

Philippe Henry

From a Universe in Colors toward a Color Universe

It seems so obvious to us to look anywhere and see colors; their presence seems so definite that it is very rare to question ourselves about their meaning and their particularities; to reflect on colors presupposes a new system of reflection.

If Newton's prism still reigned over the understanding of the universe of colors, the problem would be solved; once again the number, that magnificent fundamental entity, would have saved us. However, it is known today that color is not a particularity of light, but a potentiality of light that is only realized as such in us. Seeing colors is a property of the living, it is life itself. But what is life?

For the most modern biology, life is the character of that which is autonomous, changeable, fleeting, inconstant. Life is what becomes rather than what is, life is becoming, and being is but an elusive trace, something like an echo, the phenomenal manifestation of a sonic origin that no longer exists. For subatomic physics, being, like every object, is illusion, an illusion decreed by measurement (the very word *measure* derives from the Sanskrit *māyā*, illusion).

Well then, color is this manifestation of the fleeting and the apparent. None of the systems proposed over the millennia by scientists, thinkers, and artists have managed to curb this great fluidity of colors. This is not the case in the world of forms or in the universe of sound. A form presents itself as something resolved, stable. There is a numerical rule crowning such stability. The form is the representation of permanence. As for sound, if we remember our diatonic scale, we will notice that there is always a tonic helping a sensible note. The art of composition in our tonal music is the very search for resolution, for stabilization. Moreover, each note resolves itself, each note contains within itself the possibility of the chord (the so-called harmonic series), each note contains the principle of its own stabilization.

This is not the case with colors: there is nothing blue or green in red. In fact, this was the principle that Leonardo da Vinci used in his research on the primary colors, when he tried

to separate those colors that contained nothing of the others but themselves. And yet a primary color is not therefore more stable. On the contrary. The more green is imbued with green, the more it imprints to red.

Every color is, by analogy, a sensible note, that is, one that seeks its resolution outside of itself, just as the “B,” as sensible, seeks the “C” in order to realize itself, to perennialize itself. But there are differences. The principle of circularity, of return, is applicable to the world of sounds or forms, but not to the universe of colors.

The sound world can fold back on itself, it is possible to return, after long musical twists, to the original note. The scalar journey is a journey of recurrences. There will always be an octave higher, the comforting presence of a new “C.” This is not the case with colors.

As we travel along the visible spectrum, as we separate from the original red, we will never return to it, there will be nothing left on this tour of the color spectrum but a desaturated memory of red. And, as for the ancient belief of a “*finis terrae*,” there will be a moment when we will jump out of the world of colors that will have become something else, a heat wave, a radio wave... detached from their universe, embarked on the endless journey of the continuum.

Just as in the world of sounds, there are recurrences and similarities in the world of forms. Whether for the ancient homothetic, capable of reconstituting all forms from the triangle, or for the beautiful fractal geometry, whose principle of “self-similarity” produces magnificent images of spirals, the world of forms does not contain all the ingredients of the vertigo of the endless. On the contrary, form is the very representation of the finite, the limited. No wonder Pythagoras imagined architecture as frozen music.

There is no denying that all our thinking is of a formal order, that is, founded on the notion of form. And yet, when today boundaries are blurring, at a time when science is asserting that life itself is the realm of the changeable, the fleeting, the unlimited transformation, the static placidity of form or the comforting circularity of sounds can no longer help us to found a new way of thinking. As vertiginous and dizzying as this may seem, it is the instability of colors and their sensible power to always go beyond that can serve us, so to speak, paradoxically, as a reference.

Our world tends to be inhabited by objects that are increasingly “softer,” and consequently, increasingly more colorful. Hard matter, the form, will give way to colors. The brutality

of what is permanent gives way to the softness of what is ephemeral. Becoming is what takes the place of being. The fleeting magic of colors is what we will finally incorporate into our thinking, and what we will choose as the maximum representation of life.

Translation: Rodrigo Maltez Novaes