

Please cite the Published Version

Edensor, Tim  (2025) Book review: Organizing Color: Towards a Chromatics of the Social. cultural geographies. ISSN 1474-4740

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740251345827>

Publisher: SAGE Publications

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/640260/>

Usage rights:  In Copyright

Additional Information: Book review of "Organizing Color: Towards a Chromatics of the Social" by Timon Beyes, ISBN: 9781503638303.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Organizing Color: Towards a Chromatics of the Social. By Timon Beyes . Redwood City, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 292 pp. £75.83. ISBN: 9781503638303

Recently, cultural geographers have attended to how gradients, textures, surfaces, sounds, sights, smells and other diverse affordances distinguish places and landscapes. Non-representational thinking has rekindled a focus on how such qualities trigger emotional, affective and sensory responses. Yet surprisingly, geographers have rarely considered colour, even though all spatial realms are characterized by characteristic ceaselessly changing hues. Colour is deliberately deployed in designing environments, subsequently becoming part of the distribution of the sensible. In the west, this has been manifest in a persistent chromophobia that excludes bright colours because of their mooted association with the primitive, the feminine and the queer. A moment's reflection discloses that colours are deployed to broadcast meaning across space. Crude attributions of colour reinforce racial distinctions and spatial divisions. Colourful sporting, political and subcultural affiliations are worn on bodies or brandished as flags, while recognisable colours distinguish commercial brands and street signs. Yet geographers have perpetrated the impression that we inhabit a monotone world.

In *Organizing Color*, sociologist Timon Beyes compellingly argues that scientists, corporations, industrialists and advertisers classify, delineate and peddle colours as discrete commodifiable entities, creating hierarchies, organising perception and meaning. Impressively researched, conceptually rich themes focus on the various ways in which colour is made exchangeable, standardised and manageable. Early chapters focus on Goethe's experiments with how colours change during cooking, industrialist Robert Owen's attempt to regulate mechanised working practices through colour, and the exploitative production of indigo dyes in colonial India. Subsequently, a discussion of the classification, production and marketing of colours in 1920s Germany is followed by the expansion of corporate synthetic colour production as luridly depicted in Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Later chapters explore the complex political deployment of red in filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*, an American art exhibition staged in a black ghetto that challenged reductive racist colour associations, German artist Gerhard Richter's use of computer technology to produce multicoloured stained glass windows, and Hito Steyerl's artistic engagement with Theodor Adorno's decision to paint the walls of his lecture theatre in an unrelenting shade of grey.

Beyes' overarching critical message is that whenever individuals, groups and powerful interests seek to organise colour, their dreams are invariably thwarted by colour's volatility, mutability and instability. Hues, tones and shades - in domestic interiors or rural landscapes - continuously change over diurnal, seasonal and millennial time scales. Colour's effects also shift according to their changing relations with other surrounding colours, ongoing changes in light, and propensities to gradually fade. Drawing attention to this dynamic unfixity aligns with cultural geography's recent focus on the vitality of spaces, people and things, and shifts in fashions, political trends and cultural values. Further contributing to this instability, our perceptions are conditioned by our distinctively human optical system, itself

uneven, that profoundly diverges from the extraordinary range of visual abilities possessed by non-humans.

While *Organizing Color* adopts a primarily sociological perspective, the book triggers numerous questions about how cultural geographers might more profitably explore how colour shapes the production and experience of space: What distinctive colours characterize particular places and landscapes? How do practices that deploy colour to advertise commodities and promote place colonise space? How does intensified branding shape the colours that we wear and decorate with? How might the introduction of unusual colours reconfigure normative aesthetics and perceptions? How might the potential for creatively using a wider range of colours to create more variegated environments be advanced?