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AFRAID OF RED, YELLOW AND.......BLUE? GOETHE, MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH IN COLOUR RESEARCH.

ABSTRACT

The central topic in this dissertation is the description and application of a method that can be used to investigate colour as a qualitative phenomenon, without reducing the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in the world of colour. This method should provide space for the experience of colour, but also for a conceptual representation that gives human thinking access to this wealth of meanings.

In their colour inquiries, the German writer/poet, natural scientist and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and the French phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) used a method of investigation that meets the requirements just mentioned. By comparing their work on colour and the method of investigation they described and applied in their inquiries, the differences and correspondences between the two writers become more clear. As a result of this comparison, a phenomenological method to investigate colour is established that unites essential traits in the methods described by Goethe and Merleau-Ponty. Consequently, this method is applied in a phenomenological inquiry into the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in the colour blue (Blue as an example, it could have been another colour). As a result, the dynamic principle of the colour is described that manifests itself in the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in this colour.

In chapter one, Goethes method of investigation is examined, and the application of this method in his theory of colours, Zur Farbenlehre (1810). The first step in Goethes method is the sensory perception of all the different aspects of the phenomenon that appear in its natural connections with other phenomena. In the second step, the investigator enters into a dialogue with all this aspects. In this dialogue, the investigator penetrates into the phenomenon by being penetrated by it. In the third step, this mutual penetration becomes so strong, that the phenomenon can ‘make itself known’ in the consciousness of the investigator: the dynamic principle (Goethe: ‘Urphänomen’) that manifests itself in all the observed aspects of the phenomenon, can reveal itself.

In Goethes Zur Farbenlehre, step one and two of his method are not strictly separated (section 1,2 and 3 of Zur Farbenlehre). In this steps he observes, and at the same time he keeps the dialogue going between himself and the world of colours. He doesn't interfere with theories or explanations. In the third step, he discovers the ‘Urphänomen’ of the world of colours, and develops his colour wheel out of this dynamic principle (section 4 and 5). For Goethe, the ‘Urphänomen’ of the world of colour manifests itself in the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in all objective and subjective colour phenomena. So in part 6 of Zur Farbenlehre, he examines the subjective colour phenomena: the effect of the different colours in the colour wheel, and the effect of colour (combinations) in art (painting).

In chapter two, the reception of Goethes Zur Farbenlehre is examined. In Goethes time, the reaction of most physicists was negative. Nowadays, prominent physicists like Von Weiszäcker, Heisenberg and Bortoft suggests that in modern physics, the method Goethe used in Zur Farbenlehre and in all his scientific work is worth considering. The reactions of philosophers and artists was generally positive. Goethes ideas about the direct, primordial effect of colour have been quiet important for the emancipation of colour as an independent means of artistic expression in modern art.

In chapter three, Merleau-Pontys phenomenological method of investigation and the results of his colour research is examined. The phenomenological reduction is the first phase in its method, in which the investigator returns to the primordial experience of the phenomenon. In this primordial experience, the wealth of meanings that is present in the phenomenon can be experienced. In the second phase, the eidetical reduction, the investigator tries to consciously see and describe the dynamic principle (way of being)
that manifests itself in this wealth of meanings. In this method, the phenomenon gives the investigator the impressions and experiences, and his knowledge tries to be an exact translation of them. And for Merleau-Ponty, that translation will always be incomplete, because the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in the phenomenon is endless.

Merleau-Pontys inquiries into colour are a pleading for colour as experienced reality. The analytical view sees the experience of colour as subjective, but according to Merleau-Ponty this view is only trying to save the prejudice of the ‘objective world’ by doing so. In the analytic view, the objective colour, isolated from its context, is the ‘right’ colour. In experienced reality however, the ‘right’ colour is determined by its context.

By making use of psychological studies about the effect of colour, Merleau-Ponty concludes that while perceiving a colour, we find in this colour a ‘proposition’ of a definite way of being. And even before we are consciously aware of this colour, our body already participates in the suggested way of being. According to Merleau-Ponty, this way of being of this colour is manifesting itself in all the related objective and subjective phenomena.

In chapter four, the methods of Goethe and Merleau-Ponty are compared, and the ideas that are related to them. The differences between Goethe as a poet and a natural scientist and Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher are discussed, as well as the differences between them related to their positions in life and in history.

What unites them, is a method of investigating colour that I called the third way. In this method, the investigator tries to conquer the separation between object (objectivism) and subject (subjectivism), between experience and understanding that is essential in the Cartesian dualism. Merleau-Ponty conquers this dualism directly, while Goethe was bitterly fighting against the mathematically orientated theory of colour of Isaac Newton (1643-1727), an important representative of this dualism.

As a result of this comparison, a phenomenological method to investigate colour is formulated that unites essential traits in the methods described by Goethe and Merleau-Ponty. The three steps of this method unite the first and the last phase in the methods of Goethe and Merleau-Ponty, and also integrate the second step in Goethes method (while the activities Goethe describes in that step, can also be found in the description of the phenomenological method by Merleau-Ponty).

In chapter 5, 6 and 7, this phenomenological method is used in a inquiry into the wealth of meanings that can be experienced in the colour blue. Each chapter enters into one step of the method. Unlike Goethe and Merleau-Ponty, in all three steps I also use painting as a means of investigation, because in my opinion this offers excellent opportunities to experience colour. In the first step, the focus is on the blue in its natural appearance and connections. In the second step, the investigator enters into a dialogue with the colour blue by making use of culture historical and colour psychological inquiries into blue, and by discussing (blue) artworks of artists that gave blue a dominant role in (a certain period of) their oeuvre. All the experiences with blue that are mentioned, are collected in The field of blue experiences. A written report of the investigators own dialogue with blue while painting (with contributions of other authors), makes clear that my experiences in this dialogue are not unique; in this report, the experiences in The field of blue experiences come back in a more interrelated, dynamic way. In the third step, the phenomenon can ‘make itself known’ in the consciousness of the investigator: the dynamic principle (way of being) that manifests itself in all the observed aspects of the phenomenon, can reveal itself.

Once this dynamic principle is found, the investigator should be able to see it manifesting itself in all objective and subjective blue phenomena. The epilogue at the end of chapter 7 is dedicated to this subject.

In the valorasatie addendum the practical usefulness of this phenomenological method of investigation is questioned. The main conclusion is that professionals that are concerned with applying colour need an alternative for ‘a recipe-book’, because the application of colour is extremely dependent on context. Examples of applying colour in practical situations by an architect, a colour advisor and two art therapists are given. The phenomenological approach that is developed and applied in this dissertation offers a method that can underpin the experience-based judgements of this professionals, enlarges their awareness of the possibilities of colour, and generates (more) consciousness of what is actually ‘at work’ in their tacit knowledge about colour.