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## The Spurious Case of Synesthesia in the Popular Arts

**Abstract:** Whether we talk about genuine “synesthesia” in the context of scientific research or just exploring general realms of perception, it still remains a fascinating phenomenon. This article focuses on works that unify the senses, drawing a somewhat historical sketch, a commentary upon the thin line between highbrow art and popular forms of art. The compelling “synesthetic experience” can also be found in the uneven mixture of image and words, thus suggesting different points of departure for further projects.

**Keywords:** synesthetic experience, popular art, rigid conceptions, medium.

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“Synesthesia” is the strangest thing or should I say “ideasthesia”... This intense crossover phenomenon is highly discussed among scientists, artists, writers, poets and sensationalist shows bringing new insights dispersed across miscellaneous media along with the promise that neuroscience will indeed explain the wiring of the brain.

First of all, according to its etymological origin, synesthesia comes from the Greek word “syn” meaning “together” and “aesthesia” meaning “sensation”. As a natural occurrence, it was officially documented by Sir Francis Galton in 1880 who also observed its innate feature. Over the years, scientists and composers attempted to create instruments that would render color-music (eg: the clavecin oculaire) and become real trend setters of color-organs<sup>1</sup>.

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1 BERMAN Greta, *Synesthesia and the Arts*, Source: Leonardo, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1999, p. 16, Published by: The MIT PressStable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1576621>. Accessed: 14/03/2012.

Despite a lot of research in the field, the phenomenon hasn't exactly coalesced into one pertinent and solid opinion, but often dismissed as bogus. A more clear definition that might shed more light on the subject is given by two neuroscientists, Ramachandran and Hubbard (2001), who call it "...a curious condition in which an otherwise normal person experiences sensations in one (sensory) modality when a second modality is stimulated"<sup>2</sup>.

To such an extent, a series of experiments were made to demonstrate the perceptual nature of this experience (instead of a cognitive one). In the visual perception of items in a display that look different than other background items in the same display, the first are seen automatically and involuntarily separate from the latter, thus the set of digits seemed to "pop-out". On this consideration, the subjects were shown a black against white display of 2s and 5s, so that the 5s were mirror images of the 2s. At a careful glance, the 5s were disposed among the background and the 2s formed a triangle. The "nonsynesthetes" took their time in detecting the triangle, meanwhile the color-grapheme "synesthetes" quickly saw the triangle standing out in one color which was different than the background color. More precisely, red and green. They saw the numbers in colors even though they were presented in black and white. This accounts for

the conspicuous separation of authentic perceptual characteristics and mere verbal associations or metaphor<sup>3</sup>. Evidently, there are other instances of synesthesia but this one is the most popular form (color-grapheme synesthesia), when individuals see the numbers or letters, by the case, as having color or texture or even gender.

Interestingly and contrary to some beliefs that synesthesia is conceptual, synesthesia is a sensory phenomenon, mainly because, as Ramachandran and Hubbard concluded: (1) colors that are induced synesthetically can lead to a perceptual grouping, segregation and pop-out; (2) synesthetic colors are not seen with eccentric viewing<sup>4</sup> even if the numbers are scaled in size to make them clearly visible; (3) a crowded grapheme that is not consciously perceived can nevertheless evoke the corresponding color; (4) a color-blind synesthete sees colors in numbers that he cannot otherwise see in real-life visual scenes<sup>5</sup>.

This is very different from when an otherwise normal individual smells a pie and then uses memory to visualize the picture of the dessert. That will not be the case every time he picks up a delicious scent of a pie. On the other hand, the synesthete would have the

2 RAMACHANDRAN V.S., HUBBARD E.M. "Synesthesia: a window into perception, thought and language", in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8/12, 2001, p. 3-34.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

4 "a method by which the person looks slightly away from the subject in order to view it peripherally with another area of the visual field. This is similar to looking slightly away from an object at night in order to see it better."

5 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

same experience each time from then on: a mixture of textures and colors, nothing very clear<sup>6</sup>.

Just like in the act of ventriloquism, the venting of synesthesia in art does have something in common with the experience that true synesthetes perceive: the weaving and “throwing” of nets between senses. Here, the non-synesthetic person would not experience consistency in these perceptions, nor would he ponder upon the “editing” process. He would let himself be carried away by the gimmick of the artist and forever bought by its, perhaps, commercial formula. This is the case of a form of “popular art” created for the general audience in order to elicit synesthetic experience. Remember the heydays of live rock festivals when bands, like Pink Floyd, the Grateful Dead, The Who, Frank Zappa and others, used visual stimuli along with their music? As if the recipe wasn’t rich enough some added psychedelic drugs (LSD, Magic Mushrooms) so they could induce this chemical imbalance, mimic neural activation and feel the “highest” sensations. It is worth mentioning that this “traditional” cultural freedom of the American society is brought about by the absence of two institutions which had a say in the structuring of European high culture: the aristocracy and the national church<sup>7</sup>.

6 GROSS Veronica, *The Synesthesia Project*, on: <http://www.bu.edu/synesthesia/faq/index.html>, 14.04.2012.

7 SHUSTERMAN Richard, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Second Edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p. 197.

Nowadays, this multi-sensory effect is “staged” by the multimedia artist Joshua White and with his eclectic group in the already traditional *Joshua Light Show* in New York<sup>8</sup>. The affluence of visual “chicanery” is due to the use of “liquid lights”<sup>9</sup> and other digital approaches, such as: multiple projector, color wheels, prisms, films – an assemblage very different than the vintage analog means used back in 1967, the year the project was founded. The artist’s intention is to render the transgression on old to new media, engaging digital “listening devices” to analog media and, thus, luring the “ghosts in the machine” (the name of the trans-medial performance program)<sup>10</sup>.

There is indeed a thin line between what’s titillating and easily ingested and what’s labeled as highbrow form of art, but here<sup>11</sup> Shusterman offers some pointers. The elite thinks that relating to some forms of art in an emotional and

8 <http://www.amnh.org/calendar/event/Joshua-Light-Show:-FullDome/>, 13.04.2012.

9 “projections of permutation of colored oils that conjured magical morphing shapes”. Also, for more information regarding the recent project or performances do visit the official site: <http://joshualightshow.com/index.html>

10 <http://www.ctm-festival.de/ctm-festival/specials/the-joshua-light-show.html>, 13.04.2012.

11 SNÆVARR Stefán, *Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Art, and the Challenge of Visuality, 1953 – The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 41, Number 4, Winter 2007, p. 1-11 (Article) Published by University of Illinois Press, p. 2-4.

somatic way is not really aesthetic and undermines popular art by accusing it of: (a) spuriousness – the satisfaction obtained from such an experience is shallow or unreal (faked sensations they say); (b) passivity – everything is absorbed without any intellectual effort. Here, the philosopher neutralizes the top notch’s opinion by saying that intellectual thinking is not the only game in town and that there’s no reason to claim that the corporeal is of less worth than the spiritual. The rigid conceptions continue with (c) superficiality – where critics say that pop art is ephemeral and superficial. Unlike the classic work of art which was displaced in a remote kingdom above human condition, popular art restores the intensified and connected forms of experience.

Furthermore, John Dewey’s idea that today the arts which discharge the most vitality for the random individual are accessible things like: comics, jazz music, movies, that are not regarded as art by him. Sad to say that what he thinks art is has a brick wall around it or is relegated to the museums or galleries. Because of their distance, the objects admitted by the competent people in the field as art seem “anemic” to the mass, and thus they search satisfaction in the vulgar, the kitsch I may add, or in enhancements processes of everyday life. These are the sort of dislocations, as Dewey names them, that art could not escape<sup>12</sup>.

Again, Shusterman brings forth evidence that the audience responds to TV entertainment in a complex manner and understands the ambivalence of certain shows or rock songs. More to the point, what is the harm in having an ephemeral encounter which can be more rewarding than a long established relationship?

Blowing a horn with this next creak, the critics say that (d) the lack of autonomy – an important criterion in our discussion, which glides from the philosophical pedestal that positions art somewhere far away from the real, practical world. Yes, it serves human needs, but as Shusterman puts it “after all, life forms the substance of art and artworks inhabit the world, so can life and art really be separated”<sup>13</sup>? The last two objections refer to (e) the lack of form – manifestations of such kind are seen as formless because they focus on content, but we have all tasted the allusions to other works of art, haven’t we?; and (f) the lack of creativity – this accusation is the most hilarious of them all because it picks on the communal dimension of popular art and its standardization feature. This rests on the romantic myth of individualism, where the desire to entertain the audience is not compatible with individual self-expression<sup>14</sup>. What draws the audience in either of the infusion experiences is, as I tend to

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12 DEWEY John, *Art as Experience*, New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Capricorn Books, 1958, p. 6.

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13 SHUSTERMAN Richard, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, op. cit., p. 3.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

believe, the employment of extreme stimuli, or better yet, the shock itself.

Popular artists are also consumers and there's no real conflict between wanting to express oneself creatively and wanting to please the audience. The ordinary receiver (non-synesthete) in this act of communication will not establish or incorporate invariants of sensory modalities. He will create scaffoldings that cross multiple media engaging multiple senses. This is best described by Dewey in its referential chapter "The Common Substance of the Arts" from *Art as Experience* (1958), where he states that in any usual visual perception, we see by the means of light. "Moreover, the medium of colors tends to be mixed, "adulterated" and accompanied by hearing, feeling of pressure, heat and color. In a painting, for example, color renders the scene without these "alloys" in such a way that the medium becomes color alone. And now color carries all the attributes of movement, sound, touch etc. that are physically on their own account in ordinary vision, so the expressiveness and energy of color are enhanced."<sup>15</sup>

We are slightly gliding towards a more frisky territory. Back in the twenties and thirties, the American public's preference for cartoons began to manifest itself when daily and Sunday newspaper comic strips sales started to grow. It seems they were attracted by the vitality in graphic design associated with the energy of mass art

forms that gave the artists the chance to improvise freely<sup>16</sup>.

With the displacement and exaggeration of some body parts, cartoonish characters and abstract settings juxtaposed in sequence sold some synesthetic appeal (provisory that is). Even wordless or pantomimic strips managed to get appreciated, without the usual witticism enclosed in the near caption that would sometimes "explain" the image. The popular characters, as Robert C. Harvey suggests, "speak in the same mode as they appear – the visual not the audio mode", mentioning the inclusion of speech balloons in the frame<sup>17</sup>. Visually speaking, each experience is an enclosed one. The page is scanned by the eye with a panoptical precision. We have spatio-topical coordinates in the page layout. The panel needs to be searched "beyond linear relations, to the aspects or fragments of panels susceptible to being networked with certain aspects or fragments in other panels"<sup>18</sup>. The dialogue may be *in praesentia* between images which are co-present under the gaze of the reader or *in absentia*, if a panel from some page maintains a privileged

<sup>15</sup> DEWEY John, *Art as Experience*, *op.cit.*, p. 195-196.

<sup>16</sup> ORWELL Miles, "Writing Posthistorically: Crazy Kat, Maus, and the Contemporary Fiction Cartoon", in *American Literary History* 4/1, 1992, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> HARVEY Robert C., "How Comics Came to Be", in *A Comics Studies Reader* by Heer Jeet and Worcester Kent (eds.), The University Press of Mississippi, 2009, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> BAETENS Jan, Lefevre Pascal, apud Goensteen Thierry, *The System of Comics*, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 146.

relationship with a panel from another distant page. Therefore, the basic criterion of comics is iconic solidarity:

[I]ndependent images that, participating in series, present the double characteristics of being separated – this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes – and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Groensteen's approach of comics as a system brings forth the survey of an organic totality composed of elements, parameters and multiple procedures<sup>20</sup>.

The capabilities of visual language are also fueled by the white spaces in comics, also known as "gutters". The reader is involuntarily active in filling the gutters thus bringing closure. If we take three pictures and present them in a sequential manner, then the viewer will definitely try to make sense and search for coherence, right? Scott McCloud adds that by closure, time and motion are simulated. The sensations transmitted by the medium are conveyed by several distinct categories of closure: moment-to-moment, action-to-action progressions, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect (it sets a "wandering eye of several aspects of a place, idea or mood") and, finally, non-sequitur (no logical relation between panels)<sup>21</sup>.

The independent viewing of a panel, or a whole page can be similar to the viewing of a painting, only that the verbal language along with the "kinetic typography" of the text causes aesthetic and sensory perception. It sounds familiar as it could be the case of "crafted" synesthesia. The kinetic effect is given by the very eye of the beholder who passes with an inconsistent speed from panel to panel evoking emotions and sensations.

If we are to keep on searching for synesthetic nuances we should also investigate the nature of physiognomy in comics. Yes, stereotypical faces of villains, superheroes or super sexual women have a set of recognizable features that lure the viewer in a quick identification of roles. Pen-and-ink guru Will Eisner tells about expressive anatomy in his third instructional book, *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative* (2005), by claiming in its introduction that comics resemble theatre and that "... the artist functions like a theatrical director choreographing the action"<sup>22</sup>. Postures, gestures, space placement and other contours elicit a fusion of affect and perception from the reader through a process of identification.

George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, the intellectual comics that attracted the attention of artists such as e. e. cummings, Picasso, Hemingway, Chaplin, Walt Disney or James Joyce provides an

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

21 McCloud Scott, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, New York, HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 69-72.

22 EISNER Will, POPLASKI Peter, *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, published by W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, see *Introduction*.

abstract environment in which the reader is tempted to immerse in an allusive imaginary world filled with existential reasoning. The recurring gag of the strip revolves around a cat, a mouse named Ignatz who relentlessly throws a brick in Krazy Kat's head. The synesthetic allure wasn't at all plain as the line, the space, the syntax and logic were exceeded. Even Cummings was intrigued and wrote an essay about it published in the 1946 *Sewanee Review*, in which the strip is characterized as a "meteoric burlesque melodrama"<sup>23</sup>. Synchronicity was the premium twist that gave its fame. The setting was surreal and while Offissa Pupp is on the trail of Ignatz, the strip takes a postmodern touch. Ignatz draws his own bricks, after that hides them from the local constabulary by cutting a hole in a panel, and then stitching it<sup>24</sup>. The sensorial properties of color and sound are enhanced by the abstract lands of Coconino County, fluid frames and by the use of the indeterminate language, almost vocal and idiosyncratic: "S'funna, but I dun't see no stomm – the sky is klee – blue an' bride wit' sunshine – not

a cloud in it." This just might be what we call "ideasthesia", the conjuring of an inducer and a concurrent which are no longer just sensory, as in the case of synesthesia, but also semantic and sensory. Any wiki search can give one's indexing on the matter. The adventures of Krazy Kat and Ignatz set in an always changing background could trigger an awaited momentum (before you turn the page for another glance). And so, these sensory inputs, let's say the concept of unrequited love, could evoke something transmissive.

This monochromatic graphic storytelling undergoes a transformation later on, in 1935, when due to changes in technology and in desperation to maintain its small audience shifts to a polychromatic one. The series was in danger because it was no longer in tune with the spirit of the times and the situation of the Hearst press was gloomy. Panels become larger, a new system of repetition is being introduced that leaves the impression that each of the elements from the panel can be replaced at any time. Jan Baetens observes a paradox in the reorganization of the fictional world: "things that are traditionally seen as "mobile" such as the characters of the story, do appear very static, whereas things that are traditionally seen as static such as the setting of the story become very mobile"<sup>25</sup>.

23 CSSGN – The Canadian Society for Studies in the Graphic Narrative, "kontinue kuriosity to its illogical klimax": Krazy Kat, E. E. Cummings and the (Un)Grammar of Modernism, from: [http://cssgn.org/krazy\\_kat\\_cummings\\_project.html](http://cssgn.org/krazy_kat_cummings_project.html), 28.04.2012.

24 ARNOTT Luke, "Krazy Kat's History and Significance. George Herriman's Strip Influential in Pop and High Art Alike", 2009, on: <http://luke-arnott.suite101.com/the-history-and-significance-of-krazy-kat-a119100#ixzz1taMUIO72>, 28.04.2012.

25 BAETENS Jan, *From Black & White to Color and Black: What Does It Mean (not) to Use Color?*, College Literature; Summer 2011, Vol. 38 Issue 3, p. 111, on: <http://pdc-connection>.

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