

# A(blue)nt: Beyond the Symbology of the Colour Blue

## Breann Fallon

At the bottom of the swimming pool, I watched the winter light spangle the cloudless blue and I knew together that they made God.<sup>1</sup>

So blue, the word and the condition, the color and the act, contrive to contain one another, as if the bottle of the genii were its belly, the lamp's breath the smoke of the wraith...all those bluey hunters, thieves, those pigeon flyers who relieve roof of the metal, and the steal pipes too. There's the blue pill that is the bullet's end, the nose, the plum, the blue whistler, and there are all the blue hues of death.<sup>2</sup>

When I talk about colour and hope, or colour and despair, I am not talking about the red of a stoplight, a periwinkle line on the white felt oval of a pregnancy test, or a black sail strung from a ship's mast. I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning.<sup>3</sup>

### Introduction

When colour arouses feeling it does not normally do so as a symbol, but as an analogue.<sup>4</sup> In the above quotations, it is clear that the colour blue is beyond a 'symbol' for both Maggie Nelson and William Gass.<sup>5</sup> As Cohen and Matten advocate, "[s]ymbols are primarily a mode of reference... such examples are the dove for peace, the snake for Athena, the red flag for communism".<sup>6</sup> Symbols often correlate with geographical and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> William Gass, *A Philosophical Inquiry: On Being Blue* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, *Bluets*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Theon Van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, *Bluets*, Gass, *A Philosophical Inquiry: On Being Blue*.

<sup>6</sup> Johnathan Cohen and Mohan Matten (eds), *Colour Ontology and Colour Science* (Cambridge, London: The M.I.T. Press, 2010), pp. 65, 67.

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affinity, being rarely universal in meaning or in perceiver response.<sup>7</sup> Both Nelson and Gass display emotive and corporeal reactions to blue without any recognition of the blue as a reference for a geographic or cultural notion. Colour meaning seems to spring from a psychological reaction. Here, “Blue...is sharp and spiritual,”, a colour that excites the perceiver and induces particular states of feeling.<sup>8</sup> Blue is a motif that affects these individuals’ psyche, their self and how they experience their world.

In response to the emotive and corporeal experience of blue by Nelson and Gass, I will investigate the effect of blue on religious experience, beyond its use as a symbol. Via the consideration of images of the Blue Buddha (*Akshobyha*) and the Virgin Mary, I will ascertain the effect this colour has upon the experience of these representations.<sup>9</sup> To achieve this, a methodological lens of Semantic Colour Theory supplemented by theories on religious experience will be employed.<sup>10</sup> Semantic Colour theorist Minoru Ohtsuki lays out twelve pathways that display how different depictions of blue create emotional responses in the viewer.<sup>11</sup> Habel, O’Donoghue and Maddox would suggest that Ohtsuki’s pathways indicate that blue is in fact a ‘mediator’ in religious experience.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> These two particular religions have been selected due to the array of images containing blue in each, as well as the quantity of scholarship evaluating the semantics of blue in both Buddhism and Christianity, not simply blue as a symbol. Also, it is important for the reader to note that this paper does use the terms ‘Buddhist’ and ‘Christian’ to be universal. In no way am I suggesting that all Buddhism and all Christianity are monolithic and hold the same beliefs and histories.

<sup>10</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans., Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The M.I.T. Press, 1840), pp. 19, 304-305.

<sup>11</sup> Minoru Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism* (Tokyo: Daito-Bunka University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Norman Habel, Michael O’Donoghue and Marion Maddox, *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred: Introducing the Phenomena of Religion* (Underdale: University of South Australia Press, 1993); Basil Moore and Norman C. Habel, *When Religion goes to School: Typology of Religion for the Classroom* (Adelaide: South Australian College of Advanced Education, 1982). See also: Peter Jarvis, ‘Religious Experience and Experiential Learning’, *Religious Education: The Official Journal of the Religious Education Association*, vol. 103, no. 5 (2008), pp. 553-567 and Nina P. Azari, John Missimer & Rudiger J. Seitz, ‘Religious Experience and Emotion: Evidence for Distinctive Cognitive Neural Patterns’, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 263-281.

To integrate these plenteous theories, I shall firstly outline and examine Semantic Colour Theory, Ohtsuki's pathways and the work on religious experience before fusing these ideas on colour and experience in order to create a methodology in which blue is being investigated as a mediator of religious experience. I will then apply this methodology to individual perceiver responses of the colour blue in images of *Akshobyha* and the Virgin Mary. This will ascertain whether or not these responses fit into Ohtsuki's twelve pathways of blue and thus whether blue is in fact a mediator in the encounters of these sacred images and not just a symbol. What shall become evident is that although the interceding effect of blue may be unknown to the viewer, blue can play a psychological role both as a cognitive and cultural mediator in religious experience. This investigation will present blue in an entirely different light, not as a symbol, but as an active element in encountering the sacred.

## **Semantic Colour Theory and the Theory of Religious Experience**

### ***Semantic Colour Theory: From Goethe to Taussig***

Subsequent to Sir Isaac Newton's 1665 discovery of colour as a property of light (via his work with the prism), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe sought to understand the effect of colour beyond "science... and mathematics".<sup>13</sup> His 1840 piece *Theory of Colour* works through the way the eye sees colour, psychological differences between colour, and puts forward the explicit thesis that colour could "have direct, unmediated effects on people" and could also "excite particular feelings" in the individual beyond a symbolic nature.<sup>14</sup> It was here that the distinction between colour symbolism and the effect of colour was first differentiated.<sup>15</sup> Colour was no longer confined to the realm of science or to symbology but was now able to be scrutinised through a new lens – that of semantics. Despite this revolutionary way to investigate and consider colour, Goethe's work was largely rejected in his time due to the breadth of this thesis as well as a lack of wide evidence throughout the piece; Goethe has little data from individuals other than himself.<sup>16</sup> Still, contemporary semantic colour theorists recognise Goethe as

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<sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, p. ix.

<sup>14</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, pp. 304-305.

<sup>15</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, p. vii.

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the father of this particular manner of investigating and considering colour.<sup>17</sup>

Semantic Colour Theory has grown beyond Goethe's simple thesis – that colour can in fact directly influence people. Rather, the theory has been adopted by numerous scholars each with their own particular manner of looking at the affairs between the human psyche and colour. Two particular schools have arisen in semantics – atomism and holism.<sup>18</sup> Cohen, Matten and Landesmann seize Semantic Colour Theory from a 'scientific' and 'psychological' standpoint, falling into the atomism category of semantic theory.<sup>19</sup> In their 2010 work, Cohen and Matten suggest that "Colour vision engages experience-independent properties... [the] Colour semantic is not in language that the perceiver uses but is in the...perceiver's cognitive apparatus."<sup>20</sup> They continue on to suggest that "[i]n a semantic theory, colour ... is a symbol internal to the workings of the mind, a token by which the colour-vision system passes to other epistemic faculties, and to the perceiver themselves".<sup>21</sup>

While all of these contentions are true of Semantic Colour Theory (these two quotations picking up Goethe's notion of direct effect on the individual) these scholars speak of colour experience in exceedingly abstract and detached terms – Semantic atomism being characterised by this 'atom' in 'void' mentality.<sup>22</sup> An exemplar is the above quote in which 'cognitive apparatus' is used in place of a term more indicative of the emotional human element central to this particular way of studying colour – perhaps, 'psyche' or 'brain' would be a more suitable choice because the theory is centred on real people not an abstract cognitive apparatus in a void. Moreover, when speaking of their subjects they continue with this

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<sup>17</sup> See Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*; Charles Landesman, *Color and Consciousness: An Essay in Metaphysics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Theon Van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Minoru Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism* (Tokyo: Daito-Bunka University Press, 2000); Michael Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> M. Silcox, 'Semantic Holism vs. Semantic Atomism', *Language and Communication*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2000), pp. 335-349.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*; Landesman, *Color and Consciousness*.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*, pp. 75, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> Silcox, 'Semantic Holism vs. Semantic Atomism'.

abstract and detached way of speaking, for example, “the colour that *O* denotes is *necessarily* identical with *S*”.<sup>23</sup>

While this is indeed one way to tackle the Semantic Colour Theory, I find it restrictive to broach a theory regarding the emotive reaction to and effect of colour on the individual without considering *bona fide* instances of this theory; the individual and art, the individual and religious imagery and so on. Also, this negates the culture and language that is surrounding the individual and colour itself that may be further influencing the effect colour is having upon the perceiver. Semantic Colour Theory is, at its core, delving into the human psyche, in consideration of how our minds react to and are effected by colour. Leaving out the base interaction of human with colour and the records of the response to that interface leaves conclusions rooted in conceptualisations rather than in human reality.

The works of semantic holism by Taussig and van Leeuwen achieve what semantic atomism is unsuccessful in doing.<sup>24</sup> That is, both of these scholars not only contemplate Semantic Colour Theory in the abstract but also consider examples of the individual’s affair with colour while contemplating the influence of culture and language upon colour.<sup>25</sup> Take for example this quotation:

[a]s colour has a powerful effect on how we feel...clearly two important applications of colour psychology on interior design are schools and hospitals. Both can be very stressful environments but much can be done with colour to alleviate...worry and fear, and also to enhance concentration, happiness and relaxation...support[ing] different needs.<sup>26</sup>

While still speaking of colour semantics in a somewhat abstract sense van Leeuwen goes beyond the ‘atom’ and ‘void’ tact of the above atomism semantists. Rather, this excerpt indicates the ‘real-life’ effects of colour and also the importance of employing colour in particular respects. Moreover, Taussig appropriately cites Roland Barthes who notes that even “the name

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<sup>23</sup> Cohen and Matten, *Colour Ontology and Colour Science*, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour*; Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?*

<sup>25</sup> Semantic holism does exhibit links to Affect Theory by which there are nine human affects expressed biologically, this theory highlighting the individual’s emotional relationship with colour. While Semantic holism serves our purposes for this article, works on Affect Theory are helpful further reading; see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour*, p. 25.

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of colour (Indian yellow, Persian red, celadon green) outlines a...special effect of the colour; the name is then the promise of pleasure".<sup>27</sup> Again, the veracity of colour is highlighted here, but also the influence of both culture and language on the effect of colour, Taussig and Barthes recognising the greater ramifications of colour in the world of the perceiver, beyond detached psychological calculations. Fodor and Lepore argue that a holistic approach to semantics is impossible because language and culture are so varied in form and experience.<sup>28</sup> While this is a valid contention, to leave language and culture out is to neglect important influences on colour and the individual. Hence, it is important to be aware of the impossibility to gain an all-encompassing picture with semantic holism, yet, this does not negate the importance of language and culture in considering the effect of colour on the individual. It is semantic holism that will drive the colour theory I will use in this paper, for the sacred images and individuals in question are not appearing in a void and are certainly influenced by culture and language as well as colour.

### ***Minoru Ohtsuki's Twelve Pathways of Blue***

Apart from those above, one particular theorist of colour semantics proves to be useful in investigating how blue effects the individual. Minoru Ohtsuki, a Semantic Theorist of the atomistic persuasion, looks specifically at the emotional pathways of colour, how the psyche gets from viewing to emotion. Ohtsuki delineates 'twelve pathways' of blue depending on how it is being used in the object of viewing.<sup>29</sup> Ohtsuki presents his delineation in both flow chart and written form, although, being an atomistic theorist, he does not go into great detail.

The first pathway of blue looks at when it is used to symbolise the "blue moon", making the individual feel a sense of rarity. The second pathway of blue looks at the when the individual sees blue in an expanse, such as the cloudless sky (this distinction in the second pathway will be referred to as 2a).<sup>30</sup> The expansive blue leads firstly to the idea of no covering, leading to ideas of truth, honesty, fidelity and love, which

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<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes in Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, pp. 168-170.

<sup>30</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

furthermore creates emotions of happiness and contentment. Expansive blue can also lead to ideas of heaven and horizon escorting the viewer to feelings of unworldliness, eternity and then constancy (this distinction in the second pathway will be referred to as 2b).<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Ohtsuki notes that in this pathway from expansive blue down to constancy, the viewer will often bring up feelings of being close to and protected by God, Christ, the Virgin Mary or Christian angels. Finally, expansive blue indicates infinite space that can lead the perceiver to feel free and voluntary (this distinction in the second pathway will be referred to as 2c).<sup>32</sup> The third pathway refers to blue as a dim (weak) light, such as the blue of dusk. This leads to an idea of secrecy that can lead to a feeling of introversion. This secrecy can also trigger ideas of secret activity that can lead to a desire for sexual intercourse. The fourth pathway that Ohtsuki delineates is blue being used, or being seen, as water.<sup>33</sup> Water leads to an immediate notion of coolness or coldness that can trigger emotions of cruelty, distress, severity and judgement. On the other hand, the coolness of water in the colour blue can also signify awakening (this semantic of blue creating feelings of awakening is where the title of this article “A(blue)nt” comes from).

The fifth pathway notes that blue in a blue print can trigger the ideas of planning and then the feeling of being organised.<sup>34</sup> The sixth pathway indicates that the blue in blue pencil can be linked to censorship that triggers in the viewer feelings of being hidden or something secret.<sup>35</sup> The seventh pathway delineates blue uniform as a trigger for notions of authority.<sup>36</sup> The eighth pathway suggests that blue stockings can trigger notions of privilege.<sup>37</sup> The ninth pathway speaks of blue berets and their ability to create feelings of peace, protection and safety.<sup>38</sup> The tenth pathway speaks of the common term ‘blue face’ and its links to emotions of fear or melancholy.<sup>39</sup> The eleventh pathway delineates the concept of blue eyes symbolising innocence and in turn bringing out feelings of favour,

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<sup>31</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

<sup>33</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>35</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>36</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

<sup>39</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

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affection and kindness.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the twelfth pathway suggests that blue in blue veins triggers an emotional experience of dignity and graciousness.<sup>41</sup>

There appears to be a distinction between these first four pathways and the last eight that Ohtsuki fails to highlight.<sup>42</sup> It is arguable that the first four appear to be unlearned reactions to blue, something that is a human response – water, air, blue light, the sky. In contrast the last eight may be culturally taught semantics of blue. The 9<sup>th</sup> pathway is highly indicative of this. This pathway speaks of ‘blue berets’ triggering emotions of safety and protection. I would argue that this connection has only been formulated because the individual has been taught that when they encounter the United Nations (UN) blue helmet or beret that they are a force there to help, the blue beret thus being linked to emotions of safety and protection. However, if one had no concept of the UN and saw such a hat for sale in a store, it is questionable that emotions of safety and protection would result from seeing such an adornment. Pastoureau acknowledges this argument in his work *Blue* in which he states, “colour is a natural phenomenon, but is also a complex cultural construct.”<sup>43</sup> Despite this criticism of Ohtsuki’s simplicity, whether ‘human’ or ‘constructed’ these pathways will be vital in determining and supporting the link between blue in sacred images and the emotions felt by the perceiver.

***Supplementing Semantic Colour Theory with Theories on Religious Experience***

Secondly, to theories on religious experience which are needed to supplement Ohtsuki’s twelve pathways and bring forward scholarship on the concept of the ‘mediator’. Norman C. Habel has joined with Basil Moore in *When Religion Goes to School: Typology of Religion for the Classroom* (1982) and also Michael O’Donoghue and Marion Maddox in *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred: Introducing the Phenomena of Religion* (1993) to discuss the essentials of religion, including religious experience.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 170.

<sup>41</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168-170.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Habel, O’Donoghue and Maddox, *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred*; Moore and Habel, *When Religion goes to School*.



Within both of these works the binary of ‘immediate’ versus ‘mediated’ religious experience is presented. The former refers to a direct experience of the divine without any interfering constructs. The latter refers to an encounter with the divine that is influenced by outside forces. These forces may include symbols, ritual, texts, individuals, space and totems – these are referred to as ‘mediators’.<sup>45</sup> Although Habel et al. make the reductionist mistake of amalgamating colour into the ‘symbol’ category, when one considers Ohtsuki’s pathways, it appears as though colour also acts as mediator.<sup>46</sup>

Some interesting critiques arise from this concept of a ‘mediator’ which must be aired before investigating whether or not blue can play the role of a mediator in religious experience. Firstly, Peter Jarvis argues that the concept of an ‘immediate’ religious experience is impossible; humans cannot naturally learn religious experience, we can only take on interpretations of religious experience, which creates solely culturally mediated religious experience.<sup>47</sup> What arises from Jarvis’ notes is not only that he disagrees with any concept of ‘immediate’ religious experience but also that he qualifies mediation. For Jarvis, religious experience must be influenced by cultural or social phenomena. This raises the question what can be a ‘mediator’? Habel et al. only raise palpable cultural and social notions, which Jarvis also underlines; totems, texts, places, rituals, symbols, people. However, Azari, Missimer and Seitz argue that religious experience can in fact be “cognitively mediated.”<sup>48</sup> Azari, Missimer and Seitz suggest that “neural networks” can influence religious experience.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the reactions that up to this point have been referred to as human emotions or human responses are in fact our own natural mediations from simply being human. This can be contrasted with the cultural mediation of Habel et al. and Jarvis but also set aside from an ‘immediate’ experience which would arguably need to take place in a vacuum. Hence, the binary of ‘mediated’ versus ‘immediate’ is far more complicated than Habel et al. originally set out.

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<sup>45</sup> Moore and Habel, *When Religion goes to School*, p. 90.

<sup>46</sup> See Moore and Habel, *When Religion goes to School*, pp. 186, 216.

<sup>47</sup> Jarvis, ‘Religious Experience and Experiential Learning’.

<sup>48</sup> Azari, Missimer and Seitz, ‘Religious Experience and Emotion’, p. 263.

<sup>49</sup> Azari, Missimer and Seitz, ‘Religious Experience and Emotion’, p. 263.

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This is crucial for Ohtuski's work on the semantics of blue and the conclusions I will make on blue in religious experience. This is because, on the back of Pastoureau, I previously suggested that there appears a distinction between the first four pathways of the twelve as unlearned responses in comparison to the last eight which appear to be more culturally contrived.<sup>50</sup> Now, with the addition of these theories on mediation, when one applies this lens of differentiated mediation, it appears that the first four are in fact 'cognitively mediated' and the last eight are 'culturally mediated'. This is imperative for the combination of these two theories illustrate that all experiences of blue are in fact mediated. No encounter of the colour blue falls into the 'immediate' category of religious experience.

As such, I will now consider images of *Akshobyha* and the Virgin Mary, discussing how blue effects the viewer in each case and highlighting whether or not blue is holding a role as a mediator and if this mediation can be affirmed as cultural or cognitive.

### **The Colour Blue in Sacred Imagery**

#### ***Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhist Examples of Blue as a Cognitive and Cultural Mediator***

Unlike the solely compassionate emotions and responses to the Virgin Mary that shall come forward in the latter section of this paper, the blue in Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhist imagery can excite emotions of fear as well as love. To examine these emotions, the blue skinned figure of the Blue Buddha (hereafter *Akshobhya*) is the foremost example. The blue-skinned Buddha, *Akshobhya*, first appears c. 147 CE as a figure in *Āchūfō Guó Jīng*, one of the oldest known Pure Land texts.<sup>51</sup> Don Pavey notes that the blue-skin of *Akshobyha* can be a symbol for compassion, contemplation and intuition.<sup>52</sup> However, Pavey and others also note and evidence that the blue-skin of this figure can create an emotional response and also aid in religious experience.

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<sup>50</sup> Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Jan Nattier, 'The Realm of *Aksobhya*: A Missing Piece in the History of Pure Land Buddhism', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2000), pp. 71-102.

<sup>52</sup> Don Pavey, *Buddhist Colour* (London: Lulu, 2009), p. 14.

Firstly, Pavey notes that this figure often inspires “deep contemplation” but also “fear” and “compassion” in perceivers.<sup>53</sup> Jan Slavik also picks this up in *Dance of Colours* stating that while this figure “governs the mind” it is also seen as a “ruling figure” which often left respondents feeling a mixture of fear and compassion.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in his blog, *Peregrine Poise: The Human Potential* Stephen Stansfield speaks of seeing *Akshobyha* and feeling “devoured” by this figure (which Stansfield notes is a necessary religious experience on the road to Enlightenment).<sup>55</sup> Both Stansfield and Pavey also allude that this figure as definitively otherworldly, and when encountered creating a feeling of being joined to the Pure Lands.<sup>56</sup> Continuing this, Slavik notes that some Mahayana Buddhists feels as if *Akshobyha* is the ruler of the mind and invisible knowledge, rather than anything tangible and this-worldly.<sup>57</sup>

Although there is a mix of emotions here that are being felt by the viewer, they all still fit into Ohtsuki’s delineated pathways. The notions of deep contemplation, the unworldly and compassion expressed by the respondents of Pavey and Slavik as well as in Stansfield’s own encounter fit into Ohtsuki’s second pathway (2a and 2b) – blue as expanse creating the emotions truth, honesty, fidelity, love, happiness, contentment as well as feelings of unworldliness, eternity and constancy.<sup>58</sup> This is unsurprising as the amount of blue in this image is great, the viewer noticing the expanse of blue and as such walking down the second pathway and having this emotional response to the image. Moreover, all three of these accounts of seeing *Akshobyha* mention fear, especially Stansfield’s encounter in which he felt ‘devoured’. This emotional reaction to the blue-skinned *Akshobyha* correlates directly with Ohtsuki’s tenth pathway that notes when blue is

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<sup>53</sup> Pavey, *Buddhist Colour*, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Jan Slavik, *Dance of Colours: Basic Patterns of Colour Symbolism in Mahayana Buddhism* (Goteborg: Etnografiska Museet i Goteborg, 1994), p. 193.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Stansfield, ‘Akshobhya and Acala: From Wrath to Reality (Or How To Transform Your Anger into Abhirati, the Pure Land of Unconditioned Love)’. <http://peregrinepoise.com/akshobhya-and-acala-from-wrath-to-reality-or-how-to-transform-your-anger-into-abhirati-the-pure-land-of-unconditioned-love/>. Accessed online 22/05/2014.

<sup>56</sup> Stansfield, ‘Akshobhya and Acala: From Wrath to Reality (Or How To Transform Your Anger into Abhirati, the Pure Land of Unconditioned Love)’; Pavey, *Buddhist Colour*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>57</sup> Slavik, *Dance of Colours*, p. 194.

<sup>58</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 169.

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used in a face it can cause emotions of fear.<sup>59</sup> Again, this is unsurprising due to the depiction of *Akshobyha* as being entirely blue skinned.

Taking this further, Vensus A. George notes that the image of *Akshobyha* is vital in helping Buddhist meditators to experience transcendence of the earthly realm.<sup>60</sup> While this does fit into Ohtsuki's second pathway (2b) of eternity and unworldliness, there is an extra element here that Ohtsuki alludes to but does not discuss directly. Blue is being used here in a particular fashion: it is being employed in a manner that disturbs earthly materialities. The blue skin of *Akshobyha* is entirely other to the perceiver, there are limited ways in which the viewer could connect this figure to this world and their life in this realm. This is a prime example of cultural mediation. The viewer has been conditioned to connect reality with flesh colours of skin; blue does not fit in with the cultural code of skin colours. As such, the perceiver is influenced to think of *Akshobyha*'s depiction as otherworldly. In fact, without the blue skin of this figure, it is arguable that viewing his image in mediation practices would not aid in the viewer's feeling of the otherworld. Ohtsuki does allude to this in his tenth pathway; blue face inspiring fear.<sup>61</sup> This pathway is suggesting that a blue face is other to the perceiver although it does not state it directly or concisely. Not only does this example show blue actually aiding in a religious experience (here, transcendence) but it also displays the influence of culture on the mediation of blue.

The reactions to the depiction of *Akshobyha* align perfectly with Ohtsuki's pathways, displaying the psychological and emotion effect the blue in this image has upon the perceiver's experience. Blue is definitely playing the mediating role here, exciting and inducing particular states of feeling.<sup>62</sup> Firstly, in the foremost examples of this section, the links between Ohtsuki's pathways and the emotion felt by the viewer in the works of Pavey, Slavik and Stansfield exemplify the manner in which the blue of this figure is influencing their connection with and reaction to this sacred figure. More so, in George's note it is evident that the colour blue

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<sup>59</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 170.

<sup>60</sup> Vensus A. George, *Paths to the Divine: Ancient and Indian* (Washington: The Council for Research and Value Philosophy, 2008), pp. 489-490.

<sup>61</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>62</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 207.

is vital in aiding transcendence and meditation practice. Hence, it is evident that the religious experience is mediated by the blue of *Akshobyha*'s image.

***Christian Examples of Blue as a Cognitive and Cultural Mediator***

Of all Christian imagery, the one depiction that has become inseparable from the colour blue is the image of the Virgin Mary. Prior to the twelfth century, in the Ottonian and Carolingian empires Mary was simply seen as a figure of grieving and sacrality as she was most often depicted in black. Michel Pastoureau notes however, that in the twelfth century, when blue first began to be used as the Virgin Mary's robes, the relationship with and reaction to her image began to change.<sup>63</sup>

To explore this facet of my argument, I will first consider scholarly commentary on an array of images of Mary and blue. Pastoureau focuses upon *the Virgin of Chartres* and *The Wilton Diptych* (Figure 1) stating that medievalists viewing these two images of Mary felt "notions of divinity" and also links to the "celestial realm".<sup>64</sup> John Gage also cites *The Wilton Diptych* noting that viewers of the Renaissance described Mary in this image as being above gender due to her blue garb.<sup>65</sup>



Figure 1: *The Wilton Diptych*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Wilton\\_Diptych\\_\(Right\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Wilton_Diptych_(Right).jpg)

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<sup>63</sup> Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, pp. 50-53.

<sup>64</sup> Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Culture*, p. 130.

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This reaction to Mary as being above gender signals to blue as a link to the unworldly and, again, the ‘celestial realm’. Pastoureau’s recording of feelings of “divinity” and the “celestial” in conjunction with Gage’s recognition of viewers feelings Mary’s “unworldliness” suggests that the blue of this image fits perfectly into Ohtsuki’s second pathway (specifically 2b) of blue semantics; expansive blue as triggering the human cognitive mediation of emotions of unworldliness, eternity, constancy and divinity.<sup>66</sup> Although not a focus of these scholars’ investigations, it is important to note that while these images use blue for Mary’s robe they also use the same colour to frame her figure. This use of blue as a frame is imperative to recognise because widening the expanse of blue in the image can enhance feelings of divinity and the celestial realm as it triggers a secondary human cognitive mediation of links to the air and the heavens (pathway 2c).<sup>67</sup>

The current affairs between the individual and Mary’s blue depiction are ubiquitous. Firstly, those devoted to the Virgin Mary have come to be known as “the Blue Army.”<sup>68</sup> These believers felt the colour was said to invoke the true emotions of Mary’s immaculate heart and was defining to their cause.<sup>69</sup> The emotions evoked here fit into Ohtsuki’s second pathway of blue as expanse that denotes ideas of truth, honesty, fidelity and love stand to also create emotions of happiness and contentment (specifically 2a).<sup>70</sup> Whether the members of the Blue Army have this response due to their own cognitive mediation or external cultural mediation is unclear, although the notion that their experience is being, at base, mediated by colour is unquestionable. Jacqueline Doyle, in ‘Meeting the Virgin Mary’, also highlights these mediated emotions of Ohtsuki’s second pathway. Doyle documents a Mexican woman’s description of seeing the Virgin Mary.<sup>71</sup> In this quotation take note that the colour blue is ever present as a background to her experience of the Virgin. The woman states:

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<sup>66</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

<sup>67</sup> Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, p. 50.

<sup>68</sup> The ‘Blue Army’ indicated here is not attributed to any particular manifestation of the group, rather to a general following of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>69</sup> E. Ann Matter, ‘Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the late Twentieth Century’, *Religion*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2001), p. 146.

<sup>70</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

<sup>71</sup> Jacqueline Doyle, ‘Meeting the Virgin Mary’, *Frontiers: Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2013), pp. 114-123.

The Blessed Mother...her pale blue robes glowing, luminescent...Her arms would be outstretched. Stars would twinkle in the clear, midnight blue sky. She'd gaze down at me with such kindness and mercy that my heart would lift and expand. I'd be willing to do anything for her, face down unbelieving clerics, imperious bishops, even the pope.<sup>72</sup>

As with the Blue Army, Love is a key emotion here but this woman's fidelity (Ohtsuki pathway 2a) to Mary is beyond that of the above examples. This woman holds the Virgin above some of those on earth (bishops, the Pope) that would hold a strong hand in her salvation. Again, although she is clearly being influenced by the colour blue, it is difficult to confirm whether this woman's astounding response is due to her own *cognitive* mediation or *cultural* mediation. Yet the fact that she is willing to negate the power of the Pope suggests that she is less influenced by normative cultural narratives and her experience leans more towards the former type of mediation.

Interestingly, in her piece *Blue Mythologies*, social scientist Carol Mavor actively documents her response to blue objects. Mavor is writing in order to see the effect blue is having on her; her response to blue is not spontaneous because she is committed in seeking it. In complete opposition to the individuals above, Mavor is openly considering blue as a mediating force in her religious experience. Her response to Francesco de Zurbaran's *Virgin of Mercy* also picks up these emotions felt by the Blue Army and the Mexican woman in Doyle's work (Figure 2).

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<sup>72</sup> Doyle, 'Meeting the Virgin Mary', p. 120.



Figure 2: Francisco de Zurbarán *Virgin of Mercy*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bellas\\_Artes\\_Sevilla.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bellas_Artes_Sevilla.jpg)

Mavor states, “I am bowered [enclosed] by the Virgin’s cloak in Zurbarán’s *Virgin of Mercy*. I am under a blue sky, near a lake...circled with blue”.<sup>73</sup> This example has been included because not only does it exemplify the emotions of Ohtsuki’s second pathway (here, 2b) but more importantly it adds an extra element to the mediating effect of colour.<sup>74</sup> This is due to the fact that even though Mavor was aware of her seeking for mediation, she remained to be directly effected by the colour blue in the image, leading to an emotional response. Hence, being aware of the mediating properties of colour in religious experience does not necessarily dilute the influence of colour on the individual’s encounter.

Crucially, Pastoreau notes that these specific emotional responses exhibited in all of these examples would have been highly unlikely in the centuries before those in which the Virgin was depicted in blue garb.<sup>75</sup> To clarify Pastoreau; blue is not the only colour that can formulate an emotional response. For example, the Virgin is often depicted in red in the

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<sup>73</sup> Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p. 118.

<sup>74</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, p. 168.

<sup>75</sup> Pastoreau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, p. 52.



Netherlands, this colour conveying a feeling of beauty.<sup>76</sup> However, blue is the only colour that will bring out these particular emotions - truth, honesty, fidelity, love, happiness and contentment.

Just as with the blue-skinned *Akshobyha*, what has become evident from these examples of encounters with the images of the Virgin is that while the colour blue in the image can be a symbol, it also holds a role as a mediator in these religious experiences. While in most cases it is not clear whether blue in the above cases is influencing as cognitive or cultural mediator, the base role of blue as a mediator (whether the viewer is aware of it or not) in the religious experience of Christian imagery is undeniable. In cases from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and to contemporary times blue presents itself as an element that effects the perceiver and adds to their experience of the sacred.

## **Conclusion**

Colour is an aspect of aesthetics that is understudied, yet should not be ignored. As has been demonstrated in this paper, amalgamating colour into the category of symbology neglects an entire area of influence upon the religious experience. In combining Semantic Colour Theory and work on religious experience, I have given colour, specifically blue, its due spotlight. Via Minoru Ohtsuki's twelve pathways of blue semantics, it has become evident that blue has a direct effect upon those perceiving it and can create in them an emotional response that influences their experience of the religious.<sup>77</sup> Just as a text, individual, totem, symbol or space, colour is a 'mediator' in the religious experience.<sup>78</sup> In examples from both Buddhism and Christianity, *bone fide* encounters of individuals feeling fear, love, compassion and other emotions because of blue have been investigated, and, just as in the cases of Nelson and Gass at the start of this paper, these emotional reactions were not caused by the symbology of blue but rather the effect of blue.

Moreover, in some cases, it has been demonstrated that blue is vital in directly creating particular religious experience, blue aiding the individual in reaching transcendence in meditation practices. Hence, my

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<sup>76</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Culture*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>77</sup> Ohtsuki, *A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Colour Symbolism*, pp. 168-170.

<sup>78</sup> Habel, O'Donoghue and Maddox, *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred*; Moore and Habel, *When Religion goes to School*.

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investigation has given a new face to blue, one beyond its typical symbolic mask, for it does adhere to the role of a 'mediator'. Blue is a motif which can effect the psyche, the self and the experience the world. The colour blue can excite, can frighten, can empower – blue mediates the experience of the sacred.