

On Colour & Spectacle

Evelien Jonckheere & Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze

For a very long time, spectacle and colour have been associated with joyful festivities, such as carnivals or fairground attractions, liberating people from periods of hard work and 'dark days.' However, spectacle and colour are closely intertwined with suppression and power as well. Colourful fireworks were traditionally a strategy of ruling powers to demonstrate their dominance over their spectators, as fireworks were the result of expensive chemical explosions and strong military forces who had the skill to handle them and the willingness to take the necessary security risks. For many centuries using colour in spectacle meant luxury as it implied hazardous chemistry, colourful gems, expensive colour pigments or colourful exotic birds and flowers. This resulted in an 'aristocratic' connotation for colour. In brief, colour meant exclusivity, luxury and partying.



Fig. 1. Feu d'artifice tiré à la place de Louis XV le 30 mai 1770.
Gallica, BnF

Colour and spectacle are inseparable friends that share a similar sense of viewing. It is a relation with a deep historical character. The word 'spectacle', deriving from the Latin verb 'spectare' or 'to watch', as well as the word 'theatre' from the Greek 'theastai' or 'to look attentively', unveils an ocular-centrism in Western performance culture. In *The Denigration of Vision* (1994), Martin Jay describes how 'sa-voir' and 'pou-voir' were the foundations of our Western knowledge. From Plato to Descartes, the eye was seen as 'the noblest of the senses'.

The relation between colour and spectacle was not very stable, however. From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, theatre critics like Denis Diderot prescribed a move away from bright colours and their association with luxury and aristocracy. Brown and dark colours were preferred in more democratic 'bourgeois' spectacles. At the same time when colour is theorized and linked with several theories, a shift in ocular-centrism is announced. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Goethe's *Colour Theory* (1810) was groundbreaking, as Goethe discovered that the eye could also mislead the mind, for example, in the perception of after-images. This discovery called into question the separation of body and mind and initiated the subjectivity of 'vision' or 'subjective vision', which was further explored by scientists such as Joseph Plateau, Jean Purkinje, Gustav Fechner, and many others throughout the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century scientific insights into subjective vision paved the way for optical devices such as stereoscopes and colourful moving images such as kaleidoscopes and phenakistoscopes and, ultimately, cinematography. The observation that colour was the result of an interplay of physical, psychological and physiological processes made more thinkers aware of phenomena such as synaesthesia or creative confusions of the senses to which spiritual dimensions were quickly attributed, as can be read in poems by Charles Baudelaire or George Rodenbach (see for example his ode to Loïe Fuller on page 62).

The rapid technological evolution of colour depiction throughout the entire 20th century, such as the arrival of colour cinematography, provoked further philosophical thought, building on Goethe's propositions. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, persistently refers in his fragmentary collection of observations *Remarks on Colour* (1950) to experiences of colour in cinema. As he wonders about the projection of these colours on the big screen – black and white movies were still more common at the time –, one of his translators draws the parallel with how Wittgenstein constructed "a prose that was as sharp and contrasting as Kodachrome" (125). Colour as a language game

stands at the core of his consideration of physical and phenomenological colours, emphasizing its inherently constructed character. This paves the way for further connections enhancing colour in dialogue with spectacle culture, especially in the second half of the century during which mass media such as television and the Internet consolidated their dominant positions. And although theoretical foundations are rarely of direct importance to the contributions in this issue, they do touch on similar phenomenological aspects of the matter in all their different manifestations.

Shades of spectacle

This special issue of Documenta is dedicated to the themes of Colour & Spectacle, and through a wide range of artistic practices, disciplines and research topics, explores how colour in the past and present directly or indirectly occupies a key position in human perception, as a means of expression or as strategy. As theatre often serves as an antidote, by bringing people together for reflection in one physical space, colour takes centre stage in this experience of creative theatrical presence. This is not only the case in the theatre but also in various forms of spectacle such as the magic lantern and other optical projections, luminous fountains, as well as more contemporary forms such as video clips, social media, art, circus, drag and street performance.

Colour as spectacle and spectacle in colour keeps on affecting us. As we question their different roles in connection to different histories, various questions are being raised. What does colour actually mean, for example? How do artists and researchers represent and challenge colour? How do they incorporate ideas about colour and spectacle? How can colour be perceived as an expression of identity?

Colour still plays a leading role in the work of many contemporary artists yet we can pose the question whether it is prominent and thought-through. Colour, especially in the context of spectacle culture, needs a contemplative, layered reading. Has colour become too evident in our technicolour world as we joyfully swipe through our endless archives on a little screen?

The festive character began to descend from the aristocratic throne several centuries ago and ultimately conquered the everyday through the mass media. As colour is undeniably an essential aspect of how we perceive the world we can also conclude that spectacle has become our everyday context, as situationist Guy Debord already formulated in his *The Society of Spectacle* in 1967: “The spectacular cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass-

media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, that has become an objective reality.” (12).

Debord essentially anticipated how commerce is currently developing all kinds of initiatives, such as, for example, 'Wondr. Experience the Art of Play' in Amsterdam. This latter describes itself as a 'confetti sprinkled playground of color and sensation', and it is indeed a lucrative business model tailored to the instagramming millennial inhabiting a digital world of likes and shares. Another curious case whose product name alludes to the ambiguous character of spectacle these days is the pair of glasses that social media application Snapchat has developed. Users with *Spectacles* can share the colours as directly seen through their eyes and transform their vision into a spectacle image or video that they can post online on their social media accounts. Thus, after gradually taking over the material everyday world through classic outlets such as magazines and television, the spectacular now finds a comfortable home base in social media, where colour remains a protagonist.

Spectacles of the past...

In contrast to all the eye-catching imagery of everyday life, as always and everywhere a spectacle, art reacts once more with a spectacle of banality. However, spectacle and colour are still inextricably intertwined with a modern demand for novelty and therefore primarily characterized by 'variety'. This variety is reflected in this festive issue with a broad range of contributions with an interdisciplinary character intertwining both the historical and the contemporary. As editors, we gathered academics and artists with expertise in various disciplines: literature, film, theatre, circus and performance studies, from our personal network. With coloured lenses, these authors shed light on colour and spectacle from interfaces with history, technology, science, anthropology, sociology, the visual arts, performance studies, circus and urban arts, collecting spectacle and colour in past and present.

This issue opens with a contribution by **Bart Moens**, PhD student at the Centre de Recherche en Cinéma et Arts du Spectacle at the ULB, who investigates the use of colour throughout the development of the magic lantern and its lantern slides. Starting from a materialistic media-archeological point of view, he explores the technical evolutions and their influence on the development of a visual language of colour. By questioning the role of colour as a mode of expression in photographic series, such as the life model slide series popular between the 1880s and 1920s, he unveils the melodramatic qualities of colour.

Evelien Jonckheere follows a related research track within her contribution on another spectacular technological device from the fin de siècle, which was, however, closely intertwined with the magic lantern. She presents the colourful luminous fountain in a multimodal way by analyzing its spectatorship in schools, theatre, fairground and world fairs and traces its impact on the shifting perception and innovative synaesthetic scenography of artists like Loïe Fuller at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yet we should not always interpret the notion of colour in its most literal sense. Stereotyping, for example, is also an expression of colour, though not always one with the best connotations. **Sarah Adams**, researcher at Ghent University's Literature department, zooms in on more negative representations of colour in her article, as she explores the phenomenon of Dutch late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century blackface performances and consequently delineates the impact of skin colour on identity and perception.

... and spectacles of the present

Colour thus transcends literal interpretations and technical aspects, and this has not been lost on artists and academics alike. Although this issue partly shows that the past and the present concerning colour and spectacle are inextricably linked by overlapping themes, we can argue that the second part of this special issue turns more towards contemporary performing arts practices, negotiating the ensemble of colour and spectacle. We therefore start with an overview by **Christel Stalpaert** who looks into how (post-dramatic) theatre copies the colours and mechanisms of popular culture. She challenges the dominant aversion to the flashiness of mass media aesthetics in a high culture discourse, which links back to colour as culturally connoted. Relying on Andy Warhol's work and Jan Fabre's performances, she constructs an argument on how recuperation of spectacular images from popular culture in the black box theatre can actually challenge the scopic regimes we have acquired.



Fig. 2. Mårten Spångberg, *The Internet* (2015).
Jens Peeters

The lamenting of the levelling of high and low art that Stalpaert touches on, sketches the complex landscape of new technologies and more specifically social media. These elements do not make it any more straightforward to grapple with the appeal of appearances in the performing arts. Current tumultuous political times likewise emphasize how besides representing a (social) identity, colours are these days still heavily charged with the task of representing entire cultures or nations within a spectacle context, as nationalism highlights identifications with the colour codes of flags and emblems. But the characteristic of a geographical place can also be described in terms of *colour locale*, originally a pictorial term to describe the dominant colour in a landscape.

PhD candidate in Literary Studies at Ghent University **Lisa Vancauwenberghe** works exactly on this representation of ordinary life and urban experience from a literature and media perspective. In her article she presents a counter reading of the *couleur local* stereotype of 'postcard Italy'. Analysing how the urban environment is depicted in the music videos of Italian rapper Capo Plaza, she sets up a multi-layered lens for what she calls the infra-ordinary. She connects it to historical elements of spectacle culture, such as, for example, early industrialization. By opposing the bustling metropolis Milan, as site of the society of spectacle par excellence, with the small southern town of Salerno, she contests the popular phantasmagoric allure of Italian cities through the visual narrative present in the Italian (t)rap scene.

As one of the editors who mainly curated the contemporary part of this issue, **Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze's** article deals with similar material on the platform of YouTube. This not only opens up spectacle culture to the analysis of music videos but also of social media as an additional stage for physical spectacles in general. Unfolding the foundations of her recently started research project on musical persona performance and its omnipresence on the recent online stages of social media, the article investigates the work of music artists who centralize marginalized identities, whilst carefully curating the colours of their own universes. Even though these performances between an actual and virtual stage sometimes aim to challenge acquired identity scripts, the gendered use of colours, such as baby blue and powder pink, stays firmly anchored in our society. A recurrent artistic strategy that emerges in this article, not only through pop star Lana Del Rey but also in the tradition of drag, is to fully embrace and even exaggerate the stereotypes.

The tradition of drag fully embraces spectacular culture. Whereas a collision between the urban and the spectacular was already evident from the previous articles, we thought it would also be enriching to have a look at the pigments present in the streets of Ghent. Since 2018, drag queen collective House of Lux has been spicing up the queer scene in Ghent and far beyond, floating their fierceness at parties and events. Drama graduate from KASK **Simon Baetens** performs under the name of **Electra**, together with queens Mauve Lux, Susan From Grindr, Scandilouse and Krietjur. He uses this occasion to self-reflect in tactile theoretical collages woven around his artistic practice as a drag performer and the notion of drag as present in popular discourse, music and visual art.

Joost Rekveld gives the reader an insight into the evolution of his colourful artistic work, abstract films and installations with his artistic contribution 'Grounding Colour'. Driven by his research into alternative cinematic languages and music, Rekveld is inspired by the genealogy of colour theories such as those of Aristotle, Newton and Goethe and all kinds of colour experiments, ranging from eighteenth-century colour organs to abstract 'visual music'. These insights, theories and experiments lead him to alternative visualizations of the physicality and weightlessness of colour, which at the same time offer contemporary reflections on music and film. In this way Rekveld tries to lift the curtain in front of the audiovisual technological objects with which we articulate ourselves today.

The eye-centred discourse around spectacle and colour does not exclude the sonic element. Rekveld's creations already show that we need to concentrate on more than meets the eye and that both components reinforce each other. The performance Concert for Signal Flares, created and performed by sound collective **VA AA LR**, offered a proper opportunity to reflect on colour and spectacle in the context of experimental sound art. Mailing questions and answers back and forth resulted in an interview about the interaction and relation between auditive and visual elements in their performance oscillating between immediate visual attraction and auditive contemplation.

In line with this dynamic of turning stereotypes inside out and playfully engaging with traditions, we present at the end of this issue another interview with "new circus" duo **Mardulier en Deprez**. Ruben Mardulier and Michiel Deprez, both graduates from the Fontys School for Circus in Tilburg, manage to evoke a curious universe characterized by a rather personal interpretation of spectacle, or even anti-spectacle as they suggest in the interview on p. 230. They shine a fresh light on the tradition of circus that we now see as the perhaps slightly outworn

epitome of colour- and spectacle-related practices in the performing arts. The interview might make the reader realize, however, that circus in a new guise is back as never before.

A critical palette

As eclectic as the inspirations that fuelled our curation of this issue, we hope this special issue does shine a light on colour and spectacle and challenge the familiarity we actually have with those established concepts. As curators, we hope to lead the reader to a refreshed and more wondering gaze. By bringing together contributions on spectacles past and present, on scientific and artistic contributions, this special issue wants to colour the reader's mind and soul in a synaesthetic way. Tackling notions of colour and technology, expression and identity, the authors have challenged issues of perception and ocular-centrism, as well as celebration, vitality and spectacular culture.

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All of their expertise and support was crucial in bringing these many-hued voices together in order to reflect the current scope of practices relating to spectacle culture. It is a reflection of the hard work conducted in several fields of the research community, with openings to future possibilities. We therefore also wish to thank all our contributors, (young) researchers in the field and artists, for granting us their time and engaging in this joint dialogue by adding their own colour to the spectrum of our special issue.

Works cited

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