

## David Evans / Color Walks

The idea of 'color walks' is usually associated with American writer William Burroughs. In 1960 he recalled taking a 'color walk' in Paris, seeing all the blues in the street in front of me, blue on a foulard ... blue on a young workman's ass ... his blue jeans ... a girl's blue sweater ... blue neon ... the sky ... all the blues. When I looked again I saw nothing but all the reds of traffic lights ... car lights ... a café sign ... a man's nose.

The quotation is from a conversation between the writer and the American painter Brion Gysin, tape recorded in the Beat Hotel, Paris. In addition, Burroughs discerned close links between the colors he observed in the street and the colors 'shooting out' through the canvases of Gysin.

Gysin and Burroughs were close friends. They were also creative allies across several decades in various locations, most notably Tangiers and Paris. A joint preoccupation was a war of attrition against the routine ways of acting and thinking that sustained, they believed, an unacceptable status quo. How do you break through what Burroughs memorably called the 'grey room'? One now famous tactic was the 'cut up'. Conventionally, the 'cut up' is treated as an exclusively literary operation, involving scissors, paste and printed matter, chopped up and re-arranged in various ways to create new and unexpected associations that 'free' the word. However, it can also be assumed that Gysin and Burroughs would have treated the 'color walk' as another type of 'cut up', encouraging the pedestrian to think outside of the 'grey room'.

Burroughs studied anthropology as an undergraduate. Nevertheless, he – and Gysin – would probably have been surprised to discover that their 'color walks' are foregrounded in a fairly recent book devoted to the anthropology of color. *What Color Is the Sacred?* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2009. Its author is Australian Michael Taussig who is currently a professor of anthropology at Columbia University, New York. Taussig's academic credentials are impeccable, but his writing is not what one would expect, to say the least. To be sure, he can confidently handle a wide range of scholarship, traversing the entire history of anthropology. However, his prose is also permeated by literary figures like Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin – and Burroughs. The end result is wild or estranged anthropology, perhaps another way of reminding the novice fieldworker that she should assume nothing.

Typical of Taussig's extravagant writing is a passage in which he imagines two of his heroes (Burroughs and Benjamin) in Paris together, undertaking a 'color walk':

I can see them now – in my mind's eye – William and Walter, as if in a black-and-white photograph of Gisèle Freund or Man Ray. It looks like Benjamin has actually gotten Burroughs – normally so aloof – to bend forwards with the intensity of the conversation while Burroughs points out to him the colors shooting out on the street, not to mention the blue on a young workman's ass which, I am sure, both Freund and Man Ray would have been quick to include, along with the sudden cool wind on that warm day.

Taussig is the first to concede that the two writers never met and were very different in many ways, but he notes their shared passion for color. In one purple passage he fancifully imagines Benjamin writing an essay based on their joint walk called 'Lost in Color': getting lost whilst walking the city streets is compared to the jerkiness of cinematic montage (Benjamin); colors encountered on the walk encourage reflections on the historical layering that informs the city (Burroughs); and the consumption of hashish further enhances the hallucinatory qualities of the walk (both of them).

Burroughs, Gysin and Taussig were the starting point for my own 'color walks', undertaken in Berlin and often recorded with a camera phone. 'White Walks' was my first project, centering on Teufelsberg - a forest-covered hill on the western edge of Berlin that abounds with animals, especially wild boar. Yet Teufelsberg is by no means natural. In fact, it is a human construct, made from the debris generated by Allied bombing during the Second World War that was subsequently moved from city center to periphery by teams of *Trümmerfrauen* or rubble women. You don't have to look too far to find evidence of the violent, unnatural origins of the hill. Industrial and domestic detritus is scattered everywhere, and during my frequent walks in the area I started collecting the white ceramic fragments that had once been household crockery.

Teufelsberg is also the name of the (now abandoned) spy station built by the Americans on top of the hill during the Cold War. White too, and another regular destination for my 'color walks'. En route, I began to notice the white mushrooms that grow profusely nearby, often having shapes that seemed to replicate the geodesic domes of the spy station. The affinities encouraged associational thinking: the work of Berlin-based photographer Karl Blossfeldt, for example, whose well-known images of plant details seem to evoke varying architectural styles; and more obviously, one of the dominant images from the Cold War era - the mushroom cloud generated by the atomic bomb.

In contrast, my 'Red Walks' took place on the busy streets of the city center. Guided by the color, my starting point was a young woman at a bus stop with vivid red hair extensions. Women with dyed red hair going about their business became one theme. Another was how a color traditionally associated with love and eroticism has become vulgarized in the sex shops of Berlin. In addition, I began to think about a type of politics in Berlin that is often designated red. Fresh and promising if one concentrates on the revolutionary challenge of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacists in Berlin at the end of the First World War. Less so if the focus is on the institutionalization of revolution, including the legacy of the Spartacists, that quickly characterized the authoritarian regime known as the German Democratic Republic, with its capital in East Berlin.

Each series has a different emphasis. Retrospectively, the 'White Walks' deal with time, corroding a familiar distinction between the long duration of natural history and the short duration of political history. And the 'Red Walks' encourage reflection on the multiple, often contradictory, associations generated by colors.