A new approach to the debate between colour and form, in relation to the chromatic circles and models from the early nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

For many centuries in art, colour had a secondary place in relation to drawing. It was only considered as an application or an element of the appearance of the form. Historically, drawing and line were the protagonists of fundamental moments of Art History and the great artists of drawing were brought to the level of genius. It didn't happened the same with the great colourists. However, in the nineteenth century, with the rise of Romanticism and the inner revelation of man, colour, became the main resource for expression and was elevated to the status of substance of light and painting, in the work of artists such as P. O. Runge or J.W.M Turner. In an unprecedented moment in the unceasing debate between colour and line, the balance tipped toward the chromatic matters. Intellectuals of the most diverse disciplines (Goethe, Otto Runge, Schopenhauer, Von Helmholtz, Chevreul, Maxwell, among others) attempted to explain the phenomenon of color through numerous theories and by creating various colour models and systems, denoting the importance given to colour in this moment of human knowledge. These colour models, nevertheless, pose an interesting paradox because, from the moment of their conception, most of them are presented as geometric drawings, drawn in a strict way in their formal proposals. This could make us think that the growing assertion of the place of colour as more important than drawing (and even the place of drawing as more relevant than colour) can never be considered as a total separation of both resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the relationship between colour and form –form expressed as the line or drawing– has been part of numerous theoretical discussions, mainly from pictorial field, but it has been gradually extended to other disciplines. The dispute of *"colour against form"* has been articulated mostly by a historical tendency to seek and identify a supremacy of one resource over the other, which resulted in an overriding place of form over colour until the arrival of the eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century, mainly because of the figure of Isaac Newton and his optical discoveries, had prepared a field of interest in colour from an objective, physicist and scientist standpoint. (Jiménez, 1991: 17). Towards the end of the century and due to the emergence of the Romantic thought, a greater concern for human temperament and the subjective condition of the human being was developed. This changed the paradigm regarding the *colour-shape* dispute and, from this moment colour, in its intimate relationship with light, acquired a central place as it was considered as a resource for the expression of the artist's subjectivity. Colour could arouse a direct and unmediated effect in mind and feelings of people. The Romanticism thought revived colour symbolism. The search for a new "morality of colour" among painters tended to acquire a more psychological nuance. (Gage, 1993: 204).

In this new stage of thought, numerous theories were originated by intellectuals from different disciplines who sought to understand the phenomenon of colour considering the subjective

dimension of human beings. These searches formed the basis of what would later become the modern colour theory. These theories are a series of treatises that, following the epistemological tradition of visualizing the phenomenon of colour, are usually accompanied by some diagrams and colour models, understood as topological systems or relational geometric units, designed to represent the chromatic phenomenon, contemplating all the colours arranged in space, and establishing specific positions through an organized logic (Caivano, 1995: 1). The large number of theories and colour models generated in the context of Romanticism are a very valuable material to try to understand the way in which this visual resource was present in the philosophical discussion of those times.

However, at a first glance, these colour models generated in a moment when color as an aesthetic resource took precedence over form, it is easy to realize that it is precisely the form what became relevant in the construction of these visual explanations of the chromatic phenomenon. These color models are presented mostly as geometric figures, known shapes as the circle, the sphere or the star, and they constitute the fundamental support to explain the phenomenon. From a first point of view, it seems that in the Romanticism, the line disappeared from the paintings where clearly colour won the debate; but we can't declare the same triumph of colour when it comes to representing the phenomenon itself visually, where both resources weren't really separated, and the dispute remained in a tie.

All this raises the following question: Is the supremacy of colour over form present in the romantic way of explaining colour visually? And if so, how? There is no doubt that this question could trigger a more extensive research, but a brief look into some emblematic cases of the romantic colour theory can be useful in order to open the discussion for further development.

2. THE "ROSE OF TEMPERAMENTS"

In the late eighteenth century, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his friend the philosopher Friedrich Schiller, mulled together about nature, art and customs, and represented their dialogues and reflections through symbolic drawings and tables. In their attempt to include the study of colour into their reflections, in the year 1799 they developed "The Rose of Temperaments": a geometric colour model aimed to relate the chromatic polarities –taken from the theory of the polarities belonging to the philosophy of nature or *Naturphilosophie*– with the four traditional temperaments: sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic and choleric. This was made with regard to the sensual-moral effect of colours that Goethe was looking for. The same way complementary colours are opposed in the colour wheel, the four humors are opposed in pairs, interacting with the colors. Each humor is assigned to three types of human character. In the sense of progression on the active –red– side, there are adventurers, heroes, and tyrants, while on the passive –blue– side, there are teachers, philosophers, and pedants. Purple as the combination of the intensified poles of the colour wheel represents the ruler, who is opposed by the poet as his harmonic complement. Goethe, however, insisted that the architect of this organization was Schiller, who agreed with the superiority of the line against color in its relation with the depiction of truth.

Subsequently, through the publication of his Theory of Colours (Zur Farbenlehre) in 1810, Goethe would deepen in the aesthetic, moral and allegorical effects of colour, based on the belief that colors could touch the mind and feelings of the human being. His modern theory would serve mostly to painters because of the psychological meanings related to colour, a subject that hadn't been explored in a deep way, until then. (Miguel-Pueyo, 2009:30).

Through this first case it's possible to realize that one of the main contributions of the romantic colour theory to the design of colour models is related to the inclusion of emotional or

temperamental variables in the visualization of the chromatic phenomenon, what emphasizes the capabilities of colour to invoke emotion over the capabilities of the shape. The romantic artists looked for new meanings of colours depending on the positions they occupied in space.

3. RUNGE'S SPHERE OF COLORS

Phillip Otto Runge was one of the main recipients of Goethe's colour theory. Like the German poet, Runge expected to pictorially illustrate the colour functions. In his paintings he exposed a quasi-mystical regard of color as a natural power, as a manifestation of divine revelation, while in Die Farben-Kugel his book published in 1810, he sketched geometrical models that showed the relationships between colours and helped to understand the colour harmonies. Runge gave these color models a more objective approach than to his paintings. His sphere, one of the first attempts made by a painter of coordinating the complementary colors with the poles of light and dark, found so little opposition that became one of the major influences in the development of colour order systems throughout the century (Gage, 1993).

Runge also used figures like the star in a more mystical way, to indicate the contrast between the ideal world of love –red–, and the real world –green–. The warm side of his spheres –yellow and orange– represents the male passions and the cold side –blue and violet– represents the feminine. Although Runge establishes some relationships between color and psychological meanings within his theory, his real contribution is the classification of colours attributes in terms of the contrasting attributes of light and dark, and how he articulated his complete theory starting from this polarity, reflecting one of the main characteristic of the romantic thought applied to colour.

This second case helps to understand how the attributes of color in their relation to the lightness or darkness –visual and conceptual– determined the valuation and position of colours within the geometric shape that supports it. Is the colour, with its theoretical complexity, which forced Runge to move from flat to three-dimensional shapes. Is the color what determines the shape, what takes precedence.

4. THE CHROMATIC CIRCLES OF TURNER

Goethe's Theory of Colours also had reception in the English romantic painter J.M.W. Turner, who was a thorough reader of the work of the German poet. Always interested in the interaction between light and color, in 1812, nearly thirty years before reading the theory of Goethe, Turner described one of his paintings in terms of active and passive colours, suggesting that the painter was interested in the effects of color. From his reading of the Farbenlehre, he was particularly interested in the table of polarities in which Goethe sought to show that colour unlike light, is always specific, significant and characteristic.

These polarities and Turner's interest in understanding the phenomenon of colour in the practice of painting, led him to create their own colour models: simple chromatic circles that initially took as morphological reference the chromatic system of Moses Harris, but Turner would focus his circles to represent the principles of light and shadow, day and night (Gage, 2009). Turner saw a universal meaning in the three primary colors, subordinating them to the light. Like Runge, also devoted part of his later pictorial work to the polarities of color in their relation to value attributes.

Turner's chromatic circles are an attempt by the artist to contribute to the colour theory from his own practical experience. Although morphologically his models are constructed on the basis of the circle and the triangle, they are carefully configured by suppressing the line and drawing and setting

the visual limits only by the use of color contrast. They are an interesting case because visually, it seems that Turner rejected the idea of drawing a color wheel, and he decided to generate it by painting. The absence of the line and drawing in their color models comes to confirm the supremacy of color as the main way of expression, both in his paintings and in his explanations of the color phenomenon.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In all the three cases proposed we can see different ways to approach the visualization of colour theory in the romantic thought of the early nineteenth century. The new way of thinking about the phenomenon of colour, with an emphasis on the perceptual attributes and the subjective experience of the viewer, characteristic of the philosophy of the those days, meant new complexities to the ones who tried, with varying success, to propose colour models and systems that would help to explain the phenomenon in a comprehensively and fairly way.

From the point of view of the practice of painting in the Romanticism, the supremacy of colour over line is almost indisputable, but the translation of that primacy to the colour theory and the visualization of it was definitely a difficult task, in which the equivalence of both resources is a background to the issues raised by contemporary theories: color and form are usually presented as distinct but strongly inseparable resources, fundamental in visual representation.

There is no doubt that from this first stage of discussion it will be possible to study in greater depth a wider universe of images and theories that will fully articulate the translation of the *color-form* dispute through the more relevant color models of the nineteenth century.

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