

THE DEEP CONNECTION

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BETWEEN COLOR AND MUSIC

Boost Your Health and Emotions Through the Arts

One day in my early twenties, I saw an ad on a bulletin board for a health treatment that involved a combination of sound, crystals, music, and film. I was living in the small town of Los Alamos, New Mexico, high in the mountains. Intrigued by the unusual description, I decided to call and make an appointment. When I arrived, I was ushered into a room where there was a structure made of crystals in a large lattice, forming a pyramid. I was instructed to lay on the floor under the pyramid and left in the quiet room for about 20 minutes.

When the practitioner returned, he led me into another room with a large, comfortable chair. The windows were covered with blackout curtains. The room was completely dark. I could not even see my hand in front of my face! A film began to play on the wall in front of me. A series of large, colorful crystals spun and turned in space while soothing music played.

Although the film was beautiful to watch, I didn't feel any immediate changes. However, I enjoyed the experience enough to encourage a friend to try the treatment herself. For her, watching the film released a torrent of emotions. Something was definitely going on! Little did I know that many years later I would focus my master's degree on the history and therapeutic uses of combinations of color and sound.

From the Greeks to Modern Science

The power of art to inspire, comfort, and motivate is widely recognized. The more mysterious impacts of art reveal that there may be more to art than meets the eye. Modern research is proving this idea. In our world of ubiquitous, multimedia stimulation, the power of art and multimedia both to heal and to harm is a fertile field for ongoing research and increasingly practical applications.

From the days of the ancient Greeks through the Middle Ages, and into the Renaissance, both color and music were widely considered to possess inherent moral powers to influence their viewers and listeners for better or for worse. Even in



contemporary times, many mystics and followers of occult traditions have insisted that particular colors and types of music, especially synchronized combinations of the two art forms, possess the ability to induce trances, hypnotic states and healing.

The Divine Disease: Synesthesia

The word "synesthesia" is derived from the Greek words "syn,"



which means "together," and "aisthesis," which means "perception." Synesthesia refers to individuals who experience involuntary, cross-sensory associations. The most common form of synesthesia is "colored hearing," or seeing colors when a sound is heard. Interestingly, Pythagoras considered synesthesia to be the greatest philosophical gift and spiritual achievement, a type of divine disease.

Synesthesia has been studied repeatedly over the course of the last hundred years. Synesthesia is involuntary, stable over the individual's lifetime, contains an emotional component, and is marked by discreet perceptions. Although synesthetes may be no more divine than the rest of us, a December 1999 article in *Discover* magazine reported that "cognitive scientists contend that these unusual people are precious windows into the ultimate mystery of human consciousness."

Scientific Explanations of Synesthesia

Current scientific explanations of synesthesia are built on the hypothesis that "early in infancy, probably up to about four months



of age, all human babies experience sensory input in an undifferentiated way" (Andrew David Lyons, *Evaluating New Tools and Techniques for Intermedia Composition and Production*, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, July 2000).

Adult synesthesia may be a lack of modularization between the senses that normally develops. An intriguing aspect of synesthesia is the fact that the phenomenon is highly individual. Although there appears to be a genetic link in the occurrence of synesthesia, even synesthetes in the same family associate different colors with different sounds.

For example, one synesthete studied saw the color white in connection with hearing the vowel sound 'A,' whereas one of his daughters saw blue linked to 'A,' and another daughter saw the color black (Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*).

Multimedia Applications in Health & Psychology

Moving patterns of color and form have been used in a British hospital to reduce the pain medication needed by women during childbirth. In addition, combinations of nature films and music are gaining widespread acceptance in hospitals as a soothing alternative to traditional TV programming for patients.

Combinations of color and music have also been used by psychologists

as a type of moving Rorschach test. Another significant use of early forms of multimedia therapy took place with post-WWII veterans suffering from depression and post-traumatic shock. The patients were shown color-music movies, known as Auroratone films.

The color-music films consisted of changing abstract forms in pastel colors set to organ music, sometimes accompanied by the singing of Bing Crosby. Many patients viewing the Auroratone films were so moved emotionally that they became more accessible for traditional group and individual therapeutic methods.

More extreme examples for the phenomenon of the power of color and sound are the flashing lights in modern discos and bars. At the height of the disco era, dancers were known to pass out due to sensory overload. Psychologists also believe that the sensory overload caused by the combination of loud, rhythmic music and strobe lights reduces interpersonal inhibitions. Recent studies of epilepsy concur that some types of seizures can be triggered by the color and sound patterns of video games and animated cartoons.

Going Forward in a Multimedia World

In a world filled with multimedia, an examination of the possible association between color and music has become increasingly significant. An awareness of the power of multimedia experiences to trigger emotions and affect our psychology as well as physical health has become essential. ■

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