

Perfume Polytechnic

Exploring olfaction in perfume, art, science & life.

Smell and Synaesthesia Part One: Frédéric Malle

Posted on February 18, 2015 by FeministConfessional

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(https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/1024px-synaesthesia_5.jpg)

An example of time unit – space synaesthesia. Image credit: Dankonikolic (Own work) –
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Synesthesia_5.jpg
(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Synesthesia_5.jpg)

Synaesthesia: a definition

Synaesthesia is a perceptual condition of mixed sensations: a stimulus in one sensory modality (e.g., hearing) involuntarily elicits a sensation/experience in another modality (e.g. vision). Likewise, perception of a form (e.g., a letter) may induce an unusual perception in the same modality (e.g. a color).

Source: <http://www.synesthete.org/> (<http://www.synesthete.org/>)

Synaesthesia is a kind of sensory interplay. It isn't the same as consciously setting out to find equivalences between things attributed to separate senses, realms, or artistic media. And it isn't the same as using metaphors or similes to describe things, as in the following passage by William Shakespeare from *Romeo and Juliet*:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Here, Romeo sees Juliet at night through a window, and finds her beauty so vibrant and illuminating that he compares her to the sun. In the world of scent, our vocabulary to describe smells and perfumes is limited, due to an insufficient vocabulary or language to describe smell; so we use metaphors, similes and comparisons to describe perfume frequently. When we describe smells, especially those that are unusual or new to us, we refer to other things outside the world of scent to describe the smell. A particular perfume note might smell nutty, dark, or velvety, dirty or bright. These adjectives actually come from the sensual realms of sight, touch and taste, and yet we often use such words to describe smell. But this is not synaesthesia, rather, it is a deficiency of the language that we have available to us to describe scent that forces us to use words that commonly describe other senses.

Similarly, we might imagine the colour orange when we smell orange oil, or red when we smell raspberries, or green when we crush and smell a pine needle, but these are understandable, logical associations. They are not synaesthetic responses. We compare perfumes to works of art or music or even famous people, but not in a genuine synaesthetic way (unless we are smell synaesthetes). Again, we do this to try to describe what we are smelling to others so that we can communicate about our experiences with smells.

However, for a small percentage of the population (between 2-5%), the parts of the brain that usually detect and experience our five senses as discrete things, connect with each other neurologically, so that when one sense (or perceptual mode) is engaged, it triggers a response in another part of the brain that relates to another sense (or perceptual mode). The result? A kind of sensory co-existence of two (or sometimes more) sensory or perceptual experiences at once. One sensory experience triggers a simultaneous co-experience, usually between seemingly unrelated things.

One key factor of working out if you're a synaesthete is the repeatability of such experiences. For instance, if every time a person hears the musical note "G" they see the same shade of yellow in their mind's eye, and they have other colours assigned to other musical pitches, they almost certainly have synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is something that people seem to either have or not have. It's not something that can be cultivated. It can be simulated, and *is* simulated sometimes by artists who wish to find analogies or faux-synaesthetic associations between different art forms (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia#Artistic_investigations) or to create multi-disciplinary works. But with synaesthetes, the experience has always been there, usually throughout their lives, and it's often repeatable and the same, and it can't be switched off.

melita white • composer



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/mw-menu-final.jpeg>)

The colours and shapes used in the design for my website were based on synaesthetic associations between the letters of my name and the colours in which I see these letters (grapheme-colour synaesthesia).

Why am I so interested in synaesthesia? Because I am a synaesthete. And because it's one of the few neurological conditions that allows one to function fully in society! In fact, it can make life more interesting. For as long as I can remember, I have always experienced grapheme-colour synaesthesia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grapheme%E2%80%93color_synesthesia), which is one of the most common, most studied types of synaesthesia (there are more than 60 types altogether). This means that when I imagine letters and numbers (as forms) in my mind, I see each letter or number in a specific colour and shade. The same colour and shade each time. I had no idea this was unusual, until I thought to mention it to a friend when I was 19 years old. My friend, a fellow composer, was most excited: he told me it was a rare condition called synaesthesia and that not many people experienced it. I'm glad that the first person I chose to tell was someone who a) knew what it was and b) didn't mock me or make me feel strange for seeing coloured letters and numbers in my head. Apparently synaesthesia is much more prevalent amongst creative people and artists, and some studies show that it is also more common amongst women. I also experience number form (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number_form) synaesthesia, whereby the days of the week and months of the year form a pattern of linear blocks in my visual imagination, which I see every time I imagine the days ahead, or try to plan something.

As I mentioned already, the grapheme-colour synaesthesia that I experience is actually one of the most common kinds. I'm jealous of those who feel shapes when they eat certain foods (e.g. the chicken tastes "pointy"), or hear music when they smell certain smells. As a composer, I really wish I'd been born with a type of synaesthesia that related to sound in some way, and as a perfume buff, I'd love to have a smell-based synaesthesia. But alas, it's not meant to be, and as a true synaesthete, I know that sadly I can't train myself to develop these kinds of synaesthesia, nor would it feel right to fabricate connections between these senses and any others. Being endlessly fascinated by this topic, and wanting to find out more about the other kinds of synaesthesia, I

decided to research the topic as it relates to the sense of smell. I wanted to find out if there were perfumers and artists out there who are known to experience smell-based synaesthesia. And there are.

So, with all that in mind, in today's post I wanted to introduce you to synaesthesia, tell you a little bit about my own experience of it, and introduce you to my first subject in this series: perfumer Frédéric Malle, who experiences smell-colour synaesthesia.

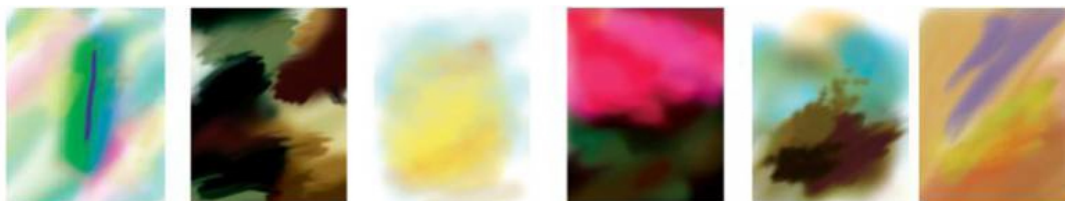
Frédéric Malle

Frédéric Malle Editions de Parfums is a collection of niche fragrances composed by some of the greatest perfumers in the fragrance industry.

Frédéric Malle introduced the Editions de Parfums in 2000, as a completely original concept whereby the world's greatest noses composed exclusive, creative fragrances that would be sold under their creator's names. In an era in which most companies attach more importance to brand names, by intensified marketing campaigns, Malle brings the attention back to the product itself: perfume. Through a simple "back to basics" ideology, the Editions de Parfums are challenging all prevailing trends.

Frédéric Malle grew up immersed in the world of perfumery; his grandfather, Serge Heftler, was most notably the founder of Parfums Christian Dior. Malle started his own career in 1986, at the prestigious perfume creation labs Roure Bertrand Dupont. Over the years, he acquired a profound knowledge of the raw materials of which perfumes are composed, as well as a strong sense of olfactory balance. Simply, he is an "evaluator," the professional term defining a specialist whose deep understanding of fragrance structure and accords enables him to critique a perfume's composition.

Source: <http://www.fredericmalle.com/eu/about-us/frederic-malle>
(<http://www.fredericmalle.com/eu/about-us/frederic-malle>).



(<https://perfumepolytechnic.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/malle-colors.jpg>).

Frédéric Malle's illustrations for the limited edition release of Editions de Parfums at Barneys New York.

Image credit: Illustrations by Frédéric Malle. Image sourced from The Fashion Reporter blog:

<http://thefashionreporter.com/blog/?paged=2&m=201212%2Fpage%2F2>

(<http://thefashionreporter.com/blog/?paged=2&m=201212%2Fpage%2F2>).

In 2012, to celebrate ten years in business together, Barneys New York and Frédéric Malle released a special, limited edition range of packaging for the Editions de Parfums collections, based on Malle's own synaesthetic illustrations.

Malle told Laura Feinstein of [PSFK.com](http://www.psfk.com/2013/01/frederic-malle-perfume-2.html) (<http://www.psfk.com/2013/01/frederic-malle-perfume-2.html>):

To celebrate 10 years with **Barneys** [Malle's US distributor], I decided to create a line of packaging with each of these illustrations, so that – for the first time in the history of our brand the exterior expresses what's inside the bottle...

When smelling fragrances I see colors. This capacity to translate scents into images is called synesthesia. A few years ago, I decided to put these visions that I have when smelling the perfumes of our collection on paper. I used Photoshop, its many layers and its many brushes to illustrate the layers and textures that I smell when smelling these scents. At first the purpose of these images was to explain each perfume not using words.

While I receive inspiration from all things– nature, things I see while walking, design, I certainly am also inspired by these colors.

In this wonderful video from Barneys New York's website, Malle explains his synaesthesia and describes what he sees when he smells a couple of fragrances from the line, while showing us the resulting illustrations.

Sorry

This video does not exist.

Video sourced from Barneys New York's "[The Window](http://thewindow.barneys.com/beyond-words-ten-years-of-frederic-malle-at-barneys/)" website (<http://thewindow.barneys.com/beyond-words-ten-years-of-frederic-malle-at-barneys/>).

I hope you've enjoyed the first in this series on synaesthesia as it relates to the sense of smell. I'd love to know if you experience synaesthesia too, and if so, what type you have.

If you'd like to read more about synaesthesia, the following websites are good places to visit:

[Wikipedia's page on synaesthesia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia>).

[Synaesthesia.com](http://www.synaesthesia.com/en/) (<http://www.synaesthesia.com/en/>).

[University of Sussex synaesthesia research page](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/synaesthesia/index) (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/synaesthesia/index>).

If you'd like to take a test to see if you are a synaesthete, I recommend the following:

The Synaesthesia Battery test (http://www.synesthete.org/pretest_start.php?action=register&remai=&semail=&ch=).

Frederic Malle's website can be accessed here (<http://www.fredericmalle.com/>).

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NUMBER FORM SYNAESTHESIA, OLFACTION, PERFUME AND SYNAESTHESIA, PERFUME
POLYTECHNIC, PERFUMERS SYNAESTHESIA, PERFUMERS SYNESTHESIA, PERFUMERS
WHO ARE SYNESTHETES, PERFUMERS WITH SYNAESTHESIA, SMELL AND SYNESTHESIA,
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4 thoughts on “Smell and Synaesthesia Part One: Frédéric Malle”

1. Pingback: Smell and Synaesthesia Part Two: Synaesthetic Poems for a Sunday Afternoon | Perfume Polytechnic

2. *Katherine*

MARCH 9, 2015 AT 6:35 AM

My son is a grapheme-color synesthete, with numbers, letters and musical notes. He also sees color when performing Taekwondo. I was wondering if there were any studies involving motor nerves that you know of?

Reply

◦ *pollytechnic*

MARCH 9, 2015 AT 9:18 AM

Hi Katherine – how exciting to hear about your son! Sounds like he has a synaesthetic connection between colour and musical sounds? And the Taekwondo connection to colour sounds amazing! There are many, many kinds of synaesthesia, I think it might be worth trying to track down an expert or some scientific literature. I'll see what I can find and will get back to you here... I'm not sure I've come across anything to do with motor nerves yet, my understanding is it's to do with cross-wiring between different parts of the brain that don't normally talk to one another. It's a fabulous thing – your son is very lucky!

Reply

3. Pingback: Just Juice: Brief Fragrance Reviews – Albino (A Study in White) and The Voices of Trees by Dawn Spencer Hurwitz | Perfume Polytechnic

