

Chromophilia: *Der Blaue Reiter*, Walter Benjamin and the Emancipation of Color

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“Indelible from the resistance to the fungible world of barter is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade.”

Theodor W. Adorno¹

In 2003, the Wilhelm Hack Museum in the city of Ludwigshafen am Rhein mounted an exhibition entitled “Der Blaue Reiter: Die Befreiung der Farbe.”² In what follows, I want to focus on the provocative subtitle of that show and ask the question, what did the “emancipation of color” mean for the Blaue Reiter, in particular for its most prominent figure, Wassily Kandinsky? The other artists associated with the movement, such as Robert Delauney, Franz Marc, August Macke, Alexander Jawlensky and Paul Klee, were also remarkable chromatic innovators, but Kandinsky was the most articulate spokesman of their more or less common position.³ The language of “emancipation” is, in fact, one he explicitly adopted.⁴ To help us clarify the stakes of his argument, I will also be examining the fragmentary, posthumously published thoughts on color by a German critic who was himself fascinated by the Blaue Reiter, Walter Benjamin, which have recently been subjected to sustained analysis by Howard Caygill and Heinz Brüggemann.⁵

In any history of early 20th-century visual modernism, the experiments in color performed by avant-garde communities of artists, such as the Nabis and Fauves in France and Die Brücke in Germany, are routinely foregrounded. But perhaps no other group put as much theoretical weight on its importance as the Blaue Reiter, which, after all, even included a color in its very name.⁶

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. T.B. Ashton (New York, 1973), p. 404-405.

² Richard W. Gassen, ed., *Der Blaue Reiter: Die Befreiung der Farbe* (Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 2003).

³ The caveat “more or less common” has to be introduced because Marc in particular had a far less spiritual understanding of the meaning of color in his work. Some observers have gone so far as to deny that there was a common position at all, for example, Peter Selz, who claimed that “the Blaue Reiter was neither a school nor a movement.” *German Expressionist Painting* (New York, 1974), p. 206.

⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Lexington, Ky., 2010), p. 60.

⁵ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Experience of Colour* (London, 1998) and Heinz Brüggemann, *Walter Benjamin: Über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie* (Würzburg, 2007). Earlier studies of Benjamin did not foreground his debts to expressionists like Kandinsky. Eugene Lunn, in his still valuable *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley, 1982), acknowledges only the influence of Symbolism and later Surrealism.

⁶ According to a later reminiscence of Kandinsky, “We [he and Franz Marc] invented the name ‘Der Blaue Reiter’ while sitting at a coffee table in the garden in Sindelsdorf; we both loved blue, Marc liked horses. I riders. So the name came by itself.” Kandinsky, “‘Der Blaue Reiter’ (Rückblick),” *Das Kunstblatt*, XIV (1930, p. 59). It is sometimes noted Kandinsky had already named one of his paintings of 1903 *The Blue Rider*, but Klaus Lankheit in

Whether infused with metaphysical, even mystical meaning or understood more in terms of sensual experiences of the profane world—this opposition radically separated Kandinsky and Marc from Jawlensky, Macke and Delaunay⁷--color was to be liberated from its hitherto inferior status in the visual arts. And with its liberation, so it seemed, would come a more profound emancipation of human experience.

To make sense of that hope requires an appreciation of the long-standing debate about the implications of color in Western culture. Occupying a unique place at the intersection of the senses and the psyche, as well as between objects and the subjective experiences we have of them, color has perplexed philosophers, scientists and artists ever since men pondered the world around them. The age-old battle in painting between disegno e colore, first explicitly articulated in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari, was more frequently won by the former.⁸ Deemed inferior to form because of its volatility and evanescence, color struggled to defend its honor against the advocates of order, solidity and duration. Against the purity and calm of whiteness, the prismatic dispersal of color often seemed dangerously unstable, somehow akin to the desire unleashed when men fell from grace.

To be sure, the colorists of Venice sought to assert themselves against the austerity of Florence in Renaissance painting, while lush romantics like Delacroix resisted the power of severe classicists like Ingres. But what David Batchelor has dubbed “chromophobia” underpinned a widespread suspicion of color as merely superficial, cosmetic or ornamental, reinforced by associating it with marginalized or abjected cultural phenomena, such as the feminine, the childish, the oriental or the queer.⁹ Indeed, since the time of the ancient Greeks, it suffered from its association with seductive rhetoric rather than rigorous dialectic.¹⁰ In the more

his introduction to the republication of The Blaue Reiter Almanac, trans. Henning Falkenstein (New York, 1974), p. 19, that it was originally called only Der Reiter and renamed only when the Almanac appeared. Franz Marc also painted many horses and the color blue was identified by him with the male principle: creative, strong and geistig.

⁷ See Volker Adolph, “Von ‘inneren Klängen’ und der ‘Bewegung des Lichtes’: Das Problem der Farbe im Blauen Reiter” in Gassen, ed., Der Blaue Reiter.

⁸ For a helpful recent account, see Rein Undusk, “Disegno e Colore: Art Historical Reflections on Space,” KOHT ja PAIK / PLACE and LOCATION: Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics V, eds. Eva Näripea, Virve Sarapik, Jaak Tomberg (Tallinn, 2006). There is also an illuminating chapter on the theme in John Gage’s indispensable Color and Culture (London, 1993)

⁹ David Batchelor, Chromophobia (London, 2000).

¹⁰ On the links between rhetoric and color, see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley, 1993) and Wendy Steiner, The Colors of Rhetoric (Chicago, 1982).

modern vocabulary of John Locke, it was understood to be a secondary, superficial characteristic of the perceived world, not primary like shape and form, which could be confirmed by another sense, touch. Often it was identified as well with the primitive, the emotional, the untrustworthy and even the pathological. In Latin, colorem, it has been argued, is related to celare, the verb for hiding or concealing.¹¹ Color, admitted even the great 20th-century colorist Josef Albers, “deceives continuously.”¹²

And yet, as we know, what is marginal often finds its way back to the center and has its revenge against the hegemonic order. What seems dangerous in one context is redemptive in another. By the late 19th century, what might be called “chromophilia” began to emerge in a number of different contexts.¹³ In 1884, to take one example from literature, the celebrated mathematical fantasy novel Flatland, by the British theologian Edwin Abbot, imagined a great Color Revolt led by a pentagon named Chromatistes against the tyranny of the two-dimensional world of orderly lines and regular geometric shapes.¹⁴ Significantly, he called it a “parable of spiritual dimensions.”

In the case of the actual visual arts of modern Europe, color asserted itself in the wake of the Impressionist exploration of the impact of light playing on objects registered by the eyes of the beholder, rather than on the objects themselves. Here, ironically reversing Abbot’s mathematical allegory, it was the move from three to two dimensions that proved liberating. More important than the solid presence of a world to be recorded by the artist, a world understood as intelligible in terms of the formal principles of perspectival space, were the fleeting impressions left on the registering apparatus itself. The familiar story of the retreat from the three-dimensionality of the traditional window-on-the-world version of painting to the two-dimensionality of the flat canvas meant a diminished interest in the solidity of objects and a new fascination with their surfaces, which soon led to a comparable focus on the flat surface of the canvases on which they were painted. Although Impressionists generally thought of themselves as recording as faithfully and dispassionately as they could their perceptions of the world, the

¹¹ Batchelor, Chromophobia, p. 52.

¹² Cited in Charles A. Riley II, Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology (Hanover, 1995), p. 6. This remarkable book will inform much of what follows.

¹³ David Batchelor has used this term for a show of his own work, mounted among other places in Rio de Janeiro in 2009. See <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/chromophilia.php>.

¹⁴ Edwin A. Abbott, Flatland: A Parable of Spiritual Dimensions (Oxford, 1994).

collapse of perspectival space meant an implicit diminution of interest in solid shape and form and a new appreciation of evanescence and impermanence.

When the Impressionist passion for sensual accuracy faded and the painter's eye was freed from recording not only enduring objects but also fleeting perceptions, what might justifiably be called the full emancipation of color could follow.¹⁵ Now the somewhat subdued, pastel, even wan pallet of the Impressionists could give way to the more intense explosion of vibrant colors on a Fauve, Brücke or Blaue Reiter canvas. Now the optical mixing of colors that produced effects of shimmering surfaces reflecting natural light could be replaced by a palette of pure colors that reflected nothing but themselves. In fact, the actual artist's wooden palette on which oil paints were placed before being applied to the canvas gained primacy over the colors of the natural world, either in objects or on the retina of the painter, a trend towards the autonomization of color that was accelerated in the 1960's when color was applied directly from commercial paint cans by artists seeking even greater chromatic intensity.¹⁶

A similar phenomenon had occurred slightly earlier in the register of music, where Hector Berlioz has been credited with emancipating color from line and preparing the way for the lush chromaticism of Wagner and Schoenberg's Klangfiguren.¹⁷ In musical terms, color is a metaphor for virtuoso ornamentation, as in coloratura singing, as well as for the variations in timbre and orchestration that give the same pitch different sonorous qualities. As Charles Riley II notes, "color is also related, as in painting, to a dangerous antiformal force that threatens the very fabric of musical symmetry and organization."¹⁸ Against melody and harmony, it allows impurity and imprecision to invade the precincts of musical order, so often understood as analogous to

¹⁵ In John Russell's well-known The Meanings of Modern Art (New York, 1974) published by the Museum of Modern Art, the second volume was entitled "The Emancipation of Color." He sees it foreshadowed by Van Gogh and Maurice Denis, but argues that it was still a shock when exhibitions in Paris (1905), Dresden (1906), Munich (1911) and New York (1913) made clear how much of a breakthrough had occurred. Although he emphasizes the importance of the Fauves, most notably Matisse, he also stresses Picasso's contribution, especially during his "blue" and "rose" periods.

¹⁶ See Batchelor, Chromophobia, p. 98f.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, In Search of Wagner, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1981), p. 71. See also his discussion of Wagner's orchestration and use of instrumental color in "Wagner's Relevance for Today," in Essays on Music, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, eds. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, 2002), p. p. 93-94. Significantly, he calls Wagner "the first case of uncompromising musical nominalism" (p. 588), which alerts us to the link between the emancipation of color and the nominalist impulse in much modern art. Adorno extolled the role of color in the compositions of Mahler as well. For a discussion, see John J. Scheinbaum, "Adorno's Mahler and the Timbral Outsider," Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 131, 1 (2006).

¹⁸ Riley, Color Codes, p. 274.

mathematical regularities. Insofar as color has often been seen as more than a metaphorical bridge between the visual and aural worlds, this parallel emancipation is not without its importance, especially for those artists hoping for a synaesthetic overcoming of rigid distinctions between senses.

Among their number was Wassily Kandinsky, who himself apparently possessed the ability to mingle senses and sought to duplicate the experience on his canvases.¹⁹ His penchant for musical titles for his works and his friendship with the Arnold Schoenberg, the painter/composer who had fostered another celebrated aesthetic emancipation, that of tonal dissonance in musical composition, also testify to his belief that the emancipation of color was embraced by more than just the visual arts. Significantly, The Blaue Reiter Almanac included not only a piece by Schoenberg, but also three other essays on musical themes by Thomas von Hartmann, Leonid Sabaneiev and N. Kulbin, as well as the plan for a “stage composition” by Kandinsky called “The Yellow Sound.”²⁰

If one defines the idea of emancipation in more narrowly defined visual terms, however, it meant freedom from three or perhaps four tyrannies. The first, as we have noted, was the priority of the drawn line or distinct form, the primacy of spatial order and relational intelligibility, which was challenged in favor of the messiness, instability, luminosity and vibrancy of hue and tone. Contour was no longer a rigid boundary, coloring outside the lines more than just an error of childish imprecision. The second was the tyranny of mimetic reproduction, the imperative to imitate faithfully the sensed colors of the external world, including the variations caused by changing conditions of light and shadow. The third tyranny was more institutional than practical: the entrenched power of official academies with their prescribed rules for good painting.²¹ One final tyranny from which color might be understood to escape, at least for certain of its liberators, was its identification with mere surface appearances,

¹⁹ For a discussion, see Ossian Ward, “The Man Who Heard His Paintbox Hiss,” The Telegraph, June 10, 2006.

²⁰ The essay by Sabaneiev is particularly apposite to our theme, as it deals with a work by Scriabin called Prometheus, which was a “symphony of colors,” based on a correspondence between notes and colors.

²¹ For a discussion of the French Academy’s defense of design over color, see Lichtenstein, The Eloquence of Color, chapter 6. In “On the Question of Form” in The Blaue Reiter Almanac, Kandinsky wrote “the academy is the surest way of destroying the power of the child. Even the greatest, strongest talent is more or less retarded in this respect by the academy. Lesser talents perish by the hundreds. An academically trained person of average talent excels in learning practical meanings and losing the ability to hear his inner sound. He produces a ‘correct’ drawing that is dead.” (p. 176).

as the Impressionists had assumed. Instead, it could be interpreted symbolically as revealing deeper essential truths, either of the world or the psyche.

Freed from its constraints, color could pursue its own path, either towards a new order of its own or towards the subversion of order itself and the celebration of formlessness as a positive value in its own right.²² Here it could be the handmaiden of the parallel revolution known as abstraction, in which the formal elements of a painting were no longer dependent on the representation of a prior world, but could be replaced either by purer ideal forms or by deliberate formlessness.²³ Abstractly geometric shapes and allegedly pure colors—neither of which can easily be found in nature—were one possible direction. But there was also another possibility, as we will see when we turn to Walter Benjamin, which involved escaping from fantasies of absolute purity in either register.

Why, we have to ask, were lines, forms and mimesis of the given world, the world of appearances, considered tyrannical in the first place? What was implied by the struggle to escape their domination? For champions of linear form and the hegemony of design, the values of clarity, distinctness, bounded space and an opposition between figure and ground were held dear. Both three and two-dimension depictions of form seemed on the side of rationality rather than feeling, balanced order rather than disordered chaos. Traditionally, line was associated with spiritual distinction, while color was identified with base materiality.²⁴ Even when modernist movements like cubism deconstructed received notions of formal design and ideal form, they did so in the name of a more complex and accurate portrayal of multiple perspectives and temporal transitions simultaneously represented on a flat canvas. As a result, they were often seen as less advocates of the full emancipation of color than obstacles to it.

Once emancipated from the hegemony of form, color could, of course, itself be subject to the structural imperative to bring order into chaos, with charts, diagrams, scales, and many other

²² For a discussion of the valorization of formlessness in certain modernist circles, see my essay “Modernism and the Retreat from Form,” in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York, 1993).

²³ The rhetoric of the “emancipation of form” is also sometimes used to characterize the first of these alternatives.

²⁴ In his defense of Delacroix as a colorist, Charles Baudelaire wrote of his critics in 1861: “It would seem that when I contemplate the works of one of those men who are specifically called ‘colorists’, I am giving myself up to a pleasure whose nature is far from a noble one; they would be delighted to call me ‘materialistic’, reserving for themselves the aristocratic title of ‘spiritual’.” “The Life and Work of Eugène Delacroix,” *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, trans. and ed., Jonathan Mayne (London, 1970), p. 51. This essay appeared in 1863, but the passage was cited from an earlier review published two years earlier.

spatial configurations used to depict relationships of harmony, complementariness, and dissonance. Here imperfect static representations sought to capture the dynamic interactions of colors, which involve issues of saturation, transparency, after-images, and lighting, but with results that were rarely satisfactory. The natural spectrum of the rainbow, prismatically refracting white light into its component parts, proved often more evocative than all of the color wheels invented by scientific categorizations, at least for practicing artists.

It is a commonplace of art criticism to note that artists who used color effectively were not enslaved to the scientific analysis of color, even if some were stimulated by works on the interactions of neighboring colors, such as Michel Eugène Chevreul's 1839 De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés and 1864 Des couleurs et de leurs applications aus arts industriels.²⁵ Although intended to help tapestry and fabric makers at the Gobelins works, these texts did inspire certain artists as well. Perhaps ultimately more genuinely inspirational was Goethe's celebrated Farbenlehre, which had explored the psychological as well as perceptual dimensions of color, and sought to separate it from the domination of schematic, mathematical optics associated with Newton. Goethe's abandonment of the passive camera obscura model of vision and stress on the role of the observer's eye—he is a central figure in the story Jonathan Crary tells of the subjectivization of vision in the 19th century²⁶—also opened the door to a more expressionist appreciation of the emotional valences of color.

By the time of Kandinsky's path-breaking treatise Concerning the Spiritual in Art, published first in 1911, and The Blaue Reiter Almanac, which appeared the following year, the physiological and psychological dimensions of the emancipation of color were supplemented by metaphysical ones, helping to reverse its traditional identification with matter rather than spirit. Not surprisingly, one of his philosophical inspirations was Arthur Schopenhauer, whose theories

²⁵ For an account that stresses the importance of scientific advances in understanding color, see Paul C. Vitz and Arnold b. Glimcher, Modern Art and Modern Science: The Parallel Analysis of Vision (New York, 1984), chapter 4. They claim that his early ideas about the psychological response to colors was similar that of the Charles Henry, but acknowledge that any direct influence was unlikely. Later, during his Bauhaus years, he was more explicitly in the debt of Ewald Hering's more Goethean theories. Selz more emphatically questions the influence of science on Kandinsky's color theory: "Kandinsky's color symbolism is in no way based upon physical laws of color or upon the psychology of color vision: 'All these statements are the results of empirical feelings, and are not based on exact science'." German Expressionist Painting, p. 230. The citation is from "The Language of Form and Color" in On the Spiritual in Art.

²⁶ Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass, 1990), chapter 3.

of color extended Goethe's critique of Newton and whose celebration of music as the art closest to the level of the impersonal Will left their mark on Kandinsky's theories. Those theories were derived from a hodgepodge of different, more or less dubious strains in Russian and German thought, vitalist, religious, mystical, theosophical and symbolist. At once apocalyptic and cosmogenic, Kandinsky swam in the same turbulent waters as many other intellectuals and artists during the early decades of the twentieth century. His central concept of Geist, which can be translated as either spirit or mind, had lost the rationalist connotation it had enjoyed in German Idealism. Instead, it was now employed in the service of a neo-romantic ideology of renewal with no fixed political valence. As George Mosse has noted, it was a favorite term of figures like Eugen Diederichs, the publisher of völkisch New Romanticism. "Earlier romantics had employed a similar concept and the same word to designate human empathy with cosmic vitality. Diederichs used the word in the same way. He styled the Geist as the 'longing of the soul towards unity'."²⁷ Others with more leftist inclinations like Kurt Hiller, the leader of the so-called Activist Expressionists who emerged during the war, were also enamored of the term. As August Wiedmann puts it, "Geist was the all-embracing and seemingly self-explanatory principle for Hiller and his intellectual workers—Geist as active, as 'holy' and holistic. And this Geist was believed to generate a new dynamic rationalism, one politically alert and aggressively opposed to the Germans' penchant for passive introspection. The new rationalism was, however, not that of analytical reason, but of intuitive creative thought which, in Hiller's view, required 'ecstasy' to keep it going."²⁸

In this usage, Geist came close to signifying what was sometimes construed as its opposite in the German vocabulary of the day, Seele or soul. In fact, in an influential book by Ludwig Klages of 1929 entitled Geist als Widersacher der Seele, they were pitted against each other as two incompatible principles. For a Lebensphilosoph like Klages, Geist still smacked too much of idealist rationalism. But for Kandinsky, there seems to have been no meaningful distinction between them. As he put it in a passage on color that has become one of the most frequently cited from Concerning the Spiritual in Art, "color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the

²⁷ George L. Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich (New York, 1964), p. 54.

²⁸ August K. Wiedmann, The German Quest for Primal Origins in Art, Culture and Politics, 1900-1933 (Lewiston, N.Y., 1995), p.319.

soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”²⁹

Along with Kandinsky’s yearning for an increasingly vibrating soul went a valorization of primitivism, which included everything from Russian folk art and the masks of Borneo to the fetishes of Africa, Oceania and pre-Columbian America. As David Pan has pointed out, the Blaue Reiter “attempted to understand the primitive as a certain spiritual dimension of all human culture. They did not work with dichotomies of Western versus non-Western or primitive versus modern but with the distinction between spiritual and the material.”³⁰ Kandinsky’s primitivism might seem to be in tension with his utopian and apocalyptic fantasies about the imminent arrival of a new more spiritual age, but it has long been recognized that spiritual renewal after an era of alleged decadence can draw on fantasies of restoring a lost innocence.³¹ Rather than evolutionary, his version of primitivism was cyclical, promising a vitalized return rather than an irretrievable past.

A powerful tool in the service of that end was the emancipation of color, which Kandinsky understood in dialectical rather than oppositional relation to form, whose liberation from mimetic purposes he also sought.³² Indeed, color, he conceded, could not exist except in the mind without a boundary around it. But he cautioned “we should never make a god out of form. We should struggle for form only as long as it serves as a means of expression for the inner sound.”³³ For Kandinsky, color seemed to have a more potent psychological and metaphysical effect, causing a “spiritual vibration.” It “provides a whole wealth of possibilities of her own, and when combined with form, yet a further series of possibilities. And all these will be expressions of the inner need.”³⁴

Colors, to be more precise, seem to be either warm or cold, light or dark, or combinations of these elements. Yellow and blue are the most powerful opposition, followed by white and black. Yellow, an earthly color, initially seems to approach the beholder, then bursts its boundaries, and

²⁹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 36.

³⁰ David Pan, *Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism* (Lincoln, Ne., 2001), p. 101.

³¹ See, for example, A.E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature: 1830-1900* (Toronto, 1968), p. 151.

³² In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he even chastised Matisse for laying too much stress on color. (p. 29).

³³ Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, p. 149.

³⁴ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 43.

can end by disturbing him through its aggressive, even shrill character. Blue, in contrast, retreats from the beholder, is closer to heaven than earth and ultimately produces a sensation of rest (although not as much as green). Other colors, Kandinsky continued, have their own properties and effects. Even if they seem individual and isolated, they can work together to produce a successful image: “The strife of colors, the sense of balance we have lost, tottering principles, unexpected assaults, great questions, apparently useless striving, storm and tempest, broken chains, antitheses and contradictions, these make up our harmony. The composition arising from this harmony is a mingling of color and form each with its separate existence, but each blended into a common life which is called a picture by the force of inner need.”³⁵ In his own artistic creations and those of his Blaue Reiter colleagues, the principles articulated in these works were given vivid and powerful expression.

There were few more appreciative enthusiasts of the Blaue Reiter in general and Kandinsky in particular than Walter Benjamin.³⁶ In 1920, he eagerly devoured Concerning the Spiritual in Art, writing to his friend Gershom Scholem, “This book fills me with the highest esteem for its author, just as his paintings elicit my admiration. It is probably the only book on expressionism devoid of gibberish; not, of course, from the standpoint of a philosophy, but from that of a doctrine of painting.”³⁷ A year later he visited an exhibition by Macke, who had been killed during the war, and wrote an essay about it, which was not published and has since disappeared. In a letter from the same year, expressing his disappointment at a canvas by Chagall, he wrote “I am coming more and more to the realization that I can depend sight unseen, as it were, only on the painting of Klee, Macke, and maybe Kandinsky. Everything else has pitfalls that require you to be on guard.”³⁸ Benjamin’s fascination with Klee is, of course, well known—it was in the

³⁵ Ibid., p. 52-53.

³⁶ There were, of course, other politically radical enthusiasts who were equally enamored of Kandinsky, for example the Dadaist Hugo Ball, who compared Kandinsky’s spiritual quest and purity of color with Bakunin’s anarchism. In April, 1917, he lectured on him in Galarie Dada in Zurich. See the discussion in Anson Rabinbach, In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment (Berkeley, 1997), chapter 2.

³⁷ Benjamin to Scholem, January 13, 1920, The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobsen and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, 1994), p. 156. See also Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1981), p.65. He writes, “evidently Benjamin was attracted to the mystical elements of the theory contained therein.”

³⁸ Ibid., p. 178.

spring of 1921 that he bought the painting of the “Angelus Novus” that was to be one of his prize possessions³⁹—but his interest in the other luminaries of the movement has been less widely appreciated.⁴⁰

Even before the war, the canvases of the Blaue Reiter seem to have held out for the young Benjamin the promise of a renewal of vision itself, the recovery of that “innocent eye” that had existed before the fall into rationalized vision in which subjects looked at objects in an organized perspectival field. Not only did their respect for the so-called primitive art of folk traditions—Russian icons, Bavarian glass paintings, woodblock prints, and the like-- suggest they were in touch with an earlier stage of visual development, but their fascination with the allegedly uncorrupted vision of the child also meant that they understood its survival even after the transition to modernity. Against Scholem’s defense of Cubism, which was rooted in the latter’s belief in a certain Jewish affinity for spatial and mathematical thinking, Benjamin vigorously extolled the utopian potential he saw in color.⁴¹ In so arguing, Benjamin was following a long tradition that included John Ruskin and extended as far back as the German romantics.⁴²

An unpublished fragment entitled “A Child’s View of Color,” written by Benjamin in 1914-15, begins with an assertion that could have been straight out of Kandinsky:

Color is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual, so that when colors are mixed they produce nuances of color, not a blur. The rainbow is a pure childlike image. In it color is wholly contour; for the person who sees it with a child’s eyes, it marks boundaries, is not a layer of something imposed on matter,

³⁹ He already owned Klee’s “Vorführung des Wunders,” which his wife Dora gave him as a birthday present in 1920.

⁴⁰ One exception is Marcus Bullock, “In a Blauer Reiter Frame: Walter Benjamin’s Intentions of the Eye and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*,” *Monatshefte*, 93,2 (2001). He doesn’t comment, however, on Benjamin’s prewar writings on color.

⁴¹ See Benjamin’s letter to Scholem, October 22, 1917, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 100-101. For a discussion, see Brüggemann, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 143-153. Scholem, it should be mentioned, many years later came to appreciate the color symbolism in the Jewish tradition, most notably the Kabbalah. See his “Farben und ihre Symbolik in der jüdischen Überlieferung,” *Eranos* 41 (Leiden, 1974).

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 134-143. For a longer discussion of that tradition in France, see Max Imdahl, *Farbe: Kunsthistorische Reflexionen in Frankreich* (Munich, 1988).

as it is for adults. The latter abstract from color, regarding it as a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space.⁴³

Benjamin's fascination with the Blaue Reiter's experiments in color was fueled by his hostility to both the domination of general concepts in German Idealism and the fetish of singular objects in the competing worldview of positivist sensationalism. Color, he argued, resisted the reduction of the world to isolated, discrete things, favoring instead a response to it as infinite nuance, alive with shimmering energy. For children, three-dimensionality was ascertained by touch, not sight, which reached its purest state when it was set apart from other senses. Color itself, however, is not at its most powerful when it seeks a homogeneous essence, but rather when it reveals the incessant movement of tone and shade. Above all, in the eyes of an innocent child it refuses to be subordinate to the tyranny of form, which for Benjamin, then at his most antinomian, was in league with the law:

The fact is that the imagination never engages with form, which is the concern of the law, but can only contemplate the living world from a human point of view creatively in feeling. This takes place through color, which for that reason cannot be single and pure, for then it remains dull...Productive adults derive no support from color; for them color can subsist only under law-given circumstances.⁴⁴

A child's experience of color is purely receptive, operating without the imposition of schematic categories of time and space. As every parent knows, they have to be disciplined to color within the lines. Going beyond the animal senses, color touches the "soul," awakening a non-reflective mood which is open to the spiritual essence of objects, not their abstract forms. There is thus something "paradisiacal" about works of art that emancipate color, art "where the world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence and harmony. Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect, but only see."⁴⁵

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," *Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, vol. I, eds. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Another fragment written during the same period, “The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Fantasy,”⁴⁶ drew on ancient associations between the apparition of the rainbow and heavenly beauty, as manifested, for example, in the halos around angels in Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altar. It is cast as a conversation between a painter named Georg and his friend Margarethe, who shares her nocturnal dreams of color with him. He responds to her description of an intense dissolution of the self into color by saying “I know these images of phantasy. I believe that they are in me when I paint. I mix the colors and see nothing but the color; I can almost say: I am color.”⁴⁷ Normal painting, he explains, is dominated by form, which involves inscribing a surface, which is a section of infinite space, an extensive infinity, graphically demarcated. Color, in contrast, is more of an intensive infinity, one that expresses an infinite number of potential contrasts with other colors, a fluid, indeterminate flow of nuances. Whereas graphic images are based on the contrast of light and dark, figure and ground, producing the line that separates forms, chromatic images develop the endless configurations of color that are without sharp boundaries, one from the other, or the distinction between figures and ground.⁴⁸

As he put it in yet another unpublished fragment from this period, “Painting, or Signs and Marks” of 1917, “A picture has no background. Nor is one color ever superimposed on another, but at most appears in the medium of another color. But even that is often difficult to determine, so that in principle it is often impossible to say in many paintings where a color is on top or underneath. The question makes no sense, however. There is no background in painting, nor is there any graphic line.”⁴⁹ Such a generalization about “painting” *tout court* may seem puzzling until one understands how strongly he identified the most advanced achievements in the medium with the Blaue Reiter. Significantly, the only painter mentioned in one final fragment of

⁴⁶ Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 7.1 (Frankfurt, 1989). The English-language version of the *Selected Writings* omits this essay.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁴⁸ We sometimes think the rainbow has seven individual colors—red, orange, yellow, blue, indigo, violet—but apparently when Newton described the results of passing white light through a prism, he was influenced by his understanding of musical harmonies. According to Batchelor, “he divided the spectrum into seven colors in order to make it correspond to the seven distinct notes in the musical scale.” *Chromophobia*, p. 93

⁴⁹ Benjamin, “Painting, or Signs and Marks,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 85.

1917, "Painting and the Graphic Arts," is Kandinsky, whose pictures he calls "the simultaneous occurrence of conjuring and manifestation."⁵⁰

Benjamin's rhapsodic celebration of color as a site of utopian phantasy has rightly been interpreted by Howard Caygill as the first manifestation of his challenge to Kant's notion of experience, which was based on intuitions of space and time as a priori, transcendental categories and the placement of objects of experience in them. Kant had, in fact, denigrated color in his aesthetic theory, arguing in The Critique of Judgment that in the fine arts, "the design is what is essential...The colors which give brilliance to the sketch are part of the charm. They may no doubt, in their own way, enliven the object for sensation, but make it really worth looking at and beautiful they cannot."⁵¹ In contrast, for Benjamin color was prior to the formal categories of the intellect, a more primitive perception than that of the schematizing mind. As he explained in frequently cited letter to Scholem of October 22, 1917, it was the correlate of the Adamic view of pure non-communicative language that he had just developed in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man."⁵² In both cases, the target was conceptual thought with its reified categories and formal distinctions, and an understanding of perception that prioritized form over content. Significantly, in the light of his later discussion of the utopian "task of the translator," he would describe translation in his 1916 essay as passing "through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity."⁵³ Both color and the Adamic Ursprache, which was approached by translating from one language of man into another, were avenues of entry into what he called "absolute experience." Both were superior to the imperfect languages of men in the plural, each of which falters when it comes to finding the adequate term for visual perceptions. No vocabulary is able to discriminate among the endless gradations of chromatic nuance; each reflects the limitations of its cultural origin and semiotic network.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Benjamin, "Painting and the Graphic Arts," Selected Writings, vol. 1, p. 82. In this fragment, Benjamin mulls over the differences between painting as a vertical phenomenon and graphic arts as horizontal, with children's drawings in the latter category. He seems to be saying that Kandinsky somehow overcomes this opposition.

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1978), p. 67.

⁵² Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," Selected Writings, vol. 1. Like the essays and fragments on color, this essay was only posthumously published.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 70. "The Task of the Translator" from 1921 is included in the same volume.

⁵⁴ A similar argument was later made by Umberto Eco, "How Culture Conditions the Colors we See," On Signs, ed. Marshall Blonsky (London, 1985).

Another way to parse Benjamin's celebration of color is to see it as an anticipation of his distrust for the traditional notion of narrative linearity that characterized his hostility to the historicist tradition. As Jacqueline Lichtenstein has noted, in the teachings of the Academy, "drawing is the means of inscribing history in painting. Drawing has primacy—included in the favor granted historical painting, assumed in the definition of painting as discourse, and also imposed by the constitution of a discourse on painting."⁵⁵ In contrast, color is on the side of anti-authoritarian disruption and discontinuity, the radical leap of temporality that undermines smooth evolutionary progress. As Charles A. Riley II puts it, "color and the unique event elude prescriptive guidelines."⁵⁶

It was, in fact, Benjamin's insistence that color defies categorization, either synchronic or diachronic, that suggests a certain distance from Kandinsky, or at least the latter's reflections on what constituted emancipation. As we have noted, Kandinsky sought to discover the spiritual language of colors in which specific ones would have inherent symbolic and psychological implications. Thus, for example, he asserts that "blue is the typical heavenly color. The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest. When it sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human. When it rises to white, a movement little suited to it, its appeal to men grows weaker and more distant."⁵⁷ Because of his desire to crack the semiotic code of color, a code he implied was universal, Kandinsky has been accused of being a chromatic essentialist. Mark Cheetham, for example, writes: "The salient notion of purity incorporated for Kandinsky the ideas of metaphysical immutability, of spiritual as opposed to material being, of essence rather than transitory appearance."⁵⁸ His talk of "an inner necessity" invokes an eidetic intuition that reveals more affinities with the theosophy of Rudolf Steiner than Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, but which nonetheless is in the service of a metaphysical absolute manifested in material terms. As David Pan warns, "Kandinsky's spiritual catalog of color effects runs the risk of arbitrarily

⁵⁵ Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*, p. 151.

⁵⁶ Riley, *Color Codes*, p. 53

⁵⁷ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 68. He sees the quest for purity and essence, which is also evident in Mondrian, as politically very problematic.

pinning down the spiritual value of colors according to a private schema that he understands to be universal.”⁵⁹ The emancipation of color, in other words, threatens to turn into a new tyranny.

In Benjamin’s appropriation of Kandinsky, however, this danger is by and large avoided. For rather than seeking to identify a particular emotion or metaphysical value with a specific color in its pure form, he stressed, as we have noted, the nuanced transitions between colors, the infinity of gradations that defied singular categorization. The emancipation of color for Benjamin meant not only from objects and the faithful imitation of the perceived world, but also from rigid semiotic schemes that attributed natural qualities to distinct colors. As in the case of what he would call “language as such” as opposed to the language of man, color’s primary function is not to communicate meaning, but to manifest the Absolute, dissolving the artificial human categories under which we subsume entities and impose intelligibility onto the world. It was thus closer to what might be called “magical nominalism” than to a Platonic search for eternal essences.⁶⁰

How successful Benjamin actually was in linking the emancipation of color with a more fundamental project of emancipation, understood in either metaphysical or social and political terms is not, to be sure, very clear. Howard Caygill rightly calls his unpublished fragments on the question an “early ruin,”⁶¹ and notes that he soon turned to language as an alternative locus of his utopian desires.⁶² When he came later to posit “dialectical images” as a model of critical cultural analysis, they had little of the chromatic intensity he had so admired in the Blaue Reiter artists.⁶³

The war and the havoc it wreaked may well have muted Benjamin’s hopes for the emancipation of color as equivalent to human emancipation via color. The Blaue Reiter itself had lost two of its major figures in the fighting, Franz Marc and August Macke, and in the words of

⁵⁹ Pan, *Primitive Renaissance*, p. 115.

⁶⁰ For an attempt to flesh out this concept, see my essay “Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Re-enchantment of the World,” *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 50, 2-3 (July-November, 2009); reprinted in Neal Curtis, ed., *The Pictorial Turn* (London, 2010).

⁶¹ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Color of Experience*, p. 3.

⁶² As early as his October 22, 1917 letter to Scholem on cubism, Benjamin noted, “As in these jottings I also allow the problem of painting to flow into the large domain of language whose dimensions I outline in my essay on language.” *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, p. 101.

⁶³ As Rainer Nägele writes, the “dialectical image” is “not a picture or a painting, but instead a figure: it belongs to a graphic sphere in contrast to the sphere of painting.” “Thinking Images,” in *Benjamin’s Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford, 2002), p. 23.

Marcus Bullock, “saw the seismic pressures of warfare end its vision of a redemption accomplished by a transformation of the senses.”⁶⁴ But during the immediate postwar years, when the utopian spirit was not yet extinguished, Benjamin could still rhapsodize about Kandinsky’s work and his thought.⁶⁵ In unpublished “Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children’s Books,” composed in 1921 as reflections on the work of Johann Peter Lyser, he returned to the experience children had of books that contained “the color of paradise.” “Children,” he wrote, “learn in the memory of their first intuition. And they learn from bright colors, because the fantastic play of color is the home of memory without yearning, and it can be free of yearning because it is unalloyed.” But for adults who had come to know what yearning was and had faced the obstacles to its fulfillment, the spiritual optics of the Blaue Reiter indicated, alas, more of paradise irretrievably lost than one that even the most brilliant of paintings might help us regain.

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⁶⁴ Bullock, “In a Blaue Reiter Frame,” p. 194.

⁶⁵ On Benjamin’s messianic hopes in the postwar era, see Michael Löwy, Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe, trans. Hope Heany (Stanford, 1992).

