

Biopolitics of Colour in Mid-Century Italian Visual Culture: *Red Desert* and the 'New Techniques of Life'

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Abstract

Since the early twentieth century, colour has been used for the purposes of improving health, well-being and safety, optimising productivity, reducing accidents, and minimising fatigue and stress. In the context of these interests, it became highly important to systematically study the reactions that colour could have on a standard subject, in order to manage and regulate the space and time of the experience, from work to leisure, education to treatment. These chromo-technics of regulation can now be studied based on one of the possible meanings of the concept of 'biopolitics' as proposed by Michel Foucault. The essay focuses on Italy and particularly the period between 1957 and 1964, when several initiatives dedicated to colour were implemented. These were years of strong national economic growth and increased life expectancy, giving rise to a growing wave of 'chromophilia'. I aim to highlight several points of convergence between the dissemination of chromo-technics and *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) in order to demonstrate how the film develops a subtle consideration of colour biopolitics at the centre of contemporary visual culture.

Colour as a Biopolitical Medium

During what Regina Blaszczyk described as the colour revolution,¹ colour gained increasing attention for its practical applications in the modernist project of turning art into life, aesthetics into expertise. Utilising colour and its psychological impact, it became possible to consider and plan new shared spaces and new forms of collective life. Since the early twentieth century, new standards, operations and procedures were developed on an experimental, empirical or statistical basis to organise and rationalise individuals' perceptions through a functional use of colour. These techniques of regulation can now be studied based on one of the possible meanings of the concept of 'biopolitics' as

¹ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

proposed by Michel Foucault. As illustrated by the French philosopher, in mass society, governmentality sciences increasingly transcend the political sphere and move into the realm of biopolitics, dealing with issues relating to the regulation of the subjects' lives and bodies.² The premise of biopolitical governmentality is not necessarily linked to a state mechanism, rather it is apparent 'at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions', with the specific aim of 'the investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces'.³

In this regard, colour can be regarded as a medium of biopolitical intervention since, thanks to its psychophysiological powers, it has been able to contribute in various forms to the rationalisation plans carried out by capitalist societies during the twentieth century. On multiple occasions, colour has been used for biopolitical goals, with the aim of improving health, well-being and safety, optimising productivity, reducing accidents, and minimising fatigue and stress. The biopolitics of colour have operated on different — yet interlinked — levels, with the aim of defining standards and applying specific operations and procedures. Setting standards to be used by professionals is one of the objectives of scientific colorimetry, which takes on the task of codifying, based on fixed rules, a potentially unstable and elusive experience such as that of colour. Retracing the subjective dimension of colour back to psychological and statistical regularities became one of the great epistemological questions on the subject of colour during the twentieth century. In this regard, the introduction of the concept of the 'standard observer' by the International Commission on Illumination, within the visible colour classification system known as the chromaticity diagram (1931), appears rather symptomatic. As emphasised by Thomas Lemke, establishing a standard subject is a fundamental premise in a specifically biopolitical perspective:

The objects of biopolitics are not singular human beings but their biological features measured and aggregated on the level of populations. This procedure makes it possible to define norms, establish standards, and determine average values. As a result, 'life' has become an independent, objective, and measurable factor, as well as a collective reality that can be epistemologically and practically separated from concrete living beings and the singularity of individual experience.⁴

By studying these regularities, colour began to be used increasingly as a tool

² Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, ed. by Michel Senellart, general editors François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. by Michel Senellart, general editors François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 141.

⁴ Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 5.

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for designing public and private spaces based on pre-determined psychological and bodily reactions. As previously set out by Goethe in his *Theory of Colors*, this potential of colour took on a more evident role in the 1910s and 1920s, in what Anson Rabinbach called ‘the era of psychotechnics’.⁵ Standing behind a functionalist and productivist ideal, a series of techniques to manage and regulate body energy attempted to rationalise the body’s activities ‘by reducing each task to a series of abstract and mathematically precise movements’.⁶ In the context of these interests, it became very important to study systematically the reactions that colour could have on a standard subject, in order to manage and regulate the space and time of the experience, from work to leisure time, education to treatment. This biopolitical interest tied in with an area of research where various forms of technical and scientific discourse were integrated into various areas of expertise, such as the organization of work, advertising, architecture and interior design.⁷

During the post-World War II era, the same premise was the focus of a new wave of interest embodied in studies such as those conducted by Faber Birren in the United States and Maurice Dérivé in France.⁸ It was during this period — which Eric Hobsbawm described as the golden age of capitalism — that colour increasingly became the focus of numerous projects, techniques and methods aiming to rationalise and conceptualise individuals and their experiences.⁹ Colour is placed at the centre of a constellation of experiences which, in turn, is part of a technological and cultural context undergoing massive change, where it is necessary to consider the mutual correlation of three phenomena that took shape between the 1950s and the 1960s: a) the transition from black and white to colour in the mainstream media, facilitated by the introduction of new, faster and cheaper technologies in film, photography, television and print; b) the growing interest for colour in the field of industrial design, giving rise to the production of an increasingly large number of consumer objects available in a variety of colours; and c) the design of spaces devoted to work and leisure based on functionalist aesthetic criteria, aimed at minimising physical and mental effort and maximising comfort and consumption. In the post-war era, colour became a key subject not only for major filmmakers, photographers and visual artists, but

⁵ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), pp. 278–80.

⁶ Rabinbach, *The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 166.

⁷ On the subject of science of work in relation to the topic of governmentality, see also Jacques Donzelot, ‘Pleasure in Work’, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 251–80.

⁸ See, amongst others, Faber Birren, *Functional Color* (New York: The Crimson Press, 1937), and Maurice Dérivé, *La Couleur dans les activités humaines* (Paris: Dunod, 1955).

⁹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), pp. 257–86.

also for specialists from industry, commerce, advertising, design and many other areas.

This premise encompasses several countries in the West, creating a transnational network of techniques, practices and discourses that are still largely worthy of study. For the specific purposes of this essay, I will focus on Italy and particularly the period between 1957 and 1964, when several initiatives dedicated to colour were implemented. These were years of strong national economic growth and increased life expectancy, giving rise to a growing wave of ‘chromophilia’. Lastly, I will concentrate on an analysis of *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) to demonstrate how the film develops a subtle consideration of colour biopolitics at the centre of contemporary visual culture. The phenomenon under examination is all the more interesting where it coincides with the years of expanding consumerism and modernization in Italy (the so-called Italian economic miracle), and with the years that define the shift from black and white to colour in the leading Western film industries.¹⁰ With this approach, I aim to offer a new perception of the transition to colour in film as part of a broader renovation that permeates the visual and material culture of the 1950s and 1960s. A culture made up of a complex set of media, technology, forms of knowledge, discourse and modes of social organisation.

Chromo-Technics in Post-war Italian Visual Culture

‘Colour [...] is not only an aesthetic element to be used indiscriminately, but is primarily an energy that affects a large part of our physical and mental well-being, with implications on social issues, productivity and safety.’¹¹ These words, appearing in 1959 in the second issue of the specialized periodical *Colore: Estetica e logica*, paved the way for a biopolitical project which was to be carried out by the upcoming Centro Italiano di Studi per l’applicazione del colore (Italian Centre for the Study of the Application of Colour). Inspired by the Centre d’information de la Couleur founded in 1951 in Paris by Maurice Dérivé and the physiologist Yves le Grand, the equivalent Italian centre, directed by the artist Mario Ballocco, aimed to gather documentation on international experiences to promote its own experimental studies and research, to serve as a networking and dissemination body, and lastly to offer advice to public and private bodies. Its objectives were ambitious, although its actual impact would be rather limited. The establishment of this centre — the history of which is yet to be reconstructed — is symptomatic of an interest in colour which manifests itself through a coordinated series of activities during those years.

¹⁰ Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 41–64.

¹¹ ‘Il Centro Italiano di Studi per l’applicazione del colore’, *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 2.2 (1959), 10 (my translation).

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Between 1957 and 1960, the four editions of Italy's national colour convention were held in Padua, where scientists, engineers, architects, planners, designers and specialists from various fields came together to discuss the features and uses of colour in the spaces and practices of social life. Leading to a series of publications, the issues addressed included colour in the human environment, colour and safety, colour in schools and, lastly, colour in advertising, printing, packaging and commercial settings.¹² This was not the only important initiative dedicated to colour; in 1958, the Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnica in Milan hosted a Colour Exhibition, held by Mario Ballocco in collaboration with designers Enzo Mari and Bruno Munari.¹³ The exhibition featured sections devoted to physical optics, physiology, psychology, chemistry and technology. The exhibition was held in a large L-shaped room with fifty stands, the first of which illustrated the physical, perceptive and chemical aspects of colour, while the following ones were dedicated to examples and applications in practical settings (homes, workplaces, hospitals and healthcare institutions, schools, industries). Other stands also exhibited samples of the colouring materials produced by the participating companies, including the two main national producers of paints and varnishes, Colorificio Italiano Max Meyer and Duco-Montecatini.

In line with what was happening in the United States and France during these years, new magazines were appearing, devoted to the study of colour, while already existing magazines addressed a growing interest in issues relating to psychology and the functionality of colour. Particular attention should be paid to the above-mentioned magazine *Colore: Estetica e logica*, published between 1957 and 1964, which took a multidisciplinary approach to address a wide range of issues relating to the theory, physiology, psychology and psychotechnics of colour. The work incorporated most of the studies and research being conducted in Italy and abroad at the time. In addition to the interventions by the editor Mario Ballocco, the magazine included translations of texts by Faber Birren and other foreign scholars, as well as articles devoted to colour in interior design, furnishings, architecture, schools, places of work, shops, in the street, in fashion and all spheres of public and private life.

Since it is not possible to go back over all of the reflections and experiments mentioned in the context of these initiatives and publishing projects, I will limit myself to examples that demonstrate Italy's desire to experiment with the theories and techniques coming from abroad. I will focus particularly on the areas of medical, educational and industrial applications of colour. With regard to the former, some Italian architects — working closely with doctors — began to set

¹² *Atti ufficiali del 1° e 2° Congresso nazionale del colore: il colore nell'ambiente umano; colore e sicurezza* (Padua: Il messaggero di S. Antonio, 1959); *Atti del 3° Congresso nazionale del colore: il colore nella scuola* (Padua: Il messaggero di S. Antonio, 1960); *Atti del 4° Congresso nazionale del colore: il colore nella pubblicità, il colore nella stampa, il colore nella confezione, il colore nell'ambiente di vendita* (Padua: Il messaggero di S. Antonio, 1961).

¹³ 'La prima Mostra del colore al Museo della scienza e della tecnica', *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 2.2 (1959), 10, 39.

up care centres using chromo-technical principles. The architect Daniele Calabi, speaking at the first national congress of colour, recalled that when designing the psychiatric clinic in Padua, two special rooms were set up for children affected by tetanus. The rooms were north-facing, with small windows and screens to ensure constant darkness; the walls, ceiling, doors and beds had been painted deep blue and violet. The designer reported how the doctors discovered that convulsing children calmed down when moved into these rooms.¹⁴

In the domain of education, this period saw the spread of a series of toys and tools used for sensorial education. Several Italian schools began to use the rods created by Belgian mathematician Georges Cuisenaire, which involved teaching mathematics with ten lengths of rulers, each in a different colour, corresponding to the numbers one to ten. In some technical institutes, games were introduced that utilised colour's ability to facilitate the learning of basic concepts. One example is the 'chemistry game', where colour was used to distinguish the various chemical compounds that can be obtained. The use of such tools was undoubtedly facilitated by the growing dissemination of coloured papers and boards, plastic blackboards, toys, musical instruments and similar objects sold for educational purposes.¹⁵

However, it was the industrial sector that was most influenced by international research on colour conditioning in terms of health and safety as well as occupational fatigue and workers' productivity.¹⁶ After the national establishment of a new public safety law (DPR 547/1955), a special commission set up by the National Agency for the Prevention of Injuries collaborated between 1955 and 1956 with major Italian industries (such as Fiat, Montecatini, Edison, Sip, Finmeccanica and Pirelli) to establish a standard for security signage. The chosen colours were yellow-orange for danger, red for prohibitions and obligations, and green for other indications.¹⁷ In the same years, many Italian industries (Pirelli, Snam, Marelli, Olivetti) started researching and experimenting on the functional use of colour in workshops, which were supposed to have 'a favourable influence on the workers' physical and mental factors and, in turn, considerable economic advantages'.¹⁸

In this area of industrial activity, a leading role was played by the Italian company Colorificio Italiano Max Meyer, which took part — to a greater or lesser extent — in almost all of the initiatives mentioned above. The same company also provided the paints used to decorate the rooms and scenes for the

¹⁴ Daniele Calabi, 'Lo studio del colore negli edifici per l'assistenza', in *Atti ufficiali del 1° e 2° Congresso nazionale del colore*, pp. 167–79.

¹⁵ Pia Albertazzi Bossi, 'Il colore nei sussidi didattici', in *Atti del 3° Congresso nazionale del colore*, pp. 127–35, 283–85.

¹⁶ On the concept of 'color conditioning' and its applications in the United States, see Blaszczyk, pp. 215–40.

¹⁷ Cesare Commini, 'Il colore per le segnalazioni di sicurezza', in *Atti ufficiali del 1° e 2° Congresso nazionale del colore*, pp. 369–82.

¹⁸ 'La psicologia del colore nell'industria', *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 3.3 (1960), 40 (my translation).

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production of the film *Red Desert*, as noted in the film credits. For several years, the paint factory opened a programme called 'Colour and Function'. This was directed by Andrea Cecchetti, who had the opportunity to explore topics relating to functional colours in the United States. In an article published in 1961 in a specialized magazine, he wrote: 'to avoid the distractions of unnecessary colour contrasts, the pipes are camouflaged in the same colour as the background surface on which they are applied or projected, using colour to identify the critical points with rings (entry and exit from the room, valves, shutters, diversions, etc.)'.¹⁹ In the same article, Cecchetti specified that:

All products to be used for functional colours [...] should be brushed and not shiny, to avoid any unnecessary visual strain. There are many clear examples from American literature in this regard, but in Italy too there were significant improvements in productivity and accident prevention, with the introduction of functional colours at the workplace.²⁰

As part of the programme, the 'Energicolor' (fig. 1) method had just been launched, with a six-colour system to be used for pipes (blue, red, green, yellow, violet, brown) and the respective materials put into them (air, steam, water, gas, acids and gases, oils and various liquids), so that the workers could quickly recognise the function of each conduit without straining their eyes.

The role of companies producing dyes, paints and colourants should not be underestimated in these processes. In this same period, an increasing availability of colour in mass culture also relates to the material culture, thanks to the spread of new raw materials. In the wake of the American trend of do-it-yourself, also in Italy the sale of easy-to-use paint that could be applied by just about anyone was the basis of advertising campaigns encouraging consumers to repaint their homes, using psycho-technical principles in line with new and updated criteria of taste. An interesting example is Ducotone, a new paint produced by Montecatini, which was the subject of a press, cinema and television advertising campaign, highlighting both the hygienic qualities of the material (bacteria and mould resistant) as well as its ability to reinvent the perception of the domestic space. In colour shorts produced by Ferry Mayer, intended for cinema (*La primavera in casa*, *Invito al Ducotone*, Amleto Fattori, 1960), the speaker praises the psychological qualities of a spontaneously coloured space, stating that 'Ducotone colours relax, rejoice, comfort and rejuvenate', while the images at the same time show a series of domestic interiors with walls painted in different variants. The brand shows viewers a range of 32 different colours, accompanied by a table of colour arrangements to guide the consumer in choosing the most effective colour, to strike a balance between functionality and aesthetics.

¹⁹ Andrea Cecchetti, 'Il colore nell'industria. La colorazione funzionale nell'industria', *Homo faber*, 11.104-5 (1960), 6779-80 (p. 6780, my translation).

²⁰ *Ibid.*



Fig. 1: Colorificio Italiano Max Meyer's Energicolor System. Advertisement from *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 2.2 (1959).

Whilst colour was used to support functionality based on efficiency, well-being and consumer culture, cinema also had to realign itself within this same project, exploring the functional and subjective capacity of colour, while at the same time, marking out its boundaries, contradictions and aporias. In this regard, colour films gave rise to new opportunity for reflection on the various ways of inhabiting a world that was changing its visible skin as colour took on new meanings and functions.

A Biopolitical Film: Red Desert

A film where the biopolitical dimension of colour is explicitly addressed is *Red Desert*. The film approaches colour as an aesthetic, anthropological and social problem, prompting the viewer to reflect on the ways in which it was reshaping the spheres of experience. Within this visual and material culture, *Red Desert*

sheds light on several aspects of mid-century colour, which have thus far not been sufficiently considered in the many analyses of the film.²¹ Several writings, interviews and other evidence show that Antonioni was deeply interested in the considerations and studies on the psychology of colour and psychotechnics. These promoted what the director called the ‘new techniques of life’²² in an interview with Jean-Luc Godard published on *Cahiers du cinéma* (November 1964). *Red Desert* is full of clues which — in an almost surreptitious and hidden way — hint at a series of changes to how colour was being used and thought about in Western society.

Antonioni never chooses the path of direct reflection, but rather seems interested in understanding — through sometimes almost imperceptible allusions — the way colour was redesigning the spaces of public and private life, as well as the behaviours and psycho-physiological states of the people living in those spaces. These considerations are developed in the film through its emphasis on the psychological impact of colour and its functionality within the industrialised and consumer society. Through the pathological state of its protagonist Giuliana, the film reveals the complexity of the integration between these two levels. The film thrives on a constant tension between the way colours appear to have been designed in the diegetic world (often in accordance with the principles developed in the field of psychotechnics) and the reactions they provoke in Giuliana (and, less frequently, in other characters, such as her son Valerio and the engineer Corrado).

The film shows the viewer a milieu which appears to be designed to organise the sensory elements, while at the same time it highlights the aporias and contradictions that make this same milieu traumatic for the characters who inhabit it. Studies on the impact of colour cut across contemporary practices and media and also make it necessary to reconsider the aesthetic boundaries and potential of colour. Various moments in *Red Desert* feature spaces and environments where colours appear to be designed and distributed with a functional approach. The interiors of the factory are central to one of the opening scenes with Ugo, Corrado and Giuliana. The pipes and machinery reveal the presence of one of the canonical examples of the application of functional colour (fig. 2), as shown by Max Mayer’s Energicolour programme and the other examples mentioned

²¹ See, amongst others, Angela Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film* (London: Athlone, 1996), pp. 43–80; Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 90–108; Céline Scemama, *Antonioni. Le Désert figuré* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1998); Sandro Bernardi, *Il paesaggio nel cinema italiano* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2002), pp. 180–88; Murray Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue: Eight Reflections on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 70–110; Luca Venzi, ‘Colore’, in *Lessico del cinema italiano. Forme di rappresentazione e forme di vita*, ed. by Roberto De Gaetano (Milan: Mimesis, 2014), pp. 199–202.

²² Michelangelo Antonioni, ‘The Night, the Eclipse, the Dawn’, in *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. by Marga Cottino-Jones (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), pp. 287–97 (p. 290).

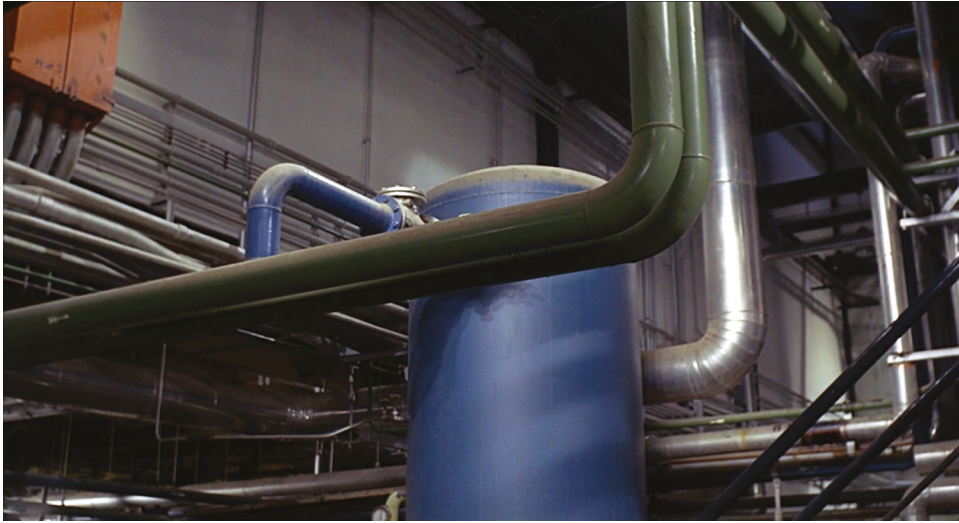


Fig. 2: *Red Desert (Il deserto rosso)*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964).

above. Antonioni himself was interested in these subjects, of which he shows a clear awareness on several occasions:

When, around the turn of the century, the world began to industrialize, factories were painted neutral colours — black or grey. Today, however, most of them are brightly painted. Even our water pipes, electricity cables, and heating systems are coloured. Behind this invasion of colour lie technical causes, but also psychological ones. The walls of the factories are coloured not red, but light green or pale blue — the so-called ‘cool’ colours, for workers to rest their eyes.²³

From the beginning, the deep conflict between these functional colours and Giuliana’s character becomes apparent. In the first sequence of the film, we see her wandering first with her son Valerio, then alone, and then with Ugo and Corrado, in and outside the factory grounds. All of the spaces she passes, from the bleak and grey industrial setting to the brightly coloured area with the machinery and pipes, are experienced as an assault on her body and senses. This creates a rift between the functional space and her experiential environment. Giuliana is quite clearly a pathological subject, a clinical case, who always over-, or under-reacts to her surrounding stimuli.²⁴ Particularly noteworthy in this regard is a statement by Antonioni’s assistant

²³ Michelangelo Antonioni, ‘Red Desert’, in *The Architecture of Vision*, pp. 283–86 (p. 284).

²⁴ On this point, see Ruggero Eugeni, ‘La modernità a disagio. Michelangelo Antonioni e la cultura psichiatrica italiana tra gli anni Cinquanta e gli anni Sessanta del Novecento’, in *Michelangelo Antonioni. Prospettive, culture, politiche, spazi*, ed. by Alberto Boschi and Francesco Di Chiara (Milan: Il Castoro, 2015), pp. 49–68.

Carlo Di Carlo (included in the script published in 1964), which suggests that ‘when establishing the protagonist’s character, Antonioni acted as if she were constantly facing a colour test [...]; a method which facilitated the investigation into her personality using the most advanced techniques in psychological and psychiatric practices’.²⁵ For several decades, the literature on psychology and colour therapy drew attention to the particular reaction to colour of neurotic and psychotic patients: attention problems, impaired sensation, changes in body temperature, fatigue, hallucinations.²⁶ As stated in an article of the time, ‘the influence of colour [...] is much more pronounced in neurasthenic and psychopathic individuals’.²⁷ Giuliana — and, at times, Valerio and Corrado — show heightened reactions which seem to be evoked by colour or other sensations of vision, hearing, touch and taste.

The violence of the sensations experienced in the factory, in the sequence mentioned above, continues to influence the following scene in which Giuliana wakes up with a start in the middle of the night and looks for a thermometer to take her temperature. She then moves to her son’s bedroom (where a mechanical robot, left turned on, keeps moving back and forth), before finally flopping over a chair on the landing. The three rooms the woman enters are designed according to the principle of taste distinctions (suggested by the elegant set and furnishings) converging with the principle of psychotechnical rationality (such as the wall leading to the bedroom, painted blue, a colour associated with rest). In this space, designed for comfort and well-being, Giuliana shows a similar physical discomfort to that shown in the unfamiliar factory environment. As noted by the director himself, there is a clear gap between her and her husband Ugo: ‘Giuliana cannot adapt to the new “way” of life and goes through a crisis, while her husband is content with his lot in life.’²⁸ Whilst, in the previous sequence, the factory is experienced by Ugo as a very familiar space, almost an extension of his domestic environment, likewise, Giuliana sees her house as an extension of the factory, one of aggression on the senses, fatigue and confusion.

In terms of the sets and costumes, this first sequence in the apartment plays with a chromatic harmony created by a series of soft, relaxing colours: white, off-white, beige and browns, as well as the blue wall. The interplay of perspectives, camera movements and editing creates constant conflicts of lines, volumes and colours, deconstructing every idea of harmony and destroying the unity of the domestic sphere. In the frame where Giuliana comes out of her room, the blue railing is filmed as if it were a factory pipe, while the repetitive motion of the robot hints at the incessant machinery work of the technological world. In the other

²⁵ Carlo Di Carlo, ‘Il colore dei sentimenti’, *Il deserto rosso di Michelangelo Antonioni*, ed. by Carlo Di Carlo (Bologna: Cappelli, 1964), pp. 27–35 (p. 33, my translation).

²⁶ Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950).

²⁷ ‘Il colore è necessario al malato e al medico’, *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 3.5 (1960), 41 (my translation).

²⁸ ‘Red Desert’, p. 284.

sequences set inside the home, protection and intimacy are constantly under threat from enormous passing vessels which can be seen from the long horizontal windows: what already seems like a home-factory also becomes somewhat of a home-port.

In this hybrid home environment, the child, Valerio, also suffers from a pathology that proves to be of a psychosomatic nature, when he seems not to be able to walk: a reaction due to an accumulation of stress caused by the overstimulation of the surrounding environment. His bedroom, it is worth remembering, is full of the sensory education tools mentioned in the pedagogical literature recalled above. To distract the child, and to dispel the fear gripping her, Giuliana — as can be read in the published script — ‘takes a piece of chalk at random like a robot, and draws a circular purple shape, seemingly meaningless, vaguely resembling a spiral’,²⁹ then traces a vertical sign with the yellow chalk. Whilst the complementary combination of purple and yellow seems to express the woman’s unconscious need for unity and harmony, the shapes she draws reveal a state of anxiety, fear and vertigo. Having moved away from the blackboard, she approaches Valerio and gently caresses him; she begins to tell him the story of the girl on the island, encouraging him (and herself) to imagine a world where colours and sound seem to belong to an earlier stage of human evolution.

The pathologies uniting the mother and son (who are — not incidentally — the two characters with which the film opens and closes) appear to be due to an adaptive difficulty in an evolutionary process brought about by the accelerated pace of industrial society and its new biopolitical way of organising sensory elements. Giuliana and Valerio are like the birds mentioned by Giuliana at the end of the film, as she explains to her son that they have learned to avoid going through the yellow, poisonous smoke to preserve their existence. Similarly, the two characters must acknowledge a new way of approaching and organising colour within consumer and mass society where — unlike the imaginary world of the island — the artificial and the natural can no longer be truly distinguished from one another. It is this adaptive and evolutionary path that Giuliana strives towards throughout the film in an attempt to engage, as explained by her husband to Corrado using his familiar mechanical lexicon (‘and the gears still don’t quite mesh’ [‘e ancora non riesce a ingranare’]). Yet, it is an exhausting journey: in the famous sequence with the barrow containing fruit painted grey, Giuliana says that she is ‘always tired’, before correcting herself, ‘... no ... not always ... sometimes’, as if she herself somehow wanted to conceal her psychological and physical fatigue.

Whilst the diegetic environments are built according to the subjects who inhabit and interact with them in order to minimise fatigue and maximise comfort and productivity, Giuliana proves unable to have standard reactions within these environments. In this regard, the scene of the little red room inside

²⁹ Michelangelo Antonioni, Tonino Guerra, ‘La sceneggiatura’, in *Il deserto rosso di Michelangelo Antonioni*, pp. 85–145 (p. 134, my translation).

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the shack is an extreme case. Red, stressed by psychology for its ability both to attract attention and arouse the senses, becomes the subject of one of the film's longest sequences. Antonioni himself stated that he would have never filmed the episode in a black-and-white film:

For example, in the scene in the hut where they are talking about drugs and stimulants, I couldn't not use red. In black and white it would never have worked. The red puts the viewer into a state of mind that allows him to accept such dialogues. It's the right colour for the characters — who, in turn are justified by the colour — and also for the viewer.³⁰

Whilst red serves as an element of intensification and excitation, as shown by the words and gestures of the characters; on the other hand, its prolonged presence overturns its function, transforming it into an element of fatigue. Between the first and second part of the long episode, an ellipsis suggests that all of the characters (except Giuliana and Corrado) fall asleep, having come down from the initial phase of excitement (suggestive games and erotic conversations).

In the sequence where Corrado outlines his plan to set up a business in Patagonia, at one point his attention begins to drift towards a few scratches on the wall of the shed, the green hills of the carboys, and the blue frame painted on the white wall. A series of camera movements — similar to the POV shots — demonstrate the power of colour to create a state of perceptual suspension, where attention is diverted away from a psycho-technical task (listening and responding to the workers' questions), losing itself in shapes and colours. The sequence takes on a strong reflective value, to the extent that the relationship between colour and attention was one of the key themes of psychotechnics, in line with the considerations made by physiology and psychology since the nineteenth century. In mass society, establishing a discipline on attention had become a key issue. The modern subject has been increasingly defined based on the ability to pay attention, that is to say, the ability to isolate a limited number of stimuli within a broader field of perception.³¹ In the context of mobile and distracted perception, psychotechnical studies had often assessed the role of colour as a key factor of engaging attention. The relationship between colour and attention was now considered central to various fields, such as advertising, sales and safety in the workplace.

Another sequence that calls into question the psychotechnical research on colour of the time is the one set in the future shop (a very particular shop with no storefront, on an almost deserted street). As soon as she comes through the door, heading towards the opposite wall, Giuliana expresses to Corrado that she is undecided about which colours to choose to paint the interior walls: 'maybe

³⁰ 'The Night, the Eclipse, the Dawn', p. 295.

³¹ On the subject of attention, see Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

light blue is better' ['forse è meglio celesti'] for the walls, 'and green for the ceiling' ['e il soffitto verde'], because 'they're cool colours that mustn't clash' ['sono colori freddi che non dovrebbero disturbare'], only to reveal she had not yet decided which products to sell. In the interview with Godard mentioned above, Antonioni remarks on the sequence:

We had to choose between warm and cool tones. For her shop, Giuliana needs cool colours because they show off better the things she has to sell. Against a wall painted bright orange, the things would be drowned out, while against a pale blue or green the objects would stand out without being overwhelmed. I was interested in the contrast between cool and warm colours; there was orange, yellow, a brown ceiling — and Giuliana realizes that for her it is no good.³²

Although this is a short passage in the film which does not appear to be of great importance, it is revealing. Indeed, Giuliana highlights her full awareness of living in a world that is increasingly organised around the principles of functional colour. The subject of colour in the retail environment was one of the most debated topics in the texts and events referred to above.³³ The female character is encouraged here to step into the shoes of an interior designer, to organise and design a way of regulating the sensorial experience of the future shop's potential customers.

In summary, through the pathological conditions of Giuliana, Valerio and Corrado respectively, the film reveals the conflict between a biopolitical concept of the subject, according to which the human being is regarded as the recipient of a series of 'techniques of life' and the concept that they themselves seek to embody, based on the singularity and irreducibility of the experience. Essentially, each of the three characters proves unable to carry out the psychotechnical tasks they are required to perform: choosing suitable colours for the sales area (Giuliana); learning through sensory education tools (Valerio); finding labour for his business project (Corrado). For them, what is at stake in achieving these tasks is a biopolitical action of treatment, rehabilitation and integration within society.

In this study on colour in mid-century Italian visual culture, I set out to highlight several points of convergence between the dissemination of chromo-technics and *Red Desert*, on the assumption that colour can be regarded as a biopolitical tool. At the end of this process, in which I have attempted to develop some interpretative and analytical hypotheses, two further clarifications are necessary. Firstly, although Italian chromo-technics regarded the whole of society as its field of intervention, its impact ultimately proved rather limited in time. Their greatest success sprang from the growing circulation of new materials, coloured objects and colour images and served to regulate their social

³² 'The Night, the Eclipse, the Dawn', pp. 294–95.

³³ See Giorgio Paini, Andrea Cecchetti, 'Il colore nei punti di vendita', in *Atti del 3° Congresso nazionale del colore*, pp. 273–78; 'Il colore elemento di vendita', *Colore: Estetica e logica*, 3.3 (1960), 34–35.

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dissemination during the period of the economic miracle and cinema's shift from black and white to colour. Already in the mid-1960s, the interest in colour could be seen in increasingly specialized areas, thereby losing the generalist dimension typical of the 'chromophilia' phase mentioned in this essay. The group of activities discussed here — primarily in the period between 1957 and 1964 — either disappeared or broke off into a large number of separate initiatives.

Secondly, it should be noted that my proposed method of analysis of a single film deserves to be tested on a larger body. However, by selecting a single case, I have highlighted the particular and paradigmatic nature of *Red Desert* as a biopolitical film. The choice of this film has allowed me to demonstrate its strong link to the visual and material culture of the time, beyond its artistic-cultural context. As such, I offer an alternative vision of the film by showing how it can be viewed from a bottom-up perspective, so to speak. Whilst the pictorial and artistic dimension is undoubtedly significant, it remains in itself insufficient to tease out the full richness of the film.