



# WHY IS GREEN A RED WORD?

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Several years ago, during a lecture on Vassily Kandinsky, my teacher mentioned the phenomenon of synesthesia. A discussion of color came up. Afterwards, my teacher passed along an article about a way of thinking that proved to be my own. It was only later that I undertook my now year-long inquisitive and expedient research into the so-called synesthetic phenomenon.

I was attracted by the complexity of our understanding; that recognition of reality can be experienced as stranger than fiction; that more takes place in our brains than we ourselves can ever understand; that we can understand that we experience the world subjectively, while intuitively believing we experience it objectively.

I wanted to research how interpretation overlaps and replaces truth, and became curious about how the mind works. How do we think? How does one reduce such a phenomenon down to something one can identify with?

My investigation of the mystery of synesthesia led me to new concepts for the exchange of subjective visual experiences.



video still *Brain Wash*, 2003

## Synesthesia

Synesthesia is just one of many things we can not experience together. It is like having one's own semiotic over and above our common language. For example, a geometric form along with the number two, or a color along with a day and time. "Shall we meet on pink, at yellow o'clock?" We are all always making associations; we just do not talk about them. They are implicit and often completely unimportant. The distinguishing characteristic of synesthetic associations is that they are involuntary and invariable. The principle is the same as that of an image of your mother popped into your head every time you thought of her or someone spoke of her.

Richard E. Cytowic explains:

Its Greek. Syn means "together" and aesthesia means "sensation". Synesthesia means "feeling together", just as syn-chrony means "at the same time", or syn-thesis means "different ideas joined into one", or syn-opsis means "to see all together". People with synesthesia have their senses hooked together. <sup>1</sup>

Multi sensory reaction is often manifested with color. At present 40 types of synesthesia have been identified. Examples are sounds and tones, or letters and numerals, that evoke colors or forms, etc. It was once claimed that one out every 100 000 people had the condition, but the current estimate is one in 2000, of which 71% are women. I would say the figure is more like one in 200. As people hear of the phenomenon and discuss it, they begin to reveal their special secrets, and synesthetes are fortuitously revealed; hopefully, they want to be discovered.

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<sup>1</sup> "Synesthesia" to my taste is a strikingly ugly word. It has a lot of vowels, thus many colors. It is as if it were trying to light up a whole city at night: too many points of light against a black background, all too colorful. It is mainly a question of that aspiring yellow *i* next to the dark blue/charcoal grey *a* at the end. Then there is the hysterical pink *y* next to the warm burgundy *s* followed by the neutral, calm light grey *n*. In the middle, the word *the* sticks out, with an actually inoffensive color combination of grey/dark green, dry turd brown/grey, and Coca-Cola red, but unfortunately it is brutally squeezed together by the strong magenta/brown *s*'s that point to the Capital S at the start of the picture. The first of the two red *e*'s also marks the point where *syn* and *aesthesia* are all too evidently joined. I spell the word in both the British and American versions. The former has that dark blue/charcoal grey *a* that casts a shadow over the two original pictures, thus looking a bit more stable and balanced.

Cytowic, Richard E, MD. 1998, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, and London. Chapter 1, "Not Enough Points on the Chicken": p. 5.

“What a relief!” Michael interrupted. “You mean I’m normal?”

“Normal is such a relative term. Let’s just say that you’re a rare bird”, I suggested, “different, but not unheard of.” (Cytowic, 1998: p.5)

## Impossible questions or inexistent questions

What are they worth? There is no such term as “impossible questions”, but let me henceforth define them as follows: Impossible questions are not those that are incorrectly formulated and thus impossible to answer; or leading questions that include their own answer, and thus bring about no real communication or exchange between interlocutors.

Impossible questions are those that do not exist in general usage; they can be asked, but they cannot be answered by anyone. In both written and spoken linguistic formulations there are distinct agreements about how words must be arranged in order to convey a clear meaning, otherwise one cannot expect an answer:

- Do you see the year?

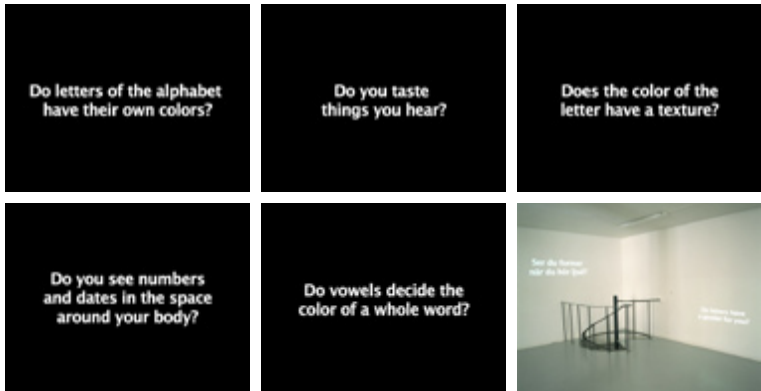
- Are your year mostly in the same position? [sic, translator]

Or, in a Vichy Nouveau ad: Which flavor are you?

Impossible questions can sound child-like or idiotic, but they have their effect and are often quite purposeful. They are a type of warm-up or instruction for the person being asked.



Panasonic commercial

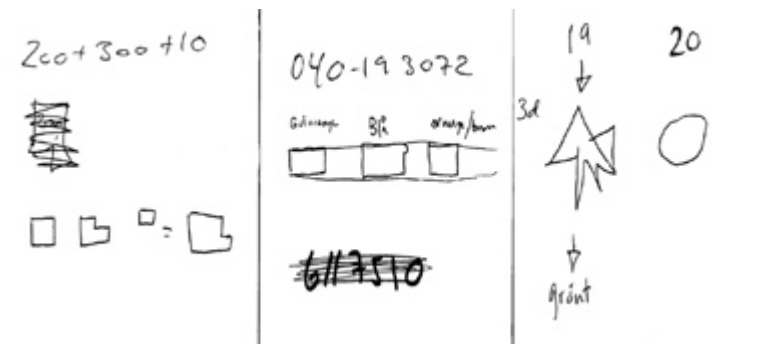


Video stills *Study of questions*. 2004. A series of questions that points out and defines the different types of mixed sensations and concepts in synesthesia. Gallery Peep, Malmö, 2004.

I prepare to conduct an interview of a synesthete. I adjust my focus onto the abstract and let my performance ability and curiosity take the lead. She comes into my studio, a bit nervous since she does not know what she should say. She has recently learned that there is a name for the sort of experiences she has always had, but she has never thought about the details of her synesthetic system. She starts by saying she can see colors on personalities, and she can remember telephone numbers in colors, and assumes at the same time that this has nothing to do with synesthesia. It is hard to describe, she says, and at that point my take-it-apart instinct kicks in. Understanding is no longer an assemblage of contradictory facts, but a method, an attitude even. The attitude is one of respect for the interviewee, but also for the scope and benefits of what we are undertaking together.

I press on and exert myself to ask the dumb questions, starting with: “Do all numbers have colors?” “No!” comes the reply. That which has always been quite natural for her suddenly goes out of focus and seems strange, but her eyes will soon turn keen as she discovers a new clarity. I continue with “What color is my telephone number?” Her assured reply: “Well, it depends on the combination of numerals!” So I ask: “What determines the combination color?” She thinks rather a while, as if she is beginning to see through her own system, then responds: “The temperature!” I quickly ask the next question: “What decides the temperature color?” “The geometric shape of the temperature, just like when I do arithmetic,” she says as she grabs the nearest paper and pencil and starts illustrating. “When I’m in the post office and have to figure out how much I have to pay, I see one form plus another, that are equal to a third form.”

After an hour we have discovered that beyond the universal signs for numerals, she sees a form, a color and a temperature. She and I both slide into the deeper reality that exists in everyone but so seldom comes up to the surface of consciousness.



### The search for the perfect description

For the present I am attracted by the idea that all synesthetes have a problem describing their relevant experiences. The problem comes in the wake of the need to be honest and precise, for fear of misleading the interviewer, but illustrates the peculiarity of the experiences, which cannot be understood via our ordinary means of communication. The nuances are difficult to describe and awkward to understand. What new language can translate these codes, and expand language's framework of comprehension to contain abstract sensory descriptions? At present I have no suggestions for correct translation.

To me the descriptions of these characteristic experiences seem more absurd than even neurological symptoms. I smile with recognition as I try to digest comments like: "Oh dear, there aren't enough points on the chicken" or "June and July are in the bottom and a bit longer than the other months."<sup>2</sup>

In a persistent attempt to describe a detail of a large synesthetic system, spelling and conjugation errors – both written and spoken – occur. And so? What knowledge can we draw from that?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



*What the Hell does Purgatory Look Like?* Video. 2005. Composed of a constant frame that shows the word PURGATORY on a white background with voice-overs consisting of nine synethetes' descriptions of each letter that spells purgatory.

See, hear, feel, taste, smell. Language's meaning is interpreted in light of its context. The senses have various languages; perhaps each sense has its own language. Actually the senses' language gets used in every other possible connection having nothing to do with true sensations. For example, the expression "to leave a bad taste in one's mouth" indicates suspicion. But the synesthetic perceptions are never charged with values of comfort or discomfort; they are simply observations, and always have been. The synesthetic experience is due to a sensory impression stimulating two or three senses simultaneously. The senses' individual languages are to a great extent mixed and integrated into ordinary usage. In attempting to describe a taste, we borrow from visual language: a round taste; to describe a smell, we use a taste-word: a sour smell; for a color, we use a touch-word: a warm red. These examples are not in themselves illustrations of synesthesia.



The year in Papier-mâché resting on a desk. A test of materializing spatial perception of time. It works like a belt around the waist. The body is placed in the opening between December and January. An unsatisfied attempt to illustrate and materialize the year.

## Famous synesthetes

Synesthesia has been recognized in scientific circles for more than 200 years, but there has been relatively little documentation or research. Since it isn't a disease, and requires no cure, it is difficult to find research funding. But there are medical and academic laboratories around the world conducting serious studies of it. As far as I know, none of this is taking place in Scandinavia. Artistic references and documentation are few, and usually the same suspects. Everyone who has researched the phenomenon has relied on material pertaining to Kandinsky, Hockney, Goethe, Scriabin, Nabokov, Basho, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, for example. But since they were never tested, it is still a mystery whether their artistic expressions derived from a special talent for metaphorical constructions across the conventional senses or from actual synesthetic experiences. In any event, they had a special ability to register and give form and language to the senses. I suppose that the prevailing intensity of interest in the subject in research circles is fed by its connection to these alleged famous synesthetes.

What does it mean when science can give names to unusual individual conditions yet it is so difficult to spot trends or parallels that can lead to definitions? Perhaps a loss of subjectivity? Synesthesia is inherently a product of difference, for even though its translation and representation require conformity, it is comprised only of great variations.

### Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

“The artist can never create anything new – he can only reveal more and more of the great spiritual, already complete and existing cosmos.” Kandinsky’s characteristic notion of “material feelings” concerns those awakened by some pre-existing material thing. He speaks without doubt as a synesthete who certainly had a special talent for representing the essence of a sensory fusion/transcending the synesthetic system into a form-language.



Richard E. Cytowic says of Kandinsky:

He had stopped objective representation in his paintings after 1911, being more interested in expressing a vision than illustrating surface reality. Kandinsky was among the first to step off the well-beaten path of representation that Western art had followed for five hundred years, and his model to express his transcendent vision was music. He explored harmonious relationships between sound and color and used musical terms to describe his paintings, called them “compositions” and “improvisations.” (Cytowic, p.55)

It is not my intention to write about Kandinsky from a wish to bring artistic practice into the discussion. The fact is that a significant number of synesthetes are artists, and that irritates me. That a majority of synesthetes are women is attributable, as one knows, to its connection to the X chromosome. Beyond experimenting and researching the phenomenon, I have not noticed it having any influence on my creative side. This certainly has something to do with my way of structuring thoughts and memories and experiencing my surroundings. I am interested in and preoccupied with synesthesia because it is such a rare phenomenon that leads me to other interesting subjects. I treat it as I would any other theme I might choose as inspiration and starting point for a project.

At the same time, I can recognize the effort necessary to overcome, or come to terms with, the non-translatable. The familiarizing and translating process synesthesia provokes is a possible metaphor for artistic production and reflection. Through a critical process, where ideas must materialize in an indefinable language, the translation replaces that which it tries to translate.

When I first had myself defined as a synesthete, I felt that I lost interest in my own synesthesia and was more interested in understanding both synesthetes' and non-synesthetes' reality. It is not my immediate evaluation that synesthetes have an advantage in understanding each other's experiences, despite what one might expect.

## Understanding

We do not understand the thing itself we look at; we acquire an understanding of its nature by discussing all of the other things around it, or perhaps more precisely its characteristics, forms and colors, along with its overall context.

We gain confidence in the information about the thing we are looking at, thereby becoming familiar with it, so we can create a definition of it. I experience art in this manner: The art object is a unique creation and often has no history in itself. In contemporary art we construct frames around the work in order to approach an understanding of a possible content. To communicate via contemporary art demands that all the rules for reading the work are presented in it. In the same way we can use sensory awareness to construct a vocabulary and common referential framework we can have confidence in.

When we meet strangers, we have nothing in common beyond language. The language's meaning is understood relative to the collective context. What happens when something is to be understood in relation to an individual context? Since

it is meaning that activates words, there are some phrases that have meaning in one way, and in another absolutely not. Synesthesia is not a language, since it has no meaning; it is only signs in the semiotic meaning. Linguistic meanings can change. They move through interpretation via a receiver-sender mechanism. Synesthetic colors are unalterable.

As we communicate, the meaning of words changes, and sometimes disappears. In a roiling, war-struck time, I tried to revive “make love, not war.” Overuse and misuse had killed it, but perhaps the power of repetition would breathe new life into the slogan.

Words circulate among intelligent and unintelligent people, who use them in different ways at different times, in different contexts. Many people express themselves with words they have unknowingly misunderstood. Others prefer difficult words since they are easier to understand than easy words. But easy words can be used as one will, whereas difficult words’ usage must be learned.



*War & Peace*, installation, 2003. Two performers make a stamp on the wall of the slogan Make Love Not War. The installation consists of the leftovers and mess from this action.

I place synesthesia in the Saussurian signified/signifier model, and if it isn't a meaningbased language, then it must function as a sign-language.

What is true is what we understand; what we understand is what we can imagine.

## Realization

Panicked and angst-ridden, I stared apathetically at the ceiling. Synesthesia is not something one can turn on and off. It is physically determined, so it would require a physical brain injury for me to turn it off. That colors and the calendar would forever follow me was no longer a gift, it was suddenly a handicap I would have to learn to live with. Since I can't change it and never have the possibility of experiencing letters in black and white as do most people, colors are no longer a fine detail or extra spice understood as exclusively positive. I was struck with the fundamental angst of not having the same frame of reference as others – of standing alone without a language.



Video stills from *Study of objects*, 2004. On the table is a model of a brain and a dummy of a man and the performer interacts with the objects by moving them around on the table.

## The impossible brain

“The brain struggles to understand,  
the brain is society trying to explain itself.”<sup>4</sup>

Our brains are influenced and changed throughout our lives, independently of what we see, hear, do, or think. If you have ever been happy, the knowledge that you are capable of happiness makes you even happier. If possibilities produce so much power and hope, what is the effect of recognizing impossibilities? That I cannot see my brain as an object or hold it in my hand while it is working makes me aggressive. The brain sits imperturbably where it should, like a black hole behind the eyes. If you are lucky you can feel it like a muscle, if you tighten the surrounding muscles. Out of pure curiosity I can decide to become blind or deaf,

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<sup>4</sup> C. Blakemore, quoted in: Johansson, Barbro B, “Hjärnan Formas av Stimulans och Utmaninger”  
Läkartidningen, 97,5, 2000.

but if I choose to become brain dead I cannot experience it. Memories never disappear; you cannot choose to remove them or refuse to remember. On the other hand you can choose to remember, and concentrate so intensively on a moment that you will always be able to recall it.

## Describing the incomprehensible

It is a common human predicament that language falls short, all the more so for synesthetes, who are never satisfied with the words and means they choose to describe their experiences. Even though the descriptions obviously can sound rather abstract, it is possible for anyone at all to recognize the character of synesthetic experiences. But how can we be sure others know what we mean? There is always a chance of misunderstanding. One's way of going about it is not inconsequential, and synesthetes have an inhuman desire for honesty and authenticity when asked about their condition.

They obviously aim to clarify the phenomenon and to use logical persuasion in their expression. Nonetheless, synesthetes, like everyone else, can unwittingly lie, cheat, and invent. But what would be their motive? To mislead science? Influence the diagnosis?

No, with respect to wanting to deliver the perfect description, misspeaking and original turns of phrase automatically become lies.

In the old days, before the cause of synesthesia had been explored, the condition was considered a mental disorder, a question of deformity in the brain's connections. It was accepted that artists, in connection with their exegeses of their works, already worked with metaphors and allegories.

## Translation, transliteration, and transformation

Speech is a text that comes out of a person's mouth in its graphic form. The speaker checks the text's grammar. The pronunciation and style - the way the words are said - determine the grammatical pauses in the text. The sonic length of the spoken word determines where in the mouth it comes from. It is not so odd or hard to understand. Or, one can turn it around and say that silent reading is impossible, because we automatically put a voice or an image to a text; text and speech are interdependent. As soon as one has learned a word's meaning, one is no longer capable of hearing it as an abstract, meaningless sound. Foreign spoken languages that we neither speak nor understand can be perceived as pure phonetic phenomena.

As a synesthete, the colors on my words are decided by the colors of the alphabet. Every single graphic letter has its color. When someone speaks to me in a foreign language, the colors appear when I can recognize the meaningless sound's spelling. Kjileos is not a word but a chance assemblage of colored letters.<sup>5</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about the possibilities of translation in "The Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*:

And translation is, after all, one version of intertextuality. If there are no unique words, if, as soon as a privileged concept-word emerges, it must be given over to the chain of substitutions and to the "common language" why should that act of substitution that is translation be suspect? If the proper name or sovereign status of the author is as much a barrier as a right way, why should the translator's position be secondary?<sup>6</sup>

Derrida writes of translation:

Within the limits of its possibility, or its apparent possibility, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But, if this difference is never pure, translation is even less so, and a notion of transformation must be substituted for the notion of translation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another.<sup>7</sup>

My understanding is that Spivak is suggesting that the driving force behind her translating activity is a desire to reproduce the original. At the end of her text, she writes that she prefers a reader who will stop short at her mistaken translations.

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<sup>5</sup> *Kjileos*: Oddly enough, this "word" has a balanced color composition. J, L and O light white shades (not the same nuances, but let us accept them for ease of discussion). K and S are strong colors - turd-brown/charcoal grey and glistening burgundy, respectively - that look good with the other letters. E is a warm pink-red (a bit reminiscent of the label on a coke bottle). I will conclude by confessing that I just now had a surprising personal insight: I had previously assigned an obviously wrong color to the letter "I". In hope of finding logical rules or patterns in my color system, I discovered when a researcher tested me that capital "I" is always white, but small "i" is yellow when not beside another white letter. In *Kjileos*, "i" is beside "j", one of the white letters, but it still appears to be yellow, so I can toss that theory. In any case, small "i" is white when it stands alone, but when next to other colors, the dot begins to shine yellow. If there is a pattern, I have not yet figured it out.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 1976, *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: p. lxxxvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.lxxxvi.

With respect to understanding synesthetic experiences, the translation takes place in the absence of an original, since it has never, historically speaking, been expressed or described properly.

Each type of synesthesia has its own original, known to only one person.

How far can descriptive language lead us, and to where?

### With the help of a dictionary

Reference works are characteristic not only of my current project, but of a tendency in our society, laying much weight on short and precise forms of presentation. Language consists of words and signs, put together to create a meaning, whose principle function is communication and common understanding. An account of what words and signs mean is written with other words, in a dictionary, accessible to all competent readers on the planet. The book's formulations are universally valid and important to our intake and understanding of linguistic information. Short, precise exposition is popular because it supports society's tempo. We think we can quickly sort the good from the bad. This is also founded on an on-going faith in language's possibilities. We believe everything can be described in words. Language is an ancient invention, and we are well-educated in its utility and effects; thus it is always our immediate means of expression.

### *Per-cep-tion* –

1. *the process of using the senses to acquire information about the surrounding environment or situation.*<sup>8</sup>

Perception is a word I have never really used. Its English ring consigns it to my foreign word category, which I seldom use for fear of creating confusion. On the other hand, I use the Danish word *opfattelse*. Before I look it up in a Danish dictionary, I will put forward my *perception* of the word, which has two meanings. The first can be described using three other words: feeling, awareness, and registration. Everything one feels or registers with all the senses in a given situation, and can give an account of later. If there is something one has not *perceived*, it is because one was not present. Two people go down the street, and one does not notice a common friend passing on the other side. The word's second meaning is derived from a person's individual history and basis for having an opinion and understanding on a very personal level. One's previous experiences form a definite and valid *opinion* of something.

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<sup>8</sup> Encarta® World English Dictionary, 1999, Microsoft Corporation.

The dictionary explanation: “Pardon me, I didn’t get everything you said; that’s not at all how I see the case; she has a hard time understanding = slow witted. *Graspable*: the problem is easily graspable. *Opinion*: form a new opinion.”<sup>9</sup>

## In search of criticism

Earlier, when I saw art as a powerful yet innocent voice in the public discourse, I had a strong need to be critical and assertive in my works. The voice is innocent when it can only be heard. At its point of origin art can only be experienced, not necessarily understood. The desire to follow a critical discourse is now gone. Concurrently with my research on synesthesia I came to realize that my material, in its expression and yield is simplified to storytelling. One can perhaps turn the problem around and say that I had been dumb enough to believe that I as a creator was the suffering victim of all of the problems that needed a new formulation in an undefined and experimental language: visual art. In that casting, the viewer is the privileged party who can take what he likes. During the process I had the insight I wanted.

Synesthesia is a physical phenomenon, and everyone who experiences it says: “Yes, but that’s just how it is, and always has been.” The operating assumption and premise of criticism is indeed that a possibility of change, evolution, or renewal is at hand. But synesthesia does not have so many critical points; the criteria of the symptoms are inflexible, and there is nothing to be done. I can choose to criticize language’s inadequacies, or the world’s prejudiced attitudes or inability to identify with anything that is different. That is hardly new or interesting. But I can choose to tell it like it is, and a telling offers an insight the viewer can digest.

On the other hand, it is still my task to localize critical subjects in a project that will provide a point of entry for discussion in the work.

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<sup>9</sup> Politikens Nudansk Ordbog. Politikens Forlag, Copenhagen, 1992.

Opfattelse is a green word with a dark grey shadow in the middle. *F*, *a*, and *tt* dominate the word’s colors, especially the dark blue-grey *a*. *F* and *tt* have somewhat the same green shade.

## Associations

What is their significance in reading an expression? What they trigger in us is obviously uncontrollable. Even though we believe our common language has universal encoding and guidelines, we can never avoid free associations. When we hear the word “red” it is not independent of our imagining some red thing or other, already perceived with the hearing. Kandinsky says in the 1911 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that all things have spiritual characteristics and are therefore beings that speak to the soul. Everything stimulates our individual world of immaterial objects.

### I hear what you're saying, but I don't understand it

In Steven Spielberg's 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, UFO researchers communicate with aliens by imitating their language. That is, they don't exchange words or conduct a conversation; the aliens' language consists of tones with colors. The scientists register them and mime them back at the UFO. I see that response as a statement of confidence and a means of bidding them welcome. They answer with a foreign language that they don't directly understand or speak, but they show that they have heard and accept the contact. Consciously and unconsciously, we send out such simple but meaningful messages and correspondence every day.

I am impressed that Spielberg had the imagination to create a foreign language for these fictional beings from outer space that so resembles synesthesia. It is a beautiful, gripping film that plays with principles of the synesthetic condition in every possible way.



Video stills, Study of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind – Codebreaking*, 2006. A reconstruction of the soundtrack in the film. The tones in the film are accompanied with colors. I translate the colors in the original film into letters, according to my synesthetic responses to colors. My decoding of the colors create a combination of letters, that could spell the word *Obey*.

## What gets us to believe in synesthesia?

What if there is a meaning that finds no code or verbalization? Does it then become meaningless?

Richard E. Cytowic, a neurologist, writes at the start of his book *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* how he was by chance introduced to synesthesia while dining with a friend who suddenly exclaimed: "Oh dear, there aren't enough points on the chicken." Here he describes the reactions of some medical colleagues to the phenomenon:

Marty insisted "I just can't believe that a normal person is going to see things that aren't there."

"They are not psychotic..."

"How do you know?" interrupted Mark, the chief resident. "You must have to be pretty screwed up to hear colors. Maybe these synesthete people are psycho retards with their brains all scrambled."

...

"I assume it's not very important," I said, "at least in terms of not causing any medical problems."

Marty interrupted. "Some slob hears colors and that's not a problem? It sounds like a major problem to me. Forget it, this is not on your neuro hit parade because it's not real."

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"Maybe you haven't seen it because your mind is closed tighter than your sphincter," I told Justin.

"You have to draw this kind of experience out of people," I said. "If folks are going to get this kind of hostile reaction from their doctor, who would ever talk about it?"

"I got enough work to do without dealing with crazy people," Mark said. "Admit 'em, work 'em up, send 'em home, and roll in the next one. I don't want to hear about crazy chickens from people whose brains are scrambled. Somebody says a lot of crazy stuff to me and I'll pump him full of thorazine and lock him up. Take my advice, Rick, leave this kind of stuff to philosophers. They have time for meaningless digression. We've got work to do." (Cytowic, p. 35)

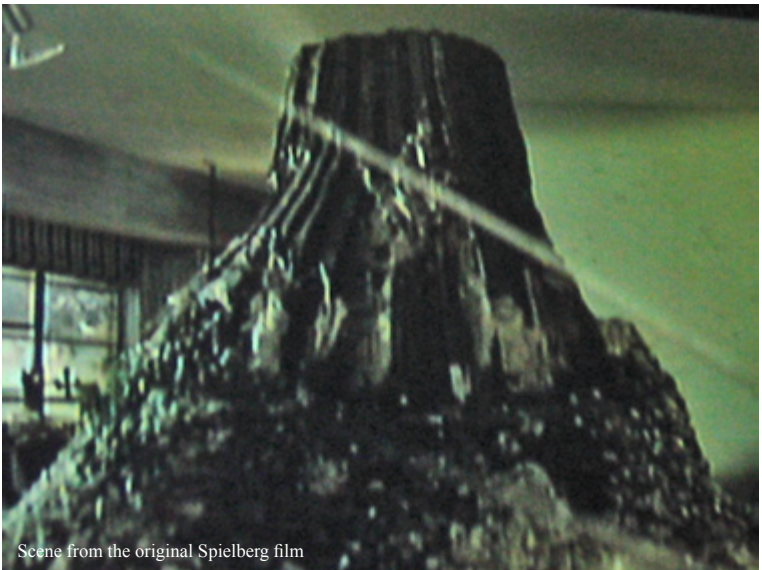
## Some kind of proof

Brain-scanning makes it possible to measure blood-flow to areas where for example color, vision, or sound are produced. These activities look different in synesthetes than in normal controls. I take this as good grounds for believing that the condition exists. I also believe in it because synesthetes have a sincere desire

and eagerness for new ways of expressing themselves. We have something that cannot be completely described in the existing forms of language. Descriptive language is constantly renewed, but still there is something missing, something missed! How can one overcome the fundamental intersubjectivity of a dialogue? We need other tools to be able to transform these phenomenological experiences into a universally accessible language. Who will take the responsibility; maybe it is all lies or fiction?

I am reminded of the “chosen” in *Close Encounters*, the people who have had an obsessive image of a mountain implanted in their minds by the space aliens, such that they can no longer carry on with their normal lives, while being incapable of describing or explaining what has got hold of them, even though it is inhumanly important to them.

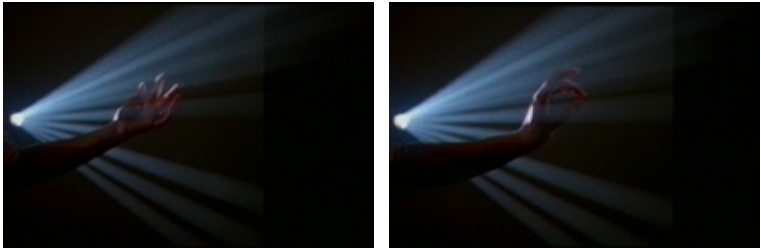
Finally, it is the implanted image that guides them to an American national park where they meet the UFO and their destiny.



Scene from the original Spielberg film

## Where do the color come from?

Goethe says that colors belong to vision and that the senses tie us to reality. He concentrates on dynamic processes of light – light/dark polarity. Colors arise in the meeting of light and dark. We don't know what light itself is, but we can first see it when it strikes something. Natural science is not interested in darkness, since it is just an absence of light. Colors function as a celestial phenomenon, constructed on a gradient principle. The basic colors are yellow (light) and blue (dark), and from them come all of the other colors. We recognize the basic world in the same way, and it generally has the same impact on us. But our picture of reality is a combination of what we see and what we know.



Video stills from *Study of light -a fake sensation of touch*. 2004. A hand is playing on rays of light.

Salmon, fire-engine red, coal black, sky blue, olive green, aqua marine: colors are named for and refer to concrete things that are the same for everyone. When we see a black and white film, we unconsciously project colors onto things we recognize by their hues.

Colors in a synesthete's head are very specific, but where do they come from? Colors are invisible; they do not exist in the real world – they are obviously produced in the brain.

Why is A dark blue-grey for me and red for someone else?

Some of the people I have corresponded with during this project, I have met at The American Synesthesia Association Annual National Meeting at Rockefeller University in New York, May 2003, and others on the basis of an add I was invited to do in the Swedish newspaper *Express*. Some people had their own ideas about why colors crept into their brains, but they were not in the least logical. For example, one of them suggested that 9 o'clock is yellow because as a child she always rode on a yellow school bus at that hour. It is important to consider synesthetic colors without liking or disliking them in order to detect any patterns.

# Personligt

## SÖKES

VERKLIGHETEN SER INTE  
LIKADAN UT FÖR ALLA

**VAR FINNS NI?** Jag söker personer med synestetiska upplevelser eller som har intresse för detta. Synestesi är ett neurologiskt tillstånd där två eller flera sinnen sammankopplas till ett intryck. Det finns många former av synestesi, den vanligaste är att man hör färger. Upplevelserna är automatiska, konsekventa och ofrivilliga. För mig har alla bokstäver, ord, siffror, tidpunkter, dagar och månader bestämda färger, former och texturer. Till exempel är siffran 8 skinande vinröd, precis som bokstäverna S och P och veckodagen torsdag. Så har det alltid varit, och så kommer det säkerligen alltid att vara. Synestesi är ett sällsynt och intressant fenomen. 1 människa på 2000. Det är ofta ärftligt och vanligare hos kvinnor efter- som x-kromosomen bär på anlaget. I Sverige och övriga Skandinavien finns varken något forum för synesteter eller forskning i ämnet. Jag är övertygad om att synestesi är mycket vanligare än man tror. Känner du igen dig? Hör av dig. Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen. [Synestesi1@hotmail.com](mailto:Synestesi1@hotmail.com)

"GEORGE BUSH'S VOICE TASTES LIKE SHOE LEATHER"



Synesthesia is not something you learn. It is innate. We can see parts of the brain being activated.

.....Lukt har färger/ färger är noter/ smaker av röster/ former har smaker/ tid uppfattas som landskap/ ord har färger/ beröring lockar fram färger/ färger kopplas till dagar/ toner har färger/ skriva ord ses med färger/ ljud kopplas till färger.....



There are some distractions and negative sides to synesthesia. I also find it useful.



Everything would be less complicated, if we could crawl into each others head.



I feel special because I have it and synesthesia really helps out with my memory. I always remember the color first.

Personer med olika former av synestesi, samt forskare inom ämnet (lingvister, läkare, psykologer, neurologer, musiker och konstnärer) beskriver och diskuterar fenomenet på American Synesthesia Association's årliga konferens i New York, maj 2003. Från en film av Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen (nederst till vänster). (överst till vänster Julian Asher / till höger Harley Gittleman och Shabana Tajwar).

Newspaper add, Expressen, (Sweden), 20 juli 2003. The Swedish Newspaper Expressen invited me to design a full page as an art project. I inserted an advertisement to get in contact with synesthetes in Scandinavia and opened an email account to start a forum. I received many emails, and some of them I met personally.

As far as presenting a synesthetic color verbally, via computer, I must conclude, after an hour, that the attempt has failed.

It is noteworthy that vowels typically dominate the colors in many synesthetes' words. My hopeless explanation would point out that vowels are very strong letters, because they have no phonetic syllables. Professor Sean Day has looked for trends and discovered that *o* and *o* most often appear as white, *i* as white or black, and *a* as red, but I find it difficult to draw a convincing pattern from that.

Bent Fausing concludes the chapter "Seeing Without Using the Eyes" of the book *Vision as a Sense* with the following observation: "But naturally actual visual sensory impressions are the basis for the gestalt of the memory, fantasy, and dream images."<sup>10</sup>

When, how and what in the world has got into my head, since *y* is pink?

### Mistrust of aesthetics

I have not found any materialization of synesthetic experiences that would make it easier for others to imagine them. We have to have a translation that will be reliably retranslated. Demuth's painting of a golden number 5 is a representation - pigment on paper, and I have no idea at all why it should be so. Illustration is not a correct rendering, it is something in itself, something totally new. Art is one of the descriptive languages we know, and even though I think its strong suit is in creating its own space between understanding and misunderstanding, the familiar and the unknown, it is still not the language I am looking for. Aesthetic language is too powerful and touches some very special nerves, which can result in fragmented perception of the actual contents. The aesthetic strikes the eye, but how the eye weaves these impressions into a context is a chance procedure to begin with.

I have no confidence in aesthetics as a means to create full understanding. I am not saying that it can't, but I consider aesthetics a self-standing language that stimulates uncontrollable senses. It is an ordinary turn of events that one sets words to pictures. For me, words always come first, so I experiment with transforming thoughts into a visual language. As soon as I, or anyone else, declares the work finished, it stands there all for itself, and I stand on the same side as a

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<sup>10</sup> Fausing, Bent. 1995, *Synet Som Sans*. Olesen Offset, Viborg, Denmark: p. 58.

viewer. It is hopeless to think that the visualizations are a copy of one's idea. Many of my projects failed in that respect, because the aesthetic was so tightly planned according to my idea in the hope of transferring it to a sign-language. In that respect the viewer has more power over the aesthetic than I do.

If one really wants to say something, that is, to get a message across, my suggestion is to use the idea's original language. Unfortunately there are no originals in the outer world corresponding to the synesthetic sensations, therefore I choose to work around the discussion of it. I like to keep it more or less in black and white in its representation and I like to get lost in first-person reports and the dynamics between synesthetes and researchers. Everything with a hope to create some kind of confusion and a social space for imagination.

## Agreements

The big question is whether one can say anything with art and what can be said, and whether one as spectator considers a work of art with the expectation and intention of understanding something the artist has created. When I, as a viewer, visit an exhibition, I cannot ignore that there is a creator behind the work I see. Therefore I try to figure out the creative process such that I try to see the choices the artist made to achieve the results presented to me. Naturally this method is a result of me being an artist. I am presented before an expression created and constructed by another; I am in a position to interpret it.

I do this, as I said, by finding and observing which means the artist uses to tell her story.

Since I expect that what I am looking at is constructed around an idea and a message, it is also possible for me to find it, that is, to pull the artist's appropriate message out of the work.

Since the viewer's perception of one's expression presumably cannot be controlled, it is difficult to say anything, even though the goal of a work is that it be sent to be "read."

When I go to see art, my ambition is to understand the artist's message and the work's content and value, so I also think there is a chance to misunderstand an art work. As long as there is an idea behind an art work, it is doomed to be understood or misunderstood.

My own personal experience of a work will always be there, but the associations that come up in my head are private and not subject to control by me or the artist. Art is considered a communicating language, and the prerequisites for communication are agreements/accords.



*No Brain No Pain*, glass sculpture 2003.

## The visible invisible

I have searched for the possibilities of translating these immaterial concepts. Both for the individual synesthete and for those who do not recognize what is being described and look to attain greater insight. What does this procedure imply, and is it even possible?

First and foremost I can observe that it apparently is not possible, but that the possibilities are found in the will of one who wants to translate, who is not satisfied. The procedure demands a definite presentation ability, detailed source information and descriptions. I will admit that since undertaking it, I have difficulty ignoring people's extra senses. When I know about someone's synesthetic system, it becomes a part of my image of them. For example, I know someone who has

conceptual synesthesia - that is, a spatial perception of time. I let myself hear how she has a kind of time archive on top of her head where she systematically puts everything having to do with time. That archive looks - or rather I imagine it does as soon as she comes into the room - like a construction, a scaffolding or invisible hat she has on.



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## Colophon:

Why is green a red word?

By Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen

Based on Master's Paper, Malmö Art Academy, March 2004, in Danish.

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Preview edition



