

The Experience of Pure Colour

By Anders Lidén

*Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity...*
Percy Bysshe Shelley, Adonais

When you are lying on your back in a field somewhere on a fine summer day with no clouds, looking up into a clear blue sky, the eyes cannot inform you whether the blue has millions of kilometers of depth or whether it is just a sort of blanket thrown over your eyes. There are no distances. There is no information. It is impossible to orient yourself anymore in this space. There is perhaps a moment of dizziness when you are losing yourself. But then you happen to change position. The roof of a house appears, the horizon line. And in the next moment the world comes back.

The perception of pure colour, absolutely free from materiality, and from all limiting form, has a hallucinating depth. This is a simple experience that we all have in common and that we all can share by simply looking up into the blue sky.

Pure colour – what is it really? What are we talking of when we speak about pure colour? Difficult questions tend to be simplified and clarified when we make definitions of the terms being used and when we seek the etymological background of words. But in this case, things, on the contrary, get more complicated. The English word *colour* and its homonyms like the French *couleur*, or the Spanish *color*, stem from the same Latin word *color*. This word in its turn comes from the verb *caelare* which means to 'hide' or to 'conceal'. Colour, therefore, should from this angle be understood as something that conceals or covers something. It is surprising to note that the Latin word for sky or heaven, *caelum*, has the same root as the word colour.¹ Therefore, not only the blue of the sky but the sky itself has been understood as something that covers and hides.

We know that there are stars and planets up there all the time even if we don't see them in broad daylight. The renaissance scientist Gianbattista de Porta suggested that the only thing one had to do in order to see the stars in daylight was to climb down into a dried-up water well, from where one would have sufficient darkness to see them.²

¹ A. Walde, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*.

² Gianbattista de Porta, *Magia naturalia*, 1587.

But there were other things perhaps hidden up there. What about God? All the ancient peoples seem to have placed their gods in heaven. In many ancient belief-systems there is not only the one heaven that we all see, but one heaven after another. So, looking up into the sky, looking down into a colour, we are confronted with something that is hidden from our normal senses. This is at least how we must conclude that these things were understood by our ancestors.

This was the case not only with the latin-speaking peoples. The German word *Farbe*, the same as *farve* in Danish or *färg* in Swedish has the same basic meaning of something that covers or hides, like the skin. In Sanskrit the word for colour is *varnah*. This word is almost the same as *varuna* which means to cover. Varuna has the same root as *Uranos* in the Greek tradition. Uranos, if you remember, was the Greek God of Heaven, who was married to Gaia, the Earth. It is obvious that all these words were universally understood in the same way.

This discussion must be somewhat odd for Polish or Russian-speaking people, because in the Slavic languages the common words for colour, *tsvet*, *kwisc*, *kweit*, come from quite another root and don't have the same connotations. But I believe that there has been some kind of suspicion towards colour everywhere in the sense that colour was understood as something that concealed reality, and, by extension, that colour would hide or distort truth.

Shakespeare, for instance, uses the word colour in this sense, when he has Brutus in the play *Julius Caesar* add colour to his talk. By utilising images and colour, Brutus is sweetening his language in order to persuade himself and others in his plot to assassinate Julius Caesar. By colouring the language, Brutus is hiding his true intentions.³

Now, if you try to transfer this meaning of the word colour into painting – that colour really is something superficial which covers and hides, you will come close to the philosophy of such a great medieval thinker as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the whole esthetic ideology of the Cistercian Order.

There is an interesting discussion of principles going on in the first half of the twelfth century between Saint Bernard and Suger, who was the mighty abbot of the monastery of Saint Denis near Paris. Suger who planned the restoration of the church where the kings of France used to be coronated, has been considered the father of the Gothic style. At least, he was the one who decided to replace the old stone walls with huge areas of coloured light. It was in his church that the first of the big rose windows were created, those masterpieces of geometry, colour and

³ Michael Srigley, *The Probe of Doubt. Scepticism and Illusion in Shakespeare's Plays*, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 113, Uppsala 2000.

light -- one of the greatest achievements of the Gothic style and perhaps of architecture of all times.⁴ Suger loved external beauty in the form of gold, silver, precious stones and colour. He believed that such beauty as was created in Saint Denis would have an ennobling and purifying effect; that such beauty possessed the ability to transform our beings. Suger thought that a trancelike state could be induced simply by gazing at these fields of coloured light, and that such a state was not a psychological but a religious experience. The physical 'brightness' of a work of art will 'brighten' the minds of the beholders by a spiritual illumination. Human consciousness would be raised closer to God. "I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe, and, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world."⁵ Such was for Suger the effect of the coloured stained glass.

Saint Bernard on the other hand is said to have looked upon the Saint Denis church as a workshop of Vulcan, a synagogue of Satan.⁶ For him the beauty of the outer world and the pleasure of the senses would only serve as distractions. Colour, pure or not, was of little importance. Important was light. Christ, being the light of the world, appeared to Saint Bernard principally in the form of light. Why use colour? Colour would only act as a curtain or a veil hiding or concealing the true light of the Christ. So for Saint Bernard the concept of colour kept its etymological meaning of something that covered and concealed. It was nothing more than light stepped down.

Erwin Panofsky has made the humoristic remark that Saint Bernard probably saw the outer world as a monochrome in black and white. It is perhaps wiser to see the differences between Suger and Saint Bernard as a question of different contemplative methods. Because, if your aspiration in life is to be in communication with the light of the Christ, and if you have the impression that you have realised a strong inner contact, then you would not need to bother much about outer means such as shining objects or colour.⁷ You would then perhaps be inclined to see bright and coloured things exactly as distortions of truth.

⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York 1955, p 129.

⁵ Op.cit. p 113.

⁶ Painton Cowen, *Rose Windows*, London 1979 (Thames & Hudson), passim.

⁷ Emero Stiegman, 'The Light Imagery of Saint Bernard's Spirituality and its Evidence in Cistercian Architecture', in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean Leclercq* ed. E. Rozanne Elder, Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995.

During that same time, at the end of the twelfth century, some Sufi masters in Iran began to pay attention to the world of colour and to write about their experiences. Not the external world of the senses, but that inner world of colour which can be discovered behind closed eyes, and beyond the 'shadows' of our human nature. Foremost of these masters is perhaps Najmuddin Kobra, who describes the spiritual combat as a striving to free the inner human being, described as 'a being of light' and to bring this being in contact with her celestial correspondence. This is done by a process of purification and prayer, continuous prayer – the use of the *dhikr* – and during this process one is subjected to light -- and colour experiences, which Kobra and others describe in great detail. In fact, there seems to be an ordered sequence in which these light and colour experiences – these *photismes colorés*, as Henri Corbin calls them – occur.⁸

First there is a state of total confusion and complete darkness. When a measure of inner cleansing has taken place, the lower nature will appear to the detached contemplator as a *black cloud*, which gradually takes on a reddish light. The next state, when the spiritual aspirations dominate, there comes the experience of the *white light*. These colour impressions are called by Kobra *witnesses*. They give information about the specific spiritual level that has been attained. When there is a closer integration with the soul, the light changes from white to *dark blue* which pours forth like spring water. All the time it is a question of freeing oneself from the 'shadows', which could perhaps be understood as a shutting out of unwanted thought forms or thought figures, and to be firmly anchored in the heart.

The colour impressions are described by Kobra as a sort of interior 'heavens'. The spiritual experiences of the Iranian Sufi master thus give support to the idea of a close correspondence between 'colour' and 'heaven' that the Latin etymology is suggesting. At the end of the spiritual journey, or combat, these heavens will seem to be experienced as from above – if it is at all possible to talk about locations and directions in this context. Up to this point both colour and heaven could rightly be considered as something that 'covers' or 'conceals', but not hereafter. Kobra explains this experience by telling us a dream: "I was introduced into the world of the heart. I paid attention to the heaven until the heaven entered into me so much that I experienced that I was myself heaven. And I observed the heaven during other nights until I saw it below me in the same way as I had seen it above me. And I observed the earth and I sought to discover it as it really is, until it was dissolved into a sphere of light."

Of these inner heavens -- Najm Kobra divides them into seven categories -- the final one is green. Here comes what Corbin has called the *visio smaragdina*.

⁸ Henry Corbin, *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*, Sison 1971.

There is in this green light such an intensity that the human spirit cannot endure it. "This heaven of green light contains of points of a red more intense than fire. When they appear, we experience a longing for them and a fiery desire to become one with them."

The seven heavens, or, the seven categories of coloured lights that the mystic experiences have this in common that they all confer illumination. The last of these is the green, the colour of Paradise. This does not mean that it is the ultimate. Beyond the illuminating colours, beyond contemplation is the *black light*. A black, blacker than the blackest, to borrow an expression from the alchemical tradition (*nigrum nigrior nigrius*). This black light embraces all.

These colour descriptions described by Kobra and his disciples have, of course, nothing to do with optical perceptions. They are phenomena perceived through an inner, mystical vision, through the so-called 'eye in the Heart' (*ayn-al khalb*).⁹ They are, however, not exclusively the experience of Iranian Sufi masters only. Artists have known about these things intuitively. They have acquired an exceptional ability to see. In the efforts to analyse and to meditate over what they have seen, they have at the same time often acquired the ability to see and to experience colour with their eyes closed. They have developed the ability to see with this mysterious 'eye in the Heart'. It is when both these faculties: of seeing with one's physical eyes as well as with the interior sight, the 'eye in the Heart', that great art is created.

Then you will have a Van Gogh almost killing himself in his efforts to render the beauty of a wheatfield with its vibrant yellow against the blue of the sky. What he tried to paint was something that he had seen not only with his physical eyes but also through the soul.

Then you will have a Matisse painting his studio all in red ("The Red Studio", 1911), Matisse who once said that seeing a specific colour, really seeing a colour, is *being* that colour. Then you will have an Yves Klein, captured by his perception of limitless space, the inventor of the monochromes. Then you will have Mark Rothko, trying to render on huge canvases the colours that the God of Moses had prescribed for the tabernacle in the deserts of Sinai.¹⁰ This was, at least for some years, an important point of departure for his amazing explorations of colour.

⁹ For a thorough discussion of the concept of "the eye in the Heart" cf. Frithiof Schuon, *L'oeil du cœur*, Paris 1974.
Exodus 26:1-3.

Two years ago there was a retrospective exhibition of Rothko that went around in USA and Europe. Hall after hall in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris filled with his vibrant reds, his magentas, his dark greens and his pinks and roses contrasted with white. The last hall contained the paintings from the artist's last two years, austere paintings, not so huge anymore, covered with grays and black. In these late paintings there was an almost unbearable expression of sadness, sorrow, depression. You could already in the colours, or absence of colours, sense that something of his ability to see was lost. His suicide was immanent.

Colour has fundamentally to do with quality. Therefore it is difficult not to talk about what colour could possibly mean to us from the subjective angle. There are moments in life, privileged moments, when our sensitivity is sharpened, when we experience colour, the colour of a flower, the colour of a human eye, the colour of the horizon on a late afternoon in October with lengthening shadows... when the impressions are so strong that we automatically will link up with something greater, we might perhaps call it the soul.

When you are lying there on your back looking up into the sky, or when you are losing yourself into the red interior of a Matisse painting, or in the blue of an Yves Klein painting, nothing is ever lost. You yourself are not lost. On the contrary, life is restored with new energy and new power. Such is the experience of pure colour. Colour is ultimately a quality which participates in the fundamental and unexplainable goodness which underlies the world.