

A Subdued Palette: The Use of Colour and Illustrations to Access Memory in Life History Research.

Una Tenue Paleta: El Uso del Color y las Ilustraciones Para Acceder a Los Recuerdos en la Investigación de las Historias de Vida.

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Abstract

In this paper I describe an arts-informed visual methodology which I have developed to guide the structure for my doctoral dissertation and my life history study of Soviet Latvia.

Closely linked with emotion, beliefs and feeling, colour in many cultural settings is used to heal, to communicate, and to persuade. The colour wheel, which turns in a full circle, can also represent the full range of human endeavours and we can use colour to express how we feel, whether consciously or unconsciously. The world in which we live, and which we interpret for ourselves and for others, as well as the experiences that we accumulate as memories, all have colour as their essential property.

In my work the colours serve multiple purposes. They are used to retrieve autobiographical memories, which are then transcribed in words and illustrations; they inform my description of the cultural, societal and political world of Soviet Latvia; and finally, they guide the structure of the overall narrative itself. The text is illustrated with my own artwork, which serves to elicit obscure memories while illuminating emotions too complex to describe in words.

In a broader context, my research will provide insights into how artists under authoritarian regimes negotiate everyday life in a meaningful and creative fashion told through using arts-informed research methodology. My account is a valuable resource for educators who liaise with persons who lived or currently are living in oppressive circumstances and is contributing to the field of arts-informed research and adult education.

Keywords

Arts-informed research, colour, autobiographical memory, life-history research, Soviet Latvia.

Resumen Ampliado en Español

Este documento describe, ejemplifica y evalúa una metodología basada en el color que he desarrollado para acceder a recuerdos personales del pasado lejano.

En las investigaciones basadas en el arte, tanto el proceso de creación de una obra de arte como la obra misma fomentan un compromiso emocional y generan conocimiento. Además, cuando se combinan el color y la imagen, la obra de arte se convierte en algo mucho más evocativo y/o provocativo emocionalmente. Sin embargo, mientras que es sabido que se usa el color para evocar sentimientos, para controlar estados de ánimo, para comunicarse y para sanar a través de la arteterapia, el color, por su propia naturaleza, continúa eludiendo una definición estricta.

A efectos de mi trabajo, que se interesa con el uso del color para evocar y organizar recuerdos centrados en la familia, definiré “color” como un fenómeno visual que es creado e interpretado por la mente humana sin mediación del lenguaje, pero que en un contexto sociocultural puede ser usado como medio de comunicación para evocar fuertes asociaciones emocionales.

Personalmente, para mí los colores siempre jugaron un papel esencial en mi vida. Crecí en Riga, Letonia, rodeada por las pinturas de paisajes de mi abuelo y el trabajo de mi madre en el campo del diseño de vestuarios. Todo esto promovió en mí una aguda percepción y apreciación por el color. Años después, adquirí un conocimiento profundo de la teoría del color cuando enseñaba, a nivel de licenciatura, en Canadá. Como artista, me volví muy consciente de los poderes psicológicos, emocionales y simbólicos del color. Sin embargo, el reconocer que tiendo a despertar recuerdos de mis primeros años en la Letonia Soviética a través de las relaciones con los colores, fue un gran momento de autodescubrimiento. Ya fuera soñando, perdida en ensueños o completamente despierta, hallé que de vez en cuando surgían de manera espontánea en mi mente, fragmentos de recuerdos a colores. Si tenía mucha paciencia y actuaba con gran delicadeza, a su debido tiempo, podía llegar a revivir una experiencia ya olvidada mucho tiempo atrás. Para mí fue como si los recuerdos de los acontecimientos, la gente y las experiencias estuvieran suspendidos en campos de color traslúcidos. Si me concentraba en el fragmento de un recuerdo en particular, éste comenzaba a emerger del campo de color: al principio borroso y monocromático pero luego se agudizaba, volviéndose multicolor y animado.

Otras veces, encontraba un color ambiental que disparaba involuntariamente un recuerdo en retrospectiva. Un amarillo fluorescente vivo en el escaparate de un negocio de Toronto evocaba, por ejemplo, el recuerdo de mí misma calzando un par de zapatos amarillo brillante mientras caminaba por las calles de Riga. Este breve recuerdo epifánico comenzó una prolongada serie de recuerdos de la época en que yo era una estudiante allí.

Durante el período en el cual me encontraba organizando sistemáticamente las historias de vida de mi familia inmediata, también empecé a anotar mis recuerdos personales, prestando atención a los colores que los detonaban. A medida que ambas tareas comenzaron a convergir y luego a superponerse, me di cuenta de que el color podía, de hecho, servir como el principio organizador de mi propio trabajo en vías de desarrollo.

El campo de investigación que se ocupa de la recuperación de recuerdos y las memorias autobiográficas es muy extenso. Bastante menos investigación se ha dedicado a la forma en que el color puede ayudar en el proceso de la recuperación de recuerdos. Sin embargo, como elemento intrínseco de toda experiencia, parece razonable suponer que el color en sí puede facilitar la recuperación de recuerdos autobiográficos. El comprender la forma en la que se construyen los recuerdos autobiográficos y el papel que podrían tener los colores en la recuperación de dichos recuerdos puede, por lo tanto, ser de gran ayuda en la investigación sobre historias de vida informada por el arte.

Conway y Williams (2008) usan el término “*memoria autobiográfica*” para referirse a “nuestro recuerdo de episodios específicos, a la memoria episódica y al conocimiento conceptual, genérico y esquemático de nuestras vidas”. Los recuerdos autobiográficos, por lo tanto, pueden variar entre una categorización abstracta y conceptual hasta datos almacenados que son vívidos, específicos de un acontecimiento y próximos a la experiencia. Excepto por el caso de las estructuras abstractas que organizan períodos significativos a lo largo de la vida y los

acontecimientos más importantes, el almacenamiento de recuerdos autobiográficos es complejo y no lineal. Por ejemplo una historia de vida puede dividirse en periodos o bloques de tiempo secuenciales, centrados en la infancia, la educación y el trabajo, mientras que los recuerdos más episódicos que se encuentran dentro de estos bloques de tiempo pueden unirse entre sí de una forma partonómica en lugar de una estructura lineal o estrictamente cronológica.

Los períodos de vida encapsulan un período en la memoria y contienen representaciones de lugares, personas, actividades, sentimientos y objetivos comunes al período que representan. Los recuerdos de acontecimientos generales, por otra parte, son más específicos que los recuerdos de períodos de vida, pero no tan detallados y vívidos como los recuerdos episódicos. Los recuerdos de acontecimientos generales se refieren a una variedad de categorías del conocimiento tales como: “mi primer día de escuela” o “mi primer viaje a Moscú”. Algunos acontecimientos generales pueden actuar como puntos de referencia para otros, relacionados entre sí, formando así la base de mini-historias.

La memoria episódica proporciona un registro a corto plazo, específico y sumamente detallado de un momento presente. Los recuerdos de esta naturaleza pueden penetrar en el campo de la percepción sin control consciente, pero también pueden ser recuperados a través de técnicas introspectivas como las de C.G. Jung, pionero de estas técnicas.

Para poder ser retenida y almacenada a largo plazo, la memoria episódica tiene que estar integrada en la memoria autobiográfica. En el contexto de la autobiografía y la investigación de historia de vida, la memoria episódica proporciona las siguientes cualidades: es concreta, vívida y específica. De manera predominante, está representada a través de imágenes visuales, y la consciencia del recuerdo parece ser detonada o activada cuando un recuerdo episódico ingresa en la percepción consciente. En términos del modelo de Conway y Williams, se puede esperar que los recuerdos episódicos que son detonados de esta forma, despierten recuerdos de alto nivel de acontecimientos generales que ocurrieron dentro de determinados períodos de vida.

Desde la perspectiva de la actual teoría epistemológica, una estructura narrativa lineal que traza una sucesión de acontecimientos desde el pasado lejano al reciente es fundamentalmente incongruente con los modos de asociación a través de los cuales la memoria, el repositorio biológico del tiempo, procesa y almacena datos de manera efectiva. La investigación de mi propia historia de vida se centra en primer lugar en recuerdos episódicos ya recuperados que contienen un destacado componente de color. Sin embargo, divergiendo de estudios previos, también visualizo o contemplo intencionalmente una variedad de colores y matices para acceder a recuerdos episódicos que pueden permanecer aún sin recuperarse. En esta fase de mi investigación, que podría denominarse “ensueño guiado”, proyecto mentalmente los colores elegidos (junto con el blanco y el negro) para poder abrir caminos hacia el almacén de recuerdos pasados.

Desde un punto de vista subjetivo, al usar el ensueño guiado como una metodología de investigación es posible vincular mi propia paleta de colores idiosincrática con varios lugares, acontecimientos y objetos parte de mis experiencias durante la época soviética. Por otra parte, al emplear un lenguaje de colores para categorizar episodios del pasado, me es posible organizar los datos que surgen de las entrevistas grabadas y de las cartas familiares en una forma paralela a la manera en que la memoria realmente funciona. Ambas estrategias dan apoyo a una discusión

más general sobre el papel que jugaron los colores en la vida social y cultural de la Letonia Soviética.

Efectivamente, el ensueño guiado es un ejercicio en recuerdos aleatorios. Mientras que los resultados son prolíficos, también tienden a ser fortuitos en el sentido de que el estímulo de un único color puede evocar recuerdos de varios períodos diferentes de mi vida. Por este motivo, se necesita tiempo antes de que me sea posible convertir estas imágenes enredadas en arte.

Al principio es un gran desafío canalizar el flujo de la memoria de forma intencionada. Trato de concentrarme primero en los períodos de mi vida y luego, en una forma más bien lánguida, busco acontecimientos generales dentro de esos períodos. Rápidamente se vuelve obvio que la recuperación y estructuración cronológica de mis recuerdos autobiográficos no es la estrategia adecuada. En lugar de hacer eso, termino escribiendo y dibujando recuerdos tal y como aparecen, sin ningún orden en particular en mi mente consciente. Bosquejo en mi cuaderno y hojeo los álbumes de familia para acceder a recuerdos episódicos que fomentan la elaboración de mi historia. También observo y llevo un registro de mis sentimientos y de mis intuiciones a medida que estas crecen, tanto de manera visual como narrativa. De esta forma, mi diario artístico va de la mano con mi diario narrativo. En otras palabras, pinto algo que me impulsa a su vez a componer una narrativa. O escribo algo que me impulsa a pintar algo que parece estar vagamente relacionado con lo que acabo de escribir. Cuento historias, narrativas, y creo imágenes que le dan cuerpo a dichas narrativas. Y ambas acciones están interesadas en la articulación de experiencias. Esta sinergia entre el medio visual y escrito, me ayuda a desarrollar un argumento con un mayor sentido.

A través de diversos ejemplos ilustrados, demostraré en el texto completo como es qué opera este proceso. Además de proporcionar un breve panorama del papel del color en la recuperación de recuerdos autobiográficos, estos ejemplos ilustran la forma en que puede usarse el color como un principio organizador para describir el contexto familiar, las estrategias de afrontamiento y los canales creativos que me ayudaron a convertirme en una artista de espíritu libre en los años del ocaso de la ocupación soviética. Es evidente que una reminiscencia lleva, por asociación, a muchas otras, haciendo que sea realmente difícil imponer una coherencia al material en general. Además, los actos de recordar y escribir son apropiados para detonar espirales reflexivos, en los cuales un recuerdo recuperado engendra investigaciones de archivo, las cuales, a su manera, estimulan más recuerdos.

Es completamente natural que, después de narrar las experiencias de la resaca y del dar a luz, uno tenga el deseo de adquirir conocimientos sobre el alcoholismo y las prácticas ginecológicas en la Unión Soviética. Afortunadamente he tenido una experiencia muy limitada con partos en matices rojos, de modo que sin importar cuán extensa sea mi investigación, puede que solo haya una escasa retroalimentación en cuanto a la recuperación de recuerdos adicionales sobre esto.

Los episodios relatados en el texto completo se encuentran ordenados cronológicamente: comenzando por el más temprano de mis recuerdos infantiles y culminando con mi traumática experiencia de parto. Este es recurso narrativo convencional. Tomando en cuenta la investigación de Conway y Williams, no se pretende replicar la forma en que los recuerdos episódicos realmente se almacenan. Pero una “clasificación cromática” donde se secuencian los episodios mecánicamente, del rojo al índigo (o al revés), no sería menos arbitraria. Si mi trabajo fuera tan solo un ejercicio privado, preferiría darle forma a la memoria episódica a partir del

modelo de mi propia paleta de artista: más bien desarreglada, con sus pinceladas y sus remolinos de colores parcialmente mezclados. Sin embargo, una presentación así se aventuraría mucho más allá de la investigación de historia de vida y hacia el terreno de la poesía, donde reina la ambigüedad y el lector disfruta de una completa libertad para conjurar significados.

Uno puede diferenciar, por un lado, entre una sensibilidad hacia *la forma* y por otro, una apreciación por el *color*. El investigador puede ser dirigido hacia el pasado olvidado, enfatizando cualquiera de los aspectos del mundo visible. Sin embargo, los colores que se retienen en la memoria tienen una cualidad transcultural y además son relativamente fáciles de reproducir en papel, mientras que las formas recordadas (que pueden haber sido distorsionadas con el paso del tiempo) son sumamente difíciles de ilustrar con formas que resulten significativas para lectores que no estén familiarizados con el paisaje cultural de Letonia (como en este caso). Por lo tanto, al enfatizar el color como la dimensión clave de mi mundo personal, espero que el lector se sienta más identificado con las experiencias de mi vida diaria, con mi abrumador dolor, con mi inspiración artística y con el radiante aroma de mi primer amor. También para descubrirse en el curso de mi narrativa está el hecho de que la muerte en Letonia no es menos negra que en cualquier otro lugar.

Palabras Clave

Investigación artes informado, el color, la memoria autobiográfica, la investigación de historia de vida, la Letonia Soviética.

Introduction – Colour as a Means of Memory Retrieval

“Colour only exists if it is perceived, that is to say if it is not only seen by the eyes, but also, and most importantly, apprehended and decoded by the memory, one’s knowledge and one’s imagination” – Pastoreau (2012, p. 170)

In reflecting upon my early years in Soviet Latvia, I noticed that I tend to rekindle memories by means of colour associations. Whether dreaming, lost in reverie, or wide awake, I would find from time to time that vividly coloured memory fragments arose spontaneously in my mind, and in due course a long-forgotten experience would come to life again. It felt to me as if memories of events, people, and experiences were suspended in translucent fields of colour like a fetus in amniotic fluid. If I focused upon a particular memory fragment, it would begin emerging from the colour-field like a shape-shifting ghost, blurred and monochromatic at first, then sharpening and becoming multi-hued and animated.¹ For example, the experience of giving birth to my first child strongly associates with the colours red and white, with a distinct emphasis on red. Summoning up a certain deep, intense, red hue helped me recall my experience of lying helplessly on white sheets in violent pain while bleeding copiously. Eventually I sketched the experience from an observer’s point of view, applying a liberal wash of that remembered arterial red (Figure 1).

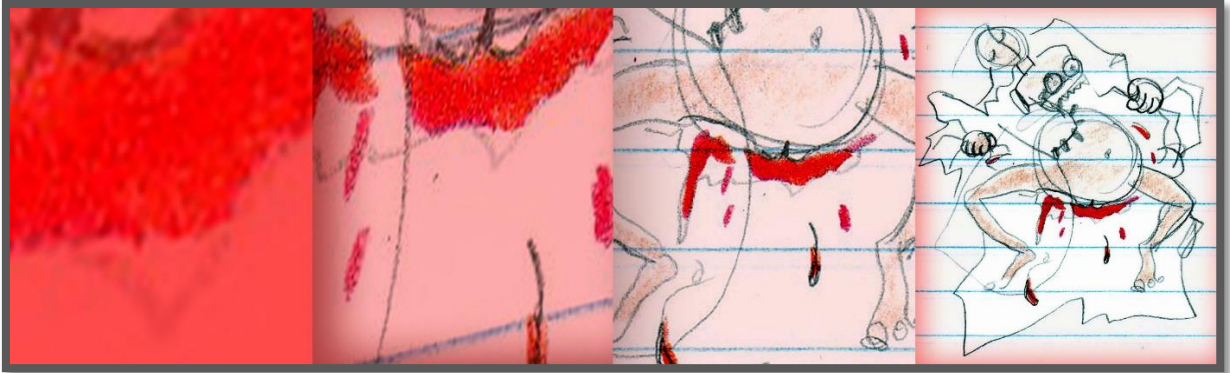


Figure 1: Anna Romanovska (2013) *Meditation on Red*. Paper, pencil, marker, digital.

At other times I would encounter an ambient colour that would involuntarily trigger a memory flashback. A vivid fluorescent yellow seen in a Toronto shop window evoked, for example, a memory of my wearing a pair of bright yellow shoes while walking down the street in Riga. My mother had purchased these shoes for me in Czechoslovakia in 1985 as a reward for my being accepted as a student at the Art Academy of Latvia. This epiphanic memory-flash opened up a prolonged series of recollections of the time when I was a student in the Art College, followed by a one-year study program at the Academy.

For me personally colours have always played an essential role in my life. I grew up surrounded by my grandfather's landscape paintings and by my mother's work in the costume design field, all of which fostered a keen sensitivity to and appreciation for colour. Years later, I gained a thorough knowledge of colour theory while teaching at the undergraduate level in Canada. As an artist I became very aware of the psychological, emotional, and symbolic powers of colour. It therefore felt quite appropriate to mobilize my knowledge of and passion for colours to awaken and retrieve memories of times past.

During the period in which I was systematically organizing the life histories of my immediate family, I also started jotting down my personal memories, taking note of the colours that triggered them. As both endeavours began to converge and then overlap, I realized that colour could in fact serve as the organizing principle for my own work in progress. In reviewing my gleanings to date, this current paper outlines, exemplifies and evaluates the colour-informed methodology which I have developed for accessing personal memories from times long past.

Defining Colour

In arts-based inquiry, both the process of creating an artwork and the artwork itself encourage emotional engagement and generate knowledge. Moreover, when colour and image are combined, the artwork becomes that much more emotionally evocative and/or provocative (Cole, 2004; Cole & Knowles, 2008). But while it is common knowledge that colour is used to evoke feelings, to control mood, to communicate, and to heal through art therapy (Bleicher, 2012; Fehrman & Ferhman, 2000; Feisner, 2006; Ludlow & Wilkins, 2009; Pastoureau, 2012), colour by its very nature continues to elude a strict definition.

Colour surrounds us and affects us on many levels, even if we seem unaware of its influence. The world in which we live, and which we interpret for ourselves and for others, as well as the

experiences that we accumulate as memories, for most of us, have colour as their essential property. Our sense of colour is linked to our emotions, so we can use colour to express how we feel, whether consciously or unconsciously. Our past and present life may be “coloured” by pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Often we use the language of colour metaphorically to interpret certain phenomena. A family member can be a “black sheep,” a person can feel “blue,” and we can turn “green” with envy. While we relate to colour almost on an instinctual level, in fact a complex set of cultural norms regulates the use of colour in public settings and ceremonial occasions. Thus, for most Westerners it is common knowledge that the colour *red* is associated with both danger and passion; nevertheless, it would be highly inappropriate for a bride to wear a scarlet dress to her wedding, even though this happy event could be thought of as a supreme expression of passion.

While the more popular explanation treats colour as electromagnetic waves that reflect or bounce back from an object and vibrate at different lengths and speed, in technical terms colour can be defined as the response of electrons at the surface of an object when in contact with electromagnetic waves extrinsic to the object (Fehrman & Ferhman, 2000; Finley 2002). The human eye can detect a portion of these atomic-level events, which is then interpreted as colour by certain regions of the human brain (Finley 2002). The human eye transforms those wavelengths in such a way that the brain interprets the processed signals as an array of perceived colour that constitutes a feature of the outside world. The narrow waveband that stimulates colour perception is known as the *visible spectrum* (Stone, Adams, & Morioka, 2006).

There are as many definitions of colour as there are disciplines or fields that deal with it (Pastoureau, 2012). Just as every culture interprets and perceives colour in different ways (Adams & Osgood, 1973), no two individuals will interpret a single colour identically unless they have access to an unbiased spectrometer. For example, if a group of twenty people were asked to imagine the colour *green*, indubitably their minds would conjure up at least that many different shades of green, ranging from the grass at their feet and the oak leaves above, through Christmas green, refreshing lime green, and delectable chartreuse, to bread mold, and repulsive pond scum. Among those twenty subjects there might even be someone who would recall the cool green waters of the Baltic Sea on a cloudy day. Colours by their very nature are unstable, context sensitive, elusive, ever changing, and ambiguous (Bleicher, 2012; Finley, 2002; Pastoureau, 2012). How a single colour appears depends on the surrounding colours and lighting conditions. Still, regardless of this ambiguity, in many cases “the prime function of colour is ... to classify: to associate, oppose, distinguish and create hierarchies; to classify beings and things, ... individuals and groups, places and times, ideas and dreams; and memories too” (Pastoureau, 2012, p. 171).

For the purpose of my work, which concerns the use of colour to evoke as well as organize family-centred memories, I shall define *colour* as a visual phenomenon that is created and interpreted by the human mind without the mediation of language, but which in a sociocultural context can be used as a means of communication to evoke strong emotional associations (Bleicher, 2012; Finley, 2002; Pastoureau, 2012).

Autobiographical Memory

The research field concerned with the investigation of memory retrieval and autobiographical memory is quite extensive. Conway and Williams (2008), Bergson (1896/1990), Frith & Frith

(1999), Jung (1964), Kwint (1999), Stewart (1999) are but a few researchers who have concerned themselves with the ways in which material objects, smell, taste, and sound affect memory. Research in the field of colour and emotions suggests that particular colours can also trigger memories of a specific person, place, or situation. It has even been argued that “most of what we see is based on the memory of colour – when and how we have experienced it before” (Feisner, 2006, p. 4). Such memories can be personal, cultural, or environmental (Birren, 1978; Palmer & Schloss, 2011; Simmons, 2011).

Rather less research has been devoted to the manner in which colour may assist the memory retrieval process. Much of this work has been done in the field of experimental psychology (Dzulkifli & Mustafar, 2013; Spence et al., 2006; Vernon & Lloyd-Jones, 2003; Wichmann, et al., 2002). However, for the purposes of life-history investigations, Kwint (1999) offers a useful point of departure in proposing that objects “furnish recollection, ... are instrumental to the formation of consciousness, stimulate remembering ... by serendipitous encounter, bringing back experiences which otherwise would have remained dormant; and form records: analogues to living memory, storing information beyond individual experience” (p. 2). As an intrinsic element of experience, it seems reasonable to assume that colour by itself can facilitate autobiographical memory retrieval. Understanding how autobiographical memory is constructed and what role colours could play in memory retrieval can therefore be of great assistance for arts-informed life history research.

According to Conway and Williams (2008), the term *autobiographical memory* refers to “our memory for specific episodes, episodic memory, and to our conceptual, generic, and schematic knowledge of our lives” (p. 893). Autobiographical memory may thus range from abstract and conceptual categorization to stored data that are vivid, event-specific, and experience-near. Except for the abstract structures which organize significant lifetime periods and major events, autobiographical memory storage is complex and non-linear. For example, a life story might be periodized in sequential time-blocks centred on infancy, education, and work, whereas the more episodic memories that fall within these time-blocks could be linked together in a partonomic fashion rather than in a linear or strictly chronological structure (Conway & Williams, 2008).

Lifetime periods encapsulate a period in memory and contain representations of locations, people, activities, feelings, and goals common to the period they represent. For example, a lifetime period such as “being a student at the art college” will consist of memories of people, locations, activities, emotions, and goals. In addition, a lifetime period will provide general evaluations of the era concerned, such as, “this was a difficult time of my life” or “this was the most creative period in my life.” Memories of general events, on the other hand, are more specific than memories of lifetime periods, but not as detailed and vivid as episodic memories. Memories of general events pertain to a variety of knowledge categories such as “my first day at school” or “my first trip to Moscow.” Some general events may act as reference points for other related general events, thus forming the basis for mini-histories (Conway & Williams, 2008).

Episodic memory provides a short-term, specific, and highly detailed record of a current moment. Memories of this nature can enter conscious awareness adventitiously, but they can also be retrieved by means of introspection. Jung (1964) observes that:

There are certain events of which we have not consciously taken note; they have remained, so to speak, below the threshold of consciousness. They have happened, but they have been absorbed subliminally, without our conscious knowledge. We can become aware of such happenings only in a moment of intuition or by a process of profound thought that leads to a later realization that they must have happened; and though we may have originally ignored their emotional and vital importance, it later wells up from the unconscious as a sort of afterthought. (p. 23)

To be retained and stored on a long-term basis, episodic memories have to be integrated with autobiographical memory. In the context of autobiography and life history research, episodic memory provides qualities of concreteness, vividness and specificity. It is predominantly represented in the form of visual images, and memory awareness appears to be triggered or activated when an episodic memory enters conscious awareness (Conway & Williams, 2008). In terms of Conway and Williams's model, the episodic memories so triggered may be expected to awaken higher-level memories of general events that took place within the lifetime periods of my early life in Soviet Latvia.

From the perspective of current epistemological theory, a lineal narrative structure which traces a succession of events from the distant to recent past is fundamentally incongruent with the associational modes by which memory, the biological repository of time, actually processes and stores data. This is a situation that I can attest to on a personal level. For example, every time I travel back to Riga, my home town, it feels as if I have become a child again, albeit one who is enveloped at this point in an adult's body. I delve deeply into the memory pool every time I return home. My grandmother's stories resonate in my mind as I retrieve and reconstruct certain episodic memories. My mother is delighted to tell as many stories about Soviet times as she can possibly remember. Our stories overlap as we oscillate between different periods of time in our lives and between different experiential frames. My memories – retrieved purposely or popping into my mind involuntarily – refuse to string themselves one after the other in a lineal storyline, as if they were neatly hung sheets drying on a clothesline.

My own life history research focuses in the first place upon already retrieved episodic memories that evince a prominent colour component. But in a departure from previous studies, I also intentionally visualize and/or contemplate a variety of colours in order to access episodic memories that may remain as yet unretrieved. In this phase of my research, which might be termed "guided reverie," I actually probe the colour spectrum (along with black and white) to open channels into times long past and forgotten.²

On the subjective side, by employing guided reverie as a research methodology, it becomes possible to link my own idiosyncratic colour palette with various places, events, and objects that I experienced during the Soviet years. On the other hand, by employing a colour idiom to categorize episodes from the past, I am able to organize the data derived from recorded interviews and family letters in a form that parallels the way in which memory actually functions. Both approaches provide support for a more general discussion of the role which colour played in the social and cultural life of Soviet Latvia.

In effect, guided reverie is an exercise in random remembering. While the results are prolific, they also tend to be haphazard, in that a single colour stimulus can elicit memories from many

different periods of my life. For this reason it may take some time before I am ready to turn these tangled images into art.³

Initially it is quite challenging to channel the flow of memory in a purposeful manner. I try focusing first on the time periods in my life. Then I scan languidly for general events within those periods. It quickly becomes obvious that the chronological retrieval and structuring of my autobiographical memories is not an appropriate strategy. Instead, I end up writing and drawing memories as they appear in no particular order in my conscious mind. I doodle in my sketchbook and browse through my family albums to access episodic memories that evoke further data (Figure 2).

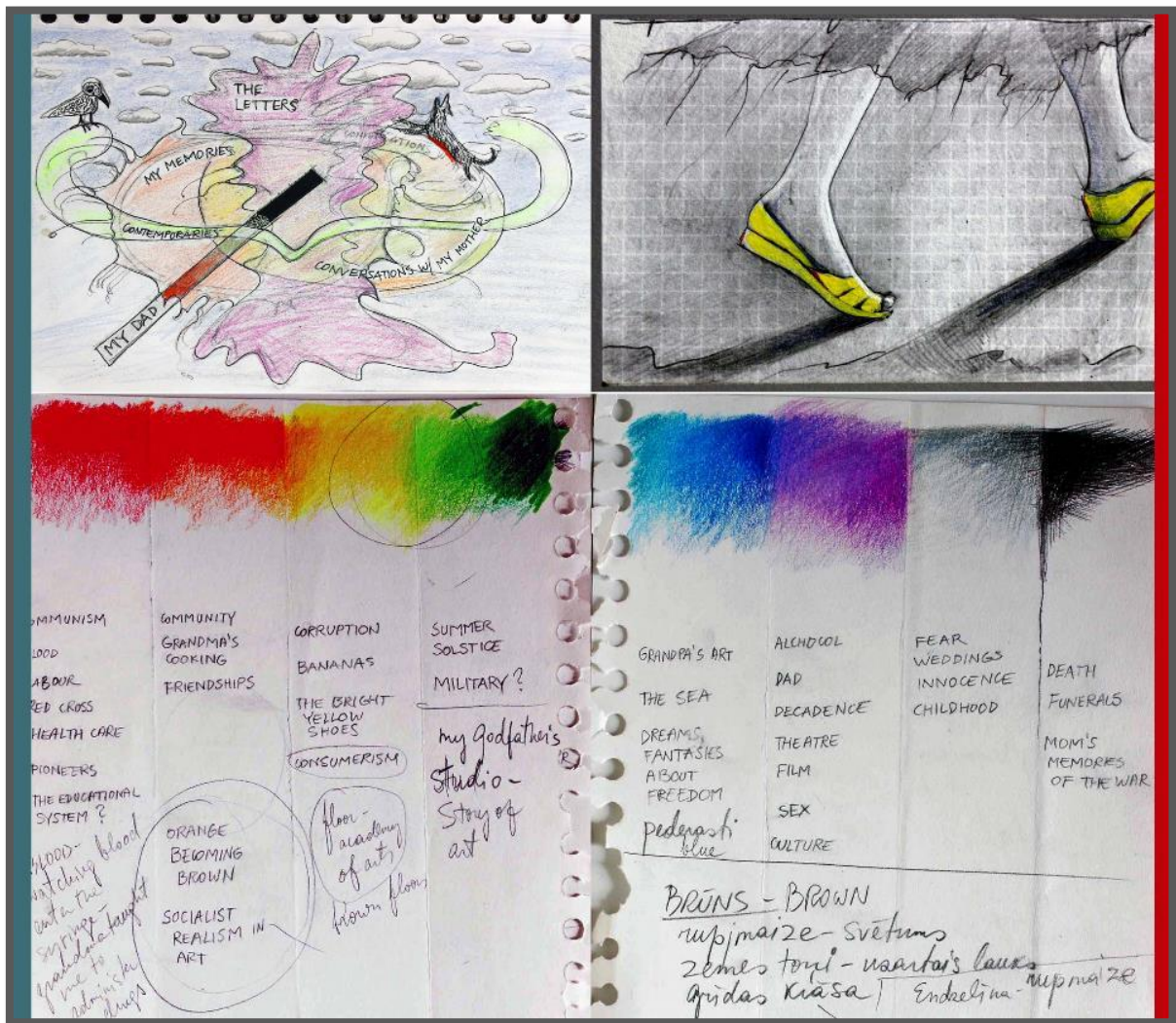


Figure 2: Anna Romanovska (2013) *From the sketchbook*. Paper, mixed media.

I also monitor and record my feelings and growing insights, both visually and narratively. In this way, my artistic journal goes hand in hand with the narrative journal. In other words, I sketch something which prompts me in turn to write something, Or I write something and it prompts me to sketch something that seems only vaguely related to what I have just written. I tell stories, which are narratives, and I make images, which embody narratives. Yet both acts

are about articulating experience. This synergism between the visual and written media helps me develop a more meaningful storyline.

The Mere Sight of a Madeleine – Work in Progress

“The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it” – Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past

Judging from his labyrinthine masterwork, it would seem that Proust’s olfactory sense was exquisitely refined as a channel for accessing recollections of time past. For other creative souls the sense of touch may guide them confidently along the byways of memory, and there are also those for whom music opens up vanished worlds. When the eye performs a similar function, one can distinguish between a sensitivity to *form* on the one hand, and an appreciation for *colour* on the other. The researcher can be led into the forgotten past by emphasizing either aspect of the visible world. In the discussion that follows I will provide several personal narratives to demonstrate how the heightened awareness of colour can help retrieve memories from the dim vault of time.

White

One of my first preverbal memories that I remember vividly is associated with white (Figure 3). I was lying in a white open field with no boundaries. Everything beyond the white field was grey and fuzzy. I was completely naked, inspecting the pale, warm coloured extremities that I did not know belonged to me. It was so amusing to watch the little appendices that were attached to the larger limbs move around chaotically. It did not even cross my mind that I could control their movement. The extremities moved on their own, interacted, and it was a great pleasure for me just to observe them. I remember two giants, who appeared vaguely familiar and non-threatening, leaning over me. I heard sounds issuing from the giants which felt pleasant and assuring. I did not have words at the time to tell the two giants that I felt cold. Nor did I even know that I felt cold. It was more as if a cool breath was continuously blowing over me.

After a while I did not feel cold anymore. Then the freedom was taken away, the extremities disappeared, and I was rolled sideways back and forth. I felt firm touch, then another touch, after which I could not move anymore. This memory floats up easily every time I see white sheets.

Of course, it turned out that the two giants hovering over me were none other than my mom and grandma. Decades later, I know that most likely my two tenders had me lie on a white sheet that for a baby felt like a boundless field. I got changed most likely in a fresh diaper and was then swaddled once more. Since then white has tended to serve me as a symbol of innocence and cold, mixed with a bit of fear for the unknown.⁴

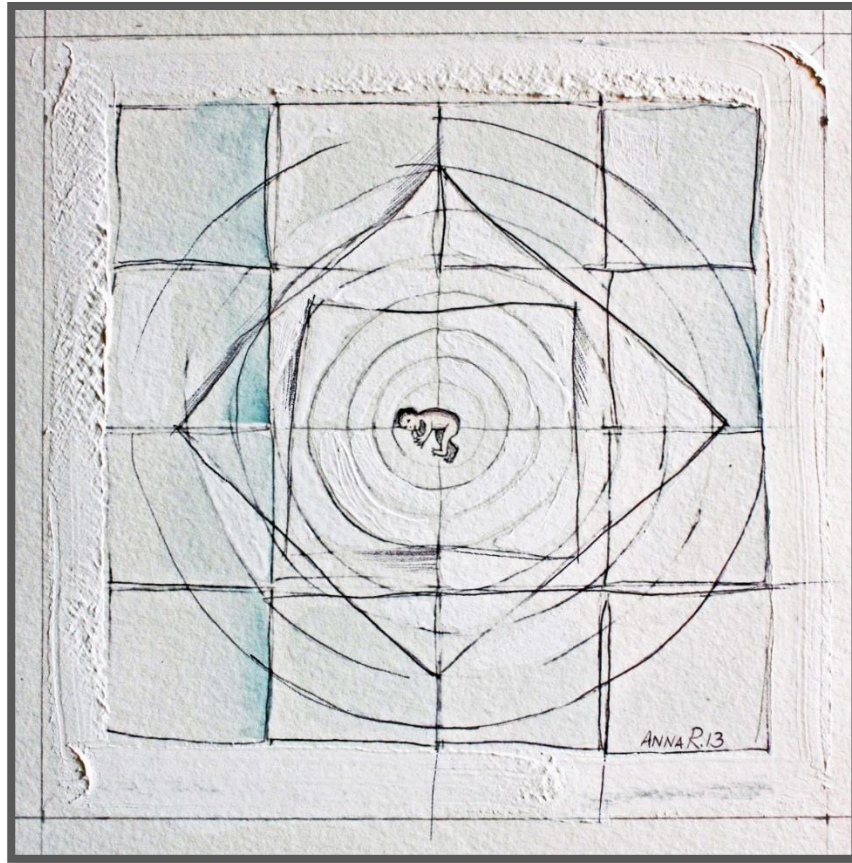


Figure 3: Anna Romanovska (2013) *The first preverbal memory in white*. Paper, mixed media.

Thus, under the rubric of *White*, which for me connotes innocence, fear, and virtue, I also recount my grandmother's grisly reminiscences of postwar occupation, arrests, and executions. As it came to pass, her stories made my own experience of interrogation at KGB headquarters in Riga all the more terrifying. During the interrogation (which concerned a trifling matter, as I realized afterwards) my mind froze in the apprehension of what could happen next. I was scared, confused, and deplorably vulnerable. Years later, the image of the trapped white unicorn came to mind as I remembered myself waiting in that barren interrogation room with its two-way mirrors. My illustration *Self-portrait as a Unicorn at KGB headquarters*, expresses visually that episode as I remember it (Figure 4).

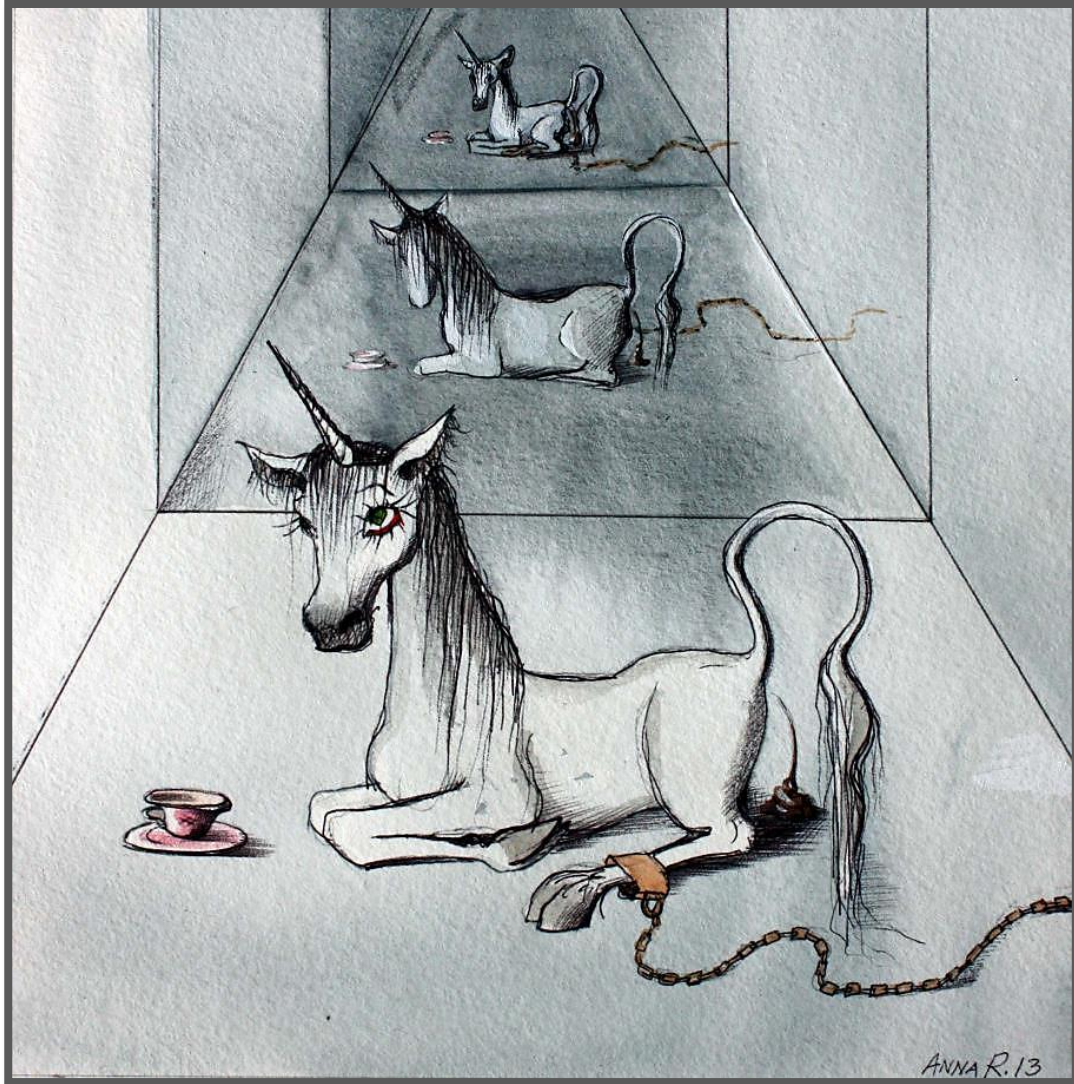


Figure 4: Anna Romanovska (2013) *Self-portrait as a Unicorn at KGB headquarters*. Paper, mixed media.

Fluorescent Yellow

There is a certain fluorescent yellow that brings to mind a pair of shoes which my mother purchased for me in Czechoslovakia in 1985 as a reward for my being accepted as a student at the Riga Art Academy. At the time there was a fierce competition to get into the Academy, which was considered one of the top art schools in the Soviet Union. Students from all the other Soviet republics applied for admission, knowing that only the most highly qualified would be accepted. This was in fact my second attempt. At that time no such colourful shoes would be available for the average soviet citizen, so my mother knew that this fluorescent yellow pair would delight me immensely. When wearing the shoes, I felt as if my feet were glowing, as if I had stepped in a benign radioactive puddle. The admiring and often envious looks from my contemporaries easily elevated me a foot above the ground while wearing those yellow shoes (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Anna Romanovska (2013) *The new shoes*. Paper, mixed media.

Radiant and vivid yellow was a colour rarely seen in the Soviet Union. According to a colleague at the Riga Technical University, there were no bright dyes, save perhaps red, available anywhere in the Soviet Union until the late 1970s (Personal communication, July, 15, 2013). This severely limited colour palette applied to all the industries that utilized colour for aesthetic purposes (automotive, home hardware, textiles).

The episodic memory of walking down the street in my yellow shoes on a grey and rainy summer day in Riga evokes further memories about my mother's work trip to Czechoslovakia. My mother was very fortunate to design costumes for the movie *Sprīdītis* (Piesis, 1985), one of the rare co-productions made with the Czech film studio. I remember her being so thrilled at the opportunity to see the costume warehouse in the film studio in Prague. We felt that times were changing, in the sense that my mother was not required to become a member of the Communist Party to work abroad (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Anna Romanovska (2013) *Self-portrait in the 80's with the yellow shoes and a cigarette*. Paper, mixed media.

Yellow like Bile

Another strong association which yellow triggers is that of piercingly painful hangovers. Specifically, a jarring yellow black spiral comes to mind, which turns into a dirty yellowish greenish nauseating tone when spun around. That was in fact the very colour of the vomitus that I produced while riding a trolley bus in Moscow after a night of heavy drinking in the railway sleeper car. Luckily, as my exit was at the next stop, I didn't have to listen to my fellow passengers chastising me with choice curses. The moment I left the trolley bus, another copious flow of vomit projected from my insides. This time it was of a yellow hue. It landed on a snowbank and I could not help but admire the almost luminous combination of crystal white and intense yellow. I remember this moment so vividly because it was one of my very worst hangovers, which nevertheless provoked a brilliant eruption of colour.

Did this tortuous moment cause me to reflect on my drinking habits? Hardly. I did not even remotely consider reducing the amount of alcohol I would consume. What other entertainment and/or escape from reality could I choose? A decent education was out of the question, since at that time I nihilistically rejected education altogether. Hobbies, then? My two main hobbies, drawing and reading, were actually quite antisocial. When I was ready to socialize, it was all about parties, engaging in obnoxious public and private activities with friends who loved to get drunk and show off. (Some folks in the West nowadays call such activities “performance art.”)

Looking back, I do not believe I was exactly bored. I knew that I was talented. I had entertaining friends and my life on the whole was good. On the other hand, I was haunted by my grandmother's stories of independent Latvia when freedom reigned. These stories were ever present in my mind, reinforced by information that I could access from abroad. Grandma's stories made me feel like a perpetual prisoner; and for me, to step out of Soviet reality on a regular basis via the power of alcohol offered an easy solution to my existential dissatisfaction.

Why did I not become an alcoholic? After all, I started drinking at around the age of 13 or 14, and when I finally entered the School of Applied Arts in 1980, I remember vividly wanting to become more popular and establish my place among the cool kids by appearing older and smoking cigarettes and consuming copious amounts of alcohol at parties. I made the grade in all three respects within the space of a year.

One of the most popular and reliable alcoholic beverages in Soviet Latvia and the Soviet Union was vodka. It was assumed that vodka is the safest booze to drink. We would say that vodka was “clean”, or that vodka was a “clean drink”, because any other drink could be tampered with easily. To throw a successful party, there would have to be at least a bottle of vodka per guest - or “a bottle per muzzle” (*pudele uz purna*), as the Latvian saying goes. If there was less than a bottle per muzzle, it was not worth holding a get-together (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Anna Romanovska (2013) *A bottle per muzzle*. Paper, mixed media.

Red

Imagine a Holstein cow with its white hide covered randomly with black irregular patches. (Or is it perhaps the other way around?) Now imagine those black shapes turning red. I felt just like a blotchy red Holstein when tossing in the hospital bed, about to give birth to my first child at the age of 23. The whole ordeal took 12 hours.

Morning of April 10, 1988. Contractions are starting and I am scared. My baby is two weeks overdue and according to the ultrasound reading, he is equipped with an enormously big head. I am anxious every time I try to imagine how wide my pelvic bones will have to spread to let the boy emerge. I know there are no hinges down there between my legs, so how's my so-called birth passage going to open? And what's going to happen with my bowels? As the boy squeezes out, won't the pressure squeeze out loads of excrement, as from a toothpaste tube? My mom keeps trying to comfort me. "Don't worry," she says, "it's not going to stay in there, it will come out one way or another."

In the Soviet Union everyone was taught the art of bribery from an early age. A little extra income or a casual gift nicely supplemented what were generally very meagre professional salaries. The same went for government officials and those in the retail sector. Just before reaching the hospital, I realized with alarm that I had neglected to bribe the gynecologist and the nurses on staff.

Upon arrival at the hospital around noon I am asked to strip down. The nurse notices my pubic hair and tells me that she is going to shave it and that I must take a shower. I am having painful contractions already, but my whining is curtly dismissed. I am led to a small cold stall paved with pale green tiles and left there alone with the instruction to shower. I stand naked with my

enormous belly, shivering from the cold and rattled by an occasional contraction. This feels like a classic Kafkaesque moment. I realize that I might get in big trouble since I haven't paid the bribe. I so want this to be over and I so dread the process.

After the shower I am given a short piece of white garment that barely covers my belly. I am led to another small room with two beds and asked to lie down and wait. I am strongly encouraged to go for a pee, which I cannot imagine doing, as I can hardly walk. There is another woman in the room having contractions. She peeks at me sideways and then totally ignores me. At this point the pain is coming in turbulent waves. It feels like my eyeballs are popping out and my spine is cracking in pieces. I cease to exist as an individual. I feel as if I have moved into an animal state, just fighting for the survival of my flesh. My skeleton is playing tug of war with my flesh. Then blood starts seeping out of me – yes, that rich red liquid has decided to vacate my body (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Anna Romanovska (2013) *Self-portrait as a cow*. Paper, mixed media.

I start rolling sideways on the bed. The sheet puckers up and my blood creates intriguing puddles and smears against the white backdrop of the hospital sheet. I spill all over. I start looking like a painting created by a misogynist expressionist – *Pregnant Nude Overcome by Contractions Laying in a Pool of Blood While Her Flesh and Bones Fight It Out*.

The nurse comes to check on the woman lying on the other bed. She is obviously struggling, but somehow she manages to keep the blood inside her body.

I get in trouble for making a mess. The nurse calls me a pig for staining the white sheets. I am perplexed – what is the alternative? How can I stop my blood from seeping out? I remember again that I have not bribed the nurse and I humbly apologize for carelessly staining the sheets. Never before in my life have I had to be humble. I grew up spoiled, talented, and attractive. I indulged in a decadent lifestyle, I flaunted my ability to create beautiful art, and I attracted a host of devoted fans. I indulged in my entitlements as a third-generation artist in my little homeland.

But now it's time for humility. Forget my life. It does not exist. What exists is pain, flesh, bones, seeping blood, and my son, still stuck inside my ripping flesh. I beg for assistance. *Nurse, can you hold my flesh together? It feels like it's ripping at the seams*. In no time I learn how to be humble.

The nurse asks if I had a chance to have a pee. “You must go for a pee,” she insists. I just stare at her. Then the next convulsion comes. A 9.0 magnitude bodyquake throws my torso in a tight arch. More blood leaks out – sorry, nurse, no I cannot go for a pee. The nurse watches me for a moment and then calls for help. It turns out I have been lying in the bed for 10 hours already without food or drink. A doctor comes in and checks my blood pressure, which is apparently skyrocketing. She injects some medicine in my butt. She tells me that this will speed up the labour. She is concerned that my water has not broken. She seems to care. I get wheeled into another room with pale green tiles, and there I am lifted on the table.

During one of the pushes I feel a sharp pain in my crotch and crackling sound. Someone cuts my perineum to open up more space for my son's big head. It's all blurry, I am a pushing animal, I am made for pushing, and nothing else. I push, push, and push. I am not going to do anything else in my life, just push, never-endingly.

I am wrong of course. Out he comes. They put him on my chest. He maybe can hear my tired heart still beating wildly. To me he seems like a slimy pink octopus. For the moment I am not capable of connecting to my son. My body melts into the table, I throw my head back. I see a clock on the wall. It reads 12 midnight.

Concluding thoughts

“Reverie shifts blocks of thoughts without any great worry about following the thread of an adventure. In that is it much different from the dream which always wants to tell us a story.” Gaston Bachelard, *the Poetics of Reverie*, p. 106

In addition to providing a brief overview of the role of colour in retrieving autobiographical memory, the above examples should illustrate the way in which colour can be used as an organizing principle to describe the familial context, coping strategies, and creative outlets

which enabled me to become a free-spirited artist in the twilight years of the Soviet occupation. It is evident that one reminiscence leads by association to many others, making it difficult indeed to impose coherence on the material overall. Also, the acts of remembering and writing are apt to trigger reflexive loops, whereby a recovered memory engenders archival investigations, which in their own way stimulate further recollections. It is quite in the order of things that after narrating the experiences of hangover and childbirth one would wish to acquire knowledge about alcoholism and the practice of gynecology in the former Soviet Union. Fortunately I have had very limited experience with red-hued childbirths, so no matter how extensive my research, there may be only meagre feedback in terms of further memory retrieval.

The episodes recounted above happen to be ordered chronologically, beginning with my earliest infantile memory (white) and ending with my harrowing experience of childbirth (red). This is a narrative expedient to which I am not fiercely committed. In light of Conway and Williams' research it does not pretend to replicate the ways in which episodic memories are actually stored. But neither am I convinced that a chromatic order, in which the episodes are mechanically sequenced from red to purple to blue (or the reverse), hews any closer to the actual structures of memory. In fact, if truth be told, I would prefer to pattern memory retrieval on the model of my own rather messy artist's palette, with its dabs and swirls of partially mixed colours arranged in no compelling order. Yet such a presentation would venture well beyond life history research into the realm of poetry, where ambiguity reigns.

The colours retained in memory have a transcultural quality and are moreover relatively easy to reproduce on paper, whereas those remembered forms (which may have been distorted by the passage of time) are exceedingly difficult to illustrate in ways that are meaningful to readers unfamiliar with (as in this instance) Latvia's cultural landscape. Thus, by emphasizing colour as the key dimension of my personal world, I expect that the reader will better resonate with my experiences of everyday life, with mind-numbing sorrow, with artistic inspiration, and with the radiant bouquet of first love. Also to be discovered in the course of my narrative is the fact that death in Latvia is no less black than anywhere else.

Notes

1. The colour terminology used in this paper is as follows:

Hue: The brightest and most intense state of a colour; e.g., a yellow hue would look like a buttercup in bright sunlight.

Tone: A hue mixed with grey; e.g., a yellow tone would look like faded plywood or a piece of amber. Tone is not necessarily dark, because it could have a substantial amount of white with just a bit of black admixed.

Shade: A colour mixed with varying amounts of black; e.g., a blue like that of the midnight sky, or a green that resembles wet moss on a rainy day. A red shade could look like venous blood, whereas a red hue could represent arterial blood.

Tint: A hue mixed with white; e.g., a red like that of a pink rose, or a blue that matches the sky on a sunny day. A *tint* is more vivid than a *tone*; for instance, a yellow tone might look like damp straw or the crumbs from a freshly baked wheat loaf, whereas a hatchery of young chicks would radiate a yellow tint.

2. Gaston Bachelard remarks on the difficulties which the painter, even more than the writer, confronts in reconstructing the past: "There exists a reverie of the lively look, a reverie which

is animated in a pride of seeing, of seeing clearly, of seeing well, of seeing far, and this pride of vision is perhaps more accessible to the poet than to the painter: the painter must paint this super-elevated vision; the poet has only to proclaim it.” (Bachelard 1960/1971, p. 183)

3. Under the rubric of *constructive reverie* Gaston Bachelard proposes a similar approach, in which, “a Poetics of Reverie becomes conscious of its tasks: causing consolidations of imagined worlds, developing the audacity of constructive reverie, affirming itself in a dreamer’s clear consciousness...” Elsewhere, Bachelard points out that in states of reverie a directive self-awareness persists, though in an diffuse or loosened form: “The reverie dreamer’s diffuse *cogito* receives from the objects of its reverie a tranquil confirmation of its existence.” (Bachelard, 1960/1971, pp. 158; 166)
4. For Latvians white also symbolizes virtue, which is documented in many *Dainas*. Latvian *Dainas* are ancient folk songs in verse form.
5. In his early work *Daybreak* Friedrich Nietzsche proclaims that, “If we wish to outline an architecture which conforms to the structure of our soul..., it would have to be conceived in the image of the Labyrinth.” (Cited in Bachelard, 1960/1971, p. 113.)

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