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Fugitive Images and Visual Memory in Goethe’s Discourse on Color

Like his philosophical counterpart, Spinoza, Goethe envisioned the animate unity of nature as a universal landscape where endless processes of composition and decomposition transpire to constitute the sensate world as a vast region of liminality. Goethe’s system of color understood the power of light, as one of the most elusive of the modes of the divine, through its fugitive effects in color production. His symbolic color wheel, which records the restorative capacity of the eye to maintain itself in chromagenesis, helped him to frame the question of visuality as a question of survival and of memory as well.

Goethe’s Spinozan Construction of Nature

Fundamental to Goethe’s understanding of a single system of nature is Spinoza’s argument that the divine substance remains in essence indivisible, although it exists physically – and can exclusively be known – as an infinitely variable assemblage of interacting bodies.1 “In jedem lebendigen Wesen”, the “Studie nach Spinoza” (1784–1785) asserts, “sind das, was wir Teile nennen, dergestalt unzertrennlich vom Ganzen, daß sie nur in und mit demselben begriffen werden können”2 [“In every animate being what we call parts are inseparable from the whole in such a manner that they can be grasped only in and through the same”] (FA 25: 15). That is, even if the parts of “the whole of nature as one individual” can “vary in infinite ways”, this necessarily happens – according to the monotheistic framework of Spinoza’s metaphysics – “without

1 Ethics Book I, Prop. 13 and 21. All references to Spinoza will be made according to the Dover reprint edition of the Bohn Library, Benedict de Spinoza: Works. Vol. 2. Trans. by R.H.M. Elwes. New York: Dover 1955. I will indicate the book and proposition numbers, etc. for the Ethics in parentheses. According to Spinoza’s metaphysical system, bodies are (extensive) modes of the divine, natura naturata, or “the order and connection of things”. See Genevieve Lloyd: Spinoza and the Ethics. London and New York: Routledge 1996. P. 48. Although their reality is fragmentary, each body partakes of the divine totality, or nature (natura naturans), which is in turn expressed through the dynamic series of all corporeal determinations and transformations. For Spinoza, bodies are virtual, or commemorative, sites where the effects of hidden causes collect and become visible as the perpetual record of each body’s actions and sufferings. When Goethe characterizes colors as the “Taten” and “Leiden” of the divine light on the first page of the “Vorwort” [“Preface”] of Zur Farbenlehre (1810) (FA 23/1: 12), he is establishing a basic connection between his own teachings on color production and Spinoza’s Ethics (1677).
2 Unless otherwise noted, the translations of all German citations are my own.
any change to the individual as a whole". The “face of the whole universe” may be infinitely expressive, Spinoza muses in a letter to Tschirnhausen in 1675, but it endures eternally as the same face.

Much like the unified totality of the Jewish philosopher’s self-generative and metamorphosing God, Goethe’s system of nature strives to maintain itself in dynamic encounters between and among finite modes of interacting bodies. In its Spinozan incorporation as complex individual, the Goethean “Gott-Natur” is thus a self-regulating engine, or assembly of “Triebräder” that similarly endures as its evanescent forms constitute and reconstitute themselves within a dynamic web of complex relatedness.

3 Spinoza: Ethics Book II, Lemma 7 note.
5 The sustaining environment that holds and contains us “verbirgt sich in tausend Namen und Termen und ist immer dieselbe” (“conceals itself in thousands of names and terms and is always the same thing”) (FA 25: 13), Tobler proclaims in his aphoristic Tierfurt-reflections about a century later. Toward the end of his life Goethe recognized Tobler’s nature-rhapsody as so in harmony with his own youthful Spinozism that he might have composed it himself. See his “Erläuterung zu dem aphoristischen Aufsatz ‘Die Natur’” (“Explication of the Aphoristic Essay, ‘Nature’”) (FA 25: 81).
7 FA 2: 685.
8 “Polarität” and “Steigerung” (“Polarity” and “intensification”) according to Goethe’s “completion” of Tobler’s fragment, are the “zwei großen Triebräder aller Natur” (“two great gears of all nature”) (FA 25: 8). In its materiality – Goethe’s commentary implies – polarity resembles the divine attribute that Spinoza called extension (body), while intensification resembles his attribute of thought (mind). Goethe’s configuration of nature as an assembly of gears in this posthumously published essay is clearly indebted to Spinoza’s determinism, which had already been celebrated, as early as 1771 in his Zum Shakespears Tag. There a fictional Shakespeare-enthusiast claims to have discovered the driving engine of the genial playwright’s theater of nature within a mysterious point where “das Eigentümliche unseres Ichs, die prätendierte Freiheit unsres Wollens, mit dem nothwendigen Gang des Ganzen zusammenstoß” (“the most intimate possession of our selves, our imagined freedom of will, collides with the necessary course of the whole”) (FA 18: 10).
9 In 1773 Goethe had celebrated the cathedral at Strasbourg as a living network of connected parts. Its architect Erwin, the speaker proclaims, whose gothic structure is a personal monument to his own genius, has reproduced the complex harmonies of God’s