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Seeing red. On the Aesthetico-Political Value of Chromatic Affects

(Image 1) In his paper “Fear (The Spectrum Said)”, Brian Massumi talks about the Bush administration and its colour-alert-system based on the use of a five colours spectrum, from blue-green to yellow-orange-red, to indicate the terrorist threat level. In the essay, Massumi argues: “The system addressed the population immediately, at a presubjective level: at the level of bodily predisposition or tendency – action in its nascent state. A color shift would trip each body’s tendencies into an unfolding through which its predispositions would regain determinate form in particular actions attuned to a changed situation. Each body’s individuality performed itself, reflexively (that is to say, nonreflectively) in an immediate nervous response.” (p.33) (slide) Red = alarm.

I would like to start from this quote, to highlight the fact that, with the former President’s administration, America (and the whole world) was faced with a government that knew how to impact directly on the nervous system, and that, among other things, had learnt an incredibly subtle use of color. Needing to maintain a continuous state of alarm, that government had learnt to efficaciously modulate the chromatic scale between the yellow-orange-red tones, using these tones to instill a sense of fear.

(Image 2) In November 2008, the situation seems to have totally changed: the affective tone has shifted its emotional connotations, the alarm state of fear replaced by the joyous suspension of hope. The techniques, though, and even the ‘suspended tones’, have not changed: for a government now in need of the population’s sacrifice (blood and tears have been requested by Obama to solve the financial crisis), hope corresponds to the other side of the emotional spectrum. Hope rather than fear, we should think it is much better now. (slide) Now, red means hope. And in fact it is better, apart from one consideration: the fact that power still seems to work in the same way, the same virtual suspension of discernment is requested, but now under the guise of a happy confidence that should allow people to work hard but without renouncing (at least for a while) to smile. So, we are faced now with a different emotional connotation, but with the same modality of intervening on the level of affectivity, on that instantaneous suspension between stimulus and reaction, on ‘activation’ in itself (rather than on activities or acts). Once again, habituation is the main modular operator to play with: the constant presence of hope and happiness is intercalated by disquieting feelings of insecurity and fear, in the same way in which previously fear was skillfully modulated through the orange-yellow oscillation of the chromo-affective scale. (Image 3) And once again, the importance of colour and chromatic tones for the affective modulations of power (as we have seen from the many artistic or simply documentary images depicting Obama’s triumph everywhere, online, on walls, on t-shirts, placards and flags). Appearing now as the colour of strength, vitality, hope, and coupled with a quantity of other bright tones, red is still there. (Image 4) The ‘virtual’ potential or, we could also say, the ‘persistence’ of colour throughout the variation of its semiotic connotations, becomes apparent when, in May 2009, a British right-wing tabloid invokes an American left-liberal politician to get people voting for their candidate of choice, ripping off Shepard Fairey’s “Obama Hope” poster from the US elections. “It’s either a brilliant parody”, a blogger argued, “of Britain’s self-deprecating view of its own elections and politicians

compared to America's bombastic presidential battle, or it's a cringe-worthy effect that's crying out for parody." (Image 5,6,7,8) Echoed by tens of parodistic remakes, the "Camobama" icon constitutes an informational and political non-sense. But in fact (slide), oscillating between self-deprecation and parody, the only element that again seems to persist and retain its affective sense is colour: as if to affirm its own apolitical force supra-partes, red is still there. (Images 9,10,11) It can also be easily noted how the same colour still resonates with images of other times, when the serigraphic process was combined with particular chromatisms in order to transform a face into an iconic symbol of alternatively positive or negative value. (slide) A chromatic association, in this case, becomes the connotative link that connects our old to our new heroes. The red, this time, acts as an active agent of temporal association, and induces us to remember.

But let's come back to the present. (Images 12,13,14) In times of financial crisis, when colour has been used as an alarm indicator in statistical diagrams and all kinds of economic analysis instruments, the red (this time, intended as wine) as been even deployed as an invitation to toast and forget all worries. Financial diagrams (often with a hint of red) are in fact increasingly becoming part of our economic and socio-political imaginary. The use of colour for the transmission of significant (economic, social etc.) information has become particularly relevant, today, in the design of information management and data visualization systems. (Image 15) Already in 1998 Martin Wattenberg, then a graphic designer at the magazine *SmartMoney* in New York, had the idea to create a "Map of the Market" in the form of a grid. The grid used the day's closing share price to show more than 500 companies arranged by sector. Shades of green or red indicated whether a share had risen or fallen and by how much, showing the activity in every sector of the market. It was an instant hit, *The Economist* comments, and brought the nascent field of data visualisation to a mainstream audience. At the same time, it eroded the clear demarcating line between information visualization and art. (slide) The use of color indicated in this case a deployment of chromatic difference to make visible what cannot be directly grasped by the human senses. "Visualisation deals with the inhuman scale of the information and the need to present it at the very human scale of what the eye can see," Mr Wattenberg says. The rationale behind this chromatic strategy is, in fact, that the brain finds it easier to process information presented as image, rather than as words or numbers. It would be possible, at this point, to show a myriad of other examples from the field of information and the news, examples of the many ways in which colour is used as a sensorial, suggestive tool of information and communication.

<http://sanfrancisco.crimespotting.org/#dtend=2010-05-11T23:59:59-07:00&lat=37.760&zoom=13&types=AA,Mu,Ro,SA,DP,Na,Al,Pr,Th,VT,Va,Bu,Ar&lon=-122.438&hours=0-23&dtstart=2010-05-04T23:59:59-07:00>
<http://www.wefeelfine.org/>

In all these examples, colour becomes a tool of clear, significant and efficacious communication, a transmitter of meaning and a powerful trigger of actions, feelings, thoughts.

Faced with this situation, with the significant (or 'signifying') use of colour by technological apparatuses of information and socio-political control, faced with the subtle affective force of power and its capacity to induce us to feel, think, or even act, through the immediate stimulation of our chromatic sensibility, the question to ask is not so much what to do or think or feel in order to resist, and even less a question of

thinking or not thinking, feeling or not feeling (first, because I do not know if it could be possible to even imagine a state of total non-feeling and non-thinking, but also because the apparent suspension of feeling and thought is something that official politics already seems to request from us at times, if we think of how we are asked to forget everyday images of violence, abomination, economic disparity. Towards these issues, re-habituating, rather than activation, seems to be the key word). At this point, I would like to connect to Andrew Murphie's argument about the importance of inertia: the tendency of bodies to resist (rather than favour) change in motion. Governmental politics and information systems of our capitalist societies often use perceptual strategies to work on the in-between of activation, on re-activity itself: the 'opposing strategy', let's say so, would therefore certainly not lie in the question of if, and how, to re-act. The inertial force of equal strength, but of opposite direction, that could counterbalance this affective politics, can only be an opposite force exercised in the moment of activation itself, when fear is not fear yet, and hope is not hope, when the information has not been 'processed' and the body is just ready to run or jump, or to start crying for a financial crack. (Red) In that moment, a colour has not been transferred to any meaningful content; red is just red, and it simply strikes as an event. In order to describe the chromatic impact of colour's pure potential on the body's system of habitual actions and thoughts, we can quote Massumi again: "System. Routine. At a certain juncture, the unfolding of the physical system's line of actions interrupts. The system momentarily suspends itself. It has not become inactive. It is in ferment. It has gone 'critical'. This 'chaotic' interlude is not the simple absence of order. It is in fact a super-ordered state. In chaos theory, it is conceived as the co-presence of all possible paths the system may take: their physical inclusion in one another." (Event Horizon) Hit by colour, the body's system reaches a state of chaotic criticality, a state in which normally alternative possibilities (to run away in fear or to jump with joy), are fused or packed into a singular potential. The system does not act or react according to physical laws of cause and effect, but critically feeling the affectivity of force and prolonging that feeling. The contrasting force would therefore correspond, I think, to a prolongation of activation in itself or, we might also say, contemplation.

In the moment of activation, affect is registered in the body as 'sensation'. Over-simplifying, we can say that affective suspension continues in the body as a sensation. In "The Evolutionary Alchemy of Reason", Massumi talks about sensation as something "inaccessible to active extension and systematic thinking-out, (...)", an excessive and abstract dimension infolding every perception. On the same level of abstraction, we find thought: the unfolding of possibilities always interconnected with sensation. Not a simple substitution, or doubling, of perception, but a moment of indistinguishability between sensation and thought. In other words, sensation and thought constitute a sort of abstract continuum unfolding alongside perception. The concreteness of the world (perceptions and actions, or systematic thoughts) appears in the encounter between the two: the 'generation' of the concrete happening at the intersection of two abstractions. Aesthetics and, at its best, art, work on this sensation-thought continuum. Art, aesthetics, a different sensitivity to colours, in other words, appear like a more creative reply to governmental affective politics: not what to do, or think, or feel, but how to exercise these faculties together and at their 'nth' power. To paraphrase Stelarc's recurring expression: IMAGINE. Imagine what could have happened, if rather than simply react in alarm and panic, to the red-orange-yellow system, people would just aesthetically contemplate' those colours. It is a bit like that

perceptual 'training' of which Whitehead talks, when he mentions artists as the ones who know how to move between the productive 'constraints' of causal efficacy and the sterile nuances of 'presentational immediacy'.

But more often than not, we are not, or do not behave like, artists. So what do we usually do? (Chair) Instead of imagining or contemplating, we just look and see. According to Whitehead, "We look up and see a coloured shape in front of us, and we say, - there is a chair. But what we have seen is the mere coloured shape. Perhaps an artist might not have jumped to the notion of a chair. He might have stopped at the mere contemplation of a beautiful colour and a beautiful shape. But those of us who are not artists are very prone, especially if we are tired, to pass straight from the perception of the coloured shape to the enjoyment of the chair, in some way of use, or of emotion, or of thought." (3) Although of an apparently more complex nature, the mental activity required to symbolically pass from the coloured shape to the chair is like a sort of 'inferior' operation, compared to the more sophisticated capacity to chromatically and aesthetically appreciate the chair. One reason to think this, Whitehead continues, "is that my friend the artist, who kept himself to the contemplation of colour, shape and position, was a very highly trained man, and had acquired this facility of ignoring the chair at the cost of great labour. ... Another reason for scepticism is that if we had been accompanied by a puppy dog, in addition to the artist, the dog would have acted immediately on the hypothesis of a chair and would have jumped onto it by way of using it as such. Again, if the dog had refrained from such action, it would have been because it was a well-trained dog. Therefore the transition from a coloured shape to the notion of an object which can be used for all sorts of purposes which have nothing to do with colour, seems to be a very natural one; and we - men and puppy dogs - require careful training if we are to refrain from acting upon it." (4) The symbolic association of coloured shapes with other elements of experience has a direct influence on our actions, inducing us to sit rather than pause for a moment and see colour. At the same time, Whitehead notes, symbolic associations can often be erroneous and, like a sophisticated play of mirrors, they can totally deceive us. The political importance of the aesthetic and of aesthetical training, in order to escape the deceitful capture of the action-reaction, or of the object-meaning symbolic circuit, is very concrete and crucial, as Whitehead also highlighted in an essay on "The Aims of Education." Art, in other words, as the most efficacious weapon to save us from all deceptions.

Paraphrasing Gabriel Tarde, Maurizio Lazzarato explains how art is in fact not only a form of contemplation but also of invention, an inventive tendency that comprises all activities of imagination and intellect. Art, in other words, satisfies the need for inventive expression, or expressive invention, in all fields and in all aspects of life. Again: imagine what would happen, if the discernment of values, of what is important and what is not, of what is scary or encouraging, and what is not, could be re-thought and re-invented, rather than simply re-acted upon. The aesthetic sense of colours, for example, taken out of their 'content-based' significant values (fear, hope, and other humanly emotional connotations) and contemplated in their purely qualitative value. That could be a change. (Oxygen in the air) The role of art to foster a different perception of things, I think, is to be thought in the context of both global and local politics, as the infiltration of a political aesthetics in life: what if people thought less about the threatening invasion of foreigners and thought-sensed more about the subtraction of transparency and oxygen from the atmosphere, and then from questions

of oxygen and air to questions of green and garden spaces etc. The aesthetic (as governmental politics and capitalist economies know very well) is able to act on the forces that determine what the needs of a society are, by establishing an accord of individual desires and by unifying those desires into bundles. Through art, in other words, sensations (the non-communicable, because singular and vague) can become socially connected. A discipline of sensitivity and imagination opposing itself to the political discipline of already actualized feelings and thoughts. Art is today present in most aspects of the information and creative industries. At the same time, in every form of social collaboration, the 'disciplined' sense of political aesthetics can also be deployed as an increased attention for the tones, the silences, the breaks and continuities, the ruptures and fluidities of a conversation, rather than just relying on its signified content: as if ideas and sensations would converse among each other, through subjectivities. Taking collaborations in their aesthetic value, rather than simply forcing them into the net of an impossible total communication based on the semantic and subjective content of words, seems to be the most significant political strategy for us now.