

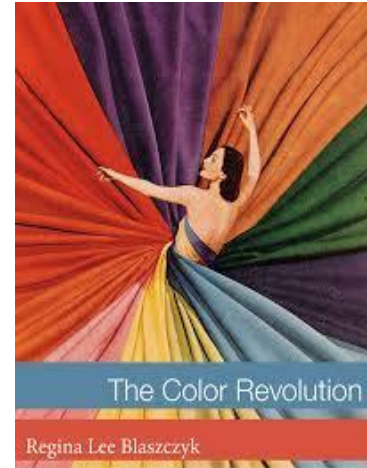
Regina Lee Blaszczyk, **The Color Revolution**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 380 pp., \$24.91 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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We glance through the horoscope section in newspapers or answer that Facebook quiz about which color defines us based on the date we were born. Would we not then want to be able to understand and interpret the role that color plays in our lives? Regina Lee Blaszczyk's **The Color Revolution** helps us to accomplish exactly that. Color plays a significant role in human existence, acting as the connector between our visual and cognitive thought processes. In Saussure's terms, color can be both the signifier (image) as well as the signified (translate image to a behavior). Color forms a part of our everyday encoding/decoding processes. "Orange is the new black" resonates with the majority of the population. Think about the pink ribbon signifying Breast Cancer Awareness campaigns or the red ribbon representing HIV/AIDS health campaigns. Color essentially allows us to form a link between a particular shade and a string of qualifiers/codes such that the particular shade of color elicits an emotional or psychological reaction every time we interact with it. As an emerging mass communications scholar with an interest in social networks and human interactions, as well as in the interaction between human agency and corporate structures, I found *The Color Revolution* to be an excellent resource for further studies.



The author takes readers through the conception of color as a powerful marketing and communications tool that boosts the economy and also heightens human interaction with each other and with the social environment itself. The book emphasizes the historical use of color as a tool for empowerment, especially for women in a predominantly patriarchal society. Each chapter of the book highlights a part of this revolution—from France, to Europe, to the United States, and other parts of the globe.

The book has 11 chapters. Chapter 1, *Mauve Mania*, focuses on the use of color as a marketing tool. In chapter 2, *Anarchy*, the author writes on the war of color which occurred in the late 19th century and the emerging concept of color management as a means to standardize color as used in industries around the globe. Chapter 3, *Naturalism*, takes readers through the post-World War I period and the role color played in that era. Chapter 4, *Hide and Seek*, relates to the use of color patterns in camouflaging. Color was a tool used predominantly by the military and the fashion and auto industries. In chapter 5, *True Blue*, Blaszczyk changes pace and examines color appeal and consumer culture. In chapter 6, *Entente*, she closes in on consumer culture, paying particular attention to the psychological stimulation of color in relation to gender. Chapter 7, *L'ensemble Americain*, focuses on color standardization. Chapter 8, *Rainbow Cities*, delves into the interplay between color and light, and specifically on using them to

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complement each other. Chapter 9, *Mood Conditioning*, is about color as a tool "to improve safety and comfort in hospitals, factories, offices, and schools" (p. 215). Chapter 10, *Sunshine Yellow*, relates to the use of heterogeneous vibrant colors to improve sales. The last chapter, *Think Pink!*, follows the media's role in the color revolution from the 1850s through the 1900s to our modern society.

Throughout her book, Blaszczyk illustrates ideas related to the dynamics behind the "color of the season" tag that fashion industries use to get consumers to buy into seasonal color trends. The book helps explain—with vivid imagery—the concepts behind why we buy into pink this year, mauve the next, baby blue for Fall occasions or radiant yellow for Spring events. One theme that runs through the book is the subtle (and often not so subtle) power that color holds in connection to consumer culture.

In part, the power of "the color revolution grew out of American industry's drive for efficiency in design, production, and distribution" (p. 5), which directly links to marketing and consumerism. The color revolution was, in a way, the beginning of incorporating color into all aspects of life including schools, corporations, factories, military, and fashion. During the American Great Depression in the 1930s (which was offset in 1929 after the stock market crash), the film industry in particular employed the use of vibrant colors in their movie advertisements to arouse excitement among the general populace, and also to boost sales. Color became more apparent in its association with human cognitive processes and industries banked on this, setting off a still-existent trend. In fact, "color was seen as a tool for tapping into human emotions and improving daily life. *Fortune* (magazine) gave this phenomenon a name: "the color revolution" (p. 1) This revolution was not just an American experience as "the spirit of the industrial corporation inspired colorists around the world" (p. 187), including the British and Australian textile industries, under the TCCA (Textile Color Card Association). The TCCA encouraged standardization, so that color terms like "True Blue for cars or Alice Blue for silk dresses" (p. 163) meant the same thing all over the world.

Among the themes elaborated by Blaszczyk, a high point is her discussion of the use of color as a status signifier (in chapter 6: *Entente*). The suggestive power of color enables its association with human emotions and behavior on a subconscious level. This association was mostly apparent in the 1900s, when event invitations were sent out in rich color shades that only the affluent could afford. Today, however, color allows for the categorization of the socially constructed gender—where males identify with blue and females identify with pink or purple—something feminists and other scholars challenge, especially as color functions to construct gender codes in children. The automobile and fashion industries also lean heavily on this suggestive concept to appeal to their target audience, making "aesthetics a powerful money-making proposition" (p. 138). The author explains:

The age of color, the auto age, the industrial age, the modern age, the urban age—these names have been used to describe the period that has been the focus of this book: the 1890s through the 1960s . . . the color revolution was thus uniquely American in its blend of Old World design thinking and the perpetual re-invention that was part and parcel of modernity. (p. 289)

Blaszczyk's book focuses therefore on "the color revolution in relation to design practice, the fashion system, and consumer culture" (p. 290). It describes the different stages of the color revolution, including the ultimate goal of the colorists to create a modern society (post 1890s) that is a significant improvement over the pre-1890 era.

The TCAA became one of the most powerful tools created by this revolution in terms of moving from a predominantly patriarchal society to one that embraces the efforts, contributions, and power of women. After hiring a woman to chair one of its fashion campaigns, the TCCA contributed to a pivotal moment in history that marked a turning point for a society that was rooted in patriarchal dominance to one that valued the presence and contribution of its female counterparts.

Additionally, the book illuminates the human ability to overlook the underlying factors that precede a phenomenon. Matching furniture, upholstery, appliances, or clothing of the same shade is often taken for granted. We can color-coordinate our weddings, or buy cars of the same color. However, the author draws attention to the fact that these sorts of comforts are direct benefits of this revolution.

For an almost 400-page book, *The Color Revolution* is not an easy read. It is strung together with many terms and abbreviations—and although a reference list for these is provided in the index, the sheer repetition of abbreviations leaves the reader flipping back and forth between the text and the abbreviation references. On the other hand, the inclusion of advertisements and illustrations captures the reader's attention. The author provides samples of advertisements throughout the book to visually explain her points. She also provides an extensive list of references, which would be beneficial for further studies on this subject.

Finally, our everyday association with color is mostly an ephemeral encounter. We rarely take the time to think about it. Why should we? We see and experience color during every waking second of our lives. However, while reading Blaszczyk's book, a reader cannot help but stop to acknowledge and appreciate our deep-seated psychological connection to something we so readily ignore. This book would be of immense benefit to any student, scholar or professional of communications, advertising, or marketing looking for a new resource to elaborate on consumer culture and advertising. It would also be useful for anyone with an interest in exploring the correlation between human behavior and the dynamics of color.