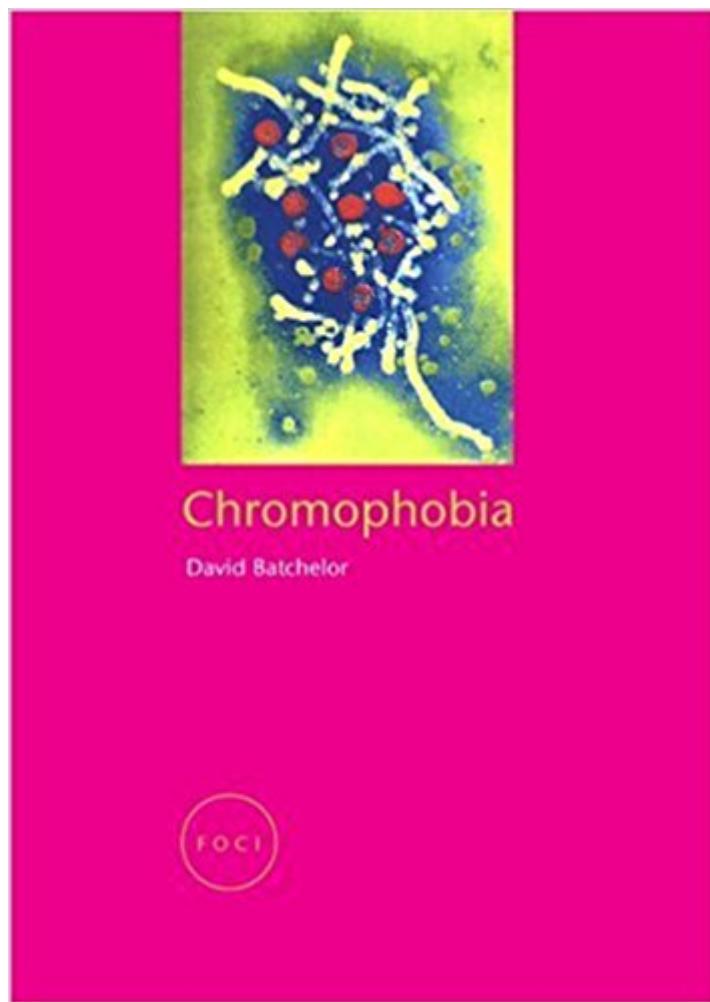


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# Chromophobia (Focus On Contemporary Issues)



## **Synopsis**

The central argument of Chromophobia is that a chromophobic impulse - a fear of corruption or contamination through color - lurks within much Western cultural and intellectual thought. This is apparent in the many and varied attempts to purge color, either by making it the property of some "foreign body" - the oriental, the feminine, the infantile, the vulgar, or the pathological - or by relegating it to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential, or the cosmetic. Chromophobia has been a cultural phenomenon since ancient Greek times; this book is concerned with forms of resistance to it. Writers have tended to look no further than the end of the nineteenth century. David Batchelor seeks to go beyond the limits of earlier studies, analyzing the motivations behind chromophobia and considering the work of writers and artists who have been prepared to look at color as a positive value. Exploring a wide range of imagery including Melville's "great white whale", Huxley's reflections on mescaline, and Le Corbusier's "journey to the East", Batchelor also discusses the use of color in Pop, Minimal, and more recent art.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"A thorough and witty cultural history of color." (Karen Rosenberg New York Times 2008-03-04)"A provocative contribution to the discourse of color theory." (James Meyer Artforum)"Full of good writing, good anecdotes, devastating quotes, deft arguments, and just the sort of mysterious anomalies one would expect from an artist writing about the enemies of his practice." (Dave Hickey

Bookforum)"This beautifully produced book is an intelligent and provocative essay on why Western culture hates and fears colour. The prose is cumulative and passionate in its effect and widely referential—from Barthes to Melville, Wim Wenders to Huysmans. . . . You cannot fail to be stimulated by his thoughts" (RA (Royal Academy Magazine))"Batchelor has found an irresistible selection of anecdotes and quotes relating to the experience of color. . . . A Thoughtful and entertaining." (Tema Celeste)"A hugely entertaining guide to our ongoing obsession with white." (Time Out London)"Switching from novels and movies to art and architecture, Batchelor clearly and cleverly traces the cultural implications of the 100 year-plus Colour War between Chromophobes like Le Corbusier, with their hosannas to whiteness, and Chromophiliacs like Warhol, the great artist of cosmetics. A succinct book of art theory which goes down smoothly." (iD Magazine)"A theoretical and cultural banquet. . . . The book's narrative quality goes beyond the telling of color theory's history and other approaches to color, coming to read like a psychological thriller: how the West crushed color—or at least thought it did so." (New Art Examiner)

David Batchelor is Senior Tutor in Critical Theory at the Royal College of Art, London. He is also the author of *Minimalism* (1997).

Just like a blank canvas, Batchelor begins his story about color with a chapter devoted to the meaning of white. He shows the nature of white's psychological significance by examining its role in important literary works, like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. "For Melville, as for Conrad, there is an instability in the apparent uniformity of white. Behind virtue lurks terror; beneath purity, annihilation or death." (16) This whiteness sets the scene for his eruptive argument for color being the object of "extreme prejudice in Western culture," due to the "fear of corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable." (22)

In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor discusses a phenomenon many of us are unaware exists--the fear of color. He claims it is prevalent in Western societies. Basically, the color white stands for "good" and all other colors encroach on "goodness," threatening a fall into "evil" and "immorality." Color has been the object of our prejudice despite us being oblivious to our own impartiality. This could be due to the fact that ancient philosophies and texts, from which we still derive many of our core beliefs, seemingly reveal apprehension of color. Batchelor points to evidence of this in both the Bible and the writings of Aristotle. Ever since the 1960s, the boundaries of art and design have been continuously challenged with intruding "corruption" through color in different forms and from

previously scorned sources such as paint from industrial paint cans. After reading this book, it is up to us to decide if we will continue running away from color. Batchelor contextualizes the history of chromophobia--fear of contamination through color--using his exhaustive knowledge of art theory, criticism and pop culture. He opens our eyes to the reality of "bright" color prejudice (after all, white is a color). The book begins in a "white room" environment, placing the reader into a bare-bones home of a modern collector filled with things but empty of color. "All the walls, ceilings, floors and fittings were white, all the furniture was black and all the works of art were grey" (11). This room represents the isolation from color that most of the Western world accepts; it is as if Batchelor believes us to be trapped by our own doing in a colorless bubble. Readers must keep this framework in the back of their mind as they learn about color marginalization through time and its classification as disorderly, shallow, hazardous and negligible. Chromophobia poses real life situations as allegories for the greater messages intended by the book, thus a familiar face is placed onto the abstract concepts of color. We can all relate when things go array in our lives. With the stigma against drug use, we understand the consequences of tampering with such things. Batchelor compares a fall into color with a similar plunge one takes while under the effects of drugs. They are both "sensuous, intoxicating, unstable, impermanent..." (31). Moreover, he helps us comprehend the cosmetic artificiality of color with the real life example of make-up. Like cosmetic materials, color has been viewed by many as an artificial imposition upon a monochromatic world (51). "It is an afterthought; it can be rubbed off" (52). The author explains early on that we purge color by relegating it to the negative categories of "foreign" and "unimportant" (22-23). Batchelor attempts to convince us of this with flowery illustrations. He may be deemed successful whether or not you are privy to his references. Many will take to the movies he mentions i.e. *Apocalypse Now*, *Pleasantville*, *Wizard of Oz* etc. But, how many of us have attempted close readings of texts by Adolf Huxley? The number cannot be numerous. Consequently, the average reader is excluded from finding significance from this text. Chromophobia is intended for enthusiasts of art theory and academics. All others should be weary. Either that or be prepared to slog through paragraphs while needing to reread again and again to pull out the main ideas. On a positive note, Batchelor teases us with information that demands more inquiry--a characteristic of a "good" book. In his examples, he sometimes touches on art historical topics of interest to many of his readers. Cezanne's color theory is one instance. Batchelor mentions a quote from the artist in chapter 2 as he explains the metaphor for the "descent" into color as equal to the decline into drug use. Here is a segment: "...Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter into the dim tangled root of things, and rise again from them in colours..." (34). This begs for a further study involving the link between Cezanne, drugs and

color. In essence, Batchelor provides art historians and critics with themes from which to catapult their own research.

Color--as David Batchelor's *Chromophobia* would argue--is an entity perpetually perceived as messy by Western society. Whether it is loved or reviled, color is thought to engage the mind on a level that is somehow primal, feminine, Oriental, other. From the dawn of classical philosophy, it has been positioned as a force of chaos. Classicists, prizing learned logic and perfection above all else, have claimed that color must be tamed, if not eradicated, by the ideal rationality of line--and, particularly in the contemporary era, by line's all-erasing hatchet-man, whiteness. Even those who embrace color do so because of its otherness and opposition to the colorless confines of rationality. Color, for those Batchelor calls "chromophiles," retains all the qualities that chromophobes despise. Color is subversive, hallucinogenic, and vulgar; embracing it is a means of taking a stand against the sterile rationality of line and whiteness, which eliminate all signs of humanity in their rush to transcend it. Color, in the Western imagination, cannot help but be active, perpetually struggling to escape from between the lines. Whether because of its own innate traits (if it has any) or because of what it opposes, color cannot help but make a mess. Much of *Chromophobia* does maintain a solid grasp on its thesis: Batchelor exhaustively catalogs examples of the treatment of color and whiteness in popular culture, literature, and philosophy as well as art, and he builds solid cases for the association of color with the feminine, exotic, and primitive in the Western imagination. His discussion of the opposition between line and color as an analog to male attempts to dominate femininity--complete with citations of artists and philosophers making this very assertion with full pride in both their chromophobia and their misogyny--is especially damning, and it lends a particular strength to the book's role as a manifesto against whiteness. But, it stands to reason, a book about color has to be messy as well. Some aspects of Batchelor's thesis are very clear and well-supported, but the book veers off-course somewhat in "Hanunoo," the fourth of the five chapters. Batchelor is clearly trying to follow the thread of the idea of color as both Oriental and primitive, but his discussions of multicultural perspectives on color--while offering interesting insights on the relationship between color and language, touching on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis without naming it--never successfully ties into the thesis of the earlier chapters. He seems to hint at the idea of language as another means by which rationality, line, and whiteness try to suppress color by containing it, but the case for any active contention between language and color (as opposed to mere neurolinguistic incompatibility) is never really made. That Batchelor later seems to disagree with previous theorists who decried all things literary as enemies of color (e.g. Clement Greenberg)

further destabilizes this theory. The book begins to find its voice again in the final chapter, positing that the industrialization and commoditization of color seems designed to destroy the otherness that gave color its appeal to would-be subversive chromophiles. But at the end of the day, Chromophobia seems to grow outside its initial thesis and become unsure of what it wants to be about. It wanders away from documenting the fear and suppression of color and becomes curious about color in general. In other words, it colors outside the lines it drew for itself in its early chapters--which, though this might cause the structure of the book to unravel somewhat in its later pages, can at least to be said to be making a principled stand.

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