

Introduction

Against Bouba and Kiki

Ce qui serait vraiment surprenant, c'est que le son *ne pût pas* suggérer la couleur, que les couleurs *ne pussent pas* donner l'idée d'une mélodie, et que le son et la couleur fussent impropres à traduire des idées.

What would be truly surprising would be if sound *could not* suggest color, if colors *could not* give the idea of a melody, and if sound and color were unsuitable for translating ideas.

—Charles Baudelaire

Synaesthesia (from the Greek, sun- , with, + aesthesis, feeling or perception) today is generally taken to mean a physiological condition that has become the object of interest for experimental psychology and neuroscience. This book contests the suggestion that physiological or neurological synaesthesia is the basis or foundation for the aesthetics of synaesthesia in literature and philosophy that will be examined here. That is, I reject the binary of literal/figurative as mapped onto a body/mind dichotomy that suggests that neurological synaesthesia is the “real” or “true” synaesthesia, of which aesthetic synaesthesia is a mere copy or aftereffect. Richard E. Cytowic and David M. Eagleman, leading scientific scholars of synaesthesia, make a point of distinguishing “genuine” and “pseudo-synaesthesia” by severely limiting the purvey of the term.

There is confusion about the word “synesthesia” given that it had been used over a 300-year period to describe vastly different things ranging from poetry and metaphor to deliberately contrived

mixed-media applications such as psychedelia, son et lumière, odorama, and even cross-disciplinary educational curricula. Therefore we have to carefully separate those who use synesthesia as an intellectual idea of sensory fusion—artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe, who painted music, or the composer Alexander Scriabin who included light organs in his scores—from individuals with genuine perceptual synesthesia. (13)

We see here the hierarchical division between “genuine,” lively sense perception, spontaneity, and what is contrived, that is, unnatural, and intellectually mediated. One is clearly valued over the other.

Cytowic and Eagleman suggest that the neurological connection between or among senses forms the basis of metaphor, which then is understood as a kind of drying up or abstraction from the “natural ground” of the body’s physiology. This thinking yields a genealogy of language modeled like this: “perception—synesthesia—metaphor—language” (166).

Cytowic and Eagleman write: “Orderly relationships among the senses imply a cognitive continuum in which perceptual similarities give way to synesthetic equivalences, which in turn become metaphoric identities, which then merge into the abstractions of language. . . . Metaphor is therefore the reverse of what people usually assume. It depends not on some artful ability for abstract language but on our *physical interaction* with a concrete, sensuous world” (166). Even at the “sublinguistic” levels, similarity and equivalence are at work, the perception of which, according to Aristotle, constitutes poetic genius and the ability to make metaphors. Thus the essence of metaphor—likeness—could just as well underpin the possibility of synaesthesia as the reverse.

The perception of likeness—the ability to make metaphor—is a linguistic function. It likewise underlies the famous “bouba” and “kiki” experiment. In this experiment, people are shown images of an amoeba-like blob and a starlike shape and are asked to pair with them the names “bouba” and “kiki.” Cytowic and Eagleman write: “98% pick the spiked shape as ‘kiki’ because its visual jags mimic the ‘kiki’ sound and the sharp tongue inflection against the palate. By contrast, the blob’s rounded *visual* contours are more like the *sound* and *motor* inflections of ‘bouba’” (165). Again, similarity and mimicry underlie the very possibility of the association of a linguistic sound and a visual shape; the ability to make metaphor thus could be fully independent of any sort of “innate” or physiological synaesthetic connection between sound and vision. This example is read as a proof

of the universality of a sort of proto-synaesthesia. Cytowic and Eagleman explain: “This kind of correspondence across cultures illustrates the rule that pre-existing relationships (analogies) are often co-opted in biology. In this way, synesthetic associations our ancestors established long ago grew into the more abstract expressions we know today—and this is why metaphors make sense” (165–66). They thus endorse a kind of neuro-Cratylism that naturalizes language and privileges nature over culture.¹

Cytowic and Eagleman refer us to an article called “Synaesthesia—A Window into Perception, Thought and Language” by V. S. Ramachandran and E. M. Hubbard, who provide a bit more detail on some of the issues I have just touched upon.² We read that synaesthesia is caused by a “cross-wiring” of different parts of the brain. “We propose,” they write, “that synaesthesia is caused by cross-wiring between these two areas, in a manner analogous to the cross-activation of the hand area by the face in amputees with phantom arms” (9). Analogy, or the perception of similarity, is at the very heart of this scientific explanation, which gives rise to the metaphor of “cross-wiring”—a metaphor that perhaps describes “metaphor” itself as a crossing over. This “crossing over” is doubly metaphorized in their explanation of the origin of metaphor in synaesthesia: “It has often been suggested that concepts are represented in brain maps in the same way that percepts (like colours or faces) are. . . . perhaps many [other] concepts are also represented in non-topographic maps in the brain. If so, we can think of metaphors as involving cross-activation of conceptual maps in a manner analogous to cross-activation of perceptual maps in synaesthesia” (17). Again, analogy links the workings of synaesthesia to the metaphor to which it gives rise, and it is perhaps the crossing of metaphor that grounds the possibility of transfer from the senses to sense.

Ramachandran and Hubbard present the bouba and kiki case with a bit more detail and nuance. They describe the reason that so many people attribute the names as predicted as follows: “The reason is that the sharp changes in visual direction of the lines in the right-hand figure [kiki] mimics the sharp phonemic inflections of the sound kiki, as well as the sharp inflection of the tongue on the palate. The bouba/kiki examples provides our first vital clue for understanding the origins of proto-language, for it suggests that there may be natural constraints on the ways in which sounds are mapped on to objects” (19). The connection between name and image is made by *mimicry*, or an originary mimesis, that gives rise to something like an onomatopoeic theory of the origin of language (as they note). This raises the problem of whether there is such a thing as a universal symbolism

of language; but the “bouba and kiki effect” only points to an originary imitation, not to a generation, of the shape by the sound, in which case the attributions are originally metaphorical.

The term *synaesthesia* is in fact much older than the three centuries that Cytowic and Eagleman attribute to it. This is indeed the age of the currently defined understanding of it as a neurological condition, of which Kevin T. Dann provides a thorough genealogy and intellectual history in *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge*. But the term can be found as early as Aristotle, in whose *Nichomachean Ethics* it appears to signify a perception shared among friends in a polity. It develops and is later conflated with the term for a sense that unifies the other senses and points to an emerging concept of self-consciousness. This book addresses the articulation of synaesthesia in a postscientific age, beginning with Baudelaire, but also taking into account later interpretations of Aristotle. The synaesthesia of this book—*The Other Synaesthesia*—is not the neurological condition, but rather the articulation of the connections among the senses and the arts found in literature and philosophy, a sense of synaesthesia that stands on its own. The book does not present a unified theory of synaesthesia, but seeks only to trace its movements and workings in the texts it investigates. This includes the notion of correspondence, which doubles the structure of synaesthesia itself, or marks out its “verticle” dimension: the connection of the senses not only among each other (synaesthesia), but also between the senses (as sensation) and sense (as in signification or meaning), thus as the very meeting place between the body and the mind. Synaesthesia, like metaphor, crosses all of these borders.

For Kevin T. Dann, aesthetic synaesthesia is aimed at discovering a primordial unity or a cosmic synthesis; he describes it as the “ultimate holism—that offering a unified sensory grounding for all human perception” (42). But while synaesthesia holds elements together in a sort of community, the senses and arts never quite fuse, but rather individuate and articulate themselves through their interconnection. In this book, I question the easy dismissal of synaesthesia as a totalizing, idealizing, and “romanticizing” trope and ask whether it cannot also be seen as a power of disarticulation, unworking, and difference. I understand synaesthesia to refer not only to the combination and crossing of the senses but also to the combination and crossing of the arts. While synaesthesia is generally read as a figure of transcendence and unity, there is also another effect of synaesthesia—another feeling of and for the relation of the arts that articulates differences and displaces the position of essence. This other synaesthesia opens up within or

alongside of the more familiar sense of synaesthesia as synthesis and points to an alternative understanding of the arts that does not see them as parts of a unified aesthetic whole. This book looks at this language of connection that resists unification to understand the workings of synaesthesia and the interarts in philosophy and literature.

The chapters of this book read the workings and unworkings of synaesthesia in a range of authors to go beyond the usual “There it is!” to examine the function and operations of synaesthesia and correspondence as they are articulated in texts. That is, this book is about discursive formations and not about perception itself. Chapter 1, “Synaesthesia and Community,” works with Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of community to open up possible meanings of synaesthesia. This conception articulates a rhythmic “being-with” that first allows the elements it connects to come into being. I trace the verb back to *sunaisthanesthai* in Aristotle through a reading of Giorgio Agamben and his focus on “shared perception” to argue for a rhythmic notion of synaesthesia that connects elements without fusing or unifying them. The chapter pursues the connection between synaesthesia and the relation among the arts to show how the interaction of arts and media resists totalization in Nancy, Adorno, and Benjamin. Adorno and Benjamin also develop the term *constellation* to evoke a similar tension, and I argue that *constellation* and *synaesthesia* are related terms.

Chapter 2, “Synaesthetic Reading: Liszt’s Double Vision,” considers the open correspondence between Franz Liszt and George Sand. The figure of synaesthesia, as a joining of the senses in the act of reading, models at the same time an experience of quasi-transcendence and the opening of a kind of friendship that connects, but does not unify, its members. Sand compares her experience of Liszt to Lavater’s physiognomic reading of heads. The Aeolian harp extends the subject beyond its limits, but does not quite allow it to exceed itself to the point of a genuine transcendence. Correspondence opens not in Swedenborg’s mystical synaesthesia, but in the syncopated relation of the senses and the arts in the act of interpretive reading.

In chapter 3: “Baudelaire’s Synaesthesia,” I consider the canonical foundation of the discourse of synaesthesia and correspondence in poems and prose by Charles Baudelaire. Pointing to the many sources Baudelaire identifies for the theory of correspondence, I suggest that citation and repetition form a kind of community. The figure of synaesthesia joins the senses, while the understanding of art as translation and correspondence joins different artists in a citational community. The community that comes into being in this way is not a group of psychological subjects, but rather is

a collection of terms that are held apart even as they are grouped together. What connects them does so alogically, through the materiality of language; it not only connects, but also fragments, serializes, expands, and realigns. The simple stating and exposure of proper names takes up the space through which a sort of community spreads itself. But this type of synaesthesia or community does not gather together presences or aggregate individuals through presence into a whole. Rather, through resonance and dislocation, to use the language of Jean-Luc Nancy, each singular plural—the many singulars—are exposed, set out and brought into play. The chapter takes up a number of poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* and several of the *Salons*.

Chapter 4, “Nietzsche, Wagner, and ‘Demonic Communicability,’” investigates Wagner’s notion of the total work of art to show that it develops a type of transcendence contrary to the tense finitude of synaesthesia. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, for Wagner, implies a logic of incarnation in representation that moves from the poet to the actor to the hero in what Nietzsche, in the *Untimely Meditations*, calls an event of communication (“Mittheilung”). This sympathetic partitioning communication, grounded in Wagner’s “demonic communicability,” coincides with synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is thus connected with artistic communication as a simultaneous sharing and partitioning that, according to Nietzsche, extends to incorporate the spectator as well. This communicability is inherently reversible; I analyze Nietzsche’s turn against Wagner as an effect of this reversibility. The chapter contrasts the later Nietzsche’s work, *Der Fall Wagner*, with his earlier celebration of Wagner in “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth.”

Chapter 5, “The Unworking of Synaesthesia in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours*,” reads synaesthesia in this novel against the backdrop of Max Nordau’s evaluation of synaesthesia as degenerate. For him, the dissolution of boundaries entails a dissolution of differences and a regression to a less developed stage, equated with the mollusk. Tracing out the alliances of the senses and the arts, the chapter shows how they revolve in a kind of rhythmic interaction that presupposes their differences even in putting them into relation with one another. The chapter focuses first on the ekphrases of Gustave Moreau’s paintings of Salomé, and then on Huysmans’s analysis of Mallarmé, in particular his dramatic poem “Hérodiade,” to show how synaesthesia connects arts and artists without collapsing differences.

Chapter 6, “Correspondances: Between Baudelaire and Heidegger,” considers Heidegger’s critique of the correspondence theory of truth in relation to the tradition of *correspondances* established throughout the book. It likewise investigates the concept of *Entsprechung* as correspondence.

Heidegger explicitly translates *Entsprechung* as *correspondance* in his lecture, “What Is philosophy?,” originally delivered as a lecture in France. There, *Entsprechung* is meant to present an “other” correspondence that is not correspondence. I want to suggest that the introduction of the term *Entsprechung* cannot help but reintroduce the overtones of correspondence as *homoiosis* that Heidegger wants so much to be done with. But in the process, correspondence comes to differ from itself, reinforcing the irreducible differences among languages in translation: German and French, Greek and Latin. The chapter concludes by taking up Werner Hamacher’s reading of the self-differentiation of the term *Entsprechung* in *Für—die Philologie*. Here he shows how language misspeaks or unspeaks (*ent-spricht*) the very thing it co-responds to (*entspricht*); it opens up the otherness to which it stands in an inarticulate relation.