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Combating Chromophobia: The Importance of Living Life in Full Color

Abstract

David Batchelor argues that Western culture has chromophobia, a fear of corruption by color, and therefore tends to marginalize color in favor of the achromatic and linear. In examination of cinematic examples of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pleasantville*, as well as the novel *The Giver*, this paper explores the Chromophobia thesis in action, discussing the dangers of a chromophobic society compared to the benefits of a fall into color. Based on the equation of the fall into color with the fall into self-consciousness, the paper further illustrates the importance of color to life and its role in authenticity and freedom.

Keywords

color, fear of color, color in Western culture, philosophy of color, fall into color

Disciplines

American Film Studies | American Literature | Philosophy

Comments

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PHIL 346

Term Paper

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Combating Chromophobia: The Importance of Living Life in Full Color

Abstract: David Batchelor argues that Western culture has chromophobia, a fear of corruption by color, and therefore tends to marginalize color in favor of the achromatic and linear. In examination of cinematic examples of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pleasantville*, as well as the novel *The Giver*, this paper explores the *Chromophobia* thesis in action, discussing the dangers of a chromophobic society compared to the benefits of a fall into color. Based on the equation of the fall into color with the fall into self-consciousness, the paper further illustrates the importance of color to life and its role in authenticity and freedom.

David Batchelor argues in his book *Chromophobia* that Western society essentially fears color, that historically we associate color with emotion and passion and the linear with form and reason, bounding and controlling color. Two pop culture examples (films) that Batchelor refers to are *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pleasantville*, the former in particular exemplifying the fall into color and out of grace, but the latter offering a contrasting view of a fall into color as a fall into grace (or otherwise). Where *WOZ* depicts the colorful as fantastical and merely a way of realizing the value of home and the way things are—returning to black and white (and gray)—*Pleasantville* challenges the apparent grace/glory of a black and white world and finds value in color as representative of who you are versus who people tell you to be. Otherwise put, in regard to the *Chromophobia* thesis, *Pleasantville*'s unfolding plot illustrates the fear of deviation from linear/B&W to color, but also shows the danger of a black and white world and the value of breaking the mold and showing your true colors. Additionally, Batchelor's identified relationship between color and self-consciousness (in regard to *Pleasantville*) implies the connection between authenticity and personal freedom.

In *The Wizard of Oz* (film), we meet Dorothy in black and white, yearning for adventure and excitement “somewhere over the rainbow.” When she finds herself in the technicolor land of Oz—home to witches and munchkins and all sorts of creatures—she receives *ruby* slippers and is instructed to follow the *Yellow* Brick Road to the *Emerald* City. Along the way, she meets friends who are each searching for something they feel they lack, while Dorothy is looking for a way home. In the end, the gang learns that what they were looking for was inside them the whole time, and Dorothy apparently always had the power to go home—and the emphasized mantra is “There’s no place like home.” The story is all about getting home, returning to the security and ‘comfort’ of black and white. The colorful Land of Oz is threatening and dangerous and even nonsensical at times, and Dorothy is utterly relieved to be back home with her family and friends, essentially negating/reversing her initial wish in the film; this is troubling to me because in the beginning she “dares to dream” and “If happy little bluebirds fly / Beyond the rainbow / Why, oh why, can’t I?” and the resolution of the film seems to discourage such thoughts and aspirations.

In other words, the film seems to encourage ‘keeping your feet on the ground’¹ and suggests that you do not have to look far (i.e. beyond home/the standard) for what you need, for happiness. While the idea of appreciating what you have in home and family is nice, *WOZ*’s use of color indicates more of a conception of ‘the heart is where home is’ instead of ‘home is where the heart is’; in other words—to put bluntly—it says to follow home and what’s known instead of following your heart, a picket fence of reason over a rainbow of passion/emotion. Although *WOZ* shows a tension between the dream of leaving and the dream of roots (Batchelor 40), showing how sweet the former can be, it still ultimately brings

¹ In fact, Todrick Hall did an autobiographical visual album based on *The Wizard of Oz*, and his song “Black and White” articulates the idea of dreaming within the lines, so to speak, featuring this chorus: “Dream / but not too big / Reach / but not too wide / ... Leap / but not too high / Shine / but not too bright / Think the impossible as long as it’s in black and white.” The song also comments on fitting within a box that Todrick is expected to fit in. (*Straight Outta Oz*)

Dorothy home, back to reality. Even the detail of Dorothy waking up and identifying the farmhands as having been her companions in the dream is a reassertion of the idea that you do not need to look far from home to find friendship and adventure. Conversely, other than the Wicked Witch of the West, whom Dorothy ultimately melts, Oz seems to be a rather delightful and diverse place where, aside from missing her family, Dorothy could be quite happy, especially in comparison to boring, ur-grey Kansas. Batchelor supposes that the idea of remaining in Oz was perhaps too radical for Hollywood to consider at the time (41), in which case further illustrates his thesis; color is associated with the radical, with change and uncertainty, and the 30s were not exactly an era of deviation.

All of these depictions of color versus the achromatic exemplifies exactly what Batchelor argues in *Chromophobia*: the West has and continues to loathe and marginalize color, masking an underlying “fear of contamination and corruption by [colour,] something that is unknown or appears unknowable” (22). Some manifestations of chromophobia view color as dangerous, threatening, and/or trivial, “property of some ‘foreign’ body,” such as the primitive or feminine (23). I would challenge the chromophobic on this idea of color as primitive; while it is indeed secondary in the sense that it can be added to a ‘blank canvas’, I would argue that the addition of color to the initial form is advanced, not primitive. Granted, their association of color with the primitive could be drawn from the use of war paint and other such markings, but still, those markings were meaningful and arranged with a purpose, not arbitrarily. The fact that indigenous and primitive cultures found color and used it shows their intelligence and innovation. Regardless, Batchelor’s theory rests on the idea that people are afraid of corruption through color, and this is where *Pleasantville* comes in.

Pleasantville is almost a reverse *Wizard of Oz* in the sense that two modern-day teens get sent into the black and white fictional world (town) of the 50s television show of the same. The main character, David, is a big fan of the show and idealizes the flawlessly

pleasant lives of the Parker family on TV compared to his troubled life as a child of divorce who is shy and a 'nobody,' etc. However, as David and his sister Jennifer try to play along as Bud and Mary Sue Parker in Pleasantville, they learn, among other things, that there is no notion of a world beyond the two streets of Pleasantville, that firemen only rescue cats in trees because nothing here burns, and it is impossible to miss a shot on the basketball court. In short, everything in Pleasantville is based on unchanging routine and maintenance of a certain order, including Mr. Johnson's inability to move on with his work until Bud (David) enters the malt shop, which is the turning point for David's idealizing of this black and white world.

Everything starts to change when Mary Sue goes 'all the way' with Skip on their date at Lovers' Lane. More and more teens start to have sex, and slowly, starting with a red rose, objects and people are starting to appear in color. As this continues, Mary Sue one day starts to tell a peer about the story of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the once blank pages of his book suddenly are filled with words and illustrations. David introduces them to books and the public library, increasing teens' curiosity about life and places beyond Pleasantville, more and more gray being replaced with color. When Mr. Bill Johnson realizes his freedom to act on his own, he embraces his passion for painting and creates beautifully colored works of art, expressing himself with passion and delight. Similarly, when Jennifer introduces the mother, Betty Parker, to self-pleasure, Betty is awakened with color. Later in the film, David finally turns colorful after punching a bully in the face to defend Betty—something that he never would have thought of doing in the real world, but that was an act of letting go, of release and expression of himself and what he cares about. These instances, in addition to the ultimate shows of emotion by the men in the town hall, are what leads Batchelor to equate the fall into color with a fall into self-consciousness: "We are not just surrounded by colour; we are

colour ourselves” (70). In a very real way, the residents of Pleasantville come to express their ‘true colors’—their authenticity and emotion—and thus their color becomes apparent.

With David spearheading the movement, Pleasantville learns to accept and embrace rather than resist color, to be curious and explore the unknown, to be spontaneous and unique, to fall into color. David learns from his time in Pleasantville that there is no “right” or “perfect” *anything*—one should live one’s life as one chooses and desires, not as one is expected to live. He articulates this to his mother back in 1998 reality when she is distraught over not ‘having her life together’, that she doesn’t live in the ‘right’ neighborhood or drive the ‘right’ car, and so on. Trying to live according to a certain standard is restricting and inauthentic; rather, embracing your authenticity allows you to exercise your personal freedom—it allows for change and growth. The still achromatic residents of Pleasantville—the “true citizens”—were initially afraid of the onslaught of color because it seemed radical and they were unfamiliar with it, even leading to violence and hostility within the town; but they came to see it instead as a beautiful mark of individuality, of discovery and progress—that asking questions and going beyond Pleasantville is actually beneficial for the town’s prosperity and development. Even Jennifer came to embrace her true color through getting lost in reading a good book and tapping into her intellectual and motivated side—she decided to stay in Pleasantville to go to college because the person she was trying to be back in reality had no chance of getting into college, and she wanted to make the most of her potential, which she realized while in Pleasantville.

Batchelor cites Charles Blanc, who saw color as a permanent internal threat, which, “if unleashed, would be the ruin of everything, the fall of culture” (23). This was what the Pleasantvillians feared about the fall into color—it was a fall out of grace, out of what they knew and were accustomed to, into uncertainty and pain, lust and failure, but this was ultimately beautiful. A further depiction of the chromophobic view of color as dangerous

come in the Lois Lowry novel *The Giver*, set in a monochromatic world of everything essentially beige, even somehow everyone's eye color, a society of "Sameness" for the sake of avoiding pain and suffering. When the main character Jonas meets the Giver—also known as the Receiver of Memory, which Jonas is to adopt—he learns that he is a special kid with a gift to see, to see color in this uniform town and to see beyond. He first sees an apple flash red when tossing it with a friend, and later he discovers that a newborn baby was intended to be euthanized because he was born with blue eyes, and that would disrupt the uniformity of the society. Ultimately, Jonas executes a plan to rescue the special baby and run away from the town, escape to the outside world where they can live freely and authentically. The story of *The Giver* evokes a very antagonistic reaction to such a chromophobic society as it almost seems totalitarian in feel and the element of genocide-esque measures to maintain the Sameness, and this is the world from which Jonas retreats into freedom where he can see color and not worry about any repercussions. Back in the Community, color is seen as a disrupting influence, and it endangers Jonas as receiver of memory because he remembers color, which is the gateway to realizing more things that would threaten the Sameness established in the Community.

In chapter three of *Chromophobia*, Batchelor cites the quest of Des Esseintes of the Huysmans novel *A Rebours*, who gets caught in color. Ultimately it becomes clear to Des Esseintes that there is no life without color, that "If colour is a kind of corruption which heralds disease and death, corruption is also a kind of colour which gives life" (60). This is identified in both *Pleasantville* and *The Giver* in the terror that color initially presents or represents but ultimately the realization that life is lived in color. The Community is suppressive of color and uniqueness but also designates the lives and careers of its children—they are chosen for a particular position based on their skill and whatnot, but this still robs them of their freedom to dream of a potential career and explore their interests and options.

Furthermore, Batchelor argues that, “Corruption, for Des Esseintes, breathes life; impurity renews and refreshes; contamination extends, animates and colours” (60). We see this in *Pleasantville*’s shift to color most especially, but also in *The Giver* with Jonas’s insight into a world unrestricted by Sameness. Color means diversity—diversity of thought, appearance, personality, belief, outlook, desire, approach, and so on. It is through such diversity that we learn from one another and allow ourselves to grow and change in our self-concept and prosper as a community. Hannah Arendt asserted that we are radically unique by virtue of our plurality, and that it is in community that we are able to appear this way and engage in discourse to enact change. In *Pleasantville*, the ‘coloreds’ came together in solidarity to defend and express their approach to life; and in the end, David defends their case in the town hall and essentially fosters a dialogue between them and the grayscale residents, namely the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, Big Bob. By engaging with their fellow citizens instead of battling them, as a community Pleasantville was able to embrace and move forward with this change oriented toward flourishing and prosperity.

Think about it: if we lived in a society such as the dystopian Community of Sameness, how strange would that be? We would all be taught the same thing until specialized for our assigned careers, exist in a beige world with plain, identical clothes, and no source of dialogue. How would we stand out from one another other than maybe our natural features and names? No variety present nor change taking place—everything is the same and remains the same as we get older and time goes on. How absurd, right? Believe it or not, color is such a strong accelerator/enabler of this individuality that we are able to embrace and exercise. In a life of color we have freedom of thought and the possibility of change. In an article on authenticity from narcissism to freedom, Merlin B. Thompson concludes that authenticity is the impetus to personal freedom: “As an outcome of authenticity, personal freedom emerges dependent upon and open to the complexities of the individual’s true self” (611). This is in

the same veins as what Batchelor argues from *Pleasantville*—that a fall into color is a fall into self-consciousness—if not an attachable piece of a larger chain. If a fall into color is a fall into self-consciousness, and by opening to the complexities of our selves we embrace our authenticity, then it is through color that we are able to emerge in personal freedom. These are the conditions in which we are able to develop to our potential both as individuals and as a society and therefore able to flourish most effectively.

The Western, chromophobic concept of a fall into color as a fall *out* of grace is reminiscent of the biblical Fall of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were in true paradise in the Garden of Eden until they betrayed God by tasting the forbidden fruit. This deviation from God's orders disrupted their life in the Garden and led to their banishment from it into the unknown world. This is alluded to in *Pleasantville* at Lovers' Lane with David and Margaret, preceding the first fall of rain in Pleasantville. The apple is also the first to flash color to Jonas in *The Giver*, likely symbolic, again, of a fall into color, or otherwise a fall into consciousness or the unknown. In any case, this act of tasting 'forbidden fruit' is essentially one's first taste of impurity or a loss of innocence. Even in culture/society today we debate protection and preservation of innocence from the dangers, pains, and threats of the world. For example, parents who choose to shelter their children from issues such as homelessness, perhaps, are interpreted as wishing to preserve their child's innocence by not exposing them to such an image of suffering that could damage their view of the world. However, this comes into debate when this sheltering is in danger of making or keeping the child ignorant of world and societal issues. (Of course, this is not about allowing a toddler to witness violence and have potential nightmares or other repercussions, but more about, say, a seven-year-old being made aware of the diversity of circumstances and fortune in which different people live.) Black-and-white Pleasantville is an example of "Ignorance is bliss" in action, but which is ultimately found to be an unfavorable condition, and that it is quite the contrary. Informed

Citizenship is a pillar of the Gettysburg College curriculum, valuing diversity of thought and global understanding in order to be an informed actor in the community, aware of the reality of the world outside of our own backyard. Color informs us, comprises the diversity that opens our eyes to the world and its vast possibilities. Sameness was implemented in the Community for the purpose of eliminating strife, so society follows a specific design to control for suffering and defend against the unknown. All that this does is restrict the citizens from being free individuals exposed to the different and authentic.

Moreover, this sealing away from the unknown is part of chromophobic culture. In the United States especially, Americans love labels. Labels make things clear cut and straightforward. When we understand the meaning of a label, we can apply that to anyone/anything that exhibits that label. This is why our society has problems with gender fluidity and sexuality spectrums, for instance; we are familiar with a binary of male and female and do not like the ambiguity of people who identify as nonbinary or fluid because it disrupts our habits and ways of referring to people with certain pronouns, for instance. This is also present in the realm of politics, as some Americans can tend to attach a specific set of beliefs to a political party and then assume that everyone who identifies as a member of that party automatically holds all of those exact beliefs. We cannot put a person into a box—they will always overflow it. We as individuals are made up of so many nuances of difference and uniqueness that cannot possibly be completely expressed or described with words or fit neatly into any number of boxes. Color represents a deviation from the clear cut and defined to the blurred and uncertain. But by embracing color, we can open ourselves to understanding these ‘unknowns’ and broaden our worldview. Language is even evolving as we learn about identity spectrums to actually give a descriptor to a concept (without rigidity), such as pansexual, demisexual, and genderqueer. Expanding our minds to incorporate these concepts makes us more informed about the world around us, introducing us to new ideas that we

previously never knew of or considered. The unknown is not so scary once we come to understand it.

David Batchelor's *Chromophobia* serves as a critical insight into Western culture and its relationship with color, specifically equating its fear of color to fear of corruption and change. Citing cinematic examples—*The Wizard of Oz* and *Pleasantville*—Batchelor illustrates the effects of chromophobia and benefits of falling into color. Black and white is restricting and safe, but color is unpredictable and free, opening us to diversity and development. In addition, we see the pros of color outweighing the potential cons in *The Giver* with Jonas's rescue and escape from the dystopian Community of "Sameness." In these cultural examples, color is linked to self-consciousness and freedom—when we fall into color, we fall into ourselves and embrace our authenticity, with which we are able to exercise personal freedom. The *Chromophobia* thesis overall illustrates the dangers of restricting color and likewise the importance and necessity of color in life.

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