

Dissertation Abstract

Yellow Moments: Aesthetic Materiality in Hofmannsthal and the Avant-garde

This dissertation examines how certain extra-literary techniques derived from mass media were assimilated and deployed in avant-garde texts, specifically with regard to the color yellow. As the color of ambivalence, yellow is seen as best able to concretize and activate the divergent cultural forces at work during the *fin de siècle* period and the early twentieth century. This study departs from the normal practice of treating colors as symbols. I use Auerbach's conception of "figura" (that is, the mimetic relations between concrete historical events as a function of their temporal dimension) to show how yellow retains its realism and its materiality.

Through a minute analysis of literary texts, I develop the idea that yellow has a special significance for modernist and avant-garde writers as a color that overturns or reinscribes a value system that it had previously supported. Historically, in Western culture, yellow has been associated with the positive values of light (illumination, enlightenment) and gold (absolute value) but also with the negative aspects of life: death, decay, excrement. Unlike the dialectical colors of black and white, yellow contains its opposition within itself. Yellow thus has a polarity that distinguishes it from other colors, endowing it with a dynamic force.

I thus contend that modernist writers of the fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century undertake a deconstruction of the polarity of yellow: in authors such as Hofmannsthal, Woolf, Gilman, Jahn, I show how yellow becomes a site in which positive and negative poles meet and subvert each other, leading to a poetics of ambivalence that in turn can be seen as a microcosm of a general cultural ambivalence at work in mass-media and politics.

This ambivalence of yellow can be seen at work not only in literary texts but also in cultural phenomena such as the Jewish Star that Jews were forced to wear in the 1930's and 40's: an emblem of spiritual light and of degradation and exclusion. Moments of potential transcendence—yellow spots on walls, yellow markers—are revealed to abortive moments of return and reinscription: citations of textual or cultural matter, they create a space of self-reflexivity and self-evaluation. The famous modernist "epiphanies" are instead a decent into an abject materiality. Yellow illuminates its own negativity, a negativity that cannot be disengaged from the desire for a utopic moment. Thus this study examines the significance of yellow as a modern color in the nexus of cultural artifacts, mass media, and visual art, through the prism of literary texts.