

STOP MAKING SENSE:
SYNAESTHESIA AND SUBJECTIVE DISSONANCE
IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT FICTION

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Science

TRENT UNIVERSITY
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
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English (Public Texts) M.A. Graduate Program
September 2014

ABSTRACT

Stop Making Sense:

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There is a growing number of juvenile novels and picture books that mean to educate the reader about synaesthesia. The synaesthete in these texts for young readers desires to be a social agent, yet sh/e also considers synaesthesia to be a healing power and a deeply personal psychedelic form of escapism; I argue that the synaesthete in these texts 'uses' their synaesthesia to dissipate emotional trauma caused by pubescent uncertainty and social isolation. In this thesis, I propose that YA and Children's texts that feature synaesthesia generally reinforce the discursive constraints of normative perception, and they also promulgate the assumption that synaesthesia is an extraordinary form of cognition instead of a legitimate subject position.

Keywords: synaesthesia, synesthesia, cross-sensory perception, neuropsychology, consistency testing, authenticity, representation, liminality, coming of age, young adult, reader response, affect, *The Girl Who Heard Colors*, *A Mango-Shaped Space*, Cytowic, Žižek, Lacan, Derrida.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Michael Epp for his unwavering support. This project could not have been completed without his concern and willingness to work under such a tight schedule. I also thank Dr. Suzanne Bailey for her encouragement and attention to detail as the second reader. My sincere thanks to Dr. Natalee Caple for agreeing to be the external to this thesis on such short notice. I found her professionalism and commentary at the defense invaluable.

I would also like to thank Dr. Liam Mitchell for his strong and pleasant leadership as the chair of the defense. My appreciation also goes out to Dr. Lewis MacLeod for his guidance during the early stages of my work.

I am very grateful for the support of my girlfriend Kimmy Stühlen during the composition of this thesis. Our many conversations about synaesthesia and synaesthesia in fiction helped shape this project. I am thankful for her enthusiasm to read my work, her great feedback, the contribution of her synaesthetic alphabet, and her translations of the German passages featured in this thesis. I will never break your Pyrex.

Finally, I would like to thank James McClelland, Kayla Fyshe, Evelyn Deshane, Niki Francis, Deb Luchuk, and Tayo Aloh for showing interest in the project, reading the thesis, providing feedback, and/or coming to the defense. I also thank Travis Morton for providing vital input on my work during the formative stages of this project. My sincere gratitude goes out to all of you for your support.

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Glossary

h'self, h/er, sh/e: I sometimes use the neologisms h'self, h/er, and sh/e when I refer to a hypothetical subject. I avoid referring to the subject with the designators 'he or she' or 'his or her' because not everybody is male or female. I also avoid the designator 's/he' since I feel that this gender neutral pronoun foregrounds the male pronoun and relegates the quasi-female indicator to a syntagmatic periphery. I use these neologisms for reasons of tact and when it is semantically awkward to use 'one,' 'oneself,' 'their,' or 'they' when discussing the subject in general.

Overture: Naïve Melody

What is to be done about the ambivalent status of synaesthesia in fiction and literary criticism? Synaesthesia, as Kevin Dann defines the term, is an uncommon form of perception where two senses are involuntarily joined when only one sensory stimulus is present: “the real information of one sense is accompanied by a perception in an another sense” (5).¹ Of the many sensory combinations, a synaesthete may experience taste when music is heard or see letters and numbers as colour; the synaesthete does not imagine this: both sensations will be experienced simultaneously as if both are physically present. Synaesthesia, Dann continues, is often mistakenly believed to be a “liberated” state of consciousness without sensory boundaries: it a “desired” cross-sensory experience that seems to be “enjoyed only by exceptional individuals;” Dann believes this is due, in part, to the lack of a comprehensive, “suitably inclusive” scientific account of human consciousness (viii). Although it is debateable whether a scientific framework of this nature is even feasible in contemporary neuropsychology, synaesthesia does continue to gain attention in the sciences; according to Richard Cytowic, following the so-called “cognitive revolution” of the last half of the 20th century and the “synesthesia renaissance” of the 1990s and 2000s, synaesthesia is no longer dismissed outright by standardized psychological thought as it had been by behaviourism, the governing school of psychology during the middle of the last century (440).² However, as a synaesthete myself, I find it puzzling that there is a scant amount of scholarly discussion on the role of synaesthesia in fiction. To speak of the treatment of synaesthesia in either fiction or literary criticism is to speak of a negligible and unfair discursive paradigm; this is a

¹ Cf. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge*

² Cf. “Synesthesia in the Twentieth Century: Synesthesia’s Renaissance.”

paradigm that forgets that synaesthesia is natural and hardly extraordinary for someone who has always tasted music, one who finds a colourless alphabet impossible.³

This thesis examines the representation of synaesthetic identity in Young Adult and Children's fiction since, in these literary categories, the representation of synaesthesia as a 'special' or even 'superhuman' condition is endemic; this makes it difficult to discern how the reader should relate to such texts. In YA and Children's fiction, I argue, it is common for the young synaesthetic protagonist to undergo a process of 'discovery,' whereby sh/e learns that synaesthesia is an uncommon and apparently aberrant condition of perception; after the synaesthete attempts to convince others that synaesthesia is both a 'real' and 'normal' experience, sh/e is designated as other since the social structure in these texts considers synaesthesia to be an exotic and unfairly exclusive form of cognition. I focus on YA and Children's texts, moreover, because the synaesthete, at a young age, generally believes that everybody perceives the same synaesthetic sensory pairings as they themselves. When the synaesthete first learns that cross-sensory perception is not universal, scientific research finds that it is not uncommon for the subject to feel confused, if not wholly isolated. Such responses, of course, are not ubiquitous: every synaesthete would surely react differently to the knowledge that there exist divergent modes of perception; confusion and isolation, however, and even despondency and the fear of derision, seem to be the prevalent rejoinders to the revelation that one's synaesthetic sensory pairing are idiosyncratic or, as it may be incorrectly thought, aberrant and strange. Richard Cytowic and David Eagleman, in *Wednesday is*

³ The reader may notice that this thesis spells 'synaesthesia' two different ways: both American ('synesthesia') and British ('synaesthesia'). Neither variation is 'correct,' and most of my sources use the American spelling. I prefer to use the British spelling in my own prose for reasons of tact, and any citations will retain the spelling found in the original source material.

Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia, elucidate the effects of this revelatory process further:

Synesthesia is usually evident at an early age. Individuals invariably claim to have had it as far back as they can remember and cannot recall ever not having it. Indeed, a childhood assumption is that everyone is like them. When they realize this is not the case, the pendulum may swing the other way, making individuals then believe that they are the only person in the world who perceives as they do. . . . Unfortunately, for young synaesthetes, disbelief and ridicule are real possibilities. (9-10)⁴

It follows, then, that the synaesthete may not begin to share h/er perceptive outlook with others until after adolescence since, at a young age, there are negligible outlets to evaluate, understand, and speak about what may appear to be a solitary subject position. Since the synaesthetic mode remains relatively obscure, I find it startling that there is an emerging trope within YA and Children's texts that systematically presents synaesthesia as an anomalous form of neurological otherness. It is troubling to think that the synaesthetic adolescent may first become aware that cross-sensory perception is not the 'norm' by stumbling upon a YA novel that employs the synaesthesia trope. The YA novel is intended to be relatable in both style and content, but the young synaesthetic reader may become baffled and disoriented when confronted with the synaesthesia trope

⁴ It is also certainly possible that neither scenario may be the case. For instance, in an interview with Maureen Seaberg, synaesthete Sir Geoffrey Rush states that he was not aware of the name for the mode until he was in his 40s. Rush does not allude to being outcast in his youth because of his synaesthesia, and he does not discuss any revelatory scenario. In fact, he admits that he is relatively unfamiliar with any scientific studies on the mode. Rush also has sequence-space synaesthesia, but he did not know the terminology for this form until speaking with Seaberg.

since this device is a conceit that suggests that cross-sensory perception is an abnormal superhuman sixth sense.

I do not pretend, of course, that the above scenario happens to every synaesthete. I use this analogy here in more ironic terms since variations on such a revelatory scenario are, in fact, common in YA and Children's texts that employ this synaesthesia trope. Specifically, drawing on Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, I argue that the synaesthete in YA and Children's texts often undergoes a process of maturation; this process is typified by a series of rites of passage, where the protagonist seeks to reclaim a degree of neurological 'normalcy.' According to van Gennep, rites of passage have three stages: preliminary rites: "rites of separation from a previous world;" liminal (or threshold) rites: "those executed during a transitional stage;" and postliminal rites: "ceremonies of incorporation into a new world" (21). I propose that the representation of synaesthesia in YA and Children's fiction follows a loose narrative formula that mirrors van Gennep's three stages of liminality since synaesthesia seems to be more tacked on to conventional narratives. First, the synaesthete begins to suspect that cross-sensory perception is uncommon or 'unordinary' and, as such, the subject distances h'self from friends and family in order to cope with the apparent onset of cognitive dissonance. Secondly, the synaesthete is forced into a revelatory scenario: the synaesthete is birthed into a situation where sh/e feels the need to explicate some of h/er synaesthetic percepts, much to the confusion of h/er audience. The synaesthete is ridiculed and, subsequently, enters a period of transition: the subject undergoes a prolonged attempt to understand h/er neurological 'condition;' this is a process that is marked by emotional trauma and spiritual cleansing. Lastly, there is a symbolic death and rebirth that leads to the

synaesthete being ‘accepted’ or reincorporated into cognitively normative society, though the synaesthete still exists, in part, as a neurological oddity.

However, I do not consider my use of van Gennep’s formulation of liminality to be the sole representational framework through which my chosen texts may be analyzed; rather, I use van Gennep primarily to demonstrate that the use of synaesthesia in fiction works to revitalize the structure of the YA and Children’s literary categories. The overwhelming presence of these representations of liminality in YA and Children’s texts, I argue, reifies synaesthesia in YA and Children’s fiction as a trope that works to universalize and thus obscure the phenomenology of being. The presence of synaesthesia as a liminal identity forces the reader into a complicated hermeneutic position. The reader is apt to read the formulaic ‘pop’ narrative passively, but the presence of synaesthesia – a seemingly strange perceptual phenomenon – may also distance the reader from the text and prompt questions about textual representation.

Throughout this thesis, moreover, I refer to cross-sensory perception as a ‘mode’ of perception instead of a neurological ‘condition.’ I find use of the term ‘condition’ in synaesthesia research inappropriate because it continues to interweave synaesthetic subjecthood with medical discourse. My use of the term ‘mode’ is an interpolation of Aristotle’s exegesis of the different modes of narration: in *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the diversity of narrative modes thus:

For as there are persons who, by conscious art or mere habit, imitate and represent [read: perceive] various objects through the medium of colour and form, or again by the voice; . . . taken as a whole, the imitation [read: sensory uptake] is produced by rhythm, language, or “harmony,” either singly or combined. (1)

It also follows that ‘normal,’ or more accurately, ‘compartmentalized’ perception should be, itself, considered a ‘mode’ of perception; I use the term ‘condition’ only when I argue the text assumes synaesthesia to be such. Although the sustained social and cultural recognition of synaesthesia is largely due to the recent increase in psychological and scientific interest in the subject, the continued classification of synaesthesia as a ‘condition’ implies that synaesthesia is studied because it seems to be abnormal and, thus, a wayward form of perception that stands in opposition to the generally accepted vision of natural, unconditioned cognizance.

Ultimately, I contend that the representation of synaesthesia in Young Adult and Children’s fiction supports a homogenization of cognitive experience, where synaesthesia is deemed to be a condition rather than another mode of subjective perception; by extension, synaesthesia becomes other to lucid, mentally ‘healthy,’ normative cognition. In Chapter One, I examine the treatment of synaesthesia in the Children’s picture book, most notably *The Girl Who Heard Colors* by Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. The goals of this chapter are twofold. First, I argue that the synaesthetic protagonist in *Girl* is forced into a liminal position and must endure a bizarre and unlikely process of emotional and spiritual growth in order to overcome what appears to be cognitive dissonance. Second, drawing on Richard Cytowic’s diagnostic criteria for synaesthesia, I outline the specificities of synaesthetic experience; I do this in order to discuss the problems that arise when one assumes that a representation can be an authentic replication of the real. In Chapter Two, I draw prominently on Lacanian theory as I investigate the belief that synaesthetic identity is a solitary, lonely experience. In this ‘Introlude,’ I also examine the ideological construction of synaesthesia in synaesthesia

scholarship, with particular attention to Richard Cytowic's *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*. Next, in Chapter Three, I evaluate various representations of synaesthesia in Young Adult fiction, and cover an array of texts from different genres in order to investigate the deviating effects of the synaesthesia trope. Finally, in Chapter Four, I investigate the representation of synaesthesia in the YA coming-of-age story *A Mango-Shaped Space* by Wendy Mass. In this chapter, I argue that synaesthesia in this YA novel is represented as a supernatural rite of passage into maturity and a ruse for emotional growth. Ultimately, what is at stake is the young reader's fledgling understanding of so-called normative perception since YA and Children's texts represent synaesthesia as a continued and unqualified source of alienation. The synaesthete, by extension, is characterized as a metaphysical and social vagrant: sh/e is a figure seemingly unfitted to nullify or even cope with the exclusionary, cloistering effect of an apparently perplexing and deeply personal state of alterity.

I. Remain in Light: Towards a Hermeneutics of Cross-Sensory Perception

Synaesthesia Orthography

The problem with synaesthesia in fiction lies not in a lack of ‘accurate’ or ‘authentic’ representations of the mode. Indeed, some works of fiction do take artistic liberties in their depictions of cross-sensory perception, to the extent that the representation resembles the mode in name only; it would be incorrect, however, to argue that ‘less plausible’ depictions of synaesthesia are problematic simply because they suffer from sloppy research or greater use of artistic licence. Likewise, certain texts attempt to sincerely portray synaesthesia as it actually exists, perhaps in an effort to educate the reader about a rare and misunderstood mode of perception. I do not claim that synaesthesia should not be depicted in fiction altogether, and I do not assume all fictional instances of synaesthesia to be misinformed or ‘wrong.’ Rather, drawing on Edward Said’s approach to representation, as outlined in *Orientalism*, I argue that it is imperative to remember that every textual representation is a re-presentation, and that a representation will never become the thing itself. A discussion of the representation must begin with an examination of the ideologies that structure of the text; from there, one must analyze how the structure of the text formulates the constructions of identity within: “The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original” (21).⁵ No matter how novel the author’s intentions or how honest the design purports to be, a representation can only re-present the real, and, by extension, a representation cannot guarantee truth.

⁵ Cf. *Orientalism*.



Fig. 1: Kimmy Stühlen's Synaesthetic Coloured Alphabet.

Furthermore, I contend that synaesthesia occupies an uneasy place in fiction, where the problem is not that a representation can only ever be a representation, but that the YA novel with synaesthesia and the picture book with synaesthesia tend to suggest that a textual representation can, in fact, be an authentic reproduction of the real. This matter is pressing, not only because it is difficult to teach the young reader that there exists a conjectural difference between the representation and the real, but also because both critical and cultural interest in synaesthesia remains relatively new and inconsistent. The burgeoning synaesthesia trope in YA and Children's fiction is founded on shaky epistemological framework, and it is essential to unpack both the methodology and the structuration of the representation: we need to interrogate any aggressive or biased assumptions of objective truth, and to not fault the representation merely for being a representation.



Fig. 2: Samuel Rowland's Synaesthetic Coloured Alphabet

The essential verisimilar dimension of representation aside, it is impossible for a text to depict a truly objective account of synaesthesia since synaesthetic percepts vary radically from synaesthete to synaesthete.⁶ The YA novel with synaesthesia does have the capacity to clarify that each synaesthete's percepts are idiosyncratic by virtue of the larger scope of the novel form; however, this is a feature that is difficult, if not impossible, to execute in the children's picture book since the content of the picture book needs to have a clear and accessible focus. Because of this, the representation of synaesthesia in the children's picture book can be trying to unpack since it needs to be both rudimentary and conversant in its design, even though synaesthesia, an experience

⁶ Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 each depict a synaesthetic coloured alphabet; the former belongs to Public Texts student Kimmy Stühlen, the latter belongs to the author. Stühlen's alphabet also has one idiosyncrasy: the letter 'v' is the only one of her letters that has texture.

that is prone to misapprehension or stigmatization, is a subject that demands methodical and meticulous discussion. The picture book with synaesthesia can be at once a learning tool, a means of familiarizing the young reader with a ‘strange’ neurological conception, and a case study that serves to comment on the uniqueness of subjectivity in general. In effect, the necessarily simplified representation of synaesthesia in the children’s picture book works to complicate reader response since the picture book with synaesthesia has the capacity to expose, or even venerate, notions of both sameness and difference in relation to identity formation.

Accordingly, this chapter evaluates the representation of synaesthesia in *The Girl Who Heard Colors*, a children’s picture book by Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton, and argues that *Girl*, by its very nature, tests the methodology of representation itself. *Girl* focuses on a synaesthetic protagonist who undergoes a liminal passage from isolation to acceptance; it is a text that seems to be at once an abridged vision of synaesthetic subjectivity and an outlet for both the synaesthete and non-synaesthete reader alike to evaluate the social sequestration imposed by perceived ontological difference. However, since the picture book with synaesthesia needs to be both elementary and engrossing, one may suspect the goals of *Girl* to be self-defeating if synaesthesia, as Dann suggests, is considered to be “non-linguistic” and excruciatingly difficult to describe, be it semantically, textually, or illustratively: “this difficulty tends to give synaesthesia a quality of ineffability, both for the synaesthetes themselves and non-synaesthete observers” (8). I agree that the presumed non-linguistic dimension of synaesthesia may serve to further isolate the synaesthete, especially since, as previously mentioned, it is altogether common for the synaesthete to originally believe synaesthesia

to be a perception that is shared by no one else. This makes *Girl* messy to unpack since this text means to present a ‘genuine’ account of synaesthesia but it also aims to unambiguously reify the real.

In this chapter’s first section, “The Preliminal Agent and the Postmodern Picture Book,” I focus on Jillian’s preliminal phase, which occurs in the first quarter of the book. Next, in “Who Colours the Text?: A Digression,” I briefly turn my attention to a children’s picture book that uses synaesthetic metaphor, *The Black Book of Colors* by Menena Cottin and Rosana Faría.⁷ Then, in “Exergue: Transition Rites and Diagnostic Turpitude,” I discuss Jillian’s liminal experience; in this five-part section, I also breakdown the specificities of synaesthetic experience. Lastly, in “Seen and Not Seen,” I conclude this chapter by outlining Jillian’s postliminal phase.

The Preliminal Agent and the Postmodern Picture Book

At the beginning of *The Girl Who Heard Colors*, Jillian is depicted as a solitary figure who chooses to be alone in order to explore her senses. When Jillian touches her toy rabbit, she is alone in her bed. When she relishes the taste of maple syrup, she is alone at the breakfast table. She plays by herself in the yard where she can smell the grass but also see and listen to the geese flying overhead (Fig. 3). When she is outside on her bicycle, she hears the red sound of a dog’s bark and the silver sound of a bicycle bell, though she promptly distances herself from the woman who is walking the dog (Fig. 4). Lastly, on a rainy day, she wanders outside alone to hear the soft gray sound of the wind and the purple sound of the downpour. But Jillian’s motivations behind her sequestration

⁷ *The Girl Who Heard Colors* and *The Black Book Colors* are the only two synaesthesia picture books I have found.

are ambiguous. Each scene is a symbolic act: Jillian's behavior is meant to merely signify her seclusion, not explain to the reader why she sequesters herself. This is significant because Jillian's conduct follows Turner's articulation of preliminality: "the first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (94).⁸ This overture of sensation emblemizes Jillian's preliminal phase since these incidences of sensation symbolize her separation from the socius.

Jillian's seclusion is not overtly stated, and it is only implied that Jillian is a secluded figure. She is also the only character present in almost all of the illustrations. The only other character in this sequence is a woman walking her dog; even here, however, Jillian seems indifferent to human contact since she glances at the woman and her dog with an apathetic gaze as she travels away from them on her bicycle (Fig. 4). In these opening scenes, there is an emphasis on Jillian's sensory reaction to various objects, not on her thoughts on sensory exploration or her motivations for exploring such sensations in solitude. In other words, we learn little about Jillian as a subject since the focus of the narrative, in this opening sequence, is on the objects that Jillian adulates. In this sense, Jillian's separateness from others and her interactions with sensory stimuli define her identity; Jillian's behavior is largely "symbolic" since the sensations of various objects both signify her identity and serve as a symbolic substitution for a more detailed and personal account of subjective experience.

⁸ Cf. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.



Fig. 3: “She loved the smell of wet grass.” *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 6-7.

At this point in the text, however, Jillian is still a social agent, and though she desires to have a degree of separation from the social order, this separateness is not the result of an overt designation of difference or otherness. The reader, at first, enters a familiar textual landscape peppered with depictions of realistic sensation, only to be halted by the unclarified and perhaps confounding presentation of synaesthesia (Fig. 4). But it may seem necessary for the narrative to establish Jillian as distinctly separate from others in order to grant the reader better access to the unorthodox theme of the text; this may help the young reader evaluate the different depictions of realistic perception. Since synaesthesia is not defined for the reader outright, both synaesthetic and non-synaesthetic sensation are presented to the reader as if both are common knowledge. *Girl* does not distinctly establish one mode of perception as normative and, in effect, it appears as if

Jillian does not explore her senses according to a fixed “set of cultural conditions,” in keeping with Turner’s classification of preliminality (94). The overture of sensation only catalogues Jillian’s “love” of sensation, and each incidence of this adulation is presented in conventional, simple sentences. The narrative reads as if it is Jillian herself that is speaking, which may explain why synaesthesia is introduced in an offhand, indifferent manner. Indeed, it is arguable that the narrative assumes there is no need to explain synaesthesia if, to again quote Cytowic and Eagleman, “a childhood assumption [of the synaesthete] is that everyone is like them” (9).⁹ During Jillian’s preliminal phase specifically, the presence of synaesthesia is ambiguous, but Jillian is not yet aware that there exists one hegemonic mode of perception; the text does not overtly state that Jillian is ‘different’ since she has no way of knowing that synaesthesia is not the normative mode.

But it may be easy for the reader to identify with Jillian since the text begins with an exposition of several familiar sensations. The reader is invited to envision familiar sensations such as the taste of syrup; in the beginning, this is a task effortlessly accomplished since the first set of sensory descriptions in the overture of sensation are rudimentary and seemingly easy for the reader to fathom. However, it is significant that synaesthesia is not defined until the end of the text; at first, the abrupt introduction of coloured sound may be obfuscating for the young non-synaesthete, and this scene may work to distance the non-synaesthetic reader from the text (Fig. 4). Because of this, *Girl* can be considered to be a self-referential picture book since the text prompts the reader to question the veracity of the text and, moreover, to query the chain of signifieds that demand immediate presence. As Bette P. Goldstone argues, the self-referential picture

⁹ This excerpt from *Wednesday* is referenced in more detail in the introduction to this thesis.

book asks the reader to question multiple dimensions of the text: “what is real – the story, the physical book, both, neither?” (364).¹⁰ At first, the non-synaesthetic reader may easily identify with the subject and, by extension, reflect on the nature of subjecthood itself since the protagonist is singled out whilst the narrative describes some general, if not mundane, sensations in clear, unobtrusive language.

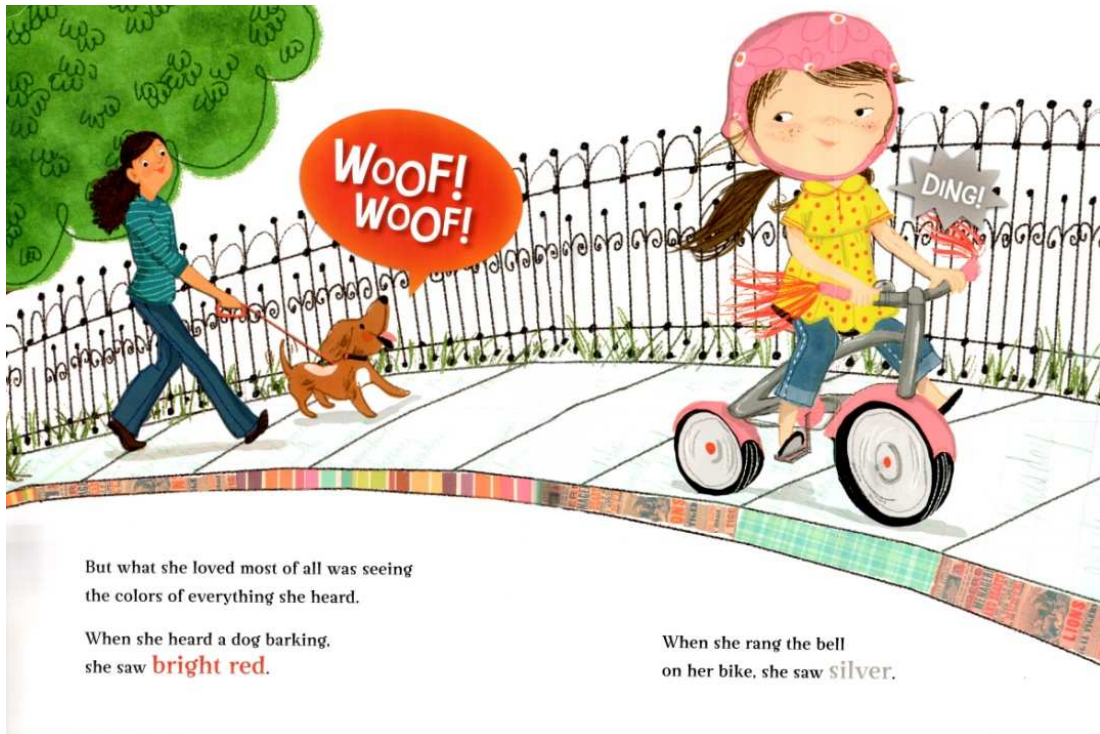


Fig. 4: Red Sound and Silver Sound. *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 8-9.

However, it is arguable that it becomes difficult for the non-synaesthetic reader to remain wholly sympathetic to Jillian once sound is described as colour, since the conventional narrative abruptly becomes complicated by a lack of semantic clarity. Although the story itself is linear and easy to follow, the equivocal transition from non-synaesthetic to synaesthetic sensation is somewhat jarring. The story itself is not necessarily “jumbled,” as Goldstone characterizes the postmodern picture book, but

¹⁰ Cf. “Whaz up with Our Books? Changing Picture Book Codes and Teaching Implications.”

synaesthesia, the text's central focus, is certainly not presented in a tidy manner. The elements of the plot, style, or structure tend to be unclear; the reader has to work to cogently understand the narrative flow. Such narrative ambiguity is a staple of the self-referential picture book since this kind of text is largely postmodern in its design. The lack of a foundational definition of synaesthesia constitutes a central absence of signification. Such an absence is typical of the postmodernist text; as Jean-Francois Lyotard states, the postmodern is "that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81).¹¹ In this sense, the reader is required to "coauthor the text," as Goldstone states, in order to make sense of the seemingly dubious juxtaposition of coloured sound and trivial, recognizable instances of sensory experience (363). Although *Girl* is quite linear in its design, *Girl* can be considered to be a postmodern picture book since the text attempts to communicate the wholly subjective dimension of perception itself.

But this form of active readership does not necessarily apply to the synaesthetic reader since the opening sequence's transition from non-synaesthetic to synaesthetic sensation would not necessarily result in such a moment of obfuscation. If Jillian's synaesthesia is the primary, if not only signifier for her identity, her characterization may even reinforce any feelings of isolation for the synaesthetic reader; this is because Jillian's coloured percepts will certainly not be the same as those of every synaesthete since each synaesthete has idiosyncratic synaesthetic percepts and "unique color combinations" (11).¹² This is not to say, however, that *Girl* cannot function as a learning tool for the synaesthetic reader in some way. Although Jillian's specific coloured

¹¹ Cf. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

¹² Cf. *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*.

percepts are no doubt divergent from those of the synaesthetic reader, *Girl* does attempt to blur the edges of normative categorization; this seems to subvert the notion of a singular, normative mode of perception. However, even though Jillian's percepts are unique to her alone, the representation of synaesthesia in *Girl* complicates the accessibility of the text for the synaesthetic reader since Jillian is characterized in such narrow, one-dimensional terms.

From the onset, the text suggests that Jillian is more of an empty container than a fully fleshed-out character. This, however, seems to be typical of the category, as Perry Nodelman states: "this is a literature of action rather than of character, and the emphasis is on events and relationships rather than on subtleties of feeling" (151).¹³ On the surface, it should not be a surprise that the text aims to make synaesthesia seem more 'normal' by presenting Jillian as an Everyman character with whom the reader, synaesthete or non-synaesthete alike, may easily relate. This characterization speaks to the audience's awareness of the ideologies that inform the structure of the text, not the need to locate the subject's position within a discursive apparatus. The text flirts with a humanistic, individual-centered focus, but the text does not work to decipher discourse or hegemonic perception; with *Girl*, the reader's perception of synaesthesia is antecedent to the textual representation of synaesthetic perception itself. This makes the text less a learning tool for synaesthetes than a "question-mark story," to quote Goldstone, since the lack of a cogent definition of synaesthesia suggests there are more questions than answers when one speaks about cognitive normativity (368).

In the text's opening sequence, therefore, both synaesthetic and non-synaesthetic sensations are described in plain, matter-of-fact language. But Jillian does not elaborate

¹³ Cf. *Words About Pictures*.

upon why she adulates sensation with such reverence. This feature of *Girl*, however, may be due to the traditionally lighthearted tone of the picture book, which is a literary category that Goldstone describes as follows: “the resolution is complete and optimistic; the general tone is one of naiveté. These characteristics seemingly are important for the success of children’s books in terms of audience enjoyment, critics’ praise, and sales” (362).¹⁴ Jillian’s preliminal phase is perhaps not as isolating as Turner’s original vision of preliminal rites, but there is an overwhelming lack of introspection and emotional refection during Jillian’s preliminal phase. Jillian simply “loved the smell of wet grass” and “loved the sight of geese flying across the blue sky,” for example, but the reader is not given an explanation as to why Jillian feels she needs to be alone, and there is no indication why Jillian feels an absolute emotional connection to the objects that spur her senses (Fig. 3).

It should also be noted that Jillian’s gaze and facial expressions in the ‘geese’ example, as with the scene where she is on her bicycle, do not correspond to the description of her expressions in the accompanying text. When Jillian is playing in the yard, her gaze is directed upwards, and she looks towards an empty space in the sky. The docile expression on her face gives the impression that she is unresponsive, or at least disconnected, from the sensory stimuli that surrounds her. In this illustration, Jillian seems to be less in love with her sensory stimuli than unstuck in her environment since she seems coyly indifferent to her surroundings. However, it is certainly not uncommon for words and pictures in picture books to clash against or “ironize” each other, as Nodelman argues: “when words and pictures combine, irony emerges from the way in which the incompleteness of each is revealed by the differing incompleteness of the

¹⁴ Cf. “Whaz up with Our Books? Changing Picture Book Codes and Teaching Implications.”

other” (223).¹⁵ But the incompleteness of both the words and pictures in this scene seems to conflict with Harris’s own thoughts on her project. Harris, in an interview with Maureen Seaberg, states that the text “highlight[s] . . . the extraordinary range that this ‘special sense’ can span.”¹⁶ Perhaps the nuances of this claim escape me, but the glaring absence of Jillian’s thoughts, motivations, and feelings, in addition to the text’s diffidently simple semantic field, work to make this text less a personal, exploratory account of synaesthesia than a textual list of data that only vaguely applies to the complex range of synaesthetic experience itself.

Lastly, it should be noted that the incongruity between words and pictures only occurs during Jillian’s preliminal phase when she smells the grass and gazes at the red and silver sounds. In the first two scenes of the book, when Jillian touches her rabbit and tastes the syrup, her expression is one of delight; this does give a clear indication of her “love” of sensation, though there is still no indication of why she loves such sensations so adamantly. Moreover, my qualms with the two scenes where she is outside arise from their specific placement in the text, as this is where one would expect synaesthesia to be explained. It is significant that Jillian dawns some ambivalent and perhaps indifferent facial expressions directly before and after synaesthesia is introduced since Jillian’s emotional connectivity with her sensorial objects seems to waver at the same time the reader may become perplexed by the text’s narrative flow. Jillian’s emotions are clearly identifiable in the very first scenes of the text, but the emotional exactitude of Jillian’s facial expressions becomes muddled when synaesthesia is first presented. The text invites the reader to sympathize with Jillian at the very beginning of the text since her

¹⁵ Cf. *Words About Pictures*.

¹⁶ Cf. “*The Girl Who Heard Colors: Author Marie Harris writes an Important Children’s Book.*”

expressions are at first warm and inviting; however, shortly thereafter, it is arguable that the reader will be alienated or at least confused when Jillian's emotions become hard to read.

Who Colours the Text?: A Digression

The humanities sometimes define synaesthesia purely as a metaphorical device. Let us first consider two rudimentary examples. First, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines the literary use of synaesthesia as such: "a rhetorical figure in which one kind of sense impression is rendered by using words that normally describe another, as in 'loud perfume,' 'warm colour,' or 'delicious sight'" (990). It is disquieting that this entry is listed as simply "synesthesia" instead of 'literary synesthesia,' and that the above quotation reproduces the entry for "synesthesia" in its entirety; we have a meager sentence from a hefty volume of a thousand-plus pages. Second, in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick defines "synaesthesia" as "a blending or confusion of different kinds of sense-impression, in which one type of sensation is referred to in terms more appropriate to another. Common synaesthetic expressions include the descriptions of colours as 'loud' or 'warm,' and of sounds as 'smooth'" (254). These definitions speak of synaesthesia as if it is simply a figure of speech, while the prevalence of this belief makes it seem like synaesthesia is an uncomplicated experience that everyone can access.

Furthermore, in *I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World*, James Geary argues that people naturally discuss sensory experience through metaphor. Metaphors such as "silence is sweet" (77) and "she has a

warm personality” (82) have somewhat synaesthetic elements. Drawing on the work of several psychologists and scientists, Geary argues that human beings instinctively interpret sensory experience through metaphor; since all thought is abstract, metaphor is an instinct “deeply rooted in our physiology” as opposed to a recent “enlightened” development of reason and logic (88). As Geary suggests, the use of sensory metaphor is imperative in everyday perception and communication because, theoretically speaking, everyone utilizes a latent form of synaesthesia to understand the world and themselves. While Geary does not argue that everybody is a synaesthete per se, Geary builds on the argument that synaesthetic metaphor and idiopathic synaesthesia are connected at a biological level because sensory perception is fundamentally a metaphorical apparatus. He implies that everybody has the capability to both understand synaesthesia and access synaesthetic perception. Importantly, some scientific evidence does suggest that everybody is born with synaesthesia, and that synaesthetic connections in the brain inexplicably disappear around three months of age (214).¹⁷ However, Geary gives the impression that the stigma that surrounds synaesthetic subjecthood does not exist.

The Black Book of Colors by Menena Cottin and Rosana Faría, a children’s picture book for the blind, is especially relevant to this discussion. The book is almost entirely black; the pictures are represented as raised line-drawings, and the narrative is told with both white font and Braille (Fig. 5). *Black*, according to Maria Popova, is an “empathy tool” that allows the sighted person to sympathize with the blind reader but also “experience the world through their fingers rather than their eyes.”¹⁸ This opinion of *Black’s* intentions is also apparent in the information given on the book’s dust jacket,

¹⁷ Cf. *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*.

¹⁸ “The Black Book of Colors: Review.”

which states that *Black* is meant to “convey the experience of a person who can only see through his or her sense of touch, taste, smell or hearing.” Both the dust jacket and critical praise for *Black* suggest that the reader should think objectively about ways of reading that are not considered ‘normal.’ In this sense, *Black* seems to promote the idea that the reader’s personal approach to the text is fundamental to determining the ‘meaning’ of the book.

But for the blind reader, the gaze may exist only as a concept, whilst seeing is not always the blind individual’s primary desire. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the gaze should hardly be considered an empowering concept: Slavoj Žižek states that this is because the subject will always need an object to capture the gaze: “what is the gaze if not *theoria* grasping the ‘thing itself’ in the presence of its form or in the form of its presence?” (125).¹⁹ Since the subject is ruled by desire, s/he depends on the gaze in order to give meaning to desire. But the subject can never possess the gaze of the viewed object since the viewer will never see the world from the eyes of another person. According to Lacanian theory, we see the image of ourselves in other objects and other people; however, we will never see the world from the vantage point of the image of ourselves in which we invest so much personal truth: “you never look at me from the place from which I see you” (126). Because of this, the gaze functions as a “stain” that both defines our desire and denies us access to the personal truths we assume to be universal: our vision is stained with the image that looks at us with an indecipherable gaze.

¹⁹ Cf. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*.



Fig. 5: “All the colors came out, and that’s a rainbow.” *The Black Book of Colors*. Menena Cottin and Rosana Faría. *Brain Pickings*. Josh Boston. Web. 1 Jan 2013. Page 13.

Black means to both accommodate the gaze of the sighted person and tell a story that appeals to multiple senses for blind and sighted readers alike. *Black* asks that the sighted reader inhabit an impossible subject position: to relinquish the power of the gaze and, as the dust jacket states, “begin to imagine what it is like to read by touch.” But for the sighted reader, a level of uncertainty remains between the book and the body: textual meaning is expected to resonate from the sense of touch, yet a fundamental barrier remains between the sighted reader and actually knowing the reading experience of the blind. In this sense, the sighted reader is intended to desire a state of blindness in order to understand the absence of the gaze. *Black* itself functions as a stain that works to disrupt an idealized, sighted vision of blindness, and the book asks the sighted reader to inhabit a liminal state of being. *Black* asks the sighted reader to perform the role of a blind reader; in effect, blindness becomes a temporary ideal which is metaphorically represented as both desired and detested, familiar and foreign.

However, blindness is a legitimate subject position that remains undoubtedly unseen and unfelt by the sighted person. Since the sighted reader is asked to perform the role of the blind reader, *Black* functions as a liminal space: it is a contested area of meaning defined by opposing perceptions of knowledge and isolation. According to George Quasha, in a conversation with Charles Stein and Gary Hill, liminal performance can be characterized by asking a real person “to do something that is not a matter of their expertise or focused abilities – to perform the unknown, so that they reveal something unique in their presence there” (58).²⁰ In this sense, a sighted person who reads *Black* is performing in a liminal space since the sighted reader is blinded, not by the inability to read, but by the incapability to visualize how the blind person actually sees. Moreover, if *Black* is read with the sense of touch, the reader’s presence will be literally implanted into the book: the oil from the skin will mix with the paper fibers when the fingertips trace the bumps on the page. Thus the identity of the reader becomes situated at the fingertips; the barrier between subject and object, vision and blindness, knowledge and isolation is here assigned an illusory presence. The sighted reader’s identity is displaced by the sense of touch, and is transposed in a “productively unsettled space or ‘threshold’ (Latin: *limen*) between mediums” (10). Ultimately, *Black* attempts to achieve compassion by feigning empathy; the act of reading *Black* reinforces the fact that the sighted reader is not blind.

For Lacan, the desire to see is rooted in the belief that a desired object needs to be desired and gazed upon in order to exist. The sighted reader, in Lacanian terms, must read *Black* as an object that demands to be seen; in doing so, blindness is made the object of desire even though possessing such a grotesque object will terminate the gaze, which is the arbiter of desire itself. But *Black* suggests that the blind individual does not have to

²⁰ Cf. “Liminal Performance.”

read in complete darkness if sh/e embraces reading with multiple senses: “But black is the king of all the colors. It is as soft as silk when his mother hugs him and her hair falls in his face” (18). *Black* means to help both blind and sighted readers question the arbitrary power constituted by the gaze, but *Black* privileges the sighted reader’s ability to negotiate the dark liminal spaces between perceptual idealism and isolation.

Although synaesthesia is a natural experience for those who have the mode, it is arguable that the synaesthetic reader who sees letters and numbers as colour, shapes, or personalities interprets the text differently from the non-synaesthetic reader who only sees black text. In *Black*, synaesthesia seems to be somewhat dubious, as the colour associations are less idiosyncratic than they are suggested by the object. For example, Thomas experiences the colour red as both “sour like unripe strawberries” and “as sweet as watermelon” (4). Thomas’s colours seem to be paired with tastes, smells, and textures due to typological influence as opposed to being entirely self-regulating. In other words, the tastes and textures that Thomas experiences from the colour red are derived from objects which are, of course, red. In effect, a fictionalized vision of synaesthesia is used to connect the sighted reader to the text; this is problematic since the familiar colour associations simplify and thus obscure the lived experience of the blind. Textual meaning is expected to resonate from the sense of touch and the illusory colours signified by the text; however, there is still a fundamental barrier between the sighted reader and actually knowing the reading experience of the blind. What we have here, to channel Jean Baudrillard, “is truth that hides the fact that there is none” (1).²¹ The synaesthetic associations in *Black* attempt to convince the sighted reader of the reality of blindness when such a thing is only a reality to the blind individual alone.

²¹ Cf. *Simulacra and Simulation*.

Furthermore, *Black* means to be a sublime object, which, in Žižek's sense of the term, is an object that that seems so aesthetically pleasing that it overwrites "the boundary that separates the body from disgust" (161).²² We can see *Black's* attempt to channel the sublime through the use of both raised line-drawings and synaesthetic metaphors. For the sighted reader, blindness can seem to be an abhorrent condition or a faulty mode of perception. But the sighted reader's desire is constituted by a mistaken gaze: sh/e is "always interposed between a gaze and its 'proper' object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object" (5). Feeling the story through the raised line-drawings replaces the gaze and the voice with an uncanny indifference to a sublime object: the line-drawings tell an aesthetically pleasing story that is both foreign yet familiar: the sighted reader can 'cheat' the textured narrative and gaze at the white text or pictures at any time. Also, the pages with raised line-drawings are glossy enough to reflect the light from the reader's light source yet they cannot act as a clear mirror for the reader to gaze at h/er reflection. The glossed pages fail to reflect the sighted reader's gaze and, to channel Žižek, they "far from assur[e] the self-presence of the subject and his vision" (125).²³ In effect, the ubiquitous blackness of the glossed pages ultimately revokes the gaze since the gloss hints at a reflection and, by extension, an idealized image of the subject. However, the barrier remains, and, as Žižek continues, "the eye and the gaze are constitutionally asymmetrical" (125). With *Black*, the sighted reader is presented with the semblance of colour through synaesthetic metaphor, while the deferral of colour in both the descriptions and raised pictures attempts to dupe the sighted person into believing that experiencing this text is akin to experiencing the reality of blindness.

²² Cf. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*.

²³ Cf. *Looking Awry*.

The ubiquitous absence of discernible colour should signify a contextual lack for the sighted reader but also a gap in understanding between vision and blindness.

The picture book, in this case, complicates Jan-Dirk Müller's assertion that the physical book needs to be considered to be a living entity: "the written word . . . is the perfect teacher, a living partner, but without the failings of a person such as bad moods, tiredness, or infirmity and death" (186).²⁴ Müller's metaphor equates the written word with a fixed presence, which is a concept that is usually attributed to oral narratives, the picture book included. The written word, according to Müller, offers a fixed presence that ensures "the longevity of the word and of the presence of author and meaning" (189). Müller states that metaphor is imperative to manuscript culture, as Geary suggests likewise, though Müller argues that anthropomorphizing the book as a 'body' reinforces the contrived notion that all texts have a guaranteed meaning. But this element is noticeably lacking from the production of the picture book since the picture book is a project that is undertaken by multiple authors whose divergent views are supported but also encouraged by the publisher. The 'body' of the book, in this sense, is created organically, as both author and illustrator contribute to the project without necessarily oppressing the other with a singular creative vision.

Müller's articulation of the book as a 'body' carries exclusionary implications since he states that the written word naturally commands more senses than speech. Echoing Boethius, Müller states that intellectual truth – be it thoughts, speech, or writing – is most accessible and "profitable" in books. Müller reaffirms Boethius's argument that the value of a book is determined by the reader's sense of sight, hearing, touch, and taste: "writing not only is more permanent than speech, but also, strangely enough, has a

²⁴ Cf. "The Body of the Book: The Media Transition from Manuscript to Print."

stronger effect on the senses” (186). The written word is the “perfect teacher” since it is a “living partner” that is seen when it is read, heard when it is read aloud, and touched when it is held. Müller attempts to humanize the book by discussing its direct relationship to the senses, but this analogy assumes that all readers can see, hear, and touch the books they read. This assertion also forgets to consider readers who are either blind or synaesthetic, in addition to other forms of perception. According to Müller, Boethius states that “truth which shines forth in books desires to manifest itself to every impressionable sense,” yet Boethius lists only three senses: sight, hearing, and touch. Although Boethius does not list all five senses, Müller asserts “others add the sense of taste in the sampling and rumination of what is read” (186). But one could hardly count taste as a sense impression in this context because the reader does not physically taste anything. I do agree with Geary’s opinion on this matter, as Geary himself states that cross-sensory metaphors of this type are vague – if not clichéd – since such metaphors fail to comment on the nature of identity in specific terms: “in a synesthetic metaphor, the source tends to come from the more immediate sense far more often than the other way around” (78). For example, crossed-sensory metaphors such as ‘feeling blue’ or a ‘literary taste’ signify nowhere near the same thing as ‘a blue-coloured feeling’ or ‘a book that tastes sour.’ Although Müller does not discuss synaesthesia per se, his sweeping generalization of synaesthetic metaphor assumes that a figure of speech can be read as if it is fundamentally the same thing as being.

In sum, *Black* uses metaphorical synaesthesia to emphasize that reading is a multi-sensory experience for the blind and sighted alike, though it does so by transfiguring ‘blind reading’ into a performative game. Such a game obscures the lived experience of

the reader who cannot see. This is why *Black*'s intentions are problematic: first, the text suggests that the sighted person can ever know the experience of the blind, and second, synaesthesia is used to enhance the experience of 'reading blind.'

Exergue: Transition Rites and Diagnostic Turpitude

Like *The Black Book of Colors*, *The Girl Who Heard Colors* invites the reader to imagine what it is 'like' to have synaesthesia. Importantly, *Girl* should not be faulted simply for wanting the reader to learn about a different, perhaps 'new' form of perception. In the aforementioned interview with Maureen Seaberg, Harris herself asserts that *Girl*, above all else, functions as a learning tool for young readers: "the implicit lessons, from the folly of bullying to the wonder of differences, are embedded in the narrative, as they are in the best stories, speaking for themselves."²⁵ As previously mentioned, the simplified language, coupled with the various ambiguous linguistic messages, prompts the reader to ask questions about the text but also investigate the categorical assumptions of perception, reality, and identity itself. But it is pressing that Jillian does not ask such questions herself, while the text does not draw attention to the fact that Jillian is copiously silent about her transfiguration throughout the narrative. Throughout each of Jillian's liminal phases, she noticeably lacks the capacity for introspection; I touched on this aspect of her character in a previous section, but the implications of Jillian's prolonged silence and the absence of any personal testimony become increasingly prevalent during her liminal and postliminal phases. *Girl* may certainly promote self-reflection for the reader, but it is ironic that Jillian herself does not possess such powers of reflexivity. Although it may be difficult to present a complex

²⁵ Cf. "The Girl Who Heard Colors: Author Marie Harris writes an Important Children's Book."

examination of identity and perception in a text intended for young readers, this conceit begs several questions: who is the intended audience of this text? Does the text function more as a device to help non-synaesthetes ‘understand’ synaesthesia than a means for the synaesthete to discover that they are not cognitively ‘alone?’ If the text means to be an ‘authentic’ portrayal of the mode, what aspects of synaesthesia does it leave out, and what is the significance of such omissions?

In my examination of Jillian’s liminal phase, I outline a prevalent scientific constitution of synaesthetic perception in order to focus my commentary on the text’s presumably authentic representation of synaesthesia. I do this in order to disseminate the real from the representation, but also to give the reader a circumstantial roadmap of synaesthetic experience. As before, I channel van Genep’s theorization of liminality when I interrogate the categories imposed upon Jillian. I mean to investigate the ideologies that inform the text, but I also appraise the author’s intended meaning of the text: Harris suggests that *Girl* should “simply be read as a story” and that its “lessons” should be taught to all audiences. It is also implied that the text should “help” young synaesthetes understand both the world and themselves. This outlook is also apparent in the text’s postscript, which is comprised of several anecdotes of “real” synaesthete children, one of whom states: “I felt afraid to tell anyone in case I would be teased, but now I realize that I’m not alone. Now I feel special and proud of my extra sense” (32). If we are to read the text as an intentionally realistic portrayal of synaesthesia, surely we must discuss how the text either suggests or states outright that its content means to be taken literally or authenticity; such an examination is necessary in order to discern which signs the text packages as authentic to a general audience. As Said suggests, a

representation is problematic if it does more to uphold the discursive structure itself instead of help the reader locate the human subject within the structure; on the other hand, a positive representation should work to make silent voices heard and fight for “the right of formerly un- or mis-represented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them, usurping their signifying and representing functions, overriding their historical reality” (91).²⁶ In other words, the problematic here is that the text attempts to blur the edges of the representation and the real in order make its product more accessible to the specific audience for whom its linguistic messages are constructed and conveyed.

In this section, I draw prominently on Cytowic and Eagleman’s *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*. I correlate the specific features of synaesthesia to *Girl*, with particular attention paid to Cytowic and Eagleman’s “diagnostic criteria” for synaesthesia. I correlate each of the following five sections with one of Cytowic and Eagleman’s diagnostic criteria from *Wednesday*. Cytowic and Eagleman’s diagnostic criteria are as follows:

1. Automatic and involuntary: sensory response happens immediately since cross-sensory perception is an inherent function of the synaesthete’s brain.
2. Spatially extended: the sense impression usually has a distinct location outside the body.
3. Highly memorable: the memory of a sensory experience can be recalled in significant detail.
4. Loaded with affect: since synaesthetic sensation is intense and pleasurable, it directly influences the subject’s personal tastes.

²⁶ Cf. “Orientalism Reconsidered.”

5. Consistent, elementary, and specific: sensory pairings do not change over time, and synaesthetic imagery is simple rather than pictographic.²⁷

1. Are Friends Electric?

Firstly, synaesthesia, Cytowic and Eagleman state, is “automatic and involuntary,” which means that an individual who hears sound as colour, for example, will immediately see a specific colour once a sound is presented (47). These two senses are irrevocably linked at an unconscious level and therefore two sense impressions are simultaneously present when the subject is exposed to a sensory stimulus: “unlike [mental] imagery, which is willed, synaesthesia happens to you” (47). This dimension of synaesthesia is paramount since a sound will not merely ‘resemble’ or ‘remind’ the subject of a colour: two sensory impressions are invariably present when a sound is heard. In other words, the subject’s exposure to a sensory stimulus “unconsciously primes” the subject to interpret the percept as both colour and sound since both sensations are registered instantaneously (47-48). Similarly, in *Synaesthesia: A Union of the Senses*, Cytowic also states that synaesthesia is “insuppressible” and “cannot be conjured at will,” which suggests that synaesthetic percepts cannot be controlled by the subject (67). This being said, however, if a synaesthete focuses on a certain activity, such as reading or working at a computer, the subject’s synaesthetic percepts may be dampened or seem less present; however, synaesthesia cannot be completely ignored or turned off: the synaesthetic percept will be “attenuated” but will not disappear completely (67).

²⁷ This list is paraphrased from *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*, pages 47 to 56.

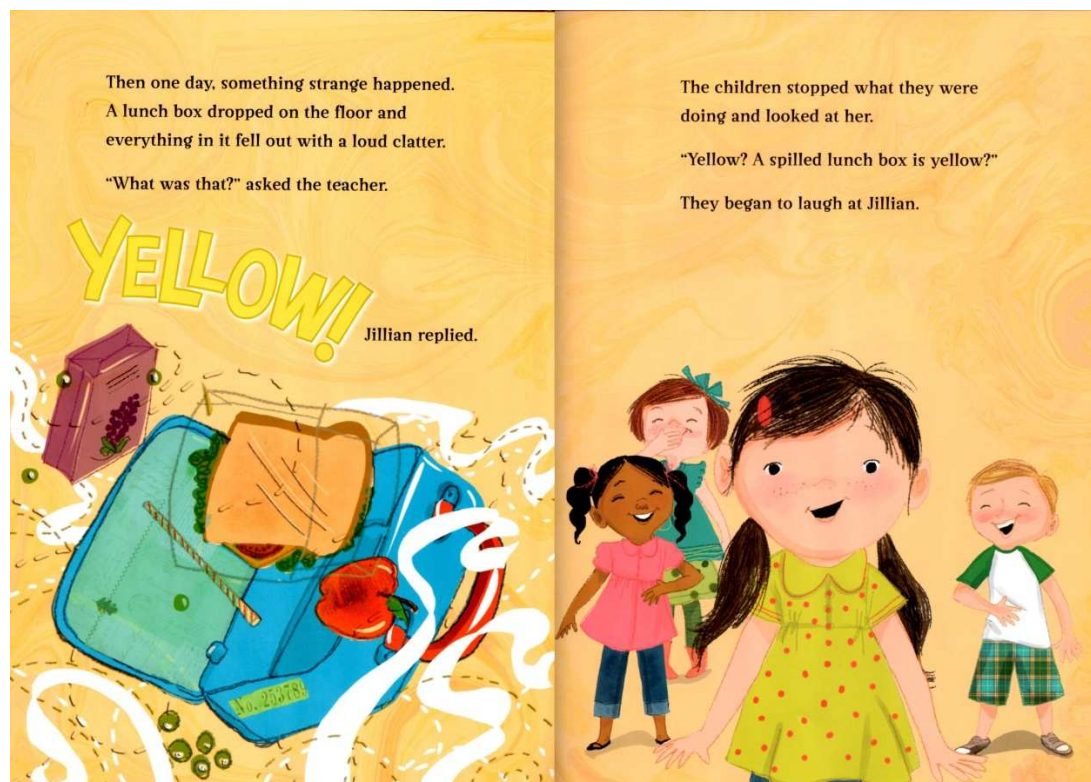


Fig. 6: The Yellow Sound. *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 16-17.

In *Girl*, a notable example of the automatic and involuntary dimension of synaesthesia occurs when Jillian reacts to the fall of the lunchbox. When the lunchbox clatters on the floor, Jillian instantly identifies the colour of the sound as yellow (Fig. 6). In the illustration, the word “yellow” is aggrandized, animated, and is combined into a single image with the lunchbox; this combined image gives the impression that the crash of the lunchbox (the sensory stimulus) and the yellow colour of the sound (the sensation) are experienced simultaneously. However, it is also important to note that the image for the word “yellow” functions as part of the written narrative itself; Jillian not only identifies the sound as yellow, her response is represented as both an image and a word. Moreover, the picture book, as Joe Sutliff Sanders suggests, is meant to be read aloud: a “proficient” adult reader is supposed to read the text to a young “preliterate” reader (86).

Because of this, when the adult reader reads the word/image “yellow,” it is arguable that the young reader who is looking at the pictures will associate the vocalization of the word “yellow” with the coloured image of “yellow” on the page.²⁸ The young reader is forced to immediately perceive the word “yellow” as various semantic registers simultaneously, as both a word and an image but also a sound and a colour, much like how Jillian perceives an auditory stimulus as two sensory registers, as both colour and sound. *Girl* emphasizes that reading is a liminal space where the synaesthete becomes aware of the exclusionary nature of both identity and perception.

2. Imagining Neurological Geography

Synaesthesia, Cytowic and Eagleman continue, is considered to be a “spatially extended” experience since the synaesthete tends to describe a percept as having a distinct spatial location external to the body. For example, when the subject with sound → colour synaesthesia hears a sound, the colour generally appears outside of the subject’s body, as if the subject is watching the colour manifest on a “screen” (50). However, Cytowic and Eagleman state that not all synaesthetes literally see a percept projected outside the body; it is not uncommon, they assert, for a synaesthete’s perception to merely resonate in the mind’s eye. Here, Cytowic and Eagleman argue, the synaesthete’s percepts still occupy a “sense of spatial location” since the perception is still situated somewhere in the body; in this case, the perception is positioned exclusively in the mind. For Cytowic and Eagleman, the synaesthete who literally sees the sensation projected outside the body, “out there in the world,” is known as a “localizer,” while the subject who sees the percept in the mind’s eye is known as a “non-localizer” (72). The

²⁸ Cf. “Chaperoning Words: Making Meaning in Comics and Picture Books.”

spatial dimension of synaesthesia is an integral component of synaesthetic identity because spatial extension means that a synaesthete literally sees a colour, touches a sound, and so forth. The act of literally seeing a percept works to disqualify the historical and cultural assumptions about the mode, namely the waning debate that synaesthesia is an imagined or a willed experience; however, as David Brang and V.S. Ramachandran state, the sciences are still apt to wonder: “is the phenomenon authentic (‘real’) and hence worthy of study? Or are synaesthete individuals simply making it up?” (1003).²⁹ It is arguable that certain texts with synaesthesia attempt to adamantly prove that synaesthesia is an authentic mode of perception because synaesthesia, as a field of study and interest, is heavily indebted to a psychological tradition of dismissal and suspicion.



Fig. 7: “Sad as a cloud.” *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 20-21.

²⁹ Cf. “From Molecules to Metaphor: Outlooks on Synesthesia Research.”

The attenuation of synaesthesia in *Girl*, moreover, gives the impression that Jillian's synaesthesia is weakened when she does not focus on a specific sound. During Jillian's preliminal phase, for example, the sound of geese honking is represented as small blue speech bubbles projected in the air.³⁰ When Jillian concentrates on the smell of the wet grass, the images of coloured sound are far away from Jillian and are matted into the blue sky above; this gives the impression that these percepts are less present but not entirely 'suppressed' or invisible (Fig. 3). During the lunchbox scene, however, the proportions of the lunchbox are exaggerated in order to demonstrate that the sensory stimulus has Jillian's full attention. The illustrations for all sensations prior to this, both synaesthetic and non-synaesthetic, are not nearly as opulent or conspicuous as the lunchbox scene. The background of this scene itself is painted with yellow hues to further draw the reader's attention to the all-consuming immediacy of Jillian's colour registration. The placement of the images in this scene, with the lunchbox on the left page and Jillian on the right page, immediately directs the reader's gaze to the sensory stimulus. Again, this indicates that both the sensory stimulus and Jillian's sensory registration are unavoidable and insuppressible cognitive functions since the reader herself cannot avoid observing this sensory event unravel on the page. The overwhelming presence of yellow on the page mirrors the overpowering sense of colour that the synaesthete with colour → sound synaesthesia may experience when the subject becomes acutely aware of a stimulus. It seems that *Girl* attempts to promote the naturalness of synaesthetic perception and, by extension, prove the legitimacy of synaesthetic

³⁰ Other coloured speech bubbles include the red sound of the dog's bark, the silver sound of the bicycle bell, and the green sound of her teacher's voice when she says "recess" (14). Other incidences of coloured sound are represented as small images as well; these include the purple sound of falling rain, where the raindrops are coloured purple (10), and the orange sound of the school bell, which is coloured "orange as a pumpkin" (14).

experience. The non-synaesthetic reader cannot know the experience of synaesthesia firsthand, but the text is structured in such a way that the reader will naturally acknowledge the imminence of colour in the illustration. This process is similar to how Jillian herself immediately reads the colour of an absorbing sound as yellow.

But it is ambiguous whether Jillian is a localizer or a non-localizer since her percepts seem to be represented as both modalities. In this text, when a sound is represented as a colour image, the colour is usually confined to a small location on the page; usually a coloured speech bubble is enough to indicate the colour of a sound. In the lunchbox scene, we do not get the sense that Jillian's percepts arise as if projected on a screen since the sensation only seems to manifest as the word "yellow;" though the yellow background is affluent, Jillian would not have an experience of yellowness in arrears to her body if the sound stimulus is presented in the foreground as it is here. Similarly, during Jillian's preliminal phase, the blue sound of the honking geese and the red sound of the dog's bark do not suggest that Jillian's synaesthesia is, as Cytowic states in *Union*, "experienced close to the body within reach of the limb axis, never farther away" (68). Conversely, when Jillian visits the doctor, several streams of colour are seen flowing from her ear (Fig. 7). This also keeps with Cytowic's classification of spatial localization from *Tasted*, albeit his report is somewhat vague: "if visual, synesthesia is experienced close to the face" (76). However, it should be noted that there is no evidence of a sound stimulus in this scene and that Jillian's gaze is directed at the doctor to her left, not the sound image that is presumably hanging above her shoulder to her right. This is a notable slippage because the synaesthete, Cytowic and Eagleman find, tends to speak of

synaesthesia as “‘going to’ or ‘looking at’ a certain location to attend to whatever they experience,” which Jillian, in this instance, obviously does not (50).



Fig. 8: *Clouds Rise Up*. Carol Steen. 2004-5. “Synesthesia: Bringing out the Contours.” *Australian Art Review*. Frances McDonald. Web. 5 Apr 2014. Page 76.

But these multiple ambiguities aside, it may be difficult to competently represent a colour projection as a localizer envisions a percept. If the image of a synaesthetic sound percept were to resemble the art of prominent synaesthetic artist Carol Steen, for example, such an illustration would be largely abstract and may be confusing for the young reader (Fig. 8). Steen has numerous forms of synaesthesia, one of which is sound → colour synaesthesia; her painting *Clouds Rise Up* depicts what she saw when she heard a musician play a shakuhachi flute: “I call this *Clouds Rise Up* because this is exactly what I saw as I listened to him play his flute” (76).³¹ In “Synesthesia and the Artistic Process,” Steen continues: “orange and red are two actual sounds produced by a single note on a shakuhachi flute, whereas the background is the color of the flute itself, a

³¹ Cf. “Synesthesia: Bringing out the Contours.”

metallic forest green” (684).³² Thus the synaesthetic character may need to be absent from the scene in order to give the reader a more ‘accurate’ effect of seeing a sound image; this would also momentarily remove the young reader’s textual guide. A postmodern picture book could experiment with this kind of artwork, but these representational inconsistencies may go unnoticed by the uninformed reader and perhaps be accepted as fact. These discrepancies do not exactly work to unilaterally dissipate popular misconceptions of synaesthesia as unauthentic phenomenon.

Lastly, as a short aside, the reader may notice some similarities between my approach to subjectivity and phenomenological philosophy. Since *Girl* emphasizes that being a subject is more important than thinking about one’s subjecthood, one may recall Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological theorization of ontology and epistemology. To quote Zygmunt Bauman’s assessment of Heidegger, Jillian can be considered to be a “pre-reflexive” being since, with *Girl*, “the mystery of understanding is an ontological, rather than epistemological problem” (148).³³ Jillian’s pre-reflexivity is encumbered with “straightforward” language and sanitized of epistemological restrictions since Jillian’s liminal phase is defined by ambiguity and uncertainty. As Heidegger elucidates in *Being and Time*, “perception is consummated when one *addresses* oneself to something as something and discusses it as such . . . [because] . . . such looking-at enters the mode of dwelling autonomously alongside entities within-in-the world” (61-62). Jillian’s separateness, coupled with her lack of epistemological awareness, establishes her as a

³² I feature this piece in particular because the brushstrokes in *Clouds* resemble the illustration from *Girl* that depicts Jillian’s synaesthesia as “streams of colour” (Fig. 7; Fig. 9).

³³ Cf. *Hermeneutics and Social Sciences*.

liminal figure since she has yet to become “polluted,” as Heidegger would say, by obfuscating categorical designations of identity.³⁴

3. Memory and Meaning

Synaesthesia is also considered to be a highly memorable experience, whereby the memory of a synaesthetic percept can be recalled quickly and in significant detail.

Cytowic and Eagleman state that synaesthetic percepts “lack semantic meaning, and are easily and vividly remembered, often better than the triggering stimulus” (52-3); in other words, when the synaesthete with sound → colour synaesthesia is presented with a stimulus, the subject is more likely to remember the colour of the sound than the sound percept itself. This explains, perhaps, why Jillian actively engages with her environment but she does not posit why, exactly, “[she] loved the world with all her five senses” (2). Since the particulars of the synaesthete’s environment are less memorable than the colours stimulated by the subject’s environment, it is arguable that Jillian’s curious lack of introspection is due to the dearth of “semantic meaning” that would otherwise be assigned to the objects one encounters.

Incidentally, the multiple semantic slippages in *Girl* draw attention to a contestation between reader and the authorial intent of the text since both author and reader have different points of access to the text. Roland Barthes argues that the physical text is interactive and unfixed: the author does not command the meaning of h/er work

³⁴ Jillian also seems to be more concerned with the Heideggerean concept of “wahrnehmen” than “vernehmen.” According to Kimmy Stühlen, the German word “wahrnehmen” translates as: ‘wahr’ – “truth,” and ‘nehmen’ – “to take;” this gives an overall meaning of “to perceive.” With the German word “vernehmen,” ‘hear’ is probably the best translation alone, though it does work for ‘questioning or examining,’ but this would be a bit less common. Also, ‘ver-’ is a difficult prefix to pin down in German. The word itself mostly refers to judicial examination: the term is closer to ‘the court would like to cross-examine the witness’ than ‘I’m going to examine this!’ (Stühlen).

since all meaning is relative and limited to the reader's understanding of sign systems; "it is language that speaks, not the author," Barthes states, since one cannot simply be told what a text says: it is the text that does the "speaking," not the author, because a word signifies many things (278). With *Girl*, this approach is paramount since the reader's understanding of the text depends upon the reader's familiarity with either the myriad suggested meanings of the words within the text or the relationships that words have with things or other words: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures [that enter] into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, [and] contestation" (280).³⁵ The work the reader must perform in order to be 'born' with a new understanding of the text's linguistic apparatus works to other the reader from the text since the idea of the reader being "not 'me,'" Barthes states, makes it incredibly difficult to understand the self in relation to both the author and the text (280). If we are to consider Barthes's approach to the text, *Girl* does not so much offer a constituency of another mode of perception as it encourages a call to subjective interpretation. But the reader's interpretation of the text remains paramount since the illustrations reinforce a gap between abstract experience and residual meaning: the reader is established as the sole interpreter of the self and the same in relation to difference and the other.

4. Atmospheric Values

Furthermore, synaesthesia is thought to directly influence the synaesthete's personal tastes since a synaesthetic percept will invoke a strong emotional reaction in the subject. Synaesthesia is "loaded with affect" Cytowic and Eagleman state; this somewhat curious phrase implies that the synaesthete may describe one of their percepts as

³⁵ Cf. "The Death of the Author."

“gorgeous” or “delightful” (54). Conversely, if the synaesthete is presented with a representation of synaesthesia that diverges from the subject’s idiosyncratic synaesthetic pairings, the experience will tend to be unpleasant; for example, the synaesthete with grapheme → colour synaesthesia will likely become unnerved when presented with a word printed in coloured ink should the colour of the printed letters not match the subject’s own colour combinations. It is arguable, then, that the synaesthete considers synaesthesia to be a pertinent designator of identity since, when confronted with another manifestation of synaesthesia, the synaesthete is apt to be alienated by the scale of perception of another person.

But colour is a highly subjective semiotic code that can neither be assigned specific importance by itself nor be exclusively associated with a particular referent. Since all objects have specific colours but no colours have specific objects, colour can be considered to possess varying “atmospheric” values, to quote Baudrillard, since colours seem to “float” or “mingle” among non-specific objects: “colour may be dictated by an event, a ceremony, or a social role . . . [but] colour does not seek contact with other colours, and [colour] is not a free value” (30).³⁶ Because of this, *Girl*’s status as a seemingly authentic representation of synaesthesia suggests a paradox. Since Jillian’s synaesthesia would not meet several of the criteria for ‘genuineness,’ it would seem that *Girl* has dubious significance as a medium for disseminating the realness of synaesthetic experience. Any representation can only ever be a representation. The notion of authenticity is an artificial designation: it is a discursive function that works to make one representation seem more real or valid than another.

³⁶ Cf. *The System of Objects*.

Moreover, as Barthes argues, language is a system of signs; since all signs are arbitrary, no singular and absolute meaning can be attached to a sign, regardless if the sign is a word, a concept, or a book: “the writer’s language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it” (162).³⁷ Words appear to give the thing itself an identifiable presence by signifying them. The nature of a thing, however, would remain unchanged if the thing did not have a word to signify it and to ‘authenticate’ its nature as a sign; Said also echoes this point: “in any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation. (21).³⁸ The use of synaesthesia in fiction can be a messy creative endeavour since synaesthesia studies define synaesthesia as an identity designation that must be signified as genuine or not at all. *Girl* suggests a double hermeneutic, whereby the text’s creation is informed by both scientific research and personal experience.³⁹ However, following Barthes’s approach to textual analysis, it is the reader’s responsibility to unpack the representational imaginary of the text, not to confide in an illusory sense of textual truth. A text can only signify identity and subjectivity; it can offer no final signified of consciousness and relatable experience.

5. On the Bound

Finally, Cytowic and Eagleman state that synaesthetic percepts generally remain unchanged over the subject’s lifetime; if an adolescent synaesthete sees the letter ‘A’ as

³⁷ Cf. *Mythologies*.

³⁸ Cf. *Orientalism*.

³⁹ Cf. Dimitri Ginev, in “Rhetoric and Double Hermeneutics in the Social Sciences,” states: “double hermeneutics is defined as a research process constituted by the interplay of an interpretive thematization (of a given cultural phenomenon) and an interpretative self-reflection that invokes the researcher’s rhetorical (or creative) imagination” (264).

turquoise, 'A' will be the exact same hue months or years hence. The unchanging nature of synaesthesia has led scientific studies to consider consistency to be the principle that decides whether or not the subject's synaesthesia is 'genuine.' The established method for verifying the subject's synaesthesia is Julian E. Asher's "Revised Test of Genuineness" (TOG-R). In "The Prevalence of Synesthesia: The Consistency Revolution," Donielle Johnson, Carrie Allison, and Simon Baron-Cohen state that consistency testing is considered to be the "gold standard" method for determining the "genuineness" of a subject's synaesthesia (5); in *Wednesday*, Cytowic states much the same: "consistency testing has become the gold standard" for synaesthesia verification (237). In the test, the subject is asked to match a number of sensations to their corresponding colours on the colour chart provided. These same percepts are then retested, a week and then a year later, and the subject is given a score between one and three based on the exactitude of each answer.⁴⁰ The synaesthete tends to score dramatically higher than the control subject because, for the synaesthete, cross-sensory perception is an in-built function of the subject's brain.

According to Johnson, Allison, and Baron-Cohen, the revised and more robust test (TOG-R) finds 71.3% of the synaesthetes tested to be congruent, while 33% of non-synaesthetes tested received a consistent, "congruent" score (8). The original test from the early 1990s (TOG), referenced in Johnson, Allison, and Baron-Cohen's article and also in *Union*, finds 92.3% of synaesthetes tested congruent when retested one year hence, compared to 37.6% of non-synaesthetes only one week after the original test. A congruent score for a non-synaesthete does not necessarily mean that the test subject has

⁴⁰ Three points are awarded for an exact match; two points are awarded if the subject's answer is the same colour but the hue is slightly different; one point is awarded if the subject's answer is anywhere in the same colour group (8).

synaesthesia; rather, it implies that a minority of test subjects aptly remembered their original answers. This is a feat that would be incredulously difficult to repeat after one year (68).⁴¹ Although this test is quite rigorous, and is highly resistant to cheating, the authors of “Prevalence” acknowledge that there are some weaknesses with this test. Some research finds that a subject’s synaesthetic pairings can, in fact, change over time; synaesthesia in children, they state, is “likely” to change or is at least less consistent than synaesthesia in adults (10-11).⁴²

Furthermore, a synaesthetic percept will not be “pictorial or highly elaborate,” as Cytowic and Eagleman state; the sensation will be generic or “elementary” since synaesthesia does not prompt the subject to see a lavishly detailed image (51). Where the control subject’s colour choices rely on memory or free association, the synaesthete’s colour pairings cannot be forgotten because they are inherent as opposed to learned or merely remembered (65). The demands of consistency testing may seem ridiculously meticulous to the non-synaesthete since a congruent score indicates that the test subject has identified not only a colour, but the same exact hue for dozens of answers on both the test and the retest. This specificity is central to synaesthetic experience since an inducer will not simply lead to an experience of yellow, for example; a precise shade of yellow will be experienced automatically every time such an inducer is presented.⁴³

⁴¹ Cf. *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*.

⁴² Cf. “The Prevalence of Synesthesia: The Consistency Revolution.”

⁴³ The significance of the “elementary” dimension of synaesthesia is perhaps more apparent in synaesthesia forms that do not involve colour since colour is itself a rather ‘elementary’ semiotic. In *Bright*, Dann gives the following example of taste → shape synaesthesia: “visual photisms are geometric shapes rather than images of actual objects, and gustatory percepts are salty or sweet rather than suggesting specific flavors” (8).



Fig. 9: Streams of Colour. *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 26-27.

Perhaps the most dubious representation of the specific and elementary nature of Jillian's synaesthesia comes in the illustration that depicts her overwhelming experience of coloured sound on music day (Fig. 9). Here, Jillian experiences a multitude of colour combinations, all of which flow from her ears in twisting, strabismal shapes; the streams of colour are less specific and elementary than intricate and spastic. Such a representation also works to negate Nodelman's following aphorism of the picture book: "picture books emphasize showing as much as telling, and their pictures often fill in the details of emotion and of setting that their words leave out and that color seems most suited to convey" (69).⁴⁴ Seemingly, if we are to evaluate the intended message of *Girl* apropos the Revised Test of Genuineness, the multiple ambiguities in the text suggest that

⁴⁴ Cf. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*.

the text stands apart from the goals of synaesthesia studies since the text glosses over the specificities that define synaesthesia. If one is to examine Harris and Brantley-Newton's attempt to present synaesthesia as real experience, the gap between isolation and knowledge is not so much bridged as simplified, and this works to further obscure the complexities of synaesthetic identity.

This diagnostic feature may seem to have dubious relevance to *Girl* since it is impossible to determine if Jillian's synaesthesia is congruent. Not once in *Girl* does Jillian discuss the same percept twice; additionally, it hardly needs to be noted that it is impossible to test and retest a fictional character's cognitive functions. This being said, however, the representation of synaesthesia in this text oscillates between simple, abstract shapes and superfluous colour designs, which suggests that Jillian's synaesthesia is less elementary than overly elaborate. Although the representation of the yellow sound of the lunchbox is simple enough, Jillian experiences a slew of different colours in the doctor's office, and it is unknown what kind of stimulus or stimuli would procure such a complex colour pattern (Fig. 7). The precise hue of the yellow sound is less specific than ambiguous: it is unclear whether the exact colour of Jillian's percept is embodied in the colour of the word/image "yellow" or the darker yellow background that seems to totalize the space behind her field of vision. Similarly, in the doctor's office, the kaleidoscopic waves of colour that emanate from Jillian's ear are not a precise hue but a variety of colours.

Seen and Not Seen

In sum, Jillian can be considered to be a liminal figure since, at first, there seems to be no way to categorize her form of perception; this makes her seem strange or abnormal. Liminality, as Victor Turner articulates the term, is a subject position that is “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he [the liminal figure] passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state” (232).⁴⁵ Jillian is a liminal figure because, for the majority of the text, her identity is in flux. Synaesthesia is the definitive aspect of Jillian’s identity, yet she cannot identify herself as a synaesthete until the musician’s revelation. She is also excluded by the other students since they do not understand how coloured sound can be considered ‘normal’ (Fig. 10). Jillian’s exclusion is only nullified once the musician offers the other students a psychological term to classify her form of perception.

The formation of Jillian’s identity aptly correlates with van Gennep’s stages of separation, transition, and reincorporation. At the beginning of the text, Jillian willingly isolates herself in order to revel in sensory experience (rite of separation). But once in preschool, ironically, her adulation of sensation leads her to unabashedly name the colour of the crashing lunchbox; this is an event that leads to imposed isolation and existential uncertainty (rite of transition). Finally, upon the musician’s revelation, Jillian is accepted by her teachers and the other students (rite of incorporation). In this sense, Jillian must pass through a “symbolic domain,” the act of naming and symbolizing synaesthesia through language, in order for her to regain a sense of equilibrium and her lost affection for sensory experience. But her understanding of synaesthesia is transfigured from

⁴⁵ Cf. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*.

merely “when I hear sounds, I see colors” to “her special extra one [sense]” (31); this is due to the discursive economy of the school and Jillian’s interpellation as other. Jillian’s synaesthetic percepts may remain the same but her “coming state” of sensory exultation diverges from her original outlook on perception since she now considers synaesthesia to be a “special” feature of perception, as if synaesthesia is equal to but also different from normative perception.



Fig. 10: The Musician’s Revelation. *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. Marie Harris and Vanessa Brantley-Newton. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013. Page 30-31.

But it should not be assumed that either Harris or Brantley-Newton are not aware of the specific/elementary dimension of synaesthesia since Harris and Brantley-Newton both have synaesthesia. Moreover, the medium of the picture book is hardly a strict collaboration between artist and author, as there will usually be some kind of disconnect between the author’s intended meaning and the illustrator’s vision of the illustrations. Harris states that the author of a picture book generally does not choose an illustrator

h'self, whilst the author and illustrator are encouraged to not converse at all. This, Harris believes, is the publisher's attempt to limit the authorial dictum of the writer, "so that she doesn't inflict her often misguided opinions on the artist."⁴⁶ However, Harris states that she and Brantley-Newton did communicate periodically, and it was during one of these conversations that Brantley-Newton discovered the term for synaesthesia. It seems to be merely happenstance that Brantley-Newton was chosen to illustrate a picture book on synaesthesia, as this choice, Harris implies, was not the result of Brantley-Newton's synaesthesia, though Brantley-Newton does include synaesthetic themes in her art for other projects (Fig. 11).⁴⁷ Not only does the picture book have no singular author, the project will commence with no unified vision of a final product. Therefore, it is dubious to assert that the reader should consider the 'intended meaning' of text to be homogenous, and thus absolute, or that the authors assume the fragmentary, disconnected production of the text to have resulted in a product with an 'authentic,' truly dependable message.



Fig. 11: *Listen to Color*. Vanessa Brantley-Newton. Ooh La Design Studio. Web. 14 Feb 2014.

⁴⁶ Cf. "The Girl Who Heard Colors: Author Marie Harris writes an Important Children's Book."

⁴⁷ Harris also states that she has sequence-space synaesthesia: "My only brush with synesthesia has been to realize that I see the months of the year as an arc upon which I am traveling."

The analysis of the representation of synaesthesia in fiction has radical potential since synaesthesia is difficult to understand for both synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes alike. As Cytowic and Eagleman argue, this is perhaps because “synesthesia is too general, imprecise, and inflexible a form of cognition compared to language and the later-developing meanings that are possible in the verbal real” (172).⁴⁸ But since Cytowic and Eagleman’s work examines synaesthesia from a neuroscientific and genetic point of view, it is not surprising that they do not pay much attention to the representation of synaesthesia in fiction. But a focus on both the representation of synaesthetic identity in fiction and the synaesthetic reader will shed new light on the concept of the reader being outside the text. Synaesthesia is by no means a ‘better’ way of reading: a study of synaesthetes as readers simply draws attention to the ordinariness of the subject through another subjective lens.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*.

II. Introlude: Silence is the Symptom, Consistency is the Sinthome

Inter Alia

The rigorous testing procedure for synaesthesia indicates that synaesthesia studies are immensely preoccupied with separating the ‘authentic’ synaesthete from the non-synaesthete. It is worth examining this point in more detail in order to discuss the messy implications of representing synaesthesia in fiction. In the section of *Union* that addresses the consistency of synaesthesia, Cytowic wants the reader to be firmly aware that some people merely pretend to have synaesthesia and that such an act is a gross offence. The descriptive language used to describe the consistency of synaesthesia in *Union* is at times ardent, perhaps even aggressive; for example, Cytowic adamantly states: “given the explosive interest in synesthesia and the public exposure to it, it is presently important to weed out synesthesia wannabes” (68). This description, as with Cytowic’s ‘disclaimer’ to his list of diagnostic criteria in *Union*, suggests an authoritative divide between the synaesthete and the non-synaesthete. Cytowic establishes synaesthesia as an exclusive subject position since he suggests that synaesthesia is perhaps the source of jealousy for some individuals with compartmentalized perception.

It has been twenty-five years since the publication of *Union*, and Cytowic often re-evaluates his original research. But some significant biases still remain in his current work. In 2011’s *Wednesday*, Cytowic and Eagleman affirm that Consistency testing is a rigorous testing procedure designed to distinguish the pretenders from ‘genuine’ synaesthetes: “it is easy to demonstrate that non-synaesthetes who are asked to fake it will fail to show good consistency” (237). But why would a synaesthete care if someone

is going to pretend to have synaesthesia? If a non-synaesthete enjoys telling people sh/e hears colours or tastes shapes, this does not make cross-sensory perception any less real for the synaesthete. In my investigation of consistency testing, I draw prominently on Lacanian theory because Lacan is foremost concerned with how the subject is wrought by language; as Sara Humphreys states, Lacan draws our attention to “how we are acquired into sign systems and, in turn, how those systems shape us.”⁴⁹ It is useful here to read consistency testing through a Lacanian lens since consistency testing appropriates the synaesthete and then attempts to redefine synaesthesia in narrow, categorical terms. Consistency testing seems unconcerned with the role of the subject whilst Lacanian theory, as Brice Fink states, considers the concept of subjectivity “indispensable” (xi).⁵⁰ Consistency testing does verify that a synaesthete’s percepts are congruent, but it also means to out the synaesthesia pretenders; in effect, I argue that consistency testing further reinforces a contingent difference between cross-sensory and normative perception.

In this chapter, I focus intently on consistency testing for synaesthesia, and argue that consistency testing is an oppressive discursive enterprise. This chapter digresses somewhat from the main goals of this thesis: we can think of this chapter as an interlude that introduces several key concepts of Lacanian theory. In the first section of this Introlude, “The Symptom in Synaesthesia Studies,” I examine several scientific accounts of synaesthetic agency, and I focus attentively on Cytowic’s *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*. Secondly, in “How does Consistency Testing Signify the Symptom?,” I draw on Lacanian theory as I examine the effect of consistency testing on the synaesthete. Finally, in “The Sublime Object of Perception,” I examine Jillian’s postliminal phase, and

⁴⁹ Cf. “Hello... Is it ‘I’ ‘You’ are Looking for?”

⁵⁰ Cf. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*.

I also argue that both consistency testing and normative perception constitute Lacan's discourse of the university.

The Symptom in Synaesthesia Studies

In the section from *Union* entitled "Synesthetes Speak for Themselves," Cytowic attempts to prove that being a synaesthete also means being fundamentally alone. He lists several anecdotes of trauma suffered by 'real life' synaesthetes and their pleas to view synaesthesia as a legitimate mode of perception. First, I address Cytowic's prelude to this section, where he establishes silence and isolation as primordial exclusionary clauses for the synaesthete. Cytowic explains:

As children, synesthetes quickly discover that others do not perceive the world as they do. Keeping their special talent to themselves, they retreat into a secret world to avoid ridicule and disbelief, even from their own families. This must have an enormous influence on personality. Despite the emotional burden that being synesthetic imposes, as well as the practical trouble it can cause in school and social situations, synesthetes would not for a moment part with their special ability. They have an unshakable sense of conviction that what they perceive is real and valid, and their synesthetic associations remain constant over their lifetime. (13)

Synaesthesia, as it seems to Cytowic, is an experience that is both envied and reviled due to its inherently 'special' and inexplicable character. Cytowic's authoritative prose is perhaps warranted due to the widespread cultural unfamiliarity of synaesthesia, not to mention the prevalent assumption that synaesthesia is not real perceptual phenomenon.

But Cytowic's articulation of this problematic is apt to further complicate the reader's understanding of the mode since he discusses the cultural envy and disdain of synaesthesia as a dichotomy, not as a homogeneity of structural elements. By identifying that difference exists, yet addressing such difference in uncomplicated, monomorphic terms, the text is structured in such a way that the ideological constraints of synaesthetic otherness are reinforced instead of investigated. This example of synaesthetic disbelief defines synaesthesia in opposition to the compartmentalized mode and therefore promulgates the notion that synaesthesia is inherently different but also other to normative perception.

Furthermore, in "Speak," as is common in Cytowic's work, there is a composite list of case studies that feature varying accounts of synaesthetic experience. In this section in particular, Cytowic outlines that synaesthesia is a naturally occurring experience and not the result of cognitive abnormality. Among the anecdotes Cytowic provides, one participant discusses the highly memorable nature of h/er coloured sense of smell; another individual professes that h/er synaesthesia is a "gift" and that sh/e should not be blamed for hearing music as colour: "it's not my fault; it's just how I am" (13). This internalization of difference silences the synaesthete, Cytowic continues. There seems to be a hegemonic refusal to accept synaesthetic experience as real phenomenon, which strips the synaesthete of h/er ability to discuss synaesthesia without the fear of contempt. Cytowic outlines this act of silencing as follows:

There is a general social taboo against inner knowledge. Biases exist in our scientific and social systems against examining what society says is not 'normal.'

It can be difficult for synesthetes to talk about their experiences because of

previously encountered disbelief. ‘Nobody understands.’ ‘People look at me like I’m crazy.’ ‘I don’t want to be a freak.’ True synesthetes are reticent; weirdoes and wannabes will talk about their ‘visions’ at the drop of a hat. (19)

In these brief accounts of synaesthetic experience, Cytowic means to demonstrate that synaesthesia is both a ‘normal’ cognitive trait and an experience that is often met with apprehension and disdain: “they also learned to stop talking about their green symphonies, salty visions, and tastes that feel like glass columns long ago in childhood when they realized that they were different, and that no one else understood” (14). In these instances, the synaesthete seems to find solace not in a vocalized rebuke to antipathy, but in quiet frustration towards social misapprehension.

It seems as if a dimension of strangerhood is imposed upon the synaesthete which leads the subject to no longer discuss synaesthesia with others. In the passage outlined above, the synaesthete is addressed as “crazy,” but sh/e remains naturally “reticent;” to channel Louis Althusser, the synaesthete, in this instance, will avoid a discussion of synaesthesia because such a disclosure will result in the synaesthete being “interpellated” as mad. The synaesthete will be addressed as imprudent and will be forced to acknowledge this designation with limited revolt because, according to Althusser, “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals.”⁵¹ However, it is not the case that the interpellated subject is misidentified by a speaker, as Michael Warner states; rather, the subject identifies, to some extent, with the assumed imaginary identification of public rhetoric; the interpellated subject invests a “partial non-identity with the object of address (78).⁵² Cytowic states that there may be a

⁵¹ Cf. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation”

⁵² Cf. *Publics and Counterpublics*.

“general social taboo against inner knowledge” that positions the synaesthete in opposition to the socio-symbolic network; however, Cytowic often fails to scrutinize the discursive apparatus that oppresses the synaesthete. The reader is asked to pity the subject of discourse instead of critique discourse itself.

But the invisibility of the synaesthetic subject is certainly not an absolute condition of the perception. For example, an often cited example of a ‘happy’ synaesthete childhood can be found in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. Nabokov, a noted synaesthete, states that he learned of the idiosyncrasy of synaesthesia as a child: he casually informed his mother, a synaesthete herself, that the colours of his alphabet blocks were incorrect; since his mother also had synaesthesia, her reaction was not one of exclusion or stigmatization: “to my mother, though, all this seemed quite normal” (22). Cytowic himself mentions Nabokov’s positive upbringing on numerous occasions. Furthermore, Julia E. Asher and Duncan A. Carmichael, in “The Genetic and Inheritance of Synesthesia,” affirm that there is burgeoning, albeit somewhat limited, evidence that synaesthesia is genetically inherited: they find that “40% prevalence amongst the first- or second-degree relatives of known synaesthetes” (25). Thus it is not unlikely that a synaesthete may have a synaesthetic parent or close family member who may promote a healthy dialogue about synaesthetic experience. The apparently insulating effect of synaesthesia is certainly not universal.

Now, Cytowic certainly does not mean to promulgate the objectification of the synaesthete. What I take issue with is the way that Cytowic frames his discussion of synaesthetic sequestration. Cytowic suggests that synaesthesia is often misunderstood as a form of madness, and synaesthetes will also internalize this designation of difference;

as one of the case studies from *Union* adamantly declares, “fear of ridicule has held my secret” (19).⁵³ Cytowic and Eagleman also includes this quotation in the more recent *Wednesday*, which seems to suggest that Cytowic considers this anecdote to be an archetypal example of synaesthetic silence and isolation (10). In either text, this quote appears in a case study which expresses a patient’s crushing inability to communicate his synaesthesia to others:

I have never communicated to anybody of seeing additional colored light. For one, I have failed to understand it myself, and to try to explain it to somebody else would leave me no better off. I was so happy to see that my experience is shared and acknowledged by others. I’m 35 years old and work in the construction industry. Fear of ridicule has held my secret.

Here, synaesthesia appears to be an ontic state where the subject views himself as neither an individual nor a member of a social collective. The individual in this case study seems to believe this is due to his lack of both a voice and an understanding of the mode. But the narrative of this case study is bizarre: the synaesthete here is a reserved, confused figure, and it is unknown how he came to learn that his experience is “shared and acknowledged by others.” Also, the subject’s openness is presented as a ‘natural’ occurrence, as if his testimony deserves no explanation. If synaesthesia is such an isolating experience, and this case study is significant enough to be reproduced in *Wednesday* two decades after the publication of *Union*, why, again, is the synaesthete offered no solution to quell such intense feelings of difference?

Finally, Markus Zedler and Marie Rehme, in “Synesthesia: A Psychological Approach,” also emphasize that one’s synaesthesia forms the basis for their individuality.

⁵³ Cf. *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*.

Similar to Cytowic, Zedler and Rehme state the following: “When the synaesthete first recognizes that others do not have an identical scale of perception, his or her identity may become formed around this fact. Hence, synesthetes may be first defined by a feeling of difference” (463). This seems to distinguish the synaesthete from a group collective, but it also results in “severe emotional pain” because synaesthesia is a trait that is difficult to describe to the compartmentalized subject. Zedler and Rehme continue:

The earliest experience of being a synaesthete in the world often elicits a sense of being alone. Nobody appears to have the same perceptions as you, and you are apparently totally unique. Because of this, you may feel that nobody could know exactly what it is like to be you. This, in particular, may be one of the most difficult and intense experiences, and may be the key experience that synaesthetes encounter when they are first shaken from their colorful world by learning that others do not share their sensations. (463)

The synaesthete’s identity, Zedler and Rehme suggest, is formed not by relating to a group dynamic, but by distancing oneself from the social milieu. Zedler and Rehme suggest that the group collective does not have much to teach the synaesthete that the synaesthete does not already know about synaesthesia.

Synaesthesia, Zedler and Rehme claim, is not only a neurological certainty, “one symptom of a hyperconnected brain;” they contend that synaesthesia is also a distinct personality type that generally prohibits the subject from incorporating the characteristics of personhood as established by a given social environment (463). Here, it seems likely that the synaesthete is more likely to be ‘lonely’ than vie for a position in a group collective since it is impossible for the compartmentalized subject to intimately

understand synaesthesia. For the synaesthete, it seems as if any attempt at individualization via group assimilation is a process of negation rather than appropriation.

How does Consistency Testing Signify the Symptom?

The cultural disdain towards synaesthesia to which Cytowic alludes is presented as a totality. Cytowic suggests, perhaps involuntarily, that isolation and exclusion each function as a “symptom” of synaesthetic experience, in the Lacanian sense of the term. The “symptom,” according to Lacan, may signify pathology but this signification can only be validated by the analyst; the analyst allows “the symptom to emerge from the state of an as yet unformulated enigma” (259).⁵⁴ The patient, in other words, possesses the knowledge of pathology but, at the same time, sh/e is separate from this knowledge; the analyst helps bridge this threshold of signification (136).⁵⁵ Importantly, the Lacanian theorization of the symptom differs from the medical definition of the symptom. In *Écrits*, Lacan writes that the analyst needs to recognize the signifying function of the symptom instead of merely make a diagnosis of a somatic or psychological ailment; for Lacan, the symptom “differs from the natural index commonly designated by the term ‘symptom’ in medicine” because the symptom indicates the patient’s subjection to language and the inability to objectively interpret the symptom as a signifier (418). The patient possesses the knowledge of disease but the patient needs the analyst to access this knowledge; the analyst is a neutral party who may transfer objective knowledge of the symptom’s signification to the patient (226).

⁵⁴ Cf. *Seminar X: L’Angoisse (1962-63)*.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*.

For Cytowic, the “secret world” that seems to grant the synaesthete safety from derision is but another node in the symbolic network that instigated such disdain in the first place. This secret world is the realm of the Symbolic, the Lacanian register of reality characterized by artificial sign relationships; as Tony Myers states, “the symbolic dimension of language is that of the signifier.”⁵⁶ Here, synaesthesia inexplicably signifies silence, and this silence appears to lead to social impairment: there seems to be a “practical trouble” in coming to terms with one’s place in the socio-symbolic network that disseminates such symbolization. To channel Slavoj Žižek’s articulation of the symptom qua ideology, the synaesthete, in Cytowic’s research, seems apt to accept isolating silence as a symptom without recourse, as if the “emotional burden” of synaesthetic experience is a “natural” and “a given” ontic state, not an artificial construction imposed by the symbolic order (129).⁵⁷ In *Union*, silence and isolation are characterized as symptoms of synaesthetic experience. The synaesthete is identified as ‘special’ (in the Symbolic) and other (in the Imaginary, in the realm of surface interpretation) since anecdotal accounts of synaesthesia (in the Real) are prone to “disbelief” and cannot be imagined or symbolized.

But one must not dwell on the signification of the symptom, Žižek argues; one must draw attention to the ideological construction of the symptom itself. Since the

⁵⁶ In Lacanian Psychoanalysis, the ego uses three ‘registers’ of reality to constitute identity. On *Lacan.com*, Tony Myers defines the three registers as follows. The ego uses the ‘Imaginary’ register to create an image of the self: this is an image that the subject wants to project; however, since this projection is imaginary, it is seen by no one. The ‘Symbolic’ register creates the rules for the substance of such images. The ‘Real’ constitutes what is experienced, but it can be neither communicated nor signified. Moreover, in *Slavoj Žižek*, Myers states that the Imaginary is the realm of the signified: it is what we want to signify (22). Also, we locate the signifier in the realm of the Symbolic: the link between the concept and the thing itself is a Symbolic connection (23). Finally, as Myers states on *Lacan.com*, the Real is beyond symbolization: “it is impossible imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order.”

⁵⁷ It is useful here to recall Lacan’s description of the symptom as an “Unterbliebene Befriedigung” (112); this concept is translated as a “failure to satisfy” (Stühlen). Arguably, the synaesthete is silenced because the subject fears that sh/e will not be able to satisfactorily describe to the mode to others.

symptom is but one element in a chain of signifiers, the symptom is a means for the subject to relate to a socio-symbolic network and, by extension, establish a sense of self: “there where your symptom already was, with this place you must identify, in its ‘pathological’ singularity you must recognize the element that guarantees your consistency” (137). Because of this, Lacan states, “the symptom in its nature is jouissance” since the patient is apt to experience excessive pleasure once the symptom’s meaning has been granted signification by the analyst; to be clear, Bruce Fink defines jouissance as “a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination” (xii). The symptom signifies the traumatic resurgence of jouissance: in this case, it is the subject’s apparent “unshakable sense of conviction” and ecstatic confidence in the ‘extraordinary’ reality of synaesthesia. Jouissance is the leftover of the Real: it is a fragment of reality that cannot be symbolized yet it continues to exist in opposition to the inexplicable pain of the symptom.⁵⁸ It is this desire that binds the subject to the socio-symbolic network, though this relationship is paradoxical in nature: the synaesthete is forced to withdraw from the *socius* in order to refuse the symbolic fiction of existence imposed by the big Other. *Union* suggests that the synaesthete desires to exist in a Symbolic realm where sh/e can embrace the radical difference of synaesthesia; here, the synaesthete can apparently confide in the assurance that “synesthetic associations remain constant over [one’s] lifetime.” If it were not for this exile, it seems as if the synaesthete would have no reason to accept cross-sensory perception as a “special talent.”

Consistency testing can help validate the veracity of synaesthetic experience and it also wants to disparage those who reject synaesthesia as real or measureable

⁵⁸ Cf. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*.

phenomenon. But consistency testing also glosses over the complex nature of synaesthetic personhood in favour of a digenesis that attempts to forcibly authenticate synaesthesia in the Real. The goals of consistency testing are flawed because perception in general is, by its very nature, subjective and outside of absolute interpretation. Again, the problematic here is not that synaesthesia should not be interpreted; it is a problem that the researchers do not attempt to identify that ideological element that leads the synaesthete to “appreciate” isolation and silence as “undisputable facts.” Why does the linkage between these designations seem to be absolute? In Lacanian theory, this lost element is called the “sinthome:” it is that aspect of the discourse that knots together the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek defines the sinthome as follows:

Le sinthome is not the symptom, the coded message to be deciphered by interpretation, but the meaningless letter that immediately procures *jouis-sense*, ‘enjoyment-in-meaning,’ ‘enjoy-meant.’ . . . It is no longer enough to locate the ideological text in its context, to render visible its necessarily overlooked margins. What we must do, . . . on the contrary, is to *isolate the sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination in order to expose the *sinthome*’s utter stupidity. (129)

Silence, the symptom of synaesthesia, emblemizes the subject’s desire to cope with the exclusionary constraints of the symbolic order; it also prompts the subject to revel in the fantasy of a diagnostic finality. In this sense, “the symptom in its nature is *jouissance*” since the patient experiences excessive pleasure once the mystery of the symptom’s meaning has been granted signification by the analyst (112). The sinthome, on the other

hand, represents the subject's drive, that element of the subject's being that resists a continued enmeshment in an oppressive dialectic apparatus. In synaesthesia studies, the sinthome of synaesthesia is consistency: it is the characteristic that confirms the subject's "unshakable sense of conviction that what they perceive is real and valid;" it also verifies that the subject's "synesthetic associations remain constant over their lifetime." The sinthome represents the obtainment of desire, not by either embracing the traumatic nature of the symptom or escaping into fantasy, but by procuring jouissance through the recognition and rejection of the incredulous stupidity of marginalization itself.⁵⁹

First we Feel, then we Fall

But if the sinthome is idiotic, why identify with it in the first place? The consistency of synaesthesia is used to verify that synaesthesia is genuine. But the actual consistent element of synaesthetic experience by itself does not work to dissipate synaesthetic difference. Consistency testing also privileges such difference as extraordinary, exclusionary, and elitist. Consistency is the sinthome of synaesthesia: it is established as the existential remedy to the subject's rejection from the symbolic order. But the actual consistent dimension of synaesthesia only exists in the Real; synaesthetic consistency itself is the Real that leads to "an unshakable sense of conviction that what they perceive is real and valid." But some researchers also attempt to define consistency in the Symbolic (consistency testing) and the Imaginary (synaesthesia pretenders). This is why consistency is the sinthome of synaesthesia: it offers the subject a solution of sorts to any suffering procured by alienation and disbelief, though this solution does not probe the discursive structure of normative perception. The sinthome merely gives meaning to

⁵⁹ One of Žižek's examples of the sinthome can be found in Appendix A.

the symptom: it is “the *something* which keeps subjects from confronting the horrors of the *nothing*” (3).⁶⁰ In other words, consistency testing seems to keep the synaesthete from confronting the horror of being alone and misunderstood. Consistency testing has resignified consistency itself into the sinthome of synaesthetic identity: consistency now constitutes the synaesthete’s drive to accept h/er place in the social order, though consistency testing obviously cannot reify synaesthesia in the Real.

We also see an example of the sinthome in *Girl*. Jillian is originally unaware that synaesthesia is an atypical mode of perception. Since no one at Jillian’s school knows anything about synaesthesia, her reaction to the yellow sound seems unusual; her teacher is concerned and her classmates ridicule her out of confusion. Eventually, on music day, Jillian becomes noticeably overwhelmed by the sound of several instruments being played in unison; this prompts her to explain: “when I hear sounds, I see colors” (27). Again, this shocks the other students but not the music teacher; he explains that he sees sound as colour as well, and that this experience is named “synesthesia” (28-29). The book ends with Jillian overjoyed and ecstatic that she can return to exploring her five senses in addition to “her special extra one;” the expressions of the other students change from confusion to excitement over the music teacher’s revelation (31). Here, we find an example of the ideological sinthome: Jillian is overwhelmed by her synaesthetic percepts, but she also delights in the news that she has a spectacular sixth sense. These two certainties ensure that she is reaccepted by the social order, though she retains her outlier status since she is constituted as ‘special’ and therefore identifiably different from the other children. We also have a knotting of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

⁶⁰ Cf. “Symptom or Sinthome? A Critical review of *Burnout and Intersubjectivity: A Psychoanalytic Study from a Lacanian Perspective*.”

The Imaginary is constituted by the continued dissemination of difference. This is emphasized by the lingering ecstatic gaze of the social network depicted in the final pages of the text (Fig. 10). The term “synesthesia” and the designation “special” are signified in the Symbolic by the musician. Since Jillian’s love of sensation that is never explained, it is the Real: it is beyond symbolization.

The Sublime Object of Perception

Consistency testing means to prove that synaesthesia is real experience. In “A Standardized Test Battery for the Study of Synesthesia,” David Eagleman et al. argue that the introduction of consistency testing played a pivotal role in the synaesthesia renaissance since testing verifies that synaesthesia has “measurable perceptual consequences” (139). But it is strange that the most important component of consistency testing seems to be the researcher, not the subject. Eagleman’s online Synaesthesia Battery is a test that seems to do just this. When the user begins the battery, sh/e is told that it will only take fifteen minutes to complete the 108 questions for the grapheme → colour synaesthesia test; this assumes that the user will take an average of less than nine seconds to answer each question. But this timeline contradicts Cytowic and Eagleman’s assertion from *Wednesday* that that it would take “many minutes” to correlate each grapheme with a precise, corresponding colour (51).⁶¹ When tested, the synaesthete finds it imperative to locate the exact hue of the percept in the colours provided; failure to do so tends to frustrate the synaesthete, Cytowic and Eagleman continue (51). Since the battery has a palette of 256 shades of blue, red, and green, for a total of 16,777,216

⁶¹ In my own experience with Eagleman’s Synaesthesia Battery, it took over two hours to satisfactorily choose a colour to correspond with each grapheme in the test, and this process was considerably rushed.

colours, it is unlikely that the synaesthete will take fifteen minutes to complete the test for grapheme → colour synaesthesia.

The researchers of the aforementioned article also state that the Synaesthesia Battery has been criticized because every computer monitor will have a slightly different colour palette and, I will add, different colour and brightness settings. For example, on my laptop, I would identify the letter 'S' as (204, 0, 0) in RGB colour space, but this same decimal may appear to be a slightly different shade of red on another computer.⁶²

The researchers attempt to tidily resolve this issue by stating the following: “this concern does not apply to our system of scoring because we are testing the *difference* in color choices across three separate trials on the same computer” (142).⁶³ In other words, the user will receive a congruent score if the decimal for each grapheme remains relatively unchanged across three attempts; it is irrelevant that the inputted colours may differ from the subject's actual percepts. Now, I understand that these oversights may be considered to be just minor quibbles; also, I recognize that one could fault me for analyzing a psychological study from the point of view of the humanities. But an irony here needs to be addressed: a test dedicated to proving the reality of a subjective experience also disregards the user's subjective approach to the test itself.

Consistency testing means to remonstrate normative perception but consistency testing is itself a discourse that privileges a strict, categorical difference between two neurological modalities. In this section, I draw on Lacan's discourse of the university in order to analyse the social link between the synaesthete and the symbolic order. I argue

⁶² On my laptop, the decimal that I associate with 'S' is the 204th brightest shade of red light; the two zeroes indicate that this colour has no trace of green or blue light. A useful RGB decimal calculator chart can be found at http://www.rapidtables.com/web/color/RGB_Color.htm.

⁶³ It should be noted that one can pause the test and continue it at a later date on a different computer.

that consistency testing constitutes Lacan's discourse of the university since this discourse figures the human subject to be a "disposable object," as Žižek states (149).⁶⁴ Lacan outlines four fundamental types of discourse, each of which describes a social link between a speaker and an addressee.⁶⁵ In the discourse of the university, the subject is constantly harassed and h/er otherness is made public knowledge. This discourse also works to "rationalize" the will of the master-signifier, Žižek continues. Sean Sturm outlines the discourse of the university as follows.⁶⁶ In the discourse of the university, the system of knowledge (S_2) is the agent. The system of knowledge derives its power from the master-signifier (S_1) and it addresses the object (a). As a result, enjoyment is "domesticated" and the subject is rendered powerless ($\$$). Lacan's matheme for the university discourse is illustrated below.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_2 & \rightarrow & a \\ \hline S_1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

Consistency testing is the system of knowledge in synaesthesia studies. It is this ideological apparatus that determines if the subject's synaesthesia is 'real' (S_2). Synaesthesia researchers uphold this system as the 'gold standard' of genuineness testing (S_1). This test determines whether or not the subject's synaesthesia is 'genuine' (a). The researchers then appropriate the test subject into their test demographic ($\$$). Consistency testing is a discourse that works to uphold a conjectural difference between compartmentalized and cross-sensory perception. The synaesthete does not need the consistency test to know that they have synaesthesia, though the synaesthete may choose to take the test in order to convince others that their synaesthesia is real phenomenon. If

⁶⁴ Cf. *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*.

⁶⁵ A detailed explanation of Lacan's four discourses can be found in Appendix B.

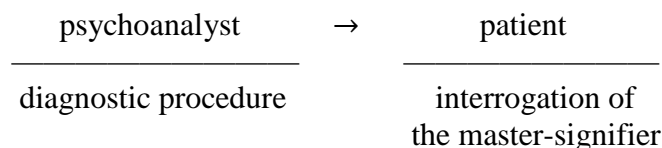
⁶⁶ Cf. "Lacan's Four (or Five) Discourses (Beware, All Ye who Enter Here!)."

we read consistency testing through a Lacanian lens, the test of genuineness is the agent and its condition of possibility is the researcher. Synaesthesia is designated as a surplus and an ‘extra sense.’ The test promises to verify that the subject’s synaesthesia is real, but the synaesthete does not need to do a test to know this. Also, the Synaesthesia Battery pretend to be a quick, user-friendly module, but this test in particular may also considerably frustrate the user.

$$\frac{\text{consistency testing}}{\text{analyst}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{synaesthesia}}{\text{synaesthete}}$$

But doesn’t consistency testing constitute the discourse of the analyst? Although one may think this at first, I would argue that this is not the case. With the discourse of the analyst, the psychoanalyst embodies the desire of the patient (a). The analyst has the power to signify the patient’s pathology; the patient is the instrument of interpretation, and this makes the patient other to the analyst (\$). The psychoanalyst’s power is derived from the diagnosis (S_2). This relationship forces the subject to “cough up” the master-signifier, as Fink States (135). In the psychoanalytic process, the patient begins by discussing the symptom; through psychoanalytic techniques such as free association, the patient will eventually reveal larger problems that litter their unconscious (S_1). However, I contend that the synaesthesia researcher should not be considered the agent since the researcher does not interrogate all aspects of the synaesthete’s unconscious. Also, the product of the relationship is not the interrogation of the master-signifier: consistency testing leads to the synaesthete’s reconfiguration as special via the isolation of the *sinthome*. The discourse of the analyst means to ‘heal’ the subject, and I have established that synaesthesia research and consistency testing neglect to do so. Lastly, synaesthesia

continues to be misunderstood in fiction, culture, and science; the synaesthete is oppressed by discourse, and the agent of this discourse is a system of misperceptions about synaesthesia. In synaesthesia studies and consistency testing, the researcher does give meaning to the symptom, but this signification leads to isolation and silence, not emotional reaffirmation.



Furthermore, the social bond outlined by the discourse of the university is also apparent in *The Girl Who Heard Colors*. In *Girl*, the students are taught to socialize and learn in small groups. The students are an anonymous collective that does everything in unison: they eat together (11), learn together (12), and play together (14). They also act together and speak together as if they are a single unit; when the lunch box falls, for example, “the children stopped what they were doing and looked at her” and “they began to laugh at Jillian” (15-16; Fig. 6). This all suggests that individuality – or at least ‘eccentricity’ – is frowned upon. Jillian is subsequently singled out because she does not think and act the same way as the other children. This leaves her confused and “sad as a cloud” (19; Fig. 7). In Lacan’s terms, this discourse would be represented as follows. The educational policy at the school is the agent (S_2). The teachers follow through with this policy (S_1). Synaesthesia is the other and is deemed to be different; this makes Jillian depressed and thus limits her jouissance (a). The result is that Jillian is powerless and divided; she must accept the signifier thrust upon her because she does not know of any other signifier with which to name herself (\$). This discourse ‘succeeds’ because normative ideology gives the teachers the power to teach the students a strict division

between sameness and difference. The school ideology (social learning) has power over all other variables (the teacher, the enjoyment of the other, and the ontological status of the other). The agent (ideology), as constituted by truth (the teachers), commands the other (abnormal perception); the product of this relationship is the split subject alienated by language (Jillian).

$$\frac{\text{social learning}}{\text{teachers}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{the objectification of synaesthesia}}{\text{the alienated subject}}$$

At Jillian's school, perception is the object that is domesticated. At first, Jillian performs social activities such as eating, leaning, and playing with other students; however, the importance she places on personal experience, exemplified by her denouncement of the yellow sound, signifies that individual perception is other to the group dynamic. Jillian is encouraged to "love school with all her five senses," but she can only acquire this knowledge by engaging with other students and experiencing sensation as a collective task. Her love of sensation also leads her to exclaim her recognition of the yellow sound of the fallen lunchbox; however, at this point, she is unaware that synaesthesia is not recognized in the school's system of sensorial knowledge. This, advertently, also designates synaesthesia as surplus jouissance: synaesthesia becomes the ridiculous object of the other students' zealous laughter and it is also the source of Jillian's alienation. Jillian's 'outburst' "worries" her teacher and her parents; Jillian is sent to a doctor but he can find nothing wrong with her. As a result, the symptom becomes the precedent for Jillian's silence and isolation. Although there is no official clinical diagnosis, the lingering question of Jillian's presumed pathology remains; this leads the group collective to ask: "whatever could be wrong with Jillian?" (Fig. 7).

Once again, the discourse at the school singles out Jillian (S_2). This ideology is reinforced by the master-signifier, which is represented by the few passive authority figures (S_1). The other students mock Jillian with excessive enjoyment; Jillian's jouissance is limited (a). The product is Jillian's divided sense of self and subsequent liminal transition ($\$$). Jillian is cast in a liminal role and must now work to come to terms with her place in the symbolic order.

$$\frac{\text{normative perception}}{\text{authority figures}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{synaesthesia}}{\text{Jillian}}$$

This discourse remains relatively unchanged once the musician arrives and educates the class about synaesthesia (Fig. 10). At first, this new perspective may seem unproblematic since coloured hearing is no longer met with skepticism. Also, Jillian regains equilibrium at the very end of the text: Jillian jumps in triumph as the narrative concludes: "Jillian loved the world again with all her five senses. And her special extra one" (31). It seems as if Jillian is accepted by the class and the musician as 'normal;' however, I would argue that the musician's dogma interpellates Jillian as other. The musician introduces the class to the term "synesthesia" and states that he has synaesthesia himself (28-29). But he also identifies synaesthesia as a "very special extra sense;" this is problematic because synaesthesia can only be considered "special" when it is compared to a presumably lesser, ordinary form of perception. Thus the educational policy at the school still imparts a strong division between perceptual hegemony and synaesthesia. Normative perception remains the focus of the narrative; this ideology is the agent (S_2). The musician's articulation of synaesthesia reflects this bias (S_1). Importantly, the musician objectifies synaesthesia as "special;" synaesthetic specialness implies that

synaesthesia is a desirable, sublime object of perception. But Jillian remains identifiably different and separated from the group collective; she is still seen as a cognitively anomalous other. This is why synaesthesia occupies the position of other and it is also constituted as *petit objet a*: synaesthesia is assumed to be a desirable subject position, though synaesthesia remains a strange neurological 'surplus' (a). As a result, synaesthesia is misinterpreted as a gift; Jillian is the split subject because she is no longer considered to be abnormal, but she is not viewed as entirely normal either (\$). Normative perception interpellates the synaesthete as other, and the result of this discourse is a subject whose identity is skewed by an arbitrary designation of neurological specialness.

III. Unknown Pleasures: Coming of Age with Synaesthesia

The Plague of Algorithms

How – if at all – should we categorize the text with synaesthesia? One may argue that the text with synaesthesia constitutes a specific genre of fiction since the text with synaesthesia, as discussed earlier in this thesis, sometimes follows a loose narrative formula. Once outed as synaesthetic, the synaesthete embarks on a crusade to again be seen as cognitively ‘normal:’ sh/e is seen as a curiosity who feels gifted and/or cursed with a sixth sense. Now, I acknowledge that it may seem as if my summation of the synaesthesia trope here is quite simple. But I argue that characters in texts with synaesthesia generally tend to have variations on the same origin story: with the synaesthesia narrative, there is typically – but by no means always – a revelatory scenario, a period of disbelief and uncertainty, and an acceptance or tolerance of the subject’s condition. There are, however, relatively few instances of synaesthesia in fiction; this suggests that the text with synaesthesia is less an established literary category of fiction than a narrative mode: what we have is a new literary style that is not bound to any one genre.

Throughout my research for this thesis, and nearly a decade of passively searching, I have come across around three dozen works of fiction with synaesthetic characters, though synaesthesia does not feature equally in each work. In some texts, such as *The Girl Who Heard Colors*, synaesthesia is the central focus of the text, and hardly a page goes by without some reference to the mode; this is also the case for *A Mango-Shaped Space* by Wendy Mass (2003), which is discussed later in this thesis. But

in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, for example, synaesthesia plays a relatively small role. In this text, synaesthesia is also not defined outright for the reader. In *Neuromancer*, synaesthesia only features in the fourth part of the text. Case, a hacker and "console cowboy," experiences "a churning synaesthesia" when he connects to a hallucinogenic dataspace called the Matrix, which is accessed by linking the user's consciousness directly to the network interface (213). One should be hesitant to classify the text with synaesthesia as a genre proper simply because, in some cases, the presence of synaesthesia in the text is not integral to the plot. Although I am not against a text's capacity for genre fluidity, it is problematic, in this case, to appropriate a text with synaesthetic themes into a 'synaesthesia genre' simply because those themes exist in some part; to do so would suggest that synaesthetic themes should be considered to be the definitive, all-consuming aspect of either a text or identity itself.

Secondly, since synaesthetic themes and characters can be found in texts from an array of genres – such as Horror, Mystery, and Science Fiction – the consequences of being a synaesthete, as laid out by a given narrative, can vary dramatically from text to text, even if the origin story remains archetypal. For instance, T. Jefferson Parker's *The Fallen*, a crime novel, and Dean Koontz's *Intensity*, a horror novel, are both mass market texts with a synaesthetic protagonist. In *The Fallen*, detective Robbie Brownlaw develops synaesthesia after being thrown out of a window. Robbie sees voices as coloured shapes, but he does not have sound → colour synaesthesia per se; rather, his synaesthesia is closer to clairvoyance: he sees colour only when the speaker becomes emotional, which leads him to consider his condition to be a "primitive lie detector" (6). After his accident, Robbie considers himself to be more intuitive but also unreliable due

to what is assumed to be an intensified and highly subjective form of sensory perception. In *Intensity*, killer Edgler Vess ‘suffers’ from cross-sensory perception; he chooses his victims based on the pleasurable colour of mingled sensory stimuli. Edgler’s “confusion of the senses” serves to not only reinforce his contemptible otherness; synaesthesia in *Intensity* functions as a nightmarish distortion of the real: it is an instrument of horror that serves to enable and provoke the villain but also disable and dehumanize the victim (25). In both mass market texts, synaesthesia is presented to a mass audience as a transgressive form of sensory experience; synaesthesia is also outlined through a revelatory scenario defined by trauma and silence. Robbie develops synaesthesia as the result of an injury, and at first keeps his “condition” a secret from everyone except his wife (5). On the other hand, we learn that Edgler has synaesthesia when Chyna, his most recent victim, secretly watches him eat a spider; this is an act which, like the rest of the synaesthesia-induced violence in the novel, is a solitary, hedonistic experience. Both texts achieve their divergent effects by using synaesthesia to make the content of the genre novel seem more engrossing and less formulaic. Synaesthesia in *The Fallen* works to make the synaesthetic hero more complex and tragic and, as a detective, more intuitive but also fallible. Synaesthesia in *Intensity* makes the villain seem more monstrous; his psychosis may seem abnormal but also engrossing to the mass-market reader.

This makes one wonder how explicitly synaesthesia needs to figure into a narrative in order for it to warrant the attention of synaesthesia studies. For instance, should we consider “The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman to be a representation of synaesthesia because, at one point, the narrator states that the wall-paper possesses “a yellow smell?” (654). Correspondingly, in “The Eye of Man hath not

Heard: Shakespeare, Synaesthesia, and Post-Reformation Phenomenology,” Jennifer Waldon analyses *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* through the dubious lens of “ancient theories of ‘syn-aesthesia,’ or ‘sensing with’ as models for theatrical phenomenology” (403). Waldon begins her essay with the question “Why does he [Shakespeare] mangle this gospel verse synaesthetically, crossing hearing and vision, tasting and touching?;” this is a reference to the eponymous line from *Midsummer*: “the eye of the man hath not heard” (403). However, Shakespeare does not, in fact, “cross” hearing and vision, as Waldon asserts, since the speaker, Bottom, declares that “the eye of man hath *not* heard:” there is no ‘mangling’ of the senses here, but rather a muddled disconnection between the senses by way of grammatical syllepsis. Moreover, the answer to Waldon’s question is not as profound as it first may seem, and it is not only easily resolved, it is essentially self-defeating. The aforementioned line is found in Bottom’s description of his dream, and his delivery is heavy with verbal irony. Bottom states “the eye of the man hath not heard” because he believes his dream is a “vision” that is beyond human understanding and perception; Bottom believes that the content of his dream is so sensational that it could not be appreciated by the human senses (IV.i.190). However, Bottom is unaware that his description of the dream emphasizes his foolish characteristics, and his overuse of sensory analogies makes him appear pompous and nonsensical. This is ironic since, in the dream he speaks of, he is unaware of his foolish appearance and transformation; he zealously bombasts the reader with a slew of sensations, but what we have here is merely a sensorial syntagma that is expressed in an overcomplicated, imprudent manner.

Furthermore, the catalogue of texts with synaesthesia is limited. During the composition of this thesis, I struggled to locate any YA novels with synaesthetic

characters. It is worth mentioning that my literature search methodology relied heavily on rummaging through *Goodreads* for texts with synaesthesia, and I relied on this site for two reasons: first, the pool of scholarly articles on synaesthesia in fiction is relatively small, and second, it is arguable that *Goodreads*, as a heavily trafficked website, has the potential to play a significant role in shaping public understanding of synaesthesia and the reception of any textual representations of synaesthesia. *Goodreads* is a social cataloging site; Lisa Nakamura describes the site as “the largest social networking site ‘for readers’” (3).⁶⁷ With *Goodreads*, Nakamura continues, the user creates “virtual bookshelves” where one may keep track of all the books one has read, wants to read, and is currently reading. Also, the user will be given an array of recommended books based on the books currently on any of h/er virtual shelves; the algorithm allows the user to then effortlessly continue to search for more books that fit their tastes. On *Goodreads*, the user can create or contribute to lists of books that share common themes. Reading and ranking books on this list will provide the user with recommendations for similar books, and this will lead the user on an interminable trail of texts with contingently similar content. Because of this, Nakamura argues, *Goodreads* is founded on “play labor” that turns the reader into a “content producer:” books on *Goodreads* are assigned value based on the labour of the reader-as-worker. The user’s labour, in this case, is the amount of time and effort the reader puts into sorting books into virtual shelves, building their libraries, and rewarding themselves with the “discovery” of new products to consume (7-8).

One such list is the list of “Best Synesthesia Books.” This is a selection of texts with synaesthesia, both fictional and nonfictional, ranked in descending order of ‘quality’ based on user’s scores. This list can introduce the user to a quick selection of texts with

⁶⁷ Cf. “‘Words with Friends’: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*.”

synaesthesia, but it also complicates any solution to the question of synaesthesia-as-genre. With such a list, the user is confronted with a system of “fetishism reification,” to channel Žižek, since the relations between people on *Goodreads* are reified by the relations between things (128).⁶⁸ This can make a critical analysis of the site messy since the critic must “penetrate the reified surface” of the abstract relationship between the user and the online platform. *Goodreads* does not just promote the exchange of virtual books, as may seem evident. The exchange of virtual books seems to guarantee the user’s membership in an online public; therefore, the act of exchange itself is the definitive signifier here, and it denotes the user’s participation in an online social structure. This is what makes *Goodreads* both fascinating and frustrating. With the synaesthesia list, first of all, we have a popular social space where the user can share texts and comment on the positive and negative qualities of a given work of fiction; on the other hand, the nexus of this information is a list of the ‘best’ synaesthesia books, where objects are ranked according to vaguely defined parameters of aesthetic valuation. Interactions between people and the content of each individual text become secondary to the proliferation of goods, which is further complicated by the hyperreality of the *Goodreads* milieu: to channel Žižek once again, the “deluge of pseudo-concrete images” and the system of abstract relationships comes to speak more about a given discursive structure than subjectivity itself (xxiii).⁶⁹ Nakamura has a similar point: “*Goodreads* bookshelves are unlike real bookshelves not because the books are not real, but because they are not really ours” (8). *Goodreads* offers a shrewd catalogue of texts with synaesthesia, but, in a

⁶⁸ Cf. *The Plague of Fantasies*.

⁶⁹ Cf. *The Plague of Fantasies*.

paradox, the site also offers one the most expansive and useful online libraries of texts with synaesthesia.

Most importantly, it seems as if synaesthesia is the defining aspect of each text on its list of ‘Best Synesthesia Books.’ But it needs to be noted that synaesthesia features in each text in dramatically different ways. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate that the growing prevalence of the synaesthesia origin story may be easily mistaken as a precondition for truth. Now, I want to make it clear that not all texts with synaesthesia demonstrate synaesthetic identity in this way, and such a claim to universality would be in contention with my resistance of a hegemonic classification of perception. Instead, I contend that the monomythic synaesthesia origin story can be too easily misinterpreted as the transcendental narrative of synaesthetic growth and development; in effect, to channel Pierre Bourdieu, “the struggle for the monopoly of legitimacy helps to reinforce the legitimacy of which it was waged” (167-8).⁷⁰ Accordingly, this chapter discusses a variety of YA texts with synaesthesia, and argues that the synaesthete in each text desires to be cognitively ‘normal’ and a social agent, and he or she also considers synaesthesia to be a healing power. In the central section of this chapter, “What’s the Focus?: Some Instances of Prestidigitation,” I examine an array of texts where synaesthesia is given a mystical, transcendental quality; I break down my investigation into five subsections, and I generally dedicate each of these subsections to a single text with synaesthesia. Second, in “The Well of Synaesthesia Dialectics” I discuss the current status of synaesthesia studies on fiction, and argue that there is oversaturation of articles on synaesthetic themes in Charles Baudelaire’s “Correspondances” and Arthur Rimbaud’s “Voyelles.” Ultimately, I contend that the silence and disbelief that enshrouds synaesthesia has

⁷⁰ Cf. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*.

becomes the most syndicated and easily consumable representation of the mode. The consortium of synaesthesia origin stories makes it seem as if trauma and otherness are indisputably analogous with synaesthetic development and identity.

What's the Focus?: Some Instances of Prestidigitation

A distinguishing feature of a text with synaesthesia is that the title usually references a synaesthetic colour transfer. With *The Girl Who Heard Colors*, for example, the use of colour in the title makes sense because the title aptly announces the subject of the book. Moreover, with Patricia Lynne Duffy's quasi-biography *Blue Cats and Chartreuse Kittens*, the title refers to the author's own revelatory scenario: at a young age, Duffy presented her father with a drawing of a cat which, he later learned, was coloured blue because Duffy sees the word "cat" as blue (6). Furthermore, *A Mango-Shaped Space* by Wendy Mass and *One+One=Blue* by M.J. Auch both feature a title with a specific synaesthetic colour transfer. In both cases, the title of the work is fitting since the coloured percept refers to the synaesthetic protagonist's seclusion and limited agency.⁷¹ Certainly, not all texts with synaesthetic themes and characters have this feature, but I find that it is prevalent enough to verge on cliché. Also, there are a number of texts where the title of the work features a synaesthetic transfer, though synaesthesia itself does not feature prominently in the work itself; in addition to this, some texts feature a character with synaesthesia, though their character is not significantly

⁷¹ Among other texts discussed in this thesis, the coloured title cliché is used by *The Black Book of Colors* by Menena Cottin and Rosana Faría, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue* by Richard E. Cytowic and David M. Eagleman, *Born on a Blue Day* by Daniel Tammet, *Blue like Friday* by Siobhán Parkinson, and *Painting Ruby Tuesday* by Jane Yardley. Moreover, *Intensity* flirts with this cliché since the title refers to the "intensity" of Edgler's senses. Other texts with synaesthesia that use this cliché include *Mondays are Red* by Nicola Morgan, *The Sound of Blue* by Holly Paine, *The Frog who Croaked Blue: Synaesthesia and the Mixing of the Senses* by Jamie Ward, and *Ultraviolet* and *Quicksilver* by R.J. Anderson.

developed. In all of these cases, synaesthesia seems to be used more as a quick, quirky means of identification than an actual attempt to explore the mode.

In this five-part section, I investigate a number of texts with synaesthesia where synaesthesia functions mostly as a plot device. I explore a variety of texts that feature synaesthetic characters but do not attempt to carefully explore synaesthetic identity. On the surface, it seems as if synaesthesia is the focus of each text, though, in fact, synaesthesia functions more as a narrative gimmick and a quirk that merely keeps the reader's attention. The presence of synaesthesia in these texts is problematic because synaesthesia becomes the absolute means of identification for either the synaesthetic character, the text itself, or both, even though the role of synaesthesia in the given character's life is not discussed. It seems as if, in each case, synaesthesia is present in the text only to increase the text's value as a product, though synaesthesia itself is developed in no great detail.

1. Phantasm

Some texts introduce synaesthesia to the reader, and then the mode disappears altogether from the narrative. This is the case in the YA coming-of-age novels *Blue like Friday* by Siobhán Parkinson, *Octavia Boone's Big Questions about Life, the Universe, and Everything* by Rebecca Rupp, and *Out of My Mind* by Sharon M. Draper. Arguably, in all of these texts, synaesthesia is an eccentric element that is used to emphasize the protagonist's outsider status. But the presence of synaesthesia in these novels, while certainly not 'pointless' in its scarcity, glosses over the complexities of synaesthesia and its troubled history of cultural and scientific misunderstanding. In each text discussed in

this subsection, synaesthesia plays a pivotal role in a young character's psychosocial development, though we never learn exactly why synaesthesia is so essential to the subject's identity.

Friday is one such text that uses synaesthetic colour transfer in the title. In *Friday*, one specific synaesthetic transfer appears in a few scenes, though the term itself is never mentioned in the actual story at all. In *Friday*, the title of the book refers to Hal's conviction that Friday is the colour blue and tastes like lemon sherbet; this description comes at the very beginning of the text, when Hal wants to make a kite that is "blue like Friday" (2). Arguably, Hal's perception of Friday – if it was even intended to be synaesthesia – could be simply read as children's game. One could interpret Hal's vision of Friday as a childish performance or quip; this would make sense thematically since much of *Friday* focuses on a prank that Hal and Olivia devise to dupe Hal's mother into breaking up with her boyfriend. The *Goodreads* review goes so far to state that Hal "suffers from a neurological condition called synesthesia that causes him to associate things with colors," but one has to wonder how synaesthetic transfer could come to define the text as a whole. Also, the copyright page to the original UK edition of *Friday* makes no mention of synaesthesia; however, the copyright page to the American edition of *Friday* states that the novel does indeed feature synaesthesia. We should not state with absolute certainty that Hal's perception of Friday is meant to be synaesthesia since synaesthesia is not named or defined anywhere in the original book.⁷²

Moreover, the colour and taste of Friday are the only 'synaesthetic' percepts to appear in the book at all. These percepts only appear in the novel the few times that Hal

⁷² I have been unable to locate any source that has Parkinson either confirm or deny that Hal is meant to have synaesthesia, though Parkinson's website links *Friday* directly to the *Macmillan* review.

describes the colour of the kite, and also when Olivia mulls over Hal's eccentricities: "how would I know what tastes and what doesn't in Hal's weird world?" (103). If we removed all the references to synaesthesia in *Friday*, the narrative would remain unchanged. Olivia lectures Hal about his odd choice in kite colour because the kite may become indistinguishable from the blue sky when in flight. The novel's opening line even has Olivia ponder the following question: "the thing is, blue is not really a great color for a kite, is it?" (1). If Hal were to not clarify that the kite is blue like Friday, it is arguable that Olivia would still consider Hal just as weird. Similarly, if Hal were to liken the colour 'blue' to anything else, the story would remain the same. For instance, if Hal were to affirm that the kite was 'blue like heaven,' or, more abstractly, 'blue like a smile,' the plot would be identical, and Hal's character would remain unchanged. Synaesthesia in *Friday* does not have to be synaesthesia in order for Hal to be Hal.

Synaesthesia in *Friday* can be considered to be a MacGuffin; this is a plot device famously employed by Alfred Hitchcock. In *Truffaut/Hitchcock*, François Truffaut's book-length interview with Hitchcock, Hitchcock gives the following allegorical definition of the MacGuffin:

You may be wondering where the term originated. It may be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?"

And the other answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin."

The first one asks, "What's a MacGuffin?"

"Well," the other man says, "it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands."

The first man says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,” and the other one answers, “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!” So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all. (134)

In this example, the lion catching device could be anything: a gun, a magic ring, or synaesthesia. It does not matter what the object is, as long it helps move the plot along. The MacGuffin is an object in the story that is supposed to be of great value, but ultimately it could be any object whatsoever. Todd McGowan describes the MacGuffin further: “the MacGuffin is an object that embodies a wealth of apparently significant content but ultimately is important insofar as it moves the narrative along” (513).⁷³ It is for this reason that McGowan describes the MacGuffin as an “empty object:” the MacGuffin is, like Lacan’s *petit objet a*, the root cause of one’s desire, and it does not matter what this desire may be (526). In Hitchcock’s allegory, one could also be searching for anything in the Scottish Highlands – it really does not matter what – but the seemingly impossible task of catching lions seems possible when one uses an empty object that could signify anything; as McGowan continues, “the emptiness of the MacGuffin as an object permits spectators to locate their satisfaction in the striving that it unleashes rather than identifying satisfaction with the discovering of its secret” (514). In *Friday*, Hal’s weirdness is never explained in detail; we only know that Hal is “weird” because Olivia continually reminds the reader of this fact; for instance, Olivia characterizes Hal’s inception of the prank as follows: “Hal, you are seriously deranged. I mean, I always knew you were weird, but this is positively *Gothic!*” (51). In *Friday*, synaesthesia is an empty object that allows the reader to envision the scale of Hal’s

⁷³ Cf. “Hitchcock’s Ethics of Suspense: Psychoanalysis and the Devaluation of the Object.”

weirdness however they want, though Hal's synaesthesia does not have to be synaesthesia for this to occur.

Similarly, the titular character in *Octavia* has synaesthesia, but the mode is not discussed in any significant detail past Octavia's introduction. One of the notable instances of synaesthesia appears at the beginning of the second chapter; this chapter abruptly begins with this statement: "I like *O* words like *Outstanding* because my brain is cross-wired. I am synesthetic" (9). Throughout the story, Octavia ends each chapter with a list of her favourite 'O' words. The term synaesthesia itself is not mentioned again past the character's introduction; the ongoing list of 'O' words is the only thing that reminds us that Octavia is synaesthetic, and this list generally does not tell us much about synaesthesia itself. For example, the first chapter ends as follows: "here is my word for Andrew: Outstanding" (8). The 'O' word list at the end of each chapter function like clipped chapter summaries; but if you remove the synaesthetic element, the structure and effect of each 'O' word list would remain unchanged. Moreover, some detailed instances of synaesthesia do occur haphazardly as the novel progresses. For instance, at one point, Octavia states: "September is such a beautiful blue-and-gold sort of word" (37). But she then casually proceeds with her narration, and she does not allude to synaesthesia again for some time. The role of synaesthesia in Octavia's life is left unexamined; while this may make synaesthesia seem more ordinary, as synaesthesia is not singled out and differentiated from other forms of thinking and living, we do not learn anything about what it is like to live with synaesthesia.

Furthermore, in *Mind*, Melody spends the entirety of the narrative trying to find acceptance among her peers. Melody is unable to speak and is bound to a wheelchair due

to cerebral palsy; most characters in the novel seem to think that she is “retarded” and incapable of intelligent thought (38). She also has synaesthesia, though there are hardly any references to the mode past the opening chapters. In the beginning, Melody makes numerous references to various synaesthetic transfers such as the following: “From the time I was really little – maybe just a few months old – words were sweet, liquid gifts, and I drank them like lemonade. I could also taste them” (2).⁷⁴ Although Melody cannot speak, she experiences language in another perceptive form that does not directly highlight her silence. Most of *Mind* concerns Melody’s performance in a school trivia competition. Each class at her school is tested, and the best students are sent to compete as a group against other schools at the national level. Melody enters her answers using a computer, and she surprises her peers when she performs better than anyone else in her class. Notably, at the national competition, one of the trivia questions concerns synaesthesia: the students are asked to identify “the condition in which a person may be able to hear colors or visualize flavors when music is heard” (220). Melody “grins” when she answers the multiple choice question; however, she is disappointed when the rest of her group chooses the same, correct answer (220). In this episode, it is implied that Melody’s answer will verify the validity of her synaesthetic experience: Melody grins

⁷⁴ Here, it seems at first that Melody is speaking metaphorically. But I would argue that this simile is indeed supposed to represent idiopathic synaesthesia. First, in the trivia competition, Melody is interpellated as synaesthetic by the speaker’s question about synaesthesia. Melody is so ecstatic that synaesthesia appears in the game at all that she perceives the question as if it is directed specifically towards her: “not only was it [synaesthesia] one of Mrs. V.’s vocabulary words, it was me!” (220). Second, at a different point, Melody asserts: “I can almost hear colors and smell images when music is played” (5). But later on, Mrs. V. asks Melody to name a piece of music by identifying the composer from an array of flashcards; Melody points to the card, and then she thinks to herself: “Mozart. I’d point to the correct card from the choices she’d set in front of me. Then I’d point to the color blue on the board. . . . I wanted her to understand that music was also colorful when I heard it” (48). It seems as if Draper is not quite sure how to describe synaesthesia, and so she sometimes resorts to simile in order to make synaesthetic imagery unobtrusive and clear.

because she knows from personal experience that the answer is correct. But when most of the other students respond correctly, the significance of Melody's answer seems to be lost. If synaesthesia is meant to be a side effect of Melody's 'disability,' then her inability to brandish her knowledge of synaesthesia also symbolizes her lack of a voice.

In all three books, the synaesthete is subordinated by a different cognitive 'aberration.' Each of these three texts intends to show that one's identity is shaped by a variety of factors, and though this can make the subject seem divergent, each text intends to demonstrate that the subject is 'normal.' Arguably, identity politics is meant to be the thematic focus in each text; to channel Mary Bernstein's definition of identity politics, in each case we find "competing theoretical ways to understand the relationship between experience, culture, identity, politics, and power" (48).⁷⁵ For instance, the bulk of *Friday* focuses on the prank that Hal and Olivia devise to get his mother to break up with her boyfriend. Although the plan fails, Olivia develops a new appreciation for Hal's 'weirdness.' Next, in *Octavia*, Octavia has many existential opinions that conflict with the religious teachings of her school; she eventually comes to realize that not all of her questions about life and God can be answered but this does not necessarily mean that she needs to relinquish her individuality and conform to the teachings of others. Finally, the central focus of *Mind* is Melody's inability to speak, which leads most of her peers and teachers to believe she is incapable of rational thought. Melody spends much of the narrative competing in a trivia competition at school to prove that she is intelligent.

Thus each of these texts achieves its divergent effects by setting out to make the reader immediately aware that the subject of the text is 'not like them.' These texts all begin with an exposition of an outlier's existential dilemma, and synaesthesia is included

⁷⁵ Cf. "Identity Politics."

in each description: Hal's synaesthetic kite seems to justify Olivia's account of his weirdness, Octavia's synaesthetic 'O' words each function as a microcosm for numerous obstacles in her life, and Melody's synaesthetic words add an element of necessity to her desire to speak. In all three novels, identity politics is meant to be the apex of the reader's sympathy, but I argue that synaesthesia is added to the dejected subject's set of aberrant character traits in order to further reinforce that character's lowly status. Here, synaesthesia is largely a phantasmal object: synaesthesia disappears from the story once the protagonist's need for sympathy is established. In any one of these cases, synaesthesia does not have to be synaesthesia for the ideological effect of the text to be accomplished. Arguably, with each book, we will still have an economization of identity politics that means to make the subject's suffering the selling point of the piece. The reader is left with a product that pretends to teach the reader about identity politics, but in actuality, reinforces identity economy.

2. Alchemist

I now turn to a text that is based on the life of an actual synaesthete. Daniel Tammet's autobiography *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant* also follows the coloured title truism, but again, synaesthesia is not the central focus of the work. Tammet is considered to be an autistic savant, and he is also somewhat of a celebrity: he has appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman* to discuss, among other things, his ability to recite the first 22,500 digits of Pi from memory.⁷⁶ Tammet also has various types of synaesthesia: he sees numbers as shapes,

⁷⁶ Cf. "Episode 12.134."

colours, textures, and motions (1-2).⁷⁷ The title of the book is a reference to the colour of the day he was born, but the title also draws attention to Tammet's savantism: if Tammet is presented with just the person's age and birthday, he can quickly and accurately recall the day of the week that a given person was born.⁷⁸ In this case, the title of the book denotes the subject's synaesthesia and savantism, though only the latter can be considered to be a decisive focus of the text.

But with Tammet's description of synaesthesia, we are presented with a quasi-scientific first-person perspective of a neurological "condition," as he describes the mode (163). In one instance, he states that he found it hard to do algebra in school because of his synaesthesia, though his account of this event seems reserved and impassive: "I found it very difficult to use equations that substituted numbers – to which I had a synesthetic and emotional response – for letters, to which I had none" (108). Here, Tammet tells the reader that his synaesthesia will invoke an emotional response, but he does not show the reader how he felt or what emotions were invoked by his synaesthesia. The synaesthesia title suggests that synaesthesia is a primary aspect of Tammet's being, but the title is also ironic since synaesthesia in *Born* is presented in a detached, depersonalized manner. The imagery of childbirth in the title suggests that Tammet's account of synaesthesia is an intense and emotional experience, though *Born* glosses over the material existence of the synaesthete in favour of a demographic profile of a patient.

Tammet describes synaesthesia in terms of causation, as if he is his own case study in a diagnostic procedure. For example, Tammet gives the reader a dry, depersonalized description about how he believes he can manipulate his coloured

⁷⁷ Cf. *Born on a Blue Day*.

⁷⁸ Cf. "Episode 12.134."

percepts: “I can even make the color of a word change by mentally adding initial letters to run the word into another: *at* is a red word, but add the letter *H* to get *hat* and it becomes a white word” (10). Tammet often reminisces about ‘what it was like’ to be misunderstood and alone because his autism was viewed as different; but we do not get an emotional and deeply personal account of synaesthesia: Tammet describes the experience with a causal, calculative delivery, as if he is solving a maths problem. Moreover, Tammet describes synaesthesia in such a way that it seems as if he can manipulate his percepts at will; to quote Dann’s original thesis from *Bright*, it is as if synaesthesia here is “a unique, desirable ‘higher’ state, enjoyed only by exceptional individuals” (viii). When Tammet states that he can change the colour of a word by synchronically altering the lexeme, he gives the impression that synaesthesia is a magical linguistic device that he can control. Tammet’s description of grapheme → colour synaesthesia gives the impression that Tammet has the power to alchemize words, as if he has access to a sublime level of consciousness.⁷⁹

3. Immortal

But *Born* is not the only text that presents synaesthesia as a form of magic. In *The Name of this Book is Secret* by Pseudonymous Bosch, magician and synaesthete Pietro Bergamo invents a device called “the symphony of smells;” this is a box that contains scented vials which allow the subject to hear music. The villains of the novel, Mr. Mauvais and Dr. L, attempt to secure the symphony of smells because they believe that

⁷⁹ Cytowic and Eagleman state that it is common for the colour of the first letter to “dominate” the rest of the word (67). Also, in *Mango*, synaesthete Mia will see a whole word as a specific colour based on the colour of the first letter: “‘What color is the word *doctor*?’ he [Dr. Randolph] asks. I answer without hesitation. ‘It’s mostly hot pinkish purple because that’s the color of the d, but the colors of the other letters add a gold tinge to it’” (70).

synaesthesia grants the subject everlasting life (287). In *Secret*, Bosch continuously breaks the fourth wall of the text and he also withholds important information about the plot. On the title page of the book, the ‘original’ title of the book is crossed out and replaced with the word “secret;” it is as if Bosch means to say that the identity of the book constitutes a central absence that needs to be solved (Fig. 12). Similarly, the ‘first’ chapter of the book is crossed out because Bosch wants to bar the reader from learning “all the things you usually learn at the beginning of the book” (5). Bosch also continuously makes his presence known throughout the book; sometimes, there will be a footnote where Bosch interjects his own opinion of what a character should do in a given situation. Another notable instance is Bosch’s omission of a thirteenth chapter, which he justifies as follows: “of course, I don’t really believe that the number thirteen is bad luck – but under the circumstances, why not play it safe?” (132; Fig. 13). *Secret* not only represents synaesthesia as a magical device; the text attempts to persuade the reader that the author has a godlike authority over the text. Because of this, the young reader is more likely to be convinced that the more fantastical elements of the text are ‘truthful’ representations of ‘real’ life.

The tone and description of synaesthesia in *Secret* is authored in the same vein as *Born*, even though the former is a work of fiction and the latter is an autobiography. In both cases, the author assumes control over the reader’s interpretation of the subject matter. Both Bosch and Tammet attempt to persuade the reader to accept the opinion of the author as truth. The climax to *Secret* involves the reveal that synaesthesia is the gateway everlasting life, and up until then, synaesthesia is largely a MacGuffin here as well: synaesthesia is a riddle that serves no real purpose to the plot other than to move the

protagonists from place to place. Similarly, the omnipresence of the author in *Secret* may have a panoptic effect over the young reader. *Secret* achieves its devastating effect over the reader's capacity to fearlessly interpret the text since the author wants to be present in the text at all times, but due to his anonymity, he is also immaterial and absent; as with Foucault's characterization of the panopticon, Bosch's pseudo-presence is "at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency" (249).⁸⁰ In *Secret*, when the reader is prompted to provide a textual analysis, h/er attempt to do so is trumped by mockery and scorn. Bosch means to present us with an illusion: we are meant to be convinced that Bosch's directives emanate directly from Bosch himself via a copia of metafictional interjections.

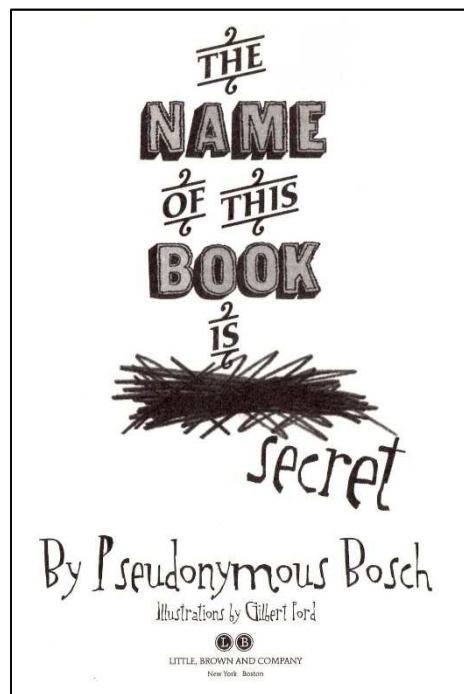


Fig. 12: Omitted Title. *The Name of this Book is Secret*. Pseudonymous Bosch. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. Title Page.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

The author's voice, like the omitted title and first chapter, are put under erasure, in the Derridean sense of the term (Fig. 12). The signifier is crossed out with a "mark of contortion" that informs the reader that the signifier can never possess full presence of the thing it means to re-present; as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in her translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*, "since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out[;] since it is necessary, it remains legible" (xiv). Bosch's authorial intent is established as the transcendental signifier of the text, and Bosch mocks the reader by suggesting that Bosch himself has the power to put his own text under erasure for the reader. The role of the reader is limited because the reader is controlled by the plethora of textual games the author plays; the rules and outcome of such games are here decided by the author. According to Michael Warner, the author of a text will be most successful in communicating an opinion to a mass audience via print if sh/e remains anonymous. This is because anonymous authorship suggests that the writer's opinions are open to public speculation, yet they are also impermeable to personal scrutiny. It seems as if Bosch intends his book to be a "prosthetic person," to channel Warner: Bosch means to give the illusion that his voice emanates directly from the page (164).⁸¹ When we read a document printed by an anonymous author, Warner argues, we seem to be reading an individual expression of identity. We are left with a quasi-anthropomorphic public document that refuses to name a human referent.

Bosch also seems to establish his own work as a physical re-presentation and embodiment of his voice, as if the author can interact directly with the reader. Warner argues that the anonymous author is both absent and present since sh/e exists as the imagination of h'self: the anonymous author is "a disembodied public subject that he can

⁸¹ Cf. *Publics and Counterpublics*.

imagine as parallel to his private person” (164). The novel could be mistaken as a truthful account of the mode since the author’s voice seems to be metaphysically represented on the page; when held under the guise of the pseudonym, the author also seems impervious to criticism. But the name “Pseudonymous Bosch” suggests that the author, under the mark of the pseudonym, is distant from the text, though the author, in this case, also has “pseudo-anonymity,” as his eponym puns. The simultaneous absence and presence of the author figure works to confuse the reader; by extension, any ‘truth’ in a material existence of synaesthesia becomes muddled.

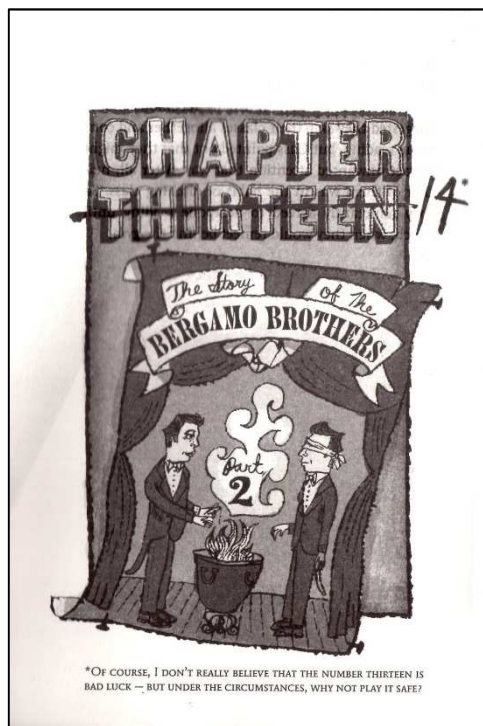


Fig. 13: Omitted Chapter. *The Name of this Book is Secret.* Pseudonymous Bosch. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. Page 132.

4. Prophet

Can a text with synaesthesia be supernatural but also attempt to be authentic?

Strange things occur throughout *Painting Ruby Tuesday* by Jane Yardley, and this novel

attempts to blend these two themes. *Ruby* is a coming-of-age story saturated in synaesthetic imagery; the text has several synaesthetic characters, while Yardley herself is a synaesthete. *Ruby* focuses on Annie, a synaesthetic vocal coach; for the majority of novel, Annie recalls her childhood friendship with an older synaesthete, Mrs. Jenny Clitheroe. The novel seems to address several pertinent issues that surround synaesthetic identity, and we also get an account of what it may like to be a synaesthete who is afraid to discuss the experience; for example, present day Annie states: “My idiosyncrasies are something else not to draw attention to . . . Alan [her husband] knows a neurologist who does research into this condition. It’s a real danger Alan will sell me to him” (63). Here, we see the synaesthete’s fear of discussing the mode, and we are also privy to Annie’s overriding suspicion of medical discourse. These themes pervade the first half of the novel; this is the ‘realistic’ part of the narrative where Yardley seems intent on writing synaesthesia as it actually exists.

The volume of synaesthetic imagery in *Ruby* far outweighs any of the novels I have addressed up until this point. At first, it seems as if *Ruby* intends to teach the reader about synaesthesia since *Ruby* is packaged as a book explicitly about synaesthetic perception; according to Phil Whitaker, *Ruby* was marketed as follows: “the press release that accompanies *Painting Ruby Tuesday* is less a description of the book than a medical briefing.”⁸² Moreover, the text sometimes delves into complex and precise descriptions of synaesthetic imagery; in the following description, Annie describes her perception of Chuck Berry’s song “Roll over Beethoven:”

⁸² Cf. “Colour Symphony: Phil Whitaker reads Jane Yardley’s murder story with a neurological twist, *Painting Ruby Tuesday*.”

In my own mind, or whatever organ I heard colours with, this was a great, luminous mint-green piece of music. Though green wasn't one of the painter's colours, he and I seemed to agree that the music was urban . . . my luminescent green was electrified light; it was traffic-light green. (90-91)

But the descriptions of synaesthesia in this novel are not always consistent. For example, we get the following description of synaesthesia, which borders on synaesthetic metaphor: "Fear was something yellow and clotted on the edge of my vision. Fear was the colour of sick" (84). This one passage in particular is significant because, on the previous page, Annie is completely surprised by a bit of loud music that was turned on out of nowhere. Annie goes on to talk about how much the music shocked her, but she does not make any synaesthetic connection to the music whatsoever, even though that would have made sense in that context. Also, it is odd that Annie regularly talks about her job as a vocal coach, but she seldom makes a connection between the music she hears on a daily basis and her synaesthesia. Again, this would have made sense: this is significant because her career is a staple of her identity and a prominent element in her life.

For the most part, however, *Ruby* does offer a detailed examination of the life of the synaesthete. Throughout *Ruby*, Annie recalls her childhood friendship with an older synaesthete, Jenny Clitheroe; these remembered events occur during the early 1960s and culminate in the middle of the decade when Jenny is murdered. Annie and Jenny bond over their joined sensations, and they also confide in each other: they both feel isolated because they cannot talk about the mode with anyone else. But towards the end of the novel, the tone abruptly changes: Annie's synaesthesia suddenly becomes a device that

allows her to predict a single future event: Annie predicts the composition of the song “Ruby Tuesday” by *The Rolling Stones*. Annie describes her original precognition of this song as follows:

Somewhere in the back of my mind was half-imagined music – not a hymn, but rock ‘n’ roll, its waves of sound pumping in blood-red breakers . . . born out of my painting. As I chased after it, I realized that Mrs. Clitheroe [Jenny] had been both born and died on a Tuesday, a day that was her favourite colour. The song was beginning to glimmer, and it was about the colour of Tuesday; strangely enough it was also a song about goodbye . . . I sang “Ruby Tuesday” to my picture of Mrs. Clitheroe. (228-229)

Synaesthesia, of course, does not allow the subject to predict the future. However, if we are to read this episode symbolically, we may find an allegory for several aspects of synaesthetic identity. Jenny’s murder haunts Annie for the rest of her life, and Annie later admits that she fears telling anybody about her synaesthetic prediction. Following Jenny’s death, Annie has nobody left with whom she can discuss her synaesthesia. Additionally, the new supernatural dimension of Annie’s synaesthesia leads to her conceal her prediction out of fear of disbelief. Annie entertains the idea that she has subconsciously altered her memories in order to cope with the death of her friend: “You were still stuck with my ‘Ruby Tuesday,’ a case of precognition that couldn’t be explained rationally. Except as memory playing false, I suppose” (351). One may forgive the supernatural dimension of Annie’s synaesthesia if we read her prediction of “Ruby Tuesday” as a symbolization for the trauma, isolation, and fear of derision that may come to encapsulate synaesthetic experience.

However, in the denouement, the novel seems to delve into self-parody: when Alan and Annie move to New York City at the novel's close, they board a plane named "Ruby Tuesday." Granted, Annie's precognition of the song seems to allow Annie and Jenny's friendship to transcend death, but the "Ruby Tuesday" airplane is an obvious conceit that may skew the intended significance of the signifier "Ruby Tuesday." The name of the airplane, as a mere signifier, may dampen the intended sentimentality of the intensely personal connection that the song "Ruby Tuesday" means to infer. Also, if Annie's prediction is meant to be an act of postdiction or psychological displacement, then Annie seems to be perpetually relegated by the silence that seems to typify synaesthetic identity. In "Synesthesia in Literature," Patricia Lynne Duffy asserts that synaesthesia in *Ruby* is "a special way of seeing/thinking that may offer advantages – but the perception is not viewed as 'mystical' or 'super-human'" (664). I disagree with this misreading of the text: in *Ruby*, we are privy to a sometimes rich and complex portrayal of the synaesthete, but the text's attempt to represent a 'genuine' portrait of the synaesthete's psyche is undermined by the text's many supernatural interjections. *Ruby* may attempt to offer an honest portrayal of synesthesia, but by mingling the narrative with elements of the supernatural, we are affronted with a confusing account of the mode that reinforces the assumption that synaesthesia is an extrasensory form of psychosis.

5. Clairvoyant

Lastly, one of the more exaggerated fictional instances of synaesthesia can be found in Alan Moore, Gene Ha, and Zander Cannon's graphic novel collection *Top Ten Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*. *Top Ten* is situated in Neopolis, a fictional city where everybody is a

superhero, complete with superpowers and costumes; the graphic novels focus on the exploits of Neopolis's law enforcement, the eponymous "Top Ten" police syndicate. The novels are comprised of twelve loosely connected episodes; the only ongoing subplot involves the murder of drug dealer Stefan Graczik and the search for the customer who killed him. The detective who is instrumental in finding his killer is Wanda Jackson; Wanda's 'superpower,' so to speak, is synaesthesia. Ultimately, Wanda solves the case when she smells the same piece of music on the police commissioner that is present at Graczik's crime scene; the smell turns out to be the police commissioner's perfume (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: The Beethoven Smell. *Top Ten*. Alan Moore, Gene Ha, and Zander Cannon. La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics, 2001. Issue 10, Page 12.

But the representation of Wanda's 'synaesthesia' is problematic since it appears to be the definitive aspect of her character, despite the fact that synaesthesia is not explained for the reader in any way. Wanda's so-called powers are an easy way to identifier her, but we are otherwise given little information about her. Wanda, in fact, is rarely referred

to by name: she is usually identified as simply “Synaesthesia.” Wanda’s depersonalization reinforces the arbitrary notion that synaesthesia is a higher, ‘superhuman’ state of cognition. The synaesthete is again not represented as a human being: she is represented as a superhuman figure defined exclusively by the condition. Although every character in *Top Ten* is a superhero, and every superhero here seems to be considered metaphysically equal, Wanda is the only character whose superpower is considered to be an unbelievable trait; synaesthesia is a source of curiosity that is sometimes perceived as a “problem,” as Wanda’s co-worker Alexei Glushko describes the mode (Fig. 15). In this instance, both Wanda’s voice and her being are put under erasure; the encroaching black ink blots out her face and, like the Derridean practice of *sous-rature*, the ink “deletes and leaves legible at the same time” (xxxii).⁸³ Wanda’s gestures suggest that she is presently ready to speak and act, but she is absent from the discussion. She gazes straight ahead as if immobilized, but she is also slack-jawed and cast in shadow. It seems as if she is in the process of being inked out of the frame.



Fig. 15: Problem. *Top Ten*. Alan Moore, Gene Ha, and Zander Cannon. La Jolla, CA: America’s Best Comics, 2001. Issue 4, Page 14.

⁸³ Cf. *Of Grammatology*.

Synaesthesia in *Top Ten* is deemed to be an unreliable, hallucinogenic, and intoxicating disorder for the subject. Wanda becomes obsessed with the Graczik murder case because she is intrigued by the smell of the crime scene which, she says, causes her to hear music by Beethoven, though she never specifies a particular musical piece.⁸⁴ Wanda alludes to the piece in almost every scene in which she appears, even if the conversation has nothing to do with the case itself (Fig. 16). The Beethoven piece connects all *Top Ten* episodes together into a truly continuous narrative by reminding the reader of the ongoing Graczik subplot. However, it should be noted that this is hardly how synaesthesia functions: a synaesthete would never be able to smell a specific piece of music. Instead, a synaesthete who smells sound would describe the sensation in more “elementary” terms, as Cytowic and Eagleman describe the experience: “sensations have qualities like warm-cool, jagged-smooth, bright-dark . . . rather than pictorial or highly elaborate” (51).⁸⁵ Wanda’s synaesthesia is an overly dramatized account of the mode that uses Beethoven, a real person, to draw the reader into the narrative and remind the reader of the novels’ continuity. Here we have a Baudrillardian simulation that pretends to be real but is not grounded in reality whatsoever. *Top Ten* fails to contextualize synaesthesia for the reader and, to quote Baudrillard, “the sovereign difference” between reality and fiction is here replaced by a representational imaginary (1).⁸⁶ Synaesthesia in *Top Ten* functions as a ruse for enlightenment and a “charm” of abstraction since synaesthesia seems to grant the reader better access to the text’s themes

⁸⁴ The composition in question seems to be the fourth movement of *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125* (“Ode to Joy”) since the commissioner states that her perfume is called “Joy” (issue 10, page 12).

⁸⁵ Cf. *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Simulacra and Simulation*.



Fig. 16: *Non Sequitur Top Ten*. Alan Moore, Gene Ha, and Zander Cannon. La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics, 2001. Issue 3, Page 8.

But this embellishment is significant not just because Wanda's synaesthesia is not, in fact, synaesthesia at all. Wanda spends the majority of the text reminding the reader of the plot instead of talking about who she is or what it is like to have synaesthesia. Also, the text never explains exactly why Wanda finds this particular scent so intriguing, even though she brings it up at tandem. I understand that the Beethoven smell seems imperative to the plot since it is eventually used to solve the case; however, from a purely narrative perspective, it is unbelievable that Wanda would only deem a single sensation from the crime scene to be of the utmost importance if she is, as she suggests, bombarded with sensory experience: "It's hard with the crowd kicking up all that color... uh... all that noise. You know." (Fig. 17). The original significance of the Beethoven piece is never identified; similarly, we never find out exactly which composition it is. The Beethoven piece is effectively a leitmotif which, in Adorno's sense of the term, is a reoccurring piece of music that "favors repetition over

development” and, in effect, “denies the possibility for change” (166).⁸⁷ Wanda, like the Beethoven piece, remains undeveloped and devoid of any actual identity. It is ironic that Wanda’s sole purpose in the text is to remind the reader of a corpse since Wanda is more of a caricature than a fully fleshed-out, realized character. Wanda becomes the signifier for Graczik’s body, whilst synaesthesia comes to signify an object that is immaterial and antithetical to the soma.



Fig. 17: Bombarded with Sensory Experience. *Top Ten*. Alan Moore, Gene Ha, and Zander Cannon. La Jolla, CA: America’s Best Comics, 2001. Issue 1, Page 13.

When we are introduced to Wanda at the Graczik murder scene, Wanda is kneeling on the ground: the lines and shape of her body are entwined with Graczik’s corpse, and the colour of her skin and clothes are almost indiscernible from her surroundings (Fig. 17). Here, Wanda is drawn in an “iconic” sense, to quote Scott McCloud, since the drawing technique here boasts a “de-emphasi[s on] the appearance of

⁸⁷ Cf. Adorno’s *Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner*.

the physical world in favour of the idea of form” (41).⁸⁸ McCloud argues that the reader is more likely to identify with the cartoon in its most abstracted form, especially if this cartoon resembles a face or even an eye: this “icon” promotes “universal identification [with the] simplicity [of an abstract drawing’s] childlike features” (36). However, in this scene, Wanda is not presented as a whole person: she is figuratively decapitated by the different panels, which symbolizes her lack of both a voice and a complete character. She is also a parody of the Cartesian subject: the mind-body ‘split’ here suggests not a transcendental, free-thinking being, but a subject who is unable to think critically outside of her comfort zone. Since the joined sensations that emblemize Wanda’s character are not ‘actually’ synaesthesia, it is grotesquely fitting that, when we first meet Wanda, her head and body are not joined together.

Thus when synaesthesia is not the focus of the text, it is systemically represented as an impossible illusion that means to compel or mesmerize the audience. The core of the presentation is founded on a lack of context and explanation: there is a division between both author and audience but also the normal and the paranormal subject. Synaesthesia is sometimes identified as a magic trick, a feat of whimsy, or a celestial instrument of knowledge and power. Furthermore, when synaesthesia is not the focus of the text, it generally constitutes a central absence: it is an erasure that still shows the trace of being erased: “the mark of the absence of a presence, an already absent present, of the lack at origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (xvii).⁸⁹ In *Top Ten*, as in the other texts discussed in this section, synaesthesia is not only out of focus, it is only partially recognizable. Synaesthesia in each of these texts is an act of prestidigitation:

⁸⁸ Cf. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Of Grammatology*

synaesthesia is presented as a prop, and we are set up to be mystified and entertained. But we are witnesses of an illusion and we are barred from understanding the real mechanics that allow the show to proceed.

The Well of Synaesthesia Dialectics

The texts with synaesthesia in this chapter are not commonly discussed in synaesthesia studies.⁹⁰ If one is to sift through the selection of available articles on synaesthesia in fiction, the critic will soon be overwhelmed with the number of articles on Arthur Rimbaud's "Voyelles" and/or Charles Baudelaire's "Correspondances." There exists a plethora of literary and scientific criticism on the synaesthetic themes in these two 19th century symbolist poems. According to Dann, the French Symbolist poets were fascinated with synaesthesia; some scientists in Fin de siècle France dismissed synaesthesia as a disease, but the Symbolist poets considered the mode to be an enlightened form of cognition: "the ability to 'see sounds' was esteemed as a special, 'higher' form of human vision" (17).⁹¹ The Symbolists were greatly interested in dream imagery, and they were engrossed with synaesthetic themes because the mode seems to have "dreamlike" qualities (18). Since 19th century science lacked a suitable schema for analysing synaesthesia, public perception of synaesthesia has since been shaped by the Symbolists' representation of the mode: "the association of synaesthesia with artistic perception has obscured the origins of scientific and extrascientific knowledge of the

⁹⁰ Notably, in "Synesthesia in Literature" and "Synesthesia in Fiction," Duffy discusses some of the same texts with synaesthesia that I cover in this chapter and the next. These texts include *The Fallen*, *Intensity*, *Painting Ruby Tuesday*, *A Mango-Shaped Space*, and *Top Ten Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*.

⁹¹ Cf. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*.

phenomenon” (18). Current scientific and cultural understandings of synaesthesia as a gift can be traced to the Symbolist’s experimentations with synaesthetic themes.

It appears that “Voyelles” wants to discuss synaesthetic experience, as the opening lines of the poem suggest: “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels” (l. 1).⁹² With this poem, Rimbaud wants to create a “hallucination of the word,” and he seeks to illustrate a perceptual link between the subjective and the objective (24).⁹³ Rimbaud’s actual inspiration for “Voyelles” remains unknown, and it is arguable that his poem experiences ongoing fame because he seeks to capture a ‘mysterious’ phenomenon, though the genesis of the poem is itself mysterious. Moreover, there is also a heavy emphasis on sensation in “Correspondances;” but on first glance, the closest we come to a vision of synaesthesia is perhaps the following line: “Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond” (l. 8).⁹⁴ According to Dann, this oft-cited line is understood as a reference to Emanuel Swedenborg’s theory of correspondence, which asserts that divine forces directly affect the inner mechanics of the human body (37).⁹⁵ At the time that “Correspondances” was composed, spiritual “unity” was a central conviction in organized religion; the prevalence of religious discourse in France led most people, religious or not, to search for some kind of spiritual harmony (42).⁹⁶ Synaesthesia was considered to be a burgeoning secular alternative to orthodox spiritualization, and Baudelaire gave credence to the reality of synaesthetic experience by linking synaesthesia directly to Swedenborg’s

⁹² Cf. *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition*.

⁹³ Cf. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

⁹⁵ Compare this line to the following excerpt from Swedenborg’s *Angelic Wisdom*: “So full of Divine Love and Divine Wisdom is the universe in greatest and least, and in first and last things, that it may be said to be Divine Love and Divine Wisdom in an image. That this is so is clearly evident from the correspondence of all things of the universe with all things of man” (15).

⁹⁶ Cf. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*.

vision of the subject's relationship to the cosmos and the divine. In fact, according to Dann, when "Voyelles" was published, Rimbaud's poem was commonly read through the lens of Baudelaire's approach to sensorial unity: the synaesthetic transcendentalist reading of "Voyelles" was popularized by readers who had recently 'rediscovered' Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The emphasis on sensorial and somnambulistic imagery in both poems also follows Baudelaire's Symbolist dictum: "commonsense [sic] tells us that the things of the earth exist but very little, and that true reality lies only in dreams" (18).⁹⁷ In either case, these two poems have become the staples of the scholarly discussion of synaesthesia in fiction, and "Correspondances" is now considered to be the axiom of popular interest in synaesthetic perception.

But there is an unnecessary and unforgiving amount of criticism on the apparent synaesthetic themes in these poems. The discussion of synaesthetic themes in "Voyelles" or "Correspondances" verges on cliché. However, this certainly does not mean that every study of these two poems is irrelevant. Notably, "Voyelles" and "Correspondances" are discussed in Cytowic's *Tasted*, which was published at the cusp of the synaesthesia renaissance; *Tasted* cannot be faulted simply for discussing Rimbaud and Baudelaire since few modern surveys on synaesthesia had already considered the synaesthetic themes in these two poems. Moreover, *Tasted* argues that "Voyelles" contains scrupulous and "direct" references to synaesthesia (57). This is a claim that Cytowic and Eagleman would later refute two decades hence in *Wednesday*: "Rimbaud later claimed to have invented vowel colors . . . the poem's language belies Rimbaud's arbitrary and imagistic color associations" (189). In their short analysis, they deduce that Rimbaud was not a 'true' synaesthete because vowels in "Voyelles" are not associated with the

⁹⁷ Cf. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*.

common colours for those letters. For example, ‘A’ is usually found to be red and ‘O’ is generally believed to be white. Cytowic and Eagleman assume with absolute certainty that “Voyelles” does not depict synaesthetic graphemes simply because the colours of the poem’s vowels are rare among synaesthetes. But if synaesthesia studies mean to rigorously defend the reality of this arguably obscure mode of perception, it does not make sense to dismiss the poem’s coloured vowels as a plausible synaesthetic permutation just because these colour associations are even more uncommon.

Furthermore, it is certainly not the case that all studies of synaesthesia in fiction focus on these two poems. In her 2013 article “Synesthesia in Literature,” Duffy states that there are five prevalent “categories” of synaesthesia fiction: Romantic Ideal, Romantic Pathology, Indicative of Pathology, Emotional Completeness, and Accepted Anomaly (649). Firstly, the Romantic Ideal corresponds with the intentions of the Symbolists, where synaesthesia “evokes a vision of transcendental beauty” (654). The Romantic Pathology also signals a transcendental perceptive state but the condition is acquired via brain injury; Duffy considers Parker’s *The Fallen* to be an example of this category (658). Thirdly, a work falls under the pretext Indicative of Pathology if the text presents synaesthesia as an obstacle in the subject’s life (661). I would argue that *Girl* fits into this category since Jillian becomes visibly overwhelmed by her synaesthesia on music day; Jillian is so besieged by the explosion of coloured sound that her symptom spreads from the pictures to the words on the page: “I am hearing too many colors at once” (Fig. 9).⁹⁸ Fourthly, Emotional Completeness refers to the representation of synaesthesia as a “healing power;” *A Mango-Shaped Space* is an example of this category

⁹⁸ This is my own interpretation of Duffy’s category “Indicative of Pathology.” The textual examples that Duffy provides in her article are not covered in this thesis, so, for clarity’s sake, I have added my own.

because the protagonist uses her synaesthesia to cope with a traumatic event (664). Lastly, synaesthesia can be considered to be an Accepted Anomaly when the mode is represented as an “everyday facet of life for the synesthete” (665). Here, it seems like Duffy is referring to ‘faithful’ portrayals synaesthesia, but she also lists *The Fallen* as an example of this category: Duffy argues that Robbie’s synaesthetic perceptions “bring their host a layer of aesthetic delight and a sense of well-being” (665). Duffy is an anomaly in synaesthesia studies since she promises to examine several emerging trends in synaesthesia fiction, and she also covers an array of texts with synaesthetic characters.

However, it is unclear whether or not each of Duffy’s categories is supposed to be a clearly discernible archetype or a loosely defined theme. Duffy does little to interrogate each of her chosen texts with synaesthesia and her article reads more like a composite list of examples of synaesthesia in fiction. The following excerpt from Duffy’s analysis of Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* is one of many instances where her analysis is somewhat lacking:

We see Colonel Kachwah’s synesthesia results from his suppressing an impulse toward beauty and poetry:

“His senses were changing into one another...What was hearing? What was taste? He hardly knew. He was in command of twenty thousand men and he thought the color gold sounded like a bass trombone. He needed poetry. A poet could explain him to himself, but he was a soldier... If he spoke of his need for poetry, his men would think him weak.” (661)

The first sentence introduces the colonel, and this is the entirety of Duffy’s analysis for this passage. I appreciate Duffy’s attempt to introduce a new grand schema to the study

of synaesthesia in fiction, but her article reads largely like a summary of numerous texts with synaesthesia. Duffy's essay promises to make significant headway in the field, but, with her article, we are left with neither a critique of a significant problematic nor a theoretical grilling of a discursive apparatus.

Finally, the analytical lens used to evaluate synaesthetic themes in "Voyelles" and "Correspondances" is sometimes forced and arbitrary. In "Issues in Literary Synaesthesia: Synaesthesia as Neuropsychological and a Literary Phenomenon," Reuven Tsur examines various Romantic poems that use synaesthetic transfer, and he argues that synaesthesia is used to heighten the reader's investment in a text. In this article from 2007, Tsur argues that literary synaesthesia has a "witty quality" akin to "a strange, magical experience or heightened mystery" that is apt to spur the reader's emotions and manipulate the reader's attention (30-31). For instance, Tsur makes the following assertion: "the particular colours attributed to particular vowels in Rimbaud's poem are not the ones associated in 'genuine' Synaesthesia; it is the global homology that creates the illusion of a term-by-term analogy" (31). This assertion is confusing because Tsur, like Cytowic and Eagleman, seems to suggest that it is not possible for a synaesthete to have the same grapheme-colour associations found in Rimbaud's poem. If we entertain the argument that this poem is intended to be a 'genuine' representation of grapheme → colour synaesthesia, we should not assume that Rimbaud's colours are 'wrong' since, as Aleksandra Mroczo-Wąsowicz and Danko Nikolić remind us, "evidence suggests that the selection of graphemic and chromatic pairing in synesthetic associations is based on a process that is driven partly by internal cognitive rules" (174).⁹⁹ It may be unlikely that the poem's coloured vowels are popular, but it is certainly not impossible. I think Tsur

⁹⁹ Cf. "Colored Alphabets in Bilingual Synesthetes."

means to say that everybody generally believes that graphemes seem to be naturally analogous with particular colours. Tsur's phrasing is unclear, and he approaches synaesthetic metaphor similar to Geary: he suggests that everybody has some form of synaesthesia.

Tsur also begins his examination of synaesthesia in literature by providing a similar historiography of "Voyelles" to the one I provide at the beginning of this section. Tsur briefly outlines the troubled history of synaesthesia and synaesthesia in fiction, but he disregards synaesthetic identity altogether. He prefaces his argument with the following explanation of his focus:

One conspicuous contrast between 'genuine' and literary synaesthesia is that the former involves rigidly predictable combinations of sensory modes, whereas the latter requires exceptionally great flexibility in generating and understanding unforeseen combinations, and, by the same token, abandoning established combinations. (30)

First, I am unsure how idiopathic synaesthesia has "rigidly predictable combinations" because each synaesthete's colour combination is unique; as Pater Hancock affirms, "the origins of color bindings are obscure, partly because most synesthetes simply report that the colors have 'always' been that way, with some even taking offence at the suggestion that they are learned" (83).¹⁰⁰ Also, synaesthesia can hardly be considered to be "predictable:" the systemic lack of a cogent cultural or scientific understanding of the mode is testament of this. Secondly, Tsur's claim seems self-defeating: Tsur argues that literary synaesthesia has a more expansive repertoire of synaesthetic transfers because

¹⁰⁰ Cf. "Synesthesia, Alphabet Books, and Fridge Magnets."

literary synaesthesia boasts many more sensory combinations than the mode itself. But literary synaesthesia only “abandons” established synaesthetic sensory combinations because literary synaesthesia forsakes the term synaesthesia itself. “Soft colours” and “warm sounds” – two cross-sensory metaphors that Tsur himself mentions – are not profound examples of either literary or idiopathic synaesthesia. I argue that literary synaesthesia is merely a decorative term for ‘figure of speech,’ and that such rhetorical figures only seem to be “flexible” because they are so vague and commonplace.

The Baudelaire-Rimbaud discussion is an overused dialogue in synaesthesia studies, and this scholarly conversation sometimes forgets to discuss synaesthetic identity itself. Synaesthesia studies needs to do more than return to these two synaesthetic ur-texts. Granted, it seems to be widely believed that our current perspective on synaesthesia originated from these two poems, and it is necessary to remind the reader of the origins of this troubled literary tradition. But it is counterintuitive for the field to continue to inauspiciously expand the glut of articles on these poems or to revel in the problematic finality of literary synaesthesia. We have to work harder to examine how synaesthesia in fiction is represented, not to continue to bicker over a topic that has been thoroughly covered. It is certainly not wrong to discuss the history of synaesthesia in fiction, but we need to expand the conversation as the library of texts with synaesthesia continues to grow.

IV. True Faith: Liminal Performance and Narrative Prosthesis

Ceremonials

What is so special about synaesthesia? Cytowic and Eagleman argue that synaesthesia is not an abnormal function of the brain; all brains have some degree of neurological “cross talk” between senses, but synaesthetes tend to have more cross-wiring than non-synaesthetes (205). For instance, all people, synaesthete and non-synaesthete alike, will use three senses when they taste food: taste relies heavily on the sense of smell and touch. Taste and smell are “intimately related,” Cytowic and Eagleman continue, because one’s sense of smell contributes significantly to one’s sense of taste; for example, when you are sick, food will not taste as rich or flavourful because you have a diminished sense of smell (127). One’s sense of smell does not make food taste better: it is but one sense involved in the process of tasting food. Also, you use your tongue to feel the texture of your nourishment. In this sense, it is arguable that everybody naturally uses touch and smell to taste food. Furthermore, all people naturally hear with the help of their eyes: if one is to watch a ventriloquist act, for instance, the viewer’s brain can be naturally convinced that the voice of the dummy comes from the dummy’s mouth, not from the ventriloquist (106). Similarly, when you watch a film, your brain is easily tricked into believing that the voice of the actor onscreen originates from h/er mouth, not from the television speakers. So, if a voice and an actor are perceived simultaneously, the brain is apt to believe that the location of the sound is the actor’s mouth, even if this sound stimulus originates from elsewhere in the room. In this sense, every brain will mingle sight and sound in order to make this perception more orderly and

coherent. However, I would add that this does not mean that everybody has a latent form of synaesthesia: we all combine our senses to some degree when we navigate the real, while synaesthetes experience the actual sensation of two sense impressions simultaneously. The compartmentalized subject cannot literally taste an object just through touch or smell: they must physically taste an object in order to receive a gustatory sensation.

Moreover, Cytowic and Eagleman also state that synaesthetes often consider synaesthesia to be a “gift.” Although Cytowic and Eagleman adamantly state that every brain has cross-sensory connections, they also intend to show that the synaesthete has an “astonishing gift” because their brains are more cross-wired than the average subject (2). The synaesthete is gifted, they argue, because the synaesthete tends to have a better memory, be more creative, or be more imaginative than the “normal” subject, among other things (102). However, this characterization of synaesthesia is confusing since it seems to suggest that cross-sensory perception is both a natural and an unnatural state of mind; there is nothing spectacular about cross-sensory perception, Cytowic and Eagleman argue – since all brains naturally mingle the senses – but more uncommon forms of cross-talk, such as coloured hearing, seem unnatural simply because these forms are uncommon. Cytowic and Eagleman are heavily indebted to the arbitrary notion of normalcy: it is not just that everybody has a degree of neurological cross-wiring, they state, it is also the case that “the normal brain is heavily cross-wired” (205). Cytowic and Eagleman lean on the term “normal” to classify people in general but they do not strictly affirm that synaesthesia is ‘abnormal;’ quite the contrary: they state that “synesthetes simply have a different texture of reality” (20). Cytowic and Eagleman’s study of

synaesthesia seems to contend that there is nothing wrong with synaesthesia, and that cross-sensory perception is just the way that the synaesthete experiences reality. But the dialectic here also suggests that the synaesthete is not wholly ‘normal’ since h/er form of perception is inherently better than compartmentalized sensation, though the synaesthete is also not entirely ‘abnormal’ since synaesthesia is a natural function of the brain.

But *Wednesday* is not the only text that defines the mode within the pretext of a normative scale of perception. In this chapter, I examine the synaesthetic revelatory scenario in two YA novels that attempt to offer honest, meditative portrayal of synaesthesia. Specifically, unlike other YA texts in this chapter, *A Mango-Shaped Space* by Wendy Mass and *One+One=Blue* by M.J. Auch are coming-of-age-stories that focus exclusively on the adolescent synaesthete’s struggle to come to terms with being ‘gifted’ with synaesthesia but also pubescent uncertainty and the pressure to be a ‘normal’ teenager. I contend that the synaesthete in these novels of formation is first outcast for being disordered, and, following a series of rites of passage, sh/e is resignified as ‘special’ and adopted back into the social order. In “The Point and the Line,” I argue that Mia, the synaesthete in *Mango*, is forced into a liminal performance in order to cope with being an outcast. Next, in “Hunted by a Freak,” I draw Mia’s liminal rites, and argue that *Mango* also represents synaesthesia as a narrative prosthetic. In “Appropriating the Empty Object,” I examine the role of the narrative prosthesis in Mia’s postliminal rites. Lastly, in “The Perfect Kiss,” I build on my discussion of performativity and prosthesis, and argue that M.J. Auch’s *One+One=Blue* has the synaesthete overcome dejection by objectifying another synaesthete; this section also functions as the chapter’s conclusion. Ultimately, in *Mango* and *One*, the synaesthete must endure a severe emotional crisis and

then use their synaesthesia to overcome the traumatic event. Synaesthesia in these texts is the axiom that forces the synaesthete into isolation and degradation; however, in each work, synaesthesia also grants the subject a symbolic rebirth and psychic cleansing. In effect, synaesthesia is represented as a deeply personal psychedelic form of escapism; synaesthesia, I argue, is ‘used’ to dissipate emotional trauma caused by pubescent uncertainty and social isolation.

The Point and the Line

In *Mango*, Mia Winchell is a thirteen year old girl with grapheme → colour and sound → colour synaesthesia; she believes at first that everyone sees letters, numbers, and sounds as shapes and colours. In the prologue to *Mango*, Mia recalls when, at the age of eight, she first becomes aware that seeing numbers and colours is unique. During class, Mia is asked to answer a maths problem on the blackboard. Knowing that she cannot solve the problem, Mia tries to stall by using coloured chalk, and she expects the class to agree with her approach. Mia unknowingly exposes her synaesthesia to the class by reading the numbers aloud: “the colors of the numbers, you know, like the two is pink, well of course it’s not really *this* shade of pink, more like cotton-candy pink” (2-3). This statement leads to intense disapproval from her peers and her teacher, Mrs. Lowe. Although Mia believes that she is “rewriting each number on the board in its correct color,” Mrs. Lowe is “genuinely confused and more than a little annoyed” (2). Mia subsequently becomes the object of the class’s mockery since she assumes that everybody has synaesthesia; because of this, she believes that her fault comes from looking to Mrs. Lowe and the class for assistance instead of looking at the blackboard.

Since Mia knows that she cannot answer the question, she goes to the front of the class knowing that she will have to make a performance: “I remember thinking that if I wrote slowly enough, the bell may ring before I finish” (1). Mia also hints that she feels embarrassed as she approaches the blackboard because she is already dressed as a shepherd-girl for the after-school Christmas pageant. But Mia is concerned that her performance will go awry since she knows that her image is visually arresting: “the one-size-fits-all costume didn’t fit me” (1). Mia’s performance, as suggested by the loose-fitting costume, will be neither seamless nor successful since she knows that the anonymous gaze of the class commands the room. Since Mia knows that the gaze dooms her performance to failure, she attempts to channel sentiment from the anonymous class collective instead of solving the maths problem herself. Ultimately, Mia’s performance is invalidated because both her person and her percepts seem visually out of place.

Moreover, the power of the gaze separates Mia from the class both physically and linguistically. Mia is not only policed by the gaze, she is barred from understanding the voices of the other students: “Then I heard it. In a loud whisper from the back row. *Freak*. Except it sounded like *FREEEEK*” (3). Mia recalls the concurrent conversation with Mrs. Lowe in detail, but she can only remember the whispers of the students as short, fragmented sentences. These insults come to haunt Mia, and, after this scenario, she keeps her synaesthesia a secret. If we consider David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s examination of the “freak,” one may argue that Mia seeks reclusion and sympathy because she is at odds with the class’s vision of ontological hygiene. In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Mitchell and Snyder argue that the concept of the freak traditionally recalls imagery of monstrosity and

physical deformity; the freak seems deserving of sympathy because the freak appears to be almost human, though it ultimately remains a mysterious figure: “the freak evokes associations with the monstrous and mythic fabulations of the primordial kind” (152). Now, I do not believe that Mia is represented as a monster per se, but it is no mistake that we are supposed to sympathize with Mia because she is objectified as different, both visually and neurologically. The class is so offended by Mia’s mysterious dialogue about numbers and colours that it seems that her very humanity is called into question: “they gawked at me as if I had sprouted another head” (2). For Mia, the whispers also only “sounded like *FREEEEK*” because Mia is the victim of the class’s signifying economy: she does not entirely comprehend the anger and confusion behind the insults because she is cast outside the linguistic and taxonomic boundaries of the class. This is why she passively accepts her signification as a freak, even though she does not entirely understand this designation.

Mia succumbs to the class’s abuse, and her identity is undercut by the authoritative insults of the anonymous student collective. The class polices Mia and attempts to fix her with a determinate identity, though the phonemes they use to police her are indeterminate and ambiguous: “*Freak*” becomes “*FREEEEK*,” and then the voices fade to anonymous whispers. Here, we have an example of Derrida’s “différance,” which points to the endless play of differences in language. In *The Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida defines *différance* as follows: “The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (11). Mia

appears to have an unknown condition, and the class attempts to reconcile this unnameable difference by inscribing her with a new, ambiguous ‘non-identity.’ Mia is interpellated as other, and we can see the hypocrisy of the class’s insults when the class uses several variations on the word ‘freak’ to differentiate Mia from themselves. The logocentric discourse of the class attempts to fix Mia’s ambiguous identity with a final signified, but the class also depends on the *différance* inherent in language to do so. The class’s insults are essentially self-defeating: the very act of signification demonstrates difference, and these insults mean to fix Mia’s identity with a proper name, a transcendental signified.

The prologue ends with Mia in the principal’s office; feeling defeated, she gives up trying to insist to Mrs. Lowe, Principal Dubner, and her parents that her synaesthesia is real. Mrs. Lowe and Principal Dubner also deride Mia’s performance as “uncharacteristic behaviour;” similar to *Girl*, the synaesthete in *Mango* is signified by a teacher, and the act of naming in *Mango* isolates and silences the synaesthete: the teachers and Mia’s parents squabble over Mia’s fate as she “sat there and listened to them talk” (4). In *Mango*, what begins as a performance in the classroom ends with a refutation of identity; here, we see a temporary negation of both performer and the desire to perform: “So I pretended I made everything up. I sat there and said things like ‘It was stupid’” (4). Consequently, Mia is forced to transition into a liminal phase where she is unable to speak sincerely about synaesthesia; to channel Jonathan Rose, as an audience of “common” readers who know nothing of synaesthesia, the students and faculty at Mia’s school use the power of “appropriation” to render Mia’s voice “less than totally

efficacious and radically acculturating” since they do not read as Mia does (433).¹⁰¹ This exposition of Mia’s synaesthesia acts as a threshold between knowledge and isolation: the blackboard episode begins with a performance based on the desire for identification, and the scene culminates with a performance confounded by the lack of identity acceptance.

Hunted by a Freak

After the prologue, several years go by where Mia does not mention her synaesthesia to anybody. The rest of the narrative focuses on Mia when she is in the seventh grade. At the age of thirteen, Mia is still having problems with maths, and she performs poorly on a series of maths tests at school. After failing these tests, Mia’s grades begin to drop, and she discloses her synaesthesia to her family; knowledge of her synaesthesia is subsequently leaked to her peers at school. Similar to *Girl, Mango* does not define synaesthesia for the reader until the synaesthete has endured a series of liminal hardships; in *Mango*, we get a definition of synaesthesia in the novel’s second act. After both a doctor and a psychotherapist cannot explain Mia’s colours, Mia is taken to Dr. Jerry Weiss, a neurologist. Jerry explains that she has synaesthesia, “a condition that is harmless;” he affirms that her colours are not a disease, as her family first believes (103). When Mia learns the term for synaesthesia, she, like Jillian, becomes visibly ecstatic and “very happy” (112-113). But this naming rite does not lead to Mia’s immediate reincorporation into the social order as it does in *Girl*.¹⁰² In this section, I argue that Mia’s interpellation as synaesthetic marks the end of several years of stagnation and

¹⁰¹ Cf. “Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences.”

¹⁰² I find the climax of *Girl* to be rather abrupt, and its dénouement quite short. The *Kirkus* review of *Girl* makes a similar point: “While the tidiness of Jillian’s resolution strains credulity, the exploration of her unusual perception charms.”

silence; this event also instigates various rites of passage, which will be detailed throughout this section.

First, why wait to the middle of the book to explain synaesthesia to the reader? For a moment, I will mention Duffy's brief analysis of *Mango*. Duffy argues that synaesthesia in *Mango* is a form of "emotional completeness:" synaesthesia sometimes functions as a means for the subject to heal themselves and regain equilibrium (664).¹⁰³ Drawing on Duffy's dialectic, one might argue that it makes sense to withhold a contextualization of synaesthesia for a large amount of narrative since this would raise the stakes of the story; this could also make the protagonist's plight seem more realistic and worthy of sympathy. Duffy provides the following example of emotional completeness in *Mango*: the death of Mango, Mia's cat and the namesake of the text, leads Mia to temporarily lose her synaesthesia; Mia only regains her synaesthesia once she resolves the trauma that follows the death of her pet (664). Arguably, the lack of an immediate definition of synaesthesia seems to allow the reader to feel the effects of exclusion; both Mia and the reader are barred from a comprehensible understanding of Mia's perception and being.

But synaesthesia should not only be viewed in a sympathetic light since this may suggest that the synaesthete is merely an object that the 'normal' subject uses to levy their emotions into the text. After Mia's revelatory scenario, she generally avoids discussing synaesthesia, though she still considers synaesthesia to be an integral part of her identity. This is most apparent with Mia's relationship with her cat, Mango. Mango is named after the colour of his purrs, though all the other characters believe that he is named after the colour of his eyes (24). So whenever Mango is referred to by name, the speaker is

¹⁰³ Cf. "Synaesthesia in Literature."

unknowingly referring to Mia's synaesthesia. Mango's name is a conceit that allows Mia to both keep her synaesthesia a secret and allude to the existence of one of her percepts. Mia uses Mango to openly discuss her synaesthesia without directly mentioning the mode; even after Mia's naming rite and the onset of other threshold rites, Mia depends on Mango to give herself confidence. For example, after Mia's naming rite, Jerry prompts Mia to search for synaesthesia on the internet; when she does so, we learn that her internet password is "M-A-N-G-O" (118). When Mia attempts to navigate online publics in search of information on synaesthesia, the signifier 'Mango' functions as a protective shield that protects Mia's anonymity, and synaesthesia is again interposed as a secretive, fragmentary identity (118). In this instance, Mia attempts to create an online identity; this is an imaginary extension of Mia's being, and she uses a symbolic representation of Mango to perform this rite since Mango already functions as a symbolic extension of her psyche.

Mango was originally a stray cat that Mia found perched on her grandfather's grave. Because of this, Mia believes that Mango harbours part of the soul of her dead grandfather: part of him is "stored safe and sound inside of Mango" (27). This implies that Mango is himself an in-between space: he is a liminal site between life and death where the soul of Mia's grandfather presumably resides. More importantly, Mia keeps this belief a secret, though she also tries to hint to people that Mango and her grandfather are metaphysically intertwined. A notable example of this is the painting that Mia works on for the majority of the story, and which she intends to leave at her grandfather's grave. Mia attempts to paint Mango onto her grandfather's shoulder; but Mango can barely fit into the small space Mia has designated for him, and so his icon is almost unrecognizable

(24). Numerous people comment on the painting, and her father even points out that Mango and the grandfather are painted with similar eyes: “They say that eyes are the windows to the soul, you know. I can see Grandpa in those eyes” (25). But despite such praise, Mia continues to be secretive about her confidence in the transmigration of the soul. The intertwined image of Mia and the grandfather is the focus of the painting, but the painting itself does not overtly suggest that the two beings are metaphysically linked. The painting broadcasts Mia’s two secrets – her synaesthesia and her belief in metempsychosis – but the intended meaning of this image remains unintelligible. Here we have an example of Baudrillard’s hyperreal: the reality of Mia’s perceptual experience is undermined in lieu of a convoluted chain of signifiers, “a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency” (29).¹⁰⁴ Synaesthesia gives meaning to Mango, Grandpa gives meaning to Mango, Mango gives meaning to Grandpa’s death, and the limbic status of Grandpa’s soul seems to justify Mia’s secretive nature. Mia attempts to publicize her secrets through a piece of art, but the axiom of this representation is crowded by a complex array of simulations that smother her metaphysical intentions.

By the middle of the book, Mango begins to act “weird,” and he subsequently hides in the walls of Mia’s home to escape punishment when he misbehaves (95). This is significant because the walls are an inaccessible and irregular in-between space: “like the rest of us, Mango had found the house’s little nooks and crannies that never quite fit together” (95). This episode in particular occurs directly after Mia reveals her synaesthesia to her parents, and, at this point, it is still believed that Mia is fabricating her percepts. Mia’s parents take her to a psychotherapist, but the doctor dismisses Mia’s

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Simulacra and Simulation*.

synaesthesia as her imagination. The psychotherapist refers to Mia's synaesthesia as "middle child syndrome," though Mia insists her colours are real (83). Mia is inadvertently 'diagnosed' as abnormal, and this interpellation directly corresponds with Mango's "weird" behaviour; shortly thereafter, Mia even wonders out loud if Mango is suffering from "middle cat syndrome" (100). But Mango does not merely symbolize Mia's plight; I contend that Mango is also a "narrative prostheses," in Mitchell and Snyder's use of the term (47). Mitchell and Snyder argue that the concept of the disabled body is an ideological construction, and that disability is marginalized and misconstrued because it is systematically represented two ways: "first, as a stock figure of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (47). In this regard, we can think of Mango as merely a re-presentation of Mia's lack of agency and the secrecy that surrounds her condition. Since Mia uses Mango to both publicize and 'normalize' her synaesthesia, Mango is also a device that Mia uses to try to understand her perceptive reality. Mango can be considered to be a prosthetic figure because his presence seems give an illusory sense of meaning to Mia's existence, and his absence seems to expose a lack in Mia's being.

Eventually, Mia's synaesthesia becomes common knowledge at school, and other students begin to recognize her; they also interpellate her as "the girl who sees colors" (99). This leads Mia to think of her synaesthesia as more of a gift than a curse, and she feels the need to experiment with her synaesthesia rather than keep it a secret. In one episode, Mia secludes herself in her bathroom at home and plays loud music; in this intensely private space, her synaesthesia takes on a theatrical dimension: she watches the colours of the music become more "solid" when the coloured sounds appear to enmesh

with the rising steam (154). Here, Mia also watches her coloured percepts take on an arousing, transcendental dimension; she sits nude in a dimly lit space, as if to birth herself into a sublime realm: “It’s like I’m part of the whole fabric of the universe – the air, the water, the music, the color, the shapes, and me right in the middle. I can’t believe I’m just discovering this” (154). Eventually, she comes down from her ecstatic state and coyly states to herself: “I remember I’m supposed to be in the tub, not standing in the middle of the room” (154). Mia has internalized the original designation of difference forced upon her, and, as a result, she begins to act out a bizarre, sensual, and intensely personal spectacle of synaesthetic experience. She takes centre-stage, so to speak, in the bathroom – which is itself a liminal, hidden space – in order to tap into the faux-transcendentalism of the coloured steam above the bath; the steam itself functions as another liminal space between synaesthetic divination and the corporeality of her bare flesh.

Synaesthesia here takes on a mystical quality, though, in actuality, the colour of a sound would not ‘play’ with the steam, as *Mango* suggests it would. A seen object and a synaesthetic percept would not directly interact with each other since synaesthesia is not a freestanding spatium that exists independently from the mind. Mia could certainly be hallucinating or imagining this scene, but the text gives the impression that the synaesthete has the capability to manually control their synaesthetic percepts and visually manipulate the objects in their perceptive field: “I’m attempting to duplicate the situation the woman wrote about where she saw all the shapes in the steam” (153). Mia’s bathroom theatre of synaesthetic experience can be considered to be a “spectacle,” in Guy Debord’s sense of the term, since the strange mingling of colour and steam is a display

that confuses fictional and nonfictional understandings of synaesthesia. It is ambiguous what exactly Mia considers to be an object ‘out there in the real’ and what is merely supposed to be a perceptual image; as Debord states, “the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearance and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance” (6).¹⁰⁵ Mia locates herself in an ambiguous, unseen part of the house in an attempt to momentarily forget her physical presence in lieu of an imaginary, purely spiritual sense of being.

I argue that this spectacular presentation of synaesthesia also suggests that synaesthesia is a disability. As Mitchell and Snyder continue, a disabled character is sometimes endowed with a symbolic extension of their own body; this “narrative prosthesis” seems to transform the subject into an able bodied agent. Also, the narrative prosthesis is an ideological device that reinforces the arbitrary debasement of the disabled subject. The narrative prosthesis makes the disabled person seem to be less of a complete person, and therefore less human than the abled body: “physical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions” (47-48). The other students see Mia as a freak, and her synaesthesia causes her to do poorly at school; most importantly of all, she is represented as an incomplete body, and Mango is the missing piece of the soma that gives tangible meaning to her seemingly incommunicable, abstract perception. I do not want to suggest that synaesthesia is, in fact, a disability – because it certainly is not – but *Mango* is so inclined to garner the reader’s sympathy that the synaesthete in the text is considered to be abnormal but also metaphysically disabled. This becomes more evident when we remember that Mango is enfeebled for the entirety of the narrative, and that he eventually dies because of his condition: “the vet told us that Mango was born

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *The Society of the Spectacle*.

with a deep rip in the lining of one lung and that it couldn't be fixed" (24). Mango requires medication to remain alive, but he can never be entirely healthy; after Mango's unexpected death near the end of the novel, Mia's father affirms: "You knew he was sick since the day you found him. It's a blessing that we had him around as long as we did" (244). But when Mango dies, Mia is overwhelmed with guilt and grief because she believes she did not give Mango his medication consistently; as a result of the trauma of Mango's death, Mia's synaesthesia temporarily vanishes. Her prosthetic disappears, and so does her synaesthetic perception for a short period of time; additionally, Mango's death forces Mia to undergo a symbolic death: "everything is so gray and pale and lifeless" (246). Mango epitomizes Mia's lack of self-awareness, and his presence leads Mia to believe that she is mentally healthy. Also, since a comprehensive definition of synaesthesia does not appear until the middle of the text, the narrative itself is constituted as a lack since the text deliberately withholds information about synaesthesia in order to garner a deeper emotional investment from the reader.

Appropriating the Empty Object

Mia's percepts return once she locates a young synaesthete named Billy Henkle. Mia intermittently searches for Billy for the entirety of the narrative. Mia originally meets Billy haphazardly at the beginning of the book when she introduces herself to him while the two of them wait in line at the grocery store. Subsequently, Billy quickly affirms that "Mia" is a pretty name because "it's purple with orange stripes;" but before Mia can respond, he is whisked away by his mother (36). Before Billy and his mother disappear, his mother quickly dismisses his synaesthesia as "overactive imagination" (37). Mia makes it her personal mission to find Billy since he is the first person with

synaesthesia that she ever meets. Her search intensifies once Mia learns the term for synaesthesia and Jerry informs her that the mode is natural phenomenon: “I must find Billy now. I have to let his mother know he doesn’t have a brain tumor” (107). Like Wanda’s constant interjections about Graczik in *Top Ten*, Mia often brings up Billy’s name in order to remind the reader of the arguably restrictive, exclusionary nature of synaesthesia.

At the end of the novel, Billy, his mother, and his sister Amy casually appear at Mia’s home. Mia knows Amy from school; Amy is one of the girls who mocked Mia’s synaesthesia, and Mia was unaware that Billy and Amy were related. It is worth citing this passage in full so we can thoroughly examine Billy’s role in the return of Mia’s synaesthesia. This scene occurs in the final pages of the novel, and it follows the Henkle family’s entrance into the Winchell household and Mrs. Henkle’s account of Billy’s “attachment” to Mia:

Billy wraps his arms around my leg as Mrs. Henkle pushes herself up from the couch. “Amy told me that letters and numbers have color for you,” she says to me. “And I realize you were trying to tell me about it a few weeks ago. Ever since Billy met you, this color thing is all he talks about.”

Billy nods happily, and I smile at him. Smiling is starting to feel less foreign. “So what do you think I should do?” she asks, sounding helpless. “His kindergarten teacher is talking about putting him in a special class next year because of this.”

I glance at Amy, who looks away. “There’s nothing wrong with Billy,” I tell Mrs. Henkle. “I’ve met other people who have synaesthesia – that’s what it’s called – and they’re totally fine.”

Billy is busy fidgeting with the lever that turns the chair into a recliner. I don’t know how much of this conversation he understands, but I think on some level he’s aware that this is a turning point for him.

Mrs. Henkle is still not convinced. “But isn’t there anything to treat this... this... disease?”

Zach [Mia’s brother] steps forward before I can respond. His eyes are blazing. “My sister doesn’t have a disease. She has a gift.”

I gape at him gratefully as he steps back next to Amy, who has a new look of respect in her eyes. I don’t think many people stand up to her mother.

“What color is my name, Mia?” Billy asks gleefully, breaking the moment of silence.

“Your name is light brown like wood, with some sky blue sprinkled in,” I reply, kneeling next to him. “And it’s sort of mushy.”

“Like oatmeal?” he asks hopefully.

“Just like oatmeal.”

“No, it’s not,” he says, laughing and bouncing in his seat. “It’s bright pink and shiny like my granddaddy’s head!”

“Um, Mia,” my mother says. “Does this mean your colors are back?”

I stand up with a start. The words in my head are in color again, and I didn’t even notice it. I excuse myself and run upstairs to check out my alphabet poster.

Good ol' sunflower-yellow *a*. Shimmering green *j*. Robin's-egg-blue *z*. They're all back. The experience feels so familiar and foreign at the same time. I think it's because so much has changed. I have no idea how to be this new person. I head back downstairs.

“Thank you for your time,” Mrs. Henkle says to my mom and me as she hands Billy his jacket. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. Amy is cheering at a school basketball game, so we have to go now.” (258-260)

I maintain that this scene depicts the symbolic transfer of Mia's prosthetic: Billy replaces Mango as Mia's narrative prosthesis. In this scene, we also witness Mia's postliminal rites of reincorporation and symbolic rebirth. I outline both of these ideas below.

First, Billy becomes Mia's new prosthetic when he chooses Mia's affection over his Mother's domineering presence. Billy clings to Mia's leg as Mrs. Henkle rises and moves in their direction: in this laying on of hands, Billy fulfills his desire for Mia's protection, and he also vies to escape his mother's sphere of influence. Mia's confidence and voice are rejuvenated, and she is able to stand up to Mrs. Henkle; this is significant because Mrs. Henkle is an authority figure who dismisses synaesthesia as a disease. But Mia does not regain her voice completely: it is Zach who corrects the assumption that synaesthesia is an illness. Zack exonerates Mia's outsider status, but he also reinforces Mia's lack of vocal influence. In an ironic twist, Zack's use of the term “gift” is itself a ceremonial gift that marks Mia's hybridization into the family structure. Next, this scene features a series of naming rites where Mia and Billy rechristen each other as synaesthetes. These declaratory verbal pronouncements recall their original meeting; it also erases the metaphysical lack felt by both parties during their prolonged separation.

This mock liturgy also follows van Gennep's formulation of postliminal rites since this scene is "systematized in the form of commemorations" (149).¹⁰⁶ This ceremonial is also in line with Turner's characterization of "communitas;" communitas is the social equity that the liminal subject expects from successfully completing the rites process: communitas is "best to arise in the intervals between incumbencies of social positions and statuses, in what used to be known as 'the interstices of the social structure'" (138).¹⁰⁷ Finally, Mia's percepts return, and her symbolic rebirth is complete once she hastens upstairs to symbolically relive language acquisition by matching her coloured letters to her alphabet chart. Mia's postliminal rites mark the return of her synaesthesia, but her agency is still compromised to some degree and, importantly, her prosthetic remains.

Billy's involvement in Mia's postliminal rites may seem intricate, but Billy's character remains stagnant, and he can also be thought of as a MacGuffin. All we know about Billy is that he has synaesthesia and that his mother believes his coloured percepts constitute a disease. Billy is a plot device that seems to serve little purpose in the narrative but to give Mia a reason to publicize her synaesthesia; this follows McGowan's definition of this Hitchcockian device: "what the MacGuffin really is doesn't matter, though the entire narrative turns on the pursuit of it" (514).¹⁰⁸ In other words, Billy does not have to be Billy in order for the narrative to make sense: the plot of the story would remain relatively unchanged if Mia, for example, randomly hears a commercial that discusses synaesthesia and then spends the rest of the narrative looking out for the same advertisement. Billy's abrupt and contrived exit from Mia's postliminal ceremony also

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *The Rites of Passage*.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*

¹⁰⁸ Cf. "Hitchcock's Ethics of Suspense: Psychoanalysis and the Devaluation of the Object."

gives credence to this reading since Billy's mother could give any excuse to leave the scene: they enter and leave Mia's home at the convenience of the plot.

care about their dresses. For dinner we have the left-overs from the meal I cooked yesterday, and again, nobody thanks me.



I'm already out of my seat when the final school bell rings on Wednesday. Roger is waiting for me by my locker as planned, looking uncomfortable. I toss my

Fig. 18: Mango-Shaped Section Break. *A Mango-Shaped Space*. Wendy Mass. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003. Page 175.

Lastly, as an aside, one may argue that Mango's ghost seems to inhabit the text as a paratextual element: every section break – both before and after his death – is exemplified by the silhouette of a cat. This gives the impression that Mango will always signify an in-between space (Fig. 18). The narrative means to show us that it is wrong to assume that synaesthesia is an abnormal freakism, but Mia still needs a prosthetic to make her synaesthesia feel less like a debilitating, fragmented, and friendless experience. These aspects of the text lead me to argue that the reader is meant to infer that the discursive constraints of normative perception are absolute, and that the synaesthetic prosthetic seems to be a latent, lingering existential necessity for the synaesthete. I take issue with the fact that Mia seems perfectly happy with being 'special,' and that the text adamantly reifies synaesthesia's classifications as a "condition" (100). One such example occurs when Mia loses her colours, and she characterizes compartmentalized perception as a degrading and depressing mode of perception:

All I am is the girl who is no longer special in any way. I'm the girl who is empty. Like a deflated helium balloon. I can't believe this is how everyone else feels all the time. (236)

Mia's Weltschmerz can be partially attributed to the grief she feels over the loss of her cat, but this anger is also fueled by her belief that synaesthesia seems to be a privileged subject position. Ultimately, synaesthesia in *Mango* is constituted as an identity that is beyond either/or designations, as if normalcy is a concept that cannot be negotiated or reconciled. At the end of the text, *Mango* seems to haunt the text and Billy becomes Mia's new prosthesis, which suggests that synaesthesia is perpetually intertwined with liminality and abnormality.

The Perfect Kiss

But *Mango* is not the only text that depicts the synaesthesia revelatory scenario as an isolating, traumatic event. *One+One=Blue* by M.J. Auch follows Basil, a twelve year old boy with grapheme → colour synaesthesia who, at first, is convinced that he is the only person in the world who sees numbers and letter as colours. He often meditates over being a "loser" at school, which he partly attributes to being homeschooled for the majority of his life. Basil therefore assumes that he lacks the social skills needed to conform to a group collective (1). But Basil believes that the overriding reason for his lack of popularity is his synaesthesia. In the first chapter, Basil unknowingly exposes his synaesthesia to Jason, another classmate, while the two of them work through a maths problem aloud; Jason reacts with confusion, which leads Basil to explain that he is bad at mathematics because he often mixes up numbers that have similar colours: "I get them mixed up a lot. Don't you?" Jason dipped his chin and peered at me over his glasses"

(4). In *One*, the synaesthete's revelatory scenario also involves reading a maths problem, as it does in *Mango*; likewise, Basil is also policed by a suspicious, normative gaze of a classmate. However, Basil learns that synaesthesia is not a universal trait, not in panoptic fashion in front an entire class of students, but via an accidental confession to a single person.

One also uses the narrative prosthesis to give the synaesthete an artificial sense of solidarity. Basil's prosthetic figure takes the form of another synaesthete, Tenzie, though he neither appropriates her as a prosthesis nor consider her a friend until the end of the novel. Tenzie is a twelve year old girl with grapheme → colour synaesthesia and also something she refers to as her "grid;" this grid seems to be sequence-space synaesthesia (Fig. 19). Both Basil and Tenzie characterize this grid as "magic," and Tenzie describes the grid itself as follows:

"The grid surrounds me on three sides. The single digits are along the bottom – that's blue. Then the next level up is blue-green – that's the tens." Tenzie's right index finger was tracing horizontal lines. "The third level is twenties – a bright green." (75)¹⁰⁹

Tenzie's grid seems to function as both a prosthetic and a protective shield: for example, Basil believes that Tenzie visualizes the grid in order to overcome anxiety when she auditions for a school play (75). Logically speaking, it is quite possible that Tenzie 'uses' her sequence-space synaesthesia to help her overcome anxiety, though this would mean

¹⁰⁹ With sequence-space synaesthesia, the subject visualizes numbers or dates (numerical sequences) as a location projected outside the body. Fig. 19 offers an example of sequence-space synaesthesia, which is taken from Eagleman's "The Objectification of Overlearned Sequences: A New View of Spatial Sequences." Eagleman's example demonstrates how the synaesthete with sequence-space form perceives months as a distinct location outside of the body (1266). Although Tenzie's sequence-space is number-based, the idea is the same.

that Tenzie visualizes maths sums for the entirety of her audition. I do not discount this possibility, and if this is indeed what Tenzie does, her performance mirrors Mia's own synaesthetic performance in front of the blackboard. However, in actuality, sequence-space synaesthesia is not a "magic" square that Tenzie can simply 'step into' in order to cleanse her emotional state. Although it does make sense for the subject to focus on a familiar element in order to deal with a stressful situation, it seems as if Tenzie's synaesthesia also functions as a utilitarian form of empowerment.

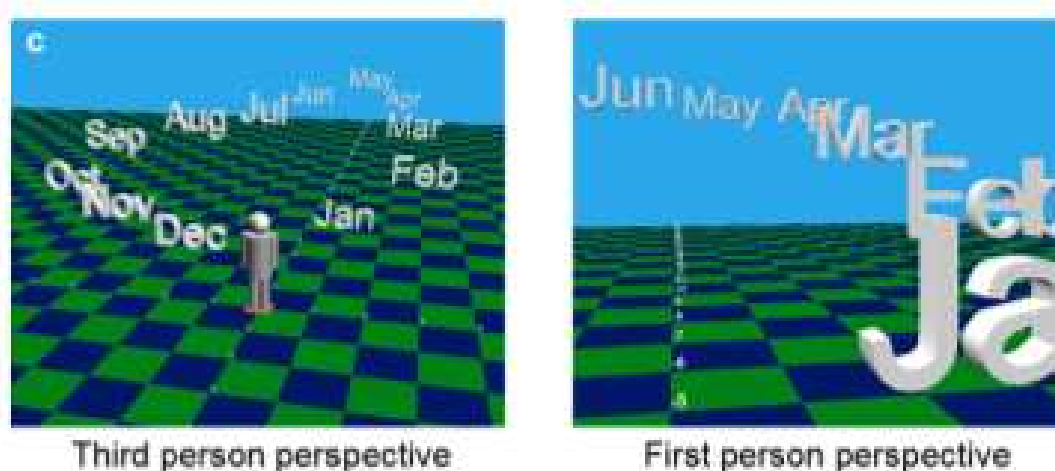


Fig. 19: Sequence-Space Synaesthesia. "The Objectification of Overlearned Sequences: A New View of Spatial Sequences." David M. Eagleman. *Cortex* 45 (2009). Page 1269.

But we do not actually know that Tenzie utilizes her grid during her audition since we only get Basil's perception of this event. Tenzie's grid, in this case, is only really present because Basil says it is: he merely assumes that Tenzie's brain is attenuating synaesthetic stimuli during her audition. At this point in the novel, Basil still does not consider Tenzie to be a friend, though he humours her attempt at friendship because he and Tenzie both have coloured graphemes. Also, Basil and Tenzie are unaware that other people share their form of perception. Synaesthesia forms the basis of their friendship, though Basil still refuses to accept Tenzie as a friend until the novel's climax. Since

Basil's relationship with Tenzie is shallow and one-sided, it is arguable that she is not the focus of his gaze during the audition; arguably, Basil gazes at the location of the synaesthetic percept that he believes Tenzie is currently experiencing. The object of his desire is the magic gird, and it is arguable that Basil believes that the gird is Tenzie's empowering prosthetic. Shortly after the audition scene, Basil does an internet search for "seeing numbers as colors," which leads him to discover the term "synaesthesia" (80). Tenzie spurs Basil's new fascination with his coloured percepts, and she functions as a placeholder for the ambiguous object of Basil's burgeoning search for synaesthetic identity.

For the majority of the narrative, Tenzie is a prop in Basil's process of self-discovery. It is Tenzie who masterminds the plan to track down Carly, Basil's selfish, estranged mother. Several years before the events of the novel, Carly moves to California to become an actress and she leaves Basil to live with his grandmother in Pennsylvania. In the novel's second act, Carly briefly returns home to live with Basil and his grandmother; much to Tenzie's delight, Carly takes over direction of the school play, but Carly soon disappears when she runs out of money. Tenzie then pressures Basil to embark with her on an ill-fated road trip to Michigan in search of Carly; when Basil and Tenzie eventually find Carly, the children suggest they all move to California together, and Carly reluctantly agrees. After they drive for some time, Carly drops Tenzie and Basil off at a library somewhere in western Michigan. Carly informs Tenzie and Basil that she needs to run some errands before they embark for the West Coast, and she convinces the children that she will collect them later in the afternoon. However, Carly never returns, and Basil is forced to call the police and then his grandmother to request a

ride home. During the odyssey with Carly, Basil experiences his mother's flightiness and abuse first hand; he also believes these strong emotions transform his synaesthesia: "I could taste the anger – sort of metallic. Was that another part of my synaesthesia?" (232). But despite all this emotional turbulence, Tenzie has become enamoured with the misguided idea of running away to California. At this point in the text, the 'voice of reason' shifts from Tenzie to Basil, as Tenzie remains fixated on the fantasy and failure of their plan. Tenzie wants to naïvely follow Carly to California to be an actress herself, and Basil takes it upon himself to stop Tenzie; this is a symbolic action that seems to correct Basil's failure to negate Carly's repeated abandonment: "Tenzie, this is all a great dream, but you know none of it is going to come true" (241). Tenzie's failed plan helps Basil overcome his awkward, passive aggressive relationship with his mother; Tenzie's role in this resolution is to merely be a symbolic re-presentation of Carly.

Tenzie's primary role in the novel is to directly influence Basil's narrative arc, not to discover anything profound about her own person. Throughout most of the narrative, Tenzie happily believes that her parents ignore her; this leads her to believe that she has no boundaries and that she can do or go anywhere she wants. It is this confidence that incites her to take off with Basil on their journey to Michigan. But when they return home at the novel's end, Tenzie realizes that her parents do not disregard her as much as she thinks: "They missed me right away, Pesto. My parents actually missed me" (247). Tenzie's character is largely static, and arguably the only lesson she learns by the novel's end is tidily resolved in this single sentence. Moreover, Tenzie can be considered to be a "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," to channel Nathan Rabin's characterization of Kirsten's

Dunst's character in the Cameron Crowe film *Elizabethtown*. Rabin defines this term as follows:

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imagination of sensitive writer-directors [read: fiction writers, fictional characters] to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventure. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing proposition.¹¹⁰

Basil's spiritual journey is complete once he fully appropriates Tenzie into his own being. At the end of the novel, Basil surprises Tenzie by allowing her into his room; this is a space that he considers intensely private. Her entry into his room is most unusual since, at the beginning of the text, Basil becomes incredibly awkward once Tenzie sets foot in this space. In fact, he feels that she has invaded a symbolic projection of his own mind: "I couldn't stand having Tenzie in there another second. I didn't want her to know how important that color stuff was to me. It was more than important. It *was* me" (24). Once the two children have significantly bonded over their synaesthesia and Basil has come to terms with his mother's abandonment, Basil allows Tenzie to re-enter his room. I argue that he does so because he means to figuratively appropriate her grid, which is the private space that only she can perceive. As a gift to Tenzie, Basil drapes his picture window with colour in order to project an image that resembles Tenzie's grid. Once Tenzie affirms that the gift is "perfect," Basil's spiritual journey is complete (260). Basil's image of Tenzie's grid has been given an observable presence; this means to solidify Basil and Tenzie's friendship but it also consummates their two liminal spaces – her grid and his room – into one perfected masculine space.

¹¹⁰ Cf. "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*."

In sum, *Mango* and *One* are quite similar in their goals and scope, despite the fact that Auch is a synaesthete and Mass is not. In either text, the synaesthete's formative process is also defined by three liminal phases. Both Mia and Basil begin their story as a disordered other and they subsequently crusade to save another synaesthete from seclusion. Both protagonists begin with a preliminal phase, where the subject believes they sh/e is cursed with an alien form of perception, a liminal phase, where the subject learns about synaesthesia but is still considered to be neither normal and abnormal, and a postliminal phase, where the synaesthete becomes convinced that sh/e possesses a supernatural gift. Ultimately, *Mango* and *One* are part of an emerging trend in Young Adult fiction, where synaesthesia is systematically represented as an empty object or a wayward form of perception; the synaesthete, by extension, is typified as a voiceless other who is incapable and unwilling to overrule their marginalized position.

Coda: The Wikiality of the Synaesthesia Closet

Goodreads provides an assortment of YA novels to investigate and discuss, and this social cataloging site also further complicates my original question about the categorization of the text with synaesthesia. In the age of new media, it is arguable that the synaesthete need not endure the prolonged uncertainty and alienation that Cytowic and others suggest are typical of synaesthetic individuals. If isolation and silence are definitive characteristics of synaesthetic identity, the myriad social networking and cataloging sites and web applications available should prove to be viable outlets for understanding the mode, connecting with other synaesthetes, and finding texts on synaesthesia that one would otherwise not be able to access. But *Goodreads*, arguably one of the primary outlets for information of synaesthesia in fiction, reinforces the categorical separation between ‘distinctly’ synaesthetic narratives and stories without any presence of idiopathic cross-sensory perception.

Prior to my *Goodreads* search, I had stumbled upon a few texts with synaesthesia thanks to the few scholarly articles on synaesthesia in fiction, most notably “Synesthesia in Literature” by Patricia Lynne Duffy. Duffy’s article introduces the reader to many works of fiction that feature synaesthesia and synaesthetic metaphor, but Duffy sometimes fails to reflect on the construction of synaesthesia in her chosen texts. For example, “Synesthesia in Literature” opens with the following statement: “In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, the author describes the ‘yellow cocktail music’” (647). This, Duffy argues, is an example of a synaesthetic sound → colour transfer. Duffy states that this metaphor allows the reader to “both hear and ‘see’ the pervasive music” (647). This is a problematic reading of the text because it assumes first, that all

people understand synaesthesia or have access to the mode, and second, that the content of the text physically manifests in front of the reader when it is read. I am hesitant to agree that this is an instance of synaesthesia, and I would instead suggest that this metaphor is an example of a synecdoche. Arguably, the music seems yellow because the orchestra is playing at sunset, and the sun may also be in the narrator's eyes. *Gatsby* is told from the point of view of Nick Carraway, and Nick's narration often resorts to underlexicalization. *Gatsby's* presence and the atmosphere of West Egg are characterized in terms of absence because *Gatsby* is meant to embody the Jazz Age itself, while Nick finds the significance of the Jazz Age ambiguous, if not entirely empty.

The few articles on synaesthesia in fiction tend gloss over the representation of synaesthetic lived experience, and the very abundance of this kind of analysis gives the impression that metaphor is the only way to either analyze or experience synaesthesia. But this is not to say that synaesthesia studies altogether ignore online resources on synaesthesia. There are three online communities dedicated to synaesthesia research and synaesthesia as a public which are repeatedly mentioned in synaesthesia studies. First, David Eagleman's Synaesthesia Battery, the aforementioned online version of the consistency test, is discussed in numerous studies on consistency testing. Notably, Michelle Jarick and Clare Jonas praise the versatility of the battery since the battery can also test sequence-space synaesthesia: the battery includes a module that can simulate a 3D environment, which is a feature that the traditional print test cannot replicate (140).¹¹¹ Secondly, Sean Day's Synaesthesia List, an online internet forum where synaesthetes can meet and discuss the experience, is devoted to "bring[ing] together synaesthetes around

¹¹¹ Cf. "Synesthesia, Sequences, and Space."

the world” (904).¹¹² Lastly, the American Synesthesia Association, created in 1995 by Patricia Lynne Duffy and Carol Steen, means to both promote education of synaesthesia and allow synaesthetes to connect with one another via annual conferences and an email discussion group.¹¹³ Edward M. Hubbard and Julia Simner specifically identify this email group as a means for the parent of a synaesthete to help their child dissipate any feelings of isolation or confusion (77).¹¹⁴ What these three sites have in common is the desire to reassure the synaesthete that they are not alone and that other people with cross-sensory perception can be contacted over the internet.

We are still no closer to an actual academic discussion of synaesthetic identity in fiction. Here, I would like to channel Stephen Colbert in order to describe the state of scholarly criticism on synaesthesia in fiction; specifically, I draw on two interrelated terms that Colbert coined on his news-parody television show *The Colbert Report*: “truthiness” and “wikiality.” As James H. Fowler describes the terms, “truthiness” refers to “emotion based” arguments that are presented as fact, simply because the speaker wants them to be fact; “wikiality” is an online phenomenon or idea, such a Wikipedia article or a topic trending on Twitter, that is assumed to be true because enough people believe it to be truthy: it is “a reality where, if enough people agree on the notion, it becomes truth” (533-534).¹¹⁵ Building on this, the prevalent way of talking about synaesthesia in fiction is so copious that one might argue that this dialectic has become the “wikiality” of synaesthetic identity; this dialectic may be easily mistaken as the only way to analyse synaesthesia in fiction, simply because it is so common. Although

¹¹² Cf. “Synesthesia: A First-Person Perspective.”

¹¹³ Cf. <http://www.synesthesia.info/aboutus.html>.

¹¹⁴ Cf. “Synesthesia in School-Aged Children.”

¹¹⁵ Cf. “The Colbert Bump in Campaign Donations: More Truthful than Truthy.”

scientific research on synaesthesia continues to develop and expand, the role of synaesthesia in fiction remains widely unexamined.

Now, a good amount of articles on synaesthesia are also written by synaesthetes themselves, and so it is no surprise that some of these pieces resort to truthy arguments, simply because the topic is so close to them. Some synaesthetes scholars write so lazily on the subject, you almost feel bad for them. Duffy, for example, sums up her article “Synesthesia in Literature” with the following précis: “whether in real or symbolic ways, synesthesia has come to represent wider possibilities of the nature of the reality we perceive – which, perhaps touches on the human desire to break beyond what is familiar to a vision of the new” (668). Duffy’s closing line here seems to suggest that synesthesia helps blur the lines between normal and “quirky” modes of perception, as she defines synaesthesia (667). But this assumes that synaesthesia has two conflicting dimensions: first, synaesthesia is a normal means of understanding reality, and second, synaesthesia is also an exceptional, multimodal key to solving cognitive inequality. Perhaps I fail to see the nuances of the “wider possibilities” to which Duffy refers, but I believe that if we synaesthetes want to be treated equally, we should not vie to be considered superior to people who do not have this seemingly ‘special, extra sense.’

Although widespread knowledge of synaesthesia remains relatively obscure, Facebook, for example, has several groups where the subject may converse with other users interested in synaesthesia. Here, the synaesthete can also share and compare h/er percepts with other synaesthetes. Social media heralds a “new communication landscape,” as stated by Kietzmann et al., and social networking allows the subject to

explore or join new online communities, even with a degree of anonymity (241; 243).¹¹⁶ In “Synesthesia in Cyberspace,” the final chapter of Duffy’s *Cats*, published in 2001, Duffy calls for further examination of the effect of the internet on synaesthetic identity, and she even goes so far as to epigraph this chapter with the following quote by Dr. Peter Grossenbacher: “the internet was made for synesthetes” (159). However, Duffy’s examination of synaesthetes and the internet has become dated, and the epigraph’s call has gone largely unanswered. Synaesthesia scholarship believes that synaesthetes tend to keep their experience a secret, even to the extent that the subject may feel “closeted,” as Sean Day suggests (940).¹¹⁷ This makes one wonder why the effect of social media on synaesthetic identity is not a central discussion in synaesthesia studies: social media allows the subject to investigate different synaesthesia publics without the fear of disbelief and ridicule. When we speak of the role of synaesthesia in fiction, social media, and popular culture, we need to unpack the phantasmagoria that surrounds synaesthesia, not assume that specialness and silence are unimpeachable features of synaesthetic experience.

¹¹⁶ Cf. “Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media.”

¹¹⁷ Cf. “Synesthesia: A First-Person Person Perspective.”

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Appendix A

Let's turn to one of Žižek's examples of the *sinthome* from *Looking Awry*. Žižek argues that "The Pond" by Patricia Highsmith is an example of the *sinthome*.¹¹⁸ In "The Pond," Elinor, a widowed mother, moves to a country house with her son, Chris. In the garden, there is a black pond covered with vines and roots. Chris is attracted to the pond and he asks his mother how deep it is. Elinor sees a dead carp in the pond and she forbids her son from playing anywhere near the water; the carp seems to be a premonition, and Elinor suddenly becomes anxious as if afflicted with a "physical pain" (41). One night, Chris wanders into the pond and becomes tangled in the vines; in the morning, Elinor finds him drowned. After his funeral, she hires landscapers to clear the vines from the pond; soon after the landscapers finish, however, the vines not only return, they seem alive and they begin to move like "tentacles" (55). Elinor is "fascinated" by the inexplicable resurgence of the vines, and she descends to the pond to cut and pull the vines herself (56). She works so frantically that she becomes tangled in the vines and she begins to sink in the mud; eventually, she gives up and allows herself be pulled under. As the vines drag her under the water, she sees a hallucination of Chris on the shore: he is smiling and holding a dead carp.

In "The Pond," Žižek argues, Elinor does not resist the "embrace" of the vines because she believes they will bring her closer to her dead son (133). Since Chris's death cannot be logically explained, Elinor continues to ruminate over his passing. The pond,

¹¹⁸ This summary of "The Pond" is my own; I summarize the same plot points that Žižek does, but I also add quotes from the original story. I also build on Žižek's original analysis of the text in order to make this example as clear as possible. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek's analysis of the *sinthome* in "The Pond" is somewhat thin; aside from his summary of the story, the entirety of his analysis is as follows: "Eventually she stops resisting and yields to their embrace, recognizing in their power of attraction the call of her dead son. Here we have an example of the *sinthome*: the pond is the 'open would of nature,' the kernel of enjoyment that simultaneously attracts and repels us" (133).

Žižek states, is an example of the sinthome because the pond is “the kernel of enjoyment that simultaneously attracts and repels us” (133). In other words, Elinor is repulsed by the vines because they remind her of her son’s death, but she is also attracted to the pond because she desires to know exactly how he died. The pond is the “kernel” or the “leftover” of her son’s death: it is the object that reminds Elinor that he is dead. Elinor gives into the power of the vines because she wants to die the same way as her son; this is a desperate attempt to make sense of his death. Elinor would have no other way of coming to terms with Chris’s death because the somewhat supernatural manner of his death cannot be understood unless it is experienced firsthand. The pond is an example of the sinthome because it is the object of desire that Elinor feels she can and must obtain, though its obtainment comes at a terrible price. The pond, then, represents Elinor’s drive and the gratification of her desire: it is neither symptom (the coded message: the official cause of death) nor fantasy (an imagined, personalized scenario of Chris’s death). It is for this reason that the sinthome is “utterly stupid:” it allows Elinor to experience death in the same manner as Chris, and this act provides her with the closure she needs. Elinor’s death seems to give her life purpose (the Symbolic). It also helps her to move on: she realizes that Chris’s actual experience of dying is something she can never know (the Real). The hallucination of Chris holding the carp reminds her of the purpose of her death (the Imaginary). Elinor comes to accept her place in the symbolic order by making the idiotic choice to enter the pond and leave the symbolic order behind.

Appendix B

According to Lacan, there are four possible types of social link, and in each case a speaker shapes the identity of an addressee. The four discourses are master, university, hysteric, and analyst. Sean Sturm describes the four discourses as follows.¹¹⁹ The discourse of the master is concerned with governing and policing. In the discourse of the master, the master has absolute power over all other signifiers. The discourse of the university is similar to the master. In the university discourse, pedagogy is the dominant signifier: this discourse privileges teaching and encoding. One figure has ample power but must follow the ideology of the state or institution. In the discourse of the hysteric, the subject questions the symptom and resists the master-signifier. Lastly, the discourse of the analyst means to heal the subject.

Each discourse consists of four components, which Sturm describes as follows: the agent (who or what is in power), the other (who or what the agent controls), truth (how the agent uses its power), and the product (the outcome of this relationship). Lacan represents this social relationship with an algorithm, which is illustrated below.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{agent} & \rightarrow & \text{other} \\ \hline \text{truth} & & \text{product} \end{array}$$

These four factions form the basis of Lacan's four discourses, and each discourse follows this algorithm. The algorithm may look daunting but I will break down it as follows. Let's start with the agent and the other. The agent is the dominant faction and the other is the faction the agent controls. The arrow demonstrates the relationship of power between the agent and other. The other is the receiver of the agent's address: the agent commands the other.

¹¹⁹ Cf. "Lacan's Four (of Five) Discourses (Beware All Ye who Enter Here!)."

agent → other

Now, the agent and the other are situated in the top positions because they are the main components in this algorithm. Mark Bracher states that the top positions represent the “manifest” and “overt” components of a discourse (109).¹²⁰ Let us consider one of Žižek’s example of the master’s discourse: the absolute monarchy. In the master’s discourse, the master-signifier dominates all other signifiers: in this discourse, the master-signifier is the agent. In the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV, for example, Louis is the master-signifier, and he therefore occupies the dominant position. But Louis does not just dominate the people: Louis shapes the way the people live and he also has the power to “transform fidelity to flattery” (298).¹²¹ Louis directly influences the beliefs of his people and how his people relate to the world. The absolute monarch controls everything in the kingdom: he is “the Master par excellence” (298). Thus Louis is the agent and he has power over all signifiers in the monarchy.

Louis → all other signifiers

Let us now turn to the bottom positions. The bottom positions denote the hidden aspects of a discourse; each of the bottom positions represent “the covert, latent, implicit, or repressed factor – the factor that acts or occurs beneath the surface” (109).¹²² In other words, the bottom positions demonstrate the social effects of discourse. Before I discuss ‘truth’ on the bottom left, I will discuss the product on the bottom right; I will discuss ‘truth’ in a moment but let’s omit it for now.

Louis → all other signifiers

 the product

¹²⁰ Cf. “On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses.”

¹²¹ Cf. *The Parallax View*.

¹²² Cf. “On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses.”

In the bottom right position, we find the product or outcome of this relationship. In the master's discourse of Louis XIV, the subjects come to believe that the all-powerful king is "made of special stuff," to quote Sharpe and Boucher (92). Since the people come to believe that Louis is a sublime being, the king's power continues to grow unchecked. This divine image of the king is the product of the absolute monarchy's discourse of the master. Therefore, Louis is bestowed with the name "the sun king" because he seems omnipotent (298).¹²³ We can stray from Lacan's original formulation for a moment and simplify this relationship below.

Louis → all other signifiers = the sun king

But what factors allow this discourse to exist? Let's turn to the position on the bottom left, truth. This is a somewhat slippery term which I think can lead to some confusion. Simply put, 'truth' signifies how the agent uses its power; to quote Sturm, 'truth' is the condition that makes the power of the agent possible. For example, during his reign, Louis used his power to instigate radical domestic reforms and centralize the government. In order to accomplish these goals, Louis needed to raise taxes but also pacify the members of both the church and the nobility who opposed his view. He also dedicated a large amount of energy waging wars on the continent.¹²⁴ Louis draws his power from making the subject expendable; this allows him to continue to oppress his people. Therefore, in the absolute monarchy, the monarch is the agent, the system of

¹²³ Cf. *The Parallax View*.

¹²⁴ Žižek's analysis here is also somewhat vague, so I have expanded upon his original discussion of Louis XIV to make my example clear. This information on Louis XIV's reign is paraphrased from Wim Klooster's *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History*, pages 5 to 6.

knowledge is the other, the subject is the condition of possibility, and the sublime image of the king is the product.¹²⁵

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Louis} & \rightarrow & \text{all other signifiers} \\ \hline \text{subject} & & \text{the sun king} \end{array}$$

Now, Lacan would symbolize the discourse of the master in a different, arguably more efficient manner. Lacan symbolizes each discourse with its own “matheme;” each matheme is a quasi-mathematical formula for the given discourse. According to Marshall W. Alcorn, these mathemes function as “metaphors that show condensed relationships quickly” (67).¹²⁶ The matheme for the discourse of the master is as follows.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_1 & \rightarrow & S_2 \\ \hline \$ & & a \end{array}$$

Each discourse demonstrates how an agent uses a condition of possibility to get a product from the other. In all four discourses, the agent, other, truth, and product are located in the same positions. But each discourse also has four variables, and these variables occupy different positions depending on the discourse; these variables are as follows: the master-signifier (S_1), the system of knowledge (S_2), the split subject ($\$$), and surplus jouissance (a). First, the master-signifier (S_1) is the signifier that the subject identifies with most. The master-signifier is the “quilting point” that binds all the other variables together (25).¹²⁷ Second, we have the split subject ($\$$). The subject needs language to relate to the world but also themselves. The subject is “split” because they use language to constitute identity, though language is also a structure that imposes its

¹²⁵ My example of the absolute monarchy interpolates Boucher and Sharpe’s formula for Louis XIV, which is itself based on Žižek’s own example; this formula can be found in *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, pages 91 to 92.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire*.

¹²⁷ Cf. *Seminar XVII: L’Envers de la Psychanalyse (1969-1970)*.

own ideologies on the subject. As Fink states, the subject is never anything but this very split: “the split is, in a sense, the condition of the possibility of the existence of a subject” (48).¹²⁸ Third, we have the system of knowledge (S_2). The system of knowledge is the “battery of signifiers” that shape the way the subject relates to the world (31).¹²⁹ Lastly, each discursive relationship has a surplus, which is an object of desire (a). As Derek Briton states, this surplus constitutes a lack; it is *jouissance* “manifested in terms of a desire for completeness” (58).¹³⁰ This surplus object is referred to as “*petit objet a*” because it is a transitional object. To channel Donald Winnicott, this object is a “security blanket” of sorts that binds the subject to the world and creates a sense of satisfaction.¹³¹ In the discourse of the master, the master-signifier is the agent (S_1), the system of knowledge is the other (S_2), the split subject is the condition of possibility (\$), and the product is *petit objet a* (a).

The four discourses each describe a social bond. As Livio Boni states, the four discourses each illustrate an “economy of enjoyment in the order of discourse” (132).¹³² In the discourse of the master, the master-signifier is the agent because the master-signifier (the king) has power over all other variables (the people, how the people think, and how the king is perceived). In the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV, Louis (S_1) oppresses his people (\$) in order to shape their beliefs (S_2). The result is the creation of an image of Louis as an omnipresent being (a). According to Fink, another example of the discourse of the master is capitalist ideology (131).¹³³ The capitalist is the master-

¹²⁸ Cf. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Seminar XVII: L'Envers de la Psychanalyse (1969-1970)*.

¹³⁰ Cf. “Learning the Subject of Desire.”

¹³¹ Cf. *Pre-Object Relatedness: Early Attachment and the Psychoanalytic Tradition*.

¹³² Cf. “Formalisation and Context: Some Elements of a Materialist Reading of Lacan’s Four Discourses.”

¹³³ Cf. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*.

signifier (S_1). The worker's social status is defined by this relationship; in "slaving away" for the capitalist, the worker comes to "embody" the knowledge of this oppression (S_2). The capitalist must hide his weaknesses and the fact that the master, like the worker, is a "being of language" (131). The capitalist "symbolically castrates" the worker by forcing the worker to work under questionable conditions ($\$$). The capitalist only wants to see the worker make a profit which the capitalist can then appropriate (a).

$$\frac{\text{capitalist}}{\text{symbolic castration}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{worker's knowledge}}{\text{surplus wealth}}$$

This is the formulation of the master's discourse. In another one of the four discourses, the master-signifier (S_1), system of knowledge (S_2), the split subject ($\$$), and surplus jouissance (a) will occupy different positions. Every time we rotate the variables a quarter turn to the right, we have another formulation of the four discourses (Fig. 20).

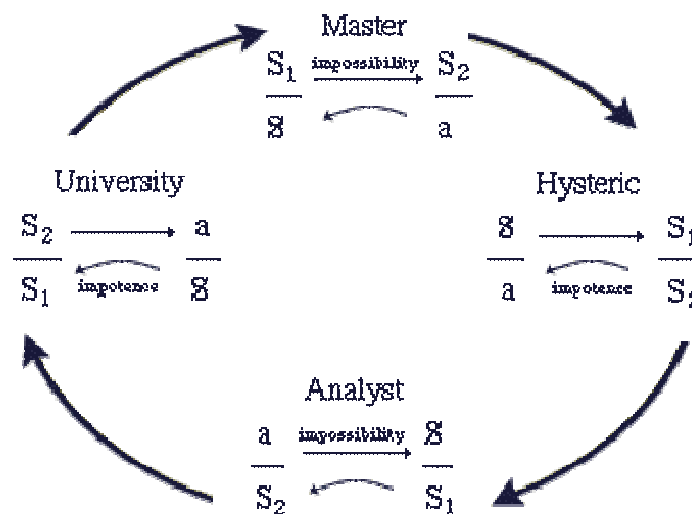


Fig. 20. The Structure of the Discourses. "Lacan's Four (or Five) Discourses (Beware, All Ye who Enter Here!)." *Te Ipu Pakore: The Broken Vessel*. Sean Sturm. Web. 8 May 2014.

When we rotate the variables of the master's discourse a quarter turn to the right, we have the hysteric's discourse. Here, the split subject ($\$$) is the agent, and it addresses the master-signifier (S_1). The agent derives its power from the desired object (a). A new

system of knowledge is produced (S_2). According to Bert Oliver, an example of the hysteric's discourse is Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Simply put, this principle states that when we make a scientific measurement, we also affect the measurement; therefore, we can never be absolutely certain of a given quantification. This principle "reveals the structural, as opposed to merely empirical, indeterminacy or 'uncertainty' at the heart of science."¹³⁴ Here, Heisenberg is the agent, and he interrogates science. The agent derives its power from the pleasure of scientific inquiry; as Fink states, the hysteric "gets off" on knowledge (133). The product is a new scientific theory that questions the foundations of science.

Heisenberg	→	science
desire for knowledge		new science

Another quarter turn, and we have the analyst's discourse. Now the desired object (a) is the agent, and it addresses the split subject (\$). The object derives its power from the system of knowledge (S_2). The product is new master-signifiers (S_1). Ola Sigurdson argues that faith is an example of the discourse of the analyst. God is a sublime object but his mastery also empowers his subjects (99).¹³⁵ Faith encourages the believer to be an autonomous subject, though the believer must also remain a servant of God; therefore, the subject is split. God derives his power from the teachings of the scripture. This relationship forms the basis for other discourses: societies, communities, or organizations founded on faith.

God	→	believer
word of God		institutions founded on faith

¹³⁴ Cf. "Lacan's Theory of Discourse."

¹³⁵ Cf. *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope*.

Lastly, a final quarter turn brings us to the discourse of the university. This is the discourse that privileges education and encoding (132).¹³⁶ According to Žižek, Stalinism is an example of the discourse of the university. Stalinism is founded on authoritarianism and state terror. Stalin's policies are dominant (S_2). Stalin's policies dictate how the figurehead should run the state, regardless of who is in charge (S_1). The Soviet people are the other objectified by state terror, yet the people still adore Stalin and desire the continued existence of the state (a). This renders the Soviet people powerless and divided; also, the Soviet subject accepts the fact that sh/e can be imprisoned or executed for any reason or at any time (\$). In the university discourse, the system of knowledge is the agent, the objectified desire of the subject is the other, the figurehead is the condition of possibility, and the fragmented identity of the subject is the product. In *Looking Awry*, Žižek states that pedagogy is the "ultimate authority" in the discourse of the university since this authority is supported but also derived from a powerful figure (132). Drawing on Žižek's example, the formula for Stalinism is as follows.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{ideology} & \rightarrow & \text{objectified subject} \\ \hline \text{supreme leader} & & \text{fragmented subject} \end{array}$$

In sum, we can think of the algorithm as the cookware and the matheme as the recipe. Each discourse has the same preparation container: the agent, informed by truth, addresses the other and creates a product. The four discourses also have the same ingredients: the master-signifier (S_1), the system of knowledge (S_2), the split subject (\$), and surplus jouissance (a). The four discourses each express a unique combination of these four variables. Each matheme is a different recipe, but the algorithm is the same.

¹³⁶ Cf. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*.