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# Interpreting Chromatic Codes through the Ages and in Different Modern Social Contexts

## **Abstract**

*Colours are crucial to what we may call “the visualization of identity.” There are numerous scientific disciplines that address the issue of colours. Chromatics as a discipline (focusing on the role of colours in communication) is of recent origin. It is the social context that makes colour important, gives it a social definition and meaning, creates codes and values. Messages that we receive contain different codes, which can be dominant (we accept them by default), subject to negotiation (we accept them partially) and oppositional (we reject them). If we change colours in a message (a flag, car, or sports jersey), our intention is to change the message as well. Misunderstanding arises when the two sides in communication understand a single sign or message differently (the so-called “noise in communication” according to Schram). Conflicts are mostly caused by differences in the interpretation of facts.*

**Key words:** message, cod, sign, colour, chromatic, interpretation, communication.



Colours have always occupied an important place in the psychology of *homo sapiens*, which is evident from the painted walls of the caves in which our ancestors lived. Red and black were already then two principles that directly referred to two important concepts – life and death. These were the two basic dyes used in that period, according to the anthropologist Howard Sun in his book *Secrets of Color*, where he recalls how the Neanderthal man marked the graves of his family members in colours (Sun, 1995:100).

In ancient Egypt, the symbolism of colours further evolved. This chromatic sensitivity spread from the East to Greece and Rome. The ancient Greeks were keenly interested in the problems of light and colour, and thus it was in this period that the aesthetics of colours evolved, with the first theories dealing with the problem of colour gamut. Early Greek drawings on vases typically had two white lines on a black background. Somewhat later, red appeared as the third colour, and then ochre yellow. These four colours were used in painting and were, according to Empedocles, the primary colours of nature.<sup>21</sup>

The absence of individual colours in the life of ancient Greece and Rome was partly related to the scientific ideas that prevailed at that time. There were, namely, three competing concepts. According to Pythagoras, our perception of colours, that is, the possibility of seeing colours, was due to the rays that the eye emitted and that searched for a coloured object; for Epicure, it was the bodies themselves that sent the rays to the eye; and the third concept was that of Plato, which would prevail in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries – the perception of colour was due to an encounter between the rays coming from the eye and those emitted by the perceived object. This concept implies that, when the eye is not directed at the coloured object, the colour of that object does not exist (each object is colourless until we look at it).

In the period between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was generally not known that colour was part of the light beam; instead, it was believed that it was tied to matter, and since colour belonged to matter, it was to be removed from the Church. One of the most important questions posed by Michel Pastoreau is how the research on colour has evolved and whether that which we call perception is something natural (that is, whether the eye of our ancestors was different as an organ from our eye), or perception is cultural in its character. In his research, the author has contradicted many of his predecessors and opted for the latter hypothesis, namely that the position of colour in a society is defined by culture rather than biology. Colour is the *organigramme* of all social life: it articulates space and time, coordinates knowledge, and creates systems out of it (Pastoreau, 1987:64). It is therefore very important to note that, when analysing colours, everything depends on the social circumstances. It is impossible to analyse colours outside of the cultural, historical, and spatial context. Even within the same culture, there can be different interpretations of one and the same colour, largely because we enter the communication process as individuals, although at the same time we retain all the characteristics of all groups we have ever belonged to.

21 The archetypal number four is not only the basis of Empedocles' theory of colours, but also of his fundamental theory of the four elements – fire, water, air, and earth – to which it referred. The theory of the four elements actually dominated the natural sciences, especially alchemy, until the beginning of the modern era.

Thinking about colours also raises questions – how is it possible that people used to paint the rainbow only in four colours in the past, or the sea on maps in green rather than blue? Why is green the favourite colour of the Irish Catholics while the Catholics in Bosnia reject it? Is the issue of colour not also a linguistic problem, since some languages only have three or four words for colours, while modern English has as many as eleven terms for the so-called simple colours?

Colours often behave like codes and it is not always easy to identify, isolate, or define them. We do not pay attention to them or take them as something important, something that “makes a difference.” Colour, however, also communicates directly. “Words must be translated into images in our mind. These images must be assembled, organized, and categorized so as to give meaning to the words.” (Trandafilović, 2006:77).

### 3. Interpreting and reading chromatic codes (colours)

Interpretation depends on our historical prejudices (Gadamer speaks about the fusion of horizons). In a drop of water, we can see a pearl or just a drop of water if we want to – as a Buddhist saying goes. But what we really see – that is a question with more than one answer. “Grass is not green, it only seems green,” as Korzybski would say. The question is not just “how do see something,” but also whether we really see “what we see.” The world is an *illusion*, it has no real existence – that is what is meant by the power of imagination (*khayal*), as Ibn Arabi once wrote.<sup>22</sup>

Signs in the process of interpretation generate other signs, and thus interpretation is an open and dynamic process with the potential of an “endless multiplication of meaning,” as Sonja Briski Uzelac has written (<http://www.zarez.hr/clanci/hermeneutika-ikonickog-i-verbalnog-znaka>). Red is not red in itself. It is blood, revolution, suffering, and murder – depending on the interpretation. This colour has become significant for individuals, for nations, perhaps for the entire humanity in an inexplicable and unpredictable manner (Gheerbrant and Chevalier, 1987:XI-XII).

What is, in fact, interpretation? In the traditional sense, interpretation is often understood as deciphering (clarification), revealing the meaning of something that was previously concealed (and colour is concealment). The meaning was already given, it is only to be discovered. The new concept of interpretation follows Nietzsche: There are no facts per se, only our interpretations of the facts (interpretationalism and perspectivism). (Lavić, 2014:110)

22 “The world is an illusion: it has no real existence. And this is what is meant by ‘imagination’ (*khayal*). For you just imagine that it (i.e., the world) is an autonomous reality quite different from and independent of the absolute Reality, while in truth it is nothing of the sort... Know that you yourself are an imagination. And everything that you perceive and say to yourself, ‘this is not me’, is also an imagination. So that the whole world of existence is imagination within imagination.” Cited after: Toshihiko Izutsu, “Dream and Reality,” in: *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1983), 7.

*We do not have any access to the world that is not subject to interpretation, be it in knowledge or in action, or anywhere else. The world is primarily constructed and structured through our human needs, abilities, and opportunities – and this relates both to our organic capacities and to the conceptual possibilities of linguistic representation. The world is understandable only insofar as it is built, structured, and formed by our own, human-made interpretational schemes, those that are found within us. Everything that we can comprehend and present as cognitive and active beings depends on interpretation* (Lavić, 2014:111).

According to Professor Hasnija Murtagić Tuna, H. Heleren has listed dozens of possible interpretations, and this can lead us to the idea that science itself has come to a dead end (<http://www.bosnjaci.rs/tekst/178/o-lingvistickiminterpretacije.html>).

The term “interpretation” covers a wide field of meanings, all of which can be reduced to decoding a text, a symbol, or behaviour in order to determine their significance. In a restrictive sense, under the name of hermeneutics, it was in the focus of research in the philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer (Treccani, 2009:1113). The concept of interpretation is also found in Aristotle – *De interpretatione* (Gr. Περὶ ἑρμηνείας) is the Latin name of one of his treatises collected in the *Organon* on how to formulate the definition of affirmation as “a claim that ascribes something to something” (*De interpretatione*, VI, 17 a 25-6).

From the 1930s, Wittgenstein radically opposed formal and strictly denotational approaches to the theory of meaning, inaugurating the type of research in which the concept of interpretation played a determining role (Philosophical Research, Post, 1953). Referring to the theory of signs, as opposed to the theory of representation, a sign model was postulated that indicated that the image did not have a meaning in itself, without an “audience” ready to interpret it. Goldmann has observed that the same or similar facts could have completely opposite or different meanings in different contexts, and that their study was valid only if included in the dynamic whole of the social and historical events that they were part of (Goldmann, 1962:22). In one social context, the red colour will be understood as a symbol of communism, in another it will be perceived as one of the basic colours in the Croatian flag, and so on.

Uspensky has asked how we look at something, that is, how we see it from the outside, how it is seen “from within,” and how to reconcile the two. He speaks of merging the inner and outer points of view (Uspensky 1973). This merging can be displayed on several levels:

1. The ideological plane (we see red and it conveys the idea of the revolution);
2. The psychological plane (red as a colour that stands for passion, energy, aggression);
3. The level of spatial and temporal perspective (red in historical Croatia and red during the presidency of Jadranka Kosor, who often spoke of “red danger”); and
4. The phraseological context (red like blood, red like a lobster).

Aristotle saw a certain coincidence, and even parallels between colours and flavours. According to him, in fact, colours were produced by mixing white and black, just as flavours were produced by mixing sweet and bitter (Aristotle, 1981:14). Gombrich has criticized John Ruskin's theory of the innocent eye (the theory of direct perception). He (Gombrich) claims that there is no innocent eye that sees an object as it is; instead, what we see depends on the previous knowledge of the observer and the established system of classification. An individual is prepared in advance as to how he or she should understand the codes, signs, and background of the story to be interpreted. Visual perception can be interpreted only by means of impulses reaching the retina in accordance with the previous knowledge, memory, and expectations. Gombrich has observed that the conclusion process is an extremely important element of perception. What we perceive is always conditioned by norms, habits, knowledge, convictions, and feelings. (Kudiš, 1990:9).

What connects Gombrich, Gaudman, and Bryson is the opinion that every seeing is preceded by a notion of the things we see. All three authors (with slight deviations) speak of how visual perception depends on the expectations, the mental orientation of the observer, his or her experience, and the knowledge of the world in which they live (<http://www.prelom.kolektiv.org/pdf/>). All that causes visual pleasure to the viewer becomes an open space of transformation and interchange of meanings between the visual object and the viewer (Bryson, 1983:12).

For centuries, we have *known* how to think and watch, paint, believe, and respect, and we never stop to think how and to what extent we are defined therein by our technique of creating closed circles of self-justifying our own beliefs – as Sead Alić has argued, referring to McLuhan (Alić, 2009:110).

We are returning here to the assertion that colours are – ideas. With ideas, and therefore also with colours, we create our beliefs and seek to justify them. We do this in various ways: by closing the circle and then colouring it in red, blue, white, or green – the way it suits us in a particular context. Each colour individually is rather complex and peculiar in its own symbolism. Wittgenstein wrote about the logic of colours from a philosophical standpoint, not mentioning the non-verbal communication of the speakers. He nevertheless intuitively acknowledged it, although his intention was not to encourage thinking about colours as a mode of non-verbal communication. It is believed that the human eye can perceive about 160 different shades in the colour spectrum. However, some colour analysts claim that there are over 12000 different tones. “If we move to the field of computer sciences, we will find out that there are 16 million tones on a colour screen. Of course, these are merely degrees, slight hues of tones and intensities of the primary colours. Nevertheless, each of these colours can have a different effect on the individual – emotional and mental” (Šarenac, 2001:16). It is, therefore, indisputable that colour has an influence on humans – the question is only to what extent, which colour, and how strong the reaction is (whether it is strong enough to make an individual react in the communication process or not).



*When it comes to colours, the transfer of information takes place even faster than by means of complex images, because colours can be noticed “from the corner of our eye” and make us subconsciously change our mode of communication in the process, without even knowing that we have seen it. “This colour has become significant for individuals, for nations, perhaps for the entire humanity in an inexplicable and unpredictable manner” (Gheerbrant and Chevalier, 1987:XI-XII).*

Denotation refers to the iconic level, while connotation is related to the so-called “plastic” level. The connotation value of red, for example, depends on the cultural context and situations. A European will perceive THAT red as a SIGN of danger, a Chinese as a sign of “lucky fate.” Today, there is an increasing opinion that language and image have an equal importance in understanding meaning. Both of these codes can actually or potentially function by themselves (individually). It is not uncommon to see a perfume advertisement in which one does not hear a single word (language is missing), yet we understand the message.

Ancient Croatian or Slavic words for colour were *mast* (“grease”) (cf. *masnica* for a bruise, or the phrase *premazan svim mastima* – “smearred with all sorts of grease” for being particularly cunning) and *kvat* (in modern Russian *cvet*) (Gluhak, 1993:139). Modern Croatian uses the Turkish word *boya*, while the Italian word *colore* comes from Latin *colorem*, related to the verb *celare*, “hide”. Thus, colour is something that covers or hides (Zingarelli, 2000:400; Kapović, 2009:163; Devoto, 1968:88). The German word for colour is *Farbe*, which comes from the medieval German *varwe*, or the Old German *farwa*, which is associated with the meaning “sprinkled, stained” (Duden, 2007:552).

#### 4. The physics of colour

In 1611, Dominis noticed that a sequence of colours appeared when light passed through a prism at a sharper angle: red, green, and blue, which preceded Newton’s discovery. Refraction of light had already been observed by Cleomedes around 40 BC, but it was only Willebrord Snellius around 1621 who established the law of fracture. Robert Hooke also dealt with this phenomenon, and the true founder of the wave theory is Christiaan Huygens: According to the wave theory, the speed of light in water is smaller than in the air. The corpuscular theory claimed the opposite. Newton wavered for a long time between the two theories and eventually opted for the corpuscular one (Supek, 2004:89). When Newton observed colourless sunlight shining through a crystalline prism, it split into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet rays, from which he concluded that sunlight was a mixture of rainbow colours.<sup>23</sup> Newton’s colour spectrum brought various changes: in the colour system, red

<sup>23</sup> Newton’s treatise on “Optics”, published in 1704, was a very important moment in the history of understanding colours. The experiment with the *camera obscura* and passing the light through a crystalline prism dates, in fact, from 1666, with the first decomposition of light into seven colours. Newton decided on a scale of seven main colours and a number of gradations inside them. White light, he explained, was a mixture of something that he called *corpusculum* (Luzatto, Pompas, 2001:44).

was no longer situated halfway between black and white, green was finally understood as a shade of blue and yellow, warm and cold colours were distinguished, and so on (Brusatin; 2013:13). Goethe believed that Newton was wrong. Besides Goethe, there was a whole group of scientists who held that the colour phenomenon must imply and involve some emotional and philosophical components, and that one could not explain colour and light solely through mechanistic theories, as Newton did. In this whole story about colours, our organism, that is, our apparatus of vision, plays a very important role, in cooperation with the luminous stimulations coming from outside – as Goethe claimed. He conducted a series of experiments with coloured shadows and proved that our eye was intensely involved in the reconstruction of the colour sensation (a red square will result in one shade if the background below it is blue, and in a slightly different tone if it is, for example, orange).

### 5. A new colour order

As Giovanni Piana has argued, colour speaks and we must try to understand what it is telling us (Piana, 1996:35). Colour is a sign, colour is a symbol, colour is a signal (Trstenjak, 1978:151). The language of colour is configured as a particularly symbolic speech, a product of suggestions that do not arise from rational observation alone (Pedirola, 1996:31). The ancient Egyptians denoted the term “colour” and “being” with the same term (*iwen*). For this ancient people, the word “colour” signified people, beings, or characters (<http://www.ledonline.it/leitmotiv/Allegati/leitmotiv010114.pdf>). In order to supply a deity with additional power and emphasize its mystery, that deity was said to be of some strange, indeterminate colour (Lurker, 1990:93).

There is not even a consensus on how many primary colours there are. Berlin and Kay are of the opinion that each language knows a certain number of names for colours, and this number ranges from two to eleven (Lyons, 2003:211). If a language knows less than these eleven terms, then one can call it a lexical restriction, which is nevertheless precisely defined (Berlin, Kay, 1997:21-56).

One of the world’s most famous paintings, *The Arnolfini Wedding* by Jan van Eyck, is an illustrative example of how, from a temporal distance, a single colour can be interpreted in several ways and how we can never be absolutely sure about the accuracy of interpretation. *The Arnolfini Wedding* is generally believed to show an actual wedding, with the girl being a genuine bride, since in the old times brides were dressed in green gowns. For this painting, the artist used the rather expensive malachite pigment. Michel Pastoureau has offered several possible answers to the question why the girl in the picture is wearing green:

1. The girl comes from a lower social layer, that is, she is certainly not a noblewoman. In Italy before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the colour of the middle estate – merchants, craftsmen, peasants – was green. She may have belonged to a wealthy merchant family, but certainly not to a noble one.
2. The girl is still unmarried. Perhaps she is about to get married and that is why she is dressed in green.



3. The woman in the picture is actually an elderly prostitute. This solution is possible, but not highly probable, since she seems like a younger person. But in Germany and Italy elderly prostitutes wore green in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.
4. The girl is called Elizabeth. Quite possible, as Pastoreau claims. Saint Elizabeth was almost always depicted wearing a green dress, so it is possible that this garment was associated with someone called Elizabeth.
5. The girl comes from a noble family with blue and green colours in its coat of arms, and she is depicted wearing green in order to associate her with that family. At that time, noble girls often wore garments that resembled the coat of arms of their families in terms of colour.
6. The painting shows a scene happening early in May. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, girls wore green at the beginning of spring, especially on May 1.
7. The girl is pregnant. In medieval Europe, women who could not get pregnant often wore green, which “guaranteed” the fulfilment of their greatest dream. Saint Margaret was proclaimed a saint protector of pregnant women and a green dress became a preferred object.

The colour spectrum that is “in effect” today runs in this order: purple, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. In the old colour system, which was in use during the Middle Ages, this order looked like this: white, yellow, orange, red, green, blue, purple, and black. Everything depends on the social circumstances. It is impossible to analyse colours outside the cultural and temporal/spatial context. The feudal era caused profound mutations in the chromatic systems, causing the breakdown of the old system based on white, black, and red, thanks to the introduction of new colours such as purple, green, and especially blue. The medieval period can be divided into two chromatic periods. The first was before the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, when blue was still absent from ceremonial garments, as it was in some way reserved for working uniforms (at that time, blue was still considered a shade of black). At the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there was a Blue Revolution.

“Royal blue” is a colour traditionally associated with Charlemagne. However, the first king who wore a blue cloak was Philip II Augustus and thus he was the first “blue” king (at least in Western Europe, because we have no reliable facts about other parts of the world). During the latter part of his rule (after returning from the Crusades), he developed a particular predilection for blue vestments, and that is when the term “royal blue” became current (Pastoreau – lectures at Louvre, November 15, 2012). In the collective imagination of that era, blue was the colour of heaven and thus wearing blue meant “bringing some heaven down to the earth.” Red, which had previously been the dominant colour, thus obtained a significant rival. The plant called “dyer’s woad” or “glastum” (*Isatis tinctoria*) was henceforth used to produce blue dye. The entire French land of Provence was planted with this plant. Soon, the skies would finally become blue in paintings. Blue was also associated with concepts such as noble, heavenly, divine, and thus God’s light was henceforth also depicted as blue; the Virgin was blue and His Majesty the King of France was also dressed in blue.

The new (colourist) social agreements established that water (the sea) was actually blue, which was confirmed only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, the sea was painted green in geographic maps. Since forests were also green, one had to distinguish somehow between the sea and the mountains, and the decision was made that the sea would be painted blue. Also, the development of heraldry contributed significantly to the diffusion of blue across Europe, and thus it became the preferred colour of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its greatest popularity, however, started with the Jeans as a sign of liberalism in 1968.

Research done after World War II in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand has shown that, when it comes to colours, blue is number one on the list of preferences (for nearly 50% of Westerners, it is their favourite colour), followed by green, white, and red. It is interesting to note that these studies show that tastes change somewhere at the age of eight. Participants who are younger than eight prefer red, followed by yellow and white. Those older than eight prefer mostly cold colours, same as the adults. The situation changes if we move from the West to the East or the South: in South America, for example in Brazil (as well as in Spain, which is a European exception), red is the first on the list, followed by blue. The favourite colour of the Japanese is white, followed by black and yellow (Pastoreau 1987:9-12).

Just as there are favourite colours, so there are (unfortunately) undesirable ones. Green is disliked by the Protestants in Glasgow as well as by Croats in the western part of Mostar. For someone blue may be associated with the “Vlachs”, red with Communism, and so on.

We seem to be heading for a period of “social colour blindness,” which is already present in cities such as Belfast and Glasgow, and some of the symptoms of this “syndrome” are noticeable also in Mostar. This “chromophobia” appears as a cultural disorder expressed as animosity toward individual colours.

## 6. Conclusion

It should be noted that signs produce various meanings, not just one per sign (the polyvalence of sign and message). The function of a sign is to transfer ideas to us through a message (a red flag calls for the revolution, white for surrender, etc.). A red carnation may be a sign (for example, when attached to a door) informing us that the entry is free. A red carnation attached to the collar means something else – it is a symbol of the revolution. Colours often behave as codes, and it is not always easy to decipher, isolate, or define them. Man is not only a rational being, but also an irrational one; and this fact allows for his behaviour to be affected not only by rational but also by irrational means (even more effectively with the latter). It can be manipulated in different ways, including through colour.

We belong to different races, i.e. colours: white, black, yellow, red. All our reality is painted, even the political one – some vote for the Red, others for the Green or the Blue; the Black and the White seem rather vague.

Rorty has written that the way out is in nihilism. The “extremists” will say that our solution is in absolute colour blindness. Do we have to give up the beauty of colour richness only because some colours disturb us – are black, white, and grey, the colours of Protestant reformism, the only coloristic remedy for our illness? It seems that there is a long way before us if we want to reach the right hermeneutical dimension – an empathic, personal, and conscious acceptance of others, with a complete understanding and developed tolerance of difference as a benefit, rather than a disadvantage, as it now seems to be.

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## Interpretacija kromatskih kodova kroz historiju i u različitim modernim kontekstima

### Sažetak

*Boje su presudne kod onoga što možemo nazvati „vizualizacijom identiteta“. Brojne su naučne discipline koje se (između ostalog) bave i bojama. Kromatika kao disciplina /posvećena bojama u komunikaciji/ je novijeg datuma. Društveni kontekst čini boju značajnom, daje joj socijalnu definiciju, smisao; stvara kodove i vrijednosti. Poruke koje stižu do nas sadrže različite kodove, a oni mogu biti dominantni (prihvatamo ih po defaultu), pregovarački (prihvatamo ih djelimično) i opozicionalni (odbijamo ih). Ako u jednoj poruci mijenjamo boju (zastava, automobil, dres), mi želimo promijeniti i poruku. Nesporazumi nastaju kada dvije strane u komunikaciji različito shvataju jedan znak, poruku (tzv. „šumovi u komunikaciji“ po Schramu). Do konflikta nas najčešće mogu dovesti razlike u interpretaciji činjenica.*

**Ključne riječi:** poruka, kod, znak, boja, kromatika, interpretacija, komunikacija.



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