The Luminous and the Grey

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Whatever looks luminous does not look grey

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour
The Beginning and the End of Colour

The Story of Colors / La Historia de los Colores, a short, brightly illustrated, bilingual fable intended for children, should have been published in the United States in 1999. Five thousand copies had been printed at a small press in El Paso, Texas, and were ready for distribution. Then, without warning, the National Endowment for the Arts, which up to that point had happily grant-aided the project, abruptly withdrew its support in an attempt to prevent publication. Around that time the NEA had become extremely nervous about its public and political profile, having been embroiled in a number of Republican-initiated controversies in the U.S. over its support of various cultural projects, the most notorious of which was an exhibition of photographic work by Robert Mapplethorpe. But the problem with The Story of Colors, it turned out, had nothing to do with the content of the book. Rather, it concerned the book’s author, a photograph of whom was printed, as is the convention, on the
inside flap of the book’s dust jacket. The image showed the head of a man, his face almost entirely hidden behind a knitted black balaclava and his shoulders draped with two heavy ammunition belts. The cover confirmed that the author was Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the Mexican revolutionary, leading figure in and spokesman of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, which fights for the rights of the indigenous population of the Chiapas region of Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos always wears a black balaclava in public, which simultaneously hides his features and makes him instantly recognizable. In spite of this, apparently nobody from the NEA had noticed anything strange until a journalist from the New York Times started asking questions about the masked figure. In spite of the fact that none of the proceeds would have ended up in the hands of the author or the Zapatistas, the NEA clearly found any hint of a relationship beyond the pale. Fortunately the independent Lannan Foundation, based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, stepped into the gap left by the NEA and the work was duly published, although the print run had been raised to 11,000 to cope with the demand created by the publicity.¹

The Story of Colors is one of more than twenty books written by Marcos. However, unlike his numerous essays on political theory, this is a simple and gentle tale with no obvious revolutionary subtext. Subtitled ‘a Folktale from the Jungles of Chiapas’, the narrative is derived from a Mayan creation myth. It is a story of how the gods created the world and of how, when and why they added colour to it. In many respects it is a rather conventional tale. Like many stories of How Things Began, the world is created in an orderly fashion: events occur in a series of separate sequential steps and divisions. In The Story of Colors, colours appear quite late in the day of creation, well after the gods make the seas and skies, mountains, rivers, fields and trees, animals and humans. At this stage in creation there were only three colours: black (night), white (day) and grey (dawn and dusk). But this left the gods bored and irritable, so one at a time they began carefully to add other colours to the world – red, green, blue, yellow, pink and brown. Then the gods got drunk, fell asleep and dropped the box of colours, which began to mix together in the rain until the full spectrum came into existence. Colour, then, was both an afterthought and a bit of an accident, and not a significant part of the Grand Design. Rather, it is contingent, and cosmetic. But it is no less necessary for that. In this tale the introduction of colours to the world and their almost random distribution represent sensory pleasure, joy, diversity and difference.

The Story of Colors resembles other mythical tales concerning the origins of colour. In his group of short stories published in 1965 as Cosmicomics, Italo Calvino describes a number of stages in the earth’s physical development, using a series of scientific speculations as its starting point.² It is a myth of origins without any gods as well as being a kind of cosmic love story. In the chapter ‘Without Colors’ the landscapes of the world, which are beginning to be populated with mountains, plains and valleys, are a contrastless grey expanse without even the extremes of
black and white. The day returned, to paint the earth with grey . . . anything that looked likely to break the absolute visual neutrality was a harsh discord; beauty began . . . only where the greyness had extinguished even the remotest desire to be anything other than grey. There is no colour and no sound in this landscape because there is as yet no atmosphere, no filter for the sun's rays. It is nevertheless the setting for a bittersweet boy-meets-girl story, over the course of which the spectrum of colour begins to make itself visible. But the existence of colour eventually divides the couple rather than uniting them, since for the boy Qfwfq, this sumptuous transfiguration of the visual field represents a blissful 'shattering of the colorless glaze', while for the girl Ayé, it represents only confusion, disorder and excess.

In perhaps the most famous story of colour's arrival in a monochromatic world, its entry is a great deal more abrupt than in Calvino's version and arguably a great deal more disorienting. The moment of colour in the film of The Wizard of Oz occurs exactly 16 minutes and 50 seconds after the opening credits. And the greyscale landscape of Kansas is not so much modified by colour as utterly obliterated by it — for a while, at least.

Notwithstanding how hard it may be for us now to imagine what it must have been like in 1939 to sit down to a black-and-white movie, only to be hurled after a few minutes into the hyperchromatic universe of Munchkinland, something of the magic of that set-piece transition still remains. The Wizard of Oz is probably the one story of colour that is familiar to most people in the West (at least), children and adults alike. It is constantly retold, regularly rewritten, often reinterpreted and rarely forgotten. As such it has over the last century acquired something close to the status of a myth. It is also near mythical in that it has become almost authorless: if L. Frank Baum is remembered by some as the author of the original book, published in 1900, the director of the film is not (it was Victor Fleming, after it had passed through a number of other hands). At the time of writing, 73 years after the film's release, a theatre in London's West End is taking bookings for 'Andrew Lloyd Webber's Wizard of Oz' . . .

When colour arrives in The Wizard of Oz it comes as a big surprise, as Dorothy literally falls into a new world of colour. It is confusing, disorienting, and it takes a little while to get used to; but it is also a source of wonder, delight, often intense and sometimes explicitly narcotic pleasure. And, at the same time, all this takes place in an atmosphere of childlike innocence. As such it is not unlike the stories of the origins of colour told by Calvino or Subcomandante Marcos. In one way or another each of these stories appears to subscribe to the long-established notion that colour, however intense, pleasurable or attractive its effects may be, is neither necessary to the workings of the world nor essential to our understanding of it. Colour is secondary, an addition, a supplement, a cosmetic or possibly a dream. But that does not necessarily make colour a simple matter, as its capacity to embellish is coupled with an equal capacity to confuse and distort. Marcos offers the most benign image of colour as generally life-enhancing, while for Calvino it is more ambiguous and divisive. In The Wizard of Oz, colour is on full
distortion mode: it doesn’t so much add ‘charm’ to the surface of the ordered world, as Kant put it, as obliterate all traces of underlying rationality and stability.

However, not all accounts of the arrival of colour in the world are of this kind. There are some in which the principal terms and oppositions are inverted or reversed. In the early 1950s both Yves Klein and Aldous Huxley sketched short narratives on colour and origins. In each the world begins not with colourless forms but as formless colour: an oceanic flow of light that is gradually and incrementally divided, categorized, classified — and finally repressed — in the development of language, line, shape and form. Here colour is primary, not secondary; in the beginning the world is colour and step by step it is made increasingly grey, dull and orderly.

In 1954 Klein planned to make a short animated film titled War Between Line and Colour. In the handwritten storyboard, which was as far as the project got, he develops the theme of origins:

Taking advantage of a need tested by the first man to project his mark outside of himself, line succeeded in introducing itself into the heretofore inviolate realm of colour... Rapidly mastered, pure colour — the universal coloured soul in which the human soul bathed when in the state of ‘Earthly Paradise’ — is imprisoned, compartmentalised, sheared and reduced to a slave... Colour is enslaved by line that becomes writing... Thus the history of the very long war between line and colour begins with the history of the human world... Paradise is lost... [Man] is exiled from his coloured soul.

This ecstatic account is similar in many respects to that of Aldous Huxley, who in the same year wrote up his experiments with LSD and mescaline. These hallucinogens, Huxley believed, enabled him momentarily to recover something of the flood of pure perception, undiminished and undulled, in what he termed ‘the unconceptualized event’: ‘Half an hour after swallowing the drug I became aware of a slow dance of golden lights. A little later there were sumptuous red surfaces swelling and expanding from bright nodes of energy that vibrated...’ He sat in his study looking at a vase of flowers and shelves of books which ‘glowed... with brighter colours, a profounder significance. Red books, like rubies, emerald books, books bound in white jade; books of agate; of ultramarine; of yellow topaz; lapis lazuli books whose colour was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful...’. He concludes: ‘I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation — the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.’

For Huxley, as for Klein, colour as origin, as primal oneness, as state of grace, is quite the opposite of the cosmetic colouring-in that is described by Marcos and Calvino. Yet for all their differences, the sets of stories are in certain respects oddly symmetrical. In each the central difference is not exactly between the colourless and the colourful, or at least it is not expressed quite in that way. Rather, in Calvino’s and Huxley’s accounts in particular, and
in *The Wizard of Oz*, the animating difference is not between colour and its absence but between the luminous and the grey. Huxley was particularly insistent on this point. For him, the radiance of gemstones and of stained glass were an intimation of paradise, where ‘leaves the colour of sapphire and lapis lazuli’ adorn landscapes ‘covered by jewels and precious stones . . . stones of fire’. ‘Heaven’, he concludes in *Heaven and Hell*, ‘is always a place of gems’. As is Munchkinland: remember the ruby slippers and the Emerald City and, above all, the most ephemeral moment of heavenly luminosity: the rainbow.

Around the same time that Huxley was writing up his experiments with mescaline and LSD, Ludwig Wittgenstein was reflecting more soberly on questions of colour and luminosity and their opposites. In the book published posthumously as *Remarks on Colour* he noted: ‘Whatever looks luminous does not look grey.’

For Huxley and Klein the primary luminosity of colour is lost in the formation of concepts and objects; for Calvino and Marcos, the achromatic world of forms gradually comes into colour. So does that also mean for Huxley and Klein that in some future colour might be regained? Klein seemed to think so, although for Huxley the degradation of colour in modernity seemed terminal. And does it mean that in the narratives of Calvino and Marcos colour could go out of the world again? Or to put it more straightforwardly, if there are stories in which colour has a beginning, are there other stories in which colour comes to an end?

In *The Wizard of Oz* colour certainly comes to a rather abrupt end because Dorothy is returned to Kansas, to home, to grey, and as the curtain of consciousness is drawn across colour it is revealed as a temporary aberration, an accidental brain-malfunction event, the result of a fall of another kind, into unconsciousness. Of course this whole episode has the feel of a Hollywood stitch-up. As Salman Rushdie has pointed out, ‘There’s no place like home’ has to be one of the most chilling and threatening and the least plausible lines ever to have been delivered – with a smile – in the history of cinema.

A much less implausible end of colour, one with no smiles at all, is described in Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006). In this excoriating account of an unnamed but probably manmade apocalypse the planet has entered its death throes, civil society has ended and life has become for the most part very nasty, very brutish and often very short. It is also a world that has almost entirely lost its colour. Colour is no longer a presence in the world but a memory of another world (for those old enough to have known it), or a largely alien concept (for those too young to have known anything else). Given the daily horrors and acts of barbarism, the all-consuming hunger and the bitter, bitter cold, the absence of colour may seem a little beside the point. But its absence is one of the principle means by which McCarthy registers the horror of a nuclear winter, where everything has become either relentlessly ‘grey’ or ‘black’, or just ‘dark’. The opening sentences of the book quite literally set the tone:
When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more grey each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world... Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees... Looking for anything of colour.9

Very occasionally some colour does punctuate the otherwise all-enveloping grey-black-darkness. For the most part it comes in the form of a remnant of plasticized tarpaulin or another fragment of the petrochemical past. Or it is the muted orange of the fires that either erupt spontaneously in the dying landscape or are carefully cultivated out of scraps of wood and tiny amounts of leftover fuel. In each case these moments of colour serve as brutal reminders of something almost beyond memory: ‘The colour of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.’ Fading memories and occasional dreams: ‘And the dreams so rich in colour.’ The colour is an unbearable trace of a world that is shrinking and dying by the day: ‘The names of things following those things into oblivion. Colours. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true.’9

The Road is arguably a relatively recent contribution to the long discourse on ruins. What McCarthy describes is a planetary ruin, and, whether the result of violent catastrophe or slow seeping decay, a ruin is always literally a dark and gloomy affair. It may be picturesque from a distance, perhaps, but close up is dank and mostly brown or grey. Can you imagine a luminous ruin? The only colour that might conceivably enter a ruin would be in the form of vegetation and fungus as they reclaim the building after nature’s brief exile or containment. But this is not an option in McCarthy’s wasteland, as the death of nature has caused the collapse of all that was ostensibly set against it.

And if colour can be erased from the world, as the world begins to erase itself, what about a Klein-esque opposite to this, a future wherein the world is returned to pure unadulterated colour? Klein himself referred in various notes and lectures to a future in which colour, and thus ‘the soul of man’, would free itself from the prison house of line and language. In his storyboard for the film he explores this ‘revenge’ of colour and suggests that although this ‘uprising’ against line may take ‘millions of years’ to achieve, it would be worth the wait.10 In ‘The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial’, a lecture Klein gave in 1959 at the Sorbonne in Paris, he predicted that ‘a colourist of a kind never seen before’ would arrive in ‘the next generation’.11 But here or elsewhere he didn’t trouble anyone with details. It may be that the epic scale and sweep of Klein’s cosmological rhetoric would not allow for any such specificity, and certainly the colours of his own modernity did not get much consideration.
Aldous Huxley did look more closely at colours, and in them he saw the modern equivalent of precious stones: glowing neon light, shiny chrome surfaces, the pulsing electrical colours of the industrial city. But what he saw in them was not some new heaven but a kind of hell. In modernity,

We have seen too much pure bright colour at Woolworth’s to find it intrinsically transporting. Modern technology has had the same devaluing effect on glass and metal as it had on the fairy lamps and pure bright colours - the fine point of seldom pleasure has been blunted. What was once a needle of visionary delight has now become a piece of disregarded linoleum.  

For Huxley, science and industry had provided not a revival of or a return to colour but a corruption, as they rendered a rare wonder ersatz, cheap, commonplace and banal.

There is plenty to dwell on in these stories of the origins of colour, but all those I have come across have one thing in common in spite of their many differences: they are all invitations to think imaginatively about colour and its place in the world, helping to rattle the cage of what is often taken for granted in perceptual experience. More specifically they are all compelling reminders of the transitory nature of colour. They are reminders that the 'when' of colour, together with the 'what' and the 'where' of it, remain open and unresolved puzzles; puzzles that have been addressed in science and philosophy on many occasions, but often in such a way as to appear abstract, cold and obtuse. Put in the form of stories, these questions, and the true strangeness of colour experiences, might be brought back to life. They remind us that in its everyday transitory ways colour is uniquely beguiling and elusive. It is, for me, a source of real pleasure that colour, one of the absolute givens of human visual experience, both conscious and subconscious, remains so resistant to analysis, and not least, to language. In one sense colour is here, now, around and in front of me, a part of objects and atmospheres, as real and commonplace a presence as anything; in another sense colour is nothing - certainly no thing - at all.

Some of these stories of colour feel more satisfying than others. In many ways I would like to align myself with Klein and Huxley: to assert the primacy of colour and to lament its defeat or dilution in the world of objects and concepts, line and language. But there is something about each of their narratives that for me doesn't quite ring true. For a start, Klein's rhetoric sounds grandiose and a bit hollow, messianic and not a little self-serving, and Huxley's loathing of modernity and hatred of the commonplace seem both snobbish and deeply pessimistic. Moreover, while their individual responses to the loss of colour are quite different, for both the elevation of colour to an absolute, an origin, serves to push colour away, make it remote and deface it. The pure perfection of colour 'in the beginning' makes it all but unattainable in the present. The overvaluation of original colour-as-origin means that any existing colour can only be tarnished, weak and insufficient; and the glow of modernity
can only be experienced as the seductive lustre of a golden calf or another such false god. This is an oddly paradoxical situation, since the aim of both writers is to propose a great revaluation of colour in the face of its constant marginalization, to place it at the centre of experience rather than at the edges. But the effect of each text is to distance colour further; to give it greater significance, for sure, but at the expense of making it more remote, exotic and unattainable. Any pleasure that might have been had from actual colours, certainly for Huxley, could only be specious, and the marker of a failure properly to comprehend the true significance of pure and original colour.

This is perhaps why I find myself returning to the other stories of colour more frequently. In spite of colour being considered secondary – or rather, precisely because of this – it has a place and a presence in the world, one which doesn't have to carry with it the weight of colour-as-origin. In being unnecessary, colour finds a place beyond necessity; in being devalued, colour gains something rather valuable. In the worlds described in The Story of Colors, Cosmicomics and The Wizard of Oz, colour is unique in its uselessness. It is useless but not insignificant, as in each tale colour has intense and very evident effects on those who encounter it. This spectrum of effects – uncertainty, confusion, disorientation, delirium, pleasure, delight, wonder – only becomes possible, it seems to me, if colour's connection to the world is in the first place provisional and uncertain. To put it slightly differently, if colour is not a given of the world but something added to it, then its place in that world is up for grabs and open to argument. For the Subcomandante, the presence of colour both reminds us of and (he hopes) unites us in our differences; for Calvino, its presence causes the first misunderstandings, as the young lovers begin to experience the world differently from one another and to make incompatible judgements and choices. While in each story, colours might have the opposite effect on different people, the point remains essentially the same: from colour, metaphorically at least, comes self-awareness, awareness of others and of otherness.

And the loss of colour? In The Road that loss is evidence of some cataclysmic occurrence, or is perhaps a cataclysm in itself. The world without colour McCarthy describes is one in which mere survival is the best – or perhaps the worst – that can be hoped for. The implication or what we can infer from The Road is that the extinction of colour is a prelude to the extinction of life, a kind of anti-light show that precedes the last whimper of humanity. The loss of colour will be followed, sooner rather than later, by the loss of everything else. This doesn't bode too well for Dorothy and Toto as they happily skip back to Kansas, whichever way you look at it.