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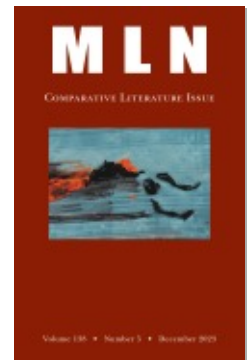
*The Other Synaesthesia* by Susan Bernstein (review)

Liesl Yamaguchi

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# REVIEWS

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**Susan Bernstein.** *The Other Synaesthesia*. SUNY Press, 2023. 136 pages.

*The Other Synaesthesia*, a dense volume of close readings by Susan Bernstein, commands respect for the sheer magnitude of its ambition: it seeks the terms by which the senses and the arts might be put into meaningful relation. It invites us, in other words, to contemplate the sublime, for the structure it would put into words would be unbounded. Unqualified by constraints of culture, language, and historical time, it would describe something like “an area in which a multiplicity can articulate itself” (109), a time or space in which “an irreducible plurality [might be] linked together but not fused” (23), “a dissolution of wholeness and transcendence that yet preserves and extends differences” (74). As these varied graspings indicate, *The Other Synaesthesia* falls short of its desire, as its author is the first to acknowledge. In place of a singular formulation or unified theory, what Bernstein offers under the somewhat surprising name of “synaesthesia” is a series of studies in which difference proves crucial, in a variety of ways, to the possibility of coming together.

It should be stressed from the outset that in Bernstein’s usage, “synaesthesia” does not refer to the current psychological definition of this term (“a sensation in one part of the body produced by a stimulus applied to another part,” *OED*), although this colloquial usage does turn up within the text. Bernstein aims to endow the term “synaesthesia” with an entirely different sense: one that would designate a general structure of connection without fusion and bear no relation to the homonymous neurological condition.

Although *The Other Synaesthesia* is dedicated to the memory of Werner Hamacher, its most immediate interlocutor is Jean-Luc Nancy, whose 1994 *Les Muses* provides the context for its title and orientation. Considering the process of “perceptive integration” that characterizes ordinary synaesthesia (glossed here as “the fusing of the senses”) in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological model, Nancy contends that “perceptive integration [...] would be more correctly located at the opposite extreme from artistic experience.” By Nancy’s account, what is foundational to art is poetic ‘correspondences,’ which “do not belong to the register of perceptive unity, which has no knowledge of ‘correspondence’ as such and knows only integrated simultaneity.” One who wishes to investigate the relation of the senses to the arts, he concludes, “can only envision a synaesthesia different in nature, *another* sensuous integration,

a sense proper to art (or proper to the senses in art)" (cit. Bernstein 14, trans. modified). "What," Bernstein wonders, "might this 'other synaesthesia' be?"

The book's six wide-ranging chapters undertake to envision this 'other synaesthesia' proper to art and, in Bernstein's hands, fundamental to community formation. Chapter One, "Synaesthesia and Community," traces the structure of community from Nancy's *La Communauté désavouée* through Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* and Sara Brill's *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life*, drawing out the commonalities between Nancy's notion of community as "being-with (*être-avec*)" and the classical sense of the verb *sunaiasthanesthai* ("to perceive jointly"—not within two senses of one body, but within multiple bodies simultaneously). The chapter then turns to texts by Nancy, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, finding a similar structure in these thinkers' conceptions of the arts and their interrelations. Initially invoked in its classical sense, the term "synaesthesia" gains entirely original associations in this chapter as well, with Heidegger's *Mit-Sein*, the French substantive *écriture*, and Benjamin's *constellation*, to name just a few.

Chapter Two, "Synaesthetic Reading: Liszt's Double Vision," finds echoes of Agamben's conception of friendship in the (written) correspondence of Franz Liszt and George Sand, offering a reading of their "synaesthetic friendship" characterized by the experience of exposure and disunity (28). The chapter's most eloquent figure for this friendship is the Aeolian harp: "a persistent romantic analogue of the poetic mind, the figurative mediator between outer motion and inner emotion" (M.H. Abrahams cit. Bernstein 29). Transforming the wind of the natural world into music, the harp also figures the separation between human and nature: it is a crafted, constructed device that "presents not an immediate unity between self and other, humans and nature, but rather a temporary eclipse of separation that can only be articulated poetically" (29).

The book's longest study, "Chapter Three: Baudelaire's Synaesthesia," draws out a notion of correspondence that is posited as the condition of possibility for (the other) synaesthesia. Meandering its way through Baudelaire's poetry and art criticism, the chapter suggests understanding Baudelaire's "correspondances" not just in terms of sensory correspondence, as in his celebrated sonnet, but also in terms of correspondences between texts and people, by way of citation. "The proper names punctuating Baudelaire's writing set up a communicative network drawing together singulars into a common project," Bernstein observes, finding that this network "sets the senses, the arts, and singular names into an interplay and circulation that can be understood as a common place, or a kind of community" (59).

Chapter Four, "Nietzsche, Wagner, and Demonic Communicability" locates the source of Nietzsche's intense admiration of Wagner in a particular quality that the philosopher identifies in the composer's works: demonic impartability or communicability (*dämonische Mittheilbarkeit*). The chapter draws out the similarities between Nietzsche's accounts of this quality in Wagner, its appear-

ance in Wagner's own writings, and the general structure of synaesthesia that the author is seeking to develop.

Chapter Five, "The Unworking of Synaesthesia in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*" offers an extended analysis of the two Salomé paintings described in the 1884 novel before turning its attention to Huysmans' treatments of the olfactory arts. Bernstein clarifies Huysmans' project by setting it in opposition to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which she understands to aim toward synthesis rather than connection in difference. Further clarification emerges from a comparison with Stéphane Mallarmé, who crafts multisensory experience by striking upon the single term capable of diffracting "at once form, scent, colour, quality and brilliance" (one cannot help thinking of "Hérodiade") where Huysmans crafts synaesthetic connections through parataxis, "piling up and accumulating overt comparisons" (85). The extended investigation of "aroma-poiesis" in *À Rebours* concludes with a revindication of sensory rhythms working in concert, *contra* Max Nordau's infamous 1892 reading of decadent synaesthesia as evidence of degeneracy (89).

The book's final and perhaps most stimulating chapter, "Correspondances: Between Baudelaire and Heidegger" provocatively posits Heidegger's philosophy as "a theory of correspondence." This is not to say that Heidegger accepts a correspondence theory of truth (in which words could be adequate to things or propositions to states of affairs) but rather that Heidegger's philosophy is underwritten by *correspondances* (in the Baudelairean sense of the term explored in Chapter 3). The argument is presented in two parts: the first rehearses Heidegger's critique of a correspondence theory of truth and the second demonstrates how a notion of correspondences slips into his 1955 answer to the question "What is Philosophy?" Bernstein's argument hinges on Heidegger's translation of *Entsprechung* into French: *correspondance*.

The volume concludes with a brief "Note on Rhythm," which situates rhythm—glossed as a "vibration of movement prior to the specular recognition of the subject by itself"—as the space, or time, or perhaps both, in which "the other synaesthesia" takes place (109).

Upon closing this dense volume of essays, one regrets only that the author did not introduce the book with what seems, on reflection, to have been its real point of departure: Nancy's observation that experiencing art means keeping company with a work in time, and that keeping company with a work in time—sharing its rhythm, as it were—sets aesthetic experience at odds with synaesthetic experience as generally understood (which is characterized by simultaneity). From here, the book might have taken shape under the more recognizable term for Bernstein's topic (aesthetics), leading readers to understand over the course of the essays why it might make sense to call these aesthetic experiences, with their capacity for community formation, "synaesthetic." The term is apt, and Bernstein certainly earns it, but its invocation throughout the text in both its colloquial acceptance and in Bernstein's original sense can be confusing, and at times it can feel a bit forced. The issue arises particularly in chapters where the primary texts do not use the term

“synaesthesia” at all (Liszt and Sand; Baudelaire; Nietzsche and Wagner), and in sections where the texts suggest synaesthesia in the colloquial sense (Benjamin on Baudelaire; Huysmans), while Bernstein discusses them using the term in her original sense. The book that *The Other Synaesthesia* leads one to envision—not so far, in truth, from the one that exists—might merely dispense with the initial opposition to 21<sup>st</sup>-century psychology’s “synaesthesia,” which has little to do with the rich, careful, and sophisticated readings advanced here.

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