

# What Color Is the Interdisciplinary?

by

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**Abstract:** Color has been considered as a special problem in several disciplines, notably art and music, but also philosophy and literature. Given that color is also a central feature of some scientific thought (think of Newton and the color spectrum, for example), the question “What color is the interdisciplinary?” seems to be a golden opportunity to investigate the interdisciplinarity of color. My question, which follows from Michael Taussig’s similar anthropological question, “What color is the sacred?” points to important issues about the nature of interdisciplinary thinking. Rather than merely posit an answer such as, for example, “interdisciplinarity is red,” we would do well to think through those issues. The question is novel not only because it invents the nominal adjectival form of “interdisciplinarity” as “the interdisciplinary” (as in “the sacred”), but also because it approaches interdisciplinarity with a hint of both reverence and irreverence. Giorgio Agamben’s take on “the sacred” and Walter Benjamin’s understanding of color figure into my response to the question. Agamben explains the importance of the “profanation” of the apparatuses of “the sacred.” And Benjamin’s ideas about the color of experience establish the basis of an answer to our question: the rainbow.

**Keywords:** color, the sacred, the interdisciplinary, apparatus, profanation, Taussig, Agamben, Benjamin, the rainbow

## Introduction

“What color is the interdisciplinary?” An odd question perhaps, but it enables two things to happen. First, the nominal form of the adjective “interdisciplinary,” normally understood to be “interdisciplinarity,” here becomes “the interdisciplinary” (a nominal adjective when used to describe a noun, and an adjectival noun when standing alone). This move enables consideration of what is otherwise, as “interdisciplinarity,” a given in terms of its meaning. The question also enables consideration of a new concept, “the interdisciplinary,” as having color.

The question paraphrases a question previously posed by the anthropologist

Michael Taussig (2009) in his article and then book, *What Color Is the Sacred?* Taussig's question was, in fact, first asked in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by an earlier generation of anthropologists who were concerned about their budding discipline. Taussig's discussion lifts the ethnographer's tent cover to illuminate a discipline for which color matters greatly and for which the question itself is revealing.

In the course of my remarks here I expect similarly to begin to lift a tent cover. To think of "the interdisciplinary" as one thinks of "the sacred" suggests a potential set of critiques that rest on the idea of "the sacred" itself. And part of my work here is to begin that discussion. My efforts are enabled via a turn to anthropology's sacred/profane dichotomy and Giorgio Agamben's understanding of the sacred and the profane.

I also want to immerse "the interdisciplinary" in the available answers to the question: white, black, blue, red, green, blended colors, and even the rainbow itself. I intend to entertain the notion that the "the interdisciplinary" does, in fact, have color. This is possible because of the parallel to "the sacred" that the question implies and the lengths to which Taussig goes to assign color to the (anthropological) "sacred." Analogy at one level to be sure, but more than analogy as the implications develop via consideration of the colors themselves.

## Color

We might begin with a mirror version of the question, and wonder about the interdisciplinarity of color. Inasmuch as color has been a problem that has received considerable attention across the disciplines over the past two millennia, then our question about the color of the interdisciplinary becomes compelling. Color occupies both physical and metaphysical time and space. Just as a child can apply the matter that exists in a writing tool to an image and fill a picture book with color, a parent can color her child's world with a variety of life experiences. Because color moves across time and space it has become the subject of considerable attention among scientists, philosophers, writers, musicians, and artists. And the fact that there are these multiple approaches to understanding color suggests a multifaceted response to our original question. Most apparent, though, is the sustained effort to understand and explain color. For two thousand years we've been unweaving the rainbow.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins (1998, p. 39) borrows "unweaving" from Keats ("Lamia"), countering Keats' anti-Newtonianism by championing what he considers to be the poetry of science. Keats: "Do not all charms fly/At the mere touch of cold philosophy? ...Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,/ Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,/ Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine – / Unweave a rainbow..."

The famous Goethe/Newton debate over color, which flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, recommends two approaches to seeing color. Newtonian physics recommends a scientific and, by extension, a social scientific approach. Goethe's Theory of Colors recommends a humanities approach. Our view of color might depend upon whether we buy Goethe's humanism or Newton's science. Scientists generally see color for its physical properties, residing in a small piece of a larger system of waves beyond the visible spectrum. Color enables them, for example, to discern the chemical composition of exoplanets (and even the moons of those planets) that orbit the stars. In the humanities, color is less about algebraic expressions and more about the expression of language in a human register. Rather than analyzing color as a composition of chemicals, the humanist might undertake an analysis of the coloring that takes place in a musical composition, perhaps even wondering about the effects of music on the composition of the soul.

Think also of interdisciplinarians. In the sciences, they borrow from outside a particular discipline in order to expand understanding. Grigori Perelman's solution to the Poincare Conjecture combines physics (including Hamilton's analogous application of thermodynamics) and several branches of mathematics (including topology and geometry). Likewise, Einstein's thinking moves in and out of physics and mathematics to explain relativity. In the humanities, a similar process unfolds. Rather than offer explanations that are grounded in disciplines that are scientific, humanist explanations attempt to express what science cannot. In both cases, they traverse the spectrum, whether physical or metaphysical, and observe the universe, experiencing a new way of seeing, and perhaps of explaining the problem they are addressing.

We might not say that the sciences and the humanities are on two ends of the spectrum, and we might not say that they are on altogether different spectra, but we might say that the two otherwise diametrically opposed approaches experience the spectrum in different ways. In either case, they are working with the same system, on the same wavelength we might say. What is perhaps certain in any case is that, as it has been for 2000 years, color is likely to continue to be on the agenda of intellectual inquiry for centuries to come. This says volumes about the importance of color to human life, and it provides a bit of justification to pursue *our* question here, "What color is the interdisciplinary?"

### **The Philosophy of Color: More than Meets the Eye of the Beholder**

Wondering about the color of the interdisciplinary, pointing out the tapestry

of thought about color that runs from the science of color measurement to the art of the *immeasurably* human, begins to illustrate how vast a thing color is, and how our question might be worthy of a response. Color appears in art, but also in music. Psychologists have been given a long list of colors to use in their disciplinary palette: A person can be “red with anger,” or “green with envy,” or simply be “blue.” Colors play a prominent role in many of the sciences, given the degree to which colors appear in nature, and indicate measurable attributes such as chemical composition and movement (think: the “red shift”). We could go on at length about the breadth and depth of color in the disciplines, but we might speak only briefly about color in philosophy, which, as it turns out, is a discipline central to a discussion of color. Charles Riley (1995) supplies an overview of perhaps the key point in philosophical work on color: whether, in art, form (line) has primacy over content (color); that is, more colloquially, whether what is more important in art is the drawing or the paint. As with much of Western thought, Kant draws a metaphysical line in the sand, and elevates form over content (color simply adds “charm”). Goethe’s (2006) monumental *Theory of Colors* was perhaps as anti-Kantian as it was anti-Newtonian. Riley places the key figures in each camp: those on the side of form, the “linearists” (Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Rorty); and those on the side of color (Nietzsche, Spengler, Adorno, Barthes, and Derrida). The battle between the two camps has been less a matter of aesthetics and more a matter of the relationship between humans and color. Riley divides thought about color in terms of literary theory on similar lines: thinkers who tend more to toe the line (Arnold, Eliot, Frye, and Bloom); and colorful “impressionists” (Pater, Baudelaire, Bachelard, and Blanchot).

These thinkers and writers often wielded what we might today refer to as interdisciplinary pens. Riley (1995) says that Wittgenstein’s view of color is far from reductive. Rather than assume a position in the margin of analytic philosophy or phenomenology or psychology, color takes its place at the center of a broad-ranging inquiry. The limits of color problems expand to such an extent that their importance to the creation of a primary philosophy is readily apparent. (p. 34)

Jonathan Westphal (1991) broadens the Wittgensteinian spin on color and “proposes [a] convergence of psychology, logic, physics, and analytic philosophy” that aims to “capture nature itself” (p. 35). Westphal does not recommend input from artists, however, who are for him “too sloppy” to include in the “harmony of interdisciplinary inquiry” (p. 37).

Oswald Spengler (1991) represents for Riley the opposite end of the spectrum of color thinkers, but Riley sees him as no less interdisciplinary in

that he “finds in the *atelierbraun* [‘studio brown’]... a force (the *Schwebend*) that is capable of ‘merging presence into eternity’ and bringing down the walls that usually separate science and philosophy, primary and secondary, the present and the past” (p. 50). Spengler notes that “studio brown” does not appear in the rainbow, and that it has a “protestant character.” It is the color of the “historically disposed soul” (p. 133). Color appears in Theodor Adorno’s work in a number of ways, but most significantly as a metaphorical conduit to ontology. Black suggests the crises that plagued the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in art and in popular culture. Echoes (or shadows) of Adorno’s notions of black appear in Alain Badiou’s (2017) *Black: The Brilliance of a Non-Color*.

These brief philosophical reflections on color indicate some agreement, but much more disagreement. Although color has mattered greatly in the lives and deaths of many millions of people, it has been left to the scholars to sort it out, and the scholars have made a game of it. This 2000-year-long project to weave and unweave the rainbow has also become the world at play. As we play along, and try to solve the mysteries of color and the rainbow, we are doing something remarkable in our relationship to “the sacred.” As scholars we are also doing something remarkable to “the interdisciplinary.”

## The Interdisciplinary

The word *interdisciplinarity* is in every case simply a noun. “*The interdisciplinary*” is a particular kind of noun, and, with its attendant definite article, it denotes something quite different. As a noun adjunct it is capable of qualifying another noun (“the rich man”). By itself it is a nominalized adjective (“the rich”). “Interdisciplinary” is traditionally regarded merely as an adjective, giving us, for example, a particular kind of “studies.”

As a noun, “interdisciplinarity” has a different character from that of the nominal adjective, “the interdisciplinary.” As a nominalized adjective, as in our question “What color is the interdisciplinary?” the word bears greater significance and potential meaning. Often, such a nominal adjective suggests a plurality: Contrast “the rich man” with “the rich.” The plurality becomes ambiguous, and filled with possibilities. Consider “the sacred.” One might use the word as an adjective, as in “the sacred oath,” or “the sacred cow,” or “the sacred rite.” In each case we have a very specific idea of meaning. Remove the qualified noun and speak only of “the sacred,” and there is considerable ambiguity, mystery, and imprecision. Taussig’s question “What color is the sacred?” is filled with these qualities. In our analogical question, “the interdisciplinary” is particularly imprecise and mysterious, partly

because the term is relatively recent, and partly because the nominalized form of the word is altogether new. As such, it begs for attention.

## The Sacred

The story of the origin of the question of the sacred is worth telling. According to Taussig's (2009) account, Michel Leiris, a member of a small, loosely-knit group of like-minded scholars called the *Collège de Sociologie* ("College of Sociology"), put the following proposition to "his surrealist friends...on the brink of war" (p. 31) in his January 8, 1938, lecture, "The Sacred in Everyday Life":

If one of the most "sacred" aims that man can set for himself is to acquire as exact and intense an understanding of himself as possible, it seems desirable that each one, scrutinizing his memories with the greatest possible honesty, examine whether he can discover there some sign posts permitting him to discern the color for him of the very notion of the sacred. (Taussig, 2009, frontispiece)<sup>2</sup>

Leiris and his colleagues were part of the intellectual movement known as "sacred sociology," a "mix of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, to which was added the astonishing novelty of ethnography – the anthropological study of so-called primitive societies" (Taussig, 2009, p. 31). Their prime motivation came from an interest in Emile Durkheim's take on "the sacred."

Durkheim was a key figure in the French tradition of scholars whose work was instrumental in the development of the disciplines of sociology (August Comte) and anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss). Durkheim left his mark on both disciplines by attempting to unite them (his early ethnographic work in Australia is notable in this regard). The aim of this collaboration of disciplines was to grapple with the complex tensions between humans as individuals and their society. Although sociologists prior to Durkheim examined the religio-sacred (in French society) as a means to understanding social categories such as authority and status, it was Durkheim who radicalized the concept of the sacred to the point that the sacred and the social became, according to Robert Nisbet, "inseparable: distinguishable but not separable. The sacred... is the highest possible point of categorical imperative in the lives of individuals and, when carried to this point, it lies

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<sup>2</sup> Leiris was in fact inspired by another member of the College of Sociology, Colette Peignot, who died before Leiris gave his lecture, and whose posthumously published collection of notes, called *Le Sacré*, includes a page that starts with the question, "What color does the very notion of the sacred have for me?" (Hollier, 1988, p. 100).

in a domain of its own” (as cited in Richman, 2002, p.4).<sup>3</sup>

In his ethnographic work, Durkheim noted the way the Australian Aboriginal subjects of his studies behaved in their response to the sacred. In particular, he wanted to understand “effervescence,” that is, the way “effervescent assemblies” simultaneously enhanced individual experience with the sacred and instantiated the collective. Outside of the ethnographic context, Durkheim and his followers could extrapolate to what they would see as their own, European effervescent assemblies, notably the French Revolution, and later, the events of the Spring of 1968. In between, the lessons of the “ethnographic turn” and “sacred sociology” were not lost on the group who called themselves the College of Sociology, who sought a way forward to address the crises of their own time.

The members of the College of Sociology were scholars who had gone through the paces of their discipline, and yet wanted to pursue “the sacred” in unconventional and hopefully more revealing ways. Michel Leiris’ inroad to the question of the color of the sacred begins in a personal recollection of childhood, an altogether unconventional approach to Durkheim’s anthropological sociology. Taussig recounts Leiris’ memories:

He quickened one’s interest in what he thought of as the sacred with his snapshots of the dining-room stove, *La Radieuse*, with the warmth of its glowing coals; his father’s nickel-plated Smith and Wesson revolver; the bathroom antics with his brother; the mysteries of his parents’ bedroom; the coining of names; the sudden recognition that one has been mishearing and mispronouncing words; and so forth – in short, charged spaces, dangerous objects, and prohibited events, lifting you off from the world of ordinary reality. (2009, p. 32)

As he attempts to “discern the color of the sacred” by scrutinizing childhood memories and acquiring “as exact and intense an understanding of himself as possible,” Leiris’ memories accumulate, and he (1988) remarks, “I see forming bit by bit an image of what, for me, is the *sacred*” (p. 31). The formation, those memories that Taussig says “lift you off from ordinary reality,” includes, in Leiris’ own summary, “Something prestigious... Something unusual... Something dangerous... Something ambiguous... Something forbidden... Something breathtaking... Something supernatural” (p.31). Something... effervescent. As much as anything else, the inquiry into the sacred was a

<sup>3</sup> Durkheim’s radicalism is not in doubt, as Nisbet also points out: “Of all the concepts and perspectives in Durkheim the sacred is the most striking and, given the age in which he lived, the most radical. His use of the sacred... must surely rank as one of the boldest contributions of a positivist non-believer” (as cited in Richman, 2002, p. 4).

performance of a “‘rhetorical question,’ tweaking its own presuppositions, leaving nothing much more than whistling in the dark. It put the very notion of the sacred in question, bracing it, not erasing it, thanks to the peculiar swerve Leiris had inflicted on things holy” (Taussig, 2009, p. 32).

Rhetorical though the question was, there was a response. Taussig (2009) explains that Leiris “had made the sacred an outcome of the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination... [He had] secularized the sacred... but preserved its magic in this way, allowing remembrance of the child’s perceptions to enchant the things of the world” (p. 33). Taussig includes in the child’s imagination the child’s view of color, which, for Leiris, as for anyone, was certainly different from that of adults. “More lively. More lovely” (p. 33).

The College of Sociology was taking Durkheim’s “sacred” in “primitive” societies deeper into their own modern, Western world, which they perceived had, in fact, lost its way.<sup>4</sup> They, Taussig, and I, might well be on a similar journey in that we are all interested in the reclamation of this “spirit-force sacred.” The roadmap shall be beautifully colored. As Taussig (2009) says, “It is my belief that color, or rather the child’s view of color, will help me” (p. 33). At length, Walter Benjamin will bring the colors out for us, and lead us to the pot of gold: the answer to our question about “the color of the interdisciplinary.”

There is one final point about our question. “What color is the

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<sup>4</sup> The specific political concern of the members of the College of Sociology was how to respond to the ideological threats (fascism and socialism) of the 1930s. They saw the existing political structures, particularly in France, as sorely inadequate to the task of preventing the rise of Nazism and of Stalinism. The members of the College decided that the French had lost access to the sacred through effervescence, and were incapable of seeing their own weaknesses. Although some of the views of the members of the College were considered at times sympathetic to fascism, they were clear in their opposition to Hitler and to the weakness they saw in French collusion, particularly as the threat of war became increasingly imminent. It is also of interest to note that Walter Benjamin had an unusual relationship with the College of Sociology. Usually considered to be one of the main intellectual forces of the Institute for Social Research (also known as the Frankfurt School), he was entrusted by Max Horkheimer with the task of searching (with only measured success) for common ground between members of the College (which included, among others, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris) and the Institute (which included Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno) (Weingrad, 2001). Benjamin found himself both physically and intellectually adrift between the two groups. Taking into account the considerable critique and revision of thought that has occurred since the 1930s, the College of Sociology could very roughly be said to be the prototype for poststructuralism, and the Institute could be said to foreshadow Critical Theory in later generations of scholars such as Jürgen Habermas. Any fluidity that has appeared between the two intellectual movements since then is reflected in the unique position that Benjamin experienced in the crucial years of the late 1930s.

interdisciplinary?” is at once heavy and light, serious and comical, direct and ironic. Just as Leiris’ and his College of Sociology’s (and then Taussig’s) question “tore at its own moorings, as a question that begged the question, it was no less bewildering than it was mocking, light hearted and unsettling” (2009, p. 34). We take the mission defined by our question very seriously at the same moment that we laugh at ourselves for doing so. Color has been a source of play among scholars for over 2000 years, and we wouldn’t want to drop the ball now.

### **The Sacred (and the Profane)**

The sacred is, of course, perhaps most famously established as a serious intellectual subject in its formulation by Emile Durkheim as part of the dichotomy: the sacred and the profane.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Durkheim, whose interests were confined primarily to explaining the social function of the sacred and the profane (organizing people around ritual, making a distinction between the special and rarefied space of religion and ordinary life), Giorgio Agamben has in mind something a bit different. Agamben’s view of the sacred (and of “profanation” of the sacred by means of “apparatuses”) not only provides a way to make sense of our question “What color is the interdisciplinary?” but also something of an agenda for action once we have found an answer.

To begin, Agamben (2009) expands Foucault’s idea of an “apparatus” to include

Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses. (p. 14)

As disciplines are included in this list of apparatuses (by both Agamben and Foucault), let us add interdisciplinarity/interdisciplinary studies, or – why

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<sup>5</sup> Richman (2002) notes the considerable influence of Durkheim’s innovation. It “provided the conditions of possibility for an innovative critical discourse” (pp. 3-4) in Marxist, surrealist and literary thought. Durkheim’s ideas have also received criticism for being narrowly conceived and Eurocentric, and thus eventually contributing to the development of postcolonial theory. The sacred/profane dichotomy has also been reincarnated as a theological issue (Eliade, 1987).

not – “the interdisciplinary.”<sup>6</sup>

If the gist of “profanation,” in Agamben’s (2007) sense of the word, is to “return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred” (p. 82), and if an apparatus is “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living things” (Agamben, 2009, p.14), then how might we proceed in our attempt to ensure “the interdisciplinary” is available for “common use”? To our delight, Agamben advocates “play” as one method of profanation.

In the state of Nebraska, in the United States, it is said that the “state religion” is Football (“Gridiron,” as we say in the rest of the world). As in almost any location in America where sport is “the only show in town,” in Nebraska spectator sport is said to have become a “sacred tradition” that is soaked in ritual, involving generations of devotees. Performing such rituals is, according to Agamben’s thinking, merely “secularization,” and not “profanation.” Profanation rather requires action that works to make the “operative” elements of such “apparatuses” as are seen as being “sacred” *inoperative*, and therefore enabling of a freedom that is otherwise unobtainable. Action that would profane “the interdisciplinary” wouldn’t simply be a matter of our making “the sacred” or “the interdisciplinary” work better, but would rather be a matter of fostering a relationship with the sacred/the interdisciplinary in which we are capable of giving it new content, naming “the interdisciplinary” anew.

For us, color becomes central to this mission. Agamben’s best example of how profanation works, perhaps our best hope as a “counter-apparatus,” is “play.” Walter Benjamin’s notion of color, as we’ll see later, makes our task of profaning the interdisciplinary child’s play!

## The Color of the Sacred

And so, in the spirit of Michel Leiris and of Michael Taussig, we are now able to pursue in earnest the question “What color is the sacred?” The answers to this question will help us answer our own question, “What color

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<sup>6</sup> Given Agamben’s openness, I’ll go with “the interdisciplinary” as our default apparatus. Another version of this project might be to return to the disciplines, which are very clearly apparatuses, and ask the question: “What color is the disciplinary?” That would constitute a critique of the disciplines, and an interdisciplinarian would be more easily convinced. But I am keen to put “the interdisciplinary” to the test, and ensure that what interdisciplinarians strive for remains the free and open project that it purports to be.

is the interdisciplinary?” Both Leiris and Taussig understood the rhetorical value of the question. Leiris did not posit a particular color of the sacred, but rather proposed that the relationship between a person and the sacred could be illuminated through the remembrance of experiences that approximated a child’s view of that color.<sup>7</sup>

Taussig’s response is more complex, yet perhaps more immediately accessible as it involves the experience of actual colors. Taussig’s (2009) palette is, at one point in his writing, the colors of the experience of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer, Bronislaw Malinowski, whose “white-on-white whiteness of soft fairy-dust-covered white suit, *that color of the sacred*” (p. 129) was in sharp contrast with the skin of the natives who constituted the subject of his research.<sup>8</sup> At another point, it is the sea (which blends with the color of the sky) that washes the sacred with its dazzling, shimmering color. At yet another point, there is not merely the color that one sees with one’s eyes (white or blue or green), but more the “‘color,’ as in ‘local color’ . . . that outer reach of words so necessary to grasp the inner nature of things” (p. 83). And at yet another point, color is the nexus of the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized: the way, for example, that colonial taskmasters were able to obtain indigo (blue), which eventually became the basis of the color of most Western people’s pant legs, by forcing their native workforce into a dance of death, endlessly crushing with their feet the raw materials to make indigo; or generally the way that the raw materials of natural colors became, like the more commonly known commodities of rum and textiles, essential to the global slave trade. Taussig points out that Goethe himself made this connection via his observation of the distinction between what he saw as the more rational black (and white) that the Western aristocracy preferred to use to color their clothing and their lives and the riot of color introduced in the process of the invasion into their society of all things Oriental (p. 155).

Beyond the notion that there is a specific color that is sacred (whatever color it might be considered to be), a relationship with color emerges from the colonial experience. For the Europeans, who were both intrigued and repelled by the “magic, the strange gods, and the colorful rites of colored people,” color was an “indulgence” that brought the sacred into focus,

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<sup>7</sup> Leiris’ life’s work, which came in the five decades to follow, could be considered largely to be an account of his relationship to the sacred (a search for its color), founded upon the opening that his early lecture and essay “The Sacred in Everyday Life” provided.

<sup>8</sup> Gauguin could be said to have thought of all of this first. “In his new effort to re-join with the sacred, Gauguin relied upon the power of color” (Huyghe, 1977, p. 129).

yet kept it out of reach, “like the altar, fenced off by the danger it exudes” (Taussig, 2009, p. 174).<sup>9</sup> One might take all of this to another level and see the world of colors that became available in the colonial experience, this rainbow of colors, as a bridge to the sacred.

Taussig (2009) enjoins his readers: “*Look!! Look at color! Become aware!* Is what I’m saying” (p. 243). Color intensifies the human experience. The intensity of that experience is manifest in the relationship between humans and what is sacred. But what clearly comes into view in this relationship is the play of color. The intrigue of color (as opposed to the black and white of the Western aristocracy, and the clergy, those darkly clad Protestants hell bent on ruling the world) lay in the way color was, as Agamben might say, crucial to profaning the sacred, and, as he might continue, the way those people in the West who had allowed themselves to be subject to the apparatus of the sacred began to put into common use terms that were otherwise left up to the high priests of the sacred to say. In their tense and dangerous relationship with color, there was at least a chance to “look at color” and “become aware.”

To be fair, we might cast our nets more widely than Leiris and Taussig, and consider what others have regarded the color of the sacred to be. Not only anthropologists, poets, philosophers, and physicists, but also religions, societies, and perhaps even the gods themselves want to weigh in.

**Gold.** The color gold appeared often in depictions of the saints’ sacred haloes and in the chalices and other artefacts of Christian ritual, but its value above all else as a source of wealth has evoked humans’ baser instincts of greed. How much toil and treasure have been expended on the way to finding the pot of gold or the streets of the New World paved with gold?

**Amaranth.** Kassia St. Clair (2016) explains that the Aztecs considered the amaranth plant to be sacred and included drops of blood from human sacrifices in recipes for the amaranth-colored cakes that they broke into pieces and ate as part of their rituals. This sacred color of the Aztecs did not sit well with their Spanish conquerors, for whom the similarly colored blood of Christ was the same color as their own (p. 131).

**Hematite.** The ancient Egyptians, and frequently others who lived even earlier during the Upper Paleolithic Era, used hematite to add color to their burial ceremonies. Hematite was as red as skilled artisans were able to go with their methods of extracting pigments until brighter shades were developed (St. Clair, 2016, p. 160), and until the ancient Egyptians faded

<sup>9</sup> Taussig also considers color in the work (and experience) of William Burroughs, Marcel Proust, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf. The sum of these is Taussig’s (2009) call to “be aware differently” (p. 205).

into history, taking their gods and their sacred color with them.

**Tyrian.** St. Clair (2016) says that an early shade of purple, Tyrian, “helped to establish the link with the divine” (p. 159), and was eventually reserved only for use in the robes worn by the emperors of Rome.

**Blue.** Until the late Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary was depicted as wearing dark clothes, as part of her mourning for the loss of her son. But starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, she was shown wearing bright blue. The specific shade of blue she wore was ultramarine, “the most coveted, bar none” (St. Clair, 2016, p. 180) of all the colors. Its raw material was available primarily from one remote place on earth, a tiny corner of Afghanistan that contained the bright blue stone, lapis lazuli. Perhaps the sacred can be equated with something hard to obtain, something rare, something valuable, and unattainable by most of us mere humans. The Egyptians also thought highly of blue, using it for the hair and skin of their main god, Amun-Ra. The Hindu gods Krishna, Shiva, and Rama have similarly blue countenances. Perhaps there’s a connection between the blue gods of peace and the United Nations peace-keeping forces: “Blues have [helped] people to express matters of the spirit... [A]t the end of the Second World War, the UN...chose for their symbol a map of the world cupped by a pair of olive branches on a slightly greyish cerulean ground” (p. 204).

**Green.** In another example of a color suggesting sacredness, the green color of a garden paradise was the color of choice for Islam. Muhammad’s white robes contrasted nicely indeed. Not un-coincidentally, green soon became associated with the devil, who appears with green skin in much Western art (St. Clair, 2016, p. 213). Goblins and dragons and the cloak of Judas were all green (Pastoureau, 2014). (Perhaps this contributes to an explanation for the green tint to Elphaba’s 1939 skin.) And green was considered bad luck in stage costumes, from Shakespeare’s time through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (St. Clair, 2016, p. 213).

**Black.** The gods of the underworld in many societies have been shown as being dark or wearing dark clothing. Among the ancient gods who either wear black or who have black skin are Nyx, the ancient Greek goddess of night; Yama, the Hindu god of death; the Egyptian god of the dead, Anubis; Nott, the Germanic night goddess; and Kali, Hindu again, and a representative of Time the Avenger. Hollywood’s most mysterious characters are often noir. And yet black is also the color associated with the sacred scribe: The process of making black ink and then affixing it to paper in the form of “wisdom and prayer...was seen as a spiritual process in itself” (St. Clair, 2016, p. 273).

**White.** As a child I remember seeing a white Buffalo, kin to Melville's whale. The Christian Holy Spirit, especially when it is a dove, is white. The heavens themselves are billowy white clouds.

In all of this, the color of the sacred remains elusive, not merely because the evidence is pretty clear that there are, and have always been, many sacred colors, but also because the same color can be differently sacred. Spike Bucklow (2016) offers the example of red. "In the Christian tradition, seraphim – the top of the angelic hierarchy, closest to God – have been depicted as red. At the same time, furthest from God, the Devil, demons and the mouth of hell were also usually shown as red" (p. 209). Red can also be the fire of Pentecost or the fires of Hell (Pastoureau, 2017).

### **The Color of the Interdisciplinary: The Rainbow**

The best answer to the question "What color is the interdisciplinary" is... the rainbow. It is also the best answer to the earlier question, "What color is the sacred?" inasmuch as it is emblematic of the sum of human effort to approach the sacred, as a bridge not only to the divine (Lee & Fraser, 2001), but also to the poetic and scientific. It serves a similar function in our relationship with the interdisciplinary. Its best quality is that it cannot be taken seriously in either case. We are playing here! As a response to both questions, the rainbow is an instance of Agamben's profanation.

And now it is time for our turn to Walter Benjamin, whose overall intellectual project connects experience, art, and politics. His concerns were with the politics of experience in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and inasmuch as images (e.g. art, photographs) were examples of technologies that organized experience, it was important to him to understand their limitations. It is with the very first element of his critique of Kant, his chief rival in this undertaking, that I see a way to link the sacred and the interdisciplinary, and it is what Benjamin does with color in particular that gives us a means of forging that link.

Howard Caygill (1998) summarizes Benjamin's critique of Kant:

For Kant experience consisted in the union of the acroamatic "word" of the categories with the axiomatic "images" of intuition by means of the schema which were a "third thing," both image and word. In the early essay on painting, Benjamin pursues two directions of argument: the first aligns inscription and mark with the spatial and temporal forms of intuition, the second dissolves the forms of intuition into a continuous medium, figured in terms

of colour. Both arguments, however, still face the problem of uniting the forms or medium of intuition with the word. The sense of Benjamin's solution is to propose composition as an equivalent function to the schema in uniting the word and intuition. It permits the translation of both objects of intuition (content) and abstract patterns (form) into the medium of painting. (p. 88)

The key here is the role of color, which is essential to one's ability to speak (the word) without being ruled by Kantian intuition (itself giving pride of place to form). In short, Benjamin liberates color, whose unfixed value "gains its meaning from surrounding colours, which because they are infinitely nuanced, make the value of a given colour infinitely variable" (Caygill, 1998, p. 13).<sup>10</sup>

It is the same with the interdisciplinary. If we are working with a particular discipline, or more specifically with a particular concept of a discipline (which, like color, is not fixed<sup>11</sup>), it gains its meaning from surrounding concepts, which are also infinitely nuanced, and make that concept infinitely variable.

Taussig and Benjamin meet on the field of play when the ethnographer is found to be perceptive in a way that mirrors the perception of the child. Taussig himself notes this. The achievement of Taussig's ethnographer, Malinowski, was to immerse himself in both color and the landscape. This immersion was, as Taussig (2009) notes, the precursor to participant observation. As Taussig explains Malinowski's experience, "[C]olor was the flux by which he achieved this [immersion], same as what Walter Benjamin suggested was a function of color in children's books, taking them into the image – for what is fieldwork but another childhood?" (p. 96). Taussig's account of the experience of color – of sailing through color – is quite literal: the ethnographer, in a boat, skimming along on the green of the ocean below, with the bright blue of the sky above, all shimmering, which transports the ethnographer into an experience altogether different from the black and white life of one of Goethe's civilized Europeans. To the ethnographer, everything is enchanted, "as if mythology itself is cascading into color" (p. 100). And, of course, the immersion in color is accompanied by words, not only those used in the stories told by Malinowski's native subjects, but also those used by the readers back home and around the world who might have

<sup>10</sup> Leonardo da Vinci understood this. As Watson (2016) notes, da Vinci, in his *Treatise on Painting*, explains that "[t]o highlight certain colors... juxtapose them, for 'every color is more discernible when opposed by its contrast than by one like itself.' As an example, Leonardo cited the rainbow" (p. 69).

<sup>11</sup> Think, for example, of Mieke Bal's (2002) "travelling concepts."

a chance to read about the experience.<sup>12</sup>

We arrive, finally, at the rainbow, which is where Walter Benjamin begins his critique of experience, with his (unusual for him) short *play*, entitled “The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasy.” For Benjamin, color and the rainbow are clearly sacred, witness what the characters in Benjamin’s dialogue (“Margarethe” and “Georg”) have to say:<sup>13</sup>

*Margarethe*: It is early in the morning, I was afraid to disturb you. And yet I could not wait. I want to tell you a dream before it fades away.

*Georg*: How delighted I am... Now tell.

*Margarethe*: ...It was entirely simple... it glowed in colors; I have never seen such colors. Even painters know nothing of them.

*Georg*: They were the colors of fantasy, Margarethe.

*Margarethe*: The colors of fantasy, so it was. The landscape shimmered in them. Every mountain, every tree, leaves: they had infinitely many colors in them...

*Georg*: I know these images of fantasy. I believe they stand within me when I paint...I’d almost say, I am color... But the painter’s colors are relative as opposed to the absolute color of fantasy... [C]olor remains the purest expression of the essence of fantasy. For among human beings, creative capacity corresponds to color. Line is not purely received, because we can transform it by a movement in the mind, and tone is not absolute, because we have the gift of voice. They are not of the pure, the untouchable, the appealing beauty of color...

*Margarethe* ...I now see clearly that both children and artists live in the world of color. That fantasy is the medium in which they receive and create... But look, it’s stopped raining. A rainbow.

*Georg*: The rainbow. Look at it; it is only color, nothing in it is form. And it is the emblem [*Sinnbild*] of the canon, as it divinely arises from fantasy...

*Margarethe*: ...I am thinking of children’s colors. How, in

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<sup>12</sup> Taussig is quick to add that such sailing occurs when we read of these experiences. This is consistent with Benjamin’s need to be able to articulate the experience of color.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin says as much elsewhere in his own words: “Color is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual” (cited in Fenves, 2011, p. 64). Fenves explains that this means that “its ‘sense’ is not a matter of sensation. The same goes for the child, whose ‘unbroken fantasy-activity’ as opposed to a ‘faculty’ or ‘power’ of imagination, which must be activated – ‘constantly’ grants it access to the pure phenomenon of motliness” (p. 65).

childhood, it is everywhere received in a pure manner as the expression of fantasy... Do you know how, in...[children's picture] books, everywhere contours were blurred in a rainbow-like play of colors, how heaven and earth were stroked in India ink with invisible colors! How colors, as if with wings, always hovered over things, they really colored and swallowed. Think of the many games of children that point toward the pure intuition of fantasy! Soap bubbles, tea games, the damp colorfulness of the magic lantern, India ink, decal pictures. Color was always as blurred as possible, dissolving, nuanced in an entirely monotonous manner, without transitions of light and shadow... The perception of children is itself dispersed in color. They do not deduce. Their fantasy is untouched...

*Georg*: ...And all these things about which you speak are only various sides of the same color of fantasy... It is the color of nature, of mountains, trees, rivers, and valleys – but above all of flowers and butterflies, of the sea and the clouds. The clouds of fantasy are so near because of color. And the rainbow to me is the purest appearance of this color that thoroughly spiritualizes and animates nature... Finally, religion places its holy kingdom in the clouds and its blessed region in paradise. And for his altarpiece Matthias Grünewald painted the haloes of angels in the color of the rainbow, so that the soul shines through the holy figures as fantasy... (as cited in Fenves, 2011, pp. 247-52)<sup>14</sup>

The rainbow is, indeed, sacred. It appears over and over again in art in every age. It has become universally regarded as an emblem of the human desire to join with the sacred: the bridge to the divine. As Goethe put it in *Faust*,

I watch the water-fall, with heart elate  
 The cataract pouring, in spate.  
 The thunderous water seethes in fleecy spume,  
 Lifted on high in many a flying plume,  
 Above the spray-drenched air. And then how splendid  
 To see the rainbow rising from this rage.  
 Now clear, now dimmed, in cool sweet vapor blended.  
 So strive the figures on our mortal stage.  
 This ponder well, the mystery closer seeing;  
 In mirrored hues we have our life and being. (as cited in Gage,

<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin, "Der Regebogon: Gespräch über die Phantasie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, *Nacträge*, S. 19-26. Trans., P. Fenves. Main: Suhrkamp, 1989.

1993, p. 112)<sup>15</sup>

I see Benjamin's encounter with his own (very real) world – despite his observations of the decay of values, loss of history, and physical and moral devastation inflicted by Modernity – as being one of optimism. His intellectual struggles against the unfolding horrors of the 20th century should give consolation and perhaps inspiration to all of us today who are witness to seemingly unceasing troubles. Caygill (1998) highlights Benjamin's uplifted spirit, reminding us that Benjamin's goal of the reorganization of experience appears

in the nuances of riotous color. The “multiple fragments assembled under a new law” remain fragments of color, but to use one of Benjamin's preferred metaphors, they together generate the image of a mosaic... Benjamin's speculative philosophy at its strongest moments does not seek truth in completeness, but in the neglected detail and the small nuance. The speculative power of the excluded is episodic and unpredictable, and it is this frangibility, as of a rainbow, which makes it an occasion for hope, which is, after all, even if not for him and not for us, only another way of saying “future.” (p. 152)

Perhaps this is why, for as long as humans have been able to see the world around them and remark as to its wonder they have held the rainbow in such high esteem. It is an occasion for hope, as is any undertaking that is of “the interdisciplinary.”

## Conclusion

The color of the interdisciplinary is... the rainbow. Unlike white light itself, which integrates all the colors in a Newtonian sleight of hand, the rainbow maintains the separate identities of the various possible colors that the interdisciplinary could be. The rainbow is an emblem of *both* clarity and mystery in that all the colors are visible separately, and yet their relationship with one another remains available for further discussion. The rainbow preserves the dialogue, the conversation, the argument, or even the conflict that must proceed in any human encounter. To unite the colors in bright, illuminating, all-encompassing (integrated) white could end the conversation, and produce a monologue.

Benjamin moved quickly on from the topic of color after his early pieces on color and the rainbow, but the traces of his wonderment, like the memory of a rainbow, remain, and we are left with an entirely appropriate and

<sup>15</sup> Goethe's *Faust* II, “Anmutige Gegend.” Trans., P. Wayne.

plausible answer to our question: “What color is the interdisciplinary?”

My comments should be taken as a suggestion to approach the disciplines, and the world they purport to represent and address, as if we were artists, and we had in hand the most diverse palette available – or better, as if we were children whose keen perception was enabling of an imagination far more powerful than anything we grownups could come up with. My suggestions should also be seen as profanations that put into common use that of the sacred (the interdisciplinary) that would otherwise remain unsayable. Whether our work as *artists of the interdisciplinary* is of only average quality, or deserves to hang in the Louvre, depends upon our willingness to take up the challenge and be aware of the way we apply color to what might otherwise be a drab disciplinary world.

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