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# Chromophobia

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REAKTION BOOKS



## CHAPTER TWO

### Chromophobia

If it started with a short visit to an inside-out interior of a colourless whiteness where clarity was confusion, simplicity was complication, and art was uniformly grey, then it would be comforting to think that it might also end there. After all, there can't be many places like this interior which was home only to the very few things that had submitted to its harsh regime. And those few things were, in effect, sealed off from the unwanted and uncertain contingencies of the world outside. No exchange, no seepage, no spillage. Rather: isolation, confinement. But this shutting-off began to speak more and more about what it excluded than what it contained. What did this great white hollow make me think about? Not, for long, its whiteness. Rather, its colour.

If colour is unimportant, I began to wonder, why is it so important to exclude it so forcefully? If colour doesn't matter, why does its abolition matter so much? In one sense, it doesn't matter, or it wouldn't if we could say for certain that this inside really was as self-contained and isolated as it looked. But this house was a very *ambitious* inside. It was not a retreat, it was not a monastic emptiness. Its 'voluntary poverty' – that's

how its architect likes to talk – was altogether more righteous and evangelical. It looked like it wanted to impose its order upon the disorder around it. Like neo-classicism, like the manifestos of Adolf Loos or Le Corbusier, it wanted to rescue a culture and lead it to salvation. In which case, colour does matter. It mattered to Melville and Conrad, and it mattered to Pater and Winkelmann; it mattered to Le Corbusier, and, it turns out, it has mattered to many others for whom, in one way or another, the fate of Western culture has mattered. It mattered because it got in the way. And it still matters because it still does.

The notion that colour is bound up with the fate of Western culture sounds odd, and not very likely. But this is what I want to argue: that colour has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture. For the most part, this prejudice has remained unchecked and passed unnoticed. And yet it is a prejudice that is so all-embracing and generalized that, at one time or another, it has enrolled just about every other prejudice in its service. If its object were a furry animal, it would be protected by international law. But its object is, it is said, almost nothing, even though it is at the same time a part of almost everything and exists almost everywhere. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that, in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed. As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia.

Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. More specifically: this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body – usually the feminine, the oriental,

the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. In one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. (It is typical of prejudices to conflate the sinister and the superficial.) Either way, colour is routinely excluded from the higher concerns of the Mind. It is other to the higher values of Western culture. Or perhaps culture is other to the higher values of colour. Or colour is the corruption of culture.

Here is a near-perfect example of textbook chromophobia: 'The union of design and colour is necessary to beget painting just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve.'<sup>1</sup> This passage was written in the last decade of the nineteenth century by the appropriately named Charles Blanc, critic, colour theorist and sometime Director of the Arts in the 1848 Socialist government in France. It is interesting on a number of counts. Blanc identified colour with the 'feminine' in art; he asserted the need to subordinate colour to the 'masculine' discipline of design or drawing; he exhibited a reaction typical of phobics (a massive overvaluation of the power of that which he feared); and he said nothing particularly original. For Blanc, colour could not simply be ignored or dismissed; it was always there. It had to be contained and subordinated – like a woman. Colour was a permanent internal threat, an ever-present inner other which, if unleashed, would be the ruin of everything, the fall of culture. For our contemporary chromophobic architect, colour also represents a kind of ruination. Colour for him signifies the mythical savage state out of which civilization, the nobility of the human spirit, slowly, heroically, has lifted itself – but back into which it could always slide. For one, colour was coded in the feminine; for the other, it

is coded in the primitive. For both, colour is a corruption, a lapse, a Fall.

There are many different accounts of the fall into colour, and many of these – well, several, enough – take the shape of stories. This chapter is, for the most part, a story of a few of those stories.

There are many ways to fall: head first, feet first; like a leaf or a stone; on a banana skin or off a log; in a blaze of glory or in the darkness of despair. A fall can be trivial or dangerous; falls have a place of honour in comedy, in the circus, in tragedy and in melodrama. A fall may be biblical or farcical or, perhaps, both. Many of the different stories of the descent into colour are stories of a fall from grace. That is to say, they have roughly similar beginnings and ends; we know very generally where they are going to finish up. In that sense, they are not mysteries. But the manner and details of the falls are what's interesting: the terms used to describe the descent; the stages and locations; the twists and turns; the costumes and props; and, finally, the place where the falling stops, the place of colour.

Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (misleadingly translated into English as a *Grammar of Painting and Engraving*), published in 1867, is as good a place as any to begin, in part because his chromophobia is not quite as clear-cut as his Old Testament rhetoric at first suggests. Blanc was, for example, a supporter of Delacroix – 'one of the greatest colourists of modern times' – and was indebted to the colour theories of the chemist Eugène Chevreul, as well as to the principles of Newtonian optics. And yet, for all his commitment to an emerging 'science' of colour, his theory of painting is expressed in terms of an almost medieval cosmology, a cosmology in which colour has a very particular place. For Blanc, 'painting is the art of expressing all the conceptions of the soul, by means of all the realities of nature.'<sup>2</sup> That is to say, while painting uses nature, its real value lies beyond nature; it deals in 'conceptions of the soul'; it is a 'work of the mind'; it is always more than descriptive as the painter 'subordinates physical beauty to moral physiognomy . . .' At the centre of Blanc's moral universe of painting (more familiar then than now) is the 'idea' embodied

in human form; the expression of the moral truth of creation requires the 'correction' of the various accidents and contingencies of nature. Nevertheless, 'the artist will necessarily represent the human figure by its peculiar, even accidental characteristics,' and for this job painting 'will be the most fitting art, because it furnishes to expression immense resources, air, space, perspective, landscape, light and shadow, colour'. This list of painting's 'immense resources' was clearly not drawn up at random, and it is no accident that colour comes in at the end, after composition, drawing and chiaroscuro. Nevertheless, for Blanc 'colour in painting is an essential, almost indispensable element, since having all Nature to represent, the painter cannot make her speak without borrowing her language.' This is a strange image – colour as the language of nature – but it is crucial, as Blanc goes on to make clear:

Intelligent beings have a language represented by articulate sounds; organised beings, like all animals and vegetables, express themselves by cries or forms, contour or carriage. Inorganic nature has only the language of colour. It is by colour alone that a certain stone tells us it is a sapphire or an emerald . . . Colour, then, is the peculiar characteristic of the lower forms of nature, while drawing becomes the medium of expression, more and more dominant, the higher we rise in the scale of being.

Colour, then, is not only low down the hierarchy of a painter's skills and resources, as it had been in Academic training from the start; it is down there because that position corresponds to colour's lowly place in the moral hierarchy of the universe.

Later, in a substantial chapter devoted to colour, Blanc questions the idea, 'repeated everyday', that 'one learns to be a draughtsman but one is born a colourist.' Nothing could be further from the truth, he argues: the whole point about colour is that it is 'under fixed laws' and is fundamentally 'easier to learn than drawing'. Here Blanc could be

alluding to Chevreul's systematic research into colour-mixture or to Newton's earlier experiments with the prismatic division of light, or even to Goethe's experiments in colour psychology. But that is not how it comes across. Rather, it is God who allows us access to the laws of colour while, at the same time, keeping us guessing about the eternal laws of form:

... the perfect form that is issued from the hand of God is unknown to us; remains always veiled from our eyes. It is not so with colour, and it would seem as if the eternal colourist had been less jealous of the secret than the eternal designer, for he has shown us the ideal of colour in the rainbow, in which we see, in sympathetic gradation, but also in mysterious promiscuity, the mother tints that engender the universal harmony of colours.

It is here, in the figure of the rainbow, that Blanc's creation theory meets modern colour theory, that God meets Newton. It is science that has allowed us to gain access to the mind of God, or at least to a small, relatively minor part of it, and through science, colour can be made finally to 'conform' to the higher requirements of the Idea.

Blanc had another problem with colour: the Chinese problem. He needed to prove that colouring was easier than drawing; that way, it didn't matter so much that 'oriental artists' were better colourists than Western ones. He conceded:

From time immemorial the Chinese have known and fixed the laws of colour, and the tradition of those fixed laws, transmitted from generation to generation down to our own days, spread throughout Asia, and perpetuated itself so well that all oriental artists are infallible colourists, since we never find a false note in the web of their colours.

But, he continued, '... would this infallibility be possible if it were not engendered by certain and invariable principles?' – principles that

had been rationally analyzed in the West. Even now that colourists could 'charm us by means that science has discovered', one had to remain on guard, for

the taste for colour, when it predominates absolutely, costs many sacrifices; often it turns the mind from its course, changes the sentiment, swallows up the thought. The impassioned colourist invents his form for his colour, everything is subordinated to the brilliancy of his tints. Not only the drawing bends to it, but the composition is dominated, restrained, forced by the colour. To introduce a tint that shall heighten another, a perhaps useless accessory is introduced ... To reconcile contraries after having heightened them, to bring together similar after having lowered or broken them, he indulges in all sorts of licence, seeks pretexts for colour, introduces brilliant objects; furniture, bits of stuff, fragments of music, arms, carpets, vases, flights of steps, walls, animals with furs, birds of gaudy plumage; thus, little by little, the lower strata of nature take the first place instead of human beings which alone ought to occupy the pinnacle of art, because they alone represent the loftiest expression of life, which is thought.

And where does that leave us? Fallen. From a lofty place tantalizingly close to God, we have fallen down flights of steps, past furry animals and gaudy birds, through a tangle of stuff and oriental knick-knacks – 'cushions, slippers, narghilehs, turbans, burnous, caftans, mats, parasols' – and ended up face down among the lower forms of nature.

For Blanc, there were only two ways to avoid the Fall: abandoning colour altogether or *controlling it*. Both had their risks. He is a little vague about the first option; at times, colour is 'essential' to painting, but in the same breath it might be only 'almost indispensable'. Elsewhere, he convinces himself that 'painters can sometimes dispense with colour,'

yet a little later on it is reinstated: 'Colour being that which especially distinguishes painting from the other arts, it is indispensable to the painter.' Blanc appears to have been genuinely uncertain about colour; it shifts from being essential to being dispensable, from being low in the order of nature and representation to being the very essence and uniqueness of painting as an art. But for the most part, Blanc accepted that colour cannot be willed away; the job therefore is to master it by learning its laws and harnessing its unpredictable power: '... let the colourist choose in the harmonies of colour those that seem to conform to his thought.'

Conform, subordinate, control: we are back with Adam and Eve, back in a universe populated entirely by unequal opposites: male and female, mind and heart, reason and emotion, order and disorder, absolute and relative, structure and appearance, depth and surface, high and low, occident and orient, line and colour . . . For example: 'Here we recognise the power of colour, and that its role is to tell us what agitates the heart, while drawing shows us what passes in the mind, a new proof . . . that drawing is the masculine side of art, colour the feminine side.' Or: 'As sentiment is multiple, while reason is one, so colour is a mobile, vague, intangible element, while form, on the contrary, is precise, limited, palpable and constant.' Or: '... colour, which speaks to the senses rather than to the mind' is 'more external, hence, more secondary'. Or: 'There is . . . in painting, an essential element which does not readily lend itself to emblematic expressions – that is, colour . . . the artist using colour will particularise what he seeks to generalise, and he will contradict his own grandeur.' Or: 'The predominance of colour at the expense of drawing is a usurpation of the relative over the absolute, of fleeting appearance over permanent form, of physical impression over the empire of the soul.'

Blanc inherited these opposites from an intimidating and ancient tradition of *disegno versus colore*: drawing versus colouring-in. When, in the art room at primary school, I was told to take a line for a walk and

then colour it in, I certainly wasn't told that the line I was being asked to draw was in fact the continuation of a much longer one which could be followed almost without interruption back to the philosophical art rooms of ancient Greece. Nor was I told that within this apparently harmless opposition between line and colour, many other oppositions were in fact coded and concealed, all of them far from innocent. As Jacqueline Lichtenstein shows in her brilliant study of painting and rhetoric, *The Eloquence of Color*, evidence of chromophobia in the West can be found as far back as Aristotle, for whom the suppression of colour was the price to be paid for bailing art out from a more general Platonic iconophobia. For Aristotle, the repository of thought in art was line. The rest was ornament, or worse. In his *Poetics*, he wrote: '... a random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without colour.'<sup>3</sup> It is from here that we inherited a hierarchical ordering within painting which in its polished form describes a descent from 'invention' through 'design' to 'chiaroscuro' and, finally, to 'colour'. But hang on a minute. Since when was 'random' associated with colour and 'definite' with drawing? Since when did drawing and colour become ciphers for order and chaos? Perhaps it doesn't matter: the prejudice is in place.

Since Aristotle's time, the discrimination against colour has taken a number of forms, some technical, some moral, some racial, some sexual, some social. As John Gage notes in his vast historical survey of colour theory, colour has regularly been linked with other better-documented sexual and racial phobias. As far back as Pliny, it was placed at the 'wrong' end of the opposition between the occidental and the oriental, the Attic and the Asian, in a belief that 'the rational traditions of western culture were under threat from insidious non-western sensuality.'<sup>4</sup> In later times, the Academies of the West continued and consolidated this opposition. For Kant, colour could never participate in the grand schemes of the Beautiful or the Sublime. It was at best 'agreeable' and could add 'charm'

to a work of art, but it could not have any real bearing on aesthetic judgement. In a similar vein, Rousseau maintained that:

colours, nicely modulated, give the eye pleasure, but that pleasure is purely sensory. It is the drawing, the imitation that endows these colours with life and soul, it is the passions which they express that succeed in arousing our own, the objects which they represent that succeed in affecting us. Interest and sentiment do not depend on colours; the lines of a touching painting touch us in etching as well: remove them from the painting, and the colours will cease to have any effect.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, Joshua Reynolds, founder of the Royal Academy:

Though it might be allowed that elaborate harmony of colouring, a brilliancy of tints, a soft and gradual transition from one to another, present to the eye, what a harmonious concert of musick does to the ear, it must be remembered, that painting is not merely a gratification of the sight. Such excellence, though properly cultivated, where nothing higher than elegance is intended, is weak and unworthy of regard, when the work aspires to grandeur and sublimity.<sup>6</sup>

Or Bernard Berenson, English aesthete and classicist: 'It appears . . . as if form was the expression of a society where vitality and energy were severely controlled by mind, and as if colour was indulged in by communities where brain was subordinated to muscle. If these suppositions are true', he added with heavy irony, 'we may cherish the hope that a marvellous outburst of colour is ahead of us.'<sup>7</sup>

So it hadn't ended when many of the Academies collapsed under their own weight during the later nineteenth century. To this day, there remains a belief, often unspoken perhaps but equally often unquestioned, that seriousness in art and culture is a black-and-white issue, that depth

is measured only in shades of grey. Forms of chromophobia persist in a diverse range of art from more recent years – in varieties of Realism, for instance, with its unnatural fondness for brown, or in Conceptual art, which often made a fetish of black and white. And it is in much art criticism, the authors of which seem able to maintain an unbroken vow of silence on the subject of colour even when it is quite literally staring them in the face. Likewise, when Hollywood discovered colour, it was deemed suitable mainly for fantasies, musicals and period pieces; drama remained a largely monochrome issue. Then there is the question of architecture, which we have already touched upon. But this is to get ahead of the story . . .

One thing that becomes clear from Blanc's thesis is that colour is both secondary *and* dangerous; in fact, it is dangerous because it is secondary. Otherwise there would be no Fall. The minor is always the undoing of the major.

Where do we find the idea of the Fall in contemporary culture? One answer would be in the image of drugs – or drug culture – and the moral panic that surrounds it. The fall-from-grace-that-is-drugs is often represented in a way that is not unlike the descent into colour described by Blanc. Sensuous, intoxicating, unstable, impermanent; loss of control, loss of focus, loss of self . . . Now it turns out that there is a rather interesting relationship between drugs and colour, and it is not a recent invention. Rather, it too goes back to Antiquity, to Aristotle, who called colour a drug – *pharmakon* – and, before that, to the iconoclast Plato, for whom a painter was merely 'a grinder and mixer of multi-colour drugs'.<sup>8</sup> The best part of two and a half millennia later, it appears that little has changed. During the 1960s, for example, drugs were commonly, and sometimes comically, associated not just with the distortion of form but with the intensification of colour. Think of those films – *Easy Rider* is the most obvious example – that attempted to convey the effects of dropping acid. Think of psychedelia; think of the album covers, the posters,

the lyrics; think, for example, of the Rolling Stones' *Her Satanic Majesty's Request* and of the song 'She Comes in Colours' (recently revived to advertise the hippy trippy brightly coloured iMac computers . . .). Today, the connection between colour and drugs seems a bit looser. Damien Hirst's *Spot Paintings* make at least a nominal connection between the two – if you accept his suggestion that their evenly spaced circles of colour can be read as schematic images of pharmaceutical pills.

There is a more interesting, if less plausible, semantic connection between colour and drugs. Ecstasy, as everyone knows, is the name given to a widely used psychotropic stimulant, but it is also a synonym for Roland Barthes' remarkable description of colour as 'a kind of bliss'. Bliss, *jouissance*, ecstasy. Barthes goes on: 'Colour . . . is a kind of bliss . . . like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell.'<sup>9</sup> A tiny fainting spell: a lapse, a descent, a Fall. Intoxication, loss of consciousness, loss of self. But here something else has happened: Barthes has given colour the same trajectory as Blanc did, and, like Blanc, he has overtly eroticized colour. Also like Blanc, he has given colour the power to overwhelm and annihilate. At the same time, however, he has also inverted Blanc's Old Testament foreboding. In Barthes' hands, chromophobia is turned into its opposite: a kind of chromophilia.

This turn, this description of colour as falling *into* a state of grace or something approaching it, is characteristic of other writing both on colour and about drugs. In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley describes in detail the experience of taking mescaline. The first and most emphatic change he registers is in his experience of colour: 'Half an hour after swallowing the drug I became aware of a slow dance of golden lights. A little later there were sumptuous red surfaces swelling and expanding from bright nodes of energy that vibrated with a continuously changing, patterned life . . .'<sup>10</sup> Looking around his study, his attention is held by a small vase containing three flowers, then by the books lining the walls:

Like the flowers . . . [the books] glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colours, a profounder significance. Red books, like rubies; emerald books; books bound in white jade; books of agate, of aquamarine, of yellow topaz; lapis lazuli books whose colour was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful, that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention.

A little later, he notices an old chair in the garden: 'That chair . . . Where the shadows fell on the canvas upholstery, stripes of a deep but glowing indigo alternated with stripes of an incandescence so intensely bright that it was hard to believe that they could be made of anything but blue fire . . .' The flood of colour that Huxley describes becomes the basis for his speculations regarding the qualities of mescaline-coated consciousness. The transformation of everyday objects leads him at one point to note that 'today the percept had swallowed the concept.' Today, that is, was seeing rather than seeing-as, seeing as-if-for-the-first-time, the recovery of a lost innocence: 'I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment of naked existence.' Today, 'Visual impressions are greatly intensified and the eye recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood, when the sensum was not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept . . .'

Adam was innocent. But the idea of innocence offered by Huxley would have been incomprehensible to Blanc, for whom Adam was, it seems, already imbued with the Idea; he was, at least in some sense, already rational, coherent, the image of the Father. His innocence, his purity, was, well, different. Huxley's Adam is innocent of concepts, innocent of self, and thus is open to the unmediated flow of perception: he is immersed in colour which is Eden. 'Mescaline', Huxley notes, 'raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind.'



Its effect – its value – lies in its reversal of the order of things, the conventional hierarchies of thought:

It would seem that, for *Mind at Large*, the so-called secondary character of things is primary. Unlike Locke, it evidently feels that colours are more important, better worth attending to than masses, positions and dimensions. Like mescaline takers, many mystics perceive supernaturally brilliant colours, not only with the inward eye, but even in the objective world around them.

To take mescaline is to be caught in the intense gaze of colour as much as it is to gaze at a new-found intensity of colour. To be transfixed by the radiant glow of 'books like rubies, emerald books' – the same precious stones which, for Blanc, were the mute lower forms of nature – is, for Huxley, to be exulted, to achieve a state of grace, a state of Not-self.

The Not-self is other; the other is colour. Another example: the poet Joachim Gasquet reporting some remarks made by Cézanne about looking at painting:

Shut your eyes, wait, think of nothing. Now, open them . . . One sees nothing but a great coloured undulation. What then? An irradiation and glory of colour. This is what a picture should give us . . . an abyss in which the eye is lost, a secret germination, a coloured state of grace . . . Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colours, be steeped in the light of them.<sup>11</sup>

An abyss; disorientation; loss of consciousness; descent. And resurrection; grace. (It is not entirely surprising that this passage was quoted by the psychoanalyst Marion Milner, for whom 'the dark possibilities of colour' were counterposed to the 'white light of consciousness'.) Cézanne's descent was also undertaken in the name of innocence, and in some respects his conception of colour is not so different from Huxley's. 'See

like a man who has just been born', the artist is reported to have said.<sup>12</sup> Cézanne, it has been argued, subscribed to the idea that a new-born child lives in a world of naïve vision where sensations are unmediated and uncorrupted by the 'veil of . . . interpretation'. The work of the painter was to observe nature as it was beneath this veil, to imagine the world as it was before it had been converted into a network of concepts and objects. This world, for Cézanne, was 'patches of colour'; thus 'to paint is to register one's sensations of colour.'

Eyes closed, drugged, unconscious: the rush of colour is also a drift into a dream state. Gustave Moreau: 'Note one thing well: you must think through colour, have imagination in it. If you don't have imagination, your colour will never be beautiful. Colour must be thought, imagined, dreamed . . .'<sup>13</sup> Baudelaire: 'Just as a dream inhabits its own proper atmosphere, so a conception, become composition, needs to have its being in a setting of colour peculiar to itself.'<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, Baudelaire condemns those artists and critics for whom 'colour has no power to dream.' In his essay on the work of Delacroix, he cites a remark made by Liszt about the painter's love of Chopin's music: 'Delacroix . . . says that he loved to fall into deep reverie at the sound of that delicate and passionate music, which evokes a brightly coloured bird, hovering over the horrors of a bottomless pit.' It isn't hard to see why the image would have been so compelling to Baudelaire: the gentle fall into dream is brought on by the delicate passion of music; the music itself is a brightly coloured bird. The unexpected turn at the end of the image is what gives it its unique power. At the same time as the music heralds a fall into unconsciousness, it also holds off another, far greater fall, always present and never out of sight: the fall into a bottomless pit of unnameable horror. Music, colour, colour-music, the colours of Delacroix's painting – these are certainly 'enchanted', but they are also much more than that. They offer salvation from and simultaneously make us aware of the presence of unutterable terror. Such works may induce a state of grace, but this

state is always fragile and vulnerable. The dream is always on the edge of nightmare.

The theme of colour as a fall from grace – or a fall into grace – can be updated a little. For example: Wim Wenders's 1986–7 film *Wings of Desire*, in which the viewer is taken to and fro between two worlds: the realm of the spirits and angels, and the sensuous world of embodied beings. We know where we are only because the latter is shown in full colour, but the spirit world is shown in black and white. When the angel (played by Bruno Ganz) falls to earth as the result of another fall – into love – he lands with a thud. Dazed and amazed, he looks around the Berlin wasteland into which he has dropped. He feels a small cut on the back of his head and looks at the blood left on his hand. He approaches a passer-by:

'Is this red?'

'Yes.'

'And the pipes?'

'They're yellow.'

'And him there?' [pointing at some painted figures on the Berlin Wall]

'He's grey-blue.'

'Him?'

'He's orange . . . ochre.'

'Orange or ochre?'

'Ochre.'

'Red . . . Yellow . . . And him?'

'He's green.'

'And the bit above the eyes?'

'That's blue.'

The first questions the angel asks are the names of the colours he sees. His fall from grace is a fall into colour, with a thud. It is a fall from the disembodied all-observing spirit world into the world of the particular and the contingent, a world of sensuous existence, of hot and cold, of taste

and touch, but most of all it is a fall into a world of desire. It is a fall into a world of consciousness and self, or rather a fall from super-consciousness into individual consciousness, but it is a fall into self made with the explicit purpose of losing the self in desire.

There are other cinematic descents into colour from the dubious stability of black and white – among them Michael Powell's World War II fable *A Matter of Life and Death*, on which *Wings of Desire* was more than loosely based. Here, the world of spirits is again represented exclusively in black and white. 'We are starved of Technicolor up here' says a very camp French angel, half to the camera. But in this movie it is a man, not an angel – albeit a man with wings: a pilot – who falls to earth, and he falls not from a monochrome heaven but from a lurid, blazing hell in the shape of a disintegrating Lancaster bomber. He (David Niven) falls to earth but does not die, and he cheats death because he too has fallen in love. He falls from colour into colour, but this is different: the sky was night, fury and death; earth is clear sky, sunlight and warmth. Earth is good; earth is life and love, green hills and blue skies; earth is . . . England.

The colour world of England is not the same as that of Berlin, which is more harsh and uncertain and altogether less homely. England was at war (though it hardly showed); Berlin was at war with itself and its memories. These differences are contained in the colours and monochromes of the films, and in the transitions between the two. Sam Fuller's 1963 *Shock Corridor* also uses occasional colour scenes within an otherwise black-and-white film to represent a kind of internalized war. The film is an allegory of the psychoses lying beneath the surface of American postwar culture. The world is black and white. Colour occurs not as an angel or a man falls from the exulted (if bureaucratic and rather boring) world of the spirits into the palpable world of flesh and blood and love, but as patients in a secure mental institution lapse into delirium. The three short colour episodes in the film denote different psychotic episodes, points at which the patients suffer a loss of self. In the first, a deranged Korean War veteran – deranged

because he was brainwashed by the 'Commies' and couldn't deal with the harsh reality of Cold War America – relives his trauma in a series of grainy, colour-saturated home-movie glimpses of everyday life in Japan and South Korea. In the second, a young African-American man – unable to cope with the pressures and publicity of having been the first black person to enter a Southern university, and now living a fantasy life as a rabid Klansman – experiences his delirium through coloured ethnographic footage of an Amazonian tribal dance. In each of these episodes of stark otherness, the suddenness of the transition into colour comes as a shock; but while colour signifies the otherness of psychosis, the colour footage is footage of other cultures: South-east Asia and South America. The third colour episode concerns the main character in the film, an ambitious journalist who fakes mental illness to get admitted to the institution in order to investigate a murder. As he snoops around, he encounters the various allegorical in-patients and, little by little, begins to lose his own grip. Then, during a heavy storm, he loses it entirely. And he falls: first of all into an interior mental deluge, then into a colour deluge made up of random close-ups of teeming rapids and waterfalls. It's an extraordinary and disturbing scene. Although the colour section lasts no more than fifteen or twenty seconds, the combination of the imagery's force and unexpectedness is quite startling. The world of psychosis and that of colour are both and at once immensely powerful and entirely formless. They have no shape. They cannot be grasped or contained. They are terror.

And then there is *Ivan the Terrible*, Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished trilogy about the unification of Russia under Tsar Ivan. In *The Boyars' Plot*, the second of the two completed parts, most of the action takes place in the shadowy labyrinthine chambers of some medieval castle. As Ivan seeks to both unify Russia and consolidate his rule, just about everyone around him appears to be seeking the exact opposite. The atmosphere of treachery, conspiracy and paranoia is etched in a thin grey light and long black shadows. Until, that is, a great feast is organized by Ivan. At this

point, the film turns to livid reds and golds as the guests (which include most of the Tsar's enemies) drink, dance, sing and fall over. It is a moment of excess, intoxication and masquerade, and it is saturated with colour. As the party ends and the crowd moves to the cathedral to become a congregation, the colour is left behind. The conspirators' plot is exposed, and Ivan consolidates his power base. The final scene shows him on his throne: secure, intense and Terrible. And the colour returns.

There are several less terrifying falls into colour in the movies, although in these too, colour for the most part remains beyond the orderly and the rational, and thus remains dangerous and disruptive. There is, for example, the recent *Pleasantville*, about two full-colour American '90s teenagers sucked into a monochrome '50s sitcom. But one film stands out from all the others: the extraordinary, wonderful *The Wizard of Oz*. Made in 1939, this movie's great set piece is a spectacular descent into brilliant Technicolor. Having been scooped up by the tornado, Dorothy's house, together with Dorothy herself (Judy Garland) and Toto, falls out of the sky into Munchkinland, a fall that has a direct impact on the narrative and an especially direct impact on the Wicked Witch of the East. Dorothy's own drift into colour is, as I was devastated to discover when I first saw the film, revealed to be 'only' a dream-state, a result of her fall into unconsciousness. So Dorothy falls, twice. And she does so in a way that Baudelaire, Cézanne and Barthes would have understood. As she lands, she is greeted by the saccharine Glinda, aka the Good Witch of the North, who instructs the Munchkins to:

... meet the young lady who fell from a star.  
She fell from the sky,  
She fell very far,  
And Kansas she says is the name of the star . . .  
When she fell out of Kansas,  
A miracle occurred.

Dorothy falls, and also finds herself among Charles Blanc's lower strata of nature: the Emerald City, the Yellow Brick Road and, of course, the Ruby Slippers. And there is talk of a rainbow (but not of God or Newton). Then there is the Horse of a Different Colour You've Heard Tell About. 'Toto, I have a feeling we are not in Kansas anymore', says Dorothy, observantly, to her dog. No, Kansas was *grey*, so grey that it was ur-grey. As Salman Rushdie notes in his unapologetically Totophobic account of the film and L. Frank Baum's book,

... everything is grey as far as the eye can see – the prairie is grey and so is the house in which Dorothy lives. As for Auntie Em and Uncle Henry: 'The sun and the wind . . . had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober grey; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were grey also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now.' Whereas 'Uncle Henry never laughed. He was grey also, from his long beard to his rough boots.' The sky? It was 'even greyer than usual'.<sup>15</sup>

And when Dorothy's release from greyness arrives, it is itself a maelstrom of grey: 'It is out of this greyness – the gathering, cumulative greyness of that bleak world – that calamity comes. The tornado is the greyness gathered together and whirled about and unleashed, so to speak, against itself.'

For Rushdie, we are not so much caught up in a Fall as in an uprooting and displacement into colour. Within the yearning in Judy Garland's voice

is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots. At the heart of *The Wizard of Oz* is a great tension between these two dreams . . . In its most potent emotional moment, this is unarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the greyness and entering the colour, of making a new life in the 'place where there isn't any trouble'. 'Over the Rainbow' is, or ought to be, the anthem of all

the world's migrants, all those who go in search of the place where 'the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true'. It is a celebration of Escape, a great paean to the Uprooted Self, a hymn – the hymn – to elsewhere.

Falling or leaving: these two metaphors of colour are closely related. Their terminologies – of dreams, of joys, of uprootings or undoings of self – remain more or less the same. More than that, perhaps, the descent into colour often involves lateral as well as vertical displacement; it means being blown sideways at the same time as falling downwards. After all, Blanc's 'impassioned colourist' falls from the rational Academies of the West into the market stalls and bestiariums of the East, and numerous other accounts, chromophobic and chromophilic alike, describe something similar. In the end, Dorothy has to return from colour – to Home, Family, Childhood, Kansas and Grey. 'East, West, Home is Best.' So she chants (in the book), albeit without a chance of convincing anyone who has taken a moment to compare the land of Oz with the grey-on-grey of Kansas, as Rushdie points out. Perhaps the implications of not returning, of not recovering from the Fall into colour, were too radical for Hollywood to contemplate.

And not just for Hollywood. There is a curious parallel between the dream-journey of Dorothy and travels described by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, aka the architect Le Corbusier, in his *Journey to the East*. Coming from the man who would later say that colour was 'suited to simple races, peasants and savages', it's surprising to find that his first published writing is in fact an ecstatic, intoxicated, confusing, delirious, sensuous plunge into colour. Written in 1911 as a series of newspaper articles and only published in 1965 as *Le Voyage d'Orient*, this is a story of leaving and of entering colour, a story of returning and a story told as if it were a dream.

Near the beginning of the narrative, Le Corbusier describes in passing a journey by boat which is vaguely reminiscent in its monochromatic

starkness of Conrad's journey down the Thames: 'The great white boat had left Budapest at nightfall. Helped by the strong current, it made its way down the immense watercourse that marked out with a black path to the right and the left the two distant riverbanks . . .'<sup>16</sup> This imagery makes the traveller's entry into colour all the more dramatic. Once in his Orient, almost every description becomes tinted; almost every observation becomes a poem to colour. Sometimes, this appears quite innocent: 'There is in the sky, before the night hardens things, a watershed of emerald green and indigo blue.' But more often, in the intense daylight, the descriptions of colours, objects, architecture and people begin to blur, spill or dissolve into each other as if their limits had been lost in a haze of sexual intensity:

You recognise these joys: to feel the generous belly of a vase, to caress its slender neck, and then to explore the subtleties of its contours. To thrust your hands into the deepest part of your pockets and, with eyes half closed, to give way to the slow intoxication of the fantastic glazes, the bursts of yellows, the velvet tones of the blues . . .

A little later on: 'Everything is smothered in flowers, and under these ephemeral bouquets, other ephemeral bouquets . . . young girls, beautiful women, smiling, somewhat depraved, perhaps a little inflamed by their desires. Gentlemen in black play second fiddle in this orchestra of colours . . .' For Le Corbusier, the Orient becomes an 'explosion of colours', and inevitably 'The eye becomes confused, a little perturbed by this kaleidoscopic cinema where dance the most dizzying combinations of colours.' His preferred description for this undifferentiated assault on the senses is a dreamy 'intoxication': 'The colour . . . exists for the caress and intoxication of the eye'; 'the intoxicating embrace of the moist evening, wafting voluptuously from the mountainside'; 'in the drowsiness of everything, in the vague intoxication of feeling space collapse and expand', You are left helpless: 'You are intoxicated; you cannot react at all.'

Once again, the drug of colour begins to weigh heavily on our eyes; we become drowsy; we begin to lose consciousness as we fall under its narcotic spell; we lose focus; we lose our sense of the distinctions between things; we descend into delirium; we lose ourselves in colour as colour frees itself from the grip of objects and floods over our scrambled senses; we drown in the sexual heat of colour . . . And the Technicolor dream continues:

The exterior is as red as iron reaching melting point. There it is, swollen, supple, and so close to the earth on its level shoreline, its pleasing oval forms radiant with clarity like an Egyptian alabaster urn carrying a burning lamp. The urn is strangely protective this evening, as if in mystical abandon outright gifts are torn away from living flesh and offered in painful and bloody oblations to the Beyond, to the Other, to Whomever, to any Other than the self. The overwhelming delirium of this moment and place.

We have no sense of direction. We drift. Hallucination follows hallucination. We are in confusion: ' . . . we others from the centre of civilisation, are savages . . .' And then, as if by chance – although chance has no particular meaning in our dreamwork – we discover a destination, an awakening, a recovery which puts our dream into an envelope of rationality, like it did for poor Dorothy. But unlike Dorothy's, Le Corbusier's awakening occurs *within* the dream. His dream-awakening dream is the Acropolis: 'To see the Acropolis is a dream one treasures without even dreaming to realise it.' Yet, realized, this dream is no less a dream. Stuck in Athens for weeks because of a cholera outbreak, Le Corbusier reflects: 'Days and weeks passed in this dream and nightmare, in a bright morning, through an intoxicating noon, until evening . . .' He is entranced, captive to its absolute spell: 'Nothing existed but the temple; it was 'an ineluctable presence'; 'the Parthenon, the undeniable Master'; 'Admiration, adoration, and then annihilation'.

Annihilation? Of what? There could be several answers to this. On

the one hand, Le Corbusier is surrounded by a cholera epidemic; he sees the dead being taken from their houses; perhaps he sees his own death in the dead around him. But I suspect he had a bigger death in mind: self-annihilation in the face of the incomprehensible sublime force that was the Acropolis, and with it the annihilation of all that came before this overwhelming experience: annihilation of the Orient and everything that was the dream-journey that preceded and led to this moment of revelation; annihilation of confusion; annihilation, perhaps, of desire. For once he had seen the Acropolis, Le Corbusier immediately decided that he had no further need of the East; the rest of his journey (not described in the book) would be through Italy and back to France: 'I will see neither the Mosque of Omar nor the pyramids. And yet I write with eyes that have seen the Acropolis, and I will leave with joy. Oh! Light! Marbles! Monochromy! East, West, Home is Best.

What colour was the Parthenon in Le Corbusier's dream? Not, as one might expect from his later writings, a magnificent, triumphant, all-embracing white. Or not immediately. Rather, in his description of the great temple, next to the form, volume, mass and space of the architecture, colour begins to *give way*; colour no longer appears to be such a significant force; it no longer has the same power to intoxicate; it no longer has quite the same intensity. His description becomes more muted: 'I shall give this entire account an ochre cast;' the marbles adopt the colour of the landscape and 'seem as reddish-brown as terra-cotta'. And yet in this *reflected* colour, there is still something awesome: 'Never in my life have I experienced the subtleties of such monochromy.' Only later, during a storm, does the Parthenon whiten: 'I saw through the large drops of rain the hill becoming suddenly white and the temple sparkle like a diadem against the ink-black Hymettus and the Pentilicus ravaged by downpours.' Once again, the Parthenon absorbs and reflects the colours of its surroundings and atmosphere, but it does not seem to have colour of its own; the Parthenon is somehow beyond colour.

In Le Corbusier's earlier evocations, just about every object had brilliant local colour, and these intense hues were often intermingled with strong blacks and dazzling whites. White was the precondition for colour; colour was intensified by its proximity to white; there was no sense of opposition between the two; they were co-dependent and co-operative. That was certainly part of the brilliance of Le Corbusier's early writing on colour. The *separation* of whiteness and colour would come later. Le Corbusier in 1925 in *The Decorative Art of Today*:

What shimmering silks, what fancy, glittering marbles, what opulent bronzes and golds! What fashionable blacks, what striking vermilions, what silver lamés from Byzantium and the Orient! Enough. Such stuff founders in a narcotic haze. Let's have done with it . . . It is time to crusade for whitewash and Diogenes.<sup>17</sup>

The architect was done with drugs. He had been off them since at least 1920; the Great War had seen to that. In their place: Order. Reason. Purity. Truth. Architecture. Whitewash.

In his evangelical *Rappel à l'ordre* tirade against 'the flourish, the stain, the distracting din of colours and ornaments', and in his campaign for a world shaped by the New Spirit and a new architecture, Le Corbusier aligned himself with the earlier but equally evangelical Adolf Loos: 'We have gone beyond ornament, we have achieved plain, undecorated simplicity. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital. The fulfilment will be ours.'<sup>18</sup> Heaven is white; that which gets closest to God – the Parthenon, the Idea, Purity, Cleanliness – also sheds its colour. But for Le Corbusier, ornament, clutter, glitter and colour were not so much signs of primitive 'degeneracy', as they had been for Loos, as they were the particularly modern form of degeneration that we now call kitsch. The difference is important, because at no time did Le Corbusier

attack what he saw as the authentic 'simplicity' of the folk cultures of the past, cultures which, he conceded, had their own whiteness: 'Whitewash has been associated with human habitation since the birth of mankind.' The problem was, rather, modern industrialized ornamentation and colouring, a problem which, for Le Corbusier, reeked of confusion, disorder, dishonesty, imbalance, subservience, narcosis and dirt.

Thus, under the chapter title 'A Coat of Whitewash: The Law of Ripolin' (a phrase that is constantly repeated and usually capitalized):

we would perform a moral act: *to love purity!*  
we would improve our condition: *to have the power of judgement!*  
An act which leads to the joy of life: the pursuit of perfection.  
Imagine the results of the Law of Ripolin. Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin. *His home* is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. *Everything is shown as it is.* Then comes *inner* cleanness, for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything which is not correct, authorised, intended, desired, thought-out: no action before thought. When you are surrounded with shadows and dark corners you are at home only as far as the hazy edges of the darkness your eyes cannot penetrate. You are not master in your own house. Once you have put ripolin on your walls you will be *master of your own house.*

White is clean, clear, healthy, moral, rational, masterful . . . White, it seems, was everywhere, at least in the minds of Le Corbusier's contemporaries and followers. Theo van Doesburg, for example:

WHITE is the spiritual colour of our times, the cleanness which directs all our actions. It is neither grey white nor ivory white, but pure white.

WHITE is the colour of modern times, the colour which

dissipates a whole era; our era is one of perfection, purity and certitude.

WHITE It includes everything.

We have superseded both the 'brown' of decadence and classicism and the 'blue' of divisionism, the cult of the blue sky, the gods with green beards and the spectrum.

WHITE pure white.<sup>19</sup>

In Le Corbusier's intoxicated rationalism, the rhetoric of order, purity and truth is inscribed in a pure, blinding white surface. So blinding, in fact, that the discourse of modern architecture has almost entirely failed to notice that most of his buildings are actually *coloured*. This marvellous paradox in the rhetoric of whiteness has been carefully picked apart by Mark Widgley, who has observed, for example, that Le Corbusier's manifesto building, the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, built in the same year as *The Decorative Arts of Today* was written, was actually painted in ten different colours: white, black, light grey, dark grey, yellow ochre, pale yellow ochre, burnt sienna, dark burnt sienna and light blue. Widgley has noted that Le Corbusier only ever made one white building. In spite of this, he has argued, there is 'a self-imposed blindness . . . shared by almost all of the dominant historiographies . . . Colour is detached from the master narrative' of architecture. Once again, it appears that we are not dealing with something as simple as white things and white surfaces, with white as an empirically verifiable fact or as a colour. Rather, we are in the realm of *whiteness*. White as myth, as an aesthetic fantasy, a fantasy so strong that it summons up negative hallucinations, so intense that it produces a blindness to colour, even when colour is literally in front of your face.

In *Purism*, a manifesto for painting co-written in 1920 with Amédée Ozenfant, Le Corbusier writes of painting as a kind of architecture: 'A painting is an association of purified, related, and architected elements;' 'Painting is a question of architecture.'<sup>20</sup> In later writing, he often describes

architecture as a kind of painting, a process that follows the academic logic from 'composition', through 'contour', to 'light and shade'. If this is the case, if architecture is a kind of painting as much as painting is a kind of architecture, then Le Corbusier, like Blanc before him, was forced by his own logic to recognize the presence of colour in a work. This he did, and in a very similar way to Blanc. *Purism* is ultra-rationalist; the text is speckled with terms such as 'logic', 'order', 'control', 'constant', 'certainty', 'severe', 'system', 'fixed', 'universal', 'mathematical' and so on. But, as the authors acknowledge, 'when one says painting, inevitably he says colour.' And in the Purist universe, colour is a problem, a 'perilous agent'; it has the 'properties of shock' and a 'formidable fatality'; it often 'destroys or disorganises' an art which aims to address itself 'to the elevated faculties of the mind'.

Colour, then, must be controlled. It must be ordered and classified; a hierarchy must be established. And so it is. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant come up with three 'scales' for colour: the 'major scale', the 'dynamic scale' and the 'transitional scale'. The major scale is made up of 'ochre yellows, reds, earths, white, black, ultramarine blue and . . . certain of their derivatives'. This scale is 'strong' and 'stable'; it gives 'unity' and 'balance'; these colours are 'constructive' and are employed 'in all the great periods'. And they are also almost exactly the colours employed by Le Corbusier in his 1925 Pavilion. The dynamic scale is made up of 'disturbing elements': citron yellow, oranges, vermilions and other 'animated', 'agitated' colours; the transitional scale, 'the madders, emerald green, and all the lakes', are simply 'not of construction'. A painting 'cannot be made without colour', but the painter is advised to stick with the major scale; therein lies the tradition of great painting. The further one drifts down the scale of colour, the further one drifts from the 'architectural aesthetic' to the 'aesthetic of printed cloth' – that is, the further one drifts from art to mere decoration. This, in the end, was Cézanne's 'error', for he 'accepted without examination the attractive offer of the colour-vendor, in a period marked by a fad for colour-chemistry, a science with no possible effect on great

painting'. Such 'sensory jublations of the paint tube' were best left 'to the clothes-dyers', because while painting could not be made without colour, 'in a true and durable plastic work, it is *form* which comes first and everything else should be subordinated to it.' The 'architectural' aesthetic of painting was concerned with the unified representation of volumes (whereas the clothes-dyers' aesthetic was limited to flat patterns); colours of the 'major scale' were strong and stable insofar as they served and emphasized this representation of volume. The same logic applies to the 'painterly' aesthetic of Le Corbusier's architecture: the function of coloured planes in a space is to render the volumes and spaces more balanced and coherent, more exact and, in the end, more white: 'To tell the truth, my house does not seem white unless I have disposed the active forces of colours and values in the appropriate places.' White must be whiter than white, and to achieve that, colour must be added.

It doesn't much matter whether this hierarchy of colours is coherent, any more than it matters whether Blanc's cosmology of colour makes any real sense. What matters is the show of force: the rhetorical subordination of colour to the rule of line and the higher concerns of the mind. No longer intoxicating, narcotic or orgasmic, colour is learned, ordered, subordinated and tamed. Broken.