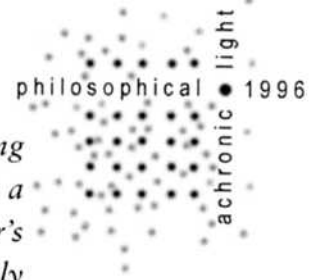


Structures of Atmosphere

Jean Baudrillard



In his examination of the role colour plays in creating atmosphere, sociologist and theorist Jean Baudrillard exposes a cultural inheritance linking material, form and space. Colour's proclivity towards embellishment is revealed to affect bodily function and yet, within the modern interior environment, it is abstract. Baudrillard points to interior furnishing, inclusive of colour, as a cultural system of signs that is reliant upon the contrast of 'hot and cold' and the interplay between objects and the humans that live among them. As such, the interior is understood outside of its historical frame as an applied, disjunctive and randomly accumulative space of inhabitation.

The term 'interior design' sums up the organizational aspect of the domestic environment, but it does not cover the entire system of the modern living space, which is based on a counterpoint between DESIGN and ATMOSPHERE. In the discourse of advertising the technical need for design is always accompanied by the cultural need for atmosphere. The two structure a single practice; they are two aspects of a single *functional* system. And both mobilize the values of play and of calculation – calculation of function in the case of design, calculation of materials, forms and space in the case of atmosphere.¹

Atmospheric Values: Colour

Traditional Colour

In the traditional system colours have psychological and moral overtones. A person will 'like' a particular colour, or have 'their' colour. Colour may be dictated by an event, a ceremony, or a social role; alternatively, it may be the characteristic of a particular material – wood, leather, canvas or paper. Above all it remains circumscribed by form; it does not seek contact with other colours, and it is not a free value. Tradition confines colours to its own parochial meanings and draws the strictest of boundary-lines about them. Even in the freer ceremonial of fashion, colours generally derive their significance from outside themselves: they are simply metaphors for fixed cultural meanings. At the most impoverished level, the symbolism of colours gets lost in mere psychological

resonance: red is passionate and aggressive, blue a sign of calm, yellow optimistic, and so on; and by this point the language of colours is little different from the languages of flowers, dreams or the signs of the Zodiac.

The traditional treatment of colour negates colour as such, rejects it as a complete value. Indeed, the bourgeois interior reduces it for the most part to discreet 'tints' and 'shades'. Grey, mauve, garnet, beige – all the shades assigned to velours, woollens and satins, to the profusion of fabrics, curtains, carpets and hangings, as also to heavier materials and 'period' forms, imply a moral refusal of both colour and space. But especially of colour, which is deemed too spectacular, and a threat to inwardness. The world of colours is opposed to the world of values, and the 'chic' invariably implies the elimination of appearances in favour of being:² black, white, grey – whatever registers zero on the colour scale – is correspondingly paradigmatic of dignity, repression, and moral standing.

'Natural' Colour

Colours would not celebrate their release from this anathema until very late. It would be generations before cars and typewriters came in anything but black, and even longer before refrigerators and washbasins broke with their universal whiteness. It was painting that liberated colour, but it still took a very long time for the effects to register in everyday life. The advent of bright red armchairs, sky-blue settees, black tables, multicoloured kitchens, living-rooms in two or three different tones, contrasting inside walls, blue or pink facades (not to mention mauve and black underwear) suggests a liberation stemming from the overthrow of a global order. This liberation, moreover, was contemporary with that of the functional object (with the introduction of synthetic materials, which were polymorphous, and of non-traditional objects, which were polyfunctional). The transition, however, did not go smoothly. Colour that loudly announced itself as such soon began to be perceived as over-aggressive, and before long it was excluded from model forms, whether in clothing or in furnishing, in favour of a somewhat relieved return to discreet tones. There is a kind of obscenity of colour which modernity, after exalting it briefly as it did the explosion of form, seems to end up apprehending in much the same way as it apprehends pure functionality: labour should not be discernible anywhere – neither should instinct be allowed to show its face. The dropping of sharp contrasts and the return to 'natural' colours as opposed to the violence of 'affected' colours reflects this compromise solution at the level of model objects. At the level of serially produced objects, by contrast, bright colour is always apprehended as a sign of emancipation – in fact it often compensates for the absence of more fundamental qualities (particularly a lack of space). The discrimination here is obvious: associated with primary values, with functional objects and synthetic materials, bright, 'vulgar' colours always tend to predominate in the serial interior. They thus partake of the same anonymity as the functional object: having once represented something approaching a liberation, both have now become signs that are merely traps, raising the banner of freedom but delivering none to direct experience.

Furthermore – and this is their paradox – such straightforward and ‘natural’ colours turn out to be neither. They turn out to be nothing but an impossible echo of the state of nature, which explains why they are so aggressive, why they are so naïve – and why they so very quickly take refuge in an order which, for all that it is no longer the old moral order with its complete rejection of colour, is nevertheless a puritanical order of compromise with nature. This is the order, or reign, of pastels. Clothing, cars, showers, household appliances, plastic surfaces – nowhere here, it seems, is the ‘honest’ colour that painting once liberated as a living force now to be found. Instead we encounter only the *pastels*, which aspire to be living colours but are in fact merely signs for them, complete with a dash of moralism. (... p 33)

Hot and Cold

So far as colours are concerned, ‘atmosphere’ depends upon a calculated balance between hot and cold tones. This is a fundamental distinction which – along with a few others (components/seats,³ design/atmosphere) – helps to endow the discursive system of furnishing with a high degree of coherence, and thus makes it into a determining category of the overall system of objects. (We shall see that this coherence is perhaps merely that of a manifest discourse beneath which a latent discourse is continually deploying its contradictions.) To get back to the warmth of warm tones: this is clearly not a warmth grounded in confidence, intimacy or affection, nor an organic warmth emanating from colours or substances. Warmth of that kind once had its own density and required no opposing cold tones to define it negatively. Nowadays, on the other hand, both warm and cold tones are required to interact, in each ensemble, with structure and form. When we read that ‘The warmth of its materials lends intimacy to this well-designed bureau,’ or when we are told of ‘doors of matte oiled Brazilian rosewood traversed by chrome-plated handles [and] chairs covered in a buff leatherette that blends them perfectly into this austere and warm ensemble,’ we find that warmth is always contrasted with rigour, organization, structure, or something of the sort, and that every ‘value’ is defined by this contrast between two poles. ‘Functional’ warmth is thus a warmth that no longer issues forth from a warm substance, nor from a harmonious juxtaposition of particular objects, but instead arises from the systematic oscillation or abstract synchrony of a perpetual ‘warm-and-cold’ which in reality continually defers any real ‘warm’ feeling. This is a purely signified warmth – hence one which, by definition, is never realized: a warmth characterized, precisely, by the absence of any source.

Atmospheric Values: Materials

Natural Wood/Cultural Wood

The same sort of analysis applies to materials – to wood, for example, so sought after today for nostalgic reasons. Wood draws its substance from the earth, it lives and breathes and ‘labours.’ It has its latent warmth; it does not merely reflect, like glass, but

burns from within. Time is embedded in its very fibres, which makes it the perfect container, because every content is something we want to rescue from time. Wood has its own odour, it ages, it even has parasites, and so on. In short, it is a material that has being. Think of the notion of 'solid oak' – a living idea for each of us, evoking as it does the succession of generations, massive furniture and ancestral family homes. The question we must ask, however, is whether this 'warmth' of wood (or likewise the 'warmth' of freestone, natural leather, unbleached linen, beaten copper, or any of the elements of the material and maternal dream that now feeds a high-priced nostalgia) still has any meaning.

By now functional substitutes for virtually all organic and natural materials have been found in the shape of plastic and polymorphous substances: wool, cotton, silk and linen are thus all susceptible of replacement by nylon and its countless variants, while wood, stone and metal are giving way to concrete and polystyrene.⁴ There can be no question of rejecting this tendency and simply dreaming of the ideal warm and human substance of the objects of former times. The distinction between natural and synthetic substances, just like that between traditional colours and bright colours, is strictly a value judgement. Objectively, substances are simply what they are: there is no such thing as a true or a false, a natural or an artificial substance. How could concrete be somehow less 'authentic' than stone? We apprehend old synthetic materials such as paper as altogether natural – indeed, glass is one of the richest substances we can conceive of. In the end, the inherited nobility of a given material can exist only for a cultural ideology analogous to that of the aristocratic myth itself in the social world – and even that cultural prejudice is vulnerable to the passage of time.

The point is to understand, apart from the vast horizons opened up on the practical level by these new substances, just how they have changed the 'meaning' of the materials we use.

Just as the shift to shades (warm, cold or intermediate) means that colours are stripped of their moral and symbolic status in favour of an abstract quality which makes their systematization and interplay possible, so likewise the manufacture of synthetics means that materials lose their symbolic naturalness and become polymorphous, so achieving a higher degree of abstractness which makes possible a universal play of associations among materials, and hence too a transcendence of the formal antithesis between natural and artificial materials. There is thus no longer any difference 'in nature' between a Thermoglass partition and a wooden one, between rough concrete and leather: whether they embody 'warm' or 'cold' values, they all now have exactly the same status as component materials. These materials, though disparate in themselves, are nevertheless homogeneous as cultural signs, and thus susceptible of organization into a coherent system. Their abstractness makes it possible to combine them at will.⁵

The Logic of Atmosphere

This 'discourse of atmosphere' concerning colours, substance, volume, space, and so on mobilizes all these elements simultaneously in a great systematic reorganization: it is because furniture now comprises movable elements in a decentralized space, and because it has a correspondingly lighter structure based on assembly and veneers, that there is a case for more 'abstract' woods – teak, mahogany, rosewood or certain Scandinavian woods.⁶ And it so happens that the colours of these woods are not traditional either, but lighter or darker variations, often varnished, lacquered, or left deliberately unfinished; the main point, though, is that the colour in question, like the wood itself, is always *abstract* – an object of mental manipulation along with everything else. The entire modern environment is thus transposed onto the level of a sign system, namely ATMOSPHERE, which is no longer produced by the way any particular element is handled, nor by the beauty or ugliness of that element. That used to be true for the inconsistent and subjective system of tastes and colours, of *de gustibus non est disputandum*, but under the present system the success of the whole occurs in the context of the constraints of abstraction and association.

Whether or not you care for teak, for example, you are obliged to acknowledge that its use is consistent with the organization of component elements, that its shade is consistent with a plane surface, hence also with a particular 'rhythm' of space, etc, etc – and that this is indeed the law of the system. There is nothing at all – not antiques, not rustic furniture in solid wood, not even precious or craft objects – that cannot be incorporated into the interactions of the system, thus attesting to the boundless possibilities of such abstract integration. The current proliferation of such objects does not constitute a contradiction in the system:⁷ they enter the system precisely as the most 'modern' materials and colours, and as atmospheric elements. Only a traditional and fundamentally naïve view would find inconsistency in the encounter, on a teak-veneered chest, of a futuristic cube in raw metal and the rotten wood of a sixteenth-century carving. The point is, though, that *the consistency here is not the natural consistency of a unified taste but the consistency of a cultural system of signs*. Not even a 'Provençal' room, not even an authentic Louis XVI drawing-room, can attest to anything beyond a vain nostalgic desire to escape from the modern cultural system: both are just as far removed from the 'style' they ape as any formica-topped table or any black-metal and leatherette tubular chair. An exposed ceiling beam is every bit as abstract as a chrome-plated tube or an Emauglas partition. What nostalgia paints as an authentic whole object is still nothing but a combining variant, as is indeed signalled by the language used in speaking of provincial or period 'ensembles.' The word 'ensemble,' closely related to 'atmosphere,' serves to reintroduce any conceivable element, whatever subjective associations it may carry, into the logic of the system. That this system is affected by ideological connotations and latent motives is indisputable, and we shall return to this question later. But it is incontestable, too, that its logic, which is that of a combination of

signs, is irreversible and limitless. No object can escape this logic, just as no product can escape the formal logic of the commodity. (... p 41)

Notes

- 1 To the extent that arrangement involves dealing with space, it too may be considered a component of atmosphere.
- 2 'Loud' colours are meant to strike the eye. If you wear a red suit, you are more than naked – you become a pure object with no inward reality. The fact that women's tailored suits tend to be in bright colours is a reflection of the social status of women as objects.
- 3 See below, pp 44 ff. [Editors' note: This reference is to Baudrillard's discussion of 'seats' which appears later in the text.]
- 4 This development at least partially realizes the substantialist myth which, beginning in the sixteenth century, informed the stucco and the worldly demiurgy of the baroque style: the notion that the whole world could be cast from a single ready-made material. This substantialist myth is one aspect of the functionalist myth that I discuss elsewhere, and the equivalent on the material plane of automatism on the functional one. The idea is that a 'machine of machines' would replace all human gestures and institute a synthetic universe. It should be borne in mind, however, that the 'substantialist' dream is the most primitive and repressive aspect of the myth as a whole, for it continues to enshrine a pre-mechanist alchemy of transubstantiation.
- 5 And this is the difference, for instance, between the 'solid oak' of old and the present-day use of teak. Teak is not fundamentally distinct from oak in respect of origin, exoticism or cost; it is its use in the creation of atmosphere which means that it is no longer a primary natural material, dense and warm, but, rather, *a mere cultural sign of such warmth*, and by virtue of that fact reinstated qua sign, like so many other 'noble' materials, in the system of the modern interior: no longer wood-as-material but wood-as-component. And now, instead of the quality of presence, it has atmospheric value.
- 6 Certainly these woods are technically better suited than oak to the needs of veneering and assembling. It must also be said that exoticism plays the same role here as the idea of holidays does in the use of bright colours: it evokes the myth of an escape via 'naturalness'. The essential point, however, is that for all these reasons these woods are 'secondary' woods, embodying a cultural abstraction that enables them to partake of the logic of the system.
- 7 It does indicate a *shortcoming* of the system – but a successfully integrated one. On this point, see the discussion of antiques below. [Editors' note: This reference is to Baudrillard's discussion of 'antiques', which appears later in the text.]

Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans James Benedict, Verso (London), 1996.
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