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CHROMATIC “ZERO SIGNS” IN THE SOVIET URBAN COLOUR DESIGN

ХРОМАТИЧЕСКИЕ «НУЛЕВЫЕ ЗНАКИ» В ГОРОДСКОЙ КОЛОРИСТИКЕ СОВЕТСКОГО ВРЕМЕНИ

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Abstract. The research object is the tradition of chromatic colours displacement from the urban environment. The main goal of the study is to analyse the role, that chromatic “zero signs” played in the environment of Soviet cities and towns, and to reveal their semantics. The findings and key principles of semiotics are used as the main theoretical and methodological research tool. Urban coloristics is seen as a language based on a system of interrelated oppositions, and the non-use of color in urban space is discussed in the context of the role of “zero signs” in sign systems outside the natural language. The author provides an analysis of the history of the development of urban colouristics and, on this basis, justifies the idea of importance for studying and understanding of “zero” colour as a semiotics object the “reflexive symmetry” principle and the usage of an ethnolinguistic strategic line of the analysis as well as a social and cultural one.

The paper reveals the unique additional shades of meaning that the non-use of colour in urban coloristics acquired due to a special socio-cultural situation of the Soviet period. The social structure of Soviet urban society and its change under the influence of urbanization and rural migration are analyzed. We consider the value system of urban residents and analyze its relationship with the social division of urban space. The mechanisms supporting chromophobia in Soviet society are described. The specifics of Soviet urban spaces are discussed in comparison with the cities of the rest of Europe. Based on the analysis of architectural features of constructivism, neoclassicism, and Stalin empire style, different forms of “zero signs” in the space of Soviet cities and towns are identified and characterized.

Аннотация. Объектом исследования является традиция вытеснения хроматических цветов из городской колористики. Цель работы заключается в анализе функций, которые хроматические нулевые знаки выполняли в пространстве советских городов, и выявлении их семантики. В качестве главного теоретического и методологического инструмента исследования используются основные положения, разработанные семиотикой. Городская колористика рассматривается как язык, основанный на системе взаимосвязанных противопоставлений, а неиспользование цвета в городском пространстве обсуждается в контексте роли нулевых знаков в знаковых системах за пределами естественного языка. На основе анализа истории развития городской колористики обосновывается идея, что для изучения и понимания нулевого цвета как семиотического объекта, особый интерес приобретает принцип «рефлексивной симметрии» и использование, наряду с социокультурной, этнолингвистической стратегической линии анализа.

Рассматриваются уникальные дополнительные оттенки значения, которые отказ от использования цвета в городской колористике советского времени приобрел в силу особой социокультурной ситуации. Анализируется социальная структура советского городского общества и ее изменение под влиянием урбанизации и сельской миграции. Рассматривается система ценностей городских жителей и анализируется ее связь с социальным делением городского пространства. Описываются механизмы, поддерживающие хромофобию в советском обществе. Обсуждается специфика советских городских пространств по сравнению с городами остальной части Европы. На основе анализа архитектурных особенностей конструктивизма, неоклассицизма, сталинского ампира выявляются и характеризуются разные формы нулевых знаков в пространстве советских городов.

Keywords: colour, city, urban coloristis, colour design, sign, “zero” sign, Soviet period.

Ключевые слова: цвет, город, городская колористика, городской дизайн, знак, нулевой знак, советское время.

Chromatic colours displacement from urban environment has a long tradition. According to Batchelor [1, p. 29], “the discrimination against colour” starting from the Ancient World was frequently exercised in urban culture (in technics, morality, racial, sexual or social aspects) and often became an object of research (see, e.g.: [2–4]). From time to time there were some strong convictions about colour in urban environment. Colour was at times losing the famous Renaissance debate *disegno versus colore*, with its classic example in the opposition between E. Delacroix and J.-A.-D. Ingres, and with the origin in Venice and Florence schools of painting. Similar colour “negation” in urban objects occurred again many times and in different variants.

This idea was especially clear in some particular styles with the ideological basis on an incorrect image of “white Ancient World”. Starting with Italian Renaissance (XV–XVI centuries), English and French Baroque (XVII century) negated the usage of colour in decoration of exterior façades. Later, in the late XVIII century a tradition of building colouration was completely lost, Classicism took the Ancient World as an example (later architecture of German Renaissance, Gothic, Romanesque buildings was also not coloured). Such an idea became the basis for an architectural movement called “Romantic Historicism” or “Later Romanesque”, which was especially strong in Germany and Austria from the 1850s onwards, in connection with the rise of the bourgeoisie during and after the Industrial Revolution. Though, according to R. Wagner–Rieger [5, p. 99], its main feature was “colourity”, the main construction material was non-coloured brick, the usage of which provoked the opening of several brick factories in Europe (in contrast to England, brick was not used in Germany and Austria till that time). The marked period of polychromy ended in the second half of the XIX century with the expansion of Neo–Renaissance and Neo–Baroque tendencies in architecture.

Fifty years later colour was found inessential, subdued and dependent in the architecture of Soviet cities. Colour spaces of Constructivism, formed by shades of concrete, glass, brick, metal constructions, materialism of Neoclassicism, Stalinist Architecture with carnelian pink shade suggestive of skin, thus taken as colourless — represented in Soviet urban environment different forms of “zero” signs.

However, in all the mentioned cases colour spaces were only “reflexively symmetrical”. M. A. Rozov defines “reflexively symmetrical” acts as those with different understanding of results: “Supposing that while taking some actions we consider result “A” as a primary one and result “B” as a secondary one. A change in the reflexive position consists in an interchange between “A” and

“B”. That means “B” becomes the main result of all the actions and “A” becomes a secondary unit. It’s obvious that the nature of our actions remains the same, i.e. invariant” [6, p. 157–192].

The difference (and reflexive symmetry) lies in special additional shades of meaning, which are attached to the negation of colour in every particular case.

To reveal the psychological mechanisms, the sociological, cultural and philosophical reasons of the principle of “reflexive symmetry” that it is used to organize the colour space of towns, urban spaces of the Soviet cities will be considered, where color negation acquired unique additional shades of meaning due to a specific social and cultural situation.

With the establishment of the Soviet power the urbanization process in Russia became the most important meaning of social modernization. A shift from agrarian to industrial economy was rapid. A kind of “urban revolution” led to a tenfold increase in city population and it radically changed the whole pattern of population settlement. Waves of rural migration, especially large in the 1930th and then in the 1950–1970th simply “flooded” Russian cities. According to the first Russian general population census in 1897 urban population was less than 10 million, i.e. accounted for only the seventh part of the population within the modern borders (within the borders of the Russian Empire — over 20 million), by the end of the 1930th years urban residents accounted for one third of the population of the country, in 1957 — for a half [7, p. 102–104].

Rural migration completely changed social and demographic structure of urban population: the nobility and old merchants were destroyed; lower–middle class and qualified, hereditary working class disappeared. Peasants who left their native places replaced the main social groups, which had made the basis of a pre-revolutionary city. The process of “krestyanization” (predominance of rural migrants over native urban residents) of the city increased in huge scales and had far–reaching consequences.

Rapid growth and concentration of urban population after 1917 considerably went ahead of adaptation processes of former villagers to an urban way of life, their assimilation to the city culture and a new system of values. New citizens preserved traditional country (communal) attitudes, peculiar world perception and unique mentality, which later laid basis for the social behaviour of a new and very specific member of society — “the Soviet person”. Such a “simple” person who “wasn’t trained at universities” was considered as a standard of pure kindness and morality. Affected by a gradual real decrease in the amount of people with secondary and higher education occupied at the Soviet and party work, deputies of party commissions deliberately underestimated the level of their education. No wonder that at this time a sign space was established among such concepts as “hardness”, “force”, “unity”.

As a result, there were no such concepts as “social inequality”, “social hierarchy”, “social domination” in sociological models of the Soviet society. The social structure of this time was represented by all means as single–level, non-hierarchical. Officially it included two equal “friendly” classes (the working class and the class of collective farm peasantry), and also the so called black–coated proletariat, representatives of which were considered not as a class, but “a social stratum of brainworkers”. According to the point of view of official Soviet science, there was no privileged ruling class in social structure of the society of this time, and the mentioned classes were considered rather as professional strata.

In fact, the social structure of the Soviet society was much more stratified. There were considerable distinctions between social groups both from the point of view of power, and prestige. On the basis of political power the main distinction existed between the party nomenclature and the rest of the population. From the point of view of social prestige, the highest class of intellectuals namely outstanding scientists, writers, cultural figures together with the best representatives of working class formed a separate privileged group.

Naturally, such social structure couldn't but influence the social division of city space. The party nomenclature and the highest class of intellectuals occupied the former quarters of rich aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie. The working class, as well as before the revolution, concentrated in the suburbs.

At the same time, the existing marked imbalance of social and cultural opportunities between a small privileged class of political elite, party and government officials and the rest of the population in the Soviet society was deliberately concealed. The specific role of the nomenclature together with the exceptional privileges, and even the existence of nomenclature as such were disguised, in contrast to the ruling nobility in old Russia. Really designated social inequality was masked and hidden.

In colouring of the Soviet cities such orientation on an illusion of classless society was realized by means of chromatic "zero signs". All cities started being filled with the identical colour symbols hiding really existing social distinctions.

A very important point in understanding of colouring of the Soviet cities was that the spaces formed by chromatic "zero signs" stretched, overcame isolation of the centre and filled all the city space. Thus, a unique form of chromophobia developed — fear of colour, which D. Batchelor compared to a fear of drugs and a panic, connected with it in modern society [1, p. 31–35] is not the first to identify colour and drugs, and only develops ideas of Plato who thought that artists only pound paints and mix drugs, Aristotle who called colour a drug — *pharmakon*, R. Barthes who considered colour as a special type of pleasure, A. Huxley who described the change in colour perception of a person after a dose narcotic substance called mescaline, P. Cézanne, Ch. Baudelaire, E. Delacroix, and other creative personalities of Modern age who connected perception and understanding of colour with drug intoxication).

Chromophobia in the Soviet society was supported by means of a scheduled start and a unique state driving mechanism. The establishment of comprehensive ideological and political control of the state over the population or, at least, an aspiration to establish such control inevitably led to the fact that art began to be regulated by special cultural institutes — academies, schools, art criticism which limited any demonstration of social instability chaos in urban environment. In order to establish a new proletarian culture in the fall of 1917 at Narkompros (People's commissariat for education) was created the Proletkult (Proletarian culture) — a cultural–educational and literary–art organization of proletarian amateur performance which had more than two hundred local organizations in various fields of art. Large art associations: AHRR (The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia founded in 1922) with youth section OMAHRR (The Youth Community of Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), VOPRA (The All-Union Association of Proletarian Architects founded in 1929), ARU (The Association of Urban Architects which existed in Moscow in 1928–1931), ASNOVA (The Association of New Architects operating in the 1923–1930th years), OSA (The Association of Modern Architects founded in 1924) — were supported by the authorities as carriers of art to masses both in form and content. All these organizations and associations helped to subdue city colouring to political and ideological orientations of the Soviet state and communist party. Architects eagerly worked on creation of the visual environment which would fit new socialist standards. A rather accurate idealized image was created which needed to be realized within long years and which was aimed at transforming the whole concept of architecture. The colour system of the cities became an object of deliberate planning influence, and each decision had to express and support a certain ideological view.

Constructivism and Stalin Empire style perfectly fitted for disguising real "declassification" of society and the transformation of its structure in two-dimensional, vertical, consisting of those who ruled and those who were ruled, and creating a feeling of participation of ordinary citizens in

high culture and high moral ideals which now, in this new, socially fair classless society, became available for everybody.

The aesthetics of constructivism was based upon the ideas of democracy and general equality. On the other hand, the style perfectly realized the idea of internationalism and creation of new supranational culture. In fact, Constructivists reduced architecture to engineering art. They were guided by a Socratic identification of beauty and practicability. Extreme simplicity, functionality, art minimalism and asceticism of architectural forms became new aesthetic ideals. An important ideological dominant of new colour spaces was the admiration of seemingly unlimited opportunities of machinery in the 20th century, which obtained a kind of romantic colouring at the beginning of industrialization.

According to these principles, colour (more precisely, its absence) became one of the important means capable to unite a set of historically developed local societies leading their own life. A new creative orientation negated the use of bright paint as an instrument which was not connected with the internal essence of things therefore constructivism buildings had no decoration and colouring. The main construction materials — steel, glass and armored concrete — metaphorically embodied poetics of the scientific and technical progress and the idea of opposition between architectural and organic forms. Natural light shades and the structure of these materials were considered beautiful in themselves.

Colour images obtained such features as dimensions and exaggeration. Newly organized city spaces had to soothe and motivate. They fulfilled a function of demonstration of force and power of a new social order or institute. As ballet tights of a gymnast emphasize the bends of his strong muscles (such an interesting parallel between colouring of architecture and a sporty body is drawn by M. Arrarte–Grau [8], classifying the ways of colouring which developed in city space), natural, neutral colour put in the front the volume and texture of an architectural material while any other colour would distract the viewer from his perception of space.

A change of cultural model outlined itself in the Soviet culture in the 1930s [9, p. 233–237]. According to the decree of the government “About the type of a residential house” dated July 14, 1932 each house had to have its own unique shape. The main goal of architecture was to create smart ensembles, which had to gradually fill the whole urban space, forming a harmonious image of the prospering and dynamically developing socialist society. And that, in turn, demanded the development of rather stereotyped and clear for ordinary citizens town planning principles using the language of classic architecture legacy as a symbol of unity between the Soviet architecture and traditions of world culture.

All architectural objects of this time symbolically reflected ideas of the epoch and had sign additions to a greater or lesser degree. Metaphoricalness and an emblem connotation of a building could be expressed directly in its form. In this case its volume and space structure completely submitted to a drawing or an inscription. Thus, the symbolical form often was obvious only on the drawing and wasn't noticed by a passer-by or a viewer. Further the tendency of architectural form submission to the symbolic figurativeness was transformed into usage of ornaments and laid on signs emblems. Emblems, coats of arms, lighting chains, figures of people being sculptural additions played a significant role in creation of a graphic structure of architectural objects.

Despite a change of the architectural style, chromatic “zero signs” still remained a widespread means of symbolism in architectural constructions of this period of time. As a rule, buildings were painted in the natural colours imitating durable construction materials. A special pinkish shade of the painted walls was added to a city palette and quickly gained popularity. V. Paperny [10] explains the domination of the flesh–pink colouring in a pre-war city by the fact that a human being becomes a measure of all things. Architecture had to be guided by the tectonics of a cheerful, healthy, well-built person. Such anthropomorphous representation of architecture led to an

unconscious imitation of human skin (and therefore this colour too was perceived as a “zero sign”) and reached its heyday in the early fifties when almost all houses were fronted with flesh–pink ceramic tiles. Walls of courtyards as befit, were without “skin”, and i.e. had no colouring.

Thus, designed at an ordinary person and possessing similar features with other European cities, the Soviet urban spaces, at the same time, due to a number of essential characteristics presented a direct opposition to the other part of Europe. While European cities of this time were more and more filled with colour, here the urban environment gradually became achromatic and was formed by generally natural material shades. Colour remained in city space, but it was no longer understood as an important means of expression and turned into a “zero sign” of colour representation. A “zero sign” as befits, at the basis of the idea of matter submission and widening of material colour meaning lays the following opposition: material colours were opposed to all the others on the principle of presence or absence of colour in general, oppositions of colour and not — colour.

There were active urbanization processes, and in new cities appeared new social system features. When there was a new form of a social order, the social system of society was completely reconstructed; age-old traditions and unknown innovations were to get adjusted to each other, achromatic colour spaces “attacked” the Soviet cities as some kind of straitjacket.

Chromatic “zero signs” in the Soviet urban space had two evident shades of meaning.

On the one hand, an opposition between colour absence and its existence embodied the opposition of naturalness and illusiveness which is a cornerstone of much deeper dichotomy — the real–life and what is seeming, opposition of essence and phenomenon. On that basis, colour was provided with the whole range of negative values, such as variability, inconstancy, emotionality and even ability to cause illusions and to mislead. Colour was understood as a deception, as a means which doesn’t render the truth but on the contrary, mostly distorts it in a greater or lesser degree. In time of a social strain in the country it was considered to be a frivolous entertainment, a thoughtless game for which society simply shouldn’t have any time.

As a result, one tried not only to avoid using colour. One was afraid to use it realizing that, according to a fair remark of D. Batchelor [1, p. 55], colour can’t be neutral, it has “power to dream, to think or speak”, it isn’t quite and patient, it is “a very dangerous cosmetic”.

Connecting itself with the ideas of depth and surface, essence and phenomenon, basis and superstructure which are almost always transferred to moral distinction of deep and superficial, colour was thought to be a “double delusion and double deception”: “If surface veils depth, if appearance masks essence, then make-up masks a mask, veils a veil, disguises a disguise. It isn’t simply a deception; it is a double deception. It is a surface on a surface, and thus even farther from substance than ‘true’ appearance. How things appear is one thing; how things appear to appear is another. Colour is a double illusion, double deception” [1, p. 54].

There was a cautious attitude towards bright colour, as if it was bright cosmetics which is capable to “make flesh more appealing, flesh that may be tired or old, or flesh that may be diseased, disfigured, decayed or even dead” [1, p. 52].

Color was considered not as addition, and more likely as “seducing” as “post factum was imposed on initial truth... as a false hair and blush with which paint dead men” [11, p. 26].

The same thought is well expressed by D. Batchelor: “... there are many ways to fall into colour, so there are many ways of applying the make-up of colour; cosmetics can be laid on thick or thin, with subtlety or with a spade. (...) If colour is cosmetic, it is added to the surface of things, and probably at the last moment. It doesn’t have a place within things; it is an afterthought; it can be rubbed off” [1, p. 51–52].

A semantic correlation between the notions “paint” and “hide” was clearly seen in a number of European languages. For example, in semantics of the English word “colour”: “The Latin

colorem is related to celare, to hide or conceal; in Middle English ‘to colour’ is to embellish or adorn, to disguise, to render specious or plausible, to misrepresent” [1, p. 52].

Or in the meaning “ukrashat” (decorate), there are derivatives from Common Slavic form of the Russian words “krasit” (paint), “krashu” (I paint), Ukrainian “krasiti” (you paint), Bulgarian “krasya” (I decorate), Serbo–Croatian “krasiti” (you paint), “krasim” (to do beautiful), Slovenian “krásiti”, Czech “krásit”, Polish “krasić” [12].

On the other hand, colour negation in Soviet urban space had one more expressed shade of meaning. The natural shades filling the entire city environment successfully rendered the idea of timelessness of events. The idea was connected with those colours first of all, because of their colour solidity about which wrote A. Ozenfant [13] and which was historically distributed between colorants not equally. The term colour solidity was borrowed from psychology of visual perception defines a psychological ability to perceive colour of a subject as constant, despite a change in spectral structure of light falling on it, and not to notice the changes which are really happening with the colour of the object.

From the psychological point of view of psychology, the colour solidity perception has a noticeable impact on that we perceive environment as something stable. A similar function was carried out by natural colours in urban space where the colour solidity was strongly connected with the quantity and the type of the applied pigments. While material natural colour wasn’t subject to changes was stable, strong and reliable, the surfaces covered with bright paint lost the qualities in the course of time, thus destroying a general impression of a construction.

The lifetime of natural shades allowed an urban colour space “to keep the advantage, inspired feeling of safety and security which usually connect with long-term, steady qualities”, — writes And. Ozenfant [13, p. 243]. On the contrary, intuitive psychology of the residents forced them to treat bright but fragile surfaces (because of use of unstable dyes) with caution and mistrust.

Natural colours were appreciated here not only because of themselves but also as signs of succession and connection with the past. In this case a natural colour carried out a function of the indicator of stability because it was associated with internal values. A solid, not changing and not consistent in time, rational material colour of such ordered spaces rendered the idea of regularity, practicability and justice of social changes and was considered as a clear metaphor of power, as expression of its might and the guarantor of stability and justice.

The natural colour formed an illusion of rationally organized and well-operated life on a society scale, which was actively developing and quite successful. In general, colour retracted giving way to the form because the first was considered to be attractive but still fragile and unreliable means, which didn’t suit for the expression of important social ideas, for rhetoric and speaking.

In general, despite quite an obvious external similarity, the chromatic “zero signs” in urban space “are read” differently, obtaining some unique shades of meaning which can be opposite to the original ones just because of a different social and cultural situation. In the Soviet cities, e. g., the semantic field was structured by the ideas of naturalness and timelessness.

In order to understand, how similar are the chromatic “zero signs” which at first sight seem to be identical, it is necessary to reconstruct the purpose which is the cornerstone of their creation, “to polarize” them. In this regard, for studying and understanding of “zero” colour as a semiotics object, it is necessary to pay much attention to the “reflexive symmetry” principle and the usage of an ethnolinguistic strategic line of the analysis as well as a social and cultural one.

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