

“I clutched at sound—” Synesthesia Across Disciplines

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Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which two or more sensory experiences are linked or conflated—one sensory perception coming from external stimuli, the other perceived within the mind. People with this condition see letters or numbers in different colors (“1 is yellow-green, 2 is light blue, 3 is dark red,” and so on); some experience specific flavors in association with particular words and sounds; others perceive shapes from flavors, colors from musical notes, or specific personalities from different letters of the alphabet. Our everyday language is filled with synesthetic phrases—think of a “loud shirt,” “sharp cheese,” “bitter cold,” or a “hot guy”. This student seminar will address synesthetic experience across a variety of media forms and disciplines.

The seminar will focus in part on studying modes of aesthetic representation that complicate sense perceptions. We will also focus on the science behind this phenomenon and how it relates to the human capacity for language and abstract thought. Artists and “creative types” are more likely to be synesthetes, which demonstrates a connection between synesthesia and a gift for analogy (“It is the East, and Juliet is the sun”); the condition also plays a key role in the study of simile, metaphor, and onomatopoeia—and may help us to understand why certain objects or concepts are represented by particular sounds. In addition to these scientific and aesthetic considerations, we will also explore the social dimensions of synesthesia, in particular the part it plays in representations of disabled, able and enabled bodies.

Our studies will necessarily involve meditation on how perception constructs reality. Some initial questions include the following: How do we distinguish between the senses? What is the relationship between sound and image in film (i.e., how does one illustrate music, as in *Fantasia*, and, conversely, how are filmic images rendered or extended through sound-effects and musical score)? What is the relationship between sense-blending perception induced by psychotropic substances such as “shrooms” and LSD and “true” synesthesia? What are the connections between the body and the mind, as sense organs mediate experience? More broadly, how might synesthesia work as a metaphor for interdisciplinary study?

The interdisciplinary nature of the study of synesthesia makes this seminar ideal for students of different academic backgrounds and varied scholarly interests. While students with backgrounds in the sciences will be crucial for bridging the gap between the neurological condition and abstract/aesthetic representation, those with backgrounds in anthropology, psychology, and other social sciences will help us with important questions related to the role that culture plays in cognitive association, and the ways in which sense and meaning, perception and language, shift across cultures and epochs. Students with backgrounds in fine

arts, music, literature, language, film and philosophy will contribute the perspectives necessary to address works that involve cross-sensory experience and narratives.