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“I spy something....”

– Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen’s works on synesthesia

Arthur Rimbaud, in one of his prose poems dating from the 1870s entitled *Délires II*, describes an invention: “I have invented the color of vowels! A is black, E is white, I is red, O is blue, U is green. I determined the form and movement of each consonant and – caught up in an instinctive rhythm – let myself be carried away in the invention of a poetical word easily accessible to all, for this day or that, for each and every sense. I have kept the translation for the time being.”

This paragraph is found in a work tellingly called “A Season in Hell”. Catholic readers, at least, will recognize that this can only refer to purgatory, since no one ever returns from the depths of actual hell.

All these poetic, synesthetic, religious connotations are subtly invoked in Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen’s work “What The Hell Does Purgatory Look Like?”. Black lettering is placed in front of a calm surface of white while different voices describe their subjective, synesthetic perceptions of purgatory and, through their description, also create it.

This historico-cultural word – highly charged ever since Dante’s mountain of purgatory – unfurls its secretive and intimate force in front of a gray, spartan background. This is achieved by the voices, which open up new dimensions that go beyond the mere characters of the word and make them accessible to the listener and observer. An entire cosmos of difference opens itself upon the screen which – through the deprivation of color and space – impressively invokes exactly these qualities for the non-synesthetic observer. At the same time, the different connotations facilitate these perceptions, which are generated by the word isolated from context and brought forth by different voices; it is known that certain

synesthetes are capable of perceiving human voices as spatial forms. Thus, in addition to the depicted synesthesia in *Purgatory*, the voices themselves also become an object of synesthetic experience. While a person describes their perception of the word, a listener could, on the other hand, experience this voice completely anew as color and form. An “endless braided ribbon” (Hofstadter) runs among the letters, voices, colors and forms that, for some, inaudibly and invisibly slumber in *Purgatory*; a Moebius strip which makes clear that our senses are neither confined nor isolated but are linked and intertwined in manifold ways.

This may be something of a catharsis for those to whom the synesthetic world remains closed and who too long were inclined to presume within this world a pathological phenomenon of perception. To us, this also seems to lie within the valences of the work.

Yet, Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen also very subtly recalls the history of synesthetic perception’s discovery.

In 1866, Alfred Vulpian introduced the term “synesthésie” at the end of a lecture on the general and comparative physiology of the nervous system in order to find a name for the transfer of sensory stimulations to the nerves which are not specific for the redirection of stimulation of that particular sense. With this he added to a fundamental principle of physiology posed by Johannes Müller which said that each sense reacts in its own specific way, no matter what impressions it is affected by. What has remained of Vulpian’s concept is the idea of the energy transfer of sensory input on neural networks which are not linked with the receiving sense. Synesthesia has won on vagueness as well as liberality since Vulpian’s era and has been an important subject not only in the cognitive sciences for more than 100 years but especially in art. With its inflationary appearance in the early 20th century, synesthesia became a lifestyle of epidemic proportions that exuded an invitation to imitate.

In engaging with the environment, myriad sensations inform and direct us. To understand the influence on the development of our habitus, it is futile to address them simply by focusing on five discrete senses – rather, it is important to focus on the unifying process of sensing and thereby to include phenomena exceeding this narrow view. While the five basic senses stand as the categorically distinct inroads

to human perception, the focus has mainly been on the visible sense organs and vision rather than on complete subjective experience and the phenomena of the binding of different sense modalities in our experience. Beyond that, other senses have been proposed which rely not on the immediate sensory material but on the way in which we sense our surrounding habitat; senses such as memory, kinesthesia, or balance. Synesthesia, as it is related to all kinds of sensorimotor capacities and binding phenomena, is not, however, just a neurological phenomenon. It has also been recognized more and more as a phenomenon of cultural relevance in the neurosciences, in phenomenological philosophy, in studies on phylogenetic and ontogenetic human development, and in linguistics. Even the development of sensorimotor capacities seems to include states of synesthetic experiencing which are often ephemeral, sometimes persistent – and sometimes perhaps even acquired.

The cultural dimension in this process is far from being exhaustively described in the neurosciences. Cultural concepts of synesthesia, arts and literatures which imply it are so divergent that the phenomenon itself sometimes threatens to disappear. Synesthesia here seems to confine with cultural phenomena ranging from the aesthetics of signification and metaphorical expressions to the basics of artistic experience. This double impasse leads us to the conviction that a phenomenon as complex as synesthesia and its relations with kinesthetics *can* only be addressed appropriately in an interdisciplinary exchange including both the humanities and the sciences. In concentrating on this phenomenon, however, the focus cannot be *only* on the development of a *personal* kind of experiencing. While subjective qualia may appear as the chasm that denies shared experience, development within a cultural habitat offers a path by which we may come to a collective sharing of sensory experience.

During international conferences on synesthesia from 2003-2006 and ongoing studio work and studies, Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen gave interviews which incorporate and reflect all these aspects in a very specific way, including those on her own artistic processing. The dialogues on very personal perceptions and sensations appear very intimate and yet respectfully distant at the same time. This is because the artist chooses a format that resembles a documentary film or a scientific evaluation only in appearance, which eliminates the need to fulfill the expectations of objectivity and normalization usually associated with such forms. One could almost be reminded of

a remark by the Frenchman and Enlightenment philosopher Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, who declared that perception is an act of cognition.

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