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What Color Is the Sacred?

Michael Taussig

If one of the most “sacred” aims that man can set for himself is to acquire as exact and intense an understanding of himself as possible, it seems desirable that each one, scrutinizing his memories with the greatest possible honesty, examine whether he can discover there some sign permitting him to discern the color for him of the very notion of the sacred.

—MICHEL LEIRIS, “The Sacred in Everyday Life” (1938)

1. The Face of World History

“Men in a state of nature,” writes Goethe, “uncivilized nations, and children, have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness.” The same applied to the people of southern Europe, especially the women with their bright colored bodices and ribbons. He recalled a German officer, returned from America, who had painted his face with vivid colors in the manner of the Indians, the effect of which “was not disagreeable.” On the other hand, in his northern Europe during the early nineteenth century, people of refinement had a disinclination to colors, the women wearing white, the men, black. And not only dress. Such people avoided vivid colors in the objects around them and seemed inclined, he wrote, to banish vivid colors from their presence altogether.¹

I see him in my mind’s eye, this German mercenary, promenading through the streets of Frankfurt fresh from God knows what violence he inflicted out there in America with wild Indians, half-breeds, and crazed Europeans trading furs for whisky along with rings and mirrors, brightly colored greatcoats trimmed with lace, and, of course, paints for face and body, as much for the corpse as for the living. How many beaver hats bobbing up and down the wintry main street and hanging on the hat stands in the coffee shops in Frankfurt are owed his efforts? And here he is with his Indian face, perhaps one half yellow, the other vermillion, asymmetrically joined, the face of world history.

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (1810; London, 1840), §835, p. 326; see also §135, p. 55; §836, p. 327; and §841, p. 329.

Not only kids, primitives, southern women, but war loves bright colors, too. Could there be a connection? And even if today color has given way to camouflage, you have to wonder how decolored camouflage really is and how much it is a fashion statement. Look at them at HQ far from the front dressed neatly in their uniforms staring into computer screens, about as inconspicuous as one of them humvees, as if the designers responsible for army gear had not been able to let go of the swirling jungle motif, allowing the ghost of Vietnam to return, this time to the desert floor no less than to the slums and highways of Baghdad, once the center of the world's indigo trade. The generals look good in camouflage, too, even though they never get close to anything more dangerous than Fox news. But the medals come colored.

French soldiers hung on the longest. They wore bright red pants well into the First World War when it was suggested that their appalling losses might be reduced if they decolored, a fate that was, according to Goethe, Europe's lot for many a year, "the women wearing white, the men, black." Yet Goethe's primitives are engraved in the European image of what warriors should be.

Wandering through the darkened streets of Paris one night in 1916 about the time the Frenchmen were losing their red trousers, the narrator in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* happened across a gay friend, the Baron Charlus, surreptitiously eyeing the passing troops. Proust thought the marvelous display of color must have been similar to the passing of the troops in Napoleon's time exactly 100 years before in the same place: "the Africans in their red divided skirts, the Indians in their white turbans were enough to transform for me this Paris through which I was walking into a whole imaginary exotic city, an oriental scene."² By African he meant Kabyle tribesmen from Algeria and Morocco known as zouaves, one of whom was painted in blue, orange, yellow, and black by Vincent van Gogh in Arles in 1888 using oils so as to heighten what he called "the savage combination of incongruous tones," the zouaves being French infantrymen famous, so it is said, for their brilliant uniform and quick-spirited drill. Native French soldiers took over the Kabyle name and their dress.³

2. Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, vol. 6 of *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. Andreas Mayor, Terence Kilmartin, and D. J. Enright (New York, 1993), p. 106.

3. Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 21 June 1888, quoted in *Vincent van Gogh: The Drawings*, ed. Colta Ives et al. (exhibition catalog, Van Gogh Museum, 1 July–18 Sept. 2005,

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That they go together, these quick spirits and brilliant colors, should not be lost on us. Isidore of Seville, the savant's savant, said in the seventh century AD that color and heat were the same since colors came from fire or sunlight and because the words for them were fundamentally the same: *calor* and *color*. Etymology like this is hardly a science, but he was onto something important, same as the famous connection between *color* and the *quick-spirited drill* of the Berbers incorporated into the colonial army. And note Isidore of Seville did not say light, but sunlight, light that comes from the biggest fire of all, the one that gives without receiving.

Talking to Primo Levi, Philip Roth suggested that his imprisonment in Auschwitz was in some sense a gift. Levi replied: "A friend of mine, an excellent doctor, told me many years ago: 'Your remembrances of before and after are in black and white; those of Auschwitz and of your travel home are in Technicolor.' He was right. Family, home, factory, these are good things in themselves, but they deprived me of something I still miss: adventure."⁴ Being a chemical engineer Levi survived because he worked as a slave in the chemical *Kommando* in the synthetic rubber factory set up at Auschwitz by I. G. Farben, the largest chemical corporation in the world, making everything from toothbrushes to the poison gas used for the final solution. *Farben* means colors, and the search for dazzling, standardized colors in the mid-nineteenth century led to the new science of organic chemistry from which emerged a world of commodities beyond even the dreams of Faust, just as it was these same dazzling, standardized colors that endowed the commodity with what Karl Marx called its spiritlike character. The brave new world of artifice created by chemical magic was to Germany what empire was to Britain and France and eventually, as nature gave way to second nature, came to far surpass that old-fashioned, graspable sense of imperial destinies Proust and van Gogh so admired with the zouaves. To ask, What color is the sacred? is to ask about these connections and how we have lost the language that could do that connecting for us: the way the primeval forests went under to become coal and petroleum, the way that coal gas came to illuminate nineteenth-century cities and produced a waste product from which first colors and then just about everything else could be made in one mighty mimesis of nature. We cannot see that as sacred or enchanting because we have displaced that language of alchemy by that of the chemists.

To equate *calor* with *color* detaches us from a visual approach to vision and makes color the cutting edge of such a shift. Color vision becomes less

Amsterdam, 2005), p. 226. For the characterization of the zouave as a type, see *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "zouave."

4. Primo Levi, "A Conversation with Primo Levi," in *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (1958; New York, 1996), p. 185.

a retinal and more a total bodily activity common to fairy tales in that we may pass into the image while we are looking at it. Three of my favorite authors relish this power of color: Walter Benjamin, William Burroughs, and Proust. All three see color as something alive, like an animal, and all three expend considerable verbal talent in getting this across. Benjamin concentrated on the child's view of color, Burroughs on drugs, sex, and games with language, Proust on the fullness of involuntary memory transporting one's body to the event by chance recalled.

To advocate such a sense of color is not to say color is really this or really that. Instead it is to speculate on some of the implications of the way the West has talked about color, what relationship such talk has to world history, and what wonder lies obscured within, such that if we think about color as heat or even as weather that propels you into the image, we might never think the same about thinking itself.

Goethe did not go far enough. Not nearly as far as the German soldier who painted his face in the manner of the North American Indians. For while it may appear that people of refinement, unlike men in a state of nature, are averse to vivid color, the situation both in Goethe's time and in our own seems to me even stranger: that this distaste for vivid color is actually an unstable mix of attraction *and* repulsion that the face-painted soldier got right. When Benjamin, Proust, and Burroughs bring out the fact that even in the West color is a whole lot more than hue, that color is not secondary to form, that color is an animal and a magical polymorphous substance as well, they are not saying that man in a state of nature has gotten this right and we in the West are nonsensuous creatures who are frightened of passions and the body. To the contrary, it is the combustible mix of attraction and repulsion towards color that best brings out its magical qualities, and, as Goethe's face-painted mercenary indicates, the insights that color brings to the elucidation of the bodily unconscious owe a great deal to the Western experience of colonization.

As our bodies change in a dangerous world now subject to global warming, color sense like heat sense detaches the senses from the complacent view of the body as a fortress with peepholes and antennae, sensing externalities, and instead encourages us to take a world-centered and not a self-centered view of viewing such that the self becomes part of that which is seen, not a sovereign transcendent. To thus see ourselves in the midst of the world is to enter into ourselves as image, to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for some quite other position that is not really a position at all but something more like swimming, more like nomads adrift in the sea, mother of all metaphor, that sea I call *the bodily unconscious*.

To make such an obscure function more subject to our consciousness and control would be to undo centuries of whitefella fantasies about the Orient, stretching back to the Middle Ages, fantasies that effectively divided the world into chromophobes and chromophiliacs and made of Goethe's soldier such an anomaly. Color for the West became attached to colored people or their equivalents, such as kids and southern women. This way the West could have its cake and eat it, could admire the zouaves, sexually as well as aesthetically, while standing in the darkness of war, the darkness of night, and the darkness of those dark overcoats, coats, trousers, socks, and shoes that men wore then in 1916, for centuries before, and to the present day.

My sense of the bodily unconscious is that it now holds the future of the world in the balance as much as the other way around. We have reached a time in world history when we can choose to press forward with the exploration of this "last frontier," which would like all other explorations probably exploit and destroy it, or leave well alone, as nature lovers such as myself wish for forests and wetlands. But in either case we need to catch up with the way that history turned the senses against themselves so as to control them. The mystery of color lies in the fact that it evaded this fate because, while vital to human existence, it could never be understood.

2. Color as Crime

His face painted in the manner of the Indians, Goethe's soldier strolls the high street jostled left and right by black and white. He stands out, this crossover man, because civilized nations and civilized people have long felt strange about color—meaning bold colors—being drawn to them yet at the same time uneasy, even repelled, wanting them less wild, less bold, and less free to wander away from the ghettos of men in a state of nature where they can be regarded from afar and enjoyed—from afar. Truth on the other hand comes in black and white for our philosophers as much as for us. Shapes and forms, outlines and marks, that is truth. Color, to tell the truth, is another world, a splurging thing, an unmanageable thing, like a prancing horse or a runaway ladder in a stocking, something, this thing, this formless thing, that we need to fence in with actual lines and marks, the boundary riders of thought, or else grant color second-class citizenship to form, essential to interior decorating, for instance, but not to architecture because it is a luxury, an excess, a filler, a decoration, an add-on that came long after black-and-white TVs and movies and Kodak cameras got started.

Indeed, it is worse than any and all of that. Color amounts to crime. Derived from the Latin *celare*, to conceal, color is another word for deceit,

says my Webster's. Benjamin agreed. Sharply distinguishing the child's view of color from the adult's, he suggested that adults understood color as a layer superimposed on matter to such a degree that they regard color "as a deceptive cloak."⁵

How strange, therefore, that my dictionary goes on to say that color also signifies authenticity or at least character and nature, as in the phrase, "he showed us his true colors." Could this amount to what Benjamin thought of as the child's view of color? Yet the dichotomy of child versus adult, deceit versus authenticity, unwinds itself and leaves us in a no-space that is, perhaps, the truer home of color, for does not the very phrase, "he showed us his true colors," venerable with age and usage, also suggest the opposite, that color is both true and untrue precisely because of its claims to authenticity? How can you ever be sure with which variety you are dealing, his true colors or his false ones? Is this why we in the West are drawn to color yet made uneasy, even repelled, as by Mafia types in Hawaiian shirts? Who of you reading this text would even dream of painting the living room wall bright red or green, any color other than off-white? Then, safe in your whiteness, you can hang a wildly colored picture on the wall, secure in its framed being.

Take that novocaine-smooth stylist who set anthropology on its head for several decades, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in an unusual display of pique when, mid-twentieth century, he says, on the very first page of *Tristes Tropiques*: "Nowadays being an explorer is a trade, which consists not, as one might think, in discovering hitherto unknown facts after years of study, but in covering a great many miles and assembling lantern slides or motion pictures, preferably in colour, so as to fill a hall with an audience for several days in succession."⁶ His anger seems boundless where, referring to Amazon Indians, he writes: "I can resign myself to understanding the fate which is destroying them; but I refuse to be the dupe of a kind of magic which is still more feeble than their own, and which brandishes before an eager public albums of colored photographs, instead of the now vanished native masks."⁷

Thanks to color. Lévi-Strauss has here exceeded even himself. Color becomes equivalent to primitive magic, but of a feebler variety, just as it is equivalent to masks, but ones that have vanished due to Western influence.

5. Walter Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, trans. Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 1:50.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (1955; New York, 1974), pp. 17–18.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The same disdain is to be found in spades in nearly all of the reviews of the first major exhibit of color photography (by William Eggleston) at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1976. Janet Malcolm ground her finger in the wound when she noted that hitherto color photography was “associated with photography’s most retrograde applications—advertising, fashion, *National Geographic*-type travel pictures, nature pictures, old-fashioned arty abstractions of peeling walls and European traffic signs.”⁸ Poor Eggleston. Refusing to photograph gorgeous sunsets or Ansel Adams-type sublime slices of colored nature out West, he made colored targets of ordinary, everyday American trash that even back then filled the shelves of the supermarkets down South: gorgeous strips of Technicolor advertising toothpaste and breakfast cereal. There were also plenty of suburban driveways and lawns, sad but colored, yet not even a stray Diane Arbus freak to enliven the show. In the temple of high art that had previously only allowed black-and-white photography, his pictures looked “insignificant, dull, even tacky,” a judgement on the temple as much as on the art. If that’s not enough, try “inartistic, unmodern, and . . . out of place in an art museum” on account of their “atmosphere of slouching dejection and tentativeness . . . which the reviews of the show cruelly confirmed.”⁹ “Snapshot chic” was how Hilton Kramer buried this colorful subject, as compared with the work of a black-and-white photographer showing at the same time uptown whose photos Kramer lost little time celebrating as achieving “an extraordinary visual poetry.”¹⁰

Which reminds me of growing up in Sydney, Australia, in the 1950s, where this same scenario was being played out with the torrent of poor immigrants entering the city a decade or so after my refugee parents arrived from central Europe and settled in the leafy suburbs. But it was the southern Europeans, the Greeks and Italians, the same who grabbed Goethe’s color-conscious eye two centuries before, that changed the drab Victorian terraces of inner-city Sydney. To your regular Anglo-Australian it seemed almost unpatriotic, certainly shocking and low class, the way they painted the outsides of their houses vivid yellows and blues, greens and reds. (Far away in the interior, Australian aborigines were doing the same thing, not to their houses but to their bodies by means of brightly colored clothing, especially the stockmen and, out of white sight, on their bare bodies with natural pigments for ceremonies.) The slums of Sydney exploded in a riot of color. Considering how strange this was, it really didn’t take all that long for the real estate investors to come in and buy big-time.

8. Janet Malcolm, “Photography: Color,” *The New Yorker*, 10 Oct. 1977, p. 107.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

10. Hilton Kramer, “Art: Focus on Photo Shows,” *New York Times*, 28 May 1976, p. D18.

The Greeks and Italians left, for the leafy suburbs, I guess, and now those same inner city suburbs, such as Paddington, are among the wealthiest in the world, the vivid colors painted over by ochres, greys, and white or else stripped back to the original brick. You can't get realer than real estate.

As for the ambiguity tied to color as both deceitful and authentic, take the mural painted by John Pugh as described in the *New York Times* the other day; his recent work *Drain* shows "a big rusty drainpipe etched with the letters LADWP, for Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, sucking the color and, metaphorically, the water out of the vista."¹¹ Here draining color stands for the belief that for close to a century the evil city of Los Angeles has been stealing western rivers and, as depicted in the film *Chinatown*, lying about it, while at the same time color in this mural also stands for authenticity, for the lost vitality of nature being sucked out of the blue-and-green mountains in the distance, foregrounded by that nasty, ever so efficient-looking big rusty pipe decoloring ever more parched flatlands.

"For them color is fluid, the medium of all changes," wrote Benjamin with reference to what he took to be the child's view of color.¹² Tying color to water as John Pugh has done is useful because, like a river, color is a moving force, and like the world's water supply under the present climatic regime of politically enhanced global warming driving our planet to destruction, color like heat is now subject to unpredictable oscillations that, in the case of color, amount to oscillations between deceit and authenticity, something that does not seem to have been factored in by Isidore of Seville, when he drew attention to the similarities between *calor* and *color*.

It is this oscillation that accounts for color's magic, thereby attracting that energetic stage magician, conjuror, and trickster, that master of deceit, George Melies. No sooner had he begun to make films in Paris circa 1900, pulling rabbits out of hats thanks to the film editor's scissors, than he found it hard to resist painting color over the black and white of his films. To the reality-effect of film was added the magic-effect of color. To the truth-effect of film was added the deceit-effect of color. And so it goes. I don't know how they looked then, but now a century later the color is filmy and faint, like the whisk of a horse's tail, flourish of the color spirit, not painting by numbers, but that true excess of the heart that can only come across through the untoward hint.

Could it be that in this scheme of fear and desire, truth and deceit, color is the excess that allows forms to come alive and that this is why my Webster's tells me color is both pretext *and* sign of the authentic? Invitation to the

11. Randall C. Archibold, "Mural Comments about Water, and a City Doesn't Like It," *New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2005, p. A21.

12. Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," 1:50.

fantastic? Sure. But there is something else as well: the too-muchness that gives forms their form. “Drawing gives shape to all creatures,” says Diderot, but “color gives them life. Such is the divine breath that animates them.”¹³

Divine? Maybe. Animated? Maybe. That is if you subscribe to the notion that the holy can be also impure, evil, and accursed—dependent on continual infusions of transgression—as with Benjamin’s observation that “the language of color” was characteristic of the posters that flourished in the shopping arcades of Paris in the early nineteenth century but that these posters were the cousins of “obscene graphics.” He recalled an advertising poster that reminded him of opera with Siegfried bathing in dragon’s blood; the cape was crimson, the sylvan solitude green, the flesh, naked. He noted that “falsar colors are possible in the arcades” such that nobody was surprised that combs were red and green. After all, “Snow White’s stepmother had such things, and when the comb did not do its work, the beautiful apple was there to help out—half red, half poison-green, like cheap combs.”¹⁴

Such a beautiful example, this apple-become-comb. Thanks to color, it illustrates thereby the new nature of the new commodity world in which industry was gearing itself to fabricate cheap luxury goods. In mimicking nature, industry and most especially the chemical industry promised us utopias and fairylands beyond our wildest dreams, hence not merely colored, but magical, not merely colored, but poisonous. As the spirit of the gift, color is what sold and continues to sell modernity. As the gift that gives the commodity aura, color is both magical and poisonous, and this is perfectly in keeping with that view which sees color as both authentic and deceitful.

3. Color Walks

Color lies at the chemical heart of the cosmos. Take alchemy. That mixture of magic and chemistry is said to have started with ancient Egyptians dyeing their otherwise drab grey cottons blue, as with the blue thread in linen mummy cloths dating as early as the Fifth Dynasty (2400 BC). The Old Testament rarely misses a chance to tell us of gorgeous purple cloths such as those demanded by God for His first temple to be hung alongside heaps of gold and silver. Pity the dyer. “His hands stink,” a papyrus of

13. Quoted in François Delamare and Bernard Guineau, *Colors: The Story of Dyes and Pigments* (New York, 2000), p. 129. Delamare is director of research at the École des Mines, Paris, studying Roman and Gallic-Roman pigments as well as modern industrial paints. A physicist and research engineer, Guineau has worked with historians on the history of pigments and has written a book on pigments and dyes from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

14. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 173.

around 2000 BC informs us with respect to an indigo dyer. "They have the odor of rotten fish, and he abhorreth the sight of all cloth." In 1900 it was found that you needed 12,000 shellfish to make 1.4 grams of Tyrian purple.¹⁵

From the dyeing of drab cloth there arose the idea of dyeing metals—so to speak—converting by alchemy drab metals into gold and silver.

Some say that both alchemy and chemistry get their name from the name of Egypt itself, Kamt or Qemt, meaning the color black, as applied to the mud of the river Nile. This name was applied to the black powder resulting from the quicksilver process in Egyptian metallurgy, powder that was identified with the body of Osiris, god of the dead.¹⁶

Dying and dyeing. Nothing could be more magically tremendous than that other world, that world of the dead over which Osiris presides—nothing, that is, other than the world of color that emerges from the world of blackness, from that black mud, protoplasmic Osiris, we might say, drifting and compacting at the bottom of the meandering Nile, equivalent to the refuse remaining at the bottom of the alchemist's pot following combustion. Harken to the most mightily alchemical transformation conceivable, not of base metal into gold, but of black into living color as when that cantankerous old writer of *Naked Lunch* fame, William Seward Burroughs, tells us of the mysterious jet-black cat, Smoker, that one day came in from the snow to the writer's boxcar by the junkyard by the river to lessen the despair of the writer-who-could-no-longer-write: "Smoker, a creature of the lightless depths, where life as we on the surface know it cannot exist, brought light and color with him as colors pour from tar."¹⁷ That was in 1987.

As colors pour from tar. We've all been there. Pure magick. Sucks you in as though it were something more than visual, so you pour with them, adding to the effulgence of color flowing in black sands granulated with the body of the god of the dead.

As for this writer-who-can-no-longer-write, Smoker allows him to get at least one thing straight; those colors that pour from tar are nothing less than words, words used to liberate words—in keeping with Burroughs's lifelong obsession. "Cut ups? But of course. I have been a cut up for years. . . . I think of words as being alive like animals. They don't like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out."¹⁸

15. See Susan Fairlie, "Dyestuffs in the Eighteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, n.s., 17, no. 3 (1965): 491 n. 1.

16. See Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science during the First Thirteen Centuries of Our Era*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923–58), 1:13.

17. William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York, 1987), p. 247; hereafter abbreviated *WL*.

18. Burroughs, "The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith," *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Aug. 1964, p. 682.

That was in 1964. Brion Gysin was his painter pal in those days and when you look over Gysin's work, playing with color in relation to written words, let alone Burroughs's own color work, as in the 1960s scrapbooks and the 1980s paintings, it suddenly hits you that there is a tight connection between the mad desire to cut out, on the one hand, and this fascination with color, on the other.

As when, in his homage to Gysin, Burroughs invokes the idea of going on "color walks"—which are a good deal more than color-coded walkways through Tangier or New York or Paris: red on Wednesdays, blue on Fridays, or whatever. A delightful idea, to be sure. But that is only the beginning because the idea here is that the very notion of a code is to be cut out, meaning that color is invoked so as to loosen the restraint of coding and that there is something about color that facilitates this, as if colors love to betray themselves like yellow means gold, awesome and holy, but also treason and cowardice, and it has a long history in the Christian West of marking adulterous women, Jews, Muslims, prostitutes, heretics, witches, and executioners.

Could we not say, therefore, that with the color walk we are alerted to the singular and beautiful fact that color itself walks?

This would make color even more of a flâneur than Burroughs, who liked to call himself *el hombre invisible* in his walks through the market in Tangier in the late 1950s. What was invisible in Tangier became color in Paris, thanks to Gysin's paintings painted in Tangier. Maybe people have to lose themselves first and become invisible as long-term residents in a third world country before being readied for the color walk? But then Burroughs was continuously marginal in utterly realistic as well as in utterly romantic ways. He was queer. He was a heroin addict. He loathed America. And he had weird ideas about most everything, especially writing. Being marginal can mean you switch on and you switch off because you are either too conspicuous or invisible. Too invisible, that's the point, at which point you emerge as color, walking color at that.

And, remember, the original insight for the color walk lay in Gysin's playing with letters, letters that form words. Here color and the decomposition of written language signs go hand in hand. What also happens when Smoker comes in from the cold is that the old writer in the boxcar by the junkyard is once again able to write. As colors pour from tar, he unblocks. He pours. The cat purrs. And guess what? All his stories are animal stories. ("Of course," adds Burroughs.) The old writer finds them in an illustrated book. There is the Flying Fox with his long black fingers and sad black face, just like Smoker. There is a Fishing Bat peering from under its shell. There is the Black Lemur with round red eyes and its little red tongue, the beautiful

Ring-Tailed Lemur hopping through the forest as if on a pogo stick. “So many creatures, and he loves them all” (*WL*, p. 248).

The old writer caresses these pictures.

After all, “I have been a cut up for years,” the writer told us. “I think of words as being alive like animals. They don’t like to be kept in pages. Cut the pages and let the words out.”

Now the words and the animals become united in the stories the old writer found welling up inside himself as colors pour from tar.

4. The Diver

When that young blade Michel Leiris asked of his surrealist friends gathered in Paris on the brink of war in their new club, the College of Sociology, that each one ask himself what color is the sacred, he must have known he was onto a good thing, like the diver facing empty space as her toes leave the security of the high board, arms outstretched into the blue sky revolving above and beneath.

It was an exquisite talk for an exquisite occasion, fitting right into the College’s wide-eyed curiosity in “sacred sociology,” meaning religious and magical forces felt to be active in modern life as energized by the obscure play of taboo and transgression. Such forces might seem irrelevant to modern intellectuals, but not to the College with its fecund mix of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, plus the astonishing novelty of ethnography—the anthropological study of so-called primitive societies. It was just this anthropological study that provided the alchemical ingredient necessary to jolt a new sensibility into existence, clustered around the category of the sacred in everyday life, the subject of Leiris’s talk.

Based on his recollections of an apparently serene childhood, Leiris quickened one’s interest in the sacred with his snapshots of the dining room stove, *La Radieuse*, with the warmth of its glowing coals, his father’s nickel-plated Smith and Wesson revolver, the bathroom antics with his brother, the mystery of the parents’ bedroom, the coining of names, the sudden recognition that one has been mishearing and mispronouncing words, and so forth—in short, charged spaces, objects, and events, lifting one off from the world of ordinary reality, unlike the disturbing memories of the one woman member of the group, Colette Peignot, one of whose writings on the sacred begins, “What color does the notion of the sacred have for me?”¹⁹

19. It was Laurie Monahan of the Department of Art History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who drew my attention to Colette Peignot, who died from tuberculosis in 1938 aged thirty-five. Some of her writings have been collected as Colette Peignot, *Laure: The Collected Writings*, trans. Jeanne Herman (1977; San Francisco, 1995).

He produced a list of characteristics that for him bit by bit formed an *image* of the sacred as something *prestigious, unusual, dangerous, ambiguous, forbidden, secret, breathtaking, and barely conceivable* other than being “marked by the supernatural in one way or another.” It is significant, I feel, that none of these terms is allowed to stand alone but is brought to life in terms of his childhood experience—for example, “something ambiguous, like the coughing fits that tear one to pieces but transform one into a tragic hero.”²⁰ In this manner the profound emptiness of the term *sacred* is checked by the grit of real life, like the notion of “the profane illumination” coined by Benjamin a few years earlier in his essay on surrealism.²¹

Leiris’s strategy here is akin to the notion of *allegory* put forward by Benjamin in contrast to the *symbol*. For Benjamin the advantage of allegory lay in its being a clumsy unit of reference—a symbol, we could say, that doesn’t quite work—marred by the grit of reality and hence continuously incomplete because of a critical gap between the representation and what is being represented. Allegory reminds us that by necessity reality skids away from logic, and it is this gap, this apparent imperfection, that nourishes the sacred as the desire for and the impossibility of the union between truth and meaning. That is why, in my opinion, there is implicit recognition of this failure—if failure it be—in the rider attached to Leiris’s long list of memories, as if everything that had come before was insufficient; there like an epitaph stuck upright in the soft turf of the text was his exploding trick: What color is the sacred?

It was, as they say, a rhetorical question, tweaking its own presuppositions, leaving nothing much more than whistling in the dark. It put the very notion of the sacred in question, bracing it, not erasing it, thanks to the peculiar swerve Leiris had inflected upon things holy. It had to be. For if the sacred no longer existed after the death of God, was there still any profane (Nietzsche’s issue), given that each term depended for its existence on its opposite? As if that were not enough, you also had to consider the proposition that because the sacred is by definition inexplicable and thus inarticulable, it made perfect sense to have recourse to the mischief of the *sur/real* by means of tomfoolery as with the *sur/question*, What color is the sacred?

Nothing much more than whistling in the dark. You have to first realize that Leiris had made the sacred an outcome of the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination. He secularized the sacred, we might say, but preserved its magic in this way, allowing remembrance of the child’s perceptions to

20. Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” in *The College of Sociology (1937–39)*, trans. Betsy Wing, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 31.

21. See Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” *Selected Writings*, 2:207–21.

enchant the things of the world. Please note the dialectic, no less common than strange, it being surely obvious that the adult's imagination of the child's imagination includes the child's imagination of the adult's, including the child's view of color. It seems so different from that of adults. More lively. More lovely. What happened, you ask, on the way to adulthood?

Whatever happened, Leiris can be interpreted as saying that both color and the sacred are inherently unstable, engaged in an endless color walk of reflections of reflections of the adult's imagination of the child's.

Likewise as adult, this child called Leiris had inherited the sacred across generations of intellectuals from the founding father of sociology, Émile Durkheim, together with the latter's close reading if not fascination with the ethnography of Australian aborigines and the Native Americans of North America. In fact Leiris himself wrote a Ph.D. thesis on the secret language of the Dogon people of East Africa and became a museum mole, keeper of secrets in the Museum of Man in Paris as well as an exquisite exponent of writing as an art form that self-effacingly thinks about itself as it moves across the page inlaying its stream of jewels.

What made the ethnographic interest in the sacred strangely pertinent at this time was that Leiris and his friends wondered aloud whether that ethnographic sacred to which Durkheim had introduced them might not be hard at work as a living force in the modern world about them. This was the basis of their College of Sociology, dedicated as it was to sacred sociology. But this had little to do with religion as a church. Instead the sacred pointed to a replay of a pagan world vibrant with spirit-forces thought to be long since obliterated by what had come to be called the disenchantment of the world. The spirit-force sacred is what I wish to reclaim, too, what Burroughs called the Magical Universe, as opposed to the OGU or One God Universe. It is my belief that color, or rather the child's view of color, will help me, yet I am aware that reenchantment is not the same as enchantment itself.

The sacred was a variant on the surrealists' marvelous. It had higher voltage and more horsepower. In it, attraction and repulsion kept changing places so fast most of the time you couldn't tell one from the other. If the marvelous still held something of the distanced contemplation so dear to the aesthete, then the sacred was what short-circuited that remove, took you into the eye of the hurricane, and you would come out with some pretty putrid colors when occasion demanded, like the yellow of Burroughs's bunker in the Bowery, earlier a YMCA locker room whose mustard tones owed much to decades of young men's sweating bodies. With a dash of sulfur, the sun that radiated out from van Gogh's sunflowers could revert to that other yellow, the yellow of hell and self-mutilation. The sacred likes to bite the hand that feeds it. It was scary yet drew you in, not least because it was always

just one step ahead of the game. “I kept myself going on coffee and alcohol,” van Gogh wrote his brother and benefactor, Theo, in 1899, the year in which he mutilated himself, then took his life. “I admit all that, but all the same it is true that to attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up.”²²

To propose that something like pagan magic was alive and well in the secular world around us on all sides and that this was not despite modernity but because of it, this was no less appropriately inappropriate than Leiris’s question as to the color of the sacred. As a question that tore at its own moorings, as a question that begged the question, it was no less bewildering than it was mocking, lighthearted, and unsettling—like the diver facing empty space as her toes leave the security of the high board, arms outstretched into the blue sky revolving above and beneath.

5. Could a Cat Be a Whale?

Could it be that the question as to the color of the sacred is itself sacred, a spiritual exercise of the sort Herman Melville undertook in *Moby-Dick* where he tells us that it was above all the whiteness of the whale that appalled him? “But how can I hope to explain myself here,” he asks, “and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.”²³

Then there is the white cat, Margaras. “He can hide in snow and sunlight on white walls and clouds and rocks, he moves down windy streets with blown newspapers and shreds of music and silver paper in the wind” (*WL*, p. 57). Sometimes he is called the Tracker, a scary creature as capable of blending into nature as threading his way through computer files. Having no color, so Burroughs tells us, Margaras takes on all colors.

Color walks. And as it walks, so it changes. It is not something daubed onto a preexisting shape, filling a form, because colors have their own form, giving life and light to the world. Is color an animal?

Sounds unlikely. But what then is an animal? And why does thinking of color as an animal throw us off, maybe down those same windy streets where we run the risk of getting mixed up with blown newspapers and shreds of music and silver paper in the wind?

Not only Margaras. There is Smoker, too, Smoker the all-black cat who came in from the snow, Smoker from whom colors pour as from tar. One cat is white, the other black, and together they emerge from the one book

22. Van Gogh, letter 581, 24 Mar. 1889, *Van Gogh, a Self-Portrait: Letters Revealing His Life as a Painter*, trans. pub., ed. W. H. Auden (Greenwich, Conn., 1961).

23. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, vol. 6 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill., 1988), p. 188.

in a flurry of color and music and wind. Are these cats colors that happen to come across as cats? And let's not forget the music or the wind.

Could a cat be a whale, a white whale at that? Take the whale whose whiteness caused Ahab such commotion. Drove Melville crazy, too. The whiteness more than anything else. Here's what Melville has to say:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time is the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we all shrink?²⁴

I stare out my window onto the snow-covered river below, trying to put myself in Melville's snowshoes. All around as far as the eye can see the ground is mantled with soft, even whiteness. It is spectacular. It is soothing. It is something you can never get tired of. But the seasons move along. The roadworkers hired by the town ripped out a tree stump the other day when I was not here, damaging the low stone wall around the front of the house. The tree, an old pine, had fallen a year before, obstructing the dirt road. The workers cut a section out of the tree trunk so as to clear the way, leaving the stump protruding a little onto the road. For some reason they returned in the depth of winter and extracted the stump from the frozen ground, perhaps to make things easier for the snow plow. When I talked with the man driving the town's truck looking for potholes to fill, he said apropos of nothing much that we should wait till spring to fix up the wall when the stones half buried in frost would be free. The seasons move, but I was locked in the frost and had forgotten time, which is to say the movement of the earth in relation to the sun and how a totally different palette of colors will soon come along with the thawing of the frost, bold greens and delicate blues, the reds of the poppies in late May, the scattering of white roses everywhere along the edges of the forest in June. Purple and yellow is the color scheme for August, the driest month. The river banks and swamps will be purple with what people around here think of as an invasive weed, loosestrife. Along the edges of the road by my house are blue cornflowers accompanied by tendrils of yellow goldenrod and clusters of intensely bright yellow flowers, black-eyed Susans, also wild, growing some six feet high. Lying on the bed yesterday I saw a bright yellow bird balancing itself on the

24. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

stem of these yellow flowers. I have never seen such a color on a bird around here. Then I saw another bird, exactly the same, perched just above it. So I assume the color of birds owes something to the color of other wild things as we tilt this way and that in our orbit around the sun. But night is another story. Every night in June and July there will be fireflies lighting up the dark in a disappearing trail of sparks. God knows how, but sometimes they get into the bedroom. The night before I left for a long trip in July there were two fireflies well after midnight, looping the loop together.

Fireflies light up the night in trails of sparks that could never be confused with the light of the sun. Why is it then that for most of my life I had confused the sun with the artificial light produced by that late nineteenth-century invention of Thomas Edison, the lightbulb? All along I had assumed the sun was nothing more than a lightbulb. Same stuff. Light. After all. But now I'm wiser. The dawn is a great teacher. You see the light gradually creeping among the shadows in the forest left by the night. It is a warm, soft, blurry, creaturely substance, liquid light we might say, with a golden touch and depths to it as well. No. The sun is not a lightbulb. The color of its light keeps changing as if it wants to talk to us.

But right now in February it's an all-white world except that the river flows black with light glinting here and there. Large rocks in the river are covered with snow and ice to form ecstatic shapes never before drawn or seen in their stately unevenness.

At times the earth seems to glow and lift upwards as a soft but irresistible force. The ash trees and maples are bare of leaves, spidery spikes securing the earth as it lies suspended in its nothingness. It is no longer a forest but a forest of silhouettes, two-dimensional cut-outs of unnerving beauty, all form so purely a form that form collapses into the effervescence you feel late afternoon walking down the mountain with the sun setting like fire on the ridge to your left. The snow has a lot of ice that crunches loudly under the snowshoes. The sun becomes more orange as it sets. But what got me really going walking down the mountain with my friend Costas that late autumn afternoon, what caught your eye and very being in the first place, was the unnameable color—a type of light purple, some subtle mist of green and blue with some red and yellow in there, too, that was, you realize, more than the color in coloring, some other medium altogether. It was, you want to say, a curious light lightness, some quite other medium is what you want to say—floating, passing, radiating across the valley through the air, twisting through the branches of the forest as if it were the breath of the dying sun glowing itself ever stronger as it passes behind the ridge of the Catskills to the north, darkening blue with every added ray of fire from the sun.

6. In the Time of Lapus Lazuli

It was some other medium altogether, twisting through the branches of the forest, something I call *magical polymorphous substance*. The same substance makes up the interior of the bodies of South American shamans, meaning the shamanism of hunters and gatherers, people without chiefs, whom the late Pierre Clastres referred to as “society against the state.”²⁵ Yamana shamans told Lucas Bridges in the late nineteenth century and Martin Gusinde in the early 1920s that their bodies were full of a strange white substance like the feathers of newborn birds, a sort of ur-substance, like fetal tissue that can become any body cell whatsoever, which is one of the reasons I have chosen to call this substance—which for me includes color—*magical polymorphous substance*. Combining the art of the conjuror with that of the spirits, the shaman’s body collapses into this white feathery substance that is unlike any other. Not only can this substance stretch and grow at amazing rates and abruptly disappear back into the body whence it emerged, but it deftly crosses over into what we fondly think of as distinct media. It is the *shaman’s song*. It is the *shaman’s eye*. Above all it is *visuality incarnate*, the *metamorphosing substance of sorcery* that takes many forms from baby octopi to sharp flints.

Among the Shuar Indians in the mountainous jungles of eastern Ecuador as described by Michael Harner from his time among them in 1961, a shaman, male or female, appears to those who have drunk of the hallucinogenic vine, *yaé*, to regurgitate “a brilliant substance in which the spirit helpers are contained.” The shaman “cuts part of it off with a machete and gives it to the novice to swallow.” At the end of a month a spirit will emerge from this brilliant substance the novice has ingested. It will rise up into the novice’s mouth, and many more spirits will be generated by the novice swallowing insects and plants because now the novice has the power to convert such things into spirit helpers that can take the form of giant butterflies, monkeys, or even jaguars. The power of the shaman depends on these animal helpers whom, under the influence of *yaé*, the shaman sees as hovering over him- or herself, perching on the shoulders, and sticking out of the skin. To another shaman, also having drunk this hallucinogen, a shaman will appear to have a red, gold, and greenish “crown” above his head.²⁶

Colors are also brought into play when, intent on destroying a rival, a Shuar shaman tries to evacuate that person’s spirit helpers. This is accom-

25. See Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

26. Michael Harner, “The Sound of Rushing Water,” in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael Harner (New York, 1973), p. 17. See also Harner, *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972), p. 163.

plished by drinking the hallucinogen and then using one's own spirits to create a bridge in the form of a rainbow between oneself and the other along which one shoots one's spirits that strike the ground beside the other shaman with an explosion likened to a lightning bolt. The shock puts the rival off guard, allowing one to suck his or her animal spirits back along the rainbow.²⁷

Actually, anthropology has a word for these white feathery insides. Writing in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert called it *mana*, a term they borrowed from an anthropological study entitled *The Melanesians* written by R. H. Codrington, who lived on the Banks and Norfolk Islands in the South Pacific for twenty years from 1867 onwards. Sifting through different ideas about the basis of magic, Mauss and Hubert seized excitedly on *mana* as a way of taking the reader into the topsy-turvy, destabilized world of accelerated movements and disappearances wherein the distinction between substances and thoughts, for instance, became problematic and wondrous.

Understood as *mana*, magic is one jump ahead of an explanation, just out of range of the hunter. Mauss and Hubert understood this. Their use of *mana* was philosophically astute. They defined *mana* to be an extraordinary substance, invisible, marvelous, and spiritual, containing all efficacy and life. It was "pre-intellectual," a function of communal psychology. Belonging to a "fourth spatial dimension," it was "mobile and fluid without having to stir itself."²⁸ They could have been talking film theory, the Eisenstein variety, drunk on *plasmaticness*.²⁹

Perhaps the story of ultramarine is helpful. Before it was produced in factories in 1830, ultramarine was gotten from the semiprecious stone lapis lazuli. Under the microscope you can see why the natural and the synthetic varieties as used in painting look different to the naked eye. While the synthetic pigment has homogenous round crystals that produce a consistent all-the-same blue surface, the ultramarine derived from lapis lazuli has large, irregular crystals of varying transparency and, what is more, are clustered together with particles of mica, quartz, calcite, and pyrite, yielding what Anita Albus calls a color "like the glittering firmament." The calcite crystals, she says, "sparkle like stars within the deep blue."³⁰

27. See Harner, *The Jivaro*, pp. 165–66.

28. Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (1903; New York, 1972), p. 117.

29. Commenting on Lewis Carroll's Alice expanding and contracting in size and giving us full-page copies of John Tenniel's illustrations of this, Eisenstein emphasizes the visual pleasure entailed with the freedom of form that he calls "plasmaticness," behaving "like primal protoplasm" (Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, trans. Alan Upchurch, ed. Jay Leyda [London, 1988], p. 21).

30. Anita Albus, *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting* (New York, 2000), p. 66; hereafter abbreviated AA.

With regard to the fine arts, as practiced by the likes of Jan van Eyck and Vermeer, centuries of craft were choked off, notably the tremendous work preparing pigments, fresh, each day, the underpainting or foundation of the painting, and following that the application of alternate layers of opaque colors and transparent varnishes, what Cézanne called the “secret soul of grounds” and others call “glazing” (AA, p. 72). In enlargements of cross-sections of paint samples from paintings made this way, what we see, says Albus, “would look like a landscape of geological layers of different shapes and colors” (AA, p. 93). Multilayering was the key, and a crystalline, transparent density, the result. You see it in van Eyck and Vermeer. You see it in the iridescent cloth woven by the Flemish and the Italians in the fifteenth century, no less than in the iridescence of a butterfly’s wing. As she puts it, color is the *interplay* between *body* and *tone* (meaning hue). Each pigment a painter used had a different body, she writes, “which refracts, reflects, and absorbs light in a different way” (AA, p. 65). In other words when we see a color we are actually seeing a play with light in, through, and on a body—refracting, reflecting, and absorbing light—something we are aware of but rarely as with sunlight filtering through a forest, black water glinting in its rush past the ice, or rainbows on oil slicks on a wet roadway.

Given the play with light brought about by texture, it is no wonder that color can seem to be what I call a polymorphous magical substance, twisting itself as if alive through the branches along with the dying sun. At least it would be of no wonder were it not for changes since the nineteenth century in the production of paints. “The very abundance of colors in the modern world,” wrote François Delamare and Bernard Guineau quite recently, “seems to dilute our relationship with them. We are losing our intimate connection with the materiality of color, the attributes of color that excite all the senses, not just sight.”³¹

It is not by chance, Albus says, that now “the language of color nuances is always connected with *bodies*: sky blue, lavender blue, turquoise blue, gentian blue, violet blue, cornflower blue, reed green, apple green, olive green, almond green, sea green, emerald green.” What does she mean, “not by chance”? She points out that each name associates a color with a texture: “transparent or opaque, smooth, rough, dense, or friable bodies that shine, sparkle, reflect, or shimmer softly or harshly in the light” (AA, pp. 68, 69; my italics). Take the new, colored look of the *Wall Street Journal* with its palette of mint green, sky blue, and soft champagne. But such body names are fake, allusions to what paints used to be before the mid-nineteenth-century industrial

31. Delamare and Guineau, *Colors*, p. 125.

production of bodies with which light has an easier time with color than before—easier in the sense that light is not whacked around as it might be with passage through a series of roadblocks of different shaped crystals, as in the case of lapis lazuli or, for that matter, in the case of the colors of the sky in storms or at dawn and sunset.

The fakeness of these bodies conjured by market hype—*sky* blue, *lavender* blue, and so forth—is a fakeness brought about because by the mid-nineteenth century the body had been killed off. What took its place were these names as substitutes for what had disappeared, and the names were marvelous. Of course the broad strokes of the colors of nature remain—to some extent—but nature has changed, too, as with the rusted edges of the shop awnings and the rainbow-hued oil slicks on macadam.

Indeed, the chemical revolution of the nineteenth century that emerged from the search for easily reproducible, cheap, standardized colors and dyes, not from the colonized world but from European and North American coal tar, this very same chemical revolution polluted those broad strokes of remaining nature with new textures that were not as subject to market hype as *sky* blue and *lavender* blue. Far from it. For what produced the new colors, these textureless colors, dazzling and uniform, simultaneously altered the color of the environment and therefore the way humans thought of color, not to mention dyes—as we see with my three writers, Benjamin, Burroughs, and Proust. All three intertwine color with dyes, like ivy color; Proust, addicted to color no less than to dyes, is especially relevant as he stands closest in time to the great discoveries spurred on by the search for synthetic colors that led to the chemical revolution of society and environment.

The sunsets never look so stunning as when you see them through the haze of factory smoke and soot. Surrealism arrived long before the surrealists caught on. The moon radiated chemical purple, streams ran phosphorescent blue and green. A stench clung to the air. To escape the chemical pollution permanently altering nature's palette, the upper classes of England's and Europe's industrialized cities sought the beauty of the natural colors of Italy and the south of France and raved about the quality of the light that hung like wings of gossamer over silky sunsets. By the same token painters such as Turner (Venice) and later van Gogh (Arles) made unprecedented discoveries concerning light and color.

And of course these purple moons and phosphorescent streams appeared all the more vivid on account of the dull, bleak carapace that coated everything else, including the human lung. Iron and coal dominated this period. "Their colour spread everywhere," writes Lewis Mumford, "from grey to black: the black boots, the black stove-pipe hat, the black coach or carriage, the black iron frame of the hearth, the black cooking pots and pans

and stove. Was it mourning? Was it protective coloration? Was it mere depression of the senses?"³²

Yet from this very same blackness, of coal, all the colors of the rainbow could be imitated by the new dyes and paints, sweeping aside in a matter of decades all the pigments that had previously come from minerals, lichens, insects, and plants. Thanks to that we now live in an artificial paradise, and it has been color from coal tar more than anything else that has contributed to its artificiality. Coal-tar color coated the world as a natural backdrop. Coal-tar color became the light of the world, the ultimate mimetic camouflage that allowed second nature to pose as nature. Could this be why we moderns think of color in contradictory ways, as a sign of fakery no less than of the authentic? We have confused the factory-made color world around us in our rooms and magazines no less than on our bodies with the colors in nature, parallel to the way we have confused a photograph with reality.

The fake names of synthetic colors took all that color was and added the aura of phantasmagoric realities—as when Roland Barthes notes, in his quirky autobiography first published in 1975, that when he buys colors he does so according to “the mere sight of their name.” “The name of the color (*Indian yellow, Persian red, celadon green*) outlines a kind of generic region within which the exact, special effect of the color is unforeseeable; the name is then the promise of a pleasure, the program of an operation.” The name, he insists, transports him “because of the notion that *I am going to do something with it.*”³³

So, the name trumps the color, but it was the color that gave birth to the name, which in Barthes’s example is likely to be colonial exotic while in the names provided by Albus the reference is to what she calls *bodies*.

Bodies thus merge with the colonial body. An equation is set up between minerals, lichens, insects, and plants, on the one hand, and India and Persia, on the other, as both recede into a lost past. Truly, color is a wonderful thing, nowhere more so than when it shifts registers and enters language with a name.

Barthes recruits these fake color names to destabilize codes, as where he refers to “a kind of generic region within which the exact, special effect of the color is unforeseeable.” This is the region of color as animal, where the color walks of Burroughs become evidence of color’s ability to itself walk. As Barthes says, the name of the color is then the promise of a pleasure. It transports him.

32. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (1934; New York, 1963), p. 163.

33. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1977), p. 129. Many thanks to Bridget Potter for pointing out this reference to me.

And not only Barthes or Burroughs but, to strike an equally translucent tone, Goethe, too, as when, standing close to the end of the use of natural pigments and dyes, he asked a painter, Philipp Otto Runge, to set down his ideas on color. Runge's response is quoted by Benjamin in his essay on color in children's books on account of the way Runge highlighted what he called *transparent* colors, expounding on the very qualities I have called *magical polymorphous substance*. Runge speaks of the relationship of light to transparent color to be one of "an infinite delight; and the igniting of the colors, the blending of them one into the other, their re-birth, and their vanishing, is like breath being drawn at great pauses from eternity to eternity, from the highest light down to the lonely and eternal silence that lies in the deepest tones." Thus "objects are cloaked with a charm that usually lies more in the illumination of the air lying between us and the object than in the lighting of its forms" (quoted in *AA*, p. 80).

Now Goethe must have known of magic lanterns and the translucent colors they projected, filling the air with shimmering color. As early as 1646 in his *Ars Magnus*, Athanasius Kircher, following a suggestion made by Giovanni Battista della Porta in his book *Natural Magic* (1589), presented a cunning device, using the sun as a source of light bouncing off mirrors to which letters of the alphabet, images, and even flies stuck on with honey were attached.³⁴ Kircher also came up with a rotating drum on whose several sides were painted colored pictures to be thus projected. Magic lanterns using candlelight magnified by a mirror and lens were shown off by Thomas Walgensten in Lyon in 1665, where his projection of glass slides was noted for the brilliance of color. The Englishman Richard Reeves, instrument maker to the Royal Society, in the seventeenth century also built a magic lantern projecting painted images. Samuel Pepys bought one.³⁵ Color seemed a natural thing to do with these magic lanterns, transmuting solid color into transparent color.

Magic lanterns filled the centuries between Gothic stained glass and modern cinema. In my version of color history, magic lanterns took up where van Eyck and Vermeer left off. The nineteenth century may have killed off the body of color, but its spirit was resurrected with the improvements made to long-existing machines projecting light through colored images. Thus color enters the ethereal region, that "generic region" that Barthes sees whenever he goes to buy a color and does so according to the *sight of its name*.

34. See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York, 1990), p. 19.

35. See H. Mark Gosser, "Kircher and the Lanterna Magica—A Reexamination," *SMPTE Journal* 90 (Oct. 1981): 972–78.

This connection between the body and soul of color by means of language was seen clearly by Proust, who frequently claimed that Vermeer's painting provided him with his philosophy of writing. It is an amazing assertion: *style is to the writer what color is to the painter*. Proust's insistent point is that this art, working through layers of color and light, achieves its revelatory power through indirection and never by means of conscious confrontation because the real treasure is inaccessible to the intellect.³⁶

As a child, Proust's narrator was given a magic lantern by his parents. It would be set up on top of his lamp before the dinner hour and, "after the fashion of the first architects and master glaziers of the Gothic age, it replaced the opacity of the walls with impalpable iridescences, supernatural multicolored apparitions, where legends were depicted as in a wavering, momentary stained-glass window."³⁷ Proust's style is itself a magic lantern (the title of Howard Moss's marvelous book on Proust), which, in its most concentrated form, is what springs into being with the famous *mémoire involontaire* as the fire ignited by the play of transparent colors with opaque ones. Didn't Runge talk of rebirth along with vanishing when describing transparent color? This rebirth is as much memory as color, memories that can never be accessed by conscious effort no matter how hard we try, as when the narrator imagines real persons as characters in the stained glass window of the local church made of not just color but changing color, like Gilbert the Bad changing from cabbage green to plum blue, or like the persons in his magic lantern show bathed continuously in a sunset of orange light.³⁸

Slides and cinema project the spirit of color's dying corpse as when the glittering firmament of lapis lazuli slides off the painter's palette to be reborn in the colored air of magical polymorphous substance. Slides and cinematic images have depth as well, and it is this mix of depth and transparency that allows them to bathe us in sunsets of orange as we sit in the darkness of the cinema washed by color, crunching popcorn.

36. See Proust, *Time Regained*, p. 299.

37. Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York, 2003), p. 9.

38. See *ibid.*, p. 175.