
Obscurities of Colour

Rémi Labrusse

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/773>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.773

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2008

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Rémi Labrusse, « Obscurities of Colour », *Critique d'art* [Online], 32 | Automne 2008, Online since 31 January 2012, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/773> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.773

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Obscurities of Colour

Rémi Labrusse

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Gage, John. *Couleur et culture: usages et significations de la couleur de l'Antiquité à l'abstraction*, Paris: Thames & Hudson, 2008

- 1 For those who enjoy venturing into history's layers to experience both the obscurity released therefrom, and, on the contrary, the futility of dreams of updating a clear and distinct sense, there is no doubt that colour will be a favourite subject—colour, its representations and denominations, a vast field of language where there is an intersection of the most wavering of meanings, clichés and commonplaces produced by indefinable mixtures of experiences, desires and ideologies, which, from one generation to the next, model what is called culture by giving shape to it, as Baudelaire wrote, the shape of “holes dug by generations of ants”. These *holes* which are the meanings of colour and the confusion which can only emerge from their problematic links with concrete uses, are what renders perceptible the major study published by John Gage in London in 1993¹, after decades of research into this unique and fleeting object, a study that focuses on the western world and, within it, the traditional arena of fine arts (without, for example, broaching the issue of textiles), in its relations with sciences, technologies, philosophies and religious thoughts—and all this in the tradition of erudite empiricism introduced to the Warburg Institute by Ernst Gombrich. Fifteen years later, the translation of this book into French, despite further works on the same subject in the mediaeval period (Michel Pastoureau), the modern period (Jacqueline Lichtenstein) and the contemporary period (Georges Roque) remains thoroughly legitimate, if only through the abundance of data it offers for reflection, supported by monumental references.
- 2 Fighting shy of speculations about the poetic challenges of colour in a work or even in a collective vision of the world, without going into any depth, let us say, in the various mazes of the Byzantine theology of the icon, nor, *a fortiori*, in the sadistic and melancholic

dramas enacted by Delacroix's greens when they assail the "lake of blood" of his reds, without getting hung up on suggestions that philosophy, psychoanalysis and simply an affective involvement might ring out on the roads he travels, J. Gage, a strict observer from without, strives to respect the rules of an historical anthropology of colours, whose primary task consists in articulating a history of perception with a history of reception. His pleasure is never as great as when he reckons he has succeeded, thanks to this method, in blazing new trails (the study of the words of colour, its materials, and its instruments like the palette, the interest in links with heraldry and alchemy, and so on) and toppling accepted ideas: in Byzantium, in the mosaics there, light is not put at the service of colour, but, rather, has the effect of contradicting it (the way the revelation of the divine substance dissolves worldly appearances); at Saint-Denis, in the stained-glass windows, Suger sought obscurity rather than light (complying with the principles of negative theology of the pseudo-Denys); more generally, in the Middle Ages, and after, the quest for a clearly readable chromatic symbolism clashed with the chronic illegibility of the vocabulary in this domain; in the Quattrocento, the contrast between *disegno* and *colore* was checked by a more crucial debate between a desire for clarity and praise of shadow; far from being heterodox. Alchemical thinking naturally informed the advances made by Jan van Eyck and Grünewald in painting, and Newton in optics; the relations between painting and music, so decisive for structuring the vocabulary and hence the thinking of colour, led merely to a series of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, resulting, at an ever greater remove, in one or two marginal and usually abortive attempts; etc. It is not until the concluding thesis of the book that paradox appears, interpreting the uses of colour by abstraction in the early 20th century as a progressive detachment with regard to the theories and (following a vision not devoid of evolutionist inclinations) as an accomplishment of the empiricism advocated, on his part, by the author of art history—with, as his last model, the American Josef Albers "who tried to replace theory by a real empiricism", and, for this very reason, whose *Interaction of Color* published in 1963 is described as "the most decisive and beautiful book of modern art on colour".

- 3 From the mish-mash of facts, in which, with a concern for rigour, the scholar keeps his stance, from this "dark forest" produced by the noteworthy proliferation of micro-narratives, where masterpieces of the mind and tiny reports circulate and overlap, along with well nigh forgotten major figures and artists, as well as thinkers, there nevertheless emerge sorts of constants—for those who cannot manage to mourn general propositions. And to begin with" the uncanniness of this object of thought, colour, whose fantastic power of capture (or repulsion) is inversely proportionate to its theoretical formulation (always relatively weak, and very inferior, in any event, to those that have given rise to two great rivals: language and music)—which, down the ages, has created a zone of intellectual blurring, of increasing wildness of thought, in fact favourable for the ceaseless blossoming of creative misinterpretations. The main such misinterpretation, since the Renaissance, resides in the relation between painting and science, where the latter is doggedly misunderstood and disfigured until—shored up by the age of its cultural domination—one or two great painters and poets, from Keats to Baudelaire and Delacroix to Matisse rose up, movingly, against the claims of a prevailing scientific ideology, in the name of the indefinable prerogatives of innerness. The indefinable: it is possible that this is what colour is (or was ?) responsible for preserving, in the fluttering of western desire, colour which, from century to century, has always, in one way or another, represented the preferred medium for a direct--live—physical test of the duel between essence and

accident—either because people have wanted to surmount the panic-inducing sensation of the versatility of reality by recourse, no matter how irrational, to the mathematicization of forms, and by the consecutive distancing (not to say rejection) of colour. Or because, on the contrary, people have decided to like impermanence as such, in the paradoxical forms of *dazzle*, at once light and illuminating fissure, and, with one and the same movement, tearing the overwhelming edifice of things perceived in exteriority.

NOTES

1. Gage, John. *Colour and Culture. Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1993 (original edition)