

## **Visual Aurality in Russian Modernist Experiments: Explorations in Synesthesia and Auditory Imagination**

Julia Listengarten

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### Article abstract

Russian modernist experiments in sensory communication include the interplay of sound and light in Alexander Scriabin's symphonic mysteries as well as colored sounds in Wassily Kandinsky's stage compositions. Inspired by various philosophical principles and creative methodologies, these artists explored the dialogue between the aural and the visual and its potential to influence the creative process and impact audience perception. This article seeks to assess the role of music and sound in synesthetic experiments of Scriabin and Kandinsky and place their theory and practice within the larger philosophical, artistic, and scientific contexts of their period and beyond.

# Visual Aurality in Russian Modernist Experiments : Explorations in Synesthesia and Auditory Imagination

Julia Listengarten  
University of Central Florida

A current explosion in scholarship on sound and auditory neuroscience has signaled a major shift toward recognizing the significance of aurality in contemporary culture and establishing aural studies as a legitimate field of inquiry. In the recent flurry of cultural turns, the “auditory” or “sonic” turn invites a dialogic relationship with its “pictorial” or “visual” counterpart, pointing to the importance of situating sound in relation to other artistic modalities and cultural contexts which are largely ocular-centric. Jim Drobnick in his introduction to the 2004 book titled *Aural Cultures* ponders the possibility of establishing “an aural equivalent to ‘visual studies’” while also cautioning against “essentializing sound as an autonomous realm” (2004 : 10). My own interest in this discourse on sound stems from my research on the early twentieth-century avant-garde, particularly artistic explorations with sensory correspondences between sound and color as well as sound and movement embedded in a particular shape or image. Russian modernist experiments in sensory communication encompass sound images in the symbolist poetry of V.I. Ivanov, the interplay of sound and light in Alexander Scriabin’s symphonic mysteries, colored sounds in Wassily Kandinsky’s stage compositions, and picture-poems in the futurist performance *The Victory Over the Sun* (with music by Mikhail Matyushin and stage design by Kazimir Malevich). Inspired by various philosophical principles and creative methodologies, these artists explore the dialogue between the aural and the visual, cultivating the potential of aesthetic synesthesia

to influence their own creative process and impact audience perception.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty points to the way the senses communicate with each other without compromising the unity of the experience. “Music is not in visible space”, he posits, “music erodes visible space, surrounds it, and causes it to shift” (2014 : 234). He further demonstrates how an auditory rhythm affects the perception of movement of cinematic images as well as the way sounds alter a perception of colors : “a more intense sound intensifies the colors, the interruption of the sounds makes them vacillate, and a low sound renders blue darker or deeper” (2014 : 237). Communication between the senses as a way of achieving the unity of the experience – clearly a phenomenological concern – is also a key issue in early twentieth-century avant-garde art and performance. What are the ways in which early twentieth-century avant-garde artists approached sound as it relates to visuality, rather than as an autonomous modality or in opposition to visual aspects? How do contemporary perspectives on sound help illuminate theoretical discussions and practical explorations embraced by these artists in their search for ideal and/or innovative art forms a century ago? And, finally, what is the influence of such perspectives on the development of theatrical vocabulary in a post-dramatic theatre rooted in the interplay of aural and visual elements as opposed to relying on the primacy of dramatic text? This article seeks, first, to examine the role of music and sound in the synesthetic experiments of Scriabin and Kandinsky, placing their theory and practice in broader philosophical, artistic, and scientific contexts of their period and beyond. Furthermore, it proposes the possibility of discussing these artists’ audio-visual explorations through a post-dramatic theatre lens, suggesting that the works of both Scriabin and Kandinsky prefigure post-dramatic theatre and thus contribute to the development of its aesthetic principles.

### Contemporary Discoveries in Sound vis-à-vis Modernist Culture

“The past can disrupt the present [...],  
but so too can the present disrupt the  
past”.<sup>1</sup> -Rebecca Schneider (2011 : 15).

Contemporary discoveries about unique qualities of sound provide a lens (or a series of lenses) to understand early twentieth-century artistic anxieties regarding the privileging of sound over other sensory modalities in the creative process. These discoveries may also illuminate the artists’ impetus to seek connections between the aural and the immaterial, especially in their envisioning of the spiritual communion between performance and the audience. Indeed, music possesses mysterious powers in how it affects the brain, as neurologist Oliver Sacks so poignantly expresses in *Musicophilia : Tales of Music and the Brain* – his personal musings based on his observations of patients with various neurologi-

cal and sensory disorders. Through narrating individual stories about the power of music on imagination, emotion, and memory, he offers a fascinating perspective on the relationships between the perception of music and brain functions. He also underlines the haunted, elusive, and universal qualities inherent in music and their – sometimes unexplained – influence on individual minds (see Sacks 2007). Elusiveness, not exclusively an essential quality of music, is also an intrinsic aspect of aurality as Swiss artist and writer Salomé Voegelin suggests, pointing to aurality's "phenomenological doubt" and arguing that "sound [unlike 'the certainty of the image'] negates stability through the force of sensory experience" (2010 : xii; 12).<sup>2</sup> Sounds entice, manipulate, and chase; they are autonomous and multidirectional. Considering the peculiarity of sounds to "detach themselves from their sources and pursue us", and comparing this characteristic to the stability of colors, Gabor Csepregi writes that "colours 'cling' to objects [while] sounds 'move away' from them and 'enjoy' an autonomous existence" (2004 : 172).

The primacy of sound as it relates to human perception and cognition has been the focus of recent studies in auditory neuroscience.<sup>3</sup> "Sound and hearing have shaped the evolution, development, and day-to-day function of the mind", argues neuroscientist Seth Horowitz in his recently published book *The Universal Sense : How Hearing Shapes the Mind* (2012 : x). He explains that since we hear significantly faster than we see, *what* we hear affects every other perception : "Music and sound work on preconscious levels". Elaborating further on this point, he claims that "Sound affects us in ways of which we are not aware. It changes our emotions. Changes our attention. Changes our memory, heart rate, desires, response to the opposite sex" (2012 : 186). Interrogating sound as a physical phenomenon and perception – "how things start in the outside world and work their way in, from the first physical sensations in the ear [...] through the lowest parts of the brainstem" (2012 : xi) – he pays particular attention to both cortical and cognitive functions associated with the process of hearing and perceiving sounds. This approach to conceptualizing sound suggests the importance of addressing both the materiality of sound and immateriality of its perception, especially in connection with the creative process.

Rejecting a rationalist or positivist vision of the world and seeking ways to awaken the audiences' awareness of their inner realities, turn-of-the-century Russian modernist artists intuitively recognized and celebrated the tensions between material and immaterial qualities of sound as well as the inherently elusive and inscrutable powers exerted on the human brain. I shall attempt to argue that early twentieth-century artistic explorations with sensory correspondences between sound and color/movement/shape may have laid the foundation for later artistic and theoretical inquiries, including auxiliary technological innovations, which continue to challenge the senses and sensory perceptions.

## Synesthesia, *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, and an Auditory Turn

Prior to current scientific and technological experimentation with sensory communication, the concept of synesthesia received much attention in art and philosophy. As a unique condition or “neurological phenomenon that occurs when stimulus in one sense modality immediately evokes a sensation in another sense modality” (van Camp 2008 : 1), synesthesia fascinated the imaginations of the Greeks who questioned “whether color [...] in music was a physical quantity that could be quantified” (van Camp 2008 : 45). The idea of sensory correspondences particularly attracted early avant-garde artists who sought to capture the unity of the spiritual world by evoking correspondences among the senses.<sup>4</sup> The Symbolists, for instance, contemplated the possibility of the spiritual effect of the arts on the audience’s senses and foregrounded their theory of “correspondences” on Charles Baudelaire’s belief in the existence of inner, spiritual reciprocity across the arts. According to this principle of reciprocity, an artist can replace or merge one art with another, as the same sense may be affected by different art forms : “a musical work can be seen as a poetic work, and a poem can be seen as a musical work” (Deak 1993 : 100). Perceiving the world as a “universe composed of a certain number of analogous systems” and imagining that “the relationship between the analogous systems may be evoked” (Deak 1993 : 100) through the use of symbols, the Symbolists saw the connection between sensory communication and the spiritual reciprocity among the arts.

Both Scriabin the composer and Kandinsky the visual artist were drawn to this idea of spiritual reciprocity across the arts, launching their own philosophical inquiries and creative pursuits in much of their work. Their experiments with the integration or juxtaposition of aural and visual elements in a work of art were innovative, occasionally contentious, but undoubtedly very influential. *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* (*The Blue Rider Almanac*) became perhaps the first theoretical document that articulated their approach to synesthesia in art and anticipated the impact of their ideas and practice on the study of the senses and cross-/multi-sensory communication.<sup>5</sup> Conceived and published by Franz Marc and Kandinsky in 1912 as a manifesto of the Blue Rider group,<sup>6</sup> *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* includes theoretical works, practical examples, and illustrations that reflect the contributors’ vision for the ideal form of art rooted in the principles of abstraction, spirituality, and unification of artistic forms. As Kandinsky explained later in 1936, “Marc and I had thrown ourselves into painting, but painting alone did not satisfy us. Then I had the idea of doing a ‘synthesized’ book which was to [...] tear down the walls between the arts [...] and [...] to demonstrate eventually that the question of art is not a question of form but one of artistic content” (qtd. in Lankheit 1974 : 37).

A model for integrating theory with practice, the almanac presents

a selection of articles that reveal artistic associations and mutual influences including Kandinsky's relationships with Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg and Russian musician and visual artist Nikolai Kulbin. Kandinsky was drawn to the abstract qualities of Schönberg's music, which he attempted to capture in his paintings and theatrical compositions, and his focus on evoking inner vibrations for the audience through his concept of the total artwork bears a striking similarity with Kulbin's studies in "Free Music" and audience sensory responses. Another – perhaps less obvious – association is between Kulbin, Scriabin, and Russian musicologist and composer Leonid Sabaneev, who was an admirer of Kulbin's work and whose major study of Scriabin's oeuvre was published in 1916, five years after the publication of his essay on Scriabin's *Prometheus* in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*.

What is of particular significance in the context of this discussion about the role of sound in affecting sensory communication is the amount of attention that the almanac's editors – both visual artists – dedicated to music and aurality. Schönberg in his work "The Relationship to the Text" encourages the search for the "internal congruence" of music and text, delighting in the observation that "music lacks [...] an immediately perceptible object" and that "some look [in music] for purely formal beauty in its effects, others for poetical developments" (1974 : 90). Exploring Scriabin's experiment with "color-sounds" in the symphonic mystery *Prometheus*, Sabaneev posits that "all arts are not equal in this unification", clearly privileging the role of music over other artistic forms. He further states that Scriabin "unites music with one of the 'accompanying' arts – the play of colors, which has, as could be expected, a very subordinate position" (1974 : 131). The dominant role of music in achieving the art work's spiritual purpose – a concept shared by the artists included in the almanac – is also suggested by Kulbin in his article "Free Music" and reinforced by Kandinsky in his multiple contributions that include two theoretical documents, "On the Question of Form" and "*On Stage Composition*", as well as his stage composition *The Yellow Sound*. While Kulbin teases out the connection between "Free Music" – the realm of natural sounds – and inner vibrations that "evoke unusual sensations in man" (1974 : 144), Kandinsky takes the discourse on music to a more abstract level and points to the existence of inner sound in every art form. "The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually effective beings" (1974 : 173), Kandinsky writes in "On the Question of Form". Underlying the spiritual, inner quality of sound, he continues with the suggestion that the "inner sound increases in its intensity if we remove its stifling, external, practical meaning" (1974 : 174). This discovery of the spiritual power of inner sound foregrounds his theoretical proposition for a total work of art that, unlike Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is entirely based upon the inner reciprocity among various arts.

Arguably, *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* addresses the potentiality of

music and sound to shift a work of art to an abstract, spiritual realm and thus signals the start of an auditory turn – a full century before aurality began to draw the more systematic attention of artists, scholars, and scientists.<sup>7</sup> The theoretical arguments in this essay, to a varying degree, allude to sound's fluidity and ephemerality, aspects which would later be formally attributed to listening as part of the phenomenological discourse that underlies the complexity of perception. While advancing theoretical frameworks about the role of music and sound in the arts, the almanac also reflects the artists' practical explorations with corresponding or synthesizing sound and visibility.

### Theory into Practice : *Prometheus* and *The Yellow Sound*

In his study of Scriabin's work, Sabaneev refers to *Prometheus : The Poem of Fire* (1910) as a "symphony of colors [...] based on the principles of corresponding sounds and colors" (1974 : 131). He further elucidates Scriabin's musical color theory in which "each key has a corresponding color [...] and each change of harmonies has a corresponding change of colors" (1974 : 131). Sabaneev identifies the connection between specific keys and colors in Scriabin's musical color sensations, offering a detailed chart according to which C corresponds with red, G with orange-pink, D with yellow, A with green, E with whitish-blue, A-flat with red-purple, etc. Despite revealing an obvious regularity in Scriabin's musical color theory, he suggests Scriabin's intuitive approach to these sound-color correspondences may ultimately result in mystical harmonies leading to spiritual fellowship with the audience. In *Prometheus*, Sabaneev observes, "the music is almost inseparable from the harmonies of color. Strange, caressing, and at the same time deeply mystical harmonies emerged from these colors. The impression produced by the music is incredibly strengthened by the play of color" (1974 : 133).

Scriabin's imagining of his ideal creative work *Mysterium* – a symbolisturgy – is rooted in his vision of mystical-religious art and echoes Russian Symbolist theories toward creating "a transcendent artistic act celebrated in collective fashion" (Brown 1979 : 49). Influenced by Theosophy – a brand of religious philosophy infused with mystical concerns preached by Helena Blavatsky, a co-founder of the Theosophical society – Scriabin's creative doctrine also developed from his engagement with the ideas of Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche, especially their envisaging of the central role of music in an all-embracing artwork. Scriabin's own lifelong artistic effort that remained unrealized was to create "an ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an eschatological Mystery, that would transfigure the universe in a glorious Act of Celebration, freeing man's creative spirit and resolving life's dissonances into perfect harmony" (Brown 1979 : 43).

It has been debated whether Scriabin indeed possessed the synesthetic ability of hearing colors, which resulted in his precise sound-



color assignment, or if his synesthetic impressions were deliberately constructed based on Blavatsky's esoteric theory concerning the color spectrum.<sup>8</sup> What remains evident, however, is that his symphonic poem *Prometheus* embodies the fusion of Scriabin's mystical, spiritual beliefs with his practical application of sound-color correspondences. In order to perform his color symphony, Scriabin envisioned an integration of the color organ or the "keyboard for light" (*tastiéra per luce*) into a concert, thus introducing the color organ notes as part of the score of the symphonic poem. Different sections of the color organ were meant to invoke consonant or dissonant associations between the music and colors. Scriabin never saw the practical realization of his theory in a performance setting: during the concert performance of *Prometheus* in Moscow in 1911, the light projector unexpectedly failed. A special light apparatus called Chromola, a version of *tastiéra per luce*, was later built by Preston S. Millar for the first successful performance of the "symphony of colors" that took place in New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1915, the year of Scriabin's death.<sup>9</sup>

While Scriabin's intricate system of analogies may ultimately elude the audience, *Prometheus* – conceived as a unified artwork that elevates the audience in the ecstatic moment of spiritual communion – gestures toward acknowledging the complex unity of perception. Relying on the mystical powers of music to lead the colors along the way, *Prometheus* as a theatrical performance affects the sensory stimuli of the attendants, complicating their sensory communication. It also introduces the idea of a musical paradigm as a creative model for conceiving and realizing a work of art.

For Kandinsky, music too was a subject of tremendous importance that guided his theoretical frameworks and impacted practical explorations with artistic forms. Indeed, musicality as both an idea and artistic paradigm inspired his quest for achieving a higher degree of abstraction in visual art and propelled his search for discovering the spiritual in an artistic creation.<sup>10</sup> Addressing the connections between music and Kandinsky's vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Peter Vergo posits that the idea of music "tantalized and intrigued him" and that Kandinsky "devoted more time and effort to thinking and writing about music than any other modernist artist" (2013 : 49). Among Kandinsky's written work about music, Vergo specifically notes his theoretical treatise *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), the autobiographical *Reminiscences*, and the article "Art without Subject" (1916), which offers a reflection on an imaginary string quartet recital. Kandinsky's own experiences with music – *i.e.* playing cello and harmonium and witnessing theatrical performances of Wagner's operas – affected the artist's recognition of the powers that music possesses. If Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, however, inspired the development of Kandinsky's own model for a total work of art,<sup>11</sup> it was his personal encounters with Schönberg and the latter's musical compositions that helped Kandinsky articulate his interest in



abstraction and its application to a visual art.

In an effort to encourage a drastic shift from painting's traditional reliance on content and representation toward the conception of non-representational artistic work, Kandinsky called for the visual arts to embrace the abstract qualities of music and its ability to "speak directly to the soul" of the listener (Vergo 2013 : 53). Schönberg's music, in Kandinsky's opinion, achieved exactly what Kandinsky intended for painting : "It leads us into a new realm, where musical experiences are no longer acoustic but purely spiritual. Here begins the 'music of the future'" (Vergo 2013 : 52). Abstraction for Kandinsky is associated with purity, which is deemed necessary for art to connect with the audience on a spiritual level without the constraints of subject matter or established artistic conventions concerning the representation of reality. He advocates for painting to follow music in attaining "to the higher level of pure art, on which music has already stood for several centuries" (Vergo 2013 : 53).

Kandinsky's theoretical proposition in which he alluded to the inherent subjectivity of music vis-à-vis the representational quality expected from painting reverberates with current critical engagements on sound that point to "sound's ephemeral invisibility" as compared with "the apparent stability of the image" (Voegelin 2010 : xi). Furthermore, Kandinsky's articulation of music's potential to establish a spiritual connection with its listeners anticipates present debates on the instability and ephemerality of sonic phenomena in affecting auditory perception. As if in dialogue with Kandinsky, contemporary artist Voegelin refers to sounds as "ghosts" or "audible spirits" that stimulate our "auditory imagination". She proposes that "the spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us listeners in the production of an invisible world" (2010 : 12).

Kandinsky conceptualized the relationship between sound and spirituality in his theory of inner sounds. Scholar Shulamith Behr hypothesizes that "the evocative word *Klang* [sound] derives from the artist's Goethean-based color theories, which expounded correspondences between color, sound, and psychological states of mind" (2013 : 70). As inner sounds exist in every art, Kandinsky argued that "words [too] are inner sounds", addressing the purely symbolic quality of vocal expressions (1982 : 147). The inner sounds of each art, when fused together in a total artwork, will evoke a myriad of inner vibrations in the audience, thus resonating in the audience's soul. As Adrian Curtin observes in his recent study *Avant-Garde Theatre Sound : Staging Sonic Modernity*, Kandinsky's "inner sound approximates a Platonic ideal" (2014 : 53). Curtin further notes Kandinsky's metaphysical conception of sound as "the soul of form", which points to the artist's theoretical engagement with the immateriality of imagined sounds rather than their physical quality. Kandinsky therefore resists the Wagnerian model

of a total artwork, which, in his view, is exclusively based on external, physical connections between plot, music, and movement, and instead proposes the internal, spiritual unity of music, movement, and color – his own artistic triad – that arises out of the arts’ inner connections within themselves and with each other. In both “*On Stage Composition*” (1909), a manifesto in which he articulates the principles of his theatre of the future, and his programmatic document *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky stresses the significance of drawing these inner connections not from plot or dramatic action but from the inner sounds of every art form.

Kandinsky’s interest in anthroposophical ideas informed his search for spirituality in art as well as his vision of an ideal art form of the future. He attended Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical lectures and openly expressed his appreciation for Blavatsky’s theosophical concepts. While he was rather circumspect about the influence of Steiner on his theory and practice, critics have noted certain resonances between Steiner’s occult theories and Kandinsky’s approach to synesthesia as a “spiritual potential inherent in [...] the most sensitive of us, rather than a medical or psychological anomaly” (Edwards 2011 : par. 4).<sup>12</sup> Steiner and Kandinsky also shared a fascination with the spiritual possibilities of colors and belief in a spiritual necessity for creating a hybrid, inter-/cross-disciplinary art form. Steiner discovered this form in a eurhythmy-based dance/performance; Kandinsky found his ideal artistic expression in a form of stage composition that embodied the abstract and the spiritual he relentlessly searched for in art.

For Kandinsky, the form of stage composition signifies “the [...] work of Monumental Art” – “the happy dream of the theater of the future [that] will rise up before [the spectators]’ spiritual eyes” (1982 : 206-7). Kandinsky’s stage compositions include *The Yellow Sound*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Black and White*, *Violet*, and *The Green Sound*, of which *The Yellow Sound* is perhaps most critically recognized.<sup>13</sup> *The Yellow Sound*, written in collaboration with composer Thomas de Hartmann, is Kandinsky’s attempt at a practical implementation of his theory of *Bühnengesamtkunstwerk* that draws different art forms together in a unified theatrical composition. As he suggested, the “inner sound” of each art is expressed through its movement. Kandinsky identified three possible movements upon which he built his stage composition : the “musical sound and its movement”; the “physical-psychical sound and its movement expressed through people and objects”; and the “colored tone and its movement” (1974 : 201). This formula therefore does not deny the presence of characters and objects onstage, but their presence serves no representational purpose. Their “bodily-spiritual movement”<sup>14</sup> replaces verbal communication, and the word as a carrier of meaning ceases to exist : the same word frequently repeated and disconnected from other words turns into pure sound. Characters in Kandinsky’s stage composition become abstract when deprived of logical connections

and verbal grounding, and their actions and physical movements can therefore be understood only by relating them to the inner sounds of music and color. The principles of abstract stage composition Kandinsky was developing in theory and practice thus become similar to the principles of abstract painting.

There is, however, a major difference between “abstractness” in painting and “abstractness” in theatre since the latter’s multi-media experience involves variations of “aural, spatio-temporal, and lighting effects” (Behr 2013 : 65). The aural in *The Yellow Sound* emerges out of the combination of music – a tenor, a backstage chorus, and an off-stage orchestra – and pure sounds uttered by the characters. The spatio-temporal is expressed through the characters’ “bodily spiritual” movement. Instead of realistically defined characters, the audience, however, encounters five giants, vague creatures, people in flowing robes, and people in tights whose puppet-like movements and reactions heighten their highly depersonalized nature. The brief appearance of a boy and a man is unexpected in the abstract composition; Kandinsky, however, highlights these characters’ nonrepresentational quality through their overtly expressive movements and unexplained actions. The third element – the color – almost becomes a character itself; constant changes in tone suggest new aural and spatio-temporal relationships.

The composition is episodic and consists of a prelude and six pictures. Each picture seems to be complete and there is no intelligible plot that would unite the actions of the characters. There are, however, some external connections among the scenes : the presence of the giants and the people who move from one picture to another, the combinations of the same colors in every picture, and a similar pattern in relationship between the chorus and the orchestra throughout the composition. The verbal part is almost absent; words do not unite the composition thematically. During the prelude, the chorus sings a couple of disjointed phrases, and then in picture 2 the people in flowing robes recite in uneven voice :

The flowers cover everything, cover everything

Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!

We are looking. We are looking.

Cover conception with innocence.

Open your eyes! Open your eyes!

Gone. Gone. (Kandinsky 1974 : 217)

A certain sequence of inner sounds is derived from juxtaposed colors. As the blue and yellow colors dominate the stage, their conflicting relationship produces the quick appearance of green, red, white, and black tones. The green and white tones seem an extension of the blue one :

the green hill coexists with the blue curtain and the blue color often dissolves into the white tone. The red color is an intense continuation of the yellow one. In picture 1, for instance, while the yellow giants are still onstage singing, “quickly from left to right fly vague red creatures, somewhat suggesting birds with large heads that are remotely similar to human heads” (1974 : 214). Similarly, in a different picture, the stage is bathed in a cold red light that slowly becomes brighter and yellow. The color black and total blackness onstage appear as a result of the ongoing confrontation between the blue and yellow tones.

From both aesthetic and philosophical perspectives, Kandinsky’s composition reveals a multiplicity of influences on the artist including Scriabin’s experiments with music and color, Maeterlinck’s drama of stasis, Isadora Duncan’s explorations with abstract dance, and eschatological motifs prevalent in Russian modernist thought and artistic practice of the time. The struggle between blue and yellow, for example, embodies the metaphysical conflict between the spiritual and the material in the composition. And since *The Yellow Sound* defies any traditional attempt to decode its meaning, this struggle – embodied by the inner sounds of each art and their inner connections – is arguably at the core of this work’s dramaturgy.

Kandinsky painstakingly engages in constructing the semiotics of both yellow and blue onstage. As the stage is revealed, the backdrop and lighting are colored in blue. The yellow color is expressed through the yellow figures and faces of the giants as well as the flowers appearing in different parts of the stage. In picture 1, the yellow giants introduce the battle between the yellow tone and the blue environment : “flat, mat, blue, rather deep-colored curtain” almost explodes by the appearance of the yellow figures (1974 : 213). The yellow color invades the stage, destroying the infinite quietude and peacefulness of the atmosphere created by the blue curtain, a broad green hill at the rear, and a backstage chorus “sounding without feeling, quite wooden and mechanical” (1974 : 213). The movements of color and music anticipate the appearance of the giants : “After the chorus stops singing, a general pause: no motion, no sound. Then darkness” (1974 : 213). In the next moment, as the yellow giants begin to “fill” the space of the stage, their movements become odd and awkward. They slide forth “as if gliding over the stage” (1974 : 213). They move their arms in various ritualistic gestures, and “they remain far back standing beside each other – some with hunched shoulders, others with drooping shoulders, with strange, indistinct, yellow faces” (1974 : 213). Kinetic objects rather than real characters, the giants are always together whispering, singing, huddling, and moving. Their exaggerated facial expressions and hunched figures create a unified image onstage.

As Kandinsky infuses colors with spiritual qualities, imagined inner sounds begin to consolidate in a particular pattern turning colors into audible signs. The presence of the yellow giants and the subsequent

emergence of the huge yellow flower, blossoming alone on the hill, precede the appearance of the people in the following picture. Deprived of individual names and wearing shapeless but colorful robes (the first one is entirely blue), they look like animated puppets. They move and speak in unison, keeping close to one another. There is an indirect physical and verbal communication between the people and the yellow objects; each person holds a huge white flower that resembles the yellow flower on the hill. They are fascinated and frightened by their surroundings : “The flowers cover everything, cover everything, cover everything. Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!” (1974 : 217). Becoming more and more dominant and powerful, yellow invades the stage and overwhelms the people. The white flowers in their hands turn yellow, while they walk “slowly to the front of the stage as if in a trance and gradually move farther away from each other” (1974 : 218). From this scene on, the yellow sound never disappears from the stage until the final image in the composition. The yellow giants are always there, more distinct and audible in some scenes than in others.

The battle between the blue and yellow colors is not over yet; the material cannot triumph over the spiritual. The yellow sound celebrates its victory – but only temporarily. In a culmination of its triumph, the giants become taller. They separate from one another and occupy the whole stage. The backdrop and the floor turn black. The music is completely absent and the silence denotes the most “tragic” moment in the composition. Unexpectedly, the yellow tone begins to lose its vigor. The people in tights, a new group, are gaining power. There is no direct physical confrontation between these two powers. The struggle is expressed by the intense change of color : “various lights sweep the stage and cross each other” (1974 : 223). The music also contributes to the conflict : “In the orchestra – confusion. The shrill shriek of picture 3 becomes audible. The giants shudder” (1974 : 223). The people begin to inhabit the whole space, and their movements are reminiscent of Duncan’s abstract physical expressions. They are

running, leaping, running to and from each other, falling. While standing, some figures rapidly move only their arms, others only their legs, or their heads, or their torsos. Some combine all these movements. Sometimes these are group movements. Sometimes whole groups make one and the same movement. (1974 : 224)

The yellow giants as a terrifying symbol of material forces gradually become invisible and are eventually consumed by total darkness. As Kandinsky explains, “it seems as if the giants are being snuffed out like lamps, that is, the light flickers several times before total darkness descends” (1974 : 224).

The yellow sound has relinquished its power to its blue counterpart. The blue backdrop is dominant again. One giant, however, is still present; the other four giants have disappeared forever. This last giant – a trace

of the bygone struggle – whose face turned white “slowly raises both arms (with palms facing downward) alongside his body and grows taller” (1974 : 224). Against the peaceful blue backdrop, the giant's figure begins to resemble a cross as darkness suddenly devours the stage and only music is heard. Behr draws an important parallel between Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* and Steiner's mystery dramas and suggests that Kandinsky's belief in “the possibility of salvation through art” is reaffirmed through “the final sequence of the giant growing in height and assuming a cruciform shape against a blue background” (2013 : 77).

Born of the complex correspondences between the inner sounds of each art, the yellow sound – an imagined metaphysical sign – grows in power, vibrates through the space, flutters convulsively, shrieks in panic, gradually faints, and dissolves forever as the spiritual order is restored. This metaphysical expression combines the certainty of the visual with the instability of the aural. The audible aural landscape in Kandinsky's abstract composition ranges from sudden murmurs and shrill sounds to terrifying silence : the orchestra's “music becomes nervous, leaps from fortissimo to pianissimo”; the giants whisper menacingly; “a shrilled tenor voice [that] can be heard from behind the stage, rapidly shrieking completely unintelligent words”; “occasionally the voices become hoarse”, one screaming “as if possessed” (1974 : 217, 219). The soundscape in Kandinsky's composition is at times barely perceptible; the sounds intensify rapidly and disappear unexpectedly : “The single tones are finally devoured by the noisy turbulence. Suddenly complete silence” (1974 : 216). To borrow from Voegelin's poetic description, the sounds, like “audible spirits [...] slink around the visual object, moving in on it from all directions, forming its contours and content in a formless breeze” (2010 : 12). As she interprets the sensory experience of listening, she writes that “the sonic life-world might be silent but forceful, grasping us as we hear it, pulling us into an auditory imagination as we mistake it for the thing seen” (2010 : 12). Kandinsky intuitively tapped into the concept of an auditory imagination in relation to, or in spite of, the tangible objects visible onstage. He envisioned that this complex dialogue between the aural and the visible, which he associated with the color-sound correspondences, would vigorously affect the audience's senses resulting in a complex multi-sensory response, not unlike the experiences triggered by recent technological experiments with cross-sensory modalities.

### Modernist Legacy and Post-Dramatic Theatrical Expression

For both Scriabin and Kandinsky, art functions as a catalyst of the audience's imagination. Kandinsky specifically articulated that the recipients – the audience – while “experiencing” art, become the creators of their own perceptions; the work of art is a mysterious composition that provokes the attendants to find their own connection to and within it. Hugo Ball, rehearsing *The Yellow Sound* in Germany in 1914 and



intending to turn this performance into the first Dada manifesto, was equally attracted to the idea to liberate the audience's fantasy and imagination.<sup>15</sup> Drawn to the principle of antagonism and contradiction, Ball the Dadaist recognized this possibility for unleashing imagination through *The Yellow Sound's* "struggle between tonalities, lost equilibrium, 'principles' falling apart, unexpected drumbeats, big questions, apparently aimless aspiration, apparently desperate urgency and longing shattering the chains and attachment" (Ball 1974 : 230).

Kandinsky suggested that all forms exist exclusively as a form of the inner spirit. Ball in turn noted that in *The Yellow Sound* "[t]he spirit creates a form and goes on to another form" (1974 : 230). Form in combination with a particular color is the most important feature of abstract painting. As in abstract painting, form in *The Yellow Sound* is mostly determined by the use of space. While offering his audiences an endless opportunity to play with a series of images and sounds and find their own inner connections among them, Kandinsky does not juxtapose the inner sounds by chance. He creates a very precise structure in which no improvisation is possible. In its stage performance, this composition can be presented as a succession of abstract paintings accompanied by music. The music, movement, and color are constantly changing; the composition is by no means static and inert. The giants and other figures exist on different spatial planes. Their movements are distinct : "one walks fast, straight ahead; another, slowly as if with difficulty; a third now and then leaps joyously; a fourth looks around continually; a fifth advances in a solemn theatrical manner, arms crossed; a sixth walks on tiptoes, each with one palm raised, and so on" (1974 : 222). The contrasted colors and lights coexist, forming particular *mise-en-scènes* : a broad hill upstage and a "flat, mat, blue, rather deep-colored curtain" (1974 : 213) behind the hill, as an example. The colors do not blend with each other; they are separate and independent. The *mise-en-scènes* thus result from specific configurations between the audible world, physical movements, and colors. The form – that has its own inner sound – ultimately becomes a multidimensional composition.

Conceived as a multidimensional composition that stimulates the complexity of perception for the audience, Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* foreshadows the principles of post-dramatic theatre identified by Hans-Thies Lehmann. Recent critical studies draw on multiple connections between modernist explorations and post-dramatic theatre that has embraced the form of the scenic poem or intermedial performance to affect the audience's visual and aural stimuli.<sup>16</sup> Elinor Fuchs in *The Death of Character : Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* employs the concept of "mysterium" to identify the influences of theatrical modernity on post-dramatic works. She specifically points to "a certain mysticism of visual form" implicit in both early- and late-twentieth-century theatrical experiments with multidirectional and multi-vocal performance landscapes (1996 : 50). In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann



focuses his critical inquiry on associative, poetic, and sensory experiences in contemporary theatrical production in which “a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving” replaces “the linear successive” (2006 : 16). Referencing the experiments of Robert Wilson, Heiner Müller, Tadeusz Kantor, and Heiner Goebbels, among others, he argues that this form of theatre stimulates “a displacement of theatrical perception [...] turning from abandoning oneself to the flow of a narration towards a constructing and constructive coproducing of the total audio-visual complex of the theatre” (2006 : 157). Whether to conceptualize this experience as a displacement of perception or to frame it as a unified multi-sensory response, it appears that Kandinsky and to a lesser extent Scriabin tapped into the potential of art to activate the “multi-perspectival form of perceiving” in the audience. The focus on sensory interplay is a key in tracing the link between the audio-visual compositions of Scriabin and Kandinsky and the works of post-dramatic theatre. In fact, in an effort to interweave their metaphysical understanding of the sonic phenomena with visuality, they strove toward generating a series of complex audio-visual associations for the audience. In this process, they envisioned the development of multi-layered audio-visual dramaturgy and thus were arguably among the first modern artists to articulate post-dramatic theatrical expression.

### Further Considerations

To evoke the question at the beginning of the article about the influence of modernist explorations with sensory correspondences on current synesthetic technological inventions, I would like to offer a brief annotation of two contemporary instances of triggering artificial synesthesia. They both demonstrate how the implementation of present-day technology fostering sensory substitution and/or facilitating cross-modal interaction may not only lead to artistic innovations but also provide practical solutions to people with sensory deficiency. The first instance illustrates the process of transferring sounds into images for blind persons while the second example points to the intersections between art, the brain, and technology in a cyborg artistic experiment.

#### Example 1 - Rewiring Sensory Pathways

A blind person crosses the street, scores a goal, visualizes an abstract house shape. A blind man takes a holiday snapshot. These physical articulations by the totally blind occur with the assistance of the vOICe vision technology (with the three middle letters standing for “oh I see”) that activates sensory substitution and enables the process of visualizing concrete images triggered by a myriad of sounds, which are akin to a complex sound composition. Through a camera built into a visor, outside images and objects are first translated into multi-layered soundscapes – “a series of bleeps, whirrs and whistles” – which then get

transmitted to the participants via headphones (Doward 2014 : par. 3). While initially images are converted to soundscapes through software, the second transformation of sounds into visualized landscapes happens in the user's brain as a result of cross-modal sensory integration. Trained to create mental images induced by sound, the participants develop a synesthetic ability that enables the transference of sensory modalities.<sup>17</sup>

#### Example 2 - Artist as a Cyborg

Named the world's first cyborg artist, color-blind Neil Harbisson<sup>18</sup> wears an antenna attached to the back of his head that expands his senses and triggers synesthetic abilities in his brain – he can hear images and visualize sounds. Known for his sound portraits and color concerts that involve an intricate process of sensory communication and correspondence, Harbisson advocates for the use of technology “to transcend senses” and explains that his decision to become a cyborg was an artistic statement : “I’m treating my own body and brain as a sculpture” (Jeffries 2014 : 4 par). Even though he still sees objects and landscapes in grey scale, he hears them in distinct intense color, a unique experience that transforms his perception of the world and impacts his approach to art. “I like listening to Warhol and Rothko because their paintings produce clear notes. I can't listen to Da Vinci or Velázquez because they use closely related tones – they sound like the soundtrack for a horror film”, he observes. The colors that he perceives extend beyond the typical spectrum of the human brain and include the invisible infrared and ultraviolet. “For me, red isn't the colour of passion as it is for many humans. [...] It's a serene colour. Violet, though, is savage to my ears” (Jeffries 2014 : 6 par; 11 par).

These two examples propose the ways in which a synesthetic experiment, although removed from synesthesia's modernist metaphysics, may generate a myriad of other creative possibilities. Enabled by technological advances, these possibilities range from rewiring sensory pathways in order to achieve sensory substitution for the blind to transcending senses and triggering sequences of compound synesthetic responses in the brain of a cyborg artist. As this article suggests, Scriabin and Kandinsky led the way to contemporary artistic and technological engagements with sensory interplay by rigorously probing the cross-sensory relationship in their theory and practice.

#### Notes

1. Rebecca Schneider teases out the “mutually disruptive energy” between the past and the present in her study of theatrical reenactments.
2. See also Bruce Barton and Richard Windeyer's “Immersive Negotiations : Binaural Perspectives on Site-Specific Sound” for a discussion on “aurality's immediate, generative ‘phenomenological doubt’” in relation to site-specific sound (2012 : 185).

3. See, for instance, *Auditory Neuroscience : Making Sense of Sound* (2012) by Schnupp, Nelken, and King.
4. I have previously written about Michael Chekhov's theory and practice in association with Kandinsky's synesthetic experiments (See Listengarten 2015). See also Listengarten (2003), "Kandinsky's Stage Composition as a Total Work of Art" (*Scenography International* [5], online), for a discussion of *The Yellow Sound* in the context of avant-garde movements including Futurism, Dada, and Expressionism. The current article draws on some of these materials.
5. Notably, in the past decade there have been new studies on synesthesia, specifically in the field of neuroscience, suggesting the need to continue to establish closer connections between synesthesia, modernism, and neuroscience which could further inform the discussion of the modernists' explorations. Among these works are Lacey, Simon, *et al.*, "Synesthesia Strengthens Sound-Symbolic Cross-Modal Correspondences", in *European Journal of Neuroscience* 44.9 (2016 : 2716-2721); Bankieris, Kaitlyn, and Julia Simmer, "What Is the Link Between Synaesthesia and Sound Symbolism?" in *Cognition* 136 (2015 : 186-195); and Goller, Aviva I., Leun J. Otten, and Jamie Ward, "Seeing Sounds and Hearing Colors : An Event-Related Potential Study Of Auditory-Visual Synesthesia", in *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 21.10 (2009 : 1869-1881).
6. The Blue Rider (der Blaue Reiter) is the name of a group of artists who gathered around Kandinsky and Marc in Munich in 1911 and became known for a single publication and two exhibitions.
7. Among recent publications that focus on a paradigm shift toward musicality in the arts, see Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat : A History of Sound in the Arts* (2001), Roesner's "Musicality as a Paradigm for the Theatre : A Kind of Manifesto" (2010), and Brown's *Sound : A Reader in Theatre Practice* (2010).
8. For this debate, see Mirka's article "Colors of Mystic Fire : Light and Sound in Scriabin's *Prometheus*" (1996).
9. Recent experiments with Scriabin's color score include a 3D digital color space designed by Dutch visual artist Peter Struycken for the performance of *Prometheus* in 1998.
10. Among other visual artists who embraced musicality as a paradigm were Vincent van Gogh, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian.
11. Kandinsky himself referred to this model as *Bühnengesamtkunstwerk* or the "Monumental Artwork of the Future". See Behr (2013 : 65-85), for a detailed analysis of Kandinsky's artistic reform.
12. During the online symposium *Beyond Kandinsky : Revisiting the Spiritual Art* (2011), organized in commemoration of the centennial publication of Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), both artists and scholars rigorously debated the impact of Kandinsky's theory on contemporary culture. Edwards' article "Steiner, Thought Forms, and Kandinsky" was presented as part of the symposium.
13. Only two stage compositions have been published. *The Yellow Sound* was published in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*; the final version of *Violet – Aus "Violett"*, *Romantisches Bühnenstück* – was included in a Bauhaus publication in 1927.
14. In a more recent translation of *On Stage Composition* published in *Theater of the Avant-Garde : 1890-1950 : A Critical Anthology* (2001), "the physical-psychical" is translated as "the bodily spiritual", an expression that I use in the current article.
15. Ball's production did not materialize due to the outbreak of WWI. As a matter of fact, *The Yellow Sound* was never staged during Kandinsky's lifetime. Kandinsky's only practical involvement with theatre occurred during his Bauhaus period when he collaborated on a theatrical realization of a ballet based on Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in 1928. Recent theatrical interpretations of Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* include the productions at the Guggenheim

- museum in New York City in 1982 and Tate Modern in London in 2001.
16. See "Introduction" by Julia Listengarten and Robert Knopf to *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1950-2000 : A Critical Anthology* (2011) for a further discussion of connections between modernism and post-1950 theatrical avant-garde.
  17. Sandrine Ceurstemont also writes about this revolutionary technology in "Substituting senses lets blind people take sonic holiday snaps" (2015).
  18. Stelarc's performances that involve integrating robotic technology (a third arm or a third ear) into his body are also worth mentioning in the context of cyborg art.

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## Abstract

Russian modernist experiments in sensory communication include the interplay of sound and light in Alexander Scriabin's symphonic mysteries as well as colored sounds in Wassily Kandinsky's stage compositions. Inspired by various philosophical principles and creative methodologies, these artists explored the dialogue between the aural and the visual and its potential to influence the creative process and impact audience perception. This article seeks to assess the role of music and sound in synesthetic experiments of Scriabin and Kandinsky and place their theory and practice within the larger philosophical, artistic, and scientific contexts of their period and beyond.

**Keywords :** Russian Modernism; Synesthesia; Auditory Imagination; Sensory Communication

## Résumé

L'avant-garde russe s'est beaucoup intéressée à la communication par les sens. Cette expérimentation se manifeste, entre autres, dans les mystères symphoniques d'Alexandre Scriabin qui jouent sur l'entrelacement des sons et de la lumière et dans les compositions scéniques de Wassily Kandinsky qui font appel à des "sons colorés". Trouvant leur inspiration chez divers philosophes et faisant appel des méthodes de création différentes, ces artistes explorent les voies d'un dialogue synesthésique s'adressant à l'oreille et à l'œil, et ce, tant du point de vue de la création artistique que de celui de la perception d'une œuvre par son auditoire. Cet article vise à réévaluer les démarches et les théories synesthésiques de Scriabin et de Kandinsky en les situant dans les contextes philosophiques, artistiques et scientifiques de l'époque, puis au-delà.

**Mots-clés :** Modernisme Russe; synesthésie; imagination auditive; communication sensorielle

JULIA LISTENGARTEN is Professor of Theatre and Director of Graduate Studies at University of Central Florida. Her research interests include avant-garde theatre, contemporary scenographic practice, and performances of national identity. Her translation of Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs* premiered Off-Broadway at Classic Stage Company and was included in *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950*. She is the author of *Russian Tragifarce : Its Cultural and Political Roots* (Susquehanna UP 2000), co-author of *Modern American Playwriting : 2000-2009* (with Cindy Rosenthal, Methuen, forthcoming), and co-editor of *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1950-2000* (Yale UP 2011) and *Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012). She has contributed to many edited collections and theatre journals and is currently editing *Decades of Modern American Playwriting : 1930-2009* (with Brenda Murphy) for Methuen.