

## Response to Allison's Article

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It is my pleasure to respond to Brian Allison's article titled *Art, Colour, Culture, Language and Education* and to extend the dialogue on the topic. The central question Allison's article addresses is: When a person with aesthetic preparation in a particular national culture contemplates a work of art, can that experience be understood through a cross-cultural comparative, philological investigation of a shared concept?<sup>1</sup> To assist in his contemplation of this question, Allison discusses a comparative study that he and his colleague Iwata (1990) undertook to investigate *color* terms between (British) English and Japanese to better understand the problematics of cross-cultural understanding of art. The study does assist us in understanding the concept of color to a degree. However, Allison's Modernist perspective may be too linear, too narrow, to achieve a complex comprehension of this cultural phenomena.

Allison acknowledges that context is important, but he does not fully define or sufficiently explore the complexity of the processes through which concepts, such as color, become active and change within sociocultural groups. In his discussion he seems to conflate nation and culture. Perhaps what is needed is a Postmodernist perspective on this topic.<sup>2</sup> Any study of color concepts, even within one culture, must take into account the multiple meanings generated by personal, national, and global experience and historical process. No culture is monolithic. From an anthropological perspective, culture is not some esoteric entity that exists outside of the lived experiences of the people who participate in them. It is what people do everyday and what they value, influenced by history, heritage, and traditions of the social groups in which they participate. Even cultural experiences of national groups, such as those of Britain and Japan, which may appear homogenous through stereotypes to outside observers (e.g., American) have many social differences at the individual citizen's level such as: age, gender/sexual preference, ethnicity(ies), class (jobs, family(ies), education), health, religion(s), exceptionalities (physical and mental), geographic regionalism(s), place (urban, rural, suburban, nomad), politics, and language(s), all of which can effect one's perception of *color*.

The national cultural level, which is largely political, is generally fragmented into state/province, county, and local community levels where institutions, laws, and policies exist and change. This may influence meaning and use of color terms. In the United Kingdom, the Thin Red Line of the colonizing British army, and the red and white of the (civil) Wars of the Roses give national and regional meanings to the color *red*. In the United State of America, the Civil War is associated with the blue and gray and sports teams display their colors as do urban/suburban gangs. In Ireland, the colors green and orange symbolize the wearer's religious and political affiliation; whereas, in the United States, Reds and Communists are synonymous. The phrase *the color purple* spoken or perceived by an African American might call forth memories of Toni Morrison's story of social issues within a Black community.

whereas the phase *the Colour purple* might raise connotations concerning the dye produced by squids and sported in clothing worn by the *blue bloods* or noble class, in earlier days in Britain. A Japanese aesthete contemplating a vase, and the color of a vase, may not just see *green* or *jade* but a continuing tradition of glazes reflecting the qualities of the earth from which they are drawn and a continuing practice of pottery where not merely imitation but reproduction of the master's work is the highest artistic achievement. However, the *man/woman in the street* in Tokyo simply might see a green pot?

Global experiences, fueled by economics, also function to create shared, virtual, hegemonically constructed cultural experiences through mass media (television, radio, newspapers, telephones, faxes, etc.) and computer technology (E-mail, World Wide Web, etc.), which affects directly or indirectly most individuals on the planet. Global cultural image bombardments can create notions of fashion: next season's colors, closely guarded secrets in Paris, to be constructed by haute couture in New York, or produced in sweatshops in India. The fall colors may appear in Paris to JC Penneys via Bangladesh. The latest pop stars can also create global color demands in clothing, hair, body ornamentation, and the popularity of a particular skin tone.

A Postmodernist's perspective would suggest that there is no one simple way to understand *the truth* of, for example, the concept color or culture. From this perspective, it can be seen that any comparative study is an extremely complex endeavor. There is a need to consider the complexities of the formation of concepts within and across cultural experiences in which one participates, as artist or audience, at the personal/largely social, national/largely political, and global/largely economic levels.

## Notes

1. In pre-Modernist times, philology was a grand and deep science. Appealing to notions of a common root and deep structure of high (i.e., European) society, it called for a close study of words and their antecedents.
2. For a discussion of the differences between Modern and Postmodern theory see Efland, A., Freedman, K., & Stuhr, P. (1996). *Postmodern art education: An approach to curriculum*. Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.

## References

- Allison, B., & Iwata, Y. (1990). A cross-cultural study on colour in Japan and Britain. (Parts 1 and 2). *Journal of the Yamaguchi Jossi University, Japan*.
- Efland, A., Freedman, K., & Stuhr, P. (1996). *Postmodern art education: An approach to curriculum*. Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.