

THE COLOUR OF THE NARRATIVE

AN ARTISTIC EXPERIMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines the objective and subjective dimensions of the relationship between colour and language. It places portrait drawing—the face—in dialogue with abstract composition and seeks analogies between the narrative embodied in a human face and the chromatic organisation of an image. Original drawings, compositions and poems form an artistic experiment through which the argument is developed visually.

Keywords: colour, language, drawing, poetry, painting, abstract composition

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Colour as Language

It is difficult to begin an argument that seeks both the subjective and the objective relations between language and colour. The difficulty arises from a long tradition of interdependence between these two perspectives. Modernity challenges that tradition while proposing new rules and new correspondences.

In his theory of universal symbolism, Wassily Kandinsky argues that every phenomenon and object, and every structural element of art, has two aspects: an outer and an inner one. From this premise he develops a grammar of expressive means in which form, colour, line, and even the point possess a spiritual life and an atmosphere of their own.

A central proposition in modernist aesthetics is that the artist can speak through the pure language of lines, forms, and colours. The theory of correspondences leads back to Romanticism and to the idea of universal symbolism. Behind the sensuously perceived object lies a mysterious content; the material thing becomes a sign of something spiritual, which the intuitive artist attempts to reveal. The artist thus becomes a medium, translator, and interpreter.

This view is closely related to idealist philosophy, mysticism, and various forms of esoteric and theosophical thought. Reading the signs of the world as analogies of the metaphysical also makes correspondence between different senses possible. Alongside a 'vertical' relation between subjective sensation and the transcendent, there is a 'horizontal' relation between sound, colour, and scent. They may evoke one another and, as symbols, point towards a spiritual content.

In keeping with this idea, Kandinsky develops a system for the expressive force of colours and forms. Every colour, hue, and form acquires a 'soul' and an emotional content of its own, independent of the objects of the external world.

Suprematism attempts to make the unrepresentable—the metaphysical—visible by reducing form to geometric abstraction and colour to its fundamental values. Colour itself becomes language: a narrative of the sublime.

Within Abstract Expressionism, the tendency later known as Colour Field painting is represented by artists such as Barnett Newman (1905–1970). Incidental detail is removed from the canvas so that pictorial space itself, and the immediate experience of colour, can become the work's centre.

The artistic experiments of modernity offer many different perspectives on colour. What they share is a growing sensitivity to the narratives that colour carries and generates.

Poetry and Correspondence

The Symbolists sought to express the inexpressible through language—a pursuit that finds a parallel in the abstract aspirations of Neoplasticism and Suprematism. Charles Baudelaire is a central figure in this development. In his work, words seek correspondences with a universal harmony; the poet is understood as a 'translator' and 'interpreter', and poetry approaches music.

In *Romances sans paroles*, Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) evokes states of mind less through the referential meaning of words than through their melodic qualities and resonance. In the name of this musicality, classical norms may be unsettled: uneven syllabic patterns, semantic ambiguity, and nuance are preferred to sharp contrast. Just as the modern painter abandons exact imitation in order to release the 'music of the painting', modern poetry loosens referential meaning in search of a purer musicality.

After Verlaine, these tendencies find a concentrated expression in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), an emblematic figure in the history of modern poetry and a defender of art for art's sake (*l'art pour l'art*). Several features of avant-garde poetry become especially clear in his work:

- a rejection of plot-driven narrative and external description;
- the evocation of states of mind through the plastic and melodic qualities of language beyond its direct referential meaning;
- a reliance on metaphor and symbol as primary poetic means;
- the breaking of fixed form in the name of free expression—a tendency shared by modern painting.

Any discussion of form and symbol in modern poetry must also include Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891). As with the other poets considered here, his gaze turns towards the spiritual, the enigmatic, and the unknown—towards what remains beyond the reach of the external senses and utilitarian reason. In a letter to Georges Izambard, Rimbaud expresses the desire to become a poet-seer and to reach the Unknown through a derangement of all the senses.

This aspiration intersects with the theory of correspondences and with the desire for a new, irrational knowledge of the transcendent. The derangement of the senses becomes a passage into the alogical, into chaos and subjective freedom—territories that would later be rediscovered by the Surrealists.

Rimbaud would later subject these ideas to criticism, calling them the 'story of one of my follies'. They also include his discovery of the 'colour of vowels' in the sonnet *Vowels* (1871), written in the spirit of correspondence: A is black, E white, I red. Sound, colour, and image enter a single poetic field.

Structure of the Artistic Experiment

The present artistic experiment begins from this tradition of searching for correspondences. Each group contains four elements: a poem, a colour field, an abstract composition, and a drawing of a face.

Placed in relation, the four elements can be read both as a whole and as separate aspects of one subjective vision. A question then emerges: where do we encounter more subjectivity, and where less? Do language and colour permit a more objective reading than the face and the composition?

poem → colour → composition → face

- The text, formed through vowels and consonants, carries a story of its own—a story that may be felt as colour.
- Colour possesses an immediate visible presence, yet it also absorbs the subjectivity of the poetic text.

- The face carries the text into its gaze and unsettles the apparent objectivity of colour through the movement of line.
- The abstract composition encloses colour and allows it to develop; it moves away from the recognisability of the face and receives the poem subjectively.

RED

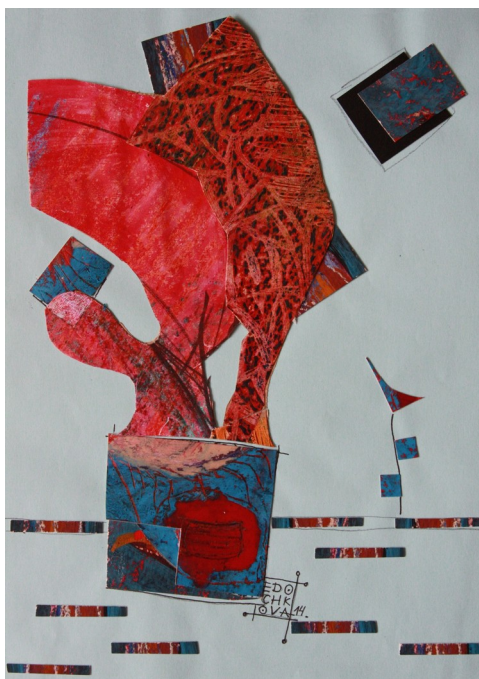
poem

*Before time could encounter the hand,
before the horizon reached the breath,
curled beneath a shadow made of silence,
colour plotted its escape.*

colour — red



composition



face

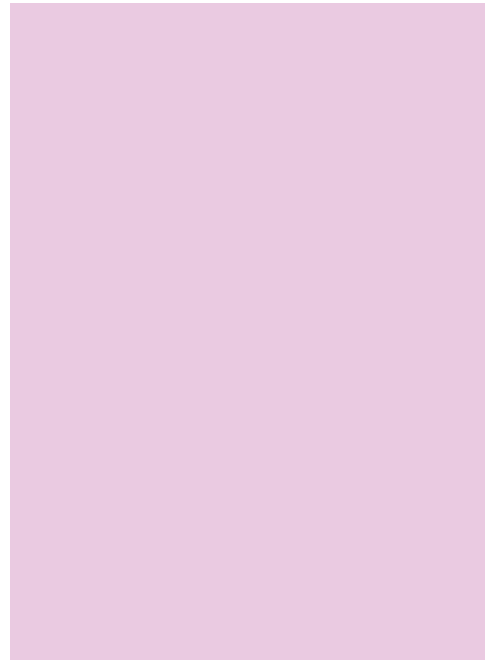


PINK

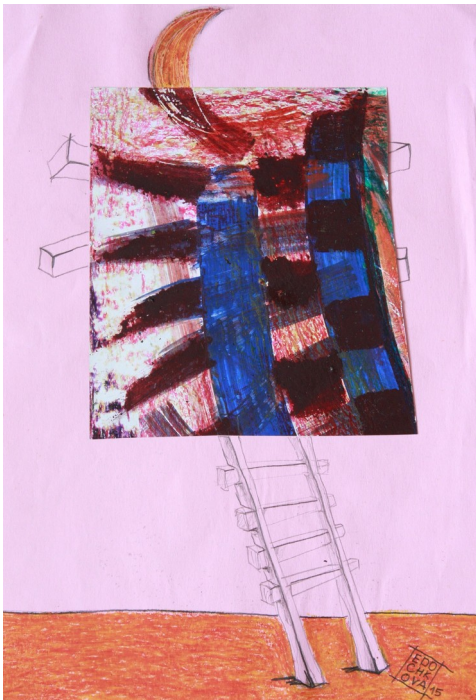
poem

*The pearls scattered
into the fissures of time.
Your eyelids grew heavy,
pressed into your palms.
From silence slipped away
the minutes, lured,
counting out
the hushed pulse
of your unlovely,
frozen past.
Memories flickered
in the emptiness.
Cold, heavy,
drowning memories.
And how you had loved them...
And how you had held them close...
Your soul rocked them gently
and sang to them softly...
in the fissures of time...*

colour — pink



composition



face



SATURATED BLUE

poem

*I love you, silent blue,
dissolved into stillness.
I love you endlessly—
insistent, playful—
breaking on the shore, wave after wave.
I love you, sorrow made of blue,
in the green-blue silt of a river,
resting there in beauty,
nestled close against the bank.
So unpredictable you are,
so deaf to every cry,
sinking into bitter depths,
setting beyond a morning made of silence.*

colour — saturated blue



composition



face



Conclusion

This artistic experiment generates more questions than answers. Within the metaphorical order, by following paradigmatic relations and substitutions between images, we enter the territory of poetry and Romanticism. From another direction, the gaze turns towards abstract art and the analogies it creates with text—just as text generates analogies with colour and melody.

It is both a challenge and a play of relations and subjective interpretations, capable of opening many different paths.

By deconstructing form through thought and emotion, and transforming it from multiple points of view, we may discover a path towards multiplicity without losing our individuality.

*The colour of the narrative is text.
The colour of the face is a poem.
The text remains an abstract composition.*

Is an objective reading possible?

References

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