**Public Lecture**

**Netherworlds of Greyness: Green-lipped Geishas and Old Sheep Dogs**

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Lecture accompanied by Powerpoint

This paper presents a few ideas about colour – how we use it, interpret it and respond to it. I’m using the example of grey, in the main, to introduce thoughts about netherworlds – strange, other worldly atmospheres and also introduce, briefly, at the conclusion of the paper my thoughts on the colour green as having similar associations with the atmospheric.

There is so much that has been said, and can be said about colour – that of perception, it’s use in the visual arts, in literature, in film and society in general - as symbol and metaphor - of theories, classifications and indexes and of nomenclature – how we use colour terms in the vernacular, every day, and how these change according to the times, societies and cultures.

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A cursory glance through an index system of colour references reveals no less than 26 broad subject headings (I won’t list them all here but you can see them on the powerpoint) from Architecture to Food, Glass to Optics, Painting to Vision. Colour plays a role in every aspect of society and each defined category has its own very specific quantification and qualification of colour, meaning and nomenclature. No time today to plumb the depths of all of these categories but an apt quote about human cognition and reception of colour is that by Ann Marie Seward Barry (Associate Professor of Communication at Boston College). She says:

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*“Human adults with normal color vision can generally discriminate between 120 to 150 color differences across the visible spectrum. When saturation and brilliance are included, the number jumps into the millions. Although we are inclined to treat color as if it were a property – an affordance of things in themselves, color is a subjective phenomenon that is never registered in isolation and can be perceived only in a dynamic interaction.”*

*“Moreover, color is relative to context. Seen next to another color, it changes characteristics and may seem lighter, darker, or a different hue.”*

Visual artists knows this. For designers, however, specific colours absolutely work in terms of attracting and creating responses and ultimately sales of merchandise:

Packaging designer Alvin Schechter is quoted in Seward Barry’s book saying:

*‘Colour isn’t the most important thing: it’s the only thing...*

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There are examples in the military where use of colour - albeit efficacious - has been altered for no other reason than a subjective negative response to its use – in other words psychological value over pragmatism.

A most disturbing example being the pastel camouflage colours used on the American F117 Nighthawk - sandy pinks, aquamarine and so on -

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which was, eventually, dropped in favour of black not, apparently, to contribute to its invisibility (in fact the original pastel camouflage colours would have contributed to night time invisibility and other colour trials had the F117 being painted gloss white) but because painting it black gave it a more **sinister** and imposing image. This reported by Mike Dornheim journalist for the US periodical ‘Aviation Week’.

A recent trailer for the new (2014) re-make of ROBOCOP shows actor Michael Keaton standing in front of the Robocop prototype – a gleaming silver chrome armour.

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Keaton’s character glibly exclaims: “Let’s go with black... it’s more menacing” – so an example of fiction mirroring fact.

I give this contemporary example before moving onto more artistic reflections on colour because it serves to remind us just how strong and frequently subjective, our selection, appeal and response to colour is despite there being tried and tested evidence of colour effect on human perception and behaviour. The point is that colour means different things to different individuals, groups and cultures - it refuses to be pinned down.

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Within my practice I am frequently grappling with the idea of netherworlds – of attempting to make paintings that straddle notions of reality, logic and alertness with the hazy, floating world of drift, daydream and fantasy. The kind of images that may not exist physically but seem to be interpretations of spaces and atmospheres that reside in thoughts and memories about real stimulants and/or events.

The colour grey lends itself very well to thoughts about netherworlds.

Japanese author, Junichiro Tanizaki’s collection of essays - In Praise of Shadows - is a rich and illuminating, personal reflection on Japanese aesthetics of light and shadow, observed in a range of social contexts – space, women, food and objects. Tanizaki discusses at length the importance of light in rooms and the distinction of the interplay of light on Japanese skin. His observations reveal the dramatic relationship between a flickering candle and ever-present shadows as he reminisces on the spectre-like character of Geisha in interior spaces at the dawn of the 20th century:

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*I have spoken of the practice of [women] blackening the teeth, but was not shaving the eyebrows also a device to make the white face stand out? What fascinates me most of all, however, is that green, iridescent lipstick, so rarely used today even by Kyoto geisha. One can guess nothing of its power unless one imagines it in the low, unsteady light of a candle. The woman of old was made to hide the red of her mouth under green-black lipstick, to put shimmering ornaments in her hair; and so the last trace of colour was taken from her rich skin. I know of nothing whiter than the face of a young girl in the wavering shadow of a lantern, her teeth now and then as she smiles shining in lacquered black through lips like elfin fires.*

And also:

*The man of today, long used to electric light, has forgotten that such a darkness existed. It must have been simple for spectres to appear in the ‘visible darkness’, where always something seemed to be flickering and shimmering, a darkness that on occasion held great terrors … this was the darkness in which ghosts and monsters were active, and indeed was not the woman who lived in it, behind thick curtains, behind layer after layer of screens and doors – was she not of a kind with them? The darkness wrapped her round tenfold, twenty-fold, it filled the collar, the sleeves of her kimono, the folds of her skirts, wherever a hollow invited. Further yet might it not have been the reverse, might not the darkness have emerged from her mouth and those black teeth, from the black of her hair, like the thread from the great earth spider?*

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The works of contemporary Japanese painter Fuyuko Matsui are based on in-depth research into self-psychoanalysis, resulting in disturbing yet anatomically beautiful works that are metaphoric contrasts of darkness, light and shadow. These contrasts permeate her painting methodology, fusing traditional Japanese systems and structures in a contemporary yet surreal context. Many of her works evoke the ghostly whiteness of skin pallor alluded to by Tanizaki – a ghostly white-faced figure seems decapitated by a ‘floating world’ of black hair; a yuzen-like treatment blushing darkly and poisonous like fog, choking the head from which it emanates. This can be seen specifically in her work entitled *Light Indentations Mingle and Run in All Directions*. Matsui’s use of blurring effect seems fit for purpose in these deeply psychological works. Perhaps it acknowledges a dream-like state – an internal vision – or perhaps the physiological truth that movement is essential to seeing clearly.

Even when we fixate on an object, our eyes are subject to ‘drift’ and ‘flicker’ movements, and a superimposed tremor. We do not, however, see things in a blur, because through constant movement and brain activity what we receive is in fact a ‘stable mental configuration’. Nonetheless, the blurring of images within an artistic context can produce interesting optical effects, or visual ‘gear shifts’, that mark a change in the psychodrama of the picture. For the blurring of an image signals a reduction of clarity in what is being presented. It is as if the artist is pulling down a veil between the audience and the subject matter, suggesting a subtle transition of something just out of focus but perceptible, and thus it has to do with control by the artist over the viewer.

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Haziness and confusion are both physically and psychologically experienced. Such phenomena have been used as literary and visual devices in painting, photography and film to blur the edges between a world of light – that of scientific clarity and reason – and the darker realm of the mystical and psychological. For example, fog and smog confuses, conceals and distorts; vision is impaired. Figures, real and imaginary, materialise and dematerialise through the fog – Spring-heeled Jack, Jack the Ripper and Dr Jekyll becomes Mr Hyde. Truths are hidden and identities appear to change. Space and time is disorientated.

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Thus the reflections on light and shadow by Tanizaki, and the example of painter Fuyuko Matsui, emphasise the notion of ‘shadow lands’ – places between lightness and darkness, of quietness, of melodramatic shading and blurring. Moreover, given their penumbral qualities, they asserted the importance of the colour grey in a number of works over recent years.

The inclusion of greys in these recent works – the colour of limbo, neither darkness nor light, and so a floating colour – also aligns with some aspects of Japanese notions of restraint and also reflection that Tanizaki further discusses in his essays.

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Grey is often perceived as neutral, dead, old and unemotional, yet it is a colour mix that can produce endless tones and hues. It can be warm, cool, hard or soft. Grey acts like a ‘switch’, illuminating the quality of brighter colours placed in its vicinity. It is probably the most useful of all colours, because it is comprised of many. It is a colour of transition – a facilitator.

The colour grey has its supporters in literature – much time and many lines have been dedicated to its qualities and context within fiction. The novelist Thomas Hardy took great care with colour use in general, both in terms of description and symbolism. He was a great admirer of the painter J.M.W. Turner, and went so far as to mention him in his novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*, when attempting to describe, precisely, the fading grey colour of the coat of the shepherd, Gabriel’s, old sheep dog:

“marked in random splotches approximating in colour to white and slaty grey: but the grey, after years of sun and rain, had been scorched and washed out … leaving them reddish brown, as if the blue component of the grey had faded, like the indigo from the same kind of colour in Turner’s pictures. In substance it had originally been hair, but long contact with sheep seemed to be turning it by degrees into wool of a poor quality and staple.

Evelyn Hardy, Hardy’s biographer, also suggests that *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* contains his most atmospheric depiction of contrasts between light and darkness. In this novel, Hardy compares the strange limbo of twilight and its counterpart, daybreak:

The grey half-tones of daybreak are not the grey half-tones of the day’s close, though the degree of their shade may be the same. In the twilight of the morning light seems active, darkness passive; in the twilight of evening it is the darkness which is active and crescent, and the light which is the drowsy reverse.

And so to the colour green via the artist and scholar, Hans Hoffman, and what he believed to be a fundamental principle in painting – the idea of ‘light emanation effect’. This statement has followed me since my undergraduate days and underpinned much research since then about specific colour use and also light. He says:

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“In the process of colouring (painting) the surface of the canvas (the picture plane) should receive the greatest possible richness in light-emanation-effect and, at the same time, it should retain the transparency of a jewel. The light and form should control illusory oscillation into space and out of space…The pictorially decorative effect is achieved through musical contrasts and rhythmic relations conditioned in space…for every medium contains its own rhythmic laws and thus its strict limitations through which it is distinguished as the specific way of expression that it is." Hans Hoffman on ‘The Aims Of Art’, 1932

And so as a counterpoint to ideas about grey, I introduce the colour green as an example of research - seeking out parallels in quarters other than painting. This has included studying early colour film in cinema and technological developments such as frame by frame hand-tinting by female workers in Paris from the 1890s to around 1912, of pre-tinted colour film stock produced by Kodak Eastman and the explosive colour palettes of Technicolor. Using traditional painting techniques of tint over grisaille and favouring coloured grounds, the creation of coloured atmospheres in recent paintings have drawn upon these cinematic properties which, in turn relay colourful impressions of the dramatic and that ever elusive holy grail – light emanation effect!

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To Green then – frequently identified as the colour of jealousy, of coveting, of mysterious forces, or entities. Alfred Hitchcock in his psychodrama, Vertigo, presents femme fatale character, Madeleine Elster (played by Kim Novak) as the woman of Detective, Scottie’s, dreams. In a pivotal scene she emerges from a green ‘haze’ within the apartment. Scottie has coerced the doppelganger lookalike, Judy Barton, to transform into his deceased lover (or so he believes).

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With Svengali-like direction he transforms Judy into Madeleine - he buys and makes her wear a grey suit exactly like Madeleine’s. He insists she bleach and restyle her hair to the exact manner of Madeleine’s. This melancholic yet aggressive obsession is an attempt to resurrect a dead desire and Hitchcock lights the key scene of Judy’s emergence from the bathroom transformed into Madeleine in this otherworldly green light. Hitchcock frequently uses coloured light to signal significant psychological shifts in the action –

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the colour red is triggered by loud knocking or storms in his film about the sexually repressed kleptomaniac, ‘Marnie’, and the briefest, but most dramatic, flash of green in his film, Rope, signifies the very instant – a split-second – blink and you’ve really missed it - when James Stewart understands that a murder has occurred in the room and his host, John Dall, now intends to despatch him too.

Mysterious green literary references include Algernon Blackwood’s 1927 short story ‘The Dance of Death’ where Mr Browne attends a dance at which he spots an alluring young woman in an ‘ivy green’ dress. Browne dances with the woman in the ivy-green dress but, alas, she is not real, she is Death spiriting him away.

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And one final example - Frank L Baum’s ‘Emerald City’ in ‘The Wizard of Oz’ is frequently argued as being representative of money – the colour of the US dollar but it is a netherworld all the same - Dorothy’s hallucination is a world of trauma, dreams, nightmares, battles and epiphanies. I’m not convinced it does represent the US dollar. I wonder if it might relate to a medical condition which affects the eyes resulting in hallucinations and green vision. This condition prompted by poor diet may connect with tornadoes, the ensuing devastation and near starvation that is the backdrop of Dorothy’s life on the farm in Kansas and one the author experienced, first hand, during the drought ridden Dust Bowl years.

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There are many more mysterious references for green, subjective as it is - the colour of dreams and dark desires but, for me, it resides with grey in a strange kind of netherworld – representing neither the real nor the entirely fictional – somewhere between – hazily lurking around the periphery of our lives...like the girl in the ivy dress, like Oz, like the green lipped geisha.. lacquered and smiling in the darkness.

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