

Blue, slowly.

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It cost me much to part with the blue coat which I wore the first time I danced with Charlotte. But I could not possibly wear it any longer.
— Goethe, *The Sorrows of Werther*¹

The relationship between colour and time is a close, complex and changing one. In ancient European societies, time, measured by religious feasts, secular ceremonies, and the stages of life and death, was marked through the symbolism of colour. In contemporary societies, the relation between colour and the rhythm of time has been displaced and transformed. Colour is less and less associated with the sacred and more and more with the social—to appearance, to the playful, to the ephemeral. The frequency of its variations having been accelerated, if not corrupted. The symbols giving way to codes and in turn to simple fashion fads. Colours tell the year, the season, the spirit of the day, and the whims of time passing.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that these shifts, perversions or trivializations do not appear to have in the least modified, through the course of time, the hierarchies, preferences and value systems governing colour. These remain intact today in the concrete domain of real practice, when we consider society as a whole rather than a particular micromilieu and when we inscribe the problems and stakes of colour within a time frame larger than a few weeks or a few months.

Certainly, the use of colour changes, but, contrary to what we may believe, it changes at an extremely slow pace. Typical in this regard, is the example of clothing. In the top designers' creations, in fashion magazines and in advertising, colours seem to be changing constantly and at faster and faster rate every decade. However, in the clothing actually worn by common mortals—that is to say, on the clothing that we see, not on television or in a magazine but in the street, at work, at the factory, in the train or subway—colours evolve a lot more imperceptibly, timidly and discretely. Well known to historians and sociologists is the fact that blue, white and black have been the colours most worn for the past five, six, and even ten generations by European men and women across all social classes and categories.

What will the case be tomorrow? In the long run, will the colours of everyday life keep, at the heart of social practices, this almost immobile character, barely troubled by the wild dreams of fashion and the extravagance of a few creators. Or will they be submitted to more sustained

changes in rhythm, to more profound mutations, to wholly new values and sensibilities neither limited by the discourse or behaviour of a few nor by the simple surface of beings and things? Furthermore, is this a possible prospective in matters of style and the sociological interpretation of colours, and can one predict the changes, the innovations or the disappearances that will affect this field in the decade or decades to come? This remains to be seen.

Surely, it is likely that new technologies, new materials and new supports will bring about some changes in taste and use. In respect to clothing, for instance, fabric textures unknown before will probably make textiles 'speak' in a different way. Similarly, in the area of photography, image and television, the acceleration of the changeover from the chemical or the magnetic towards the digital will lead to different applications for colour, which will in turn somewhat modify our modes of perception and sensibility. In the everyday, new categories of light, new modes of lighting will play into the scripting of colours, and in this way, on their role in the interior design of houses, buildings, offices and means of transportation. However, do all these mutations mean that the colours of tomorrow will be different from those of today? Probably not, for two reasons.

The first is that regardless of the discoveries or manipulations of science and technology, colour remains a function of society, a cultural practice, and a symbolic value. It is first of all society that 'makes' colour, and not the eye, the brain, nature, science, the computer, the artist or the pigment. Social practices and cultural values are not fixed, far from it; but, contrary to what is often affirmed, they evolve, as slowly and even slower than technological progress, aesthetic mutations or scientific discovery. For this reason it would be almost absurd to try and predict the 'colours of tomorrow.' In twenty or thirty years, they will be no different from today. At the most, we may imagine that in Western societies, a greater attention will be paid to two colours little present in daily life today: green, and more importantly, yellow. As for projections further into the future, one or two centuries from now for example, the exercise is at once impossible and devoid of interest.

The second reason—and it is the principle one—comes from the fact that, for historians, sociologists and anthropologists alike, colours constitute neither matter, nor light, nor wave, nor vibration. They are abstract intellectual categories that are defined differently by culture. In the West, for close to a thousand years, the basic colours number six: white, red, black, green, yellow, and blue. There is absolutely no reason to believe that a given mutation might alter these six base colours in the decades to come. This also goes for the following five colours, those of the 'second

rank,' which play a minor social and symbolic role: grey, brown, purple, pink and orange. No, if there are to be mutations they will only affect the varying hues of these eleven colours. New media, new pigments, new light may act upon the hues and shades of hues, valorizing some, and discrediting others, sometimes creating and multiplying them, perhaps even making some disappear. But for the six base colours that are pure categories (foremost ideological rather than material), the new tools, new pigments or new light will not have an effect. The example of the computer is already available to us as proof. Common are the ads which boast the number of colours a computer and its peripherals can recognize, save, edit, reproduce. Over the years, we have gone from 16 shades of grey to 256 colours, to 64,000 colours, to 512,000, to several millions, indeed tens of millions of colours today. It is unlikely that this evolution will carry meaning. For the machine and the technology, maybe (but even then...). For the user, certainly not. A nuance in colour that the human can neither name nor differentiate from surrounding shades is a shade that does not exist. The human eye can really only distinguish with certainty about a hundred odd shades (perhaps two hundred in particularly adept subjects) and the lexicon permits the naming of only a few dozen. Given this, what can these thousands and millions of colours represent? Can such a number have a particular significance? No, of course not.

Colour does not exist on its own; if we refuse to acknowledge this, we cannot hope to understand any of the historic, social, cultural and symbolic phenomena it is tied to. Outside of its perception through the coupling of human eye and the brain, a colour only really exists if it is individualized by a culture, a vocabulary, and a set of social practices which give it name and meaning.

This leaves the question of taste and preference. Will they evolve? We are forced again to respond in the negative. It is quite probable that in the West, for the next ten, twenty or fifty years, one colour will retain a far lead over all the others: the colour blue. In effect, all the public opinion polls undertaken since the end of the nineteenth century show that, with great consistency, blue is the favourite colour of more than half of the European population, ahead of green (15-20% of respondents) and red (7-8%). It is probably safe to say that if polls had been taken at the beginning of the nineteenth century, indeed even in the middle of the eighteenth century, the results would have been identical: blue, already blue, always blue. In France, this tendency is even more evident than in neighbouring countries, with a 60% preference rate. Without reaching such high rates blue is also the colour of choice in the US, Canada, Australia and in all countries of the Western world.

European culture has progressively spread to other continents, leaving an almost indelible mark. On the other hand, polls carried out in non-Western countries reveal differing preferences. In Japan for example, red comes first ahead of white and black. In China, India and many parts of Asia, it is yellow (little appreciated in Europe). In Islamic countries, it is green, the colour of the prophet which superceeds white and black. All matters related to colour are always tied to the cultural.

This well documented inclination towards the colour blue by Europeans poses a number of questions to historians: why? how? since when? how long will this preference last? what are the stakes and the significance? Moreover, there are many more questions which are difficult to answer because they point to problems inscribed in duration, and which bear on all aspects of social, religious, artistic and intellectual life. I have deliberated much on these questions elsewhere and I don't wish to re-examine them here. What is certain is that the unmediated European taste for blue is not very old. It dates back to halfway through the middle ages, more precisely from the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries, when for reasons theological, artistic, social and moral, the old western colour system which revolved around the prehistoric triad of white-red-black disappeared. In a few decades, a new value system is established based on six base colours (white, black, red, blue, green, yellow) among which blue, until then very discrete, henceforth occupies a preponderant place. But it is in the eighteenth century in the era of the first wave of romanticism that blue takes the place of red and definitively gains the status of top colour, if not *the colour par excellence*.

Contrary to what we might believe, this predilection of contemporary societies for blue is not the expression of particularly strong symbolic impulses or stakes. On the contrary, it is because it is symbolically less 'charged' than the other colours (particularly red, green, white or black) that blue is the unanimous choice (and will continue to be favoured). Being the colour chosen by more than half the population undoubtedly contributes towards weakening the symbolic potential of the colour blue. Since, all things considered, when we admit that our favourite colour is blue, what are we really revealing about ourselves? Nothing, or almost nothing. This taste is so banal, so lukewarm. Whereas admitting a preference for black, red or even grey...

Here lies one of the characteristics of blue within the western symbolic order of colours in the modern and contemporary eras. Blue doesn't make any waves; it is calm, peaceful, distant, almost neutral. It invokes dreaming (think of the Blues...) but this melancholic dream is in a way anaesthetizing. Hospital walls are painted blue, tranquilizers are packaged in blue, it is used in traffic rules to express what is permitted, it is solicited