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RETHINKING BAKER-MILLER PINK THROUGH GENDER STUDIES

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RESUMÉ

Alexander Schauss a reconnu en 1979 le Baker-Miller Pink (BMP) comme une nuance particulière de rose capable d'apaiser l'esprit et de diminuer la force musculaire. Il est actuellement utilisé sur les murs de plusieurs prisons et cellules de garde à vue, où il est sensé contribuer à calmer les détenus. À travers différentes apparitions dans les médias, le BMP est devenu un phénomène culturel, une « légende urbaine ». Cet article a pour objectif de repenser le BMP, de sa théorisation à sa mise en œuvre, à partir d'une synthèse bibliographique des travaux sur ce sujet. C'est une relecture du point de vue des études de genre, en questionnant l'importance du genre des sujets expérimentaux recrutés (principalement des hommes) et du contexte (prison d'hommes) des expériences. Il repense donc l'utilisation du rose en tant que réaffirmation idéologique de stéréotypes de genre et en réactivation de l'homophobie en tant que système d'exercice du pouvoir sur des individus soumis à l'injonction de « faire homme ».

Mots-clés: Baker-Miller Pink, effet des couleurs, masculinité, homosexualité, patriarcat

ABSTRACT

Alexander Schauss recognised in 1979 the Baker-Miller Pink (BMP) as a peculiar shade of pink able to soothe the mind and decrease muscular strength. It is currently used on the walls of several prisons and police custody facilities where it is expected to help calming the inmates. Through various media appearances, BMP became a cultural phenomenon, an “urban legend.” This article intends to rethink the BMP, from its theorisation to its implementation, through a bibliographical synthesis of the works done on it. It is a rereading from the point of view of gender studies, by questioning the importance of the gender of the experimental subjects recruited (mainly men) and the context (male prison) of the experiments. It therefore rethinks the use of pink as an ideological reaffirmation of gender stereotypes, and as a reactivation of homophobia as a system of exercise of power over individuals subject to the “make the man” injunction.

Keywords: Baker-Miller Pink, colour effect, masculinity, homosexuality, patriarchy

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1. INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, the fashion brand Vollebak launched the “Baker-Miller Pink Relaxation Hoodie,” a pink sweatshirt which includes a hood completed by a mesh mask that can be entirely zipped up on the face. This is supposed to allow a certain exclusion from the world without causing any sense of claustrophobia. This new product launch quickly rekindled the debate about the Baker-Miller Pink (BMP). Alexander G. Schauss recognised in 1979 the BMP as a peculiar shade of pink able to soothe the mind and decrease muscular strength. It is actually used on the walls of several prisons and police custody facilities, particularly in Switzerland and the United States, where it is supposed help calming the inmates. Through various media appearances, it became a cultural phenomenon that could even be described as an "urban legend" (Alter, 2012).

2. THEORY

Numerous studies conducted by Schauss intend to prove the soothing effect of BMP on subjects. However, the results are often not significant in the opinion of the authors (Pellegrini, Schauss and Birk 1980; Pellegrini, Schauss, Kerr and Ah You 1981). However, this did not prevent them from repeating their experiences (over and over). Other researchers have also looked in vain for a possible effect of colour on muscle strength or aggressiveness (Profusek and Rainey 1987; Gilliam and Unruh 1988).

A 2015 study raised the question of experimental bias in the recruitment of experimental subjects (Genshow, Noll, Wänke and Gersbach 2015). In fact, Schauss performs its experimentation on women only once, in a study that did not lead to satisfactory results (Pellegrini and Schauss 1980). In both studies with prisoners, he obtained temporary results: the rate of aggressions (insults, agitation, attempted attacks) of the prisoners fell at the beginning of the experiment, but it went back up to exceed the initial rate after several weeks. Schauss and his peers concluded on a surprise effect on the prisoner’s discovery of the confinement cell with pink walls while they were usually white (Pellegrini, Schauss and Miller 1981).

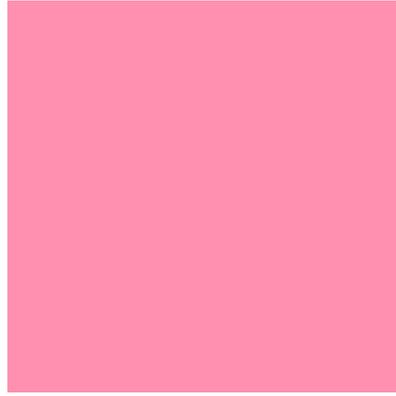


Fig. 1: Baker-Miller Pink shade (©Kévin Bideaux)

3. EXPERIMENTAL

We shed a new light on the studies conducted by Schauss through the lens of gender studies, and particularly through Arnaud Gaillard's work (2015) on the prison environment. He stated: "the question of gender is at the heart of the problem of prison confinement": the male prison is thus akin to a "conservatory of masculinity" set up in response to the submission and therefore of the remasculinization situations that impose prison confinement and penitentiary punishment. Stereotypes of male gender are then exacerbated: physical and moral strength, domination, violence, and heterosexual policing. Virility must be manifested in the appearance and attitude ("to make the man") that is to say by the muscular mass, the presence of tattoos, the deep voice, etc.

In order to guarantee a universal gender division within this monosexual space, the prisoners have set up a system of hierarchy articulated around the homosexuality. The dominant ones are those who have a heterosexual sexuality considered as masculine, the "penetrants," while the dominated ones are those who have a homosexual sexuality considered as feminine, the "penetrated." This system guarantees a stable symbolic order of the heterosexuality around of which the binarity and the gender complementarity is articulated. But homosexuality in prison is more symbolic than real, and it is homophobia that is more present. Homophobia plays the role of authority and of guardian of the heterosexual norm, establishing a hierarchy among inmates, which insures a position of power to the most virile among them (Hoquet 2009).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this context, we must rethink the effects of the BMP on prisoners. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, pink is considered in the West as the colour of the feminine (Paoletti 2012). As feminine colour, pink also became an anti-masculine colour (Mollard-Desfours 2002) which, when associated with men, leads to a suspicion of homosexuality. Imposing pink to the detainees could be seen as an empowering attempt from the jailer to deprive the prisoners of their male attributes. The gender signifiers have a stronger impact in prison, and pink thus

become a questioning of their capacity “to be a man” and “to make the man” within the prison community. By losing the symbolic attribute of their masculinity, they also lose their dominating status in the prison universe towards the dominated, or, to put it more simply, the homosexual ones.

The homosexual man is symbolically closer to women because his sexuality presupposes him as a penetrated subject (Eribon 1999; Hoquet 2009). Pink can thus be used to signify the homosexuality of a man, as during the deportations of gay men in the Second World War.

In the early 1980s, the visitors’ locker room of the Kinnick Stadium in Iowa was painted in pink by the coach Hyden Fry who put the Schauss studies into practice to reduce the strength of the opponents to win matches more easily. In the renovation of 2005, the visitors’ locker room was painted over in pink, and pink lockers and toilets to match the walls, thus raising feminist student’s outcry.

Indeed, this choice could also been interpreted as a form of misogyny and homophobia, since in sports, playing “like a girl” or “like a fag” means playing poorly. Understood as masculine, sports operate as the foundation of patriarchal’s authority power. Painting the locker room in pink is therefore a symbolic form of emasculation of the opponent, not only because pink is associated with the feminine, but also because the sport is co-constructed with masculinity (Buzuvis 2007).



Fig. 2: The pink visitors’ lockers of the Kinnick Stadium of Iowa (©Asolsma1988/Wikimedia common)

Joseph Michael Arpaio, sheriff of Maricopa County in Arizona since 1992, runs the Maricopa County Jail. This prison became infamous especially because of the detention conditions he set up. He is especially known for forcing the prisoners to wear pink underwear (boxers and socks), “to prevent inmates from stealing the white shorts” (Arpaio 2015).

By emphasizing again the interactions between the pink colour, the feminine symbolism and the context of the prison highlighted with the BMP, this measure could also be apprehended from the angle of the humiliation of the prisoners, since they are deprived of their virile signifiers. In addition, the Sheriff Arpaio also banned erotic magazines and bodybuilding equipment within the prison, two tools allowing prisoners to perform their masculinity in this conservatory of masculinity.

5. CONCLUSION

The effect of the BMP is therefore the result of the combination of the feminine symbolism of pink with an exclusively masculine environment (male prison, custody facilities) or closely associated with masculinity (sport). From this combination emerges the stigmas of male homosexuality which — in a heterocentric patriarchal context — is negatively perceived as inferior to a masculine norm.

More than a scientific research, the BMP has become a marketing argument for selling products or promoting institutions or their leaders. This highlighting of the BMP by the media is obviously made possible only because gender relations are central in all spaces and at all times. By drawing attention to the symbolic jeopardizing of masculinity by the colour pink, the patriarchal power reaffirms the symbolic and social order of the sexes around a segmental element. More than being the colour of the feminine, pink allows to detach the masculine from what is not (women or gay men), and thus to create a clear separation between the dominant and dominated categories. It is possible to apprehend the BMP as an instrument of patriarchal power, which would explain why its popularity persists despite its scientific non-existence.

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