The Multimodal Icon: Sight, Sound and Intellection in Recent Poetries

Joseph M. Conte
University at Buffalo

This paper examines the development from single to multiple semiotic modes in poetry during the age of digital media. While one can argue that in the history of poetry the text has always represented "sight, sound and intellection" (Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* vii), the propagation of digital media and the devolution of popular culture into a predominantly graphical regime has made an irrevocable impression on poetry-on-the-page: the "turn" of line no longer stands as the defining characteristic of "verse." Louis Zukofsky recognized the compound nature of poetry, composed as it is of image, music and what his mentor, Ezra Pound, in "How to Read," called *logopœia*, or "the dance of the intellect among words" (*Literary Essays* 25). And yet in the presentation of examples that met the test of poetry, both ancient and modern, the texts are solely defined by the tyranny of the alphabetic symbol, the characters whose arbitrary value, aural component, and semantic reference must be painstakingly interpreted by the skilled reader. Reflecting on the training of readers of verse, W. K. Wimsatt declared in 1954, at the height of the New Criticism, that meaning was to be found in the poem as a "verbal icon," that is, as a fixed, monomodal, lineated text read in strict sequence from left to right and top to bottom (*Verbal Icon*). Only in the sense that the reader must visually interpret the alphabetic characters as representations of the spoken word is the poem an "icon," or image. In early examples of visual or "pattern" poetry such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings" (1633), the image formed by the monomodal arrangement of type is merely a supplement to its meaning. And then, because of the limits on print technology of the period, Herbert's reader must alternately choose between portrait orientation (the vertical image of the "wings") and landscape orientation (the horizontal, and legible, text of the poem). Perhaps in anticipation of multimodal works Herbert encourages the reader to play with the book as a physical object in space. A transitional moment in the relation of text and image is surely William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), described as an "illuminated book" by its Oxford University Press editor in 1967. A poem such as "The Sick Rose" is an example of what the art historian, Simon Morley, calls an "inter-medial" work (*Writing on the Wall* 12) that combines the traditional practice of calligraphy with marginal illustration and illuminated page borders. In keeping with his poetics, Blake breaks the chains of print Typography. Still, the illumination remains literally peripheral to the undisturbed calligraphic representation of the poem's text, "Oh Rose thou art sick."

My attention here will be paid to the production of multimodal poetries in print literature that present a hybridization of text and image, typography and the visual arts. Such works require that the reader negotiate, decode and interpret more than one semiotic mode, serially if not simultaneously. In *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, Morley offers a catalog and

analysis of the interplay of text and image from the Impressionists to Postmodernism. As his concentration is devoted to gallery art and not the *livre d'artiste*, or the book arts, his discussion of the encroachment, insertion and manipulation of letter-text within or upon the purity of the visual plane in modern art represents the inverse relation of my concerns with the appearance of the visual icon within print literature. Either way you look at it, however, there are issues in common, and in a progressively multimodal culture, it's likely that we will at some point stop making a distinction between the visual, conceptual and literary artist. Morley opens his commentary with a key observation on human cognition: "the activities of seeing and reading occur at quite different tempos and involve different orderings of perception" (9). The "visual scanning" of an image provides for freedom of movement and encourages associative, non-logical, intuitive and sensual operations; spatial relations among icons predominate. Whereas in reading a text, the eye perforce follows the strict route of lineation, the rational mind decodes the script (ciphering the Greek, Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic or other alphabets), and assembles the discourse; temporal relations of narrative predominate. Because these two semiotic modes call upon different and potentially confounding cognitive functions, the reader-viewer constitutes a complex adaptive system of interpretation. Of course, graphemes and the tools used to create them—stylus, chisel and brush— were once the common materials of inscription and image-making that gradually diverged over millennia (Morley 13). And while the museum and the library as institutions once mandated a singular concentration of cognitive functions, even the most pedestrian of activities such as crossing a street demands a multimodal cognitive processing.

The modernist revolution in the arts is, among much else, notable for its experimental typography and print design. Works associated with or manifestoes for New York Dada, Paris Cubism, London Vorticism, Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism appear in close order, sometimes as individual efforts and often as collaborative enterprises. The Spanish Dadaist artist, Francis Picabia remarks of his journal, *391* (whose title was in homage to Alfred Stieglitz's studio 291 and his journal *Camera Work*), "Every page must explode, whether through seriousness, profundity, turbulence, nausea, the new, the eternal, annihilating nonsense, enthusiasm for principles, or the way it is printed." As Johanna Drucker observes in *The Visible Word*, these texts introduce a semiotic complexity through their use of "words which form images, are manipulated through their visual form, appear as visual phenomena—but are, still, recognizable producers of linguistic values" (2). A brief review of some of the typographical innovations of radical modernism on the page is necessary, if only because these monomodal techniques are brought forward into the multimodal, polysemiotic systems of recent poetries. Among the modernist typographical experiments is the employment of spatial relation on the page that is prominent in the setting of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. One could point to his collaboration on the journal BLAST (1914) with writer and painter Wyndham Lewis and Vorticist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, in particular for the use of columnar arrangement, varying font sizes and san serif typeface in the Manifesto. Pound's exploration of spatial form in poetry relies upon the ideogrammic method.[1] In his desire to MAKE IT NEW (*Cantos* 265) Pound misunderstood, in Ernest Fenellosa's treatise on "The Chinese Written Character," the ideogram as a fundamentally pictorial form of writing. The associative logic of his ideogrammic method in verse allows Pound to arrange words spatially on the page as if they were icons freed from at least some of the restraints of syntax. The intuitive, associative and spatial qualities of Pound's *Cantos* summon the reader's visual apperception of the text nearly as much as a semantic parsing of its many historical, multilingual and intertextual references. Yet as Pound

---

[1] For an extended and definitive discussion of the ideogram in Pound's poetry, see Lazlo K. Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*.

concedes, "the foreign words and ideograms both in these two decads and in earlier cantos enforce the text but seldom if ever add anything not stated in the english [sic]" (*Cantos* 256).[2]

Published in the same year as BLAST No. 1, Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*) combines not only the disruption of the poetic line on the album-width space of the page—as per the dynamic tumbling of dice, rather than the static block of conventional typesetting—but also varying fonts (roman, italic and capitals) and type sizes. Drucker claims that Mallarmé's "inspiration for the visual appearance of *A Throw of the Dice* derived in part from his negative reaction to the habits of reading formed in response to the daily press" (*Visible Word* 56). Modernist revulsion towards bourgeois commerce and the tedious monocursality of its newsprint are in play here, but note that as in Picabia's *391* and other journals the visual arrangement of headlines, text blocks, indexicals and borders mimic the segmented structure of the newsprint page, which is, after all, the dominant form of mass media in the period. Its large-print title phrase, or heading, can be read free of the elaborations of the text in smaller font sizes.

Further claiming space on the page rather than the binding of syntax and lineation, F. T. Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, or "words in freedom," shifts the reader's attention to spatial relations and the dynamism of the printed word. In his "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura Futurista," or "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," contained in *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914), Marinetti's demands for a revolution in typography and poetics begin with "1. We must destroy syntax by placing nouns at random as they are born." Like the release of a Turkish aerial surveillance balloon, words are released into parataxis that relies more heavily on the reader's visual association to create meaning than on phrasal packets. At times the word is even blasted into stray letters and figures that function as design rather than bearers of signification. Such techniques contribute to the visualization of the word, and the letters of which it is comprised, overtaking, but never quite obliterating, its function as an arbitrary and transparent signifier. The epitome of this practice comes in another book of the First World War, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1916). In poems such as "Il pleut," words are arranged as icons. But depending on one's degree of presbyopia or myopia, whether one needs to hold the page at arm's length or close to the face, the eye *either* focuses on the image-icon of rain sheeting against a window pane *or* on the lexical sequence that—not all at once— reveals a complex metaphor between the dreary weather and women's voices that are the mournful chorus of wartime. To make an analogy with the visual arts, the effect is somewhat akin to viewing a pointillist painting such as Georges Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (*A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884): one can stand far enough from the wall to appreciate its scene of tranquil recreation; or one can stand too close to the wall and see mostly arrangements of points in color; but one cannot, either optically or cognitively, apprehend both the image and the material form of the painting at once. Seurat's illusion depends on the principle of optical unification that takes place in the visual cortex, in the occipital lobe at the back of the brain; whereas the language function is associated with Broca's area in the frontal lobe. Thus, even more demanding than a pointillist painting, full comprehension of Apollinaire's calligrammes requires the brain to switch between these two areas and cognitive functions.

For all their inventiveness, however, these modernist texts largely confined themselves to a single semiotic mode: alphabetic typography. While the reader of Apollinaire's "Il pleut" interprets and relates both the graphical form and lexical reference of the poem, it is nonetheless composed in

---

[2] As Pound remarks, the translation of the Chinese ideograms is provided in the English text. Carroll F. Terrell, in his invaluable *Companion*, identifies hsin[1], "new," and jih[4], "sun," so that "[t]he four characters mean: "make new, day by day, make new" (205).

a single semiotic code (i.e, French). A close examination of Apollinaire's text shows an effect of modernization, namely, that it is a typewritten rather than manuscript or typeset page. The spatialization in literary form that appears in international modernism is made possible, or at least abetted by, the introduction of the typewriter as the technology of composition. Friedrich Kittler recognizes that the "typewriter is not really a machine in the strict sense of machine technology, but is an 'intermediate' thing, between a tool and a machine, a mechanism," and he quotes an aphorism of Nietzsche, "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts" (*Gramophone* 200). Mixed media collaborations between artist and writer become common in the twentieth-century arts; but the spatialization of the literary page is more a collaboration between the writer and the machine, or the typewriter as an intermedial mechanism. So Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, drafted onto scraps of paper in the Disciplinary Training Center's infamous detention cages in 1945, were actually composed by Pound on the medical office's typewriter. Explaining his own theory of "projective verse" in 1950, Charles Olson speaks to the indispensability of the typewriter "as the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work" (*Collected Prose* 246).

By the end of the century, the introduction of the personal computer and digital page-composition software such as QuarkXPress® enables the writer (or should we say the design artist?) to make nearly equal use of index, icon and symbol in increasingly complex relations. I refer here to Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic typology of the sign in "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," though I would like to apply them in a somewhat different manner than does Peirce. Thus in a multimodal poetry one is likely to find intermixed examples of the *icon*, a sign that *resembles* its object in some fashion, as in a portrait or diagram; the *index*, a sign that *refers* to the object by means of a physical connection, as in design elements on the page; and the *symbol*, which *denotes* the object by virtue of some arbitrary designation, the "interpretant," as in words and figures (*Philosophical Writings* 102-103). Modernist works of art that put all three types of signs in play include Francis Picabia's *Here, This Is Stieglitz Here* (1915), which is simultaneously a portrait of the photographer; a diagram of a bellows camera with an automobile brake; an indexical pointing, "Ici, c'est ici"; and a symbol for the man, "Stieglitz." Similarly, we have Charles Demuth's poster portrait of the poet William Carlos Williams, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928), which is iconic (fire engine, streetlights), indexical (lines of force), and symbolic ("Bill," the figure 5). In *Writing on the Wall* Morley would identify such multimodality in the visual arts as mixed media (12).

Kittler tells us that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the "general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface" (*Gramophone* 1). All text, video and audio files are stored as binary digits. Whereas all information was once contained within the regime of the symbolic and all data flowed "through the bottleneck of the signifier. Alphabetic monopoly, grammatology" (*Gramophone* 4), now the flow of bits through fiber optic cable makes all media interchangeable. Thus, the millennial information culture—after the vast colonization of the public sphere by digital media—is an age of intermedial relation. Among the many sorts of blending and "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin) in the arts, popular culture, architecture, advertising, network television news and the global Internet, we find a multimodal print literature that displays the "surface effects," as Kittler calls them, of image, design, and text because these works are created in a digital environment—on PCs, tablets and hand-held devices—that recognizes no distinction between media that are processed and stored in a single code.

Alison Gibbons defines multimodality as "the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context" (*Multimodality* 8). Not only the creation of multimodal literature but also the study of multimodality has been "catalyzed by the rise of digital technology" (8). We experience

multimodality as the environment of our daily life, in various platforms that include the urban streetscape, our digital "desktops," and more formal art galleries and installations. Multimodality is as new as the iPhone 5, but as old as the New England Primer's abecedarium. In the multimodal poetries of what Marjorie Perloff calls "twenty-first century modernism," the lessons of the modernist avant-garde are relearned after a long period of lineated, Establishment lyric poetry (*21ˢᵗ-Century Modernism* 4-5). There has been a sea change in our media culture that may have been anticipated by Apollinaire, Marinetti, Khlebnikov, and Pound but could not be fully realized on the print page. In these twenty-first century poetries, the reader encounters multiple semiotic modes corresponding to *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. The preponderance of twentieth-century poetries are monosemiotic and language-centered; they call on the reader's store of linguistic competency and comprehension, but they subordinate or exclude the iconic and indexical modes. Recent multimodal poetries exhibit polysemiosis: the reader encounters two or more semiotic modes and *recognizes* that they are not autonomous meaning systems but semantically interrelated. The experience of reading a monomodal text recalls the term from Latin grammar: to *parse* the text; each word in an inflected language is evaluated as to its grammatical function; and then the *parole* (in Saussure's terminology) takes its place in the sentence, or the system of language, *la langue*. But the experience of reading a multimodal text requires that the reader—in the broadest sense of the word—negotiate between systems of meaning, not merely within the rule of one mode. Thus, the relation between the verbal text and the visual icon is one that is cognized rather than decoded. As Gibbons observes, the study and reception of multimodal literatures requires the development of a cognitive poetics. Such a poetics—still in its nascent form—draws upon the interdisciplinary field of cognitive science that includes cognitive psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and cognitive linguistics that investigates the mind and its processes (*Multimodality* 26). Cognitive poetics summons such frameworks as conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson), conceptual integration (Stockwell) and multimodal metaphor (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi). The relation between text and image is thus not one of dependency (illustration; annotation) or autonomy (catalog; journal) but a bilateral "interanimation" that requires and stimulates a cognitive poetics (Gibbons, *Multimodality* 99).

A recent book that demonstrates several characteristics of multimodal print poetry is Emily McVarish's *The Square* (2009). McVarish describes herself as a book artist, writer, designer and publisher living in the San Francisco Bay Area—and it's fitting that a composer and producer of multimodal works would envision herself as a multimedia artist rather than as a poet who delegates the design, cover art, and printing of the book to other hands. *The Square* and three other books by McVarish are published in limited editions by Granary Books in New York as *artist's books* that range upwards of $1,200 per copy, if they're available. Each book is "written, designed, hand-set, and printed letterpress" by McVarish, and she assists in their binding and production (Granary Books Catalog). To be distinguished from commercial print literature, these books are works of art that have been exhibited in galleries such as 871 Fine Arts in San Francisco and collected by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Harvard University's Printing and Graphic Arts Collection. But they are also examples of the thousand-year-old tradition of the book arts that employs craftsman techniques for letterpress printing, typography, illustrating, paper marbling and bookbinding.[3] In the age of Kindle e-books and Acrobat e-text files that reduce all texts regardless of genre to a single proprietary format to enhance legibility on miniscule e-readers, the book arts community has doubled down on the very characteristics that describe the material form of the book. And so the book-object itself with its album-width pages, exceptionally fine paper and embossed printing speaks ambiguously of itself as both artwork and text.

---

[3] See for example The Center for Book Arts in New York, NY.

McVarish's title, "the square," refers to a geometric form, but it is also a spatial representation within which various signs or text-objects are arranged. The catalog description notes: "Blind-stamped pages, scattered holes, perpetual calendar parts, pedestrian video stills, dotted lines, and overturned letter-blocks extend and perform *The Square*'s three texts" (Granary Books Catalog). The reader's cognitive reception of this work of art depends on her ability to relate aspects of the material form of the letterpress book (and such nominal defects as holes in the paper), graphical images, indexical design elements and multiple *lexia*, or units of reading.[4] Only when the reader brings these elements together within the page-space as a hybrid form that is both read and viewed do they attain meaning. "The square" also recalls the ancient Greek *Agora* [Ἀγορά], the central gathering place in the city-state [πόλις] where citizens shopped or exchanged goods, listened to public speeches and conversed amongst themselves. Ironically, however, the reader of McVarish's *The Square* encounters a multimodal representation of the alienating effects of communications technology, personal displacement and disembodied speech. In spite of our mobile telecommunications and information culture, the contemporary public square is a scene of transitory, dysfunctional and fragmentary conversations resulting in the dissolution of community. What I *recognize* as the central fact of McVarish's work is figured by the wandering, solo figures (photoshopped from literally "pedestrian video") who are not apparently conversing with or addressing anyone; eavesdropped one-sided cellphone calls; the discontinuous scattering of design elements; and a series of more literary texts that emanate from no singular speaking subject. The calls overheard on a San Francisco MUNI bus are set in a typeface of hollowed out block capitals, as if to suggest their electronic insubstantiality: "Hey. My phone has the pesky habit now of losing your calls. I'm just, I just came over Castro Street, or Divisadero now, …[.]" This text, representative of a mobile society in which one can be physically adjacent to other auditors but speaking to someone absent, runs across the gutter of a two-page spread; or it hopscotches from one spread to the next, suggestive of the missing respondent.

The text in its displacement from linear order recalls Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice*. There are sanserif boldface words in a larger font size that can either be read as part of a lexeme with the miniscule text that surrounds them or which could be combined across multiple page spreads to provide another phrase. For example, one can read combinatively,

Little lodges of aimed presence drop out.

Loaded pauses of stretched reference set in,

in-sets of absence on the scattering scene.

or paratactically, **lodges pauses absence**. Other lexia that are set in columnar or perpendicular orientations force the reader to turn either the book or his gaze. Numbers that appear in large multicolored type may refer to the technology of the book—as pagination—but since they are not sequential may only be the scattered parts of a calendar. McVarish's print works demand that the reader-viewer pursue a multiplicity of reading paths. In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth "distinguishes between two kinds of labyrinthine structure: the unicursal, where there is only one path …; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia" (5-6). McVarish's book places the reader on a multicursal path within a multimodal setting. In its wandering figures and floating texts, *The Square* apprehends the distressing failure to connect in public spaces; yet the skills required of the reader to cognitively navigate and

---

[4] See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (13), in which he defines "lexia" as fragmented, cut up units of otherwise "ordinary language." The term describes the three disjunctive, discontinuous texts of McVarish's *The Square*.

make meaning of the book's textual and graphical elements are of a high order. McVarish sets this sentence across the page gutter, and so violates one convention of block printing:

Two screen-readers │ sit in and out,

side by side │ and uncontemporary.

She indicts the alienation of electronic communication while at the same time visually transgressing the traditional typesetting of the book.

In its negotiation between print, graphical and telecommunications McVarish's *The Square* provides an example of remediation. As employed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, remediation refers to the ways in which new digital media repurpose and refashion and pay homage to the analog media of the past, including painting, print, photography and film. On my iPhone, the Books "app" permits me to "turn" a "page" with a single flick of my finger; and if I do so slowly enough, I can vaguely glimpse an image of the text on the reverse side of the "page." That's an instance of the digital remediation of the hardcopy that we're leaving behind but still nostalgically recall. McVarish's books reflect another form of remediation, not as an instance of the pulling forward of old media into new but as a reflexive representing of the new media. What, after all, is more iconic of personal computing and its graphical interface than the liberal use of icons to denote the device's various functions? *The Square* is generously sprinkled with visually intriguing but useless icons, not unlike their digital counterparts. Such graphics, and the representation of mobile telecommunications in the printed pages of this book, both deform and reform the legacy print medium.

My colleague in the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo and the David Gray Chair in Poetry, Steve McCaffery, is best known for his language-centered poetry and for his bravura performances of sound poetry. But he has throughout his long career composed a variety of visual poetry. Last year, drawing on his extensive personal collection, he co-curated an exhibit, "LANGUAGE to Cover a Wall: Visual Poetry through its Changing Media," at the University's Art Gallery. These works "in which the visual arrangement of text, images, and symbols combine to create an intended effect" are described as "intermedia" poetry, many of which may be regarded as multimodal. One of Steve's works included in the exhibition pays homage to a modernist forebear while serving as an instance of multimodal metaphor: "Four Versions of Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro'" (*Seven Pages Missing* 378-81). We are all familiar with and have probably memorized Pound's haiku-like Imagist poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

What is perhaps less well known is the spatial representation of the two-line poem that emulates the ideogrammic characters of Japanese in its first printing in *Poetry* magazine's April 1913 issue. That's to say that not only is it an Imagist classic that fashions, as Pound later wrote in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, a "super-position" of "one idea on top of another" (89) but it is also a modernist visual experiment within the limits of western linear typesetting. Steve's versioning of Pound's sentence even more resolutely treats it as a visual poem.

All metaphors proceed according to an associative logic (comparison) rather than a syllogistic logic (deduction). The standard analysis of metaphor in poetry, advanced by I. A. Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, distinguishes between the "tenor," or subject to which attributes are ascribed, and the "vehicle," or subject from which attributes are derived (96). There's typically an unequal relation between the two, as the tenor, "My Lady," often cannot be known by the reader,

whereas the vehicle, "an exquisite flower," is usually more familiar. What's distinctive about Pound's Imagist, and hence visual, metaphor is that tenor and vehicle are almost indistinguishable; they are a "super-position" that extends the attributes of the one to the other and vice versa. To achieve the full effect of the "apparition" requires what Gibbons terms "interanimation" (*Multimodality* 99). That said, both elements are presented in the same semiotic mode, and thus the reader must engage in an interpretive linguistic analysis that decodes and compares the terms to arrive at the aspects of visual similarity between "faces" and "petals." Pound may also have been influenced by something else he could have seen in Paris in 1913, namely the superimposition of images in the photography of Man Ray (double exposures, photograms) or Alvin Langdon Coburn (Vortographs).[5]

McCaffery's versions of Pound's poem are an apparition of another sort, a "super-position" that places fragmented texts together with fragmented images. These are multimodal metaphors, defined by Charles Forceville as "metaphors whose target and source domains are predominantly or entirely presented in different modes, these modes including minimally visuals, written language, spoken language, non-verbal sound, and music" (*Multimodal Metaphor* 383). In studies of conceptual metaphor, the target and source domains correspond roughly to the tenor and vehicle in poetry, though presented in different semiotic modes. The "verbo-pictorial metaphors" of a work such as McCaffery's "Four Versions" evoke a cognitive poetics because the reader-viewer must interrelate conceptually the attributes of both distinct modes. Francisco Yus suggests that visual metaphors are initially more powerful "due to their holistic gestalt-like processing," whereas verbal metaphors require that the reader "make interpretive hypotheses as text is processed in a word-by-word integration" ("Visual Metaphor" 168). All four plates are comprised of cut-up text and images: a Caucasian woman's eye gazing placidly amongst Chinese ideograms; another woman's eye amongst confetti of illegible fragments of Roman type; Olympus surrounding a squinting male face that should be looking through, not inside, the camera lens; and Roman statuary busts bisected by columns of likewise bisected Roman capitals.[6] In all four plates, then, there are eyes that signify the holistic immediacy of Pound's visual apparition, whereas any linear decoding of the Western text that would describe that experience is frustrated. These multimodal metaphors appear to comment on the powers and limitations of the verbal and the pictorial, not as G. E. Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) does, but by interrelating the two modes.

A third type of multimodal poetry, after McVarish's artist's book and McCaffery's postmodern cut-up of text and image, is the visual poetry of Geof Huth. Since 1985 Huth has been engaged in idiosyncratic forms of the visual poem, including "fidgetglyphs" and Eyechart poems, as well as theorizing the hybrid form of verbo-visual artwork, largely on his blog at *dbqp: visualizing poetics* (http://dbqp.blogspot.com/). Most of the visual poetry by Huth and associated poets such as Miekel And, Gustave Morin, and Joel Lipman qualifies as multimodal because they summon more than one semiotic mode on what Huth calls the *mise en page*.[7] I'll attend here to the fidgetglyph, which he describes as "designed to play with, and find meaning within, the various shapes that written language can take…. Most fidgetglyphs mimic handwriting in some way, but letters take various forms, and sometimes a letter is disfigured to such a degree that it is hardly recognizable" ("What We Make" 33). Written language is the visual representation, or notation, of spoken

---

[5] On the use of superimposition in cinema of Sergei Eisenstein and Fritz Lang in the 1920s, see Mats Rohdin, "Multimodal Metaphor in Classical Film Theory from the 1920s to the 1950s."

[6] See also the readings of McCaffery's "Four Versions" in Perloff's *21st-Century Modernism* (190-200) to which I'm obviously indebted.

[7] See his essay, "Visual Poetry Today," on the Poetry Foundation website: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/182397.

language in an alphabetic or ideogrammic code. A visual poem resists utterance because "there is always some meaning within it that cannot transfer accurately into speech" (Huth, "What We Make 32). Three fidgetglyphs by Huth make the point that we both read the graphemes and view the line drawings that they partially comprise. As testament to their multimodality there are some fidgetglyphs that are more easily and immediately discernible as images than they are as words; part of the decoding of their text is in descrying the glyphs (an element of writing such as a letter) from the doodled fidgets. Doing so only leads to further interpretation of portmanteau words such as "architextual" (combining visual and textual structures), "idealogies" (both a set of ideas and a way of looking at things) and "requestion" (asking and inquiring). For Huth, these "texts refer to multiple ways of making text and making meaning with text, so a fidgetglyph might experiment with the history of Western calligraphy, play with the idea of the signature and adorn words with florid paraphs, hearken back to nineteenth-century broadsides, mimic a handwritten note by a barely literate teenager, or imagine a writing that doesn't yet exist" ("What We Make" 34). In *Writing on the Wall* Morley would recognize the fidgetglyph as an example of intermedia work extending back to the Book of Kells (c. 800 AD): "[r]ecognition of the visual, material side of letters (and of the performative and sensory dimension to the act of writing) is also at the heart of the traditional practice of calligraphy, as it is of typography." These are works in which "the distinction between word and image breaks down, and a hybrid form is produced" (12).

The multimodal poetries of the twenty-first century certainly owe a conceptual and technical debt to the literary and pictorial avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Whereas the modernists conducted much of their experimentation with typography and spatial form, the multimodalists establish complex cognitive relations between text and image that a. pursue multicursal reading paths; b. exploit the interrelation of the lexical and visual through multimodal metaphor; and c. engage in the remediation of aspects of photography, film and video, drawing and painting, telephony and other digital communications. Yet while poet-artists such as McVarish, McCaffery and Huth have embraced page-composition suites and web publishing they have not abandoned print. I've offered only the thinnest of electronic veneers of these poems that cannot adequately represent their texture, any more than a digital photograph of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) can substitute for viewing the painting itself in the Prado. For a letterpress artist such as McVarish, the resolution, grain, embossing, material substrate, color stability and texture of the book's pages are visual characteristics of the multimodal print text that are lost in digital-photographic reproduction. McCaffery's "Four Versions" in *Seven Pages Missing* are themselves only reproductions of an original collage work on paper. And the fidgety pen-strokes of Huth's visual poetry recall the oldest forms of written characters made with a stylus. Or, as Peter Allen sang, "Everything old is new again."

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U P, 1997.

Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1918.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. New York and London: Oxford U P, 1977.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

Drucker, Johanna. *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1994.

Forceville, Charles J. "The Role of Non-Verbal Sound and Music in Multimodal Metaphor." Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 383-401.

Forceville, Charles J., and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, eds. *Multimodal Metaphor*. New York and Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009.

Géfin, Laszlo K. *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1982.

Gibbons, Alison. *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. New York and London: Routledge, 2012.

Granary Books. http://www.granarybooks.com.

Huth, Geof. "What We Make of Poetry Even When It is Poetry that We Make." *P-Queue* 6 (2009): 27-37.

Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1999.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1980.

Marinetti, F. T. *Zang Tumb Tuuum*. Milan: Edizioni Futuriste de Poesia, 1914.

McCaffery, Steve. *Seven Pages Missing*. *Volume One: Selected Texts 1969-1999*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2000.

McVarish, Emily. *The Square*. New York: Granary Books, 2009.

Morley, Simon. *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Olson, Charles. *Collected Prose*. Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover, 1955.

Perloff, Marjorie. *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Malden, MA and Oxford, Eng.: Blackwell, 2002.

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos*. New York: New Directions, 1986.

———. *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions, 1970.

———. *Literary Essays*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968.

Richards, I. A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York and London: Oxford U P, 1936.

Rohdin, Mats. "Multimodal Metaphor in Classical Film Theory from the 1920s to the 1950s." Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 403-28.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Terrell, Carroll F.   *A Companion to* The Cantos *of Ezra Pound.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of
        California P, 1980.

Wimsatt, W. K., and Monroe Beardsley. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry.* Lexington: U
        of Kentucky P, 1954.

Yus, Francisco. "Visual Metaphor Versus Verbal Metaphor: A Unified Account." Forceville and
        Urios-Aparisi 147-72.

Zukofsky, Louis. *A Test of Poetry.* 1948. New York: C. Z. Publications, 1980.