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THE COLOURED WORLD
OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

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in FRENCH at
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IAN WRIGHT ADCOCK
(February, 1982)

MASSEY UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the result of a close examination of the functions of colour in the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet, undertaken in the expectation that the careful study of this limited element would reveal the finer details of some of the important characteristics of his novels and films.

The Nouveau Roman and the works of Robbe-Grillet originate in a desire to produce creative literary forms which are a better representation of man's situation in the modern world of disorder and uncertainty, than the narrative forms of the traditional nineteenth century novel. An integral part of this search for new forms is the deliberate designation and subversion of the traditional conventions which Robbe-Grillet wishes to expose as neither natural nor necessary. Thus many of the colour terms in his works are used in ironic games with these traditional forms.

The illusion of realism is ironically subverted by colour and lighting references, which "foreground" the text as a fabrication of words, and also reveal that perception of reality is a subjective function and then of only one among many "realities" possible. His works therefore constitute their own reality, without necessary reference to any world "out there". However they are "realist" in that they are constrained by the laws of physical nature, e.g. description is elaborated only with illumination. Traditional colour symbols are degraded by colour, as is the convention of character, as Robbe-Grillet shows that situation and clothing do not necessarily define character or function. Fictitious characters are not "real" people but constructions of the text. The traditional anthropomorphic relationship between man and the world is thus destroyed. A related convention subverted is "le petit détail qui fait vrai", which false colour details show to be largely meaningless.

Robbe-Grillet's other important subversive use for colour is to reveal the limitations of our linguistic structures; our ability to perceive colour is not matched by our ability to describe it. Colour thus plays a significant subversive role in Robbe-Grillet's works.

However, to replace the traditional narrative forms, Robbe-Grillet uses colour constructively in several ways, it becomes dynamic rather than descriptive. Colour terms, at both the level of the signifier and signified, are manipulated in games with meaning to construct new texts. Traditional colour symbols are replaced with colours which become "symbolic" only in the context of a particular novel, as each now constitutes its own reality. Changing colours show the shifting focus of a narrative and create the personality of a character, while colour oppositions give movement and rhythm to texts. Specific colours generate texts through their metaphorical associations, and metaphor itself, after initial rejection, becomes a dynamic element. Colour produces many constructive forms to replace those of the traditional novel, to thus create a new "écriture romanesque".

The obvious dual subversive-constructive function of colour indicates a constant tension within Robbe-Grillet's works, a tension which is perhaps the conflict basic to all literature. The many different functions of colour suggest that Robbe-Grillet's works contain an inherent multiplicity, functioning on several levels of meaning. And the changing functions of colour through the various works point to a continual evolution in Robbe-Grillet's creative production. Thus the Nouveau Roman of Robbe-Grillet is created through multiplicity, tension and evolution.

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I.W.A.

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1. PROJET POUR UNE THÈSE
(Introduction)

In the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet there appears to be a significant use of colour, in both novels and films. Colour is in fact used more frequently as his works have evolved; in his novels the proportion of colour terms increases quite markedly from the first to the latest and in films Robbe-Grillet has moved from black and white to colour film, which, as we shall discuss, constitutes an important transition.¹ The intention of this thesis is to examine Robbe-Grillet's use of colour in the expectation that this detailed investigation of an isolated element will assist in a fuller comprehension and appreciation of his creative works.

Scholars have studied the use of colour in literature from all ages and from the earliest texts colour appears to have played a significant role in much creative writing.² That colour should assume this importance is probably due to the fact that it is a major element in man's dominant perceptive sense - sight. It is thus an important part of our perception and hence knowledge of the physical world and it is perhaps not surprising that the significance of colour is reflected in man's creativity. The study of colour in literature through the ages may thus provide information on man's changing view of the world and also the changing art of the creative writer. In a given work, colour is of interest in its own right, as specific colour symbols for example, but the study of colour in the works of a particular author or even group of authors may also be used as a means to obtain a more global insight into the works in question; that is a close examination of a limited element such as colour may illuminate more general characteristics in the work, the imposed constraints preventing the field of investigation from becoming unmanageably large.

In this thesis we shall thus discuss the various functions of colour in Robbe-Grillet's works, seeking to establish from this perspective some of the major

characteristics of his creative production. Some of these functions are specifically functions of colour, while in others the colour terms play a part in the construction of much larger functions, which nevertheless reflect the important role of colour in Robbe-Grillet's works.

For the purposes of this examination, we shall concentrate mainly on four of Robbe-Grillet's works, taken as a representative cross-section of his novels and films to date; the four works are the novels La Jalousie and Projet pour une révolution à New York, the colour film L'Eden et après, and the "picto-roman" La Belle Captive which contains a text by Robbe-Grillet generated by a selection of paintings by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte.³ Although concentrating largely on these four works, we shall also draw examples from Robbe-Grillet's other novels and films to illustrate particular points. In the course of our discussion we shall refer to Robbe-Grillet's "early" and "later" novels, this distinction is made more for ease of reference rather than to indicate significant differences between the two groups. We thus see the "early" novels as those up to La Maison de rendez-vous⁴ which is perhaps a transitional novel, and the "later" group comprises Projet and subsequent works. Chronologically the first group contains those novels written in the fifties and the latter those written in the seventies, with the transitional work La Maison de rendez-vous being Robbe-Grillet's only novel from the intervening decade. Instantanés (1962)⁵, a collection of short prose pieces, has not been included in our discussion as it reveals little of significance about colour not already shown in other works, and is also difficult to place chronologically as the pieces were written and revised at various times.

In the course of our discussion, we shall use several examples more than once to illustrate different functions of the same colour term. This shows the complexity of the functioning of colour in Robbe-Grillet's works but also poses difficulties for the organisation of our discussion. To overcome these problems we shall discuss examples as they illustrate a particular function of colour,

rather than examine the various functions illustrated by one particular example.

As we mentioned above, Robbe-Grillet's works are complex and this has resulted in him being regarded as a "difficult" author, one best left to scholars and intellectuals. This attitude to Robbe-Grillet's works is probably due to the fact that they are not in general recognisably similar to conventional novels and films. The obvious deviation of his creative works from traditional forms immediately seems to arouse suspicion and mistrust, the traditional forms for some reason still being regarded as definitive by many in the literary world. For example, in an attack on the Nouveau Roman, a generally respected literary figure, Pierre de Boisdeffre, still appears to see a "good" novel as one which best competes with the great novels of the past;

Nous n'avons vu surgir depuis la guerre ni un nouveau Bernanos, ni un nouveau Céline, ni un nouveau Giono, encore moins un autre Proust ou une seconde Colette.⁶

Robbe-Grillet, however, does not accept that the modern novel should reproduce the forms of the past, and in Pour un nouveau roman⁷, a theoretical reappraisal of the novel, Robbe-Grillet strongly attacks Balzac, or more specifically the forms of the Balzacian novel, which he sees as still exercising considerable influence on the novel today. Balzac is singled out as the most influential of the nineteenth century novelists and is attacked probably because of his vision of unity, of an interrelated, unified universe based on "man". In many of his articles and interviews, "Une Voie pour le roman futur" being a good example, Robbe-Grillet constantly refers to the "récit balzacien", which much literary criticism appears to consider as the natural form of the novel to be imitated and reproduced ad infinitum, a view which Robbe-Grillet does not share;

L'erreur est de croire que le "vrai roman" s'est figé une fois pour toutes, à l'époque balzacienne, en des règles strictes et définitives.⁸

Robbe-Grillet is not attacking Balzac's novels in themselves, but rather the fact that the novel has not been allowed to evolve freely since his time; the successor of the Balzacian novel - with plot, character and causal chronology to the fore - is still regarded today in literary circles, and certainly among the "prix littéraires", as normative in form, content and style. Time in particular remains a major paradigm governing the novel and it is perhaps Robbe-Grillet's deliberate rejection of causal chronology which gives much of his writing its "difficult" quality.

One of Robbe-Grillet's main points of contention regarding Balzac's novels is that they reflect the society of his era and not ours. They mirror the social and political power of the bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century, a bourgeoisie which reflected the belief that it was in control of the world and of events. Balzac's novels depict this society at the height of its power; however, its anthropomorphic view of the world is no longer the only possible relationship between man and the universe.

Cet ordre, que l'on peut en effet qualifier de naturel, est lié à tout un système, rationaliste et organisateur, dont l'épanouissement correspond à la prise du pouvoir par la classe bourgeoise. En cette première moitié du XIX^e siècle, qui vit l'apogée - avec la Comédie Humaine - d'une forme narrative dont on comprend qu'elle demeure pour beaucoup un paradis perdu du roman, quelques certitudes importantes avaient cours: la confiance en particulier dans une logique des choses justes et universelles.⁹

But this society no longer exists and thus the novelistic conventions we have inherited from Balzac belong to a bygone era. The importance of powerful

individuals or family dynasties, the forms of our individuality have been replaced to some extent by the forms of our collectivity; man and his place in the world have changed greatly since Balzac. As Robbe-Grillet points out, even in Balzac's era the novel was evolving into new forms in the hands of writers like Flaubert and Stendhal;

Non seulement l'évolution a été considérable depuis le milieu du XIX^e siècle, mais elle a commencé tout de suite, à l'époque de Balzac lui-même. Celui-ci ne relève-t-il pas déjà de la "confusion" dans les descriptions de la Chartreuse de Parme ? Il est certain que la bataille de Waterloo telle que Stendhal nous la rapporte, n'appartient plus déjà à l'ordre balzacien.¹⁰

Certainly the novel has changed since Balzac, Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu being a notable development with its replacement of the omniscient, omnipresent third person narrator by the subjective first person. However, in Robbe-Grillet's view, the forms of the Balzacian novel which create a coherent, ordered, meaningful reality still predominate in much of contemporary literature, as does the humanistic view of the world they present, a world of which man is master.

On voit tout de suite pourquoi les objets balzaciens étaient si rassurants: ils appartenait à un monde dont l'homme était le maître ... L'homme était la raison de toute chose, la clef de l'univers, et son maître naturel, de droit divin.¹¹

But man is no longer in control of a totality, he has no natural or divine power over events and thus the novelistic forms which represent this control are no longer valid. However, even after writers like Proust, Joyce, Kafka and Beckett, there seems to be a desire in the sphere of the novel to perfect these past forms rather than renew and build on them. This insistence on

past forms, by people like Boisdeffre, implies that the novel does have definitive forms, forms which Robbe-Grillet still attributes, perhaps rather polemically and simplistically, to Balzac.

La seule conception romanesque qui ait cours aujourd'hui est, en fait, celle de Balzac.¹²

Thus if, as claimed in "Une Voie pour le roman futur", the aim of Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman in general is to produce a new "écriture romanesque", then the traditional forms of the Balzacian novel must be replaced with new forms which better represent man's situation in the modern world.

Hence Robbe-Grillet entered the literary world in a state of rebellion, intent on the subversion of the dominant conventions of the novel and with a desire to invent new forms and structures for creative writing. This thesis is to be an examination of how Robbe-Grillet uses colour in both novel and film to bring about these changes and thus to create the Nouveau Roman.

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Notes

1. See Appendices for comparison of colour use.
2. e.g. Sigmund Skard, "The Use of Colour in Literature," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 90, No.3 (July 26, 1946), pp.163-221.
3. La Jalousie (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957). Projet pour une révolution à New York (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970). For convenience this will be subsequently referred to as Projet. L'Eden et après (1970). Franco-Czech co-production, Eastmancolor, 100 mins. La Belle Captive (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1976). Half of the text of this "picto-roman" appears without pictures in Topologie d'une cité fantôme and the other half in Souvenirs du triangle d'or.
4. La Maison de rendez-vous (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965).

5. Instantanés (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1962).
6. La Cafetière est sur la table (Paris: La Table Ronde de Combat, 1967), p.44.
7. Pour un nouveau roman (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963).
8. "Nouveau roman, homme nouveau," (1961) in Pour un nouveau roman, p.115.
9. "Sur quelques notions périmées," (1957) in Pour un nouveau roman, p.31.
10. "Nouveau roman, homme nouveau," p.115.
11. "Nouveau roman, homme nouveau," p.119.
12. "Une Voie pour le roman futur," (1956) in Pour un nouveau roman, p.15.