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A Phenomenological Approach to Color Theory and Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper proposes to investigate color theory and aesthetics from a phenomenological point of view, that is, from the point of view of the lived experience. Two angles of study are suggested: one is from the point of view of the artist creating a piece, the other is from the point of view of the audience receiving the work. In each case, it is possible to interrogate the lived experience in order to find some cues about the aesthetic components that contribute to this lived experience, in particular as they relate to color. A tool, the explicitation interview, is proposed as a mean to conduct such investigation.

Keywords: *Phenomenology of Color, A Practice-based Theory of Color, Color and Aesthetics, Color and Emotions, Color as a Lived Experience*

Introduction

For many years, I have approached color and aesthetics from a practical point of view. Being both a scholar and a practitioner, I consider my research in the framework of the creation research paradigm (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2022a), also called for instance the practice-based research paradigm (Candy, 2018). My practice as an artist being at the foundation of my research on color and aesthetics, it was natural for me to look into phenomenology (Husserl, 1985, 1992), and to approach color and aesthetics from a phenomenological point of view, that is, from the point of view of the lived experience. This was also for me a way to put the creative process at the centre of my research. In other words, I am interested in the creative process as it is experienced by the person who is involved in this process. And I am particularly interested, in this creative process, in the moments when we make decisions that impact the aesthetic of the work at hand, and in particular decisions, conscious or unconscious, that involve color.

Phenomenology is a paradigm that put the lived experience at the centre. But how can we access the lived experience with an approach that is objective enough and can be reproducible? This is where the explicitation interview, developed by Pierre Vermersch, comes into play (Vermersch, 2014). This interview technique allows to access the lived experience of a subject as it really happened, as opposed to how the subject thinks it happened. Developed initially in the framework of experimental psychology, and particularly in the context of pedagogy, this interview technique has been used by people who were interested in phenomenology, and more particularly in a practical approach to phenomenology (Bitbol, 2017). I have been using this interview technique for the past few years in order to learn about the creative process, about the decisions that impacted the aesthetic dimensions of a creative project, and in particular decisions that had to do with color.

Why is color such an important component of aesthetics? Following the theories of embodied cognition (Varela, 1991), I believe this has to do with the fact that color relate to our daily experiences. Colors are everywhere. And because they are, we have a rich web of associations with them. That means that colors have an important impact on us, in particular emotionally. And that

means that artists manipulate colors, consciously or not, in order to create something in the viewer, at an emotional level, but also in more subtly ways. There is a reason why we speak for instance of warm colors and cold colors, in terms of what experience those colors create for the viewer.

I have already written, in the past, about my experience with color as a practitioner (in Film, Theatre, Photography), included for AIC (Magrin-Chagnolleau, 2013, 2021, 2022b). Each time, I have written from the point of view of a practitioner developing a theoretical reflection based on his practice. Here, I would like to go one step further and address the phenomenological dimension of practicing art-making, aesthetics decision-making, and color choices. The ambitious goal of this research would be to develop a theory of color based on practice, that is, based on the lived experience, in other words, a phenomenological approach to color theory and aesthetics. More modestly, in this paper, we will discuss the bases of such an approach to color theory, as well as its feasibility.

A Practical Approach to Phenomenology

What is phenomenology? A phenomenological approach is an approach that deals with the lived experience of a phenomenon. Phenomenology puts experience in the center. Phenomenology tries to get rid of any theory or preconception one can have about a phenomenon, and tries to approach a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experience, relying only on the lived experience itself to extract any knowledge about the phenomenon (Husserl, 1985, 1992; Heidegger, 1992; Merleau-Ponty, 1976).

What does it mean to have a phenomenological approach of color? It means investigating color as a lived experience, that is, trying to extract knowledge about color as a phenomenon from the experience we have of color. It refers to mostly two broad categories of experiences we can have of color as a phenomenon. One is on the side of reception: how do I experience receiving color? For instance: how do I experience viewing a painting? How do I experience viewing a photograph? How do I experience viewing a film? How do I experience viewing an orange? a tree? etc.

The other is on the side of the creative process: how do I experience making choices about color as I create something? For instance: how do I experience choosing and using a color in a particular area of a painting? how do I experience choosing the color of a piece of cloth for an actor? how do I experience grading color for a particular shot in a film? etc.

Phenomenology can be approached from a theoretical point of view, in which case we deal mostly with the idea of phenomenology. This is sometimes what has been said of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. But phenomenology can also be approached from a practical point of view. How can I interrogate the lived experience? How can I extract knowledge from the lived experience? How can I use the lived experience to learn something concrete about a phenomenon and the way we experience it?

There is a way to do it through the use of the explicitation interview (Vermersch, 2014). The explicitation interview was created by Pierre Vermersch in the framework of experimental psychology. The interview was developed in order to be able to interrogate a subject on a past experience and have access to what the subject had precisely done during this past experience, as

opposed to what they thought they had done. This is particularly useful in the framework of training, when someone makes a mistake during a process, without being able to pinpoint the moment of that mistake. Through conducting an explicitation interview, it is very easy to find the moment when the person deviates from the learned procedure.

The explicitation interview was then used in the framework of research, in particular as a tool to approach phenomenology from a practical point of view (Depraz, 2011; Vermersch, 2012). What is unique about this interview technique is the fact that it can have access to some pre-reflected knowledge, that is, knowledge that is stored in someone's mind and can be accessed through the interview, but that the subject themselves were not aware about. For instance, when led by a skilled interviewer, this technique gives access to mental operations conducted by the subject while living the experience, such as information taking or decision making.

There is also a version of the explicitation interview called auto-explicitation (Vermersch, 2007, 2008), which consists in administering the explicitation interview to oneself, using in that case particular techniques to be able to be in turn the interviewer and the interviewee.

Now, there is one drawback to the explicitation interview. It takes between 45 and 90 minutes to conduct an explicitation interview, and during such an interview, one can only interrogate a very brief moment of the past experience of the subject. In order to be practical, you usually need to already have a good understanding of the task at hand, and of the particular moment of the task that you want to finely interrogate. Sometimes, you acquire that understanding by first doing some interviews without really knowing what you are after, and then you will conduct some interviews more specifically on a moment that you are interested in.

Relating Phenomenology, Aesthetics, and Color

Now that we have defined phenomenology and how to approach it from a practical point of view, let us have a further look at how we can apply it to aesthetics, and more particularly to color. What does it mean to approach aesthetics from a phenomenological point of view? Let us go back to the way aesthetics can be seen from the point of view of the lived experience. Here again, there are two angles.

The first one is the angle of the artist. As an artist, when creating a piece, I go to a series of decisions, some conscious, some unconscious. Each decision contributes to making me go through a creative process that culminates in the production of the piece. Most of these decisions impact the aesthetic of the final piece. As the artist, this creative process, that is, the succession of all these decisions and actions, are experienced by me. This builds my lived experience of this creative process. By interrogating this process, these decisions, these actions, someone can have access to this process, to this lived experience, and relate all these decisions and actions to the aesthetic of the final piece. This is what I mean by a phenomenological approach of aesthetics. Rather than relying on a pre-conceived theory about aesthetics, it is possible to have access to the lived experience of the artist and correlate some of the decisions made and actions taken to the resulting piece and its aesthetic.

The same can be said about colors. Some of these decisions and these actions directly deal with color. Therefore, if there is a possibility to have a phenomenological approach to aesthetics, then there is a possibility to have a phenomenological approach to color.

The second angle concerns the way a piece is received by an audience. The audience, when receiving the piece, goes through a lived experience that can also be interrogated. And this interrogation can lead to understanding how the person interviewed experienced the piece and its aesthetic. This is a way to understand, from a phenomenological point of view, how the aesthetic of a piece impacts the lived experience of an audience. And again, part of the lived experience of an audience is impacted by colors, and this can also be interrogated.

I would like to point here that color is an important component of aesthetics, mostly because of the particular relationship between color and emotions. There is a reason why we speak of warm or cold colors. This refers to the lived experience that we go through when being exposed to such colors. Color is also a component that is easily manipulated by artists in order, precisely, to create such lived experiences in an audience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to describe what a phenomenological approach of color theory and aesthetics could look like, and how we could develop it through the use of the explicitation interview. It speaks of the possibility of interrogating the lived experience of an artist creating a piece or of an audience receiving it. In both cases, through this interrogation, we can access some elements that relate to the aesthetic of the piece, in particular as it relates to color. By doing that, we can establish some ground rules concerning aesthetics and colors that are free from any preconceived ideas and theories about aesthetics and colors, but rely directly on the lived experience, therefore allowing to establish a phenomenological approach to color theory and aesthetics.

The future of this work will consist in testing the possibility of developing a phenomenological approach to color theory and aesthetics by conducting some explicitation interviews with artists creating pieces and audience members receiving them, as well as using auto-explicitation.

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