The 'architecture of colour-form': Adrian Stokes and Venice

Stephen Kite

One of the greatest English aesthetic writers explores the interrelation of colour and form – despite renewed concerns for materiality and surface, colour-form remains a neglected issue.

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Adrian Stokes (1902–72) – aesthete, critic, painter and poet – is linked to John Ruskin and Walter Pater as one of the greatest aesthetic thinkers in this English empirical tradition. This paper explores his insights on the reciprocity of colour and form in relation to architecture.[1] He opens the second chapter of his book *Colour and Form* (1937) on the early spring landscape of Hyde Park with a passage that presages release from its dark claims:

> 'We had forgotten that the skies may open: the tent of winter is asunder; the clouds sail. On this day as you approach Hyde Park the great elm trees stand up black. It is as if the sooty tunnel of winter has passed them through: they stand in the stronger light a vibrant memorial of the dim months.' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p22)

The black trees against the bright spring skies are a sign of conquest over the dark forces of the Park, of the reparation to the 'destroyed mother' that the Park represents.[2] The following pages demonstrate that in this passage we have Stokes's theory of colour – compacted.

I shall take Venice as the site wherein to investigate what Stokes called the 'architecture of colour-form'. In the Renaissance contest of *disegno* versus *colore*, commonly characterised as a Florence-Venice opposition, Stokes sides with the quattrocento epicentre of Venice. Stokes capitalises the quattrocento as 'Quattro Cento' to isolate those special qualities of 'outwardness' and stillness that he discovers in the art and architecture of the Adriatic centres of Venice, Rimini and Urbino (Carrier, 2002). For Stokes – drawing on the theories of Goethe, Alberti and Aristotle – colour is a panorama that unfolds between the ethical and tonal extremes of light and dark, imaged in the passage above by Hyde Park's black elm trees against the strong spring light. 'The true colourist' he maintains '[brings] light and dark to some kind of equality ... not ... by eliminating their difference, but by utilizing the inter-compensatory relationships of colour'. (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p19)

Oppositions of light and dark

These oppositions of light and dark are seen at their most extreme in the Venetian adjacencies of white

Istrian stone, *liston,* and dark lagoon-washed aperture. Goethe defined 'colour [as] a degree of darkness' (Matthaei, 1971, p87) and, in *Della Pittura*, Leon Battista Alberti describes how in his colour system the 'well coloured' drawing arises from the 'balancing of white and black' (Alberti, 1966, p56). In Stokes' psychoanalytic aesthetics, these colour oppositions of black and white reflect our successful management of 'good' and 'bad' internal figures, and the panoply of organic life that unfolds between birth and death. The humanist colour intent is 'to realize a warm effect of shape glowing with inner life, like human forms' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p56). Alberti draws on the Aristotelian notion that colours spring from black and white and are connected to organic growth. In this vein Stokes writes, 'The cycle of a plant is from the white shoots underground through yellow, green, orange, red and purple, to the shrivelled black of death' (*ibid*). In the 1937 edition of *Colour and Form* he adds to this passage, 'from the subjective and aesthetic standpoint, this seems to me still the best way of conceiving colour' (Stokes, 1937, p120). I shall outline the theoretical framework of Stokes' 'architecture of colour-form' through Goethe, Alberti, Aristotle and other colour-writers such as David Katz, before moving to investigate its realisation in Venice.

Stokes ponders the scope of *Colour and Form* in his notebooks:

> 'First after-thoughts
> It would be best to start, possibly with the Christmas trees in St Martin's in the Fields. Then describe what sort of Form I am writing about, the carving form, and put this in relation with the previous books. Then say that I am doing what has not been done before, or at any rate carried very far, writing about form from the angle of colour.' (TGA: 8816 – notebook 18)

These notes reveal three cardinal aspects of the book's approach to colour. The Christmas trees in the portico of St Martin's in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, London that, in the published text, open Chapter Three, illustrate the organic and familial interrelations of colour. In Stokes' mind, the reciprocity, or 'identity in difference' struck between the dark trees and St Martin's limestone portico,

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evoke the affinity between the black-green olive trees and the sparse rocky earths of the Mediterranean. Second, *Colour and Form* provides an account of colour that extends his concept of 'carving' into considerations of hue and tone, far beyond the frame of reference provided by Renaissance relief.[3] 'Carved' colour must co-exist with form to achieve the outwardness and luminosity of Agostino di Duccio's (1418-81) sculpture. In the opinion of Stokes:

> *The colours of a picture are fine when one feels that not the colours but each and every form through the medium of their colours has come to an equal fruition. Thus is carving conception realised in painting. It will be my aim to show that colour is the ideal medium of carving conception, that this wide range has the power of charged outwardness which an efflorescence upon the stone possesses ...*' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p24)

The final point of *First after-thoughts* shows that Stokes' theory of colour-form refutes that long critical tradition that condemns colour's sensuality against the merits of form and line. *Colour and Form* is prefaced by three quotations. The first two are from Bernard Berenson and Roger Fry, selected to highlight their marginalising of colour. Fry wants us to believe that 'colour is the only one of our elements which is not of critical or universal importance to life, and its emotional effect is neither so deep nor so clearly determined as the others' (cited in Gowing, 1978, IIa, p8). The third citation is from Goethe, one of the heroes of *Colour and Form*, 'All nature manifests itself by means of colours to the sense of sight' (*ibid*).

Colour-form and Venice
The 'miracle' of Venice is nodal to Stokes' architecture of colour-form. Venice, this 'city of stone

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1 Giorgione
(c1477–1510). The
Tempesta. Detail
(c1505). Oil on
canvas. Accademia
Venice. Reproduced
in *Venice* (1945),
Plate 48
2 Santa Maria della
Salute and the
Venetian lagoon

and water' is for Stokes 'the most stupendous, the most far-reaching … humanistic creation' (Gowing, 1978, Ib, p226). His *Venice – An Aspect of Art* (1945) closes with a description of the *Tempesta [1]* by Giorgione, the artist whose Castelfranco altarpiece had formed the frontispiece to his second book *Sunrise in the West* (1927). Stokes finds it fitting that 'an account of this aesthetic spread over several volumes and a considerable time should conclude with Giorgione' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p133). In the *Tempesta* he is arrested by the unfurling of Giorgione's 'jewel-like colour' between the spectral light that strikes the flanks of the Veneto buildings, and the dark menace of the breaking storm. Those types of humanity, the youth leaning on the staff, and the woman with the suckling infant, 'stand between the night and day'. 'We too' he urges 'must redefine the inner and the outer …' (*ibid*, p132. Stoke's ellipsis).

How is the inner life of the psyche to be resolved with all that lies outside within the scenario of colour-form? To answer this I shall take an undated and unpublished typescript of Stokes, entitled *In Short*, and move, via Venice's primal elements, the sea and the sky, to examine the concepts of 'film' and 'surface' colour which Stokes borrowed from David Katz. The *In Short* text is undated, but some of its ideas relate to the final, 'Envoi', section of *Venice*[4] – 'To live is to apply an inner pattern to an outward scheme'. Using aquatic images appropriate to the Venetian lagoon, Stokes writes:

'Who can say turmoil of the mind? The mind moves as does the wrinkling skin upon a calm sea. The underneath is set, deep as the sea beneath a surface skin.

Consciousness is no more of the mind than the surface is of the sea. And just as the surface of the sea lies opposite to the sky and, indeed, is thus defined, so does consciousness lie opposite to the external world.' [2] (TGA: 8816:211)[5] In Stokes' notes the film-like surface of the sea, masking its unscannable depths, depicts the veiled depths of consciousness.[6]

Film and surface colour
Following Stokes, Paul Hills finds that the lagoon at Venice 'readily proposes to the imagination a peculiar sense at once of unlimited extent and of tangible connection between the distant and the near' (Hills, 1999, pp9–11). In *Venetian Colour,* Hills addresses the surface and film colour qualities of the lagoon with Katz and Stokes in mind. 'On the lagoon … colour is like a substantial film, elastic and glassy, adhering to the surface, moving with the undulations of the waters yet nowhere revealing its depths' (*ibid*, p9).[7] Katz's theories of surface and film colour are an important reference point in this resolution of consciousness and the external world through colour-form. Stokes refers to Katz's *The World of Colour*, translated from the German in 1935, as 'this invaluable book' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p305) and for Hills, writing as late as 1987, it is 'still the most useful account of colour' (Hills, 1987, p2). Film and surface colour are the terms Katz employs to define 'the modes of appearance' – 'how colours appear in space'. Film colours are 'homeless', pure and translucent, like spectral colours. In everyday life they are encountered most nearly in the 'intrinsic visual grey' of our closed eyes and most distantly in the sky; if we lie 'in a large open meadow and look upward, the sky produces the impression of a very extended film colour' (Katz, 1935, p11). Surface colour, on the other hand, is object related. It 'follows all the wrinkles of the surface of the object, and presents … its finest structure and texture' (*ibid*, p11). Struck by Katz's view that the tactile visual world extends between the film colours of our closed eyes and the distant sky, Stokes finds it 'appropriate that the only

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parallel under ordinary circumstances for what we see inside, as it were, ourselves, is what we see when we look into the furthest distance. We have here the perfect parable of all rationalizations' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p14). Between these film-like extremes, in the 'harmonious surfaces [of] the outer world the artist externalizes and orders the extortionate divisions of the ego' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p14).

This is about as far as Stokes dares to go in psychoanalytic terminology in the published *Colour and Form* and we must turn to the notebooks for wider elucidation. Here an extended discussion of colour over several pages, in the apparatus of Freudian-Kleinian analysis, confirms that Stokes could have published in this language long before the 'Tavistock Publications' series that he began in 1955. From the standpoint of her work on child analysis, Melanie Klein had pushed back Freud's development of the super-ego – the child's parents internalized in fantasy as objects or part-objects – to the much earlier years of child development.[8] These terrifying internal figures, which appear in tales as wolves, dragons and devouring monsters, are compounds of the child's parents and fear of its own aggressive instincts.

In the external world, how can colour pacify these internalized monsters? 'By virtue of colour', Stokes argues in his notebooks, 'all those figures of relationship, figures in harmony and figures hateful and destructive which everyone carries about inside him and with which he is identified ... may call to one another, proceed from one another, flower, make themselves manifest, not so much from mutual opposition, although that element exists too, but from mutual enhancement'. He continues, 'It will be my aim to show ... that our sense of colour

lies behind so much of our sense of form, that colour, indeed, may well serve as the archetype of all harmony that touches us deepest and that, indeed, our very sense of symmetry and of balance, as well as the more general concept of coherence, are coloured by colour perception' (TGA: notebook 18). When he wrote publicly like this in the 1950s he lost his publisher, Faber and Faber, yet it should be remembered that stirring beneath the equable surface of *Colour and Form* are the full-grown psychoanalytical figures of Freud and Klein.

Colour-form – an attribute of architectonic surface
Impressed only by Katz's science, Stokes rejects his conclusion that these other-worldly film colours are 'aesthetically more pleasing than surface colours' (Katz, 1935, p12). 'Pure film colours are of no interest aesthetically', Stokes insists. In the tactile non-filmic world we actually inhabit, 'our concern is entirely with the colour of surfaces' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, pp16-17). Film colour, he believes, can be left to the mystic and the scientist. In his post Second World War writing Stokes moderated this extreme dismissal of the aesthetic value of film-colour in accord with the greater value he then gave to the enveloping, incantatory aspects of art. Influenced by Aldous Huxley's mescalin-induced visionary experiences, described in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956), he concedes, in the essay, *The Painting of our Time* (1961) that 'he was very severe' on film colour in *Colour and Form,* but still insists that these

3 Dwellings, Venice – Dorsoduro
4 S Maria dei Miracoli; upper part of west facade

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colours do not represent insights into the infinite. On the contrary, they connote regression to the primitive ego states of infancy:

'We encounter [in experiences of film colour] a very youthful light; the treasures are mostly of the breast as we are transported into a world blazing with colour. The incidence of visionary experience is usually described as a state of being transported. It has suggested to me the condition of being snatched back partially into infancy but also an image of the infant picked up from the cot and carried to the bed … for the feed for which he has pined.'
(Gowing, 1978, IIIa, pp162-63)

From the same angle he chafed at supra-real conceptions of colour, such as those advanced by theosophists and Bauhaus teachers of colour like Kandinsky. If colour does not exist to tint form, neither does it hold much value for him as disembodied synaesthetic experience. In *The Painting of our Time* he rejects, as 'muddled radiance', those tendencies in Modernism to regard colour-in-itself as the basis of reality in art.

Colour-form only holds meaning for Stokes when embodied in material and texture as an 'attribute of surfaces'. The exemplary colour surfaces he has in mind are architectonic – those matt building surfaces of the architecture of the everyday found throughout the Mediterranean, especially when glowing in the subdued just-after-sunset light: 'Mediterranean countries show surface colour at its best, matt building surfaces that dispense with the more shiny outposts against damp, favoured in the north' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p21) *[3]*. In his unpublished postwar lecture notes, 'An Influence of Buildings on the Graphic Arts in the West',[9] Stokes stresses ordinary building surfaces as the basis and body-language of an architecture of colour-form:

'In Italy … and other Mediterranean countries not only is there, and has there been from early times, a far greater use of stone and of smooth matt finish to walls, but the light, which is much stronger, impels us to examine every variation of texture and to give full value to the undersides of projecting surfaces, since illumination reflected from the ground can make them very bright. Reflected light is strong … Our sense of texture very largely embraces sensations of colour as an attribute, and is itself dependent upon the remembered feel or touch of surfaces, of texture, as well as upon vision.' (TGA: 8816. 181)

In linking colour sensations to 'the remembered feel or touch of surfaces', Stokes reminds us that our first experiences are overwhelmingly haptic and that architectonic understanding is a body-language before it is a visual one.

Colour and the after-sunset hour

Local surface colour is pre-eminently distinct in the after-sunset hour. That hour, as Dante describes in *Inferno*, 'when the fly yields to the mosquito' (*la mosca cede a la zanzara*). At this time colour is unaggressive and approaches the condition of the soft grey sky that Katz terms 'normal illumination', when we are most alert to the texture and micro-structure of surfaces and their specific material qualities. For these reasons, this time between daylight and darkness has been called 'the painters' hour' (Gage,

1999, p16). Adrian Stokes' namesake – the painter Adrian Stokes RA – in his book *Practical Landscape Painting,* describes how the nineteenth-century *plein air* schools favoured these times of 'normal illumination'. He writes of the 'long awaited grey morning' and of 'perfect silvery grey weather' (Stokes RA, 1956). In *Colour and Form*, Stokes observes that, because of the low angle of incident light – now coincident with the observers' viewpoint – we become keenly aware of the ground as an 'architectonic base' and its structural relationship to other vertical surfaces (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p305, n16). Things seem self-lit, and the gentler 'carved' aspect of colour overrides tendencies to 'plastic' hardness and brilliance. In the plastic conception of colour, on the other hand, he detects 'a rather sadistic will … at work that drills antithetical forces'.

But the carving colourist makes colour-forms that 'possess … the radiance of architecture', that are 'as brothers and sisters like the pillars and mouldings of Classical buildings'. Or – to take another architectural image from his notebooks – 'colour is like one of those Quattro Cento buildings of many arches without a central feature, or it is like an Agostino [di Duccio] low relief every part of whose agitated surfaces is of equal value to the whole' (TGA: notebook 18) *[4]*.

Goethe was intrigued by this enhancement of colour values in subdued light. Stokes himself declares that, among all the writers on colour he studied, 'Goethe alone, Goethe with his finely developed visual imagination, has stimulated me' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, pp107–108). In his *Doctrine of Colours* (*Farbenlehre*) of 1810, Goethe regards 'colour [as] a degree of darkness', noting that 'shadow is the proper element of colour … a subdued colour approaches it, lighting up, tingeing, and enlivening it' (Matthaei, 1971, p87 and 148). Equally of interest are the notes of Goethe's translator, Charles Eastlake, on Goethe in relation to Venetian colour. Eastlake relates how the Venetian painters grasped the value of evening colour through the practice of sunset gondola rides on the lagoon, 'when the sun had already set behind the hills of Bassano; when the light was glowing but diffused; when shadows were soft – conditions all agreeing with the character of [the Venetian painters'] colouring' (*ibid*, p148). Giorgione (1476/78–1510) learnt these lessons well; his lost frescoes on the facade of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi 'were remarkable for extreme warmth in the shadows' (*ibid*, 1971, p267).

Alberti: black and white

Here is Stokes' prologue to *Venice [5]*:

'Venice excels in blackness and whiteness; water brings commerce between them. Italians excel in the use of black and white, white stone and interior darkness. Colour comes between, comes out of them, intensely yet gradually amassed, like a gondola between water and sky.'
(Gowing, 1978, IIb, p88)

This dramatic prelude, with its stark oppositions of black and white – like the Hyde Park passage at the start of this essay – embodies Stokes' colour-system

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that derives, via Goethe and Alberti, from Aristotle. In some aspects this is a flawed system, as it perpetuates Aristotle's errors. Thus, Alberti's primaries of blue, red, green and earth colour are limited as they exclude yellow. Alberti has also been reprimanded for attempting to perpetuate classico-medieval symbolic codes of colour, such as the association of primary colours with the elements. Yet, it is exactly such codings, beyond a bare physiological account of colour, that would appeal to Stokes, because of his desire to equate the 'inner' and the 'outer'. *Della Pittura* is the first text to consider 'the psychological effects of colour … to arouse emotion in the observer' (Alberti, 1966, p130, n83). Stokes comments that Goethe, in regarding 'colour [as] a degree of darkness' is, like Leonardo da Vinci and Alberti, a follower of Aristotle who saw 'colour … as inner light and a lesser light than light itself … All hue is to be considered as half light, since it is in every case lighter than black and darker than white' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p55).[10] In Alberti's system, as noted in my opening points, black and white are the extremes; colour and relief arise from the 'balancing of white and black':

> 'White and black are the two extremes of colour. Another is established between them … Through the mixing of colours infinite other colours are born, but there are only four true colours – as there are four elements – from which more and more other kinds of colours may be thus created. Red is the colour of fire, blue of the air, green of the water, and of the earth grey and ash. Other colours … are mixtures of these. Therefore, there are four genera of colours, and these make their species according to the addition of dark or light, black or white.' (Alberti, 1966, pp49–50)

Later Alberti describes how the 'well coloured' drawing arises from the 'balancing of white and black', and here we might recall the organic Aristotelian notion that colours follow the life cycle of a plant from its white shoots, through the spectrum of colour, to the shrivelled black of death (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p56). Alternatively, in another organicist metaphor, Stokes characterises the painter as one who carves colour from the white canvas:

> 'Colour is the division of white. I would define the European painter as an artist who, as it were, carves a white canvas, divides that white … opens it to show the strength of colour that may evolve from it. The painter, on the analogy of the earth and its vegetation, by ploughing, as it were, a white surface, creates his own organic world, his own evening panorama.' (Ibid, p40)

These analogies of Aristotle and Stokes also relate, of course, to our knowledge of spectral colour as a division of white.

Colour and the mean-point

As so far described, the whole field of colour-form is an attribute of tactile surfaces which extends between the extremities of black and white, and Katz's 'film' realms of the innermost dark of the visual grey and the outermost film colour of the bright sky. So where does the mean point lie within this field of colour? Here it is necessary to address the vexed question of Alberti's grey. In Book One of
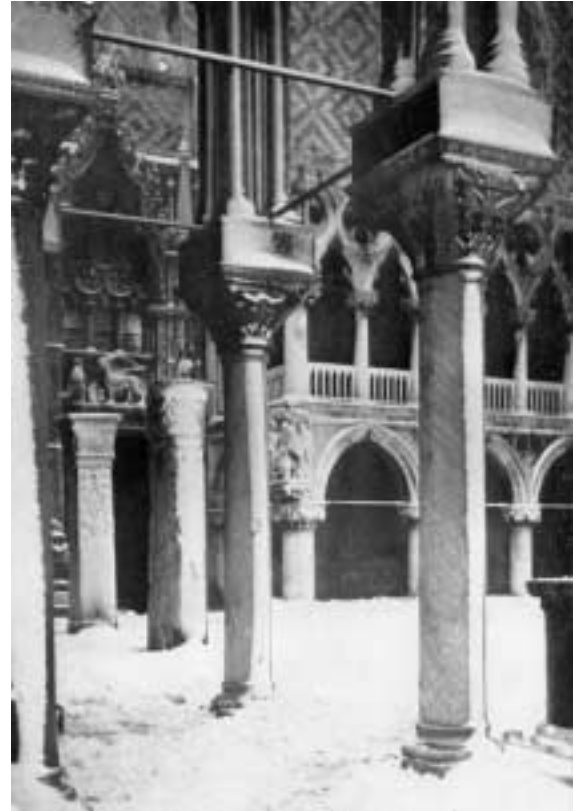
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Della Pittura, as described, the 'four true colours' that Alberti identifies between the extremes of black and white – in accordance with the elements of fire, water and earth – are red, blue and green. But then, where we might expect the primary of yellow, he links the earth to 'grey and ash' colour. Troubled by this, some commentators have attempted to make this 'grey and ash' into a substitute for the supposed missing primary. Thus James Ackerman translates *bigio* (grey) and *cenericcio* (*cenere* = ash) as 'earth colour', claiming that 'what Alberti must have meant was an earthy, unsaturated yellow' (Ackerman, 1991, p183). However, from the standpoint of Stokes and his Quattro Cento aesthetics, I find John Gage's viewpoint more convincing. Gage argues that 'what [Alberti] needed was not a fourth "primary" but a colour which would express the mean between black and white seen as absolutes … It was essential to his understanding of the art of the colourist that Alberti should give equal status to grey and the other three "true" colours, from which many mixtures (*species*) could be produced' (Gage, 1995, p119). Alberti, himself, describes earth colour as a mixture of black and white. Gage concludes that as all colours participate in grey, then grey should be seen as 'the key to the tonal coherence of the pictorial composition' in the same way that the 'perspectival system' is the key to Albertian space.[11] Within these colour-form frameworks we turn to the 'architecture of colour-form' in Venice.

Venetian colour: levels of realisation

Alberti seems close when Stokes finds 'the pigeons of St Mark's … a solace to tired feet, grey softness above the hard and grey volcanic pavement. Feeding the

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pigeons is a ritual, an offering to the stones we tread' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p92). The neutral tones of the Mediterranean earth are seen as the source of all fancies connected with colour and form:

'In Italy, in whose bright landscape there is a prevalence of neutral colours that gain from each other, the earth is seen as mother and founder of the virile vegetation … To our fancies, colour and tone, and through them, forms, are the fruition of earth's inner store of fire and form, of our own vital heat, of mind and spirit.' (*Ibid*, pp49–50)

Stokes denounced Ruskin's obsession with the bricky medieval Venice and his refusal to recognise the omnipresent Renaissance city of stone. However, from the angle of colour, Stokes concedes that – despite the prominence of the Istrian stone – Venice is predominantly a construction of brick walls and tiled roofs. In actuality his theory of colour requires Venice's stable and unifying mid-tones of brick to dovetail between the poles of white stone and dark aperture. Pursuing the earthen, organic analogy, brick is 'a loam in Venice from which the encrusted stone is seen to flower. (It would not be so if the surfaces of tactful thin Italian bricks played a less quiescent role)' (*ibid*, p118). These matt brick surfaces play a crucial part in the tonal organisation of Venice. They range in colour from warm red through orange-pink to yellows, grey-browns and umbers. Hills (1999) identifies two basic types; a warm red from the Mestre kilns and, from Treviso, a coarse-grained yellow. Stokes' *Venice. An Aspect of Art* (1945) is constructed as an intimate discourse between the poetics of the text and deeply evocative photograph images, many of which were specially commissioned by him – as he notes in the Preface (Stokes, 1945, pv).

5 Venice – blackness and whiteness. Venice in the snow, from *Venice* (1945), plate 2

6 Window and balcony in Campo San Polo. Early Renaissance, from *Venice* (1945), plate 5

7 A House. Seventeenth century, from *Venice* (1945), plate 17

The brickiness of Venice

Numerous plates in the book draw attention to the tonal values of everyday junctures of brick and stone, for example 'Window and balcony in Campo San Polo' *[6]*. At the same time the text venerates the matronly brickiness of the city:

The unhidden brick of Venice, even when it is vast in many campanili including the one of San Marco, in the huge Gothic churches of the Frari and San Zanipolo … suggests a certain domesticity without challenging the image of bright stone … Such rosy brick … suggests an islanded peace, an earth substance matured by the sun, an aged country warmth.' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p118)

Before moving up a register in the tonal and material scale, consider one of the plates of an ordinary patched and peeling seventeenth-century house – Plate 17 in *Venice [7]*.

The washing above hangs white and listless: but the liston below of Istrian stone takes an added density as the sum of apparel. We see approximations and differences as in a family. The monolith Istrian jambs to the door give added density to the layer upon layer of thin transverse bricks and even to the worn horizontal planks of the canal door. Yet brick and wood seem to partake of the stone from their intercourse.' (*Ibid*, p105)

Thus these bricks of Mestre and Treviso excellently serve a grounding and median role in the Venetian spectrum; in the Venetian lagoon they offer a reassuring reminder of the earth, and their higher russet keys suggest the warmth of corporeal life.

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Flesh and stone

But Venice is also Ruskin's marbled city of incrustation, and only marble contains the richer flesh hues able to fully assert the living between the light and dark. In Venice – complementing the green-blue waters of the lagoon – the white Istrian stone is married with Verona marble; the *brocatello*, which is orange-red, when newly quarried, fading to pink and, at times, almost to white (Hills, 1999, p65). This marble reminds Stokes of the 'rich pinky flesh of succulent [Mediterranean] fishes' (Gowing, 1978, Ia, p38). In *The Quattro Cento,* Stokes urges us to 'spend a day in Venice with eyes on the ground … You will note when you finally sink exhausted at Florian's that the second step of the portico [under which] you sit, is made of white Istrian alternating with Verona marble … or is it reflection of the sunset, so faint are the salmon pink veins' (*ibid*, Stoke's ellipsis). He points out that the warm light of 'those great barns the Frari and San Zanipolo' is owed to the light reflected from the floors of 'Verona *diamante* alternated with Istrian' (*ibid*). These warm marbles 'afford … an image of living process', and their 'live colours amid the blackening stone excite one orally' – they evoke the mother's breast. These flesh tones recall Henry James' comment: 'If we were asked what is the leading colour at Venice we would say pink … It is a faint, shimmery, airy, watery pink: the bright sea-light seems to flash with it, and the pale whitish-green of lagoon and canal to drink it in' (cited in Grieve, 2000, p120).

Stokes asks us to 'consider this earth of Venice. Here it is, a few stones and two steps at the entrance to San Michele' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p107) *[8]*. This earth is poignant as San Michele in Isola is the cemetery island of Venice. There is an existential force to this tiny campo that lies between the lagoon waters and the walled graves. Stokes portrays the step as 'a short, strong, thick projecting tongue with enormous suction power'. At this cemetery threshold the band of flesh-toned marble in the step becomes an emblem of frail humanity: 'Such medium-toned marbles … have the effect of nodules of chromatic richness holding a balance and preserving an intercourse between the broader masses of light and dark … Even in this truncated subject we have the members and the mythology of all true Venetian architecture' (*ibid*, p108). At this threshold Stokes would remember his former mentor Ezra Pound who lies interred in the St Michele cemetery.

The Venetian church he and Pound most admired, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, is striking for the crosses of Verona marble on the lower stages of the facade *[9]*: '[Verona] stone helps out the much admired Miracoli church. The lower panels on the outside walls have two Verona bars let into each of them in the shape of a cross. This gives the flesh tones, the original incentive to every tonal effect, stimulating our love both of colour suffusion in general and of Venetian colouring in particular' (Gowing, 1978, Ia, p39). Istrian stone provides the building's fictive structure of Corinthian and Ionic columns and is fielded, from the Verona and other marbles, by bars of pigeon grey.

Here, abutting the glistening white Istrian, is – once more – Alberti's mean of grey.

Hills observes that under Alberti's influence 'white and grey … were increasingly valued in Quattrocento painting … and in Venice grey becomes used for relief on architecture' (Hills, 1999, p163). Grey marble became widely employed by architects and sculptors on numerous buildings and tombs. Pietro Lombardo uses similar bars of grey on the screen to the forecourt of the Scuola Grande [di San Giovanni Evangelista] to accent the Corinthian columns and openings – this screen is illustrated in *Venice* as a key Quattro Cento work. In his notes to Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, Eastlake observes that, in Venice, the spatial relations engendered by passage by gondola and canal, make one especially aware of the flesh tones evoked by the Verona marble. He contends that nowhere can the 'colour of flesh … be so conveniently compared as when the observer and the observed gradually approach and glide past each other on so smooth an element' (cited in Matthaei, 1971, p267).

Whiteness and blackness

Yet despite the warm ever-present brick and the extensive use of pink Verona marble (in the fourteenth century, the most common stone), it is the wide use of *listons* of Istrian stone (the characteristic edging members to doors and windows) from the fifteenth century onwards, that makes Venice seem a city of white stone, and which lends distinction to the commonest dwellings. The use of Istrian stone at critical junctions to frame openings, reinforce corners and rebut the sea, magnifies the impact of its actual limited extent *[10]* – as Stokes points out:

The area of stone on the walls is probably minute. One thinks of Venice as a stone city because stone is the final material, the head and the fruit of walls of brick and stucco. Emergent from duller surfaces, the white stone glows.' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p118)

For Stokes, whiteness is both an image of origin – of wholeness embodied in that first figure of sufficiency, the mother – or completeness accomplished through successful ego-development. The circumambient flux of Venice makes the whole city 'a potent symbol of the mother'. The domes of Venice – particularly Mary's 'great dome of the Salute' – 'feed the sky' (Gowing, 1978, IIe, pp244-45) *[2]*. The plates in *Venice* portray ordinary passages and walls of the city where the 'flowering' of Istrian stone on gnarled and crumbling brick is especially poignant. In *Venice* his description and chosen viewpoint of the Sottoportico San Cristoforo fuses these holistic accounts of whiteness as origin and attainment *[11]*.

'Notice about this stone that although it is old and in places broken and decayed, neglected in fact, it provides the image of something treasured, of something indefectible … We … strive to carry within us, to our dying days such an image of indefectible bounty as is suggested by this white stone flowering upon the brick; and we strive to impose this image on the piecemeal of life, an image to come through the cement and brick of circumstance,

creating from them a steadfast face, a sum or total of circumstance.

At the far end of the passage in the photograph we observe a white light as the image: and so it is when we try to look back to whatever impetus to well-being we may feel to exist. But at the near end of this passage – to pursue the simile, the present consciousness or present end to the passage of living – we have the original impetus in solid, though necessarily in abstract, form since it serves as a principle of unification for infinitely more than would describe the original content. Such an image – the one above, of course, is that of the mother regarded as the source of all good things – such an image, as well as the constant images of figures good and bad often in conjunction, dominate our lives.' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p104)

These are powerful metaphors to extract from a common episode in Venice's urban tissue. The tactile 'white stone' of the arch that confronts us is projectively identified as a present grip on reality; a personal creative process that began with the filmic 'white light' in the distance, a memory of the 'mother … as the source of all good things'. And the bars of light and shade connote the fantasies of introjection and projection of good and bad feelings surmounted in this passage to maturity. The extended investment in white stone in the fifteenth century can be mapped onto a Venetian Quattrocento and Early Renaissance value system which ennobled whiteness as a symbol of purity and status. In an observant essay on 'The Colour of Venice' the architect Luigi Moretti hears 'the minute chatter of thousands upon thousands of houses, each wearing its own colour, bowing respectfully toward the white reserved for the great buildings of stone' (cited in Bucci and Mulazzani, 2002, p166). The limpid volumes of churches built by Mauro Coducci – one of Stokes' favoured Venetian architects – are described in the alternation of plain surfaces of white stucco and stone orders, like Santa Maria Formosa begun in 1492. This language reached its apotheosis in Andrea Palladio's work, nearly a century later. In *Smooth and Rough* (1951), the interior of his church of Il Redentore (begun 1577) is praised as a 'supreme architectural attainment'. Blackness is striated with whiteness in the bars of shade and light of the Sottoportico San Cristoforo; although black is imagined variously as the 'bad' object, aggression and ultimately death, a coming-to-terms with the

8 S Michele in Isola. Entrance, from *Venice* (1945), plate 22

9 S Maria dei Miracoli; south side from *Venice* (1945), plate 12

10 Palazzi on the Grand Canal viewed from the Rialto fish market

The 'architecture of colour form' | Stephen Kite

inner world of the psyche demands negotiation with both the 'bad' and 'good' aspects of the inner world – the 'black' and 'white'.

There are numerous black and white lithographs in the *Venice* edition of 1965, a collaboration with John Piper, whose drawings describe this dovetailing of white and black as extractions from the waters of the lagoon; for example the powerful image of the flanks of the Palazzo Pesaro rising from the side canal *[12]*. So that blackest genie of Venice, the gondola, must be seen not as a 'silhouette' against the flux but as integral to a deeper reciprocal and tonal organisation of blackness and whiteness floated on the depths of the lagoon:

'In Venice … blackness, as well as whiteness, obtains a meaning over and above its tone value, more especially that value fundamental to profound colour relationship, identity in difference. The gondolier's seaworthy serpent … is black between water and sky: but rather than as a silhouette whose character is to stand out, and the character of whose background is thus to be a contrasting background, the black gondola appears in organic connexion with its light surroundings, an organic connexion, suggestive of circulation, which belongs to colour rather than to tone … the gondolier's rhythmic stroke sums in an orderly succession the crowded flood upon which he works.' (Gowing, 1978, IIb, p90)

11 **Sottoportico San Cristoforo, from** *Venice* **(1945), plate 16**
12 **Side of the Palazzo Pesaro, from** *Venice* **(1965), Stokes and Piper. Drawing facing P55**

Notes

1. For an overview of Stokes' contribution see Kite (2003).
2. For an account of the psychologised *topos* of Hyde Park see Kite (2000).
3. For an account of Stokes' *carving-modelling* dyad, see Kite (2002).
4. References to the Nazis and Goebbels in the present tense imply a Second World War date, probably as thoughts linked to the writing of *Inside Out* and *Venice,* TGA: 8816:211.
5. Some of this imagery also occurs in the 'Envoi' to *Venice*, see Gowing (1978, IIb, p138).
6. For a darker aquatic imaging of the mental life see the account of Stokes' 'The Serpentine lake in Hyde Park, London' in Gowing (1978, IIc) and Kite (2000).
7. In *Venetian Colour,* Hills notes: 'My comments on architecture and the body, surface and depth, owe much to the writings of Adrian Stokes', p227, n18. I shall return to this excellent study at a number of points in this paper. See also Hills (1987).
8. See for example 'The Early Development of Conscience in the Child' (1933), in Klein, M. (1948). *Contributions to Psycho-analysis 1921-1945*, Hogarth Press, London.
9. The ideas contained in the lecture, TGA: 8816:181, refer back to *Smooth and Rough* (1951) and reflect, or anticipate, views contained in *The Painting of our Time* (1961). These dates suggest the lecture was written in the late '50s or earlier '60s although, of course, it could possibly be later. In itself it forms an original and lucid essay summarising Stokes' views on the interrelation of architecture and the graphic arts.
10. Stokes also observes: 'Goethe admitted that his original intention was to write little more than a paraphrase of Aristotle' (Gowing, 1978, IIa, p55).
11. Alberti's tonal stress on black, white and grey and the use of black and white to draw out the relief aspects of painting might imply an emphasis on *disegno* against *colore*, but it is clear from *Della Pittura* that 'copiousness' applies to colour as much as to formal variety. Gage cites as example the famous passage from *Book Two* where Alberti describes Diana's train of nymphs picked out in green, white, red, yellow and so on. Stokes, not an uncritical reader of Alberti, comments in *Art and Science* that 'where Alberti treats of colour, the emphasis is almost entirely upon chromatic tone', but adds 'he writes with approbation, it is true, of a certain *amicitia*, a certain amity between colours' (Gowing, 1978, IId, p190).

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Acknowledgements

Biography

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