

MARILYN MONROE

Gentlemen Prefer Synesthetes

By Maureen Seaberg

The most glamorous star of all time was not only beautiful but possessed a brain trait that is now being researched vigorously around the world. Marilyn Monroe was likely a synesthete. Synesthetes are those curiously wonderful people able to blend senses, sometimes resulting in astonishing things like seeing colored music. The more clinical definition of the trait is “a neurologically-based condition in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.”

Monroe biographer Norman Mailer was the first to allude to the star’s interesting gift in *Marilyn: A Biography*. He brought it up in the context of her divorce from Joe DiMaggio. The passage was rediscovered recently by Mailer intimate Dr. John Michael Lennon while teaching at the Norman Mailer Writers Colony in Provincetown, Mass.

Mr. Mailer wrote there that Ms. Monroe’s first husband, Jim Dougherty, surmised the reason for the split between Ms. Monroe and her second husband, Joe DiMaggio was her inability to cook. But it was more than that:

...he recounted evenings when all Norma Jean served were peas and carrots. She liked the colors," Mr. Mailer wrote. She has that displacement of the senses which others take drugs to find. So she is like a lover of rock who sees vibrations when he hears sounds, and it is this displacement which will keep her innocent and intolerable to people who hold to schedule. It also provides her natural wit. Ten years later, when reporters will ask her about the nude calendar

pictures, she will reply to the question, 'Did you have anything on?' with the answer, 'Oh yes, the radio,' a quip quickly telegraphed around the world, but just as likely she was not trying to be funny. To lie nude before a photographer in a state of silence was a different condition, and much more naked, than to be nude with the protection of sound. She did not have a skin like others.

What Mr. Mailer is describing is an eccentricity but also her synesthesia. Her love of colors, even in food, is the first clue. The displacement of the senses others take drugs to find is the most certain one. Her wit and her skin unlike others more than suggest it.

Confirming the qualities that make up the condition is Ms. Monroe's niece, Mona Rae Miracle of North Carolina, though she also was unfamiliar with the word "synesthesia." Ms. Miracle wrote a well-received book on her aunt with her mom, Berniece Rae Miracle, titled *My Sister Marilyn*, which challenged many of the sensational rumors surrounding the incandescent legend.

"Synesthesia is a term Marilyn and I were unaware of; in the past, we simply spoke of the characteristic experiences with terms such as 'extraordinary sensitivity' and/or 'extraordinary imagination.' I don't know what Marilyn's IQ was; mine as tested is in the top 3% of the population (not genius). Marilyn and I both studied acting with Lee Strasberg, who gave students exercises which could bring us an awareness of such abilities, and the means of using them to bring characters to life. As you know, the varied experiences can bring sadness or enjoyment. I particularly enjoy manifesting odors. Marilyn's awesome performance in *Bus Stop* (the one she was most proud of) grew out of the use of such techniques, and quite wore her out."

To think that Ms. Monroe's synesthesia informed her amazing performance in that film and countless other performances is astounding. It's also testament to the high incidence of synesthetes in the arts.

Dr. V.S. Ramachandran of the University of California at San Diego says that synesthesia is much more likely among those in the arts. "Synesthesia is about eight times more common among artists, writers, poets and creative people.... If you assume that there is greater cross-wiring and concepts are located in different parts of the brain, then it's going to create a greater propensity toward metaphorical thinking and creativity in people with synesthesia," he said in a TED lecture. He later explained he would not go so far as to say the synesthesia gene is the creativity gene, but rather that it lays a foundation for creativity. "The reason it was preserved through evolution and natural selection is because it makes some people metaphorical and link ideas[and] be creative. You need this whole spectrum of human diversity."

Other famous people believed to be synesthetes in the arts include Pharrell Williams, Itzhak Perlman, Billy Joel, Lady Gaga, Tilda Swinton, Tori Amos, John Mayer, novelist Douglas Coupland, Norwegian punk star Ida Maria, Eddie and Alex Van Halen, Stevie Wonder and the late Duke Ellington, Jimi Hendrix, composers Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt.

Heir to Ms. Monroe's blond superstardom Lady Gaga recently said during an interview with Singapore journalists that when she composes music she sees hues. "When I write songs I hear melodies and I hear lyrics but I also see color. I see sound like a wall of color; like, for example, "Pokerface" is a deep, amber color. And when you watch the show tonight you will feel that."

Studies are being done in more than 15 nations to discover more about this remarkable trait. Should you believe that you may be experiencing synesthesia, you can take The Synesthesia Battery test run by Dr. David Eagleman at <http://synesthete.org>.

More than 100 years ago, synesthesia was not only known, it was chic. It was celebrated in salons, French symbolist poetry by Rimbaud and Baudelaire and lighted

color organs were invented to best represent the sound to color associations by musicians. The rise of Behaviorism in psychology is believed to have stamped out interest in synesthesia through most of this century. In the 1970s and '80s modern researchers like Dr. Larry Marks and Dr. Richard Cytowic took up the cause, often over the objections of their own colleagues who saw it as too "New Age" a topic. Later, brain imaging machines would prove that synesthetes' brains "light up" in two conceptual areas when only one is stimulated – proving unequivocally that it is not artistic conceit.