

Dubois, Arnaud & Jean-Baptiste Eczet,  
Adeline Grand-Clément, Charlotte Ribeyrol (eds.).

*Arcs-en-ciel et couleurs, regards comparatifs.*

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In recent decades, numerous comparative studies on colour have been published. Whether they have been collective or individual works, compilations, syntheses, or original texts defending a certain position, many of these volumes appear to push a definitive stance on the anthropology of colour. *Arcs-en-ciel et couleurs*, on the other hand, is original because instead of seeking to close the debate, it opens up to new reflections on colour. The way this has been achieved is as simple as it is ingenious. Instead of it being just another volume on the perception, semantics, or nomenclature of colour, Arnaud Dubois, Jean-Baptiste Eczet, Adeline Grand-Clément, and Charlotte Ribeyrol have gathered articles on rainbows to examine the way they are viewed in a variety of places and times.

This atmospheric phenomenon is known to every human society. The rainbow is an ideal example to use in cultural comparison because it constitutes for the post-Newton West a large-scale figuration of the refraction of light resulting in a spectrum of colour, and its natural condition seems to corroborate the thesis of the English physicist. Yet rainbows have not been regarded as grandiose and evanescent monuments to the physics of modern colour in all places and at all times, meaning that through their cross-cultural analysis we can address the classic theme of colour from an unprecedented and very productive standpoint.

This collection breaks this objective down into three distinct sections. The first section is for me the most interesting as it dives headfirst into the topic by describing cases of confrontation between rationality, knowledge, and diverse cultural experiences relating to the perception and explanation of rainbows. It is also the most anthropological, so it deserves a little more of the limited space I have available. This section could not start with a more

suggestive article than Dubois's, which chronicles the survey on rainbow colours by W.H.R. Rivers among the inhabitants of Murray Island in the Torres Strait, at the beginning of the twentieth century, marking the transition from nineteenth century cabinet anthropology to contemporary fieldwork anthropology. That colour is one of the first topics studied by contemporary anthropology demonstrates the relevance of this phenomenon to this discipline and shows the underside of its configuration as a scientific discipline: between nature and culture, the subjective and the objective, sensation and cognition, colour is one of anthropology's decisive objects. This particularly interesting article on the history of anthropology is followed by three fascinating chapters: one on the confrontations between the perspective on rainbows in traditional Japan compared with those introduced by the Jesuit missions in the seventeenth century (Parmentier, chapter 2); another article on Ethiopia's Mursi pastoralists for whom the universe of possible colours is made up of the different colours of their cattle's hides (Eczet, chapter 3). For physicists, the possible colours are those formed by rainbows, which then allow us to name the colours of animals, for instance. For the Mursi, however, all colour is found in animal hides, which in turn allows us to refer to the colours of the atmospheric phenomenon. This first section closes with an article on the Victorian poetry of colours and rainbows where a subjective and aestheticizing vision faced the advancement of science with an industrial vocation of colour (Ribeyrol, chapter 4).

The second section consists of four chapters referring to historical cultures: the pre-Hispanic Nahua (Dupey Garcia, chapter 5), the ancient Egyptian (Donnat, chapter 6), the ancient Mesopotamian (Rendu Loisel and Verderame, chapter 7) and the ancient Greek (Grand-Clément, chapter 8) respectively. All these articles show, despite the historical and geographical distances between them, a common feature that the editors note in their introduction: in many cultures colour does not appear defined as such and is almost always interspersed with other physical properties. This provides more empirical refutations to the

universalist theory of colour. It also necessarily implies a dissociation between chromatism and rainbows in many societies. The latter appear associated with the most diverse avatars (particularly snakes), and are seen more as a luminescence, or as a confusing cloud with divinatory powers, than as semi-circular stripes of colours.

The third, final section presents four reflections on the visual representation of rainbows in Western contexts as diverse as that of the Christian illustration of the Middle Ages (Jacquesson, chapter 9), nineteenth century European painting (Korzilius, chapter 10), contemporary art in general (Manfrini, chapter 11) and Len Lye's cinema in particular (Turquier, chapter 12). These final essays confirm that even within the same continent, the perception of rainbows and their association with colour can be very diverse, and far removed from the scientific connotation which the Newtonian perspective of colour and rainbow inevitably introduced.

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