AREA 31(2)
MAYO-OCTUBRE DE 2025
ISSN 2591-5312

DOSSIER
© SI-FADU-UBA

WHAT DO THE COLOURS OF THE MET GALA REVEAL ABOUT THE WESTERN SITUATION? A SEMIOTIC INQUIRY

¿QUÉ REVELAN LOS COLORES DE LA GALA DEL MET SOBRE LA SITUACIÓN EN OCCIDENTE? UNA INDAGACIÓN SEMIÓTICA

KEYWORDS
Semiotics,
Fashion semiotics,
Semiotics of colour,
Brand marketing,
Semiotics of culture,
Colour theory

PALABRAS CLAVE
Semiótica,
Semiótica de la moda,
Semiótica del color,
Marketing de marcas,
Semiótica de la cultura,
Teoría del color

LUCA LOSARDO
University of Turin
Communication and Media Cultures
Turin, Piedmont, Italy

RECIBIDO
31 DE MAYO DE 2025
ACEPTADO
18 DE SETIEMBRE DE 2025

EL CONTENIDO DE ESTE ARTÍCULO ESTÁ BAJO LICENCIA DE ACCESO ABIERTO CC BY-NC-ND 2.5 AR

INFORMATION FOR CITING THIS ARTICLE
Losardo, Luca (2025, May-October). What do the colours of the MET Gala reveal about the Western situation? A semiotic inquiry. *AREA*, *31*(2), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.62166/area.31.2.3630

ABSTRACT

How can we understand which are the values circulating in a semiosphere –a topological space where meaning circulate linked to a specific culture– by looking at the colours? Our hypothesis is that, considering Oberascher's cycle of colour phases, and confronting it with the colour trends proposed on runways, the Met Gala, and Pantone "Color of the Year", it is possible to attest the situation of our semiosphere, i.e., *explosion*, *stability*, *growth* or *extinction* of meaning attribution from a culture. If there is a change in the order of the cycle, it will mean an *explosion* of the semiosphere; if there is a *stability*, the colours are going to gradually change; if there is a *growth*, there is a rhythm; if there is *extinction*, there is a stagnation of a phase over prolonged time. Therefore, which is the condition of the Western semiosphere? Focusing on the colour presented at the Met Gala and on the Pantone "New Year Color" selection, the answer that emerges is that the semiosphere is, at the moment, in an *explosive* phase: there are big swings in action, changes that are conducting to a switch of values related to the thirties, such as technological advancement and political recession that could lead to the *extinction* of the semiosphere.

RESUMEN

¿Cómo podemos comprender los valores que circulan en una semiosfera –un espacio topológico donde circula el significado vinculado a una cultura específica– observando los colores? Nuestra hipótesis es que, considerando el ciclo de fases de color de Oberascher, y comparándolo con las tendencias cromáticas propuestas en las pasarelas, la Gala del Met y el "Color del Año" de Pantone, es posible constatar la situación de nuestra semiosfera: la explosión, *la* estabilidad, *el* crecimiento *o la* extinción *de la atribución de significado de una cultura. Si se produce un cambio en el orden del ciclo, surgirá una* explosión *de la semiosfera; si se produce* estabilidad, *los colores cambiarán gradualmente; si se produce un* crecimiento, *aparecerá un ritmo; si se produce una* extinción, *se dará el estancamiento de una fase durante un tiempo prolongado. Por lo tanto, ¿cuál es la situación de la semiosfera occidental? Al centrarnos en los colores presentados en la Gala del Met y en la selección "Color del Año" de Pantone, la respuesta que surge es que la semiosfera está, en este momento, en una fase* explosiva*: hay grandes oscilaciones en acción, cambios que están llevando a una modificación de valores relacionados con los años treinta, como el avance tecnológico y la recesión política que podrían llevar a la* extinción *de la semiosfera.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luca Losardo. Bachelor of Communications Studies and Master of Communication and Media Cultures taken at the University of Turin, Italy. His research focuses on the intersection of socio-semiotics, fashion theory, cognitive studies, and design. In 2024, he participated in the "Semiotic Resonance" summer retreat in the Czech Republic, co-directed by Prof. Massimo Leone in collaboration with the International Semiotics Institute (ISI). He has published in *Linguistic Frontiers* a paper about heels and their "sounding silhouette" thanks to a analysis of "The Devil Wears Prada" movie.

✉ <luca.losardo.20@gmail.com>

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Luca Losardo: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Introduction

This essay aims to explore the situation of our semiosphere (Lotman and Uspenskji, 1975), meaning a semiotic space where there is a nucleus and there are margins. The margin is composed of a double space: the one directly linked with the nucleus (ES1) and the one directly linked with the external part (ES2). In this "in-between" territory (ES1 and ES2) the exchange and the "translations" between cultures start. This margin (ES2) has, in fact, a membrane that can be open or closed. The activity of selection used inside a semiosphere, i.e., "translation" from another culture (semiosphere), tells us about the values that are prominent inside it. Even past events or uses of the same culture in a new chain of associations recall this *translation* process. For this reason, looking at occurrences like the Met Gala[1], which is a coded event, gives us the possibility to understand which values are being shared in the nucleus of Western semiosphere.

Why looking at this coded and culturally relevant event? Because, if "the semiotic focus considers color as an element objectively *apt to substitute* entities of another universe, and to be organized in meaningful sets" (Magariños de Morentin, 1981, p. 61, in Caivano, 1998, p. 394), we consider the universe to be translated as the *condition of Western semiosphere*. In order to achieve this aim, we have decided to take into account the most used colours at the 2025 Met Gala event. Since it is a conventional event, the *ratio* is *facilis* (Eco, 1975), i.e., a token corresponds to a specific type. In fact, all the artists and their stylists explain the meaning of the clothes. For example, during the 2025 Met[2] –theme *Superfine: Tailoring Black Style*– Lewis Hamilton[3] underlined how the ivory colour meant *purity* considering the African heritage, also highlighted by the use of seashells –in the past, a currency.

At the same time, it is important to see what the process of changing of colours is inside the semiosphere. We will do so by looking at the Pantone "Color of the Year" selection. Moreover, considering that we have decided to use Leonhard Oberascher's (1993) cycle of the different phases of colours, only once these different phases are clarified we are going to check how the cycle has evolved (in the Western semiosphere) by looking at the Pantone "Color of the Year" –from 2019 until 2025. This will be confronted with the Met Gala colours and the colours trends on the Paris, Milan, New York and London runways. After this, we will focus on the imaginary that these colours (and shapes of clothes) evoke, i.e., actualize. In this way, a panorama of the values circulating inside the Western semiosphere will appear, and it will give us the possibility to see whether the semiosphere is living an explosive, stabilizing, growing or extinction moment, and which values are being conveyed in that situation.

© SI-FADU-UBA | DOSSIER

1 An annual fundraising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York City, which has a specific different theme every year.

2 From now on, when Met or Met Gala are used, we will be referring to the 2025 Met Gala event: *Superfine: Tailoring Black Style*, unless otherwise expressed.

3 The picture is visible here: https://www.elle.com/fashion/celebrity-style/a64677390/lewis-hamilton-photos-met-gala-2025/ and the declaration about the clothes meaning here: https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJS9Qz3Ic6H/?igsh=dmhydzZvMmZteDZ6

Met Gala's colours analysis

To see the colours that emerge in the Met Gala event we have filled a list with all the colours on the red carpet. We describe them according to the picture published on the Vanity Fair's website[4], paying attention to the visible items[5]. For example, we took note of Teyana Taylor's outfit designed by Ruth E. Carter, in the following colours[6]: *burgundy* (cape, flower, hat, bandana, shirt, waistcoat, gloves, and cane), *silver* (chains and jewellery), *burgundy, black, and silver* (suit and pumped heels), and *light grey* (socks).

The questions that lead this inquiry are: Which is the most used colour? Is it also the most used one in pairs with others? Which are the colours mentioned by the journals that publish information about the event? How much influence exert these Met outfit colour trends on the runways? And how strong are their influences on the bigger social panorama? We are going to answer the two latter questions in the next paragraphs by using the research done by *TagWalk*, for the runways[7], and Pantone, for the social colour panorama. In fact, the first is a website that analyses the trends on runways and their fluctuations, while the second "provides a universal language of color that enables color-critical decisions through every stage of the workflow for brands and manufacturers. More than 10 million designers and producers around the world rely on Pantone products and services"[8].

Now, let us focus on the press perspectives. This is important since they construct the collective imaginaries (Barthes, 1967), therefore, the collective meaning we attribute to colours. Looking at the discursivization of colours given by the newspapers, we see that:

- *Harper's Bazaar*[9] mentions: grey, gold, ivory, white, dark brown, yellow, pearl, black and white, and black, respectively appearing 1, 2, 2, 2, 2, 4, 5, and 8 times.
- *Vogue*[10] does not mention a single colour.
- *WWD*[11] decides not to mention colours too, but chooses to show us 10 pictures where the present colours are: black, black and white, burgundy, black and silver, Klein blue, gold and pearl, leopard print, ivory and pearl, navy blue, pearl and white, brown and yellow.
- *The Cut*[12] underlines three categories of judgment: the best, the worst and the weirdest dresses. We see (but do not read) the following: For the first category: white, butter yellow, cinnabar, butter cream, black and white. For the second one: neon pink, silver. For the third one: blue, red and gold.

4 https://www.vanityfair.it/gallery/met-gala-2025-outfit-look-red-carpet-abiti-vestiti-foto

5 The list can be obtained by writing to the author.

6 The picture of the clothes is visible here: https://www.vanityfair.it/gallery/met-gala-2025-outfit-look-red-carpet-abiti-vestiti-foto

7 "SaaS data platforms & strategic reports provider on luxury trends and insights" https://www.tagwalk.com/en/

8 https://www.pantone.com/color-systems/pantone-color-systems-explained?srsltid=AfmBOopcG5VyEOiXH5e_xJ6uwh7I4nTaGqaAzfbIDcirTymevTOMY3N0

9 https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/g64673465/best-dressed-red-carpet-photos-Met-gala-2025/

10 https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/Met-gala-2025-best-tailoring

11 https://wwd.com/eye/people/gallery/Met-gala-2025-best-dressed-photos-1237310978/Met-gala-2025-red-carpet-arrivals-photos-221/

12 https://www.thecut.com/article/met-gala-2025-best-dressed-outfits-looks.html

This discursivization gives us the possibility to understand which are the *early-adopter*, the *mainstream* and the *laggard* colours (Rogers, 1962). Brown, yellow and gold can indicate either *laggard* or *early-adopter*. We believe that the first two are an *early-mainstream* adoption: *Ansa* underlined butter yellow as trendy for the season[13], and *TagWalk's* trend analysis positioned brown in the same wave[14]. Gold would be a *laggard* colour: it was used to remember the black singer, actress and dancer of the past Josephine Baker. Thus, the theme of the dress was recalling something from the past —fashion is driven by this power of recalling (Lipovetsky, 1987; Coccia and Michele, 2024). The meaning of the colours explicitly given by the journal *Harper's Bazaar* was the following:

- Black and white, black, white, grey, pearl and ivory were conceptualized as without time, forever lasting, timeless (*mainstream*).
- Gold, as old homage, therefore time corrupted (laggard).
- Yellow and brown, as contemporary (*early-adopter*).

As Roland Barthes pointed out, the journals aim to dictate which products are *in* and which are *out*, therefore, which are the values linked to that specific time according to the references conducted in their discoursivization[15]. We will focus on this later in the paper.
Now, if we consider the colours taken *per se*, without considering their combination on the patterns or motive, we see that the most used colours are white (77 tokens) and black (135 tokens). The correlations between the colours and the items are interesting:

- Black has a strong correlation in footwear (93 shoes).
- White is mainly used in shirts (58 shirts).

It is not a surprise that the most usual pattern employs black and white (42 tokens), while the multi-coloured patterns have mainly a black base. Outside this combination, the other most common ones in fabrics are:

- Black and silver (20 tokens).
- Black, white and grey (7 tokens).
- Black, white and red (5 tokens).

Other relevant data are the uses of burgundy combined with other colours (5 combinations), and the fact that blue is also often used with other colours.

A first analysis: the colours' cycle and the semiotic perspective

"If we consider color as a sign, we are including all the aspects, because a sign is not a previously defined thing, but a consequence of various factors

13 https://www.ansa.it/canale_lifestyle/notizie/moda/2025/05/01/il-color-giallo-burro-la-tonalita-trend-di-primavera_eb516e88-7d85-4891-aa6f-99fc0e9ed479.html

14 https://www.instagram.com/p/C-66pYgMVSy/?igsh=MWs0dHlkYnIzZzImNg

15 In fact, *Harper's Bazaar*, commenting on FKA Twigs in Grace Wales Bonner outfit, writes: "the look channelled 1920s elegance through a modern lens", making an explicit link to the world's value taken into account as *contemporary* when these 1920s echoes have "refined detail and subtle drama".

and of the context in which it is taken as such" (Caivano, 1998, p. 390). In fact, it is not surprising that in order to underline how much culture determines the visibility of the world, Umberto Eco states:

> Nel continuum sono state ritagliate delle porzioni (che come vedremo sono arbitrarie) per cui la lunghezza d'onda *d*. [...] costituisce un'unità culturale alla quale viene assegnato un nome. Sappiamo anche che la scienza ha ritagliato in quel modo il continuum per giustificare in termini di lunghezze d'onda un'unità che l'esperienza ingenua aveva già ritagliato per conto proprio, assegnandole il nome |*verde*|. La segmentazione compiuta sulla base dell'esperienza non è stata arbitraria nel senso che è stata probabilmente dettata da esigenze di sopravvivenza: una popolazione che vivesse in un deserto di sabbia rossastra, abitato da animali dal pelo fulvo e in cui crescono solo varietà di fiori scarlatti, sarebbe obbligata a segmentare con estrema finezza quella porzione di continuum che noi chiamiamo |*rosso*|. Ma questo stesso argomento prova anche che la segmentazione è 'in certo modo' arbitraria, perché popoli diversi segmentano lo stesso continuum percettivo in modi diversi (Eco, 1975, p. 135).

> [From the continuum, some portions (which, as we shall see, are arbitrary) have been carved out, so that the wavelength *d*. [...] constitutes a cultural unit to which a name is assigned. We also know that science has carved out the continuum in this way to justify in terms of wavelengths a unit that naive experience had already carved out on its own, assigning it the name |*green*|. The segmentation made on the basis of experience was not arbitrary in the sense that it was probably dictated by survival needs: a population living in a desert of reddish sand, inhabited by animals with tawny hair and in which only scarlet flower varieties grow, would be obliged to segment with extreme finesse that portion of the continuum that we call |*red*|. But this same argument also proves that segmentation is 'somewhat' arbitrary, because different peoples segment the same perceptual continuum in different ways.] (author's translation)

In fact, "color combinations that do not follow the accepted conventions fail to communicate the intended message", and similarly, from a phenomenological perspective, "a change in color relationships due to an illumination different from white light would turn familiar objects into unrecognizable things" (Caivano, 1998, pp. 392-393). The change of the spatial flux of light reflected or transmitted by objects, an aspect called *cesia* (Caivano, 1991, 1997; Caivano and Green-Armytage, 2016), also influences the perception of colours. However, since our aim is to note the condition of the semiosphere, we are not considering the *cesia* effects but the conventions associated with colours. As already stated, we are going to do so by looking at the trend colours on runways also.

> The fact that a painter can recognise and name more colours, the fact that verbal language itself is able not only to designate hundreds of nuances, but also describe unheard-of tints by examples, periphrases and poetic ingenuity —all this represents a series of cases of elaborate codes (Eco, 1985, p. 174).

© SI-FADU-UBA | DOSSIER

As Beat Lehman (1998, pp. 192-197) and José Luis Caivano (1998, pp. 399-400) point out, in color semantics, in order to convey a more precise meaning, adjectives coming from plants, herbs, objects or animals are added. However, "the names of colours, taken in themselves, have no precise chromatic content: they must be viewed within the general context of many interacting semiotic systems" (Eco, 1985, p. 171).
For this reason, if we consider the Met as a text where the colours are *clues* about the situation of the Western semiosphere, it could be interesting:

a. to confront the colours of Met with other fashion events, like runways and colour companies or institutions, like Pantone; as well as
b. to study the dispositions of prominent colours within the theory of colours' cycle proposed by Oberascher (1993).

With regard to this last point, and from surveys conducted in Germany, Oberascher notes a circle of colour preferences where every phase leaves gradually the place to the other one in this order:

- a chromatic phase,
- a darkening phase,
- a brown phase,
- a lighter phase,
- an achromatic phase (white and greys dominates),
- a combining phase of achromatic and chromatic tones,
- a combining phase of achromatic, chromatic and purple tones.

After the purple phase, where the achromatic colours disappear, the circle starts again, i.e., it goes to the chromatic phase.
Using this precious analysis, we can link the movements of the cycle as indicators of *stabilisation*, *explosion*, *growth* or *extinction* of a semiosphere (Lotman and Uspenskji, 1975; Lotman, 1992). In fact, considering that black, grey, gold, ivory, white, dark brown, yellow, pearl, black, and white are the colours mentioned in *Bazaar*, we can see that there is a combination of colours of achromatic and chromatic tones. However, inside the entire panorama of the event, and in the picture published in the other articles (*WWD* and *The Cut*) we *saw* few purple tones: cinnabar, neon pink, blue, red, burgundy, and a leopard print. Considering that the purple phase is only visually present (and in minority) but not verbally expressed, we would tend to highlight the situation as a "combining phase from achromatic towards chromatic" tones. In fact, *Harper's Bazaar* described the gold (lighter) phase as old, the white, black and grey (achromatic) phase as timeless, and the brown and yellow (chromatic) phase as contemporary. Nonetheless, considering only the Met Gala we could not highlight the disposition of the Western semiosphere; we need other comparative elements, like colour trends on runways.

The colours' trends on the runways

What do the trends on the runway tell us about Oberascher's (1993) cycle? The *TAGWalk* analysis of the Paris, Milan, New York and London Fashion

Weeks points out that the trending colours of the S/S 2025[16] womenswear season are (Figure 1):

- Black and white in the majority of cases;
- Beige and light blue in minor proportion than the first two;
- Grey, pink and pastel as the following colours.

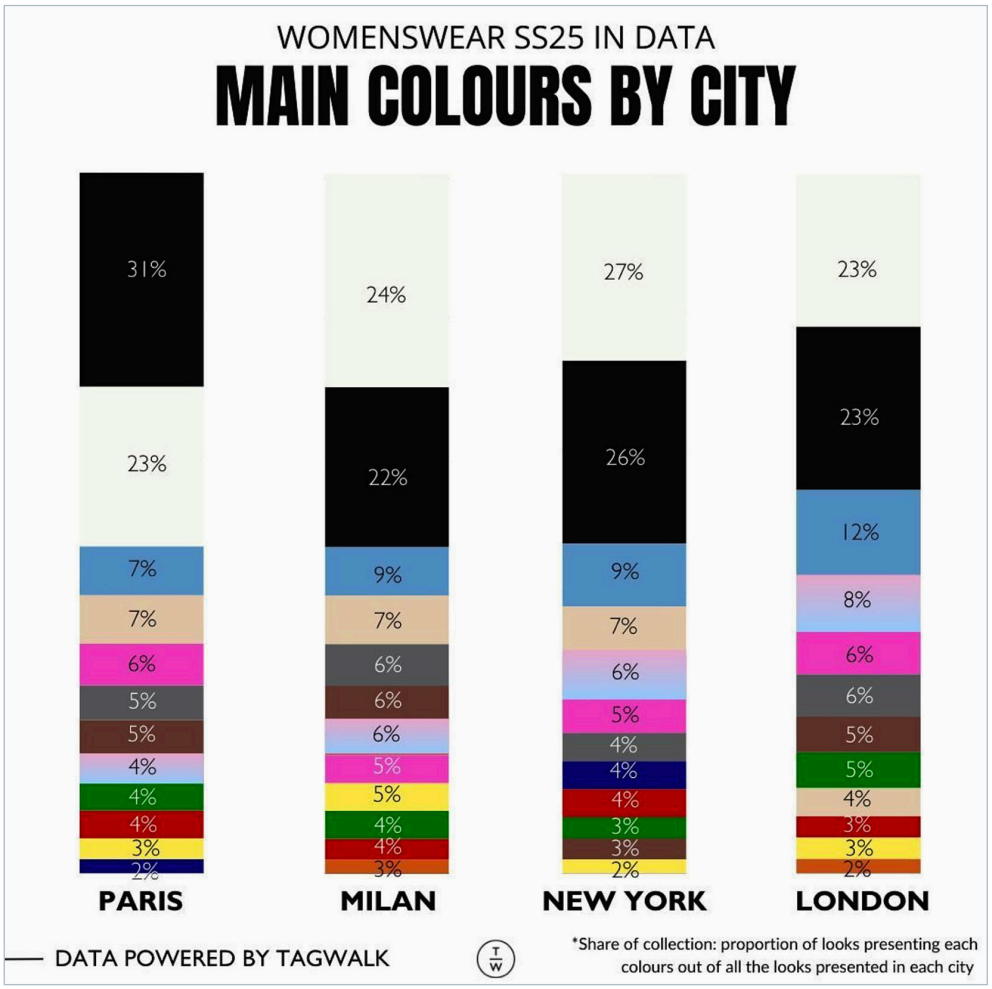


Figure 1

TagWalk analysis of the womenswear S/S 2025.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DHZOEo7tdEY/?igsh=MTZpaWd1aGI5NDdodg

These data underline almost the same situation of the Met colours: there is a combination of chromatic and achromatic tones. However, we see that something strange is happening. The chromatic colours (red, green, yellow) are decreasingly used; things not to be expected if we adopt the point of view of the Met Gala colours (where the chromatic and purple tones were more frequent) and the Oberascher (1993) colours' cycle (where the achromatic should be progressively substituted).

If confronted with the situation of the womenswear F/W 2024 season, pink was substituted more and more by red, and the same happens in the F/W 2025 as well (Figure 2). Therefore, we cannot think but a strange jump happened passing from the combining phase of chromatic and achromatic tones (F/W 2024) towards an achromatic one (Figure 1, S/S 2025) to a combing phase of chromatic, achromatic and purple tones (F/W 2025)[17].

16 Not many differences in the womenswear F/W 2025, the major change is the increasing of the grey colour.

17 *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Elle* state that purple is the trendy colour of the F/W 2025 season: https://www.vogue.it/article/viola-ametista-colore-tendenza-capi-accessori, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/it/moda/tendenze/a65897912/questo-colore-difficile-tendenza-autunno/, https://www.elle.com/it/moda/tendenze/a65661282/7-colori-moda-autunno-inverno-2025-202/

Semiotic analysis: the explosion of the semiosphere

Now that we have noticed the colour trends of runways, it is necessary to understand which are the phases that can be considered as an *extinction*, *explosion*, *stability*, and *growth* of the semiosphere, meaning, the correlation between the light-spectrum perceived as colour (thanks to the interaction with cesia, spatial disposition and texture; see Caivano and Green-Armytage, 2016) and the values that colour culturally conveys in the specific artefact.

Jurij Mihajlovic Lotman (1992) says that when there is an *explosion* in the semiosphere, the values totally change, they are put upside-down. This happens because some catastrophes take place —in the mathematical sense, i.e., a sudden jump from one stable state to another due to minor changes (Thom, 2011). Obviously, what is currently happening in Europe and the USA, but also in Gaza, could induce a *catastrophe* in the colours' circle. However, this can only be inferred by a comparison between the different colours' circle taking place in different realms. In our specific case, the fashion world (Met and the runways) and the industrial realm (Pantone). Nonetheless, before proceeding, the difference between *growth* and *explosion* must be stressed.

Growth takes place when the semiosphere is in a "good state", confronting with other semiospheres and "translating" their codes, thanks to the opening of the membrane, adding new aspects and perspectives. This can be somehow predicted —as it happens in the rhythmic change of the first four phases of Oberascher's (1993) colours circle (from a chromatic to a lighter phase).

Explosion happens when the change is abrupt and unexpected, usually caused by major or minor events —in this last case we could talk about *catastrophic points* referring to René Thom's theory (2011). It must be clear that *explosion* does not indicate a positive or a negative position but only a major change inside the values of a semiosphere. The *explosion* should be indicated by a *jump forward* or *backward* in the colours cycle. The closure of the membrane should indicate the persistence of a specific phase during time, and if it does not lead to a change, it causes the *extinction* of the semiosphere.

Considering that the trends on runways and at the Met Gala pointed to a combining phase of achromatic, chromatic and purple tones, we should be in a *stabilizing* moment of the semiosphere, at least in the fashion sector. This stabilisation could be easily directed towards instability, i.e., an explosive moment, if there are forces that push the semiosphere in the folding (Figure 3). However, only one sector would not highlight the multiplicity of the semiosphere, therefore, we aim to look at Pantone in order to have another comparative and more general account of the colour disposition inside the semiosphere. Moreover, the diachronic perspective on runways highlights an *explosion* moment, where a jump is observed between the sequence of trend colours, as underlined before[18].

18 From the combining phase of chromatic and achromatic tones (F/W 2024) towards an achromatic one (Figure 1; S/S 2025), to jump on a combination of chromatic, achromatic and purple tones (F/W 2025).

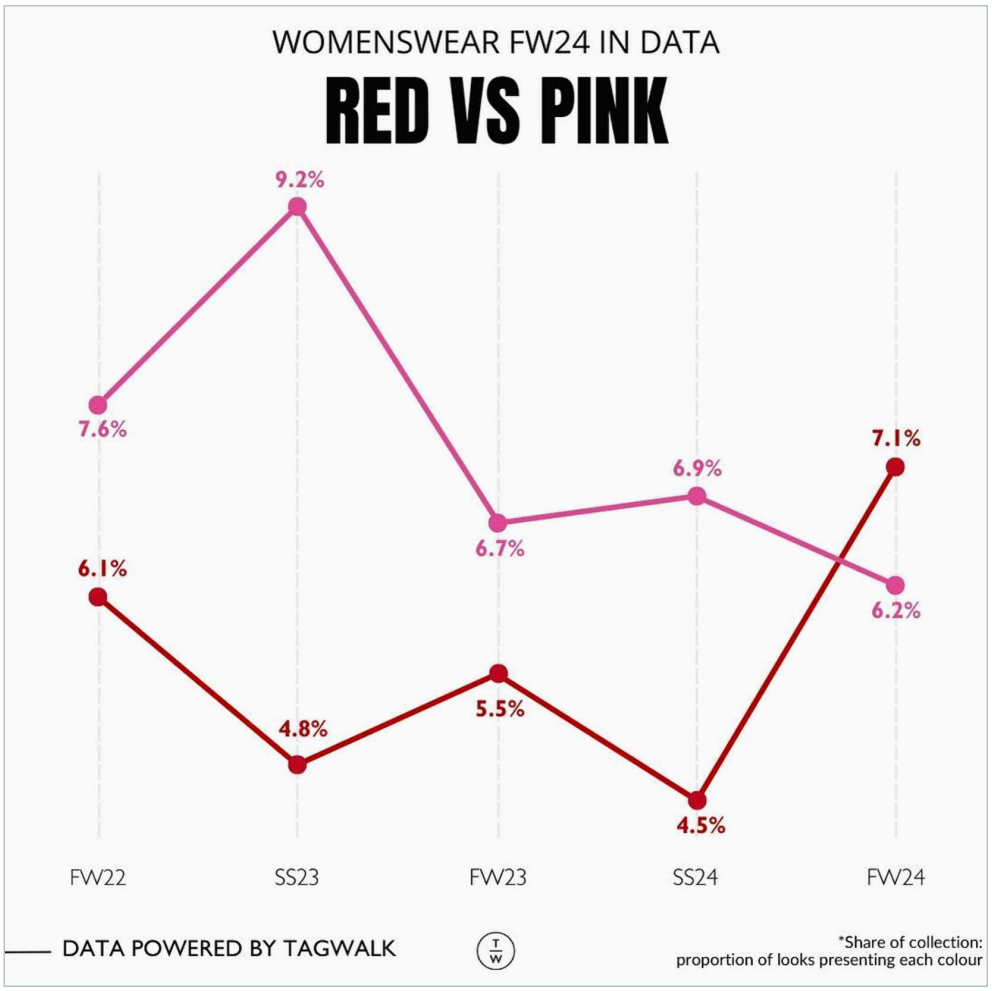


Figure 2

TagWalk comparative analysis: red vs. pink.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C7EKU-DNZmy/?igsh=MWQ1OWJ2NXRhYmMwbg

A macro analysis from Pantone "Color of the Year"

It is also possible to see the explosion by looking at the Pantone elections of "Color of the Year" –election that happens at the beginning of each year. To take this assertion into account, we are going to analyse the period that goes from 2019 to 2025. The colour chosen by Pantone passed from the chromatic (Living Coral, in 2019) towards the darkening phase (Classic Blue, in 2020), but it was immediately followed by a (paradoxical) combining phase of chromatic + achromatic tones (Illuminating, i.e., a bright yellow, and Ultimate Gray, in 2021)[19] and by a lighter phase (Very Peri, in 2022)[20]. It was no coincidence considering the situation: the explosion of Covid-19 (the end of 2019 and hitting on Western countries in 2020) and the necessity to rethink the cultural trauma. In 2022, an open war broke out between Ukraine and Russia, and the colour of 2023 was, in fact, Viva Magenta:

19 These are the words that explain the reason of these colours as the colours of the year 2021: "Practical and rock solid but at the same time warming and optimistic, the union of Pantone E 17-5104 Ultimate Gray + Pantone 13-0647 Illuminating is one of strength and positivity. It is a story of color that encapsulates deeper feelings of thoughtfulness with the promise of something sunny and friendly" (https://www.pantone.com/articles/color-of-the-year/color-of-the-year-2021).

20 "Very Peri is a symbol of the global *zeitgeist* of the moment and the transition we are going through. As we emerge from an intense period of isolation, our notions and standards are changing, and our physical and digital lives have merged in new ways. Digital design helps us to stretch the limits of reality, opening the door to a dynamic virtual world where we can explore and create new color possibilities." (https://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2022).

> Viva Magenta welcomes anyone and everyone with the same verve for life and rebellious spirit. It is a color that is audacious, full of wit and inclusive of all. [...] Viva Magenta is a transformative red tone capable of driving design to create a more positive future. [...] What distinguishes this year's Color of the Year from last year's [...] is Viva Magenta's ability to answer our collective need for strength. (https://www.pantone.com/articles/color-of-the-year/what-is-viva-magenta)

This does not continue the cycle; in fact, it is a blend of a darkening and a chromatic phase: the colour presents, in fact, red pigments (red, that is a saturation of brown, as the Groupe μ, 1992, noted). In 2023 emerges in the mainstream the genocide still happening in Gaza. If we hypothesize that here, as in 2020, there was a catastrophe, meaning a jump from one part to another, we should see that the darkening phase is not followed by the brown phase. In fact, in 2024 we have Peach Fuzz (lighter phase): brown was skipped. Here there is a cusp, given by the opening (towards Ukraine) and closing (towards Russia) of the semiosphere. Other changes happen, and the cycle is not restored. Still following the uncertainty of the new panorama, with the emerging of far-right wings in Europe, we see another *catastrophe*: the brown phase emerges after the lighter phase. This seems to suggest a hysteresis loop, since the lighter phase is moving backwards in the *continuum* (but this will be visible only if the next colours will be from the darkening phase and then again brown and lighter phase). The colour of 2025 is, in fact, Mocha Mousse. In this case, we have a *folding* of the *continuum*.

Now, if we link the theory of catastrophes (Thom, 2011) with the approach of semiotics of culture (Lotman and Uspenskij, 1975; Lotman, 1992) used to study the semiosphere, we would obtain the opening (y) and closing (x) of the membrane of the semiosphere as variables of control, while the condition of the semiosphere (z) as variable of state. In fact, on the surface of behaviour we obtain four points: stability (3), growth (1), extinction (2), and explosion (4). All these correspond to specific positions in relation to x and y, as it is visible in Figure 3. In fact, if y increases there is *extinction*, while if x increases there is *growth*. When there is the presence of both, x and y, we obtain the instability that pushes the explosion of the semiosphere, while if there is a rhythmic circle that moves from opening to closure moments and *vice versa* there is stability.

In the case study of Pantone "New Year Color" from 2019 to 2025, we see that there are more folds —so, just to be clear, it differs from the basic scheme of the semiosphere topology that we are proposing in Figure 3 (next page)— because the cyclic order has been broken more than just one time.

Interactions between Pantone's and fashions' colour trends

This analysis about the rhythm of the Pantone "New Year Color" shows us a different position between the Pantone view, the one from the runways taken under exams and the Met Gala event. In fact, in 2025 Pantone is in a *brown phase* after a *lighter one*, while from the runway and the Met 2025 we see that there is a combining phase of achromatic and chromatic tones, and in the case of runways we passed from an achromatic towards a combining

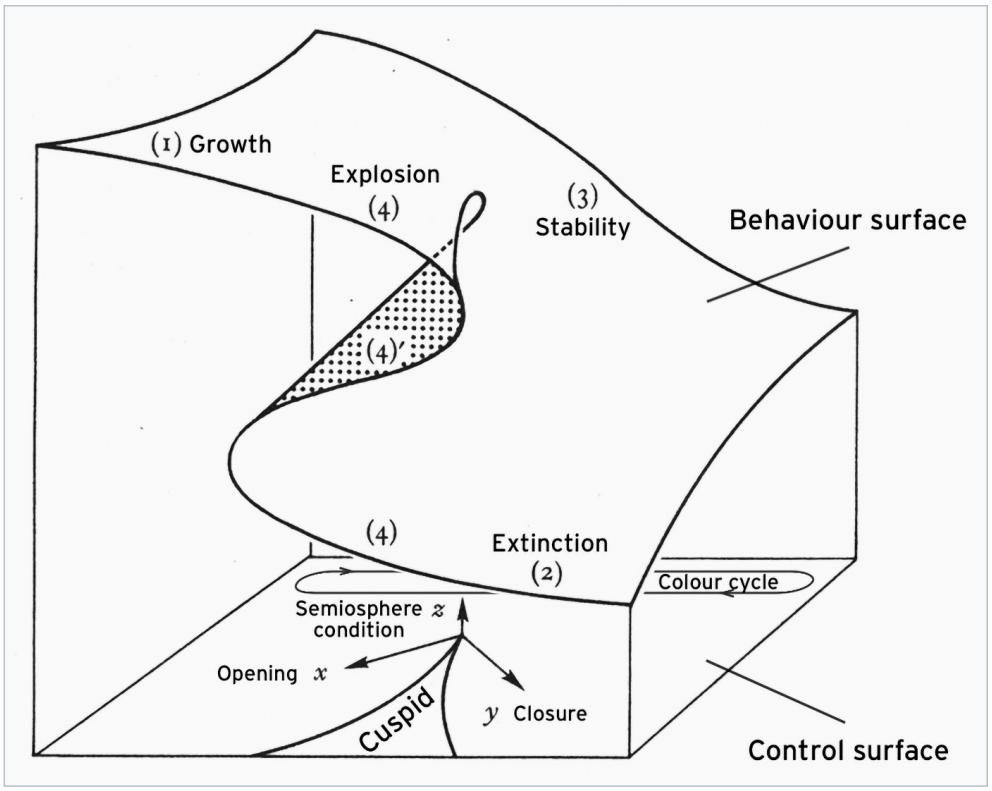


Figure 3

Model of the semiosphere using the theory of catastrophes.

Source: prepared by the author.

phase of achromatic, chromatic and purple tones. Why does this phenomenon happen? The answer can be found upon considering two facts:

- Pantone proposes a colour —often pushing it— that should be applied in every aspect of life, from the construction of houses to digital devices, from clothes to interior design[21].
- Runways and the Met Gala present a specific part of the colour disposition and social diffusion in clothes.

For this reason, we can say that Pantone is inserted into a macro field that also contains the fashion world, while the fashion world, as a micro component, can influence the macro aspect. This theory about macro and micro relations has been studied by the sociologist James Coleman (1990), as relations between institutions (macro) and actors (micro)[22]. Thanks to the "Coleman Boat" it is possible to observe three relations:

- Macro to micro (Mm),
- micro to micro (mm), and
- micro to Macro (mM).

The Mm relation is the constitution of what in semiotics is called a *code*, i.e., a rule that create relations between systems: the colours decided by Pantone and the industrial production. The mm relation is the *use*, i.e., what a community of users does with this *code*, i.e., to decide to totally apply, oppose or modulate the relation given by "the coder": the fashion

21 "The goal of the program isn't to push a certain color, although we do see that colors named as Pantone Color of the Year increase in popularity. After being integrated into the cultural mindset, they sometimes become even more influential the following year" (https://www.pantone.com/articles/color-of-the-year/what-is-color-of-the-year).

22 A critic can be moved to the concept of actor in sociology; but from this perspective we invite the reader to look at Bruno Latour (2021).

system proposes another use of colours underlining a different phase. The mM relation is the creation of a "shared norm", i.e., the micro actions influence the institution; for example, the fashion industry factually pushes the use of different colours (in the clothes realm) more than the colour proposed by Pantone. This highlights the reason for this difference. However, even in the difference between Macro and micro, we see that the austere colours predicted for the F/W 2023 collections (but used in the F/W 2022) appointed by *TagWalk* (Figure 4) are shown as dominant colours on Met Gala and runways.

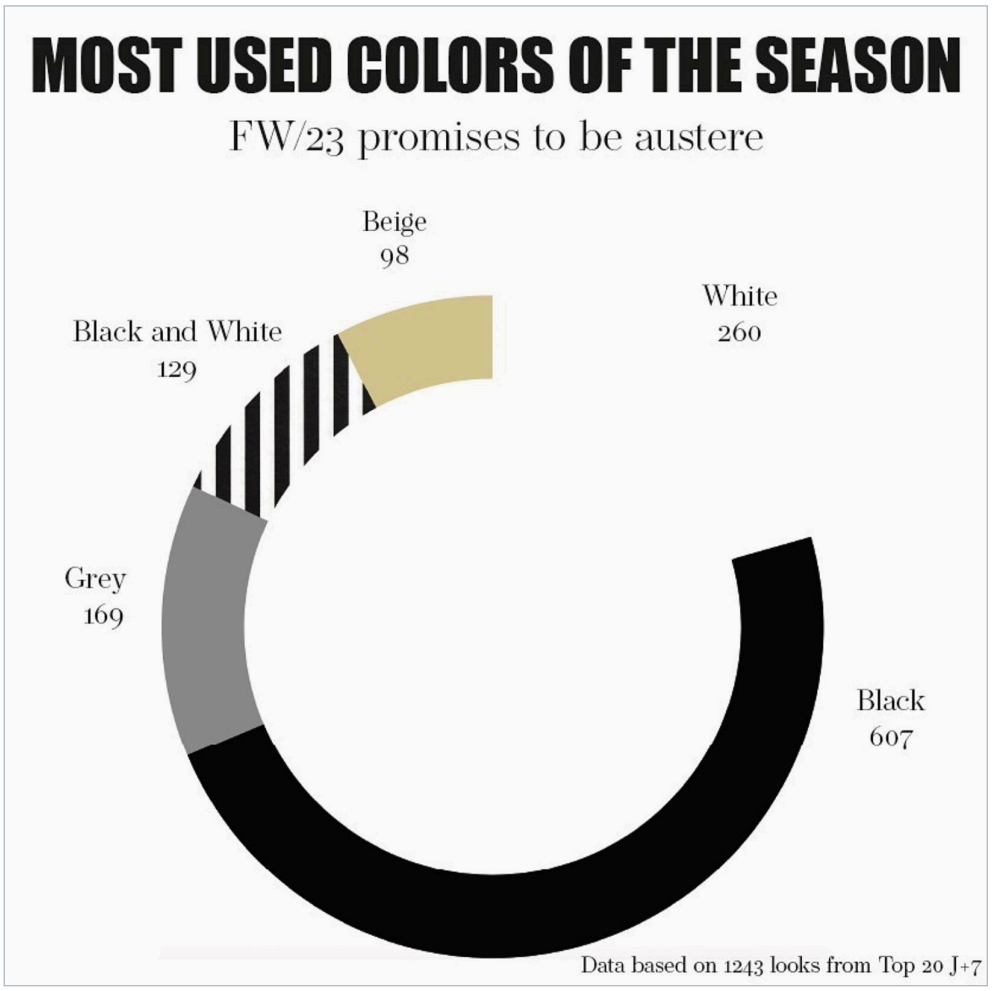


Figure 4
F/W 2023 prevision of "austere" colours.
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CqBMpT7IjAz/?igsh=NjNweDhkaWpiZjFq

What does this suggest? This tells us about a discontinuous pattern caused by some culturally shocking events that break the continuity of the cycle: an *explosion* of the semiosphere. "The role and significance of particular colors in human society are characterized by collective experiences associated with these colors" (Oberascher, 1997, p. 2). The runways show us more colours that are, in some portions, present to the Met Gala but are not the ones mostly conveyed by it. The colours culturally conceived as more pertinent —namely, the most shared colors on the newspapers— are the same of the F/W 2022, three years before. There is an emergence of the *achromatic phase* that goes toward a combining phase with *chromatic and purple* tones.
However, as we stated earlier, the *closure* of the semiosphere is characterised by the persistence of a certain colour. So, could not this be the case? No, as we stated, the actual panorama has pushed more on brown and butter yellow colours, making a somehow corrected Pantone's assumption on the trendy colour as a *brown phase*, even if on the runway for the S/S 2025

collections the colour is not so much present but it is more present in F/W 2025[23]. Here, we can see instability, the premonition of a hysteresis loop[24]. We are at the bifurcation point: the cycle shows us the possibility towards a combining phase (as the cycle should go) or an instable one towards the brown (as the cycle seems to go, looking at Pantone predictions and at the newspaper publications).

The values of the contemporary semiosphere: political recession and technological dreams

What is the semantics linked to these colours? If we consider the theme of the night —*Superfine: Tailoring Black Style*—, it is impossible not to link the use of colour (and the piece of ornament that conveys it) to specific periods of time, as the *ratio facilis* (Eco, 1975) pushes us to do.
The use of the pinstripe fabrics is highlighted —characterized by a pattern of black and white colours. This specific colour combination and symbolic association pushed by the theme of the night that works as an interpretant (Peirce, CP 1.553, 2.242), i.e., something that links a sign (Met Gala Event) to an object (piece of ornament), builds a bridge with the thirties, were the pinstripe gained great success. It is not possible, when thinking about the thirties, to underline a technological development (such as the one we are living today with AI) and the political recession (such as the one we are living today in Europe[25] and USA). All these cultural connections underline how much the imaginary draws on forms from the past in which it mirrors the conditions of today. This is shown, in fact, by the interruption of the normal flow of the cycle —as already noted in the previous paragraphs. A study conducted by Antonio Santangelo (2023), following Gabriele Marino's (2015) conception about remixing, remaking and spreadability, had shown how much the discourses —and so the values— spread about the IA are taken from novels and concepts already present in the past. Therefore, the uses of specific past references convey the values that are dominant inside a society.
Another reference that underlines a critical situation of politics in Europe and the pushing for technological advancement is the reference to the twenties[26]. On Ferragamo website it is stated:

> Ferragamo al Met Gala 2025. Con radici che affondano nella Hollywood degli anni Venti, l'eredità di Ferragamo è profondamente intrecciata con il cinema e il fascino senza tempo[27].

23 https://www.instagram.com/tagwalk/p/DN04ls_2pAR/

24 The hysteresis loop happens when there is a coming back from the point of departure. In the current case, the beginning of a combining phase with a majority of achromatic colours would pass towards a lighter (with butter yellow) and a brown phase, to follow again the cycle —if another fold does not happen in the *continuum*.

25 In Germany, the far-right party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), is considered unconstitutional (https://verfassungsschutz.thueringen.de/).

26 We have already stressed, in footnote 15, the link to the twenties realized by *Harper's Bazaar*.

27 https://www.ferragamo.com/shop/ita/it/sf/gallery-Met-gala-2025?srsltid=AfmBOooLRJSjfPFP-ZbjShzvGfPuFtKOHUIe5dBdBNqdn641sh3p1vbD

© SI-FADU-UBA | DOSSIER

> [Ferragamo at the Met Gala 2025. With roots stretching back to 1920s Hollywood, Ferragamo's legacy is deeply intertwined with cinema and timeless glamour.] (author's translation)

Considering that the theme of the night was the *Black Tailoring* and the black community influence on fashion, black is "charged" by euphoric, i.e. positive, valence. However, this euphoric valence is not opposed to white:

> Black and white [are] associated with birth and death. In western culture, the pairs are: *white* = birth, baptism, and *black* = death. But, as Arnheim notes, *white* has a double and opposite meaning, the purity and innocence of the beginning of life, on one hand, and the emptiness of death, on the other. Lack of hue means lack of life. In oriental cultures, *white* definitively means death (Caivano, 1998, p. 397).

Now, white does not represent "the emptiness of death" here. So, even white is charged with *euphoric* values. At the same time, black expands its realm further than the "death" meaning attribution (*dysphoric* valence) and becomes something like the "exploration of life". In fact, even black possesses the white duality:

> Il nero [...] da una parte è un non colore come il bianco, regno della continuità, della piattezza, della cancellazione del variopinto [...] mentre dall'altra è il colore più forte che ci sia, pura discontinuità, la tinta che si raggiunge quando si sommano tutti i colori (Agnello, 2013, p. 40).
>
> [Black [..] on the one hand is a non-colour like white, reign of continuity, of flatness, of the multi-coloured's removal [...], while on the other hand it is the strongest colour that exists, pure discontinuity, the colour that is obtained when all other colours are mixed.] (author's translation).

The disposition and the relation of black and white on the body, thanks to the ornaments, suggests us this "in-betweenness" of black —that for metonymy becomes linked to the black community. The black ornaments appear at two extremes: footwear and sunglasses. They both are linked to movement: the feet with the movement of the entire body in the space, and the *gaze*[28] with the movement of the "emotion", the "desire" in and outside the space.
However, since the value is always given in a relation, what is the position of the other major colour? White is still present in a central position. It is not opposed to black, but it works with it. In fact, white appears at the centre of the body —the shirt— and sometimes it shares the space in the foot (many wore black and white shoes, like Rihanna, Dapper Dan, Whoopi Goldberg, Pusha T's outfits). Somehow, it is being suggested that black and white can cooperate, not being in an *oppositive* relation but in a *participative opposition*, where black is the term that includes both, black and white. Topologically speaking, in the dresses presented at the Met Gala, in fact, black circumscribes white.

28 Leopardi's *Infinito* underlines this *gaze* movement: "Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,/ E questa siepe, che da tanta parte/ Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude./ Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati/ Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani/ Silenzi, e profondissima quiete/ Io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco/ Il cor non si spaura" [This lonely hill has always been dear to me/, And this hedge, which excludes so much/ Of the last horizon from my view./ But sitting and gazing, I imagine endless/ Spaces beyond it, and beyond human/ Silences, and profound stillness;/ where my thoughts focusing, for a moment/ My heart is afraid-taken.] (author's translation).

It is clearly associated with *emancipatory* actions. Moreover, the relation and stability of black and white as a pattern.

> Non nasce con la scacchiera, che fino all'Ottocento usava i colori più disparati, ma con la stampa, e si afferma poi con la fotografia, il cinema e la televisione (Agnello, 2013, p. 39).
>
> [Is not born with the chessboard that until the 18th century used diversified colours, but with the press, and then it is established thanks to photography, cinema and television.] (author's translation).

Marialaura Agnello also highlighted how much black and white are opposed to other colours, the former being considered as lack of colours. The semantic values are therefore "everyday routine, realism, authority, rigour, austere, scientific", opposed to the values of chromatic colours: "extraordinariness, fantasy, futility, lightness, ridiculous, artistic".
Outside this specific relation, and other than the "black and white pinstripe thirties", we have references to the fifties. In fact, there was the presence of colours that immediately echo this period: baby blue and butter yellow (men's sportswear, women's dresses). The fifties underlined also a period of difficult times —post-war— and of *vintage* retrieval: the need for a strong imaginary taken from the past, as the current political emerging parties seem to evoke. Thus, the values that are underlined are the ones of *austerity* and *rigour* that are put on us by the political, economic and social situation. These two values also seem in resonance with the semantics of brown, considered as something that, at the same time, gives comfort and stability, at least in the current panorama.

Conclusion

In this semiotic exploration we have seen how much the current Western culture is filled with a "nostalgia" given by the uncertainty of our contemporary times: both political and social instability and technological advancement (without any control). There is an *explosion* happening in the semiosphere. The change of values considered, until now, central for our culture —democratic debates, exchanging of concepts in a pacific way and explorations— are challenged by extreme rigour and austerity, and searching without questioning for stability.
We have approached this by using the instruments of the semiotics of culture, in particular Jurij Michajlovic Lotman and Boris Andreevic Uspenskij (1975) and Lotman (1992), in interaction with the theory of catastrophes (Thom, 2011) and colour theory (Oberascher, 1993, 1997; Caivano, 1998; Agnello, 2013).
In the first part we noticed that dominant colours were black and white, with black strongly linked to footwear and white to shirts. The most recurrent pattern was black-and-white, followed by black-and-silver. *TagWalk* data corroborated the dominance of black and white, with burgundy and blue emerging as versatile accents in polychromatic designs.
Drawing on Caivano (1998) and Eco (1975, 1985), we affirm that colour perception is neither innate nor arbitrary but emerges from *Umwelt* (Uexküll, 1934), i.e., socio-cultural segmentation and material affordances. The dominance of achromatic tones (white and grey) alongside selective

© SI-FADU-UBA | DOSSIER

chromatic accents (e.g., burgundy, cinnabar) at the Met Gala reflects a "combining phase" (Oberascher, 1993), where Western semiosphere oscillate between stability and transition. Editorial narratives (*Harper's Bazaar*, *The Cut*) reinforced black and white as canonical, while marginalizing purple hues, despite their visual presence —a tension between verbal and visual codification (Eco, 1985). *TagWalk*'s S/S 2025 data corroborate this, showing the black/white dominance (Figure 4) and a decline in primary chromatics (red, green) (Figure 1), suggesting a jump in F/W 2025 toward a combining phase of achromatic, chromatic and purple tones (Oberascher, 1993). However, Pantone choices and the newspaper description of brown and butter yellow as *trendy*, push us to think about an emergence of brown tones highlighting also the instability of the system.

After that, we have shown that the semiosphere is undergoing a phase of explosion by considering the relation between the colours' cycle (Oberascher, 1993) and the morphology of the semiosphere (Thom, 2011; Lotman, 1992). We have accomplished this by comparing the colour trends of Western fashion and the successions of Pantone "Color of the Year", showing the explosion periods from 2022 to 2025, thanks to a jump forward in 2021 and 2024, and backwards in 2022, 2023 and 2025. We are representing them in Table 1, where we have linked different colours to every colour phase, and used the same colours for the Pantone data to make the jumps clear.

Table 1. Comparison between the colours' cycle and Pantone "Color of the Year" disposition

COLOURS' CYCLE	chromatic phase	darkening phase	brown phase	lighter phase	achromatic phase	combining phase of achromatic and chromatic tones	combining phase of achromatic, chromatic and purple tones
PANTONE	Living Coral, 2019	Classic Blue, 2020	Illuminating + Ultimate Grey, 2021	Veri Peri, 2022	Viva Magenta, 2023	Peach Fuzz, 2024	Mocha Mousse, 2025

Source: prepared by the author.

The state of the semiosphere can thus be diagnosed through colour trends:

- An unclear "combining phase" (both with achromatic and purple tones) suggests *destabilization*, as the one we are experiencing today. It can make foreseen *explosion*.
- The gradual change, as the normal colours' cycle goes, suggests *stabilisation*.
- A sudden change in the colours' cycle might signal *explosion*.

The resurgence of F/W 2022's achromatic palette in 2025 media discourse underscores this rupture, aligning with Lotman's (1992) notion of cultural memory as a destabilizing force. In fact, Lotman argues that cultural memory is not merely preservative but generative and unpredictable. It stores potential meanings that can resurface abruptly, triggering "explosions". However, since the cycle has not ended, we do not know how it is going to proceed, whether

towards extinction or growth. We just know that we are in an *explosive* moment (as indicated by the jumps between the folds of the *continuum*).

However, in the last section was have stressed how much the values that are being conveyed by the colours refer to technological advancement and a social uncertainty time period, where there is a strong desire for stability, underlining a closure of the membrane. So, this seems to push the semiosphere towards extinction. In this case, Figure 3 would highlight that the growth is pushed towards the right-side, generating explosion for the jump of the *continuum*, since there is an attractor given by the (desired) closure of the semiosphere's membrane; how it emerges from the references of time period where this closure happened.

This framework places fashion as a barometer of cultural-semiotic flux, where chromatic choices materialize deeper structural shifts. Future research could correlate specific geopolitical events with trend disruptions, in order to test catastrophe theory's applicability and obscure points of our seminal proposal. By looking at the fashion sector, the present research highlighted how much the market is saturated by achromatic colours and low chromatic ones. Therefore, it could be a good marketing strategy for a brand to use chromatic colours in opposition to all the other brands. This would give the possibility for a brand to pop up more than the others in the market. Obviously, the use of these chromatic tones should be properly semanticized, in order to be effective in the current (unstable) panorama ■

REFERENCES

Agnello, Marialaura (2013). *Semiotica dei colori*. Carocci.

Barthes, Roland (1967). *Système de la mode*. Éditions du Seuil.

Caivano, José Luis (1991). Cesia: a system of visual signs complementing color. *Color Research and Application*, *16*(4), 258-268.

Caivano, José Luis (1998). Color and semiotics: a two-way street. *Color Research and Application*, *23*(6), 390-401.

Caivano, José Luis and Doria, Patricia M. (1997). An atlas of cesia with physical samples. In *AIC Color 97, Proceedings of the 8th Congress*. Kyoto, Color Science Association of Japan, 499-502.

Caivano, José Luis and Green-Armytage, Paul (2016). Appearance [pp. 40-47]. In Ming Ronnier Luo (ed.), *Encyclopedia of color science and technology*. Springer.

Coccia, Emanuele and Michele, Alessandro (2004). *La vita delle forme: filosofia del reincanto*. HarperCollins Italia.

Coleman, James S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Harvard University Press.

Eco, Umberto (1975). *Trattato di semiotica generale*. La nave di Teseo.

Eco, Umberto (1985). How culture conditions the colours we see [pp. 157-175]. In Marshall Blonsky (ed.), *On signs: a semiotic reader*. Blackwell.

Groupe *μ*. (1992). *Traité du signe visuel : pour une rhétorique de l'image*. Éditions du Seuil.

Latour, Bruno (2021). *Politiche del design: semiotica degli artefatti e forme della socialità*. Mimesis Edizioni.

Lehmann, Beat (1998). *ROT ist nicht «rot» ist nicht [rot]: Eine Bilanz und Neuinterpretation der linguistischen Relativitätstheorie*. Gunter Narr.

Lipovetsky, Gilles (1987). *L'empire de l'éphémère : la mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes*. Gallimard.

Lotman, Jurij Mihaljovic (1992). *Kul'tura i vzryv*. Iskusstvo.

Lotman, Jurij Mihaljovic and Uspenskij, Boris Andreevic (1975). *Tipologia della cultura*. Bompiani.

Magariños de Morentin, Juan A. (1981). *El cuadro como texto: aportes para una semiología de la pintura*. Tres Tiempos.

Marino, Gabriele 2015. Semiotics of spreadability: a systematic approach to Internet memes and virality. *Punctum*, *1*(1), 43-66.

Oberascher, Leonhard (1993). The language of colour. In *AIC Color 93: Proceedings of the 7th Congress*, vol. A. Budapest, Hungarian National Colour Committee, 137-140.

Oberascher, Leonhard (1997). The role of color in the 21st century – color culture between homogenization and diversification. In *AIC Color 97, Proceedings of the 8th Congress*. Kyoto, Color Science Association of Japan, 83-89.

Peirce, Charles Sanders (1931-1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1-8. Harvard University Press.

Rogers, Everett M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Free Press.

Santangelo, Antonio (2023). Essere umani al tempo dell'intelligenza artificiale: narrazioni a confront [pp. 239-266]. In Antonio Santangelo and Massimo Leone (eds.), *Semiotica ed intelligenza artificiale*. Aracne.

Thom, René (2011). *Arte e morfologia: saggi di semiotica*. Mimesis Edizioni.

Uexküll, Jakob von (1934). *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen. Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten*. Springer.

© SI-FADU-UBA | DOSSIER