

Colour and Emotion

Humanising the message



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Illustrations by Fabian Keppens

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“Colours, like features, follow the changes of the emotions.”

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)

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Foreword

None of us can fail to notice the proliferation, during our own lifetimes, of the media messages that assail us in our day-to-day lives. A high proportion of those media messages contain a strong graphical element, with colour playing a strong part. But colour, as Jan Callebaut and his collaborators point out, is more than a characteristic of visual images. Colours, and the words that describe them, are the vocabulary of a language; and that language plays a key role in the marketing process. Understanding that language, its complexities and changing nuances, can play a major role in creating effective brands and the marketing materials to support them.

Colour is a fundamental tool of marketing. The humble mobile phone, always black in its earliest form, became a fashion accessory for the young through the introduction of colours and the ability to change colours to suit the occasion or mood. But the use of colours can also communicate more selectively through the rich vein of associations from colour metaphors: “blue with cold”, “green with jealousy”, “he gave me a black look”. The snag is that these colour associations are not always consistent; having “blue blood” has quite the opposite connotation to “blue collar workers”, and “blue humour” means something else again. The connotation of colours is also culturally dependent: black is the colour of mourning in the West but white is the colour of mourning in the East. Colours can create a mood in unexpectedly powerful ways: people sitting in a red room can tolerate a temperature 3°C lower than people sitting in a blue room, before they start to shiver.

These, and many other examples in the text, should be enough to persuade us that we need some help and guidance when we set out to exploit the meaning and associations of colour in our messages about brands. Jan Callebaut and his collaborators in Synovate Censydiam help us through this maze, identifying ambiguities of meaning, tracing the history of colour associations and colour metaphors, and describing the cultural variations in the meaning of colours. After reading this monograph it would be impossible to have any faith in “universal” theories of colour, or personality tests that rely on simple colour preferences. This fascinating book is not a recipe book for the use of colour in marketing. It is more truly an exploration of the vocabulary, history and cultural context of colour, which helps us to understand the meaning of colours, and to create our own marketing recipes.

I hope you enjoy the voyage as much as I have.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim Bowler". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Chief Executive Officer – Western Europe
Synovate



Introduction

Ceci n'est pas une pipe

This book on colour is not really about colour. It is not a book about the physics of colour, the so-called colour order systems, though it will briefly outline the landmark theories in the history of our understanding of how colour works – from the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers and scientists to the theories of Johannes Itten and the Bauhaus movement.

We will tell you, in brief, what colour is and of the contemporary models as you see them on your computer and television screens.

This is not a book about the psychology of colour either, in the sense of the effect of colour on the human mind, though we will discuss at length the symbolism of colours in different cultures.

By following the path of linguistics, our observations will try to reveal how colour is as much a question of linguistic signs, and the interplay between signifiers and the signified, as of physics. Our ultimate aim is to tell you how and why colour can help you sell.

Do colours help marketing?

Every year the Colour Marketing Group forecasts a palette of colours to aid the marketing of goods and services. The Group however is not into the understanding of the functions of colour so much as the observation of consumer preference. Today, more than in the past, colour is a crucial factor in making purchase decisions. More so than before because, as Cheon Mi-ryung from the Secretariat of the Seoul International Colour Expo 2004 said: “As youth have grown up with heavy influence from the visual media such as TV, film, video and fashion magazines, companies are starting to focus more on marketing colours that appeal to the senses.”

Before World War I we pictured the world in black and white – movies were in black and white, as were newspapers and magazines, which gave us a cohesive view of the world. The advent of colour imagery dispersed that vision; colour isolated details and made our making choices much more difficult.

This is not a guidebook therefore in the same sense that the pipe in Magritte's painting is not a pipe. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Red for instance is not, or is not simply, according to the Webster dictionary, “one of the four psychologically primary hues that is evolved in the normal observer under normal conditions by radiant energy from the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum combined with a very small amount of the radiant energy from the short-wave extreme”. Just as the pipe in Magritte's painting is only an image of a pipe, red is much more than the colour that falls on the retina; red is also both what memory

– our collective unconscious – recognises, and our reaction to it. This is what we will try to explain in these pages, what should eventually guide us in the use of colours in marketing. In that sense it is a guidebook, a guidebook through the streets of colours and eventually a larger picture of the city.

The language of colours

If we imagine colours to be the vocabulary of a language, then the meanings of its words do not only change according to the context in which they are used, but also according to the historical and cultural context in which these meanings developed. Historically and culturally, for example, the red of a traffic light is not the same as the red of the Red Army, or a red sports car.

In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, French semiologist and occasional calligrapher and painter Roland Barthes wrote that when purchasing paint colours he chose them on the basis of their names – Indian yellow, celadon green, Persian red... The name of a colour, Roland Barthes tells us, traces a generic region inside which the particular special effect of the colour is unforeseeable: the name becomes a promise of pleasure. It inspires Barthes with the idea that he is going to do something with the word and, therefore, the colour.

In our attempt to understand the language of colour we will explore the Barthesian generic regions of its vocabulary, which are in fact the real signifiers. A red traffic light does not tell us to stop because the light is red but because, in traffic discourse, the words “red traffic light” signify “do not go any further”.

Our story of colour bears similarities with the history of linguistics. Linguistics has long been marred by structuralism and subsequently deconstruction. Likewise the perception of colour cannot be structured. We shall therefore tell the story of colour in fragments, for to structure it into a narrative would obscure the message: colour is a constant succession of pleasure and astonishment that defies cohesion. It is for the reader to construct or deconstruct their own “virtual text” in their search for a personal comprehensive meaning.





In the Censydiam Model, red is for vitality

Vitality is achieving individuality by embracing innovation, by exploring new emotions, by an extroverted Self, not in the sense of gregariousness, but in the sense of exploring the world. Vitality is all about experiencing freedom, passion, adventure, buzzing about, spending energy, feeling very much alive and kicking. It is characterised mainly by achieving independence away from the Others, as opposed to finding security among the Others – represented in our Model by the colour blue.

The expression “red blood” refers to vitality. Red is the colour of passion and passion runs in our blood. (See also The colour of music: the red and black sides of flamenco). However red must be seen worn to express this passion. The British author Angela Carter wrote: “A guardsman in a dress uniform is ostensibly an icon of aggression; his coat is red as the blood he hopes to shed. Seen on a coat hanger, with no man inside it, the uniform loses all its blustering significance and, to the innocent eye seduced by decorative colour and tactile braid, it is as abstract in symbolic information as a parasol to an Eskimo.” A red Ferrari must be seen driven on the racetrack; it loses its winner’s passion in the showroom of the car dealer.

Red is an ambivalent colour. Red passion can be positive as well as negative. One can be red with anger, and one can be red-blooded, emotional, passionate and full of feelings. Wars and revolutions are red but in Chinese New Year messages are written on red paper. Red is the colour of cardinals, the highest dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church after the pope. Red is also the colour of the scarlet letter, the mark of Cain.

Creative use of red

Red is a difficult, if not impossible colour to replace: its warning function is just about universal and its political function indissolubly connected with leftist or revolutionary parties. Imagine Liberal or Green Parties changing their blue or green house style and logos into red. When Russia adopted its new flag in 1991, the colour red had sunk to the bottom, much like the communist overtones of the new government.

Red also stands for vitality, freedom, passion and adventure. Can you imagine a green heart? Ecologists have a heart for green forests, but a “green heart” would be too far-fetched and absurd a construction of the imagination. It is an analogy that cannot possibly work.

And what about the so-called red herrings? A red herring is a smoked herring with a reddish-brown colour. It is also a false lead, particularly in a detective novel. Where is that meaning derived from? Some say that it stems from the use of a strong-smelling herring, trailed over the ground, for inducing a dog to follow the scent over any other. Therefore, in this image, the smell is more important than the colour, or better still, the colour refers to the strong smell. Colour referring to smell, a sort of synesthetic reference, which is what creative use of colour is all about.

Colour synesthesia rarely works the way of colour evoking a sensation of smell; the hearing of a sound producing the visualisation of a colour is much more common (see also Colour preferences, matt and brilliant, humid and tender). Technically, synesthesia is not what we would call “creative” but a hitherto unexplained reflex. Scientists still debate why we feel that a red painted room is warmer than the same room painted in blue. Linguistically, on the other hand, synesthesia is the description of one kind of sense impression by using words that normally describe another. The creative use of colour language.

Little Red Riding Hood

In their introduction to *The Naked Consumer*, explaining the narrative and the Self, Censydiam put Little Red Riding Hood on stage and gave her hoods of different colours, corresponding with the colours of their Illogic Algorithm. In the original story, Little Red Riding Hood wears red headgear – and we often see her depicted with red clothes too. Where do these red clothes come from?

Although the story, or stories, as there are many different versions, has been studied from all angles, especially the psychological and even psychoanalytical angles, Little Red Riding Hood's red clothes have never been given a definitive explanation.

Some say it reflects the cruelty of the wolf and the blood that will flow, but Little Red Riding Hood herself is not cruel. Others tell us that the red is the reflection of sexuality and that Little Red Riding Hood in fact wants the carnal knowledge of the wolf. More seriously, others tell us that Little Red Riding Hood is dressed in her best, as is often the case for women and girls in the Middle Ages, in red. In one of the oldest versions of the tale, Little Red Riding Hood is born on the Pentecost and wears the colour red of the Holy Ghost.

All very well, but is the explanation not of a semiotic nature, based on the structure of the tale and on the ternary distribution of the colours red, black and white, the threesome of colours that was widespread in the symbolic representations of ancient Western cultures?

In our story, the girl dressed in red brings a pot of white butter to her grandmother dressed in black. The fact that the wolf will replace the grandmother in bed does not change the third of the threesome of colours: the wolf is black too. The fairy tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs has the same ternary distribution of colours: a black witch gives a white girl a red apple.

Red meat

Today, consumers want very dark red beef. However, the different factors that determine the colour of beef are many: the race of the animal, the conditions under which it has been slaughtered, the part that is presented on the counter and so on. All these factors are difficult to control, so the producers and sellers often have to cheat and use colouring agents – which are strictly controlled by law – and, at the selling point, play with the light, the packing and so on. All this is much easier achieved with the green of fruits and vegetables than with the red of meat.

In 1940, red meat consumption in the United States reached 142 pounds per capita on an average annual basis. The figure increased to 184 pounds in the next 30 years. In 1967, the annual beef consumption in America reached 105.6 pounds per capita, up from 99 pounds in 1960, and the average American ate 71 pounds of other red meat.

The question that creeps up first is why? It can be explained by the need to show off wealth. Red meat is much more expensive than white meat but the average American can afford it. In poorer countries, we find more chicken and pork on the menu. So, if we ask why, it appears that it has nothing to do with the colour red.

However, if we want to know where the preference for red meat comes from, we should ask: what does it mean? A steak is reddest, having a colour resembling that of blood, when it is rare, cooked only a short time to retain its juice – and, incidentally, redness. In his *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes – who has always avoided the why? and favoured what does it mean? – wrote: “To eat steak rare... represents both a nature and a morality.” A nature, an essence of the animals we are after all. A morality, not a quality of being in accord with standards of right and wrong conduct but the quality of being in accord with our nature.

The colour of music: the red and black sides of flamenco

It is called synesthesia: a condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another, as when the hearing of a sound produces the visualisation of a colour. We all experience it to a greater or lesser extent. Synesthesia also means describing one kind of sense impression by using words that normally describe another, which is what we have tried to explain all along. Colour “sensation” is more often than not linked with semantic cross-references and shifts (displacements) of meaning.

When we hear flamenco music and listen to the texts for example, we may see the colours red and black. Does it mean that flamenco is lively and flaming? Some say that the term flamenco comes from the Old Provençal *flamenc* and ultimately from the Latin *flamma*, “flame,” but this etymological explanation is far too easy and convenient.

Flamenco is more than music or song and dance; it is a vehicle of a culture. Seeing the colour red as the evocation of the liveliness of flamenco music is more than a synesthetic experience. It is true that flamenco is about passion and love which evokes and is evoked by the colour

red – the female flamenco dancers often wear a red dress – but flamenco is also about emotional pain, intense suffering and death, which evokes and is evoked by the colour black – and the male flamenco dancers are almost invariably dressed in black.

Virginia Armas tells us, “the short and sudden dance movements reflect this quality: one would think that flamenco dancers do not get to relieve this burst of passion and violence that is expressed only to get trapped again inside a suffering body.” Flamenco is red and black at the same time: passion and suffering as two sides of the same coin.

Other culturally defined folk music genres do not have that duality. The Black American blues are blue. They only convey a state of depression or melancholy. The music of the Greek underworld, the *rebetiko*, also often called “the Greek blues”, is black as the crime-fostering nights and the semidarkness of the hashish dens in which it was performed.

Using colour to express emotion: a roadmap

If we want to humanise a message using colour as a sign of a specific notion, or a specific emotion, the semantic function

of a colour we use to give our message a specific value is of major concern.

As we have seen, a colour can have different meanings. The different meanings are determined by the context in which they are used. In a particular context, a colour always has a single conceptual image, a single notion. In a traffic sign, red always means “Stop! No! Forbidden!” At the same time, extra-notional associations or “connotations” can colour the concept, without shifting it. That is what we call – in opposition to the signification – the value of the signifier, which in our case is the colour.

These values belong to two worlds. On the one hand, they can evoke a certain milieu, a certain social or cultural group. It determines the social or socio-contextual value of the colour. The socio-contextual value of a colour is usually linked with the cultural context in which the colour is used. On the other hand, and even more importantly, there is the emotion “contained” in the colour. This is more often universal and we would call it the expressive value of the colour.

Contrary to the unique conceptual meaning, which is logical or cognitive, the expressive value is volitional: we use it to obtain a reaction. See the example

the ING bank: the colour orange has the cognitive notion of being Dutch and also the expressive value of the pleasure dimension, the spontaneous and immediate satisfaction.

Obtaining a reaction is what we want when we use a colour in commercial communication. We should work with the expressive and socio-contextual values (i.e. the expressive values) of colour, values that are not absolute but are determined by context and connotation.

That is what we tried to illustrate all along, hoping it may inspire you in the choice of colours you make to give additional value to your messages, commercial or otherwise.