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# Can color be an antiglobalization factor? analysis of colors in branding

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**Abstract:** Color, in its use as identity, is symbolically codified but, in turn, it is traversed by other codifications that interfere with its interpretability. The formulation of a chromatic identity takes into account the coherence in relation to the competence in a system that assures identity and differentiation, tradition and innovation. The expansion of companies and institutions in the global market implied the transposition of their chromatic signs. The local connotations may re-signify or neutralize the values attributed to brands and identities. Being a feature of the global communication, it is interesting the study of this phenomenon from the point of view of color, because, as a sign, color seems to be more “transparent” in its meaning than written texts or even certain iconographies.

## 1. Designed identity: being at the service of the global market

Color works as a true code in the context of an institutional image. The existence of a chromatic code presupposes an intention in its aspects of production and the possibility of being recognized by the readers or users, i.e., it shows some degree of standardization. The use of color for identity purposes is symbolically codified but, in turn, is also traversed and interpenetrated by other codifications that interfere in its interpretation. The formulation of a chromatic identity takes into account the coherence in relation to its competence in a system that assures identity and differentiation, traditional values and innovation. The expansion of companies and institutions in the global market resulted in the transposition of their chromatic signs. Local connotations may re-signify or neutralize the values attributed to the brands and identities that the companies intend to communicate. While this phenomenon is a consequence of the global communication, it is interesting to study its chromatic aspects because, as a sign, color seems to be more “transparent” in its meaning than written texts or even certain iconographies.

The formation of the very concept of corporative identity is a product of market. At the beginnings of the 20th century, and in the frame of the so-called second industrial revolution, production and design appear interwoven, inaugurating a new way of series production that adds a symbolic value to objects. This tradition is inaugurated with emblematic works such as those produced between 1907 and 1914 by Peter Behrens (a German architect and graphic artist) and Otto Neurath (an Austrian sociologist) for the German company AEG.

However, only some decades after, with the creation of the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung), the application of the principles of design at the service of a company becomes evident and systematic. One of its precursors, Otl Aicher —to whom the creation of the concept of *corporative image* is attributed— asserts that when speaking of corporative image we should speak of its representative image, the intended appearance. Everything that exists has a form, a shape, a face. The form is not only image and edge; it is gesture, presence and behavior. The image is a philosophical and moral phenomenon. Corporative identity is not the visible aspect but the complete personality of the company; the figure should not be understood as an external appearance but as a manifestation of the whole: the company seems what it is, and represents what it is.<sup>1</sup>

Identity is unity, concordance, synthesis of different elements; it should never be mere cosmetics that simply cover the objects or services as a make-up. Concerning activities of companies or organizations, this posture would imply that the inner profile of the services of a company —i.e., its know-how, its competence, its attitude— must coincide with the external profile of its services —for instance, the configuration of the product, the communication or image of the brand.<sup>2</sup>

The communicational study of corporative identity —understood as the representations or play of images of the subjects interacting in the interchanges— demonstrates that there is no univocal image but a set of ideas more or less diverse, coexistent and, however, “true”.<sup>3</sup> The identity involves at least

four complementary faces: two subjective aspects, what the subjects intimately *believe to be* (Identity), and what *the others think they are* (Image); and two objective aspects, what *they say they are* (Communication), and the so-called objective indicators (Reality), what the data —relatively true and not always known— reveal.

The work on the company or institution can only operate on the subjective aspects, but it is necessary to establish the correspondences with the “phantom” created, between the interpretants addressed by the symbols and the objective aspects of the company (objective world or reality).

The identity becomes visible and communicable by means of different objects of design (architectural, graphic, industrial, textile, and multimedia design) that integrate a system of signs. The global character of the identity —pointed out by the designer Joan Costa<sup>4</sup>— and its interdisciplinarity —emphasized by Otl Aicher<sup>1</sup>— are two dimensions which can never be disengaged from the designer of the institutional image. The identity is a complex system of signs that calls for the sensorial and cognitive domains: it is visible, audible, and communicable. This system of signs was organized by Costa by means of seven vectors that constitute the support of the global identity (Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

The communicational strategies outlined coincide temporally and ideologically with the materialization of the globalization of markets. In fact, it can be asserted that both are two faces of the same coin, and that both, global identity and global market, permanently feed back each other.

*Table 1. Vectors that support the corporative global identity according to Joan Costa (left), and our interpretation in terms of a semiotic system (right).*

1. Name (brand name) or verbal identity	Linguistic symbol
2. Logo	Verbal symbol visualized typographically
3. Graphic mark	Graphic symbol
4. Chromatic identity	Color as a symbol
5. Cultural identity	Behavioral indexes: behaviors, actions, modes of doing, gestures
6. Corporative architecture	Spatial signs
7. Objective indicators of the identity	Economical indexes

## **2. Color: a global sign?**

Is color a global sign? One of the factors that render the identity of an institution visible is color. As a factor of identification of a company and, in turn, as a factor of differentiation from its competitors, color is widely acknowledged in institutional design. As Joan Costa says, it is one of the vectors of corporative identity.<sup>5</sup>

By mentioning cases such as *The Big Blue* (IBM), we must agree that, inside the global semiotic system, color is one of the key elements in the conformation of corporative identity. Its visual impact, pregnancy, memorability, as well as its possibilities of reproduction in different applications and media are key factors in design. The perception of color is faster than the perception of a symbol; inasmuch as it works as a “signal” and not as “information”, the corporative color becomes a language.<sup>5</sup>

Color has a high impact on institutional communication because it is perceived faster than other institutional symbols such as iconographies or verbal texts. In addition, color requires less time of “lecture” than a logo.<sup>6</sup> When shape and color are adequately associated, color (the more primary element) facilitates the memorability of shape. Chromatic logos are more easily remembered than achromatic ones. In this way, color works as a factor for remembering the brand (for instance: *Kodak* yellow, *Nestle* red, *Coca-Cola* red, etc.).

But in addition to the perceptual aspects and the production and reproduction matters, the right choice of an institutional color is based on the values attributed by the addressees. Positive or negative associations are metonymically transferred from signs to objects, whether they are products or services.

The color of an institution is never apart from the more or less conscious associations that a community historically endorses to that color by tradition. For example, the color of the packaging of a product may connote cheapness or expensiveness. In the global economy it is necessary to pay attention to the values culturally attributed to colors by different people, because they can present local variations that downgrade the idea of a brand and are associated with negative connotations.

Color works as a sign that transmits symbolic values; for instance, the choice made by IBM is appropriate for the universe of technology and the vanguard: The future is blue.

### **3. The identity in metamorphosis: an imperial rainbow?**

The local identity of a population, of a nation, is a constant whose axis is the spatial variable. The modern urban project defines the city as a spatial unit. The urban identity is displayed in an infinite space that promotes difference, with its history, its people, its economic and symbolic patrimony. This urban space reproduces a sensory and affective world identified by smells, sounds, colors, which are basically referred to a territoriality.

Globalization, instead, proposes a de-territorialized identity. Marshall McLuhan's *global village* was an infinite space without frontiers or boundaries. The Internet recreates this paradigm: virtualization, dematerialization of space, and the illusion of belonging to a global fraternity. The dissolution of barriers (communicational, economic, cultural and ideological ones), whose emblem could be incarnated in the fall of the Berlin Wall, seems to be a sign of the age. In parallel, the creation of supranational entities with diverse aims was fostered (such as the European Economic Community, the Mercosur in South America, the ALCA). In this new paradigm of infinite spaces, time is the measure, and movement or dynamism is, paradoxically, the only constant.

With all these warnings it becomes evident that management, institutional or corporative identity does not mean the same thing than at their origins. Given that one of the essential conditions for identity is unity in differentiation, the very concept of *global identity* becomes dubious. In the first place, its characteristics require the acknowledgment and identification on the part of the public—not just a massive public, as before, but a global public—and, in addition, it could not anchor its communication in rigid schemes that rapidly become obsolete but, instead, it must undergo a unity in perpetual movement.

Globalization has not produced the utopia that McLuhan envisioned; nobody ignores that today the world is not a village but a gigantic market without barriers and with deep asymmetries between producers and consumers, between those who have access to consumption and those who are directly excluded from it. And communication in a globally interconnected community has created necessities instead of satisfying them.

In this scenario, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out, the sovereignty has acquired a new shape, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms joined by the logic of domination.<sup>7</sup> This new form of sovereignty responds to the concept of “empire”. In spite that this word immediately recalls the concept of “imperialism”, these theoreticians differentiate them. The national sovereignty was a condition of the imperialism, whose boundaries guaranteed the purity of the own identity and, at the same time, excluded what was different.

Imperialism was actually an extension of the sovereignty of the European state-nations beyond their own boundaries. Eventually, almost all territories in the world could be divided in pieces of land, and the entire map of the world would appear encoded with the European colors: red for the British territories, blue for the French ones, green for the Portuguese ones, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The empire does not establish a center of power—but it could be argued that the United States occupy a place of privilege in it—but is constituted in a decentralized and de-territorialized apparatus that includes the whole planet with open boundaries in permanent expansion. Within the empire there are no pure identities, but hybrid ones. This is a world governed by new ways of differentiation and homogenization. The national colors, distinctive of the imperialist map of the world, have been fused and melted together in a global imperial rainbow.<sup>7</sup>

### **4. Chromatic identity**

How were some companies able to establish a universal chromatic code? Among other factors, leadership in their markets, diffusion, and permanence are decisive. For instance, the election of red for *Coca-Cola*, when no equivalent beverage was present in the market, created a generic code for all cola beverages. In spite that what is remembered is “*Coca-Cola*”, the use of red in the competitor brands allows for the identification of the kind of beverage and for certain mimicry which would associate them to the prestige of the leader brand. Red conveys “calories”, and in this sense may be appropriate for this kind of energizing beverages with sugar and caffeine; however, the association

seems to be more of a symbolic kind. In addition, red is the preferred color for products of massive consumption, because it is regarded as a “declassifier”, i.e., a color that does not contain markers of class. Another similar phenomenon is the case of McDonald’s.

In general, once a generic chromatic code has been installed the different brands tend to reproduce it; for instance: normal cigarettes (reddish, brownish, blackish) versus light cigarettes (bluish) and menthol cigarettes (greenish). This kind of metonymic-indexical association is repeated in liquids for cleaning, mineral water (cold colors plus white), coffee or tea (warm colors plus black). The green hue, selected as an index of naturalness, has become a symbol of “ecological”.

However, these connotations only reach certain regularity in their interpretations within the frame of the class of product or service alluded. For instance, green can be selected for a bank, a health service or a university because of being a “serious” or institutional color (such as bordeaux and blue), which metaphorically and symbolically transmits “security” and “reliability” and pretends to generate trustworthiness on the part of the public.

To design a chromatic identity, then, more than “creating” the color seems to be a matter of a delicate play of insertion in a complex grammar of codes (generic, stylistic, cultural codes) which, in spite of not being determinant of the election of color, certainly imposes limits to this election. There are senses that must be “silenced”, sealed off, making then invisible; then, there are inappropriate or unacceptable colors. For instance, pink is not acceptable for male products, while is the preferred color in brands of products for girls, like *Barbie*.

However, when a brand succeeds in breaking those stereotypes, it may impose its chromatic identity as a powerful symbol. For instance, the lilac color of *Milka* chocolates is a transgression with regard to the traditional iconic associations of the product with brown, the indexical-metonymic associations (energy, calories = warm colors), or the metaphorical-symbolic values (sumptuousness, premium = gold). In this way, the lilac color creates a plus (softness), re-inventing and re-updating an old product such as chocolate.

From what has been said, we can conclude that very few brands have succeeded in fixing their chromatic identities to the public. Only the pioneers and leader brands are memorable and have established true codes that regulate the use of color.

##### 5. Chromatic identity: a factor of resistance?

The opacity of the chromatic sign is based upon its great sensibility to the context and on the fact that every color simultaneously participates of different subcodes. Then, when one of these subcodes enters in competence with another, the user decides the sense by paying attention to the criteria of relevance (in that context). This would explain how some chromatic codes that are positively interpreted in the majority of contexts could be rejected in certain local contexts.

The conscious rejection that global phobic people could make by not consuming certain brands is an isolated gesture; its action is weak in comparison with the organized project of creating a global market. However, there are zones —not of the order of what is rational but of the order of what is emotional, and for this reason more resilient— which still operate as a factor of continuity and resistance: the patriotic colors (national identity), and, associated to them, the sports identity (for instance, the colors of the national football team), and the identity of political parties.

This hypothesis would explain anomalous cases in which the local market fights against the multinational brands and even succeeds in defeating them.

One of the few countries in Latin America in which *Coca-Cola* is not the most selling cola beverage is Peru. *Inca Kola*, with “a national flavor”, is the leader. Its success is based on the exaltation of the local and autochthonous values that it represents (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Inca Kola case in Peru (blue and yellow): a transgression of the chromatic generic code for cola beverages.

Argentina—a country with no prestige as a producer of beer—has generated, however, a leader brand, *Quilmes*, whose success relies on the use of the national colors. In addition, light blue and white are colors very seldom used for beers, and for this reason become transgressors and “different”. *Quilmes* cannot make a good competition with the leader brands from common or traditional positions, but it is effective from the evocation of values of the local idiosyncrasy (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The case of *Quilmes* in Argentina (light blue) compared with other brands of beer (red, yellow): transgression of the generic chromatic code.



These kinds of associations are not unknown by the creators of a global image—for instance, they know that it would be impossible to introduce a brand with the colors of the US flag in adverse contexts.

An interesting case, where an identity was created by paying attention to the state-national axis versus the private-foreign one, was the process of privatization of national companies (state companies) in the decade of 1990 in Argentina. Something had changed, and it was necessary to show that change in the design, but some aspects were best to be hidden. In this sense, the two companies of telecommunications that divided the business of fixed telephonic services—the French *Telecom* and the Spanish *Telefónica*—selected different ways. It is necessary to make clear that the companies required a differentiation in the market, though there is no competition between them because each one was assigned a different part of the country, with “captive” customers whom they do not need to seduce. The old national company, *ENTEL*, lacked a chromatic identity. *Telecom* aimed at a national identity, its logo was an Argentine flag-telephone. In reality, it is not a continuity with respect to the past, but an overacting on the quality of being multinational, oriented to this specific market. On the contrary, in that initial moment, *Telefónica* aimed at the concept of modernization and universality, at the idea of a positive change. In a second moment, *Telecom* detached its identity from the icon of the telephone to correlate it with the new services offered. The new symbol can be seen as a metaphor of fiber optics circumvallating the globe: the promise is the future of technology as an inevitable destiny. The chromatic continuity lays down a bridge between past and future, masking the global aspects. On its side, *Telefónica* also maintains its own profile by introducing its global corporative image (the typographic mark) with a chromatic election that connotes modernity, innovation, and technology. All these attributes are desirable and are expected from a company that offers this kind of services, a reason why both companies empowered their positive images (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Privatized telephonic companies in Argentina: *Telefónica* and *Telecom*, 1st and 2nd stages.



At the same period, the state oil company *YPF* was privatized. Its image was not depreciated in the mind of the public, as it was the image of the old telephonic state company *ENTEL*. Instead, *YPF* was regarded as an emblem of sovereignty and national richness. Its position was excellent, even when, before being privatized, the government said that it overloaded its budget in order to be able to afford its bad administration. Its identity was based upon the national colors. The privatized company kept the name and also the chromatic spirit. The modifications were almost imperceptible, and seemed just a modernization of the same company. Yellow was incorporated, which may represent the sun that appears in the Argentina flag of war. The design emphasized the continuity and dissimulated the change of owners. In the last stage of this story, the company was fused with the Spanish *Repsol*, integrating both names in the same logo. However, the gas stations—of a high technology and quality—have not been modified. The commercial strategy was not to make the change evident. The

value of the local-national features makes *Repsol-YPF* different from their competitors, *Esso* and *Shell* (red and yellow), which historically represented the multinational companies (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The changes after the privatization of YPF oil company in Argentina.



When the Brazilian company *Petrobras*, with its green and yellow colors (making a clear reference to the flag of Brazil), was introduced in the Argentine context, their owners decided to make a small chromatic change. The inclusion of blue had the intention of making the identity closer to the company that holds the best position in Argentina (*YPF*), and attenuating its Brazilianness, which is an attribute not at all positive in the mind of some users (mainly because of the historical rivalry between Brazil and Argentina in football —soccer). The strategy is clearly to mimic the old national company *YPF*, still present in the mind of the consumers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Insertion of the Brazilian Petrobras oil company in Argentina. Left: original colors (green and yellow). Center and right: chromatic adaptation to Argentina (blue, green, and yellow).



Extreme cases of this strategy are produced in the publicity applied to sport clothes, where the corporate color give up in front of the colors of the team (Figure 6). The patriotic colors, the national identity, the sports identity and the political identity seem to be colors engraved in our affective memory in such a positive way that work as unconscious barriers or “chromatic vaccines” in front of the dominant and hegemonic colors of the global market. Perhaps these are the colors from which small but fruitful redoubts of local resistance can be built.

Figure 6. Lose of the identity colors of a trademark when it is a sponsor of a sports team: Petrobras (in blue) in the Racing club, and Pepsi (in blue on a yellow background) in Boca Juniors club, Argentina.



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