

## Colour Culture: An Introduction

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### ABSTRACT

The paper concerns how to approach to colour cultural study in colour research. We argue that colour culture is coming the point whereby as a separate study field with its own concepts, methods, and research practices, in short its own distinct style and knowledge production. Colour culture is interwoven colour research and cultural study as a disciplinary approach to provide particular knowledge of colour meanings and values.

First, we examine the concept of colour culture in terminology. From the definition of culture, we address two important components of colour cultural study: colour meaning and value of colour. Second, we look at the research context, which provides a theoretical framework for colour cultural study. Third, we discuss the methodological approach to colour cultural study. Fourth, we demonstrate possible institutional practice as academic inquiry of colour cultural study.

We are providing an introduction of the concept that enables researchers embarking on its studies. The colour cultural studies requires a comprehensive understanding of cultural roots, and more importantly appreciate colour plays an essential role to constitute our historical heritage as well as the contemporary life.

**KEYWORDS:** Colour Culture, Colour meaning and value, Colour cultural study

### CONCEPT OF COLOUR CULTURE

The studies of colour and culture have been long established as interpretive part of colour research. John Gage in his remarkable book *Colour and Culture* considers colour meanings should be explained by ethnographers and semioticians in finding cultural references.<sup>1</sup> Gage does not further provide the clues of colour research in culture. Although researchers from various disciplines view the colour differently in their own professional culture, for example, historical, humanity, linguistics, psychology, art and design aspects.

Kirsi Kommonen proposed a new concept 'colour culture', in which she interprets the colour culture as a phenomenon, which is on the importance of shared experience in the production of shared meanings for colours.<sup>2</sup> The central concept of colour culture thus is about the meaning which colour generates. Colour as a meaning-maker actively plays a significant role in a process of visual communication, which can be understood as a particular culture.

According to Williams, the culture is regarded as a process of human development.<sup>3</sup> In contrast with the parallel conception of colour and culture, the notion of colour culture is to emphasise colour values should be considered as part of culture. Therefore it provides a direct map for researchers to decode the colour meanings in its own disciplines. Colour cultural studies thus can be introduced as a tool for interpreting and understanding the meanings of colour in particular culture.

### KEY COMPONENTS: MEANING AND VALUE

The analysis of culture is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life, a particular 'culture'.<sup>4</sup> Barnard suggests culture can be thought of as the beliefs and values (ideology) of groups of people and the ways (the signifying systems – both products and processes) in which those beliefs and values are communicated, reproduced and contested.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the key of colour cultural study is to investigate a system of meanings and values in its own interests of colour.

Although many colour researchers regard the colour as an appearance, they are taking an approach to materialise the colour. Colour cultural study may be used for explaining the meaning of colour. In practice, each 'system of imagery' is tied to the specific historical and social context out of which it emerges and is therefore strictly opposed to any form of absolute meaning; it is radically embedded in the world of political and social signification.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the study of colour meanings suggests that the colour culture research is more explanatory rather than descriptive.

Peirce suggests a referent is an important element for understanding the signification process.<sup>5</sup> In a semiotic sense, every colour object is a sign, colour is a signifier to generate the meanings in which is signified. Meaning may vary depends on the various referents of different cultural groups of people. One of the key dimensions to measure the referent is the cultural dimension. Colour culture serves the purpose of providing the specific cultural measurement for the understanding of colour meanings.

Another pole of colour culture we suggest is value. Oxford English Dictionary defines value as principles or ordinary of behaviour; one's judgment of what is important in life. Williams interprets culture as ordinariness, which implies the people's common preference of their decision-making.<sup>3</sup> It is fundamentally based on beliefs and values system that they insist.

Colour is one of the ways to communicate social and cultural constructed meanings. The process normally reflects a social order that includes social classes, ideologies and institutions, that can be seen as social value of colour. On the other hand, colour creates a meaningful form through colour symbolism, which may consider as a process of interchanging and mediating cultural values within both insiders and outsiders.

Every culture conceives of colour and defines it in accordance with its own natural environment, its own climate, its own history, its own knowledge and its own traditions.<sup>6</sup> Particular colour preference and knowledge is derived from a natural and cultural context. It points out a framework of colour cultural study should also be included a natural dimension. The sociocultural and natural aspects have a wide disciplinary field for researchers to engage with the study of colour culture.

### CENTRAL ISSUES IN COLOUR CULTURAL STUDIES

Colour cultural studies are obviously an amalgamation of many disciplinary ways of associated research practice. In the sense, a cross-disciplinary approach will greatly benefit the researchers to gain a keen understanding of various phenomena, people, cultures, and belief systems- and this kind of knowledge can be indispensable in the real world.<sup>7</sup>

The issues related to colour cultural studies is constituted by an integration of knowledge, which is from different disciplines or different areas within a same discipline. The discussions although have a wider range of interests, the presented issues here is to address the key points of colour culture in relevant discourses at this stage:

- Colour language  
The linguistic problem in colour research such as colour naming largely reflects a local culture in defining colour meaning and expression. As the post-structuralists define language as a system rather than a coding.

In reading a particular colour text thus should be understood the colour language as an embodied subject with colour culture.

- Material culture

For Marxism, the culture is a corporeal force locked into the socially organised production of material conditions of existence.<sup>8</sup> Colour material in the sense determines the colour culture. It provides a perspective to explore the mechanism for analyzing specific colour culture, which involves an economic construction of the cultures.

- Visual culture

The conception of visual culture is a part of that group's set of beliefs and practices by means of which it produces and attempts to produce itself in a social order.<sup>9</sup> The colour culture must respect different cultural and social groups that have different conception of visual and culture. The colour culture concerns the colour meanings reflect as a set of beliefs and values of those groups.

- Location of colour culture

The 'culture flows' of globalization challenges the conventional conception of culture, in terms of the location of culture.<sup>10</sup> They argue the culture is impossible to be located culture in a fix boundary as the globalizing discourse. The flows increasingly produce a hybrid culture beyond the traditional sense of local and global. It suggests that we should rethink how to allocate colour culture in a new global space.

- Change of colour culture

Cultures need economic, political and religious and social institutions to provide and enforce regular, predictable patterns of behaviour so that culture is reinforced and replicated.<sup>11</sup> A particular colour culture also will make a major turn and shift from a historical context which includes political agenda, cultural reform and new cultural movement.

### CONCERNING METHODOLOGY

There are many methods and methodologies are widely deployed in colour and culture studies respectively. And yet the colour cultural studies have paid little attention to question about the research methodology. The colour cultural study as an independent principle requires a distinctive methodology between colour and cultural study.

Colour cultural study considers qualitative methods with their focus on colour cultural meaning. Because, the research approach concentrates on the meanings generated by cultural groups through the experience of the world. It implies the interests of meaning in colour cultural studies.

A typical qualitative research approach is structured by constructivist worldview, ethnographic design and observation of behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The constructivist perspective allows the researcher to interpret and understanding the meanings through cultural phenomena, further to develop a pattern of meanings. And the ethnography is designed for sharing patterns of behaviour, languages with certain cultural group through observations and interviews.

In particular, we may also use the methodological frame of cultural studies as our reference. The three main kinds of approaches can be considered: 1. Ethnography, which enables the researchers to interact with cultural members and stress on the interpretation and understanding of meanings. 2. Textual approach, which includes the study of semiotics, narrative theories and deconstructionism. 3. Reception or communication model, which focuses on a meaning making process that constituted by the senders and receivers.

The methodologies of colour research and cultural studies have been presented by academics, researchers, designers, artists and others to contribute new knowledge in various ways. It should be encouraged innovative and creative juxtaposition with methodological experiences and discourse that construct a study of colour culture in the future.

### ACADEMIC INQUIRES OF COLOUR CULTURE

Colour cultural study as an academic inquiry concerns about fostering and exchanging new ideas in formatting new knowledge. We will argue the academic invention can be embraced with intuitional collaboration and academic practice. A research agenda thus has been initiated by Tongji University and Loughborough University.

First, we have advocated a study group on colour cultural research, for example, with collaboration between Tongji University and Loughborough University, project like 'Colour of Two Cities: a comparative methodology for understanding colour culture of London and Shanghai' has been started thinking about the colour culture in historical, contemporary and future significance of colour signs in the urban context.

Secondly, we are hosting an international conference 'Colour cultural study' which builds up an academic platform for sharing and exchanging research, which with the concerning on colour culture. The first meeting will be held in Tongji University in Shanghai China in October 2017.

Thirdly, we are going to setup Colour Culture Research Center in Tongji University. It will formerly establish an institutional approach to colour cultural study as an academic discipline, which enables the students and researchers devote their scholarly career in the center. The continuously work will be sustained to contribute to existing knowledge of colour culture.

### SUMMARY

Colour culture has been developed as a research field for study independently with it distinctive principles. We are providing key concepts that enable researchers embarking on colour cultural studies. An outline of the study scope in terms of breadth and depth has been illustrated in this paper. A cross-disciplinary approach to the methodology should be considered in the study. At the same time, we also share the experiences of the colour cultural study as an academic inquiry. Colour cultural studies require a comprehensive understanding of cultural roots, and more importantly appreciate colour plays an essential role to constitute our historical heritage as well as the contemporary life.

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