Archive of Beautiful Colours

or When the Doctrine was Overthrown by Lived Experience and Love

We have taught our children that red, yellow and blue are the three primary colours with which we can create all colours in the world[1]. We grew this rooted assumption when we as children ourselves dutifully tried to create the perfect twelve-part colour wheel[2] from the teacher's poor-quality paint in red, yellow and blue. We had a fuzzy sensation of not being able to fulfil the task while we struggled to mix the violet that would never glow; no matter how much blue or red we added, the blend stubbornly turned out more greyish than violet[3]. Unlike the daring boy who exposed the emperor as a naked fool[4] we dared not question the teacher's authority and the proud artistic model he presented to us.

"I must be very bad at art", we thought, instead of rightfully question the theory. Because, we were right in our experience of the phenomenon[5]: red, yellow and blue are not three primary colours with which we can create all colours in the world[6]. After the endeavour to mix the perfect colours, we were furthermore taught to use the colour wheel as an instrument to create harmony, taught that colours placed in a certain relation to each other in the wheel would be harmonious[7], and thus, pleasing to look at. Again, the uncomfortable tingling from before would reappear as we once more witnessed the stripped emperor and struggled inside. "I hate these colours together"[8], we thought, while we obediently created a colour chord of three based on a triangle in the colour wheel.

"I like pink. In all its variations, from light, bold chewing gum pink to the deep and warm colours of my mother's roses. I don't like pink together with its complementary green. I love pink together with more pink."[9]

And so, we continued to do as we were told and spread the doctrine of the three primary colours while we secretly collected beautiful colours in a box.[10]

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Footnotes:

1 The claim, that we teach our children that red, yellow and blue are the three primary colours, is based on observations in primary and secondary schools in Denmark and conversations with international design students at Design School Kolding and supplemented by my own experience as a child and as a student.

2 The twelve-part colour wheel is created by Johannes Itten while he developed and taught the mandatory, preliminary course: the Bauhaus 'Vorkurs', from 1919 to 1922 (Wagner 2019). The colour wheel is presented in Ittens book "The Art of Color" published in 1961 almost forty years after his engagement with the Bauhaus School (Itten 1961). The twelve-part colour wheel is based on the artist's experience with colour, where colour is paint. Unlike Newton's theory of colour, where colour is presented as light (Newton 2012).

3 This refers to one of the critiques of Itten's theory on colour; that he claims his colour wheel to be based on the artist's interaction with colour yet his three primary colours cannot produce the secondary colours in the wheel. "Defined in this manner, the primary colours, however, cannot produce the mixtures given in the illustration in Itten's book" (Arnkil 2013: 88). It is not possible to produce the violet colour with the warm red colour, also known as vermillion, that Itten has defined as his primary red. Professional artists must always have two of each of the three primary colours for example a warm and a cold red.

4 The story of the boy in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes' who shouted out that the emperor was naked and thus exposed the great hoax of the magical clothes represents a phenomenological approach to research; the boy reacts on what he experiences instead of what people believe to be true.

5 I apply a phenomenological approach in my PhD aiming to describe phenomena as they appear to us through our lived experience rather than explain them through objective and abstract means. This means that I am interested in colours as they appear to us rather than in their physical properties. Heidegger claims that by describing the way the world is given to a concrete living subject, it becomes possible to show how the human life-world forms the starting point for objective structures of cognition. He furthermore confesses to a hermeneutical tradition and regards our prejudices as a productive point of departure, which must be analysed and possibly corrected, but not neutralised (Heidegger 1967).
In connection to the experience of colour in context I use concepts of pre-reflective experiences, relation and ecstasy from Böhme's theory on New Aesthetics to explore how the colours play a part in the creation of atmospheres (Böhme 2017). As a means to describe colour phenomena I have been inspired by Van Manen's process for phenomenological investigation, in which he describes four phases starting with 'Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience' and concluding with 'Phenomenological writing' (Van Manen 2014).

6 The main argument against red, yellow and blue, also known as RYB as being the three primary colours with which you can create all other colours is that other colour systems have other primaries: our printers use cyan, magenta, yellow and black as primary colours and our computer screens red, green and blue. Furthermore we might question the word primary; if colours are created by the trinity of light, material and vision, what is then the primary part with which all other colours can be made?

7 Itten proposes that harmonic colour combinations can be created by placing geometrical forms in the colour wheel (Itten 1961) and as such his ideas lean on the Pythagorean tradition of the divine beauty of mathematics, cf. the golden ratio (Lippmann 1964). Itten argues that these colour chords represent an objective colour harmony. In same text he also acknowledges subjective preferences towards colour. His experiments with subjective colour inspired the fashion phenomenon of colour tests based on the four seasons (Jackson 1981).

8 Today O'Connor suggest a contemporary model or formular for colour harmony: 'Colour harmony = f (Colour strategy X) x (ID + CE + CX + PE + TI)' where ID is age, gender, preferences etc, CE is cultural colour beliefs and symbols, CX is context, PE is perceptual effects and TI is temporal impact factors such as colour trends (O'Connor 2019). O'Connor acknowledges individual colour preferences but maintain the notion of 'harmony'. Her formular is highly complex and there is something ambiguous and provocative about using a format from natural scientific presentation to describe a statement that comes from social science. This can be interpreted as a hidden comment on the many existing perspectives on colour.

9 I use autoethnographic methods, such as fictional writing (Ellis 2004) in my research to bring to light nuances overlooked by science. My choice of using autoethnographic methods is inspired by feminist theory claiming that "(…) the ideological doctrine of scientific method and all the philosophical verbiage about epistemology were cooked up to distract our attention from getting to know the world effectively (…)" (Haraway 1988: 577)

10 In the PhD project I have conducted an experiment called 'Personal Colour'. It investigates an intuitive and sensual basis for the work with colour design - as opposed to a dogmatic quest for an objective harmony. The purpose of the experiment is to bring to light the diversity in colour preferences and form the basis for a discussion of how this might affect design processes when we design for other. As such it is related to the Heidegger's hermeneutics as it enables an analysis and possible correction of preunderstandings. As an extension of the 'Personal Colour' experiment I am building an 'Archive of Beautiful Colours' together with a group of design professionals, engaging with them through 'Cultural Probes' (Gaver et al 1999) and poetic writing. The archive consists of three types of colours; 'Colour Samples', 'Colour Compositions' and 'Colour in Context Photos'. Through the archive the diversity of colour preferences becomes evident.

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