COLORS' ROLE AND SYMBOLISM IN VISUAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The use of colors was determined both by the broadening of human knowledge horizon – through science, art, traveling, commerce – and by the desire to experiment in order to obtain various colors and nuances. Therefore, color is an essential element of aesthetics. Ever since ancient times, people have used colors, assigning them multiple significances, but color research began in the 17-th century and would undergo a great development in the following centuries, together with the development of various industries and the growing interest in art.

Key words: *color, symbolism, visual language, heraldry, term*

Résumé

L'utilisation des couleurs a été déterminée tant par l'élargissement de l'horizon de connaissance des hommes – par les sciences, les arts, les voyages, le commerce, etc. – que par le désir d'expérimenter, afin d'obtenir des couleurs et des nuances spéciales. La couleur est, donc, un élément important de l'esthétique. Depuis les temps anciens l'homme s'est servi de la couleur, lui a attribué diverses significations, mais la recherche des couleurs commence seulement au XVII^{e} siècle et connaîtra un développement spécial dans les siècles suivants, avec le développement de différentes branches de l'industrie et de l'intérêt accordé à l'art.

Mots-clés: *couleur, symbolisme, langage visuel, héraldique, terme*

1. Nowadays the discrepancy between art functions is becoming ever greater: comparing art syntax and semantics, the latter does not benefit from the perfected means of expression become more often than not a purpose in itself[1]. At present creativity in the field of fine arts implies on the one hand the continuation of well known rules (incorporated within new "linguistic" functions) and on the other totally new rules, postulated by new linguistic

[1] Cf. Ailincăi, 2010, p. 15.

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forms. These new "languages" cannot be accessible to the general public and don't have the power of persuasion acquired by the forms verified in time but they have the advantage of being fresh, maximal expressions of the artistic effort since they mainly operate with symbols.

1.1. The symbol represents a sign, an object, an image, etc. which, by its form or nature, "indirectly (conventionally or on the basis of an analogy) represents or evokes something else than what it really is" (DEXI, 2007: 1804). Etymologically, the symbol is a means of expressing a relation between two terms which make up a unit. In ancient Greek, the verb *symbállein* or *symballesthai* meant "to unify, to link together those which were separated, to reunite, to bring together". Linguistically, the symbol implies the dynamism of two terms which constitute a unit. Therefore, the symbol represents something by means of which something else is known. "The common point (...) is the idea of an element which replaces and represents another element', but in Greek the verb also means, to join together, to compare", which suggests that, originally, there was 'the idea of an *analogy* between the sign and the designated object, still preserved in some modern definitions of the term' (Warren, Wellek, 1967: 248).

1.2. The symbol is a conventional sign, a partial hypostasis of the linguistic sign. As a result of that, there are words which have symbolic value but not all symbols are expressed through words – for instance, there are visual symbols, having social or socio-cultural value (*white* is the symbol of purity, chastity, but also of mourning).

Generally, the symbol is identified with a sign, i.e. with an object which represents something else than the object itself and, like the word, consists of a *symboliser* and a *symbolised*. The former belongs to the perceptible world (for example the color black) and the latter is psychic in nature and indicates a referent – it signifies a (real or imaginary) object or an idea always placed outside the sign. Nevertheless, the relation between the symboliser and the symbolised is not identical to that between the signified and the signifier. In the process of symbolisation, establishing a relation between the two components is optional (conditioned by a certain motivation) and the symbol significance is allegorical.

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2. Color language is the exponent of universal symbolism. The European culture has acquired a level of complexity which has imposed it as a major modern cultural model, among other reasons, because of a refined understanding of image and color representation functions.

2.1. In spite of color perception difference[2], body beautification by using colors is practised in ancient Egypt both by men and women: they discolor their skin by rubbing it with a sort of goldish-yellow ink, "temple and chest veins are blue-lined (...). The eye gets a fish-shape highlight with *khol*, while eyelid shades have vivid colors: Malachite-green, turquoise, *terracotta*, black-copper oxide, coal. Elongated and completely blackened brows, pink cheek bones, rosy or crimson lips gave a multicolored brilliance to the sacred face (...). Polished hand and toe nails are painted with *henna*" (Paquet, 2007: 16-17). Therefore, nail polishing is an ancient custom, preserved till today. Another example from the same category is the following: those women who were part of Paris artistic bohème painted their fingernails in strong colors (green, violet, even black); they shocked but they got exactly that they wanted. In the same line of a persiflating attitude of revolt, Dadaists painted their hair green or blue.

2.2. In old times, white was important, since it represented the measure of face beauty - it is the color which suggests both chastity and beauty. But the rigid rules regarding body beauty are not very clear because one's attention was drawn exclusively to what was visible. Ever since ancient times, beauty has been a condition of happiness, of self-accomplishment and this purpose is served mainly by the color one chooses including when using make-up, as we pointed out in our examples. The term *fard* (cf. Germ. *Farbe*) was attested in the 12-th century and it originates in the Frankish word *farjwan* or *farwidon* which meant "to paint".

3. It is generally agreed that the most frequent colors in Romanian folklore are white and black, the two referring to contrastive aspects.

[2] There is a difference in color perception between men and women. For instance, blue is more easily observable by men than by women, the former preferring blue to red and orange to yellow.

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Symbolising beauty, white[3] is the color of the face but also of purity, whereas black is the color of beautiful eyes[4]: "Lelea-i albă ca şi caşul/ Ochii-s negri ca neghina"/'My darling is as white as snow/ Her eyes are as black as coal (*Folklore*). The same type of beauty is exemplified by George Călinescu in *Estetica basmului*, describing the fairy prototype as it appears in Petre Ispirescu's fairy-tales. The fairy "had, my friend, pure gold hair. When she looked at somebody with her big eyes, as black as night, he was lovestruck; her eyebrows were so beautifully arched that they seemed painted and her skin was whiter than milk froth"/"avea un păr, nene, cu totul şi cu totul de aur. Când se uita la cineva cu ochii ei ceia mari şi negri ca murele, îl băga în boale; avea nişte sprâncene bine arcuite de pare că erau scrise, şi o peliţă mai albă ca spuma laptelui"[5]. Different from the beautiful, white-skinned Fairy, the daughter of the Black King has dark skin and is "as ugly as sin, smoked and black as coal" and, on top of it, she is "extremely fastidious"/Diferită de Zâna cea frumoasă, cu pielea albă, fata lui Negru-Împărat are pielea neagră şi este "urâtă ca Mama-Pădurii, afumată şi neagră ca un cărbune", pe deasupra şi "mofturoasă foc" (Călinescu, 1965: 263).

4. Color meanings and preferences depend on other factors, such as regional and national specificity, in its turn determined by the historical, social and cultural conditions of a certain area. Since an early age, the child acquires certain traditional conventions, some of them basically connected to art: a bride wears a white dress, little girls are usually dressed in pink and boys in blue. Some other conventions are learned: for instance, cabs have a

[3] Albă-ca-Zăpada/Snow-white is very beautiful because, as her name says, she is white, unblemished and innocent.

[4] "*Noapte-întuneric-negru/night-darkness-black* represent the material elements which constitute one of the most obsessing images referring to eyes in Romanian literature. The poem is called *Izvorul nopţii/ Night spring* and is written by Lucian Blaga: «Frumoaso,/ ţi-s ochii-aşa de *negri* încât seara/ când stau culcat cu capu-n poala ta/ îmi pare,/ că *ochii* tăi, adâncii, sunt izvorul/ din care tainic curge noaptea peste văi,/ şi peste munţi şi peste şesuri,/ acoperind pământul/ c-o mare de-*ntuneric*./ Aşa-s de *negri* ochii tăi,/ lumina mea»."/'My beauty,/ your eyes are so black that at night/ when I lay my head on your lap/it seems to me,/ that your deep eyes are the spring/ from which the night flows mysteriously across mountains and plains,/ engulfing the earth/ into a dark sea.' (Tohăneanu, Bulza, 1976, p. 94)

[5] Petre Ispirescu, *Lupul cel năzdrăvan şi Făt-Frumos*, apud Călinescu, 1965, p. 89.

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certain color (yellow), traffic lights indicate permission to cross the street when the light is green, every national flag has certain colors[6]. The Romanian tricolor[7] has three vertical stripes, the order of colors starting from the flagpole being blue, yellow, red. The most frequent color of national flags is red[8], followed by white (symbol of peace and purity), blue, yellow (symbol of sun light and material achievements) and black[9]. 'There are monocolor flags, for instance (...) the green flag of Lybia, symbolising colonel Gaddafi's *green revolution* in 1977' (Evseev, 1999: 439).

5. In the Middle Ages chromatic symbols[10] belong to the antique period[11] heritage, being further transmitted during the following historical periods. Heraldic chromatics is one of the fields which allow us to see and interpret the way in which some colors acquired different significances on various coats-of-arms (in fact, colors signify virtues, vices or the notorious deeds of a certain nobleman). Heraldry color terminology is French. There are five main colors ordinarily used in heraldry and some other marginal

[6] Flags appeared for the first time in India and China, but it is believed that their European origin is linked to the Dacian wolf, the Dacian war flag, whose tail flew in the wind, and which was copied by the Roman legions which thus adopted flexible banners. At present, flags represent a complex domain with a particular terminology and ceremony, whose study represents the domain of vexilology.

(http://sites.google.com/a/atlasullumii.org/atlasul-lumii/steagurile-lumii)/23.07.2009

[7] The oldest tricolor is that of Holland; it was used beginning with 1572 and (through France) inspired many countries to adopt that model.

Cf.http://sites.google.com/a/atlasullumii.org/atlasul-lumii/steagurile-lumii/23.07.2009

[8] The red flag with the symbols of the sickle and hammer was imposed by the Boshevik government in Russia and became the flag of the proletariat all over the world.

[9] Pirates' flag was black and had a white skull drawn on it - death's symbol.

[10] "It is considered that European chromatic symbols have established themselves slowly, over a period of time which covers thousands of years, ending in the 18-th century; thus we can notice that there is a color 'grammar' regulating communication through colors, the meanings of chromatic messages being understood only as a result of their semantic study." (Lăzărescu, 2009, p. 75)

[11] "(...) Hundreds or thousands of years ago, man's mental conditions were totally different from those of modern times. Life was an endless series of hierophanies, in a world dominated by the sacred. Man discovered a supernatural world and created another: that of symbols. Through it, he was part of superior realities in a desperate attempt to discover the ultimate and, at the same time, the primary reality. The magical symbolism of colors is extremely important even if the color in itself remains neutral. It acquires a symbolic significance only as a result of mental processing." (Botiş, 2008, p. 23)

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colors are added to those. The usual colors are: 1) *azurul* 'azure' (cf. Fr. *azur*, Sp. *azul*, It. *azurro*) which is, in fact, blue, pure cobalt (not light blue called *azur* nowadays); 2) *gueles/gueule* is crimson – the name is very old and rather controversial. One hypothesis is that the word comes from Hebrew, language in which *gulud/guludit* designates a reddish ointment used curatively. It is possible to connect the word to the red snouts of some animals (cf. O.F. *gueles*). Another explanation would be that this term originates in the Latin word *cusculium*, the name used by Pliny for *cosenilă* (Cf. *Le petit Robert*, 2006: 2432). 3) *sinópe/sinople* (< Lat. *sinopis*) means green; the term cannot derive from the colorant having the same name since the latter designates a type of red not green. *Sinópe* could come from *prasinos* 'green' and *opla* 'coat-of-arms' – the compound term *prasino-opla* underwent the clipping of the first syllable followed by contraction resulting the forms *sinopla*, *sinople*. 4) *pourple* means 'purple'. 5) *sable* means 'black', the heraldic color of the earth. This name might derive from *zibeline*, called in old French *zables* or *sables*.

6. Colors have a great power of suggestion[12] resulted from the associations with the elements in the surrounding reality; red is provocative because it reminds us of fire and blood. Green can make us recall peaceful memories connected to nature, blue is as refreshing as water, yellow, associated to the sun, induces vigour and orange can stimulate appetite. Therefore, the effect of colors is much too evident to be interpreted solely as a result of perception[13]. Any color is endowed with a certain affective facet[14]. Warm colors generate optimism and cold colors predispose to melancholy.

[12] "Researchers consider that colors have been assigned magical powers ever since the Paleolithic, thus marking the beginning of the chromatic symbolism." (Lăzărescu, 2009, p. 70)

[13] "Reactions to primary environmental colors (...) led to the hypothesis that they are genetically, ancestrally not individually determined (...) They are genetically preserved within the genetic code and their integration is double: both at the level of vegetative and central nervous system." (Golu, Dicu, 1974, p. 21-22)

[14] "Colors determine the state of spirit to the same extent to which the aspect of the sky sets every day its destiny." (Pleșu, 1974, p. 228)

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7. The oldest images representing Romanian folk costumes are considered to be the two miniatures from *Chronicon Pictum Vindobonense* (*The Painted Chronincle of Vienna*) – 1358 –, illustrating the battle of Posada. The basic colors used in decorating the pieces of the Romanian folk costume[15] are yellow, red, black and blue to which we should add the gold and silver thread. When vivid colors are used, the chromatic combinations are very refined and denote esthetic taste, by proportionally 'dosing' the nuances. The alternation between color spots and blank spaces gives a sensation of harmony, amplifying the power of plastic expressivity characterising colors. The unitary character of the traditional Romanian folk costume is given not only by color harmonization but also by the way the various pieces are put together to form traditional man and woman folk costumes; the structure of the costume remains the same both on working days and on holidays, no matter what ethnographical region we consider. As the poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga stated in his work *Spațiul mioritic*, 'comparing it to the ornamentation style of other neighbouring people, Romanians represent the rare case of a classical type of folk culture, which means it is discrete and balanced' (Blaga, 1994: 150). Our ornamentation style is not garish and the proof results from the comparison with the art of our neighbours: 'In point of colors, Greeks have their idols which are not ours. Their predilection is for strong «colors» whereas we prefer «nuances», subtle, pale tinges of color extracted from the sap of plants. Before the large scale use of chemical colors, those industrial rainbows which perverted people's intuition and totally spoiled their taste, our color recipes made up a complete heavenly alchemy' (Blaga, 1994: 146). Consequently, for Romanians vivid colors are never strident and pale colors are never dull.

7.1. The blue color is specific to the painting of the Voroneț Monastery, as the pale brick red of the external frescoes is defining for the Moldovița Monastery and green is characteristic to the Sucevița Monastery.

[15] "The degree to which Romanians love nature, and its display of greenery is proven by the typical beginning of every melancholy folk song: «frunză verde». Costumes, linen, house furniture are not appreciated by Romanians if their color is green. Strange thing! Since green denotes firmness and life strength." (Coşbuc, 1903, p. 46)

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Voroneț blue[16] is unique and is a defining feature of the Romanian culture[17]. To obtain the blue color, an Asian pigment called *lazurit* was used in combination with other ingredients. Even if we don't know the recipes used by the 'masons' of old times, one thing is obvious: the mineral pigment which helps making the famous shade of blue has the property of changing its color depending on the weather, i.e. on the humidity degree. Because of that, the blue and the green in the same painting are complementary and complementarity remains valid in relation to the forest surrounding the church (on humid weather the blue acquires a blue-greenish shade).

Ana Maria Musicescu noticed that: "A gradual and more profound study of the artistic means used by the Voroneț painters in order to make the multitude of scenes and characters more vivid shows the fact that, within the general ensemble, lines are as expressive as colors. Essentially constructive – as 15-th century painting was – but having more grace, refinement, sometimes even fermity, the lines, full of discrete eloquence, perfectly agree with the expresivity means of colors, thus achieving the highest level of harmony[18]. Blue and golden-yellow prevail on the south wall fresco and dark green, red, grey, white and black discretely harmonize with them. Blue is the color of space and characters' clothes, olive-green with metallic nuances is the color of the earth and dark ochre is the color used to paint the faces.

Voroneț blue is as representative for the Romanian culture as *bleu horizon* is to the French, the latter making reference to the line which separates the sky from the earth or the sea and it also represents the color of the French uniforms worn by the troops fighting in WW I[19].

[16] "Voroneț blue – dark blue, representing the color of a pigment obtained from azurite and used for mural paintings, especially frescoes, in some Romanian religious monuments. (Initially considered as having exclusively been used for the Voroneț paintings because of its predominance there, the color was used to paint other monasteries too: Curtea de Argeș, Humor, Moldovița.)" (Bulai, 1997, p. 13)

[17] As *Voroneț blue* is one of the representative colors of Romanians, so is *Saint-Denis blue* (perfected by glassmakers and linked to the re-building of Saint-Denis Abbacy) to French people.

[18] *Voroneț*, Album. Introduction by Ana Maria Musicescu, București, 1969, p. 18.

[19] In post-war France the syntagm *bleu horizon* enters the domain of politics.

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8. Therefore, colors are used according to cultural conventions and contexts; they often identify themselves with seasons and, implicitly, with people's nature and state of mind: spring colors suggest freshness and winter colors are associated to distant attitudes or depression. The same phenomenon happens with the nuances characterising mornings (light yellow, pink, emerald-green), linked to the waking up states: hope, lifejoy, motivation, desire to succeed, etc. Dusk colors (turquoise, light mauve) are associated to the ordinary moments of relaxation at the end of a day.

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