Episode 3: The Colour with Leonardo Sonnoli

Transcript of the third episode of the podcast "With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" titled "The Colour", with guest Leonardo Sonnoli. MOOC "Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré", Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre with Paolo Ferrarini. In this series of conversations, we meet designers and practitioners from every field. With them, we talk about their projects, their challenges and their working methods, always starting from Gianfranco Ferré's design principles – namely body, matter, colour, detail, volume and movement. We will discover viewpoints, disciplines and applications that help us to understand more clearly Gianfranco Ferré's vision, his cultural legacy and the relevance of his thinking in all the different fields of contemporary design.

In Gianfranco Ferré's work, colour is an alphabet – a vocabulary to draw on to describe worlds, reveal inspirations and put fashion into dialogue with culture. We find a similar vision when we look at the work of Leonardo Sonnoli, one of the most important Italian graphic designers and our guest in this episode. We meet him in his studio in Rimini to explore colour as a tool of communication, investigate its cultural value and discover its applications in publishing, graphic design and product design.

Paolo Ferrarini: Leonardo, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre, Digital Innovation for the Creative and Cultural Industries at the Politecnico di Milano. Today, with you, we will talk about one of the founding values of Gianfranco Ferré's creative process – colour. Let's start with a first question about design itself. In your work, is colour a starting point, an end point or an intermediate state?

Leonardo Sonnoli: Colour is one of the elements of the project and of the design process. Generally, I work on form first of all, and I often work in black and white – I prefer working in black and white. I like to work with letters, words, typography – not exclusively, of course – but it is clear that when you work with type, the most natural thing is to work with the strongest contrast: black, the colour of the ink, on the colour of the paper, so the traditional solution. And when you introduce colour, it is a design element – you add it because there is a reason for adding it.
When I start working and begin to put in coloured backgrounds, I stop immediately and always think of a sentence I once read by Angiolo Giuseppe Fronzoni. He said that when you start adding coloured backgrounds it means you are at the end of the line. So that is not the problem. You always try to solve something through colour when some form, something you are doing, is not working and you hope that the issue is the colour – you hope that is the problem and so you intervene on the colour, on the shade. It probably is not like that. So, I stop, go back and try to understand where the problem really lies.

PF: So, you could also work quite happily without colours – just in black and white.

LS: Well, no. Not quite happily. In the sense that I like working in black and white, I like working in that way, but many times I need colour, I like adding colour, in other words I have a reason for putting it in.

PF: Could you give us a few examples?

LS: A very simple one, again starting from the history of typography. If we look at the earliest incunabula, they are printed in black and red – reds that have now turned brown, and blacks that are perhaps a little faded. But the idea was to use natural materials to make inks and to have two inks: to have one ink which, unlike black, would stand out, which would be different, not too dark so that it would resemble black, and not too light so that it remained legible.
So, reds – also because of the minerals, resources and materials required to obtain certain pigments – were the colours that contrasted most strongly with black. When something had to be highlighted, what did printers do? They used red. Even if I imagine working with a very limited set of type – always the same typeface, without variations in weight, light, bold and so on – if I need to differentiate a word within the text, a verse, the indication of a verse in a Bible and so forth, I use another colour and at that point I use something that makes it stand out. Highlighters did not exist for printers at the time, so they used red.
So, when I have to highlight elements, when I need to create contrasts – in this case, when I am working with typography – I have two options: I can lighten things by using a lighter weight, or I can colour that element. And I use colour at that point because I need it. Or again, I might need colour to make something brighter, richer, to differentiate it and to give it a reason for being different.

PF: So, it seems that your choice of colour always starts from specific needs, but it can also be connected to your personal sensitivity in relation to a given project.

LS: Well, a project always depends on personal sensitivity. When I am asked to design something, I do it on the basis of my knowledge, my historical knowledge, my culture and therefore also my sensitivity. Sensitivity is something that can be refined. There are probably people who are naturally more sensitive, but what I have learnt, personally – through my sensitivity and my culture – is that you need to learn how to use colours. Using colour is not something natural.
You do not simply have a special talent. Or maybe there are people who have a specific talent for using and combining colours, but I am sure – because I have, in some way, learnt this myself – that you can learn how to use colours. It can also help to study colour theories, and there are many, many of them – ancient, more contemporary and so on. And you can learn the history of colours. I remember that, as a student, I read a wonderful book called "La storia dei colori" by Manlio Brusatin. Knowing their history, where they come from, also sharpens your sensitivity, doesn't it?
And then, as people always say – and as, unfortunately, anyone who does my job, the job of designer, knows – the choice of colour is always highly debatable, very open to criticism, and very easy to discuss, because anyone can pick a colour. You do not need any specific scientific or professional skills. Sadly, the majority of clients, when it comes to discussing colours, behave as though they were choosing a jumper in a Benetton shop – they simply look at shades. Lots of shades, and they pick the one they like best. It is not really like that, is it?
Sometimes I may even arrive at a range of colours which – and I am exaggerating here to make a point – I do not like, but there may be a reason why those colours are there.

Years ago, I worked on the entire visual identity of the Venice Biennale under the direction of Francesco Bonami. Bonami's request was that the poster and the communication materials should immediately convey the fact that this was a Biennale where he had invited eight – I think eight or nine – different curators and given each of them a section of the Biennale. So there was this idea of a composite Biennale. It was not the Biennale of a single director, but the Biennale of many directors. It represented, at that moment, a very broad, varied, composite, heterogeneous idea that existed in the art world.
After some trials, Bonami very decisively chose the proposal I had made among various options – the idea of a sort of palette of colours that clashed with each other. They were simply blocks of colour placed next to one another. When I started designing – when I proposed this idea of having many colours side by side – he said: fine, let's do that. It was very, very simple.
At that point I began working on the colours, on the way they worked together, and I could not make it work. I could not understand why I could not make it work. Everything I did made it look like the poster for a fast fashion chain, or something that was, in inverted commas, cute – and it did not work. Absolutely fine for a poster for a brand or a commercial campaign, but completely wrong for the Biennale.
Thinking about it, I came to the conclusion that the colours were too well matched – they worked too well together. So I took the opposite route: I started again from scratch and combined all the colours that I do not like together – the ones which, every time I see them, irritate me. It is a kind of chromatic irritation, a visual unease, but this made them extremely recognisable, because it could only be that particular combination.

PF: Has it ever happened that you were, in some way, surprised by colour?

LS: Two things come to mind, which are very far apart. More than twenty years ago – almost thirty, I think – I saw an exhibition by Peter Halley in New York. He is an artist who, at a certain point, really was everywhere, very well known at the time. I am talking about the late Nineties. He used very strange, fluorescent colours, very much linked to that period. Then, for a while, Peter Halley seemed to disappear. Now I have started seeing his exhibitions again, his catalogues and so on, and he uses a lot – still – of fluorescent colours, colours linked to matter, to metallic effects, to very harsh, very strong contrasts, beyond Pop, with extremely rigid abstract compositions. That is something I remember – at the time it struck me greatly.
Another thing that comes to mind is the architecture I have seen in Iran, in Isfahan and Tehran, with all the colours of lapis lazuli and gold used together. Again, there are contrasts, but extremely pleasant contrasts. Then everything is multiplied: the multiplication of a tiny piece of colour, a tiny decorative element, repeated millions of times, becomes something fascinating to look at. That too is an application of colour – in a pattern – which is different from using pure colour on a background.
Then there are other examples – artists who work only in black and white, which is also a matter of colour. When I see work by an artist who uses… well, another thing that comes to mind is a wonderful Ellsworth Kelly exhibition at the Guggenheim. He too, like Peter Halley, is an artist who works with artificial elements, artificial colours.
But then there are also works that… I enjoy seeing artists who work with matter and therefore, in those cases too, the result is colours or non-colours brought together with great sensitivity. Arte Povera is full of examples of artists who combine stone, tar, gold, leather and walnut – all elements

that perhaps sit within very uniform tonal and chromatic ranges, and then, in the midst of them, you suddenly find Zorio's blowtorch flame or gold.

PF: What you are saying is wonderful, because you have mentioned – I don't know how consciously – a whole series of references that are closely tied to Gianfranco Ferré's work. He very often started from contemporary art. This is clearly demonstrated by the works that formed part of his collection, which are still housed in the Research Centre. And, of course, there was also the whole exotic dimension – the Middle East, the Far East – which, depending on the collection, emerged in very different ways in his own work and in his work for Dior. And black and white… he experimented enormously with black and white, so this affinity is beautiful.

LS: Yes, black and white – and not stopping at white alone. We know that in Northern countries… there is a well-known Swedish photographer, Gerry Johansson, who told me that they have I don't know how many kinds of white. I cannot remember the exact story, but they have all these different whites.
We, here in the studio, work a lot, for instance, in publishing, and we spend a great deal of time choosing the right papers – the paper that has a white that is different from another white, depending on what you are going to print on it. So here we are dealing with materials and not colour in the strict sense, but they completely change the perception of what you put on top.

PF: Yes, perhaps it would be more accurate not to talk about working in black and white, but of working in blacks and whites.

LS: In blacks and whites, yes – with different whites and different blacks.

PF: Because there is both the chromatic element and the material one.

LS: Since we also work on exhibitions – on exhibition graphics and layouts – we are constantly waging war on adhesive vinyls and forex boards. Now that technology allows us to print on virtually any surface, we try to work with materials. And it is, I must say, great fun to find fabrics, papers, woods, metals, brass and so on and print on them. The colour changes, the sensation of what you are looking at changes.

PF: Among the masters, who are your points of reference in the use of colour – perhaps in art, in design, in typography, in graphic design?

LS: Earlier I mentioned black and white and Fronzoni – and what Fronzoni said about colour. There are graphic designers like Fronzoni, but not only him, who have worked a great deal with black and white and who show you how strong an idea and a form can be, even in relation to colour, in certain cases – particularly in posters.
I have always tried to learn a lot from the illustrations of George Hardie – the famous author of Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of the Moon" cover – who, beyond that very famous sleeve, has created many other illustrations with a chromatic range of pastel colours mixed with black and white, with line drawing, with black outlines. They are extremely interesting, simply beautiful to look at.
Someone who really taught me a great deal about using colour – in other words, I would look at his work and copy it – was Pierpaolo Vetta, who was my mentor, my teacher. He had an extraordinary feel, a perception, a sensitivity in the use of colour.

I have not yet mentioned Franco Grignani, who also worked extensively with black and white and therefore with form. Having spent his entire life working on visual perception and on what the eye perceives, his work contains endless gradations of blacks and whites. But some of his colour work is also very beautiful. For example, there is a series of covers he designed for Penguin – photographs that had been processed and distorted, with extremely bright colours that feel incredibly contemporary: a black background and these signs which, originally, were probably white, because they came from photographic treatments, and were then coloured with very vivid tones.

PF: Is it possible to design ageing? Let me explain. At the beginning, you spoke about red turning brown. With video, of course, that does not happen – it is always reproduced in the same way. But paper ages, changes, transforms and can be subjected to stresses that alter it. So, I wonder: during the design phase, do you ever find yourself having to anticipate a possible evolution over time of your work on colour?

LS: The first thing that comes to mind, in response to this question, is that when I want to use a fluorescent colour on a book cover, I think twice, because fluorescent colours are much more sensitive to light – they fade more quickly. So, if you use a colour that is, say, on the spine, after a while that fluorescent red becomes pink.
Another thing that comes to mind – because I had it in my hands the other day – is a book I designed for Guido Guidi, a catalogue titled "Guardando ad Est". Since everything was linked to the idea of light – the very title, "Looking East", evokes the idea of light – I suggested the following to Guido. It is a simple paperback with a black cover, inserted in a slipcase that has a triangular opening shaped like an arrow, a motif that then appears in many of Guido's photographs.
This book, this cover – because it has this opening in the slipcase – is exposed to light on that part of the black board of the cover. So, when you pull it out, the light has faded just a triangle, a single area. When I told Guido about this idea, he looked at me and laughed: "Are you making fun of me?", he said. And I replied: "No, look – it can be done." "Then prove it." So I made a mock-up, left it in the sun, in the light, for a few days, brought it back to him and said: "Look, you see? It works."
So, in a way, it is the light that draws the cover. It is the fading that does the drawing.
So, something that is usually very annoying – especially for anyone who loves books – namely the fact that the cover fades… here, it is used deliberately. I like the idea that this book will fade.

PF: You have almost taken a photograph.

LS: It is essentially a photograph – a drawing made with light. That was precisely the goal, which until now only Guido and I knew. Someone else would simply have seen a faded cover. But it is fun.

PF: Now we know too. Is there a colour you would never use, not even under torture, or are you open to everything?

LS: I have learnt to be open to everything. I used to be much more rigid. I used to work only in black and white and, at most, in black and red. My visual culture was formed very much on the artistic avant-gardes – the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, Germany, the Bauhaus and so on. So, I used black, red, sometimes yellow and blue – primary colours and so on. Also, because I did not know how to use other colours. And I realised that it was essentially a matter of sensitivity, knowledge and practice – that too is something you have to train.

If there is one colour that I try to use but really struggle with – because whenever I use it, everything looks worse than it did before – it is green. Green – especially very yellowish greens. Not sage greens, those slightly greyer shades, but very bright greens. I find them very difficult to use. I do not know why. It is not that I dislike them; it is just that I see… I see things as worse when they are green.

PF: That is strange, because it should be one of the easiest colours, being one of the most natural ones – it almost becomes a neutral.

LS: I have thought about this, and perhaps that is precisely the reason. I live in the countryside, I love green. At this time of year, in spring, you start seeing all the tones of green, which is fantastic – there is not a single green that is the same as another. You see this tone-on-tone palette, and I stand there looking at the little leaves. Perhaps that is exactly the reason, because for me it is a colour that corresponds to nature, not to artifice. So, I can only see it with chlorophyll, not as paint.

PF: Earlier, you mentioned the fact that clients often choose colours based on personal taste. Has there ever been a time when you dug your heels in and insisted that your colour choice had to be the final one?

LS: In some cases, I have presented projects while already anticipating potential criticisms of the colours – criticisms that would be very difficult to overcome. When that happens, I try to create a project that is colour-proof. In other words, I work on something where colour does not matter – in the sense that you can apply any colour to it – and so you avoid the issue.
This is the classic case of designing a logotype, for example. The first question you are asked once you show a logo is: "What colour did you think of using for it?" And you reply: "Why do you need to use a colour? The logo can also be black." Or, if a colour is chosen, that colour has to be the colour of all the communication materials. At this point we would need to discuss what this identity is for – whether it is for a product, for a manufacturing company, for a public institution, for a private institution and so on. I won't go into that here.
But when we design a logo, we obviously think of it in black and white. Then it may be that there is a need to add a colour, but only if that colour is to become one of the tools of identity. There are many brands that are recognised more for their colour than for their logo, of course – they build their identity on colour.
There have been some extraordinary redesigns because some of these companies – I am thinking of product-based companies – were gradually losing their identity as they lost their colour. The most obvious example, which everyone knows, is Coca-Cola, known as red and white – a red background with a white script – which in recent years had started to lose some of this distinctiveness because it had created many products. So, Coke Zero was black, Banana Coke was yellow, Apple Coke green… all these variations on different markets, perhaps not in Italy. Green cans with the Coca-Cola script were no longer recognisable, and the black cans were much less recognisable.
Starbucks did something similar. In its latest rebranding, it has very deliberately reclaimed green as its colour and made it much more prominent across all the products it sells, compared to before, when things were much more generic. Either the green disappeared, or you would have a biscuit tin with a photograph of biscuits and the Starbucks logo. Now the tin is half green and the photograph of the biscuits has become smaller.
So, every case is different. But when, in corporate identity, someone expects to have "their" colour

– as in: “This is your logo”, and they ask: “Right, and the colour?” “Why does there have to be a single colour? You can use it in any colour you like.” Often the identities we design can take on any colour. It is a logo. Obviously, it depends on the project – but we have worked on projects where the logo was conceived specifically so that it could take on any colour in different situations. Because if I have to imagine that a logo will end up on a different image every time, either it is always black and white, or it has to be able to adapt each time to the colours that are already there. So, colour is also a tool of integration within an identity.

“With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue” is a podcast curated and produced by Paolo Ferrarini for the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre. Full credits can be found in the synopsis of each episode.