



Colour Blocking: Disregarding Traditional Artistic Colour Harmonies or Promoting Post-Modernist Expressionism?

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ABSTRACT

A development in the world of design – costume, fashion, graphics, architecture and general decor whereby traditional colour harmonies are reengineered to suite the taste of the time engages the attention of the paper. The trending phenomenon popularly referred to as ‘colour blocking’ involves the use of bright ‘expressive’ colours for finishing in the decorative and utilitarian arts. In this practice, complimentary and contrasting colours are liberally used in the visual field to engage the attention of the viewer. This paper seeks, in the first instance to understand this trend and the alternative interpretations of the concept. A review is made of traditional theories of colour usage and templates of appreciation of the arts, weighing them against current innovations in colour blocking. The paper attempts to theorize the phenomenon from the perspective of post-modernist expressionism, which encompasses the arts and to a large extent shapes production and consumption patterns. In conclusion, the paper submits that colour usage like other design trends is evolutionary and in some cases cyclic. But nevertheless, messages can still be transmitted despite the revolving trends and the influences of time.

Keywords: Colour Blocking, Colour Harmonies, Post-Modernism, Expressionism

INTRODUCTION

As the global social space becomes more interactive, it is also becoming more dynamic. The rapidity of assimilation and sharing of new cultural products and notions manifesting in diverse forms and perspectives is remarkable. Much transformation has been witnessed in the wide world of arts particularly in the areas of performance, visual arts and the electronic arts. What engages our attention in this paper is a development in the world of fashion, costume, graphics, architecture, interior, exterior and general decor

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where colour, a traditional element of artistic creation is now entangled with what could be described as ‘uncontrollable’ innovation. In specific terms, colours are now being used much more expressively with little regards to traditional colour codes and harmonies. Artists and designers seem to be breaking colour barriers more than ever by using several ‘loud’, bright and unrelated colours on costume, furniture, interior, exterior, ceremonial and other designs. While many refer to this practice as colour blocking, others call it colour blogging. This paper adopts the reference ‘colour blocking’ because of its relative popularity.

This paper reviews this development first, by seeking to understand the concept and its alternative interpretations and by examining some possible theoretical backgrounds upon which the phenomenon of colour blocking may be anchored. From the perspective of the artist, the paper reviews traditional theories of colour usage and templates of appreciation of the arts, weighing them against current innovations in colour blocking. As a historical commentary, the paper traces the evolutionary and recurrent trend of colour blocking and reviews the post-modernist characteristics in the phenomenon. The paper comments briefly on the issue of wholesale consumerism of cultural forms and the manner in which this tendency has encompassed the arts as demonstrated in colour blocking.

Blocking or Blogging: Theorizing the Global Phenomenon of using ‘Expressive’ Colour Harmonies

There seems to be a dispute in the use of terminologies to describe this unfolding scenario of colour usage in design expressions. While some maintain that the phenomenon should be referred to as ‘colour blogging’, others think that is it ‘colour blocking’. At the centre of the first position is the argument that the current trend of colour usage has opened up non-verbal dialogues similar to posts found in blogs. This kind of dialogues, it is argued, involves the users and the perceivers in peculiar circumstances of interpersonal or in some cases cultural/cross-cultural dialogue. Blogging now transcends its traditional/technical usage in reference to writings or posts in a digital platform, a specially formatted technical space with its own unique web page address – the permalink, designed using some kind of software to allow readers to leave comments. It has now been extended in definition “by trying to identify its spirit... to inform, to teach, to entertain, to provoke...” Though many still maintain that blogging is basically writing, it must be understood that writing is basically an art form, and that there is plenty of artistic scripts in structure and in concept that are found in places which are not blogs. The primary aim of art is to communicate, and in communicating, a dialogue (box) is opened, which could be physical or may end as a provocation of thought. The dialogue may accommodate a talk-back process directly to the initiator or generate cross-communication among others who discuss the blog content at a distance.

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In line with the argument that blogs can include images, audio, video, slideshows, and all other manner of what is called “embedded media”, and that blogging does not even have to include words: a blog post can have only pictures, some designers have opened up dialogue blogs through their designs or products as exemplified in the graphic and fashion items below:



Plate I (top): Multi-coloured Design for a Fashion Outfit (Source: *Chic Outlet Shopping's* Wertheim Village* Website)

Plate II (bottom): “Colour Blogged” Handbag Advert on <http://www.bloglovin.com>.

From the perspective of those who insist that the phenomenon of multiple colour usage in a visual field is colour blocking, it has been argued that while blogs open up conversation space, colour blocks provide the structure and theme for dialogue. In this respect, cases have been made for the use of the reference – colour blocking. What is actually expressed in the visual field are blocks of colours, which may appear as fabrics, paint or any other colour medium. These blocks build the artistic structure and create the desired effects, therefore generating the text and forming the basis of intellectual dialogue or interaction.

Understanding the Concept of Colour Blocking

Colour blocking is a current design trend that combines or features contrasting colours on a spatial area in bold blocks. In a blog spot opened by Yahoo, a number of definitions of colour blocking were submitted based on individual artistic or design experiences thus:

- It is wearing bold solid colours with each other, for example a red top and blue skirt.
- It's basically just wearing 2 or more plain colours together; contrasting colours look best.
- It is when you wear a dark coloured outfit with a little bit of colour. Such as coloured earrings, shoes, belts, scarfs, or bracelets.
- ... its where you wear different bright colours with a little black touch such as a bright orange skirt with an aqua top and a black big belt...
- It's when you wear two bold colours against each other. For example, a yellow shirt and red skirt. Colour blocking is very in at the moment.

(<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index>)

From the definitions, colour blocking involves a number of things, including in the first instance, using hues that are the direct opposites on the colour wheel. Those are complimentary colour, which in pair include purple and yellow, red and green, and orange and blue. These colours are said to create the best effects in colour blocking. Colour blocking takes bold opposites on the colour wheel (that is complementary colours) and puts them together for the widest contrast possible.

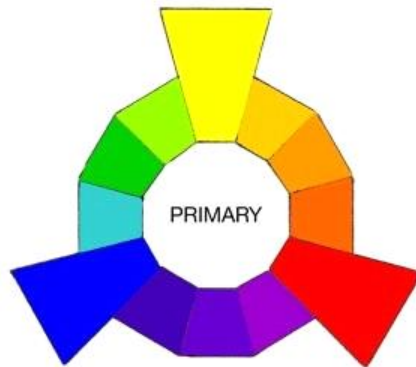


Figure 1: A Colour Wheel.

Secondly, colour blocking also involves using bright colours that are not necessarily compliments of each other. The combination ideally should involve colours with the same level of intensity. In many cases of usage,

colour blocks must balance each other not only in intensity, but also spread otherwise the look appears unbalanced.

Thirdly, colour blocking also involves projecting colours using neutrals such as black and white. For instance, orange placed on a black background is more luminous. In summary, colour blocking relates to loud and proud colour combinations made to enhance dynamism (<http://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/trends>).



Plate III: Colour Blocking in Fashion: The Western Experience



Plate IV and Plate V: Colour Blocking in Fabrics: Alternative Experience.

Even though many of the definitions and explanations considered earlier are in the context of dress fashion, the idea of using multiple colours is central in design and transcends the world of fashion. Contrasting colours have been used in interior and exterior decoration. In many homes and public spaces, items of furniture are multi-coloured. In architecture, multiple colours are also used in interior and exterior finishing. The choice of colour depends largely on the taste of the artist or patron and the functions for which the

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architectural space is meant. Commercial buildings are seen to use louder combinations of colour than non-commercial buildings.



Plate VI (Left): Colour Blocking in an Exterior Setting.



Plate VII (Right): Colour Combination in a Single Architectural Plain.

In the world of graphics, the phenomenon of colour blocking extends to various items such as billboards, stickers and posters. Bright colours in graphics no doubt help in publicity as they draw the viewer's attention faster than dull colours. Competing brands have found colour blocking a valuable strategy of publicity and as a marketing tool.

In terms of ideological spread, colour blocking appears to be a universal phenomenon. Like most global phenomena, it is difficult to pinpoint its local origin. However, it is evident by glancing through media images; design catalogues of fashion, furniture and decor that colour blocking is wide spread. Items used for production cut across cultures. In fashion for example, while some brilliant coloured fabrics may originate from some indigenous African cultures, finished apparels and other products using those fabrics could be made by Western or Asian producers. Ideas, motifs or creativity in colour combination or usage may also be a product of local cultures or designers.

Traditional Colour Harmonies (Schemes)

Conventionally, artists and designers use colours following certain laid down patterns or established harmonies. In conservative terms, colours are expected to harmonize, that is one blending into the other. But sometimes, colours could be used to deliberately highlight or complement each other. Gilbert and McCarthy (1988) highlight four basic colour harmonies frequently used in design, including the monochromatic, analogous, triad, and the complimentary harmony.

Monochromatic harmony consists basically of one colour, which is composed of variations of the same hue. The single colour could have different values and intensities. The complementary harmony consists of colours that are found directly opposite each other on a regular colour wheel. Yellow is the complement of purple, red is the complement of green, while blue is the complement of orange. These three pairs are the most popular among complementary colours. However, other complementary pairs exist among the tertiary colours. In using complimentary colours, designers frequently avoid creating colour antagonism in the visual field. Quite often, they are used to accentuate each other in an unequal spread. In this case, one must dominate the other.

Analogous harmony involves the combination of colours that are adjacent to each other on the colour wheel. Colours used in this regard are seen to be in perfect contiguous harmony. There exists a clear accordance, whereby blue blends into green, green into yellow, etc. The layout gives a rainbow effect. In this flow, some elements of the adjoining colours are traceable in one another.

Triad harmony involves using three colours that are of equal distance to each other on the colour wheel. This combination can give full polychromatic effects particularly when the triad colours are the three primaries, which can produce any other colours when mixed in proper quantities.

It would appear that designers are increasingly looking beyond the traditional colour harmonies to discordant applications that would further extend the boundaries of creativity. This seems to be the trend in the post-modern period.

Post-Modernist Traits in Colour Blocking

From many indications, the art of colour blocking is post-modernist by inclination. Waugh mentions some of the indicators of postmodernism – parody, irony, self-reflexivity, playfulness, etc. (49). In post modernism, there is a tendency to “Mediate a sense of multiplicity, fragmentation, instability of meaning, dissensus, the breakdown of grand theories as either narratives of emancipation or speculation (Waugh 49). Other formal characteristics are found in the very nature of post modernism, which may include its revolutionary thrust, fractal structure, innovative profile, its pastiche and avant guardist forms. All these are reflected in the art of colour

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blocking. Some of these conditions have been developed or have evolved to overcome established structural (modernist) autonomy. To an extent, these formalisms attempt to explain the argument that postmodernism is a direct departure from modernism and that it is concerned with all aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity (Giddens 45). In an analysis of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Edgar and Sedgwick elaborate on the philosopher's thought thus: "Modernism embodies a nostalgic yearning for a lost sense of unity, and constructs aesthetics of fragmentation in the wake of this. Postmodernism in contrast begins with this lack of unity but, instead of lamenting it, celebrates it" (258). In departure from modernism therefore, post modernism is revolutionary and in some cases disturbingly reactive.

In colour blocking, colour users try to break conventional biases in their narratives. They seek emancipation in thought and expression. Bright and multiple colours are used in visual fields with no clear consensus. While some users combine varieties of complimentary colours to accentuate disharmony, others simply use bright colours arbitrarily. Every user addresses peculiar, quite often personal aesthetic need, probably just to become distinctive. The situation could therefore be described as free-for-all expressiveness, manifesting in multiplicity of interpretations and fragmentation, both of which are conditions of postmodernism. This fractal structure creates room for instability and sometimes uncertainty in the translation of meaning. The colour montage in colour-blocking could also be described as experimentation with abstract notions for self satisfaction. The glut of experiments also leads to multiplicity in interpretation and consumption. Dissatisfaction leads to further fragmentation.

Being an attack as it were on conventional colour harmonies, colour blocking is revolutionary and avant guardist. Colour blockers must have reflected on some fundamental questions – Why must every design follow established orders? Why the subscription to traditional colour harmonies? These reflections are manifestation of post modernism, which thrives in the deconstruction of existing notions. Innovators challenge the persistence of 'grand narratives', replacing them with 'little narratives' in the wake of existing notions of what constitute 'knowledge'. Breaking down of grand theories is dissention, which is also an agenda in the aesthetics of postmodernism.

Theoretical Perspectives and Historical Precedents

Colour-blocking as a postmodernist trend is not a clean break from earlier artistic traditions as it so far appears in this discourse. Can there really be such a loss of historical memory and time lapses in art styles and movements through periods and epochs? In arguing against a radical break theory of the relation of postmodernism to earlier aesthetic practice and theories, Waugh underlines the need to consider continuities and the possibility of perceiving new relationships (4). In the light of this fact, it has become necessary to

review works of arts in early 20th century - late Modernity, which by many accounts was the precursor to post modernity.

In colour blocking, picture fields are sometimes divided into spaces which are later filled with distinctive colours. This practice of creating planes for blocks of colours may have started with cubism, led by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at the inception of the 20th Century. Colour blocking on a 2-dimensional surface shares a similarity with cubism where there was “complete and consistent geometrical ‘structurization’ of the subject” (Read 75), which was either completely filled with flat colours as found in Picasso’s *Seated Woman* (1927) or modulation of colours as found in Juan Gris’s *Bottle and Glass* (1914).



Plate VIII: Picasso’s *Seated Woman* (1927).



Plate VIX: Juan Gris’s *Bottle and Glass* (1914).

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At approximately the same time with Cubism, there were other radical approaches to colour usage spearheaded by artists and philosophers, some of whom shared the cubist philosophies. Dadaism which was perhaps more revolutionary in ideology than Cubism featured both visual and performative artistic productions which were more vigorous in expressive energies particularly in the use of production elements. The painting *Configuration* (1928) by Hans Arp, exemplifies this vigour in the combination of colours, which is equivalent to what is now done in colour blocking.



Plate X: Hans Arp's *Configuration* (1928).

Also about the same epoch with Cubism was Neo-plasticism, formed approximately in 1917 and led by Piet Mondrian, a member of the *De Stijl* movement. Mondrian himself defined Neo Plasticism as “a means by which the versatility of nature can be reduced to the plastic expression of definite relations”. He sought the kind of arts that would become “an intuitive means, as exact as mathematics, for representing the fundamental characteristics of the cosmos” (Read 200). Colour areas for Mondrian helped to define reality. His work *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1921) is an example of the Neo-plasticist philosophy. Mondrian's works, like colour blocked works of the 21st Century were a search for “intensity, for precision... and a profoundly human and rich beauty...” (Read 202-203). These are abstract qualities that can hardly be defined with unanimous denominators.

Still about the same period, Kasimir Malavich founded an art movement he called Suprematism, which expounded the philosophy of non objective representation. With a clear insight and mind, Malavich asserted that “the reality in art was the sensational effect of colour itself” (Read 204). He

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therefore went into the production of series of 'colour blocked' paintings, the most popular of which was *Suprematist Composition* (1915). This work is a composition with multiple colours in geometric patterns similar to some layouts frequently found in contemporary colour blocked works.

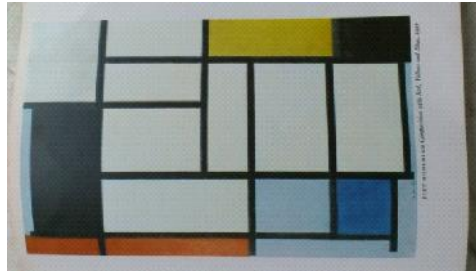


Plate XI: Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1921).



Plate XII: Kasimir Malavich's *Suprematist Composition* (1915).

Several years after Cubism, Dadaism, Neo-plasticism and Suprematism came Abstract Expressionism as a movement in the later part of the 20th Century. While there were many variations of expressionism, some of the most striking works were the series of Colour Field paintings by Mark Rothko and Morris Louis. Practitioners of colour blocking seem to have derived much inspiration from the practice of colour field painting developed as part of Abstract Expressionism in the 20th Century. Colour field painting involves a situation where whole pictures consist of large expanse of more or less unmodulated colour”, and in some cases using “several colours that are similar in tone and intensity” (Chilvers and Glaves-Smith 145). Pioneers who led the development of the style also considered a type of Minimalist arts in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s included Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, among others. Their works were exercises in bold

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expressive usage of colours to defy conventions just like other avant guardist movements. In some cases, single colours were dominant, only boarded by narrow marginal bands of other colours. For proponents, it was “both a solidifying process and an assertion of freedom... a denial of dogmatic principles” (Read 290).

These are earlier attempts in visual and decorative arts that may be equated with the current ideology or practice of colour blocking. Studying all these developments, one could be forced to reconsider whether colour blocking in philosophy and practice is really a new phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

In the pastiche of postmodernism, some notable intersections must be understood – the intersection of the ‘old’ and ‘new’, and of the ‘global’ and ‘local’ – all of which combine to produce refreshingly new matrices to characterize the production of hybrid identities in postmodern phenomena such as colour blocking. The relationship between the older art forms in early 20th Century and the new ones have already been analysed. In a similar manner, there is an interface between what appears global in scope on the one hand, and the local on the other. As earlier stated, the phenomenon of colour blocking appears global, considering the range of subscription seen in many global artistic cultures. But the interpretation of the phenomenon can assume local dimensions. The symbolism of colours is often drawn from local/traditional beliefs, which may include a wide range of notions. Where decoration and fashion are concerned, one begins to consider traditional modes of modesty, conservatism or decency, and on the other extreme flamboyance or assertive identity. These interpretations can be dynamic, depending on the prevailing condition.

Between the old and the new, the local and the global, the interpretations given to colour blocking is elastic, underlining the heterogeneity of postmodernism. According to Cvetkovich and Kellner, this diversity could be read from two extremities:

For some theorists, postmodern heterogeneity is positive, but for others, it makes it easier to manipulate fragmented selves into consumer identities, synthetic models produced by the culture industries. From this perspective, the fragmentation or even dissolution of traditional identities result in superficial changes of fashion and style that reconceive in terms of looks and attitudes as opposed to fundamental commitments, choices and action. New postmodern selves who go from moment to moment without making fundamental choices or commitments live on the surface, lost in the funhouse of hyperreal (media) images and the play of floating signifiers, themselves becoming images and signifiers in the post modern carnival (11).

It must be restated at this point that multiplicity of artistic products and ideologies introduces a deluge of fragmental interpretation of forms. And so the tussle for identity continues only to confirm the fact that in aesthetics, there is no ultimate sense of beauty.

What is almost certain about colour blocking is the fact that it may yet be another short lived style of artistic expression. Read has observed that in art, a style or movement, once flourishing, normally deteriorates as it goes on (11). Andrew agrees with the notion of brevity in the life of artistic movements, but deviates in part from Read's opinion where he notes that art styles are frequently cyclic as older forms are later revisited in later years (140). This as earlier suggested may have been the case with colour blocking. The practice had probably been in existence under different nomenclatures. The current practice is a re-visitation or at best a variation of earlier experiences in colour usage in arts.

Like many examples of avant guardist arts, colour blocking has re-entered the art scene this time to make a statement across broader specialties. What seems to be dominant in this statement is the issue of artistic freedom - of conception, creation and expression. Creativity in arts entails, among other things the desire to break conventions and to assert individuality in some instances. In the pastiche of colour blocking all these are found. The application and interpretation is left to the individual.

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