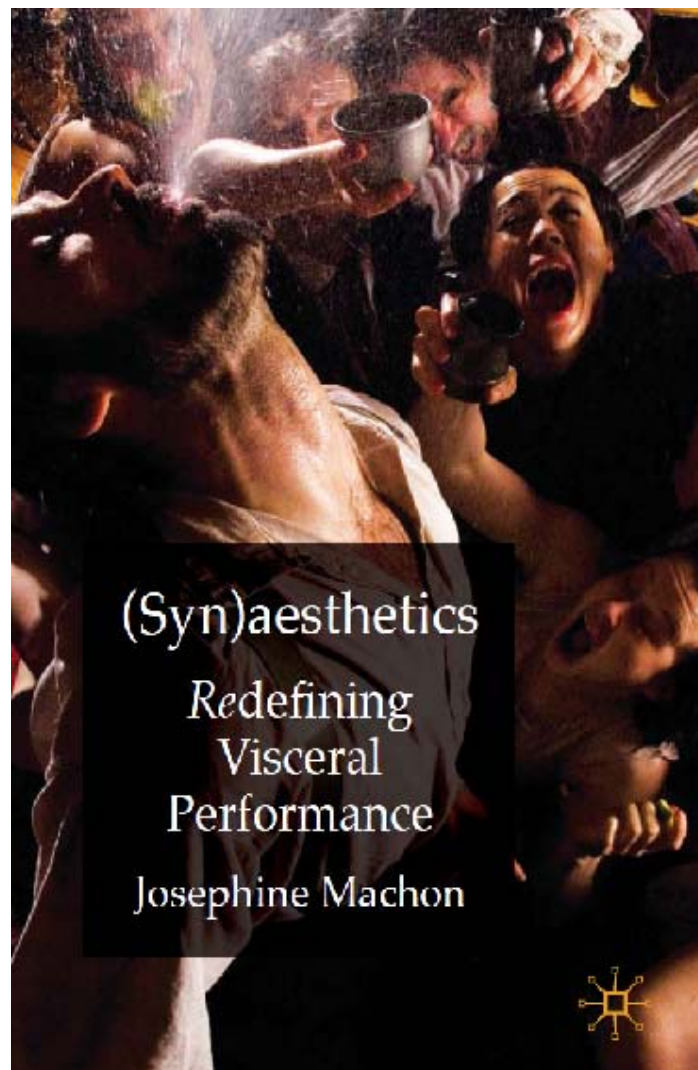


*(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*

by Josephine Machon

A review

by Paul Woodward



In Josephine Machon's groundbreaking book we are offered an original theory that describes a meeting point and sensate fusion of art and science through her appropriation of the curious psychological condition known as synaesthesia. In an unusual and highly original manner Machon excavates the writings of, amongst others, Richard E. Cytowic (1994) and A.R. Luria (1969) who explored the fusing of the senses common to synaesthesia as a heightened mode of appreciation of the everyday. In adopting these theories Machon highlights the fact that the phenomenon of fused perception is a significant factor in an audience's artistic appreciation of cutting-edge performance work, which attempts to engage on a sensual level to create a response that is simultaneously unsettling and/or exhilarating. It is in this moment of the interplay between immediate, visceral cognition and the interpretative impulse that the physiological condition of synaesthesia is utilized by Machon and its features reconfigured to build, in an exciting and extremely convincing theoretical narrative, what she identifies as a (syn)aesthetic mode of appreciation. The premise of the project then, is the interface between the creative act and the immediate and subsequent processes of interpretation of such acts.

The first section consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the theory of (syn)aesthetics which includes a detailed explication of the central features and clarification of the concepts and terms integral to it. It outlines how the (syn)aesthetic performance style fuses disciplines and techniques to create interdisciplinary and multi (or inter)sensual work. The project places particular emphasis on the exchange between three aspects of the performance mode identified, these being the (syn)aesthetic hybrid, the prioritisation of the body in performance and the 'visceral-verbal *play-text*'.

I found the sections which directly referenced the diagnostic conditions of synaesthesia as put forward by Richard E. Cytowic and A.R. Luria particularly fascinating. I was also prompted to think how other psychological conditions such as this had been used by artists to create new and startling performance work. Most notably Michael Nyman's opera and Peter Brook's theatrical adaptation of Oliver Sacks *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for His Hat* and Pete Brooks (ex Impact Theatre Collective and Imsonnia productions) physical theatre/opera hybrid *The Sleep* based on another Oliver Sacks study *Awakenings*. It led me to wonder if Machon's work on (syn)aesthetics might take its place in an exciting emergent sub-genre here through which we might not only come to greater understanding of the condition itself but to view such alternative appreciation states of mind/body as portals to understanding any perceptive experiences of the art/theatre subject.

Throughout her explication, the appreciation strategy of the (syn)aesthetic, is firmly located by Machon in the body, and as such posits the case for a theory that emanates from a corporeal/sensual impulse that can in turn be applied to work in which the body is the primary locus of performance. A theory of the body that in turn appreciates the body and all of its signification processes in the work it produces, including the physical act of writing itself. In this way we are presented with an artistic principle of fused aesthetics, marrying the interdisciplinary with the intersensual in artistic terms. (Syn)aesthetics aligns itself with performance practices that are at the cutting edge of experimentation, and at the same time explores a new means of articulating a response to such work. Machon surveys the inheritance, in theory and practice, that saw to this cutting edge style emerging, considering female

performance practice, intercultural and interdisciplinary ensemble performance and the innovative and disturbing writing aesthetic of recent years.

In building her argument Machon articulates how the defining characteristics of the synaesthetic experience aligns itself with writings from historical critical thinkers who have celebrated the notion of the sensual/semiotic and the sublime. Chapter 2 endeavours to make the theoretical propositions of the first chapter more accessible by placing it within the context of critical and performance theorists who have looked to the body as a primary force of creativity and interpretation. Where her theory intends to instil a new discourse is by way of drawing together the various critical tools which describe such work, tracing the connections between them in order to clarify (syn)aesthetics as a practice and mode of analysis. The writing of Kant, Nietzsche, Derrida and Artaud amongst others are called into play to both review our understanding of the visceral in art and performance as much as redefine it through the lens of the (syn)aesthetic mode of appreciation. Of particular use is the intertwining of Machon's reconfiguring of the (syn)aesthetic impulse to that of theoretical projects of early feminist writers and in particular the notion of *écriture féminine* as articulated by Helene Cixous and others. In this way Machon's project, through establishing a symbiotic and accessible link between science and art, provides a stimulating vocabulary that emphasises the visceral nature of the performance style and defines the ineffable nature of the appreciation mode.

As an educator working within the field of physical performance studies, I believe Machon's theories of the (syn)aesthetic is extremely useful to undergraduate and postgraduate study. Whether analysing or examining through practice physicalised

approaches, students are so often drawn into areas where the ineffable comes into play. I have found that students often struggle with words when experiencing the sense of flux and 'inbetween-ness' that comes from exploring the liminal and that this can sometimes result in confusion and a loss of confidence. In developing a '*defining aesthetic that simultaneously describes and interprets*' contemporary work which embraces an embodied subjectivity, Machon's (syn)aesthetics is extremely useful in guiding students towards a wider range of responses to embodied performance work which could go some way to remedying this.

I particularly enjoyed the assertion that within the notion of the (syn)aesthetic the '*individual interpretation is itself acknowledged to be a creative act, generated by the creative act*'. This emphasis on the *playful* element of performance analysis I found exciting as it could prove very empowering for students as creative/critical thinkers, especially those students wary or inhibited by traditional academic discourse. I found the parts of the project involved in the '*reclamation of the word as a visceral act*' particularly compelling and original in its vision. As such the material offers a unique angle on the suturing of the word/body debate which has been prominent in so much contemporary performance theory since the early 90's.

In carefully building an argument for a new vocabulary and style for the appreciation of contemporary styles of theatre which draw on the audience's somatic response, Machon herself provides new and extremely useful terms. She articulates distinctions such as the double edged semantic/somatic or making-sense/*sense*-making process of appreciation, which embraces the individual, immediate and innate, and the 'corporeal memory' of the perceiving body. In marking the evolution of such terms Machon also

considers notions of Liveness and the live(d) moment, alongside notions of ritual, transcendence, the primordial and the technological.

In chapter 3, Machon applies her (syn)aesthetic model to a variety of contemporary performance works to illustrate both the type of work that this term describes and to show how this theory can articulate and respond to the challenges of such work.

Machon celebrates the importance of a sensate response to live performance work and clarifies how the sensate impact of the work affects a visceral cognition which leaves its traces on the perceiver's body via the immediacy of a corporeal memory. In this chapter Machon outlines what she observes as three key strategies of (syn)aesthetic performance style; the (syn)aesthetic hybrid, the predominance of the human body in performance (the body as both sight and site of performance) and the particular visceral-verbal quality of the (syn)aesthetic *play-text*.

The second section of the project consists of interviews with key practitioners highlighted in Part 1. Part 2 aims to both identify and apply (syn)aesthetic theory in, and to, practice. Many of the artists interviewed have not as yet had many articles published about their work. Shunt and Punchdrunk being cases in point – extremely popular performance makers at the moment and such incisive questioning of their material is a real coup and will be very useful reference material for a lot of students and theatre professionals.

I found the interviews in part 2 of the sample material particularly enlightening in this aspect as Machon's focus seemed to help the practitioner subjects articulate something which seems to be at the very core of their performance work. The

validation of a sensual subjective response to work under scrutiny here articulated the emergence of a more democratic vision of critical methodology in which hierarchies between the professional practitioner, the audience, and the academic are abandoned. I found this especially interesting as these domains have often seen to be considered distinct and separate in some performance related discourses which has, I feel, often been to the detriment of the artistic processes in question. An appreciation of the (syn)aesthetic project as outlined by Machon could provide a meeting point for anyone therefore involved or interested in contemporary performance. Further to this I did feel that it was in these generous exchanges between the practitioners and Machon herself that the notion of a sensual engagement was exemplified. She guides her subjects into areas of articulation which celebrates a sensory fused hybrid style of writing/receiving and as such, talking about the artistic work itself became performative acts in themselves, thus further emphasising Machon's project.

To conclude this review, this is an exciting, well written and original book that is timely and much needed. I believe this approach will be extremely empowering for students of contemporary performance practice and leads the way for a re-appraisal of certain academic strictures. From an educational perspective, it is ideal for courses engaged in critical/theoretical approaches to performance analysis, contemporary performance making, new writing for the theatre, dance/theatre forms and conventions, site specific performances, storytelling & performance, creative writing for the theatre, technology and performance and the list goes on. Such is its immediate utility on such courses and in its uniqueness in providing a creation/response/analysis

vocabulary I would welcome its immediate use in my own practice and would imagine other lecturers in the field would follow suit.

In emphasising the works utility within educational contexts I would not want to diminish its relevance to anyone currently engaged in professional performance practice. What is on offer here is the possibility of a *playful* mode of performance analysis that is underpinned by *experience*, from the perspectives of both audience and practitioner. The result is a less dry form of analysis, that places practice and audience experience as central to the theory. This, I believe, will be greatly appreciated by *all* its readers, especially those wary of or inhibited by traditional academic discourse.

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