

1997 MONDRIAN LECTURE
THE IRRESISTIBLE ADVANCE OF DISCOLORATION

—
HERMAN PLEIJ
—

In 1997 the Mondrian Lecture was given by Dr. Herman Pleij, Professor of Medieval Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam.

At last there is a new sort of lipstick which provides a solution to the embarrassing problem of staining, which has sustained an extremely boring form of humor for years. After all, as the STER spot assures us, colors always fade away. However, this scientifically designed “stand-out” color cannot simply be kissed away. Are there really colors which go beyond the mere surface?

There have always been impassioned discussions about the question of whether colors are part of the essence of things or a suspect addition which actually removes from sight the essence of what was created. In that sense, this sort of negative qualification also applies for the corresponding imagery. If my words are shown in color, I am probably angry. This means that something has been added which I do not intend, so that my original intentions are concealed. This is not what Cicero meant when he distinguished the “colores rhetorici” in his theory of eloquence, a sort of colored chalk with words in order to adorn the message, so that it is expressed in a more pleasant and efficient way. However, what is a meaningful embellishment in verbal communication for one person is actually seen by another as a cunning method to conceal true intentions by creating an attractive appearance which deliberately muddies and distorts honest opinions.

According to many people in the Middle Ages, this way of coloring words was the devil’s art. After all, colors were amongst the favorite instruments of Satan and his cronies in their indefatigable aim to make mankind stumble on the difficult journey through the earth towards eternal life. People who believed this considered color to be a substance of dubious origin added to creation, further corrupted by the Fall, which made all material things transient, and was therefore a plaything for the devil. However, there were also devotees of color in the Middle Ages who actually felt that color was the result of a divine play of light which brought life to matter. And as God started his creation by bringing us light, colors are therefore amongst the spearheads of His creative capacity, no matter how insubstantial and intangible they are.

It is precisely this quality of being intangible that in our modern age promoted the idea that colors are no more than an added value, certainly not part of any essence or core of things. The traditional tools of science do not allow us to measure color or express it in any objective figure of space, taste or odor. We perceive color as a changing phenomenon of light which can be perceived differently, not only during the course of time but also by one person under comparable circumstances. This manifest lack of support and stability is translated by preference as superficiality, another attractive and characteristic example of modern arrogance to denigrate anything we do not understand as being unreal: even in contemporary science there are many sour grapes.