

Black, white and red: archetypes and symbols

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ABSTRACT

Colour is a complex cultural construction, a rebel against generalisations, something to which we assign values, qualities and meaning.

In our lengthy experience in teaching about colour and its role in the visual project, in addition to colour theory, we have always also analysed its emotive and communicative aspects. But we still wonder to this day to what extent students perceive the difference between the archetypal, and therefore universal meanings, and those symbolic meanings specific to the culture they belong. We are talking about archetypes and symbols of articulated situations where, if one does not grasp diversity, in today's globalised world, one risks formulating imperfect or ineffective communication. For this reason, it is important, in research and education about colour, to begin with knowing its archetypes, understood in their supra-historical and supra-geographical sense, followed by the symbolic garland that each culture has developed in an independent manner.

In its symbolic declinations colour has represented the property which renders intelligible to the eye the meaning concealed behind the surface: the image of the mystical in nature, of the transcendent within the immanent, of the hidden properties of interdependent elements which, according to ancient knowledge, formed the universe.

As a means to knowledge and interpretation of the real and as energetic form able to interact with the natural forces, in archaic societies colour has been an instrument of medicine and magic; as image of mystical forms and of their relationships within creation it has coloured religious language; as mark of belonging or exclusion it has characterised social life organising itself in codes.

This work analyses the universal meanings of colours which over time have specialised historically, namely the progress from archetype to symbol, leading an inquiry through ancient religions, cosmogenic tales on the formation of the Universe and the myths of civilizations that developed around the Mediterranean sea, cradle of European society, taking as an exemplificative title the three principal colours from an anthropological point of view: black, white and red.

This is an exploratory and comparative survey on the archetype of colours and their structuration in symbols born to reveal the inexpressible through colours, which concludes with an observation on contemporaneity, where despite the destructuration of society, the archetypal meaning endures, while the symbols which developed over centuries starting from the original meaning have become fluid and evanescent along the way, and they are now used irrespectively in

social and communication contexts where they continue to change sense according to the environment in which they are found.

Keywords: *education, identity & heritage, colour descriptions in literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

Why teaching *chromatic archetypes* in colour modules? We think that archetypes are a way to analyse and to use leverage on the socio-cultural imaginary, with the intent of realising a project able to insert itself in the lives of social groups the project and communication are addressing.

Colour archetypes present themselves as a basic dominant in the forest of symbols which over the centuries have woven together, a dominant devoid of time and space that on occasion asserts itself with a clarity which traverses the planes of symbolic syncretism, and speaks with strength and empathy.

For example, going to the root of the *black* archetype and of its primordial garland of symbols (marks which have themselves become archetypes) allows us to go deeper and therefore communicate with young rebel groups who utilize this colour as a mark of themselves, rather it allows us to penetrate the imaginary of youth sub-cultures such as Punk, Goth, Metal, etc. For these anarchic groups black expresses not only anger, but also hope for a new form of life: a compressed and germinative black.

We are talking about comprehending the original forms of human experience, not dependent on latitude or on how this experience is nourished and amplified by diversity along its course, expanding into garlands of symbols pertinent to each society.

In this way the *white* archetype promotes symbols of life and death which differ from East to West. Archetypes unite humanity in the primal experience: think of the universal primitive custom of smearing the dead with *red* ochre, a representation of the red archetype intended as blood, repository and generator of life.

2. ARCHETYPAL BLACK

Looking far back in time we find that all of the myths on the origin of the universe and of our world, view this colour as without time and without place, a matrix colour, the gestating uterus whence all worlds came. A universal, primal image, which represents the preceding phase to creation, a phase which contains in embryo the energy and potentialities that will spawn the universe. Hence the archetype of black becomes as primordial substance, in its twofold aspect of absence of presence, of empty and full, of rarefaction and concentration, of turmoil and latency, where uncreated forms lie promiscuous in undifferentiated chaos.

By the same token, according to the Phoenicians, “in the beginning there was a sombre darkness, devoid of spatial confines and eternal” (Wincler 1992). For the Egyptians there was: “The Infinite, the Void, the Inexistent and the Darkness”. For the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, Sumerians and later Babylonians, the god Marduk was born in the centre of the Abyss: “in his dark room, in the place of destinies, in the domain of determinations”.¹ In a similar way, among the peoples we gather under

¹ *Enuma Elish (Il poema della creazione)* (in Furlani 1958).

the name of Greek, black stood out and could be found expressed or alluded to in the darkness of primeval chaos, in that: “primordial void” where the gods originated (Hesiod, *Teogonia*). And lastly, among the Jews, primeval chaos was described as a boundless vacuum where: “darkness was on the verge of the abyss” (*Genesis* I: 1-2).

Leaving the Mediterranean, we also find that in the Chinese Taoist representation of creation, in the beginning there was a black, gloomy chaos, which slowly took on the form of the cosmic egg, cradle of Pangù, the first living being, who emerging from the egg, crushed it, igniting creation and the complementary forces of *Yin e Yang*.

2.1 Black from archetype to symbol

Over time a garland of symbols has taken structure around this primordial cornerstone of the understanding of the universe, which gradually has been enriched or impoverished by new and old meanings. Those symbols that refer to all things chthonic and subterranean, are still alive today in the socio-cultural imaginary and are utilised in language as much as in a lot of visual production.

Given that black was antecedent to Creation, in ancient times it also became its conclusion, in religions it characterised anything pertinent to the Kingdom of the Dead: they were dark and forsaken lands, like the place described in the Egyptian “Book of the Dead”: “Everywhere I cannot hear, nor anything do I perceive, in the deep shadows surrounding me, what chasms and what abysses! What opaque gloom” (*Book of the Dead*). Analogous were also the “The gloomy [and] deep Tartarus” (Homer, *Iliad*, VIII, 13 & 481) of the Greek and the “Land-of-no-return” of the “Netherworld” enveloped in shadows of the Sumerian and Babylonian civilisations, described in “Ishtar’s descent into the Pit”² and also: “The home of shadows seat of Ircalla [...] the home where those who enter are deprived of light, there where their nourishment is dust, mud is their food, light they cannot see, in the shadows they sit”. It is a desolate landscape reminiscent of nature in sterile volcanic terrains, image of nature’s demise.

These values were passed down through the ages: death-black was employed for example on the facades of houses in XVII century Amsterdam, to signal the presence of the plague, while nowadays it darkens the landscapes in films describing a dystopian future.

After becoming a symbol of wealth in the funerary ceremonies of the powerful, black acquired a new meaning of exclusivity and elegance. A sumptuous black, launched in Europe when dyers in the Middle Ages succeeded in dyeing magnificent black velvets, of a deep and brilliant hue, that nowadays is present in fashion with this meaning, as seen in Givenchy’s recent show; in design and architecture, as in the black walls of some interiors, see the GAM museum in Bergamo and New York’s Hublot Store: a black tower covered in aluminium panels, partly lit up by LED.

3. ARCHETYPAL WHITE

“Speaking of light, especially in its anthropological, cultural and religious declinations, entails referring not only to the history of mankind, but also to the history of the universe” (Burgalassi 2000) and this road takes us to the origins where light marks the passage from the uncreated to the created, chiefly in the Mediterranean cultures. Here white as most perfect light represents the primeval, order-inducing force contained within the shadows which, when released, ignites the

² *La discesa di Istar agli Inferi* (in Furlani 1958).

formation of the universe, transforms chaos into cosmos and gives rise to space and time. The representation of it given by ancient peoples differs according to each culture, but it is identical in the essence of its colour: white.

In Egyptian texts it is a white lotus: “mysterious and splendid, in its purity”: a five petal lotus, which, blossoming on the surface of the primeval waters, radiates into the infinite. Otherwise manifesting as a blazing effulgence: “And here I rise into the Ether of the mysterious Universe like the cosmic egg surrounded by rays”. And again as a bird in flight: “Like a great Golden Falcon, who emerges from its egg” (*Book of the Dead*: LXXXI, LXXVII, XXII). The peoples of ancient Greece also, in the elaboration of their theogony adopted the image of the divine principle intended as “pure light”, in the personification of *Phanes* (light), also known as *Protogonos* (first born) who, once emerged from the cosmic egg, flooded the universe with brilliant light and generated everything: “After him and because of him, the universe shone with light” (di Nola 1970). According to the Jewish people the representation of light is abstract and linked to the power of speech. The “*Fiat lux*” (“Let There Be Light”, Genesis I, 3-5) is the force of the ordaining and generating Word, the *Logos* which constitutes the luminous and audial manifestation of the first act of creation.

As Marco Conti has written (2000), “Unveiling becomes a quality of light so much so that the world appears or does not by virtue of this very metaphor. [...] Light and shadow in myth, seem to be more of an oxymoron, the union of two opposites so to speak, rather than an antithesis: the shadows contain light and vice-versa”.

Similarly in the beginning the light-soul of the world, defined in such a way by Jung, is freed from the matter in which it was trapped, revealing a moral and psychic order. The light of unconscious, symbol of consciousness, along with its counterpart white, is the positive pole —opposed to the black of evil and shadow— which yearns to come out of the darkness: “It was then I understood —writes Jung (1978)— that in the soul, from its inception, there has been a yearning for light and an inextinguishable impulse to come out of primitive obscurity”.

3.1 White from archetype to symbol

Approaching archetypes helps us to understand the original forms of human experience, regardless of latitude or how this experience is informed and amplified by diverse histories, expanding into a range of symbols inherent to each society. So the question is: how has original white favoured this diversification? We must search for the answer in the dual opposition between black and white which for all peoples has represented concepts of ending and beginning (see also Luzzatto and Pompas 1987). So it is that, in the East, mourning is white, because it heralds both death and reincarnation —sign of reunification with the light of the Beginning— while in the West it is black that expresses the mystery and the unknown of death.

Nevertheless in the West also, white was present in its funerary use: Cretan, Greek, Phoenician, Etruscan and Egyptian iconographies, are rich in imagery which represents the dead shrouded in white funerary bandages or sheets (see Luzzatto and Pompas 2002).

In fact, Homer describes the funerary rites of Patroclus’s burial: “After laying him on the bed, they shrouded him in soft linen from head to foot, and they put a white sheet on top” (*Ileucos*) (Homer, *Iliad*, XVIII). In contemporary times, the artist Alberto Burri covered in white cement, like a shroud, the village of Gibellina, destroyed by the 1968 earthquake, in his work *Il grande cretto* [*The big crack*], one of the largest landscape artworks in the world, that encapsulates the profound pain of a village, totally razed to the ground.

The whitewashing of church facades in the Middle Ages also marked an ending, that of colours as seductive elements which hampered devotion, in order to promote inner purification, just as white lime was purifying against the plague and saved the lives of Ostuni inhabitants in the 17th century.

White has traversed the centuries as the symbol of inner and outer purity. In Mediterranean civilizations, the white robes of initiates to the mysteries have represented innocence, integrity, the taking place of a catharsis. In Rome, the pure white *toga* of aspirant senators during the Republic, was a symbol of probity and righteousness. The white dress of the bride, since the 19th century, was chosen as a symbol of physical and, by extension, moral integrity, matched by the trousseau of household linen, which came once upon a time solely in this colour (see Luzzatto and Pompas 1992).

4. ARCHETYPAL RED

It is archetypes that unite humanity in the primal experience. Potent, tangible and fundamental, it is the experience of red, that embraces blood so tightly as to become its archetype.

As we had the opportunity to write in our book on the meaning of colours in ancient civilisations (Luzzatto and Pompas 2017), the custom of smearing corpses with red ochre has been attested since prehistory, among all the Palaeolithic peoples of the world: from Europe, to Africa, from Australia to America. In China, red hematite was found in burial rites dating circa 20,000 BC, in an area called *Zhou Kou Dian*, a few kilometers from modern Beijing. The aim of this chromatic ritual was to return the vital force death had stolen from the bodies, to accompany them in the mysterious journey toward an unknown afterlife.

As it was established that the life principle was contained in blood, subsequently it was believed that its benevolent shedding could increase the said principle and potentise it, gifting with vigor and fertility nature and life itself. So, it was that during rituals dedicated to the gods and the dead, gory blood shedding was performed with sacrificial victims' blood and with that seeping out in the self-flagellations of priests and the followers (a custom still in use nowadays among some peoples), later substituted with red liquids, such as wine that was pouring freely in Dionysian rituals until it provoked "intoxication that plunged followers into animal unconsciousness, overstepping human condition" (Eliade 1979).

In the study of archetypes we cannot ignore the strong link between red and fire, with its either devastating or purifying force. An intense red that veers toward orange, that because of its aggressive, violent and destructive qualities, has become the image of hell, of apocalyptic catastrophes, of exterminating divinities, like the Egyptian *Seth*, the Greek *Hephaestus*, the Roman *Vulcan* and the Jewish *Satan*.

In the imaginary geography of the afterlife of many civilisations, the rivers of damnation that surround the realm of the damned, were depicted as subterranean rivers of liquid fire, visible to the living in volcanic eruptions. So it is that the Egyptians thought there was a "Lake of Fire" where the damned were lying in anguish: "those whom, there in the depths, yearn to drink to quench the thirst that torments them [...] they look to these fiery torrents and back away unable to extinguish their searing thirst" (Eliade 1979: chapter LXIII); while Romans believed the souls of the damned had to cross the "immense *Flegentonte*" on fire, on the boat led by Charon, whose "hirsute beard was soaked in fiery waters and on whose face flames would flow" (Claudian, *De raptu...*, I).

4.1 Red from archetype to symbol

As a pigment and colouring matter, red has conjugated itself in a variety of hues and shades, for purposes that depart from the rituals deriving from its archetypes. Red has multiplied itself in social and religious symbols, requiring a gaze able to perceive the differences. Nowadays though we are familiar with the shades of carnelian, of jasper, of glass and other substances red in colour, used in ritual and decorative objects, we do not know exactly how many and which were the hues obtained through the many tinctures, from the more vermilion *reseda* to the intense, deep and brilliant tyrian red, that could vary according to its processing from pink, to carmine, to purplish.

We can only imagine what the tyrian red robe of the Greek goddess Aphrodite would have been like, described by Claudian in such a way, that Ovid by virtue of this colour attributed the nickname of *purpurissa* to the goddess, alluding to regality, beauty and youth (Claudian, *De raptu...*, II). Or we can imagine what the numerous hues of the precious twisted linen drapes of the Jewish tabernacle could have been, described in the Bible with these words: "ten drapes of twisted flax entwined with azure, tyrian and scarlet thread" (*Exodus XXVI*, 31), an azure that others translate as "purplish".

The temples were decorated with these reds, and the altars and statues of the gods were draped in them. Their magnificence became over the centuries sole prerogative of emperors, kings, priests and generals, who made red in its various shades the pre-eminent colour: sacral, sophisticated or heroic, just as Plutarch succeeds in depicting it for us in his description of the Roman general Emilianus Paulus' triumph "swathed in a tyrian-red cloak embroidered with gold" (Plutarch, *Vita di Emilio Paolo*). A precious colour which, when laid onto fabrics, since the beginning, has been symbol of power, regality and wealth. Emblem of authority and prestige, today it is still a distinguishing mark of power in the garments of magistrates and prelates, or of luxury in environments that need to flaunt or simulate magnificence and elegance.

As archetype of blood, red had a dual purpose in military uniforms of war and heroic actions of the past: on one hand, that of increasing power, of exciting rage, and on the other, being red, that of concealing spilt blood. "Red enhances our physical reactions because what we see is the beginning of danger" (Elliot and Aarts 2011).

Just one colour, which conjugated in different shades and materials, has expanded into all the symbolic meanings we have inherited from antiquity: an important legacy to comprehend when, with this colour, one can undertake a process of communication which requires a look able to detect the connections coming from so far back (see Pompas 2009, 2017, 2018).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The teaching of colour archetypes opens up the chance for a different type of dialogue with the chromatic experience, because it leaves superficiality behind, recovering the deep, original and creative expression, on which ideas and meanings have been grafted and articulated according to each culture. One must be aware of them when undertaking a design project in order not to make evaluation errors, like it happened with the Italian Institute of Culture building lacquer red, designed in Tokyo by Gae Aulenti, which disturbed the inhabitants' aesthetic sensitivity with its aggressivity in the neighbourhood.

Colour offers accounts that go beyond the immobility of the mark which defines it chronologically in the present. Referring to the past and studying its course makes us aware of the fact that the time elapsed in the evolutionary history of human society contains and projects in the present

innumerable symbolic values linked to the original nucleus, which offer the possibility to recover them in a contemporary mode, to access new chromatic experiences and to formulate more complex messages.

Making chromatic archetypes known, also means bringing back alive the forgotten documents of colour archaeology and ethnography which nurture imagination and creativity.

Venturing into the rituals that have marked the evolution of colours —particularly the more ancient and rich with meaning such as black, white and red— helps us to understand their value and it is like availing of a rite of passage to glean their secrets (see also Pompas 2009a).

Therefore, viewing chromatic archetypes in light of all their richness entails learning to use them with wisdom: it is in fact sufficient to juxtapose a few chromatic marks to evoke deep meanings and to give rise to emotions.

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