguing that technology is not the principal determinant, I draw on classical branches of phenomenological thought, in particular the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and the central concept of 'revealing'. Taking this as the locus, I suggest that digital colour presents itself as a 'difference-as-absence', both a disclosure and a concealment. Digital colour, in this perspective, is not simply a technological improvement on or successor to analogue colour as a difference but as an absence. Here, Heidegger's term 'standing reserve' is useful, for it serves to distinguish digital from analogue colour by accommodating the technological but not reducing it to technology. I link this mode of being to the digital world predating electronic imaging, most significantly the mosaic, in order to refute the notion that its being simply relies on its appearance as a set of discrete units; yet where once the body moved and accommodated the images and colours, now images move, zoom and reconstitute themselves. We, as bodies, implicate ourselves in the editing of our colour reality, and so it is that the being of such colour is rooted in dissimulation, in truth as representation rather than the truth of being. This has implications for the images' function or use. Heidegger's concept of usability and obtrusiveness, which refers to traditional tools (such as a broken hammer) run aground with digital colour, whose logic is to merge or collapse usefulness and uselessness. The only obduracy in digital colour occurs when the laptop's battery runs out and the colours disappear.

Liz Watkins's reading of Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) argues for a recognition of philosopher Gilles Deleuze's contribution to the understanding of the moving image's use of colour. Watkins's approach focuses on the relation between chromatic and acoustic registers and feminine desire and subjectivity, thus attending the effects of colour as part of a 'transient complex' including sounds and the actuality of the film print itself. This emphasis on movement points to the possibility of recognizing a form of 'fluid subjectivity', that destabilizes not merely the formal categories of image and narrative but extends beyond feminist theories of the gaze, of silence,



plenitude and loss and spectatorship; in short the subjugation of the specifics of female desire to the image of women.

From this position the writer posits a Deleuzian approach and attention to the actual materiality of film with emphasis on colour variations beyond the visual and dialogical. From this vantage point *The Piano* is a shifting texture of sound, colour and movement, all drawing to the intricacies of perception inseparable from the inscription of feminine desire through sensations and affects. This is Deleuze's 'movement-image' is a theory of becomings, which Watkins extends to sexual politics and feminine desire, and locates beyond the sexual particularities of the body. Employing a close description of filmic colour and movement, she argues for a prelinguistic account that registers the affective and phenomenological dimension, from the 'saturated' images that compress colour, light, sound, voice and movement in shallow depth-of-field shots, to the tactile and textural specificities that are traceable as diffusions: 'as if a solution of ink, liquid in its movements'.

## Colour and Text

The third section focuses on literature, history and the textual and ethnographic representation of race. It variously presents the colonized body in light of writings by Fanon and Bhabha – mid-nineteenth-century Haitian historiography; and transcriptions of the lived cultural and social determinations of Mexican racial and national identity.

Charlotte Baker describes and analyses the cultural constructions of the albino body, where the focus is on external appearance. Baker's study redresses the lack of critical attention paid to this marginalized figure through the literature on the black African albino by Sassine, Destremau and Grainville. It emphasizes the perceived absence of colour of the albino and the consequent attempts to colour the albino in the face of this lack. Commencing with a description of the albino's genetic condition, and the misunderstandings that lead to associating the albinism solely with those of African descent (on account of its visibility), the writer moves on to the question of the lack of reference points or identifying features, and the inability of characters in the literature to identify the age of the albino he has seen. The uncertainty and superstitions that arise, allied with the supernatural constituents of myth which arise in parts of Africa, conflate medical condition with poor education, racial prejudice and classifications that stigmatize and relegate the albino within society and culture. Above all, the writer argues, albinism is regarded simply as an indicator of race, as though 'there are distinct "races" of people with clearly definable sets of social and physical characteristics'. Baker agrees that this is a fallacy, for there are no fixed demarcations; indeed, variety

within racial groups and shared characteristics across racial divides are present. It is in terms of this transaction between the fixed and the mutable that the albino's body is problematic, and the novels studied here suggest that looking beyond the skin of the body is unnecessary: 'it is white skin above all else that marks the albino apart'.

Charles Forsdick's chapter on 'pigmentocracy' addresses Haitian historiography and the Haitian Revolution by exploring a 'representational field' and tracking textual and visual constructions of its general and leader Toussaint Louverture, since contemporary early-nineteenth-century and later observers remarked on Louverture's unpredictability and mysterious omnipresence. The writer uses this model to examine the revolutionary's 'afterlives', and the complexities and contradictions that persist, accrue and emerge in the passage of this figure from nineteenth-century abolitionist imagery to his reconstruction in recent debates on commemoration in France and Haiti.

Forsdick is careful to frame his approach with the difficult issues of race, colour and ethnicity, particularly to avoid the binary categories that 'Negritude' and whiteness construe – ones which threatened national independence – and incorporate complex colour gradations in Haitian history and historiography. He identifies the textual constructions of the general as black in one text and mulatto in another in order to reveal the 'competing pigmentocratic power structures' that persist in debates on skin colour and race within colonial and postcolonial contexts in general, and the 'decolonization' and 'neocolonialism' of (postindependent) Haiti in particular. The case study of Louverture thus connects with a wider concern to assess representations of a figure as a process of sedimentation, in paintings as well as writing, of motifs over time, as well as contradictory versions at each time.

Mid-nineteenth-century Haitian historians – especially Thomas Madiou, Aléxis Beaubrun Ardouin and Joseph Saint-Rémy – represent and repress in contradictory ways Toussaint's colour, in ways that more recent writing on Toussaint as an example of the rapid trajectory from African slave to general, and figure of cultural creolization, seek to question and redress.

Mónica Moreno Figueroa shows how perceptions of skin colour and difference operate within the specific context of Mexicanness and 'mestizaje', or racial and cultural intermixing. Her research employed interviews and sessions with Mexican women who discussed beauty and racist practices, linked with emotions of shame, guilt, and the desire to 'not be *insignificant*'. As such the analysis proceeds from women's self-perception to the cultural and social determinations of Mexican racial and national identity. The writer is concerned to show how inequality operates out of the 'collision' of 'regimes of difference' in the mestiza female body in terms of race, nation and femininity. This is in the context of vestigial colonial racial categories that place

'whiteness' as a goal, and the relative invisibility of racism in Mexico, which expresses itself in the everyday life experiences of these women. This relation the writer calls 'mestizaje logic', in which racial mixing and social difference operate in a discriminatory and relational fashion. The case studies reflect the divergent ways the respondents define or identify skin colour, and the relation of dark skin to light skin, through inheritance and the expectation of 'improvement' in the colour of children, but in a context of the desire to belong. Moreno Figueroa concludes that in this matrix the role of beauty is bound up with notions of visibility, self-worth and racial perception – in a configuration of gaze, emotion, body and performance that constitutes the 'mestizaje moment'.

The chapters attempt to see, write and think colour as textual, material and visual instantiations by situating these themes in historical, theoretical and empirical contexts. The immediacy of these themes is not lost in this contextualization however, owing to the precision with which each disciplinary approach aligns itself with the particular problem or opportunity that colour's cultural dimension presents.

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