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Timon Beyes. *Organizing Color: Toward a Chromatics of the Social*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 292 pp. ISBN 9781503638303.

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“Look! Look at color! Become aware!” (p. 206)—anthropologist Michael Taussig’s impassioned plea chosen by Timon Beyes to conclude his book encapsulates the essence of this compelling text. The emotion conveyed by these exclamations characterizes Beyes’s book as a manifesto, echoing a call that permeates the entire work. Beyes challenges the notion that color is merely an ancillary aspect of the complex social processes, instead positioning color as an aesthetic force capable of organizing the social through a rich tapestry of “forces, affects, and atmospheres” (p. 12).

Beyes aligns with scholars belonging to media, technology, and organization studies who emphasize the role of nonhuman agents in determining social organization. The organization is understood as the result of affects and effects of various human and nonhuman agents exercised as part of human and nonhuman entanglement (Beyes et al. 2020:1–2). In this context, Beyes views color as an agent of transformation and organization.

The book presents color as an essential component of “social, historical, political, economic, and material contexts” (p. 9) and, ultimately, as a fundamental component of the “chromatics of the social,” serving as a means of structuring people’s perception and actions and influencing historical processes. In essence, color—through its deliberate organization—becomes a tool for social organization (p. 7). However, the book also acknowledges the contradictory nature of color, which arises from its inherent unreliability. Consequently, color is regarded as a disorganizing force that resists organization (p. 4).

Rather than following the conventional structure with distinct introduction and conclusion sections, the book comprises 10 interconnected chapters referred to as “scenes.” These scenes collectively embody an attempt at “discontinuous writing” (p. 215). Through this approach, the montage of 10 scenes brings together a range of historical and contemporary scenarios, revealing diverse aspects of color’s organizing and disorganizing power as demonstrated by Beyes. Drawing from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “delicate empiricism,” Beyes highlights the necessity of a sensitive approach to research on color: “Thinking with or in color calls for a tender . . . empiricism” (p. 41).

In the second chapter, “Weimar, ca. 1800: Cooking Chocolate,” the author highlights Goethe’s observation of chocolate’s preparation and its influence on his work *Theory of Colours*. Goethe’s insights inspired a chromatic counterdiscourse that challenges traditional notions of color. Central to this discourse, driving the entire book are the ideas of color’s instability, continuous variability (p. 31) and inherent resis-

tance to organization (pp. 28–29). Additionally, the chapter underlines the interconnection between human perception, thought processes, and color (p. 30).¹

The next chapter, “New Lanark, 1816: Working the Silent Monitor,” employs the example of social reformer Robert Owen’s technology of “silent monitor” at a Scottish cotton mill to showcase color’s capacity to transcend its semiotic function. Beyes notes that the aesthetic force of color, exemplified by the monitor’s elements, not only impacts workers’ perception but also actively shapes their lived experiences (p. 53).

The fourth scene, “Lower Bengal, 1859: The Coke of Empire,” explores the connection between the color indigo and the growth of European colonial empires and global trade since the fifteenth century. The author argues that the European exploration and subsequent colonization of new lands were driven, in part, by a desire for new chromatic experiences, that is, it was colonization of chromatic registers. This desire for color not only played a significant role in shaping European expansion but also contributed to the development of the global trade system, labor practices, and economic structures (pp. 72–73).

The next chapter, “Berlin, 1924: Consuming the Color Chart,” examines the color chart as a social technology of organization of unstable colors. Beyes explores how this technology has contributed to the democratization of color, the education of color perception, and the growth of commodity capitalism and consumer culture. The chapter provides an example of American painter and entrepreneur Albert Henry Munsell, who played a significant role in the development of the color production industry in the beginning of the twentieth century. Munsell’s efforts sought to educate people’s color perception, paving the way for a future society of consumers adept at navigating the intricacies of color (pp. 103, 107). Beyes argues that the drive to organize and commercialize color was a key factor in the emergence of consumer capitalism (p. 103).

Chapter 6, “The Zone, 1945: Unleashing the Synthetic Rainbow,” analyzes the place of color in Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Beyes asserts that Pynchon’s work explores color as a transformative medium, capable of both creating order and fostering chaos. In the book, color functions as an organizing and disorganizing force within the narrative and the themes it presents (p. 116). Moreover, Beyes posits that the novel reflected the crucial role of desire for color in driving the development of the artificial dye production industry. Focusing on Germany’s prominence in this sector, Beyes discusses the darker consequences of pursuit of innovation in the color industry on the example of the chemical conglomerate IG Farben’s support of the mass extermination efforts during the Second World War (p. 119).

The seventh chapter, “Paris, 1967: The Revolution Will Be Colorized,” focuses on the utilization of colors in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 film *La Chinoise*. Godard is por-

¹ Drawing on Charles A. Riley’s 1995 book *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology*, Beyes identifies Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Jaques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva, Michael Taussig, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Ludwig Wittgenstein as representatives of the chromatic counterdiscourse (pp. 28–29).

trayed as an expert in manipulating the “color-image,” a term coined by philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Color functions as a means of organizing and disorganizing the film’s narrative and of disrupting the established norms of Hollywood’s organizational complex. For instance, red is used in the film as an organizing force of revolution. However, the color’s ability to blend with other hues and move between objects demonstrates its disorganizing potential, as red becomes associated not only with revolution but also with commerce (pp. 143–144). Godard aimed to revise viewers’ visual experiences defined by Hollywood color films, evoking a sense of discomfort while simultaneously introducing a fresh perspective on color (p. 149). Therefore, aesthetically distinct colors of the film serve as an organizational technology for alternative cinema in general (p. 147).

Chapter 8, “Houston, 1971: Two Kinds of Colorism,” delves into *The De Luxe Show*, a 1971 exhibition of abstract modernist art by both White and Black artists in a Black neighborhood in Houston, Texas. The exhibition is presented as an example of “political optimism” particularly aimed at children whose perception of skin color is not yet conditioned by frames of racial hierarchies of black and white. By prioritizing color over form, the curators sought to provide children with an alternative perspective (pp. 162–164), one that blurs boundaries between White and Black cultures as well as defamiliarizes the identity-focused Black culture. The foundation of this approach rested on abstract expressionist paintings, which, devoid of representational elements, present a myriad of color experiences born from the transformative and unstable nature of color itself. Beyes contrasts the concepts of racism and colorism in this context with the latter, unlike the former, being able to facilitate organization—build hierarchies but also blur them, that is, be a disorganizing agent (p. 175).

In chapter 9, “Cologne, 2007: The Distribution of the Insensible,” Beyes investigates the digitalization, a process that has led to the production of vast arrays of colors, shades, and tones. This process was foreshadowed by artist Gerhard Richter’s experiments, which involved positioning colors within grids randomly using a computer program. As digital colors are composed of electronic signals transmitted across multiple interfaces, the visible or “sensible” parts of colors rely on algorithmic calculations that remain hidden from human perception—the “insensible” (pp. 188–189). Consequently, this novel method of color organization gives rise to new possibilities for color’s resistance to control (p. 183). The extensive range of visible colors results in a sense of visual blur. The latter contributes to the instability of digital and therefore to its potential as a disorganizing force (p. 197).

The book’s closing scene, “Broken Tones: Toward a Chromatics of the Social,” recounts the pursuit of German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s legendary gray, as captured in the 2012 video installation by the artist Hito Steyerl, *Adorno’s Grey*. According to legend, the lecture hall at Goethe University Frankfurt—the site of Adorno’s final lecture—was painted gray following his retirement, prompted by student protests in 1969. In this context, gray symbolizes academic dedication, contrasted with colorfulness of life. Steyerl’s video installation, situated in Adorno’s auditorium, features students scratching the wall. Their actions produce variety of changing grays that undermine the color’s perceived stability associated with scholarly activities.

The installation further disrupts this monolithic gray through audio recounting the incident in which three partially unclothed female students threw colorful flowers at the professor (pp. 203–205). Steyerl's video installation encapsulates the book's central arguments, underscoring color's ambiguity as simultaneously an ordering and a disordering force.

Beyes's research uses concepts and theories from an array of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, history, art history, anthropology, psychology, literary and film studies. The analysis of these materials aligns with the author's ambitious goal of investigating color as an ambiguous aesthetic force that can both organize and disrupt social structures. However, the argument about the impact of color as part of organizational complexes and technologies on historical processes and people's perception may be less convincing due to the limited use of primary sources. Given that historical processes and events comprise a large portion of the book, a closer examination of historical records could have further bolstered the claims. The cases of *The De Luxe Show* exhibition and of the film *La Chinoise* are illustrative examples. Supplementing the discussion by drawing on insights from exhibition guest books and a diverse range of critical reviews, respectively, could have provided evidence to clarify the transformational power of color and its ability to challenge social norms and viewers' sensory experiences.

A closer examination of historical documents could offer a more nuanced understanding of color's organizational impact, potentially challenging Beyes's narrative of the "desire for color" (p. 127) as the primary driving force behind the rapid rise of IG Farben's commercial empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some contemporary scholars, such as Charlotte Guichard, Anne-Solenn Le Hô, and Hannah Williams, are beginning to question "sensationalist narratives of rupture" in such stories (2023:182). In the work of these scholars, this phrase is used to highlight earlier historiography's portrayal of the early eighteenth-century discovery of Prussian blue as principally accidental and revolutionary. By employing detailed analysis of historical records, these authors reveal a more complex story of Prussian blue.² Conversely, Beyes's book attributes the shaping of historical processes to the "desire for color," which can be viewed as a generalized account. This narrative could be served as an example of a "sensationalist narrative of rupture," underlining the importance of a more thorough examination of the historical context.

Overall, Beyes's concept of color as an organizational force certainly merits consideration by scholars across various humanities disciplines. The author's investigation responds to the recent surge in color research and invites specialists from diverse fields to engage in the interdisciplinary study of chromatics of the social (p. 14). The research explores a wide range of questions and problems related to past and present, through an examination of color's affects and effects. These include the epistemology of color, the development of consumerism and capitalism, the intrica-

² It should be noted that Guichard and coauthors accentuated the importance of Prussian blue's chromatic qualities for scientists. They were used as indicators in chemical experiments. This observation is contextualized by the authors within the notion of science as collective endeavor (pp. 160–161).

cies of workplace transformation and its psychological impact, the societal effects of ongoing digital transformations, the mechanisms of hidden discrimination, art's role in contemporary society, and Eurocentrism in approaches to colonialism and racism. The book is distinguished by its demonstration that the consideration of color plays a significant role in the examination of these areas. For this reason, Beyes's work could be valuable to researchers studying the topics. However, a more nuanced treatment of historical dimension in future studies of color could further strengthen Beyes's approach.

REFERENCES

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