

## The Perils of Yellow

DEREK JARMAN

from *Chroma: A Book of Colour* (1995)

It's a hundred years since the Yellow Press invented itself in New York; warmongering and xenophobic, it fights for the yellow in your pocket. Cultural cuckold. Raving, betraying, mental.

The fetid breath of diseased Yellowbelly scorches the hanging tree yellow with ague. Betrayal is the oxygen of his devilry. He'll stab you in the back. Yellowbelly places a jaundiced kiss in the air, the stink of pus blinds your eyes. Evil swims in the yellow bile. Envious suicide. Yellowbelly's snake eyes poison. He crawls over Eve's rotting apple wasp-like. He stings you in the mouth. His hellish legions buzz and chuckle in the mustard gas. They'll piss all over you. Sharp nicotine-stained fangs bared.

As a child I had a horror of dandelions. If I touched a pis en lit I would scream myself to sleep. The dandelions harboured the daddy long legs that rustled in my dreams. Mess a bed. Devil's milk pale. Piss mire. Shit a bed.

The milk-white sap bleeds, the yellow flowers turn brown in death.

Here comes the yellow  
dog, Dingo, chasing a  
brimstone butterfly on a  
sharp April morning.

Daffodil yellow. Primrose yellow. The Yellow rose of Texas. Canary bird.

Rape and rattle. Yellow hot as mustard.

Ultraviolet reflects yellow strongly, so insects fall over themselves to hallucinate.

Although yellow occupies one-twentieth of the spectrum, it is the brightest colour.

Lemons were used by Venetian courtesans to bleach their hair in the sun ... gentlemen preferred blondes! I painted a lemon yellow picture for my show in Manchester ... Vile Book in School—that was the Yellow Press telling us about a child being brought up by a couple in a same sex relationship ... the painting took longer to dry than any of its companions. The charcoal words written on it muddled it:

*Dear Minister,  
I am a twelve-year-old Queer. I want to be a Queer  
artist like Michelangelo, Leonardo or Tchaikovsky.*

Mad Vincent sits on his yellow chair clasping his knees to his chest—bananas. The sunflowers wilt in the empty pot, bone dry, skeletal, the black seeds picked into the staring face of a halloween pumpkin. Lemonbelly sits swigging sugar-sick Lucozade from a bottle, fevered eyes glare at the jaundiced corn, caw of the jet-black crows spiralling in the yellow. The lemon goblin stares from the unwanted canvasses thrown in a corner. Sourpuss suicide screams with evil—clasping cowardly Yellowbelly, slit-eyed.

Was Van Gogh's illness xanthosis?

Yellow imparts violet to a fair skin.

In a conner the unbought paintings stacked under the bed—once kings weighed pictures in scales of gold. The sun boils in the sky, a can of chrome maggots.

Whistler painted the Grosvenor Gallery yellow for his exhibition. Painted the golden fireworks in nocturnes, while others laughed. ‘Greenery Yallery Grosvenor Gallery.’ Whistler was bitter—was he a bitter lemon? Lemon-faced? He dished out brimstone...

The executioner in Spain  
was dressed and painted  
in yellow.

For every yellow Primrose that commemorates Disraeli there is a Yellow Star. There are the stars extinguished in the gas chamber. (Old as the ghetto.) Jews were wearing yellow hats in the Middle Ages. They were condemned to yellow like thieves and robbers who were coloured yellow and taken to the gallows.

Park benches were painted yellow. Aryans sat apart, yellow with terror. An evil vision jaundiced by colour, mark of Judas. Yellow plague cross.

We sail with yellow plague flag on a ship into the bladder-wracked waters of the Sargasso.

The yellow emperor of the Ming Dynasty sails his saffron barge along the yellow river. A sage in orange robes tells him that yellow orange is the highest colour, a deep yellow that is medicine against the livid acid yellow of illness. Jupiter, King of the Old Gods of the Far West, dressed in yellow, so did Athene, Goddess of Wisdom.

Black and yellow sends a warning! DANGER,  
I am a wasp—keep your distance. The wasps  
circle the Burger King, McDonalds and Pizza  
Hut, fast convenience food lettered in livid  
'Jump at You' typography—black and yellow, red  
and yellow.

Yellow lines the kerbside. Yellow earth-moving equipment with flashing  
yellow lights, cutting a wound in the landscape.

*The yellow fog came creeping down  
The bridges, till the houses' walls  
Seemed changed in shadows.  
(Oscar Wilde, Impressions du Matin)*

A yellow memory from the yellow age. Fool's yellow,  
and yellow silence. When yellow wishes to ingratiate  
it becomes gold.

We drove from Curry  
Mallet through country  
lanes to Bristol, leaving  
the golden harvest, farm  
dogs catching mice as we  
progressed to the centre  
of the field, cutting back  
the corn. In the hospital  
in Bristol we had injections  
to ward off yellow  
fever. That turned us sick.  
I nursed my throbbing  
arm for days.

I missed my summer holiday in York General Hospital on a fat-free diet—dry  
toast and yellow sponge pudding. Canary pudding. Pretty as a picture with  
bright yellow jaundice.

*Yellow is more akin to red than blue.*  
(Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*)

Yellow excites a warm and agreeable impression. If you look through a yellow glass at a landscape the eye is gladdened. In many of the shoots I took at Dungeness for *The Garden* I used a yellow sky filter on my Super 8. It produced autumnal effects.

A golden colour appears when what is yellow and sunny gleams.

The nimbus of the saints, haloes and auras. These are the yellows of hope.

The joy of black and yellow Prospect Cottage. Black as pitch with bright yellow windows, it welcomes you.

Yellow is a combination of red and green light.  
There are no yellow receptors in the eye.

If you mix paints you will be unable to mix yellow, though the oil you use is golden. Yellow sands. Yellow streak.

These are the pigments:

The modern yellows: barium yellow, lemon yellow... stable in light and invented in the early nineteenth century, Cadmium yellow, sulphur and selenium. The modern production of cadmium pigments began during the First World War. Chrome yellow. Lead chromate darkens on ageing. The yellow of turmeric sunsets.

Cobalt yellow, mid-nineteenth century. Too expensive. Zinc yellow. 1850. The old yellows: gamboge—a gum resin from the earth, that came with the spice trade. It leans toward orange.

Indian yellow, banned. Cows were poisoned with mango leaves and the colour was made from their urine. It is the bright yellow in indian miniatures.

Orpiment poisonous arsenic sulphide. Brilliant lemon yellow used in manuscripts and mentioned by Pliny. It came from Smyrna and was used in Egyptian, Persian and later Byzantine manuscript. Cennini says it is really poisonous, 'Beware of soiling your mouth with it lest you suffer personal injury.'

Naples yellow, lead antimonate, varies in colour from pale to golden yellow. The yellow of Babylon. It is called giallorino. It last forever, and is manufactured from a mineral found in volcanoes.

Spring comes with celandine and daffodil. The yellow rape sends the bees dizzy. Yellow is a difficult colour, fugitive as mimosa that sheds its dusty pollen as the sun sets.

Clouded yellows. Butterflies. Brimstone flying fast along the lanes in the spring sunlight. Yellow stone.

I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er dale and hill, when all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils...

Why not yellow?

What is the kinship of yellow to gold?

Silence is golden, not yellow.

Golden rod is without doubt yellow.

Gold dog Dingo could be a relation of the Yellow Labrador.  
Yellow oldies and anniversaries.

Lemons  
Grapefruit  
Lemon curd  
Mustard  
Canary bird.

This morning I met a friend  
on the corner of Oxford  
Street. He was wearing  
a beautiful yellow coat. I  
remarked on it. He had  
bought it in Tokyo and said  
it was sold to him as green.

The caged canary sings sweetest.