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A Benjaminian view of colour

One of the greatest problems and greatest pleasure of painting is the one named colour. You can't see painting without seeing colour; you can't think about painting without thinking about colour. But it's hard to think about colour in a way that really illuminates and enriches your engagement with painting. Art historical studies of colour usually turn out, in my exeprience, to be arid and technical and fundamentally tangential to the activity of looking at, understanding, and enjoying a painting.

My own fascination with colour, as it has been directed by my engagement with painting over the years, has been intertwined with what I suppose would be called a philosophical question related to the classic topos of the one and the many: my experience is of a multiplicity of different colours, yet all these different, distinguishable and sometimes clashing colours point me back to a kind of unity of colour, what I might even call the fundamental colouredness of the world. Colour exists as an unbroken continuum, but the language that directs our perception breaks this continuum down into distinct areas thar are red, orange, yellow, green, and so on.

Among the few places where I've read thoughts about colour that helped me further these stray ruminations has been in the early writings of the German literary critic Walter Benjamin. It might seem surprising to invoke Benjamin's name in a discussion of painting. He wrote some important essays on photography and film but not much on painting, and his essays most often citend in art context, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", is typically seen as supporting the foreclosure of interest in an "auratic", autographic, handmade art painting in favour of camera-based and reproducible art forms.

But while reflections on painting and its constituent elements are scarse in Benjamin's mature thoughts, they are absolutely essential to his earlier work – fragmentary and scattered as with so many of his projects. If you look at the first volume of the English translation of Benjamin's selected writings edited by Michael W. Jennings, you will find a numebr of fragmentary texts, all unpublished during Benjamin's lifetime, that have title like "Aphorism on Imagination and Colour", "A Child's View of Colour", "Painting and Graphic Arts", "Painting, or Signs and Marks", "Perception is Reading", "On perception", and "Notes for the Study of the Beauty of Coloured Illustrations in Children's Books", that have a definite bearing on issues related to painting and the role of colour in it. There are also several other relevant texts that have not been translated, whose titles can be

rendered as "Reflection in Art and in Colour", "The rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasie", "The Rainbow or the Art of Paradise" and "On painting". All these texts date from the period bewtween 1914 and 1921, and according to Howard Caygill – the only scholar to have written on them in depth, as far as I know – they were essential to Benjamin's philosophical programme of those years, a critique of the Kantian notion of experience.

Caygill finds a kind of encapsulation of Benjamin's concerns in this period in the lapidary statement that begins one of these fragments, which says "Perception is reading". That may sound like Paul de Man talking, but Benjamin was not a premature deconstructionist. Gershom Scholem was later to recall that Benjamin "occupied himself with ideas about perception as a reading in the configurations of the surface – which is the way prehistoric man perceived the world around him, particulary the sky". In other words, the "reading" that takes place in perception, as Benjamin understood, is a kind of divination, of soothsaying. It is "to read what was never written", as Benjamin put it in his late essay "On the Mimetic Faculty".

Benjamin was interested in the duality of an inscription and the surface on which it appears, a graphic duality that functions in both writing and drawing. At times, in these writings, Benjamin seems to think the same duality exits in painting, saying that "the surface and not colour is the essence of painting". Painting does not begin from colour, "but from the spiritual and creative, from form" – that is to say from the outline. Elsewhere Benjamin says that, because of its subsumption to form, "painterly colour cannot be seen for itself, it is in relation, is substantial as surface ground, somehow shadowed and related to light and darkness", that is, to the duality of the graphic inscription.

But must this necessarily be so? Is there no possibility of manifesting colour as such in painting? I would suggest that such a possibility emerges clearly with abstraction, where colour need not support a representation of something other than its own presence. A clear instance of this would be a yellow painting, called *Yellow painting*, by the American painter Joseph Marioni. It shows colour as a single yet complex thing; its yellow appears not as something that is added to a surface, like the graphic sign, but as an articulation of the surface.

As Benjamin says, "colour is first of all the concentration of the surface, the imagination of infinity whitin it". He sometimes refers to this "concentration of the surface" as a mark, in contradistinction to the sign that is added to it, giving examples such a stigmata or blushing and describing them as effects of rather than on the surface of the skin. Is a blush something we see on

someone's face or in it? the face is marked by it, though it is nor a sign on the face like a tattoo.
Caygill's study is important not simply for explicating some of these writing on colour but for showing how they underlie Benjamin's subsequent, and much better known, writings on language, particulary on translation. In "On language as Such and on the Language of Man", Benjamin describes translation as "removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity". As Caygill glosses this, "the world in translation functions analogously to the colour in configuration, having no fixed meaning but existing in a state of continual transformation according to its relation to other colours." The reverse, I've come to think, is true as well: colours function as vehicles of translation. So my first Benjamin theme is: colur of translation.

The best way to approach the notion of colour as translation may be anecdotally, and br referring to a very familiar painting. In 1911, soon after Henri Matisse completed *The Red Studio*, he was visited by a Danish painter and art historian called Ernst Goldschmidt, who wrote about his first encounter with the painting: ' "You're looking for the red wall," Matisse said to me as I gazed at the objects depicted in the painting and mentally compared them to what I could see in the studio'.
Imagine Goldschmidt seeing the painting still sitting in the very studio in which and on which it had been painted, and his face showing some puzzlement over the fact that whatever resemblance there was between the motif and the painting did not extend to the aspect that would have been most important to Matisse, namely colour.
Goldschmidt continues to quote Matisse: ' "That wall simply doesn't exist. As you can see here, I painted the same furniture against a completely blu-grey studio wall. These are experiments, or studies if you will. I am not happy with them as paintings. Once I had discovered that red colour, I put these studies in a corner, and that's where they'll stay. Where I got that red from I couldn't say... I find that all these things – flowers, furniture, the commode – become what they are for me only when I view them together with that red." '
Now if you go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and look at *The Red Studio* I think you'll see that this very rich red that dominates the painting is not a clear, clean, transparent red but a dense , heavy one that is somewhat impure. Very distantly, th red still has something of the blue in it. In any case, what I want to focus on here is the idea that Matisse was

trying to express a visual sensation that had come to him in the form of a blue-grey, and that by paying close attention to what happened in his process of articulating that sensation pictorially he discovered that he could only be communicated by transforming it into a hue that would normally be considered completely opposite to it, into red. In order to express the sensation carried by the blue-grey, he had to translated into a red.

As if to give further emphasis to this point, Matisse goes on to say something similar about another painting that was in his studio at the time, a landscape with two female nudes. Here's Goldschmidt relaying Matisse's words again: "In Collioure I take walks every day in the hills along the shore, and that's where I saw the lanscape you find so beautiful. I found it impossible to paint. I made many attemps, but I found the paintings I produced to be trivial, they didn't say anything. There were many more paintings in what I was seeing than in what I was painting.

For Matisse, the painting is already to be found somewhere out in the world and the essential problem is to translate it into pictorial form. ' "The colour yellow came to me one day when I was trying, in vain, to paint those hills. So I painted the canvas over again, this time painting the whole of the landscape in relation to the yellow colour I gave the nude bodies in the middle of the picture, and I think I can say that it is only because of that yellow that lanscape turned out such that you venture to call it a good painting." '

Once again, a kind of translation of a colouristic sensation away from its naturalistic origin makes the painting possible, that is, makes the painting on the canvas an acceptable realisation of the potential painting glimpsed out in the world – a translation possible through a colour that Matisse has to say that he 'gave' the painting, not one that he found.

That's Matisse 90 years old. Does what said still bear some relevance to what painters are doing today? I can't help but think of something the young Frank Stella said, back in 1960's – that he wanted to keep the paint on the canvas as good as it was when it was in the can. So coming a little closer to the present, there was still for Stella this notion that painting was already out there, and the problem would just be to translate it into pictorial form – though of course there is a world of difference between thinking of this to-be.translated painting as exisiting in the industrially manufactured realm of one's own working materials, like Stella. Moving right up to today, I found very striking something that the English painter Gary Hume told me when I visited his studio last year. I noticed a painting of a yellow grid containing black squares, basically a kind of strange window frame, and sked him about it. He said, 'I've been wanting to do a window paintings for ages.

When you go to Portugal, or lots of places, when they fill in a window for some reason or another they always paint the outside black reactangles with white lines and I've always loved seeing that. I've been trying to paint that for ages, I've done many of them, all totally unsuccessful, which is ridiculous because there's nothing to it. That's the first one that's worked because I've been painting the frame white and it took me ages to realize I could paint the frame any colour I like!'

Sounds like Matisse, doesn't he? Befuddled at his sense of this incredible discovery that he could paint what he'd seen as white by means of yellow, I said, 'Well, of course, it's your painting,' and he responded, 'It's my painting, it's my window, and just like your home, you can paint your window frame any colour you want. When I painted it yellow it all made sense, visually and linguistically: What's the window? Where is the window? Am I looking out? Am I looking in? It's the yellow that managed to make that. White, it was entirely diagrammatic.' And then he added, 'I could probably do a white one now and it wouldn't be diagrammatic.'

The felling engendered by the white and black windox could only be translated pictorially by a yellow and black one – at least in that moment. Now that he's seen how this particular translation functions, his options have opened up somewhat. But like matisse, Hume is profoundly convnced that his paintings already exist. 'Everything's found', he told me, ' I recognise it as my painting and then I paint it.' And also: 'I'm not expressing the painting' – that is, translating the painting he sees in the world, which is less Matisse's world of nature or Stella's world of manufactures materials than the world of media imagery.

Of course, if Matisse or Hume hadn't happened to give us their accounts of it we might never have realised how this act of translation had made their paintings possible. But I know of at least one case of a very interesting contemporary painter, who really seems to make this act of translating colour into the subject of her painting, se we can just look at the paintings and work out the fact that this is what has happened without our needing to be told about it. Maria Morganti is an Italian painter whose work I've been following for quite some time.

Typically, each of her paintings is dominated by single large colour area almost fills it, almost turns the painting into a monochrome like Marioni's – yet never does. The edge of the shape always coincides with bottom of the canvas and sometimes, at least in part, with another edge as well. The areas along the top and sides of the painting that have not been covered by the dominant colour show traces, not of a single 'background', but of numerous other colours. And the rounded-off yet somewhat angular shapes

of those slivers of colours, which more or less echo the contours of the dominant colour-shape, suggest the temporality of the painter's process. It seems there have benn several attemps to satisfactorily fill this canvas with colour as rich and commanding as the one that now possesses it, but they were seen to be unsatisfactory and therefore painted over, though incompletely. A blue painting might easily have been green, red, pink, purple, and so on, just as a green one could have been red, purple, blue, or perhaps simply a different green. One colour unfolds into another, not as arbitrary change but as explication. Strangely, an experience first evoked by a given red may only be fully articulated by a particular green. a brillant hue may ultimately find itself rendered by one several shades more sombre.

The second aspect of Benjamin's thinking about colour that has come to seem valuable to me as a way of understanding colour in contemporary painting has to do with what he called 'a child's view of colour'. This is an other way of understanding colour as a mark rather than a sign. In the essay called 'A child's View of Colour', Benjamin writes: "The rainbow is a pure childlike image. in it colour is wholly contour; for the person who sees with a child's eyes, it matks boundaries, is not a layer of something superimposed on matter, as it is for adults. The letter abstract from colour, regarding it as a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space.'
(As I woul put it, the adults disregard the essential colouredness of the world to the extent that they see this as irrelevant to the object-quality of its contents, intuited by way of the Kantian categories.)
'Colour is single, not as a lifeless thing and a rigis individuality but as a winged creature that fits from one form to the next. Children make soap bubbies. Similarly, games with painted stivks, sewing kits, decals, parlour games, even pull-out picture books, and, to a lesser extente, making objects by folding paper – all involve this view of colour.
'children like the way colours shimmer in subtle, shifting nuances (as in soap bubbles), or else make definite and explicit changes in intensity, as in oleographs, paintings, and the pictures produced by decals and magic lanterns. For them colour is fluid, the medium of all changes, and not a symptom. Theier eyes are not concerned with three-dimensionality; this they perceive through their sense of touch. The range of distinctions within each of the senses (sight, hearing, and so on) is presumably larger in children than in adults, whose ability to correlate the different senses is more developed. The child's view of colour represents the higest artistic

development of the sense of sight; it is sight at its purest, because it is isolated.'

There are interesting parallels here to the later exaltation of the purity of the medium and of opticality by formalist critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried; tracing their significance would take another essay altogether. Let me just go on with one more quotation from this brief fragment of an eslouring-in has a purer pedagogical function than painting, so long as it makes transparent and fresh surfaces, rather than rendering the blotchy skin of things... Children's drawings takes colourfulness as their point of departure. Their goal is colour in its greatest possible transparency, and there is not reference to form, area, or concentration into a single space.'

We can see this 'child's view of colour', once again, in some of Gary Hume's work – most obviously in his sculptures of snowmen. The motif itself alerts us to see a childlike quality, but there's something else. I referred to them as sculptures, because they are obviously three-dimensional, free-standying entities, but I see them more as paintings, in fact – three-dimensional paintings, three-dimensional paintings and, because rounded, completly continuous expanses of painted colour. You can just look and look and walk around and around them and you never come to an end of the colour ther are. In this way, childlike, they elude 'refernce to form, area, or concentration into a single space?, as Benjamin put it.

A different way in to this child's view of colour might be through the paintings of Monique Prieto. Here, by contrast, the decal-like cripness of the shapes evokes a child's play with colour. These shapes don't seem fixed, evoking instead the haphazard results of moving a mouse around a mouse pad – the motor activity of a hand on a horizontal surface, which children delight in today just as much as they ever did drawing with crayons; the sheer quantity and as it zere insistence of colour tends to be more important than the particular shape that arises. For Prieto, each colour remains distinct, each painting, a discursive sequence of intensities. Think of children's drawings, where the sky is always a detached band of blue at the top of the paper and a tree trunk is a brown column on top of, never within, the green of the lanscape.

Benjamin's respect for the child's delight in colouring would have been rewarded by some work done by Glenn Ligon in 2000. The artist gave copies of pages from colouring books from the Blach Power era, the late 1960s and the early '70s (which is to say the time of his own childhood) to a group of kids to colour, then 'translated' the results into large-scale

paintings of his own. The effort brought out a wildness and intensity that had not previously been admitted into this artist's work, for instance in the painting in which Malcom X is endowed with red cheeks and pink lips. What emerges in the antithetical nature of what Benjamin called 'the pedagocical function' of colouring, since it must encompass both that might be called the manifest content of the imagery – in this case, pride in the various manifestations of Black culture – and the latent content of an experience of colour that is indifferent to all categorisation. With these paintings, Ligon leads his viewers to the difficult period when innocence and experience begin to exist simultaneously in a child's mind. He points us back to a child's view of colour and then back to an adult view, enabling us to see each differently.

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