

Monochromania

Understanding the Affective Ambivalence of Monochrome

*"What would it be a symptom of to start seeing one color more acutely?
Mania? Monomania?" - Maggie Nelson*

The monochrome, an "unbroken, meticulously prepared expanse of color" is perpetually wrapped up in the language of purity - a "primal opticality" that appeals to the "innocent eye" unspoiled by form and line (Cray, qtd. Wollen 198) (Riley, 5). Despite this close linking of the monochrome with preserving a pre-lapsarian stasis, there seems to be some inherent instability and violence to it as well. If reading color in relation to one another helps us avoid questions of subjective perception and epistemic uncertainty, then a focus on the monochrome seems like an unnatural, ghastly fixation that deliberately forces these problems to resurface. Monochrome thus seems to be both preserver of Edenic color virtues and destroyer through its aesthetic and temporal excess, which in turn seems to create a desire-aversion dual similar to Brinkema's affective ambivalence of disgust. We trace the figure of the monochrome through Jarman's *Blue*, Maitland's *Tower*, and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, noting how the monochrome simultaneously attracts and repulses its obsessors, even as the monochrome space itself fragments from complete visual totality to mere narrative accents. We find that monochrome - through the same mechanism of the forced stare at an unchanging color - offers both the hope of life, spiritual enlightenment and redemption while concurrently leading to inevitable violence, fetishization, and death.

Jarman's *Blue* offers a logical first step towards understanding the monochrome with its single long shot of blue. From Jarman's desire to reassert "an immense joy in the face of dreadful disaster" and the film's recurring Tibetan singing bowls, *Blue* is a meditation on "dying with AIDS," offering a respite from Jarman's resignation towards death (Wollen, 196). Consistent with earlier aesthetic discussions of the monochrome, *Blue's* static blue field and visually evocative sound design (the

beeping of a hospital, the babble of a café) encourage the audience to project their own mental images onto the blue canvas. The film is freed from the "opinable verisimilitude" of Barthes' reality effect (147) by fixating on a single unchanging color that is inherently "uncluttered with objects, unmarked by history" (Wollen, 200). Through the monochrome, Jarman as auteur seems to successfully apply Riley's grid model to color; while the grid model usually fails because of the inability for "static schemata" to capture temporal effects (Riley, 7-8), monochrome's inherent stasis allows all of reality's images to be stabilized around a single color.

However, monochrome's success at preservation and spiritual affirmation is immediately subverted by monochrome's visual and temporal excess, leading to death and an inability to achieve the offered enlightenment. In Brinkema's discussion of disgust and aspic, she notes that aspic halts death and instead brings "fixed objects for a hungry gaze" - the same preservation that *Blue's* monochrome performs (74-75). However, disgust at death is caused by the body being "furiously *too much*" (Brinkema, 86), the same response that Nelson gives upon seeing a Klein monochrome (78).¹ Thus, monochrome serves as both aspic and death. A monochrome is inherently both a long rumination and a single intense color, making it impossible to separate the stasis / duration / preservation / aspic aspect from the death / color excess / "too much" aspect. An "affective ambivalence" is created within monochrome (Brinkema, 82), perverting Jarman's goal of spiritual monochrome hope and instead reaffirming the resigned inevitability of death. Under monochrome's ambivalence, the singing bowls become not pause for reflection, but a countdown for remaining life. The grid scheme fails once more as it can not even stabilize just a single color to an aesthetic-moral equivalence!

1 Interestingly, Nelson's rumination on Klein echoes the violence of the gaze enacted on the audience of *Blue*. Klein's IKB seems to "radiate so hotly that it seemed to be touching, perhaps even hurting, [Nelson's] eyeballs", a pain that directly corresponds to the hot light that projects *Blue* and reflects into the audience's prolonged stare. Interestingly, this pain seems to cross differences in medium.

Perhaps most sinisterly, this dual nature of monochrome causes the viewer to ignore blue and the film media itself in an act of self-preservation - effectively completely invalidating any auteurship that Jarman had. Without a relational point of contrast for the monochrome, *Blue's* audience becomes desperate for difference. The black speckled imperfections of the film stock stand out; the visuals are tuned out in order to better listen to the words; viewers pretend that the film is a radio drama or a podcast - essentially focuses on anything *but* the blue, on anything *but* the visual medium. Unlike Michaux's *Miserable Miracle* where inexpressible colors are experienced, we instead have a blue that is immediately present to everyone, but can't be accessed because it is "too much".² The audience becomes resigned to watching the film, focusing on the spoken words which inherently carry the "difference, complexity, contingency which monochrome seems to deny" and is the very antithesis to Jarman's goal of keeping his own resignation at bay (Wollen, 200). Jarman appears to be aware of this contradiction as the words in *Blue* emphasize duration, whispering that "you can take longer than the second World War to get to the grave" and encouraging to "fight the fear that engenders the beginning, the middle and the end". However, this self-reference taunts more than comforts, simultaneously reminding viewers of monochrome's potential positive affect through stasis, while also reminding that the inevitability of death are also part of the monochrome experience.

Although *Tower* fragments *Blue's* single color field dramatically, the same attraction-repulsion dynamic is demonstrated. Unlike Jarman's sworn disavowal of images, Maitland shows figures in all forms with frequent cuts between archival footage, rotoscoped animations, photographs, and matte combinations. Although this more figure-oriented approach dilutes the purity of the monochrome and prevents us from doing the same theoretical investigation as we did in *Blue*, we can derive new

² Jarman's tight focus on blue seems to almost create more violence than Wojnarowicz's controversial AIDS film, *A Fire in My Belly*. Despite Wojnarowicz's heretical images of an ant-covered Christ and Jarman's mostly non-violent vignettes (exception being the "I am a Lesbian Man" vignette), the strobing images quickly flicker past, never giving the full dread and decay that the long duration in *Blue* causes. Although we may be disturbed by the imagery in "Fire", the viewer can at least take solace in the fact that soon the image will pass within seconds. No such reprieve exists for the *Blue* viewer.

meaning from doing a close reading on how monochrome red color fields are introduced, sustained and omitted.³

In *Tower*, monochrome red fields are created as a direct effect of Whitman shooting a person. Right before being hit, the victim is transported from their existing color scheme to become a white silhouette on a monochrome red field while time is slowed enough to see the bullet's trail and impact.⁴ This time dilation is crucial to creating monochrome's attraction-repulsion duality; by creating the effect of duration for a short moment, we are able to display the conflicting affective ambivalence - the simultaneous hope of dodging the bullet and the violence of being forced to stare at the completion of the shot. This violence is further emphasized by the aestheticization of the body to a monochrome white, offering no hope of line preventing the monochrome color intrusion into the body. The fear of this monochrome violence causes the same attraction-repulsion to occur narratively as well: the tension between wanting to help victims of the monochrome shooting but not being willing to risk the monochrome attack. To push the analogy, Whitman acts in a auteur role similar to Jarman, inflicting the monochrome upon an audience unwilling to accept its implications.

This monochrome fixation of red occurs outside Whitman's color fields as well, reflecting *Tower's* more fragmented canvas. Several red background objects draw the eye due to extreme contrast with the current color scheme - a barber pole and an ambulance alarm are the only colored objects in their grayscale surroundings, while Crum's red handkerchief is colored much more intensely than the

3 Non-red monochrome color fields in *Tower* still display the same affective ambivalence and also more closely follow Jarman's *Blue* ideal of the monochrome with no figures than the red color fields. The monochrome blue of the sky that Claire notices as she's about to give up hope is followed immediately with a cut to her present-day non-animated self. Despite her past self's despair, the monochrome fills us with hope as this is both the first time that we've seen present-day live action footage and we see that she is alive in the present/future. Similarly, the pure purple shot in the "anti-matter gun" scene is immediately followed by the introduction of Rita, the person to finally break the attraction/repulsion divide.

4 The white silhouetting of the figure also directly calls into question the white background used in the rotoscoped and live-action interviews as well as in the frequent abstraction of the reenactments. Despite the usual assumption of white as a neutral color, if we think of it instead as a monochrome white color field, this opens up questions about the abstracted nature of the interviews, especially when it is revealed in the the present-day McCoy's interview that the live-action interviews were filmed on a monochrome green screen.

cell-shaded colors of the surrounding people and their clothes. All of these red objects remain connected with Whitman's shooting, the original source of the red monochrome: the barber pole is seen before and after a man is shot, the ambulance is carrying the injured newspaper boy, and the handkerchief is only seen to staunch the boy's bleeding. Although this seems to imply that Whitman acts according to Riley's palette model (9-10), painting the landscape with his monochrome red, these items break our current conception of monochrome because they *move*, whether on their own or via Crum's hands. From *Blue*, we noted that the stasis of the monochrome was what gave it its preservation aspects - the ability to form pure, real-not-realist images based on the monochrome. By now allowing monochrome objects to move spatially, we seem to be hinting at a possible break in the proposed affective ambivalence.

This break occurs dramatically with the monochrome red of Rita's hair. After a very Jarmanesque color field of a monochrome purple, Rita comes in as a blurred kaleidoscopic color figure without lines, cycling through a variety of red / oranges and grayscale colors with afterimages - a pure color expression that doesn't rely on monochromaticity or stasis, but instead one that relies on movement, change, and symmetry. This red doesn't come from Whitman's or Jarman's monochrome palette; it banishes the purple monochrome and refuses to let monochrome's affective ambivalence stand like Jarman. Instead, Rita accepts both aspects of the monochrome - intentionally self-inflicting the same durational heat violence that Whitman forced on Claire while also preserving the idea of hope in Claire. Rita's monochrome and her acceptance also marks a narrative turning point in the film, breaking the tension of whether to risk being shot to help the people on the mall, as Crum, Martinez and other figures start approaching the tower and saving victims, fighting against the monochrome paradigm.

Given *Tower's* fragmented red canvas, the elision of red adds further complication to the monochrome ideal. Unlike Godard's famous quote, the blood in *Tower* is very much not red, only

showing up as black / gray in archival footage and rotoscoped animations. Even in scenes where blood is verbally stated like when Crum uses his handkerchief to mop the newspaper boy's blood, the only red in the scene is from the handkerchief. Combined with the fact that UT Austin closed the school for only a day to "clean up the blood" and suppressed talking about the shooting implies that the monochrome can only be created / used by an individual auteur (Fresh Air). From Jarman, Whitman, and Rita, we see that using the monochrome's affective ambivalence is heavily linked to the idea of the auteur and Riley's palette / table framing. States are large enough to decide their own color paradigm and have it carried out by their citizens. UT Austin's lack of shooting memorialization and immediate cleaning of the blood is an active refusal against monochrome red - i.e. to be a school known only for the shooting. Similarly, the police officers' shots that kill Whitman are *not* shown in red as the officers already identify with the "blue" of the police department, not this errant monochrome red.⁵

While *Tower* demonstrates how the monochrome attraction-repulsion duality explored by *Blue* can be solved and complicated through a partial fragmentation of the monochrome canvas, *Vertigo's* complete fragmentation of monochrome to service the narrative causes its characters - and critics - to be blinded by a false "obsession with obsession."

In *Vertigo*, the pure color fields of Jarman and Whitman have now been significantly diluted and completely relegated to the supernatural as seen in the nightmare sequence's tinting. Scottie's new obsession with the monochrome coincides directly with his "fall from grace" from police officer to duped private investigator. By being forced out of large state systems, Scottie no longer has an overarching color paradigm and is now susceptible to the individual affective ambivalence of the monochrome. At the beginning of his nightmare, Scottie is forcibly transported into an aesthetic realm via alternating color-fields of blues and purples, similar to how Whitman transports his victims into the

⁵ Although I can not confirm that the journalist's Red Rover car is actually red, this idea of "states deciding their own color paradigm and choosing whether to accept / reject the monochrome" is probably why Red Rover is also not colored or red.

monochrome red palette. The nightmare sequence continues to play with ideas introduced by *Tower* as it rapid-fire cuts through different forms of representation of painting, animation and live-action reenactments, all intermediated through monochrome greens and yellows. Despite the movement of all of the elements within the nightmare, the monochrome itself is not moving but is instead imposing itself *over* the movement. Scottie is unable to reclaim the monochrome like Rita does and is forced into the cognitive dissonance of monochrome's attraction / repulsion, literally falling into a monochrome white color field at the nightmare's end.

From this nightmare, Scottie is led to obsessive fixation on the monochrome, emerging from a gray sanatorium after his color-field nightmare to now obsessively pursue gray. Scottie swings from the negative violence and repulsion of the monochrome to the alluring attraction of the monochrome, desperately looking for a gray suited woman. He fetishizes the color, looking at women not as a holistic object but only for the individual colored parts that fit in with his monochrome obsession. This obsession leads him to serendipitously find Judy / Madeline, but his need to be a gray-auteur blinds him to his discovery, instead persisting in continued fetishization. Scottie overrides Judy's green skirt - a color more closely linked to the affect of desire - with a gray suit, steamrolling the actual affective clues with this narrow minded focus on monochrome gray. By refusing to move on from gray to green, Scottie loses the chance to accept both aspects of the monochrome and free himself from the violence like Rita does.

Although we, as critics, may chastise Scottie for falling for this false monochrome of gray, it bears some meta-analysis that we may be falling for the same alluring trap of the monochrome green. There are many instances of green framing the object of desire (ex. Madeline's green-trimmed sash, Judy's ghostly green-lit return as Madeline), making it seem that if we can trace green through the film, we'll be able to make the narrative-aesthetic structure fall into place - a critical strategy that Richard Allen employs. However, *Vertigo* seems to imply that this is just as false as Scottie's idea that if he can

just find the right shade of gray, he can destroy his fantasies. Monomaniacally pursuing one color in criticism without relation to other colors seems like it will lead to a similar essentialist steamrolling of actual signifiers and affective markers.

On the other hand, of course, this paper's own preoccupation with the monochrome should be questioned.

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