

## The way lint collects

Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow: Or, the visual politics of late modernity* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (NYRB Classics; Reprint edition, 2014)

Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (Reaktion, 2013)

Michel Pastoureau, *Green: The History of a Color* (Princeton University Press, 2014)

REY CONQUER

“I love lists,” William Gass told the *Paris Review*, “They begin with no form at all. . .” The same could be said of Gass’s “philosophical inquiry” *On Being Blue*, published shortly after that interview in 1976: the first sentence, which lasts for over a page, is deliberately formless, inconsistent, meandering. It is, itself, a list: of things blue, or at least said to be blue, or that are significant when blue, such as pencils or (central to this perhaps datedly priapic book) movies. It encompasses “the pedantic, indecent, censorious,” “Russian cats and oysters,” “all that’s dismal.” In an essay from 2002, ‘I’ve Got a Little List,’ Gass calls lists “the purposeful coming together of names like starlings to their evening trees.” But it is only once the fourth starling has joined that we can talk of a list proper, Gass claims; a list can only come into being through the juxtaposition of multiple entries. The same mechanism seems to apply to coloured things: “bonnets, beards, coats, collars, chips, and cheese [. . .] through a scrambling of accidents, blue has become their colour.” Whereas the names on a list are brought deliberately together, these meanings have gathered at random, “the way lint collects”—yet it is only through this gathering that blue has come to be, for instance, “the colour of everything that’s empty.”

For Gass, blue is an obvious pretext; as Michael Gorra, who has written the introduction to this new edition, rightly points out, “[t]he real subject of *On Being Blue* is language itself”—specifically “blue” (i.e. prurient) language, to which a good three quarters of the book is given over. Carol Mavor, Sabine Doran and Michel Pastoureau are, however, more dedicated to the problem of teasing apart the “lint” of meanings that has gathered around their titular colours.

In his blurb for Doran’s *The Culture of Yellow*, W.J.T. Mitchell is keen to point out that it is “not just a compendium” of instances of yellow in literature and art, and a fear of the accusation of mere list-making informs Doran’s careful insistence that there is more than just the colour yellow that unites her many examples. Together, she claims, such instances produce a “network

of meaning,” and turn yellow into a colour of “stigma and scandal” in “late modernity,” a period which Doran acknowledges as “nebulous” but which covers, roughly, 1890-1940. Thus, one “yellow book” does not cultural significance make, but through juxtaposing several—which may or may not acknowledge each other—we can make out an overarching theme or “cultural mood,” which she calls, in her suggestive conclusion, a “chromo-tope” (as an analogy to Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the “chronotope,” the particular manner in which the interrelation of time and space is represented in literature).

If the “cultural mood” of the turn of the twentieth century was yellow and its associated meanings, it seems the turn of the twenty-first century is obsessed with colours per se. As well as these four books, all published in the past twelve months, the National Gallery hosted an exhibition on the subject, ‘Making Colour’, over the summer. Michel Pastoureau’s *Blue: The History of a Color* (2001) had been intended as a stand-alone book and, even as late as 2009, Pastoureau wrote in its sequel *Black* that writing a series on individual colours was the “furthest thing from [his] mind.” But in *Green* he announces that he is to do just that—thanks, no doubt, to the praise and popularity the previous volumes received. The reissue of *On Being Blue* is therefore nothing if not timely, in that it takes as its pretext a single colour, but also as a reminder of the dangers of writing about colour at all: that the associations we have so carefully compiled are only on the list through a “scrambling of accidents.”

This is not a reminder that Pastoureau needs, and I can imagine a reader becoming frustrated by his unwillingness to draw causal lines between, say, the growing association of green with devils and demons in the middle ages on the one hand and the crusades on the other, during which green became, mostly through the eyes of its opponents, the colour of Islam. Whereas Gass’s tactic is to encourage us to see the various “meanings” of blue as somehow related, but then pull the rug from under our feet, Pastoureau uses questions: “Were they the result of increasing hostility between Christians and Muslims?” for example, or “Why would green and black not go well together?” to which the answer is always along the lines of, “It is difficult to say.” Pastoureau has no time for those who would go further than this and throws shade left, right, and centre at anonymous authors, researchers, and “more or less fanciful exegetes” for letting their imaginations run away with them. Colour does seem to provoke self-indulgence (of which Pastoureau’s gripes are also an example), and the uneasy mixture of academic and “poetic” language in Mavor’s *Blue Mythologies*, along with its haphazardly chosen and inelegantly incorporated snippets of theory and criticism, do the “colour monograph” genre no favours. At least Gass, when the *Paris Review* interviewer suggested that self-amusement might drive his writing, took their point: “Amuse may be the wrong word because it hurts so much, but in essence what you are suggesting is correct.”

Pastoureau's greatest ire, however, is directed towards falsely universalising (and therefore ahistorical) accounts of colour's effects or cultural significance, whether Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* or Berlin and Kay's seminal study, *Basic Color Terms*. It is then amusing to place the central arguments of his, Mavor's, and Doran's books side by side, as they are all based on the same claim: that their colour is uniquely "ambivalent," "paradoxical," or "polarized" (respectively). In the case of Pastoureau this just goes to show that you can't say anything about the meaning, singular, of a colour; just as green pigment is chemically unstable, the meaning of a colour is liable to vary between points in time and place, often accumulating contradictory associations which exist side by side. For Doran, and especially Mavor, these claims of their colour's unique multivalence seem less defensible. The various meanings and associations of a colour are fascinating, especially when they are at variance with contemporary usage; the mere fact of there being multiple meanings and associations, however, seems a weak peg on which to hang a book, even one as beautifully illustrated as Mavor's. (Both *Blue Mythologies* and *Green* have gone all out on reproductions; Anna Atkins' cyanotypes of algae are especially wonderful, as are the medieval crocodiles in *Green*.) A better account of the "paradoxical" associations of blue over the twentieth century can be found in the chapter 'A Riff on Blue' in Ruth Levitas' *Utopia as Method* (2013); Levitas makes a clear case for blue as a colour that artists and writers have explicitly imbued with utopian associations without suggesting that this is unique or essential to the colour, nor universally true.

The "meanings" of colours, as these books all show, arise through relations and networks of association, within a work, or within a culture. And this is not just through juxtaposition with other instances of the same colour; as Pastoureau reminds us, "a colour does not occur alone [...] it only takes its meaning, it only fully 'functions' insofar as it is combined with or opposed to one or many other colours [...] To speak of green is necessarily to speak of blue, yellow, red, and even black and white." One of the most fascinating sections in *Green* deals with the laws surrounding the dyeing industry in the middle ages. A dyer who was licensed to produce red wool was then not allowed to produce blue, for instance, although the former was responsible for yellows and the latter for greens. This meant that green made by mixing blue and yellow—a technique every child learns at nursery school—was illegal, and dyers who made it were successfully sued by their competitors. In choosing to follow a single colour, a unitary meaning, an author denies herself the useful overview denied also to these dyers, and sets up a false picture of its distinctiveness.

"The list is the fundamental rhetorical form for creating a sense of abundance, overflow, excess," Gass claims. To want to avoid offering up a mere catalogue seems misguided: the list form, which both Gass and Pastoureau rightly exploit, is perhaps the best way to do justice to colour, which, as Julia Kristeva (quoted by Mavor) says, "is not zero meaning: it is excess meaning."