Literature and the other arts

postmodern poetry in English

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Resumo

Partindo da tendência pós-moderna para a eliminação de fronteiras entre as artes e mídias, o artigo analisa as relações intermidiáticas frequentes na poesia pós-moderna de expressão inglesa.

Palavras-chave

Intermidialidade, literatura e as outras artes,
poesia pós-moderna de expressão inglesa

It is a commonplace of contemporary criticism that postmodern poetry – here loosely taken as experimental texts created after World War II – has strayed in many different directions. Poetry now often overflows into the other arts – if we can still use the term "art" for all present-day cultural objects wrapped up under this controversial label. In fact, as they incorporate the resources of their day and age, contemporary poems do not always confine themselves to books, their traditional support. They may spill over into the computer or TV or cinema screen or even into museum galleries, in the shape of multiple objects, paintings, performances, videos and installations. Poets themselves are the first to bear witness to this fact. Among Brazilians, the names of Antonio Fernando de Franceschi, Marcos Bagno, Felipe Fortuna, Carlos Ávila, Duda Machado and Lúcio Autran (come immediately) mind. Franceschi acknolewledges that poetic creation frequently surrenders to forms of intervention mediated by languages with a more immediate impact, especially music, both scenic and electronic.[1] So also Margos Bagno declares that he "extracts his poetry from other sources," among which he mentions music, "a hollow, a-semantic sign," "the more perfect for that."[2]

A number of other Brazilian poets likewise allude to various forms of intercourse between their poetry and the arts. Felipe Fortuna considers essential the influences he captured from Brazilian humor, from Chass Adams's melancholic cartoons to the most diverse draftsmen, such as André François and Quino. A cartoonist's son, who avows

[1] FRANCESCHI. Notas de um percurso, p. 66.

[2] "Signo oco, assemântico e, por isso, mais que perfeito." BAGNO. In principio erat Verbum, p. 247. As in all other Portuguese sentences quoted in this paper, the translation is mine.

his fascination for Paul Klee, Fortuna says he turned to writing only because he could not draw. He attributes his choice to the visual hegemony of our times: developed societies, addicted to digital culture, reduce almost all information to a luminous, non-verbal sign. Carlos Ávila informs the reader that his 1981 book *Aqui & Agora* [Here & Now] is the result of ten years of poetic experiments bringing together the verbal and the visual: "lyrical microforms bearing a strong relationship to music, concrete poetry as well as poems which turn out to be verbal ready-mades, synthesized in brief forms on the white surface of the page."[3] Another poet, Duda Machado, emphasizes the presence of visual compositions in his first book, *Zil.* Together with the abolition of verse for the sake of spatial configuration, words are organized in discontinuous planes, according to sound affinities. The poem becomes an object, "a mixture of words and design."[4] One more poet, Lúcio Autran, affirms that the starting-point for his book *Um nome* [A Name] was Hieronymus Bosch's painting "Extração da Pedra da Loucura" ["The Extraction of the Stone of Madness"], and that his poem "Uma baleia vista em São Paulo" ["A Whale Seen in São Paulo"] refers to three paintings by Franck Stella on display in the 1989 Biennial Exhibition in São Paulo.[5] Rodrigo Garcia Lopes's words seem to sum up the conclusion implicit in all those pronouncements:

> The very meaning of the word poetry has been expanded – poetry has been shattered and is now dispersed? and travestied in numberless forms, chameleonic. You may find it in the most unusual sites: in the Hebrew transcriptions of someone like Haroldo de Campos, or in Mauro & Quitéria's babelic raps. In the images of a Win Wenders film or in Itamar Assumpção's music. In the words of Cazuza's or Quintana's songs. Some of it in records, in clips, videos, slogans, layouts, holographs and even books. Where, after all?[6]

Lopes's remark might just as well refer to a number of North-American poets who, in different ways, also proclaim their affinities with other arts. In some cases, they talk of the influence of jazz on their poems, or of the use of their texts in performances. Otherwise, allusions to works of visual art contribute to their creative work, and are addressed to implied readers whose familiarity with the history of art is instrumental for their reading of the poems. In this context, the reference to non-verbal semiotic systems may play different functions – the creation of a certain mood, the expression of the poet's subjective response to an art work or his political or metaphysical worldview.

The inspiration for such poems may also come from an artist's biography. This happens for instance in the work of Ed Sanders, poet, singer, publisher and environmentalist, the

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[3] "Microformas líricas que guardam forte relação com a música e a poesia concreta e poemas com o caráter de 'ready-mades' verbais, sintetizados em formas breves sobre o branco da página" (ÁVILA. Uma poesia e dois livros, p. 86).

[4] "(...) misto de palavras e design." MACHADO. Poesia de uma voz a outra, p. 114.

[5] AUTRAN. Trajetória de uma trilogia, p. 223.

[6] "O próprio significado da palavra poesia se ampliou – se estilhaçou e ela agora está dispersa e travestida de inúmeras formas, camaleônica. Pode estar no lugar mais inusitado: nas transcrições do hebraico de um Haroldo de Campos, ou nos *raps* babélicos de Mauro & Quitéria. Nas imagens de um filme de Wim Wenders ou na música de Itamar Assumpção. Nas letras de Cazuza ou Quintana. Um pouco nos discos, nos clips, vídeos, slogans, layouts, holografias e até nos livros. Onde, afinal?" (LOPES. Poesia hoje: um check-up, p. 274).

leading force of "The Fugs," a satirical folk-rock band. Sanders has been considered a bridge between the Beat and the Hippie generation. His poem "The Cutting Prow, for Henri Matisse" relates directly to the last year of the French artist's life and work, from the spring of 1952 to the spring of 1953, when, sitting in his wheelchair, with a pair of scissors in his hands, Matisse produced some of his finest art, a group of wall-sized works of painted paper cut-outs on canvas and the smaller "Blue Nude" series, the culmination of his exploration of abstraction. Sanders's poem begins with a downright evocation of the artist's figure in his last year:

> The genius was 81
> Fearful of blindness
> Caught in a wheelchair
> Staring at death

Further on, the forms and color of this phase of Matisse's work are called up. Taking their cue from the artist's allusion to the essence of things, which he called their "sign," the verses compare the artist's scissors to Charon's mythical boat, which would take the painter to the artists' heaven, the platonic world of ideal forms:

> The cutting of the scissors
> Was the prowl of a boat
> to take him away
> The last blue iris
>
> Blooms at the top
> On a warm spring day[7]

The final strophes of the poem include drawings of tiny pairs of scissors. An allusion to the tools used by Matisse for his cut-outs, the sketchy drawings, in the poet's own hand, also bear witness to the alliance between visual and verbal creations.[8]

Affinities with both music and the visual arts show up in the work of Michael McClure, one of the leading poets of the Beat generation, a participant in the 1955 Six Gallery Events, which launched the San Francisco Renaissance. The poet's alliances with music and performance have led him on occasion to perform his poetry with the accompaniment of Ray Manzared, the former keyboardist for the rock group "The Doors." McClure's poems sometimes display a graphic design, suggestive of clouds and flowers. Pointing to certain traits of his writing – "the deliberate depersonalizations of grammar and alterations of accepted written syntax"– he invites the reader to see his verses as analogies for the splashings of paint in modern canvases.[9] So also his "Ode to Jack Pollock" recalls some of the abstract expressionist's favorite colors. In this poem, Pollock's technique of pouring and dripping paint comes out as an image for a lyrical evocation of pain, in which the hand swinging the loops of paint is presented as equivalent to the poet's "gestures":

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[7] SANDERS. The Cutting Prow. For Henry Matisse, p. 366-367.

[8] For a short introduction to Sanders' life and work, cf. HOOVER. *Postmodern American Poetry*. A Norton Anthology, p. 366-368.

[9] McCLURE. Ode to Jackson Pollock, p. 21.

> Hand swing the loops of pain _ splashes _ drips_
> chic lavender, *duende* black, blue and red!
> Jack Pollock my sorrow is selfish. I won't meet
> you here. I see your crossings of paint!
> We are all lost in the cloud of our gestures_ [10]

Clark Coolidge, another contemporary North-American poet, adopts a similar stance. In the essay "Words" he relates his poetry to the work of Philip Guston, the neo-expressionist painter and printmaker of the New York School. Coolidge writes: "I find myself very close in spirit and work to the (…) dialectics of the painter Philip Guston (…) the kinetics of thought/action: growth, destruction, transformation."[11] Puzzled at the obscurity of Coolidge's writing, the reader can only vaguely associate it with Guston, the painter and printmaker of the New York School, who in the late 1960s helped lead a transition from abstract expressionism to renderings of personal symbols and objects. The hermetic character of Coolidge's is purposeful. We cannot forget his affiliation with language poetry – a kind of creative enterprise marked by its disregard of referential meaning and corresponding preoccupation with fragments, nonsense, and unmeaning, as well as the rejection of the linear model current in traditional literature. Like other "language" poets, Coolidge privileges word and letter as pure forms (hence the affinity with abstract painting), inseparable from a concretistic distortion of texts.[12] In this connection, Hoover comments:

> [Coolidge's] arrangement of seemingly unrelated words without the aid of sentences can create a puzzle of disjunction for the uninitiated reader. Yet, once the reader suspends any demand for narrative or linear organization, the words are free to come into relation, like the abstract yet liquid shapes in a Tanguy painting, or like the geologic formations that have fascinated Coolidge since childhood. Coolidge perceives poetic composition as an "arrangement" of discrete materials (words) just as quartz and calcite are an arrangement of molecules.[13]

Coolidge's work has also been associated with jazz rhythms and movement, by reason of his style of public readings, typically characterized by a driving tempo.

Affinities with jazz and performances likewise mark the poetic creation of Lawrence Ferlinghetti,[14] the founder of the famous all- paperback bookstore, "City Lights," and of

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[10] McCLURE. Ode to Jackson Pollock, p. 256.

[11] COOLIDGE. Words, p. 652.

[12] Here the classic reference is the anthology by MESSERLI. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E P=O=E=T=R=Y, now out of print.

[13] HOOVER. *Postmodern American Poetry:* A Norton Anthology, p. 369. HOOVER quotes Coolidge's Arrangement, p. 144-147.

[14] Ferlinghetti's work challenges the definition of art and the artist's role in the world. He urged poets to be engaged in the political and cultural life of the country. As he writes in *Populist Manifesto*: "Poets, come out of your closets, /Open your windows, open your doors, you have been holed up too long in your closed worlds (...) Poetry should transport the public/to higher places/than other wheels can carry it (...)". Ferlinghetti was instrumental in bringing poetry out of the academy and back into the public sphere with public poetry readings. With Ginsberg and other progressive writers, he took part in events that focused on such political issues as the Cuban revolution, the nuclear arms race, farm-worker organizing, the murder of Salvador Allende, the Vietnam War, May '68 in Paris, the Sandinistas in

the "City Lights" publishing imprint in San Francisco, which brought to light such landmark works as Ginsberg's *Howl*. Ferlinghetti has indicated that some of his poems in *A Coney Island of the Mind,* including the popular "I am waiting," were "conceived specifically for jazz accompaniment and as such should be considered as spontaneously written oral messages rather than a poem written for the printed page."[15] His poetry is also dotted with allusions to the visual arts. The references pop up, for instance, in the verses of "In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see" transcribed below. Marking the author's political commitment, the poem verbalizes the denunciation of violence embedded in some of Goya's paintings. Here belongs, for instance, "The Disasters of War," the series of 83 prints finished between 1810 and 1815 depicting the cruelties of the Spanish war of independence. The denunciation of violence bursts out in Ferlinghetti's irregular lines, starting with:

> In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see
> the people of the world
> exactly at the moment when
> they first attained the title of
> 'suffering humanity'
> They writhe upon the page
> in a veritable rage
> of adversity
> Heaped up
> groaning with babies and bayonets
> under cement skies
> in an abstract landscape of blasted trees
> bent statues bats wings and beaks
> slippery gibbets
> cadavers and carnivorous cocks
> and all the final hollering monsters
> of the
> 'imagination of disaster'
> they are so bloody real
> it is as if they really still existed
> And they do
> Only the landscape is changed[16]

As so often in contemporary art, the concretization of this poem makes heavy demands on the reader's grid of cultural associations. In this particular text, what is called for is familiarity with graphic details scattered in several of Goya's "Black Paintings": "landscape of blasted trees," "bent statues," "bats wings and beaks," "slippery gibbets" and "carnivorous cocks." More specifically, the poem refers to Goya's "The Third of May," one of the paintings from the series "Disasters of War." The canvas shows a bunch of Spanish civilians about to be shot by a firing squad, a register

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Nicaragua, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico. He read not only to audiences in the United States but widely in Europe and Latin America. Many of his writings grew from travels in France, Italy, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, Nicaragua, and the Czech Republic.

[15] FERLINGHETTI. *A Coney Island of the Mind*, p. 265.

[16] FERLINGHETTI. In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See, p. 43.

of the French reprisal against the people of Madrid for their 1808 uprising against the Napoleonic occupation. The canvas also represents the bloodied corpses of rebels already executed. Transposed to Ferlinghetti's poem, and "heaped up" before the reader's eye, they no longer "writhe" upon the ground, but "upon the page, in a very rage of adversity." These victims of French brutality are captured by the verses at "the moment when they first acquired the title of 'suffering humanity'," and thus became emblematic of all "the people of the world." The verses resonate with the author's anguished empathy with Goya's rebels and with all those who fight for the cause of liberty. They seem *so* "bloody real (...) as if they really existed"; in fact, "they do, only the landscape is changed." With these words, the poetic voice implies that the wheel of history may turn to other times and scenes, which will not stop the brutality of war. "The hollering monsters of' the imagination of disaster" _ a phrase recalling another of Goya's paintings, "The sleep of reason produces monsters" – will keep on haunting the memory of all those who find in art a vehicle to vent their indignation against man's cruelty to man.

FIGURE 1: Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May*
Source: www.artmuseums.com/currentevents.htm

Hinting at the continuity of destructive drives through history, Ferlinghetti's lines point to an endless semiotic chain, leading to other works of visual art, like Edouard Manet's 1867 "Execution of Maximilian." The French painter, taking his cue from Goya, refers to the death of Maximilian of Habsburg by a Republican firing squad in Mexico.

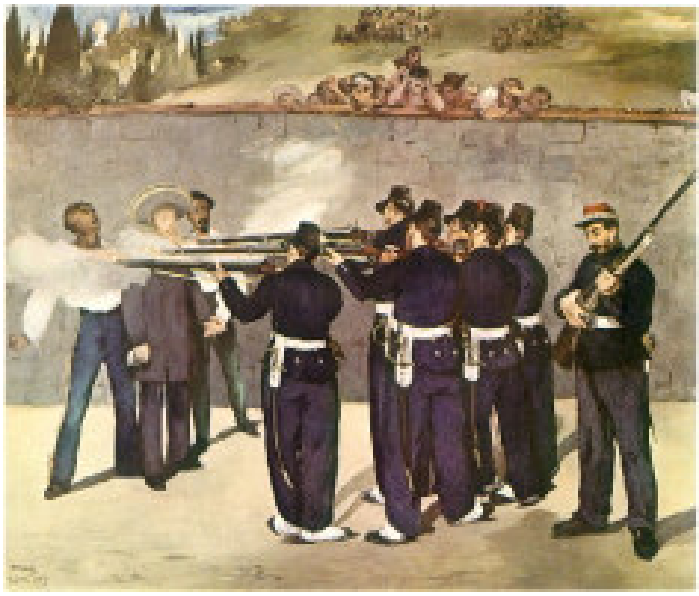

FIGURE 2: Edouard Manet, *Execution of Maximilian*
Source: peaceaware.com

In the same line, the informed reader may recall another painterly paraphrasis of "Third of May," the Chinese artist Yue Minjun's "Execution," which registers the massacres of Tiananmen Square in 1989.

FIGURE 3: Yue Minjun, *Execution*
Source: artobserved.com

It is thus to a kind of artistic lineage that Ferlinghetti takes us. In fact, artistic lineages seem to fascinate him. Another poem of his, "Monet's Lilies Shuddering," can be read as a reference to successive events in art history, moving now to one then to another artistic medium. Starting with Monet's "lilies" in the title, the verses suggest both the continuities and the ruptures of artistic creation. From the paintings initiated by the French artist in 1903, the reader is taken to the Chicago Art Institute's films showing lilies still blooming at the Giverny garden today and then moves on to John Cage's playing electronic music at the University of Chicago in 1976.

"Monet's Lilies Shuddering"

Monet never knew
he was painting his "Lilies" for
a lady from the Chicago Art Institute
who went to France and filmed
today's lilies
by the "Bridge at Giverny"
a leaf afloat among them
the film of which now flickers
at the entrance to his framed visions
with a Debussy piano soundtrack
flooding with a new fluorescence (fleur-essence?)
the rooms and rooms
of waterlilies

Monet caught a Cloud in a Pond
in 1903
and got a first glimpse
of its lilies and for twenty years returned
again and again to paint them
which now gives us the impression
that he floated thru life on them
and their reflections
which he also didn't know
we would also have occasion
to reflect upon
Anymore than he could know
that John Cage would be playing a
"Cello with Melody-driven Electronics"
tonight at the University of Chicago
And making those Lilies shudder and shed
black light.[17]

References to contemporary art are sometimes less explicit than that, simply contributing to the mood the poet means to create. Here belongs, for instance, the work of Tony Towle, a poet associated with the New York School of Poetry and with the French Surrealists. One may remember that the New York School,[18] named after the New York School painters, got this label only in 1961, but really began in 1948, when John Ashbery wrote the sestina "The Painter." This was the first of many poems in which the members of the group projected their identification with the crises, conflicts and artistic aspirations of modern painters. Representative poems include Kenneth Koch's "The Artist," Ashbery's "The Painter" and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," as well as Frank O'Hara's "Memorial Day 1950" and "Why I Am Not a Painter." None of these poems may be called ekphrastic in the narrow sense of verbal descriptions of visual artworks. They rather consist in subjective responses to such works – often not to individual pieces, but to the *œuvre* of an artist as a whole. Wrapped up in clusters of visual images,

[17] HOOVER. *Postmodern American Poetry.* A Norton Anthology, p. 50.

[18] FOR a brief introduction to this school. Cf. <http://jacket maganzie.com>.

poems take on a life of their own. It is in this spirit that one may read Tony Towle's hermetic "Random," dedicated to Robert Rauschenberg. The verses are paired with colors, as in the lines:

A woman should be pleased *magenta?*
To sit back *low flame*
And be freed by men from hassles *idle peach*
Until he smiles at the memory *bright lemon*
Dissolved like boiling fugues *heavier pink*[19]

Besides the implied reference to the role of chance emphasized by some modern artists, "Random" presumably alludes to the colors in works like Rauschenberg's "Untitled."

FIGURE 4: Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*
Source: www.lightmillennium.org

Also by Tony Towles, "Red Studio (after Matisse)" has another explicit reference to a visual artist. I quote a few lines:

the moon rises
and you see the city
from the window
where you look out
like the flight of a baseball
and repaint the walls
of this miserable century
and the wonderful August clouds.

[19] TOWLE. Random (Re-arrangeable) Study for *Views*, p. 361-362.

By simple reduction
Matisse could quote his whole picture
but imprecisely;
I cut out slices
but I don't lose the detail
unless I want to
here on the surface where the birds stop
over inches of water.[20]

A look at the French artist homonymous painting will reveal few equivalences between verbal and visual images.

FIGURE 5: Matisse. Red Studio
Source: smarthistory.org

As in so many modern works, the relationship between poem and picture is not of the illustration kind. Instead, the verbal creation seems to register the author's subjective response to a piece of visual art. We should thus note a number of other contemporary poems where it would be idle to look for precise equivalences in their references to painting. This applies to Kathleen Fraser, a writer whose poetic, critical, and editorial work has been central to the project of feminist experimental poetry in North America. Unlike Ferlinghtetti 's "In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see," which does contain discernible allusions to the Spanish painter's works, Fraser's "Magritte Series" (1977) displays few, if any, traits remindful of René Magritte's creation. In her poem "The Secret Life," homonymous with the Belgian surrealist's canvas, the description of bruised portions of skin has been seen by Joyce Nower, a member of the Readers' Ensemble as a metaphor for men's psychological states, that is, for tender aspects of male sensibility, which men themselves hardly admit or are aware of. It is however difficult to pin down any direct connection between the poem and the painting. Readers may use their own judgment as they peruse Fraser's "The Secret Life":

[20] TOWLE. For the Text and a Recording of the Reading of This and Other Poems by the Author.

"The Secret Life"

Suddenly there were bruises
at various places
along his left thigh
and just below the knee-cap
he could see the freckles
holding their bits of brown
as the purple flesh
turned to yellow,
but mostly he knew
when the bruised parts of him
came into contact
with other firm objects
and a light but definite
sense of pain
surprised him
and he stopped to locate it,
to understand the source
and recapture some set of moments
in which his flesh
had received blows
distinct enough
in precisely those spots
he understood now
as tender.
All his body was tender.
But most of it did not know.[21]

Magritte's "La Vie Secrete IV," which lends the poem its title, is a study in blacks, browns and tans on forms representing corner walls, the floor, and a ball suspended close to the ceiling. The relation between this work and Fraser's poem may strike one as rather subjective, though, for those familiar with the canvas, it may contribute to set the mood of the poem and thus be justified. What cannot be denied is that this approximation, even if arbitrary, re-affirms the kinship contemporary poets feel with the other arts, however diverse their artistic tools may be.

Among such poets, Clayton Eshleman keeps a space all his own, by placing himself at the other end of the history of art. In stark contrast with most contemporary authors, it is to pre-historical, rather than to postmodern art, that he responds. The primary American practitioner of what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism," he presents literary affinities with Blake, Artaud and Vallejo. However, as regards the visual arts, he only avows he has incorporated its early Paleolithic manifestations. Eshleman subscribes to the psychologist James Hilton's archetypal theory that Paleolithic art was less concerned with empirical surroundings than with dreams and myth. The animal paintings on cave walls would thus make up a language, to be used by all subsequent mythology. To this common source Eshleman traces back all sorts of discourse, from Greek myth to Allen Ginsberg's work. Likewise, he relates some cave figures to Michelangelo's "Creation of

[21] FRASER. The Secret Life.

Adam" in the Sistine Chapel. Alongthe same line, he sees all art as the result of a separation anxiety between human and animal, and the artist's imaginative predicament as something remindful of a cave, both maze and refuge.

In a poetic underworld impregnated with memories of the prehistoric paintings of Lascaux, Eshleman's verses evoke superimposed scenes of animal herds and shamanistic figures on cave walls, counterpointed by accounts of the poet's own cave explorations. Reflecting his twenty-five-year obsession with the enigmatic cave paintings of southwestern France, his "Notes on a Visit to Le Tuc d'Audoubert" stand out as a kind of diptych of verse and rough drawings. The first stanzas are illustrated by sketches in the poet's own hand, suggesting breasts dripping with milk. The reference to Artaud is also apparent:

> *bundled* by Tuc's tight jabbedcorridors
> flocks of white
>
> stone tits, their milk in long
>
> stone nipply drips, frozen over
>
> the underground Volp in which
> the enormous guardian eel,
> now unknown, lies coiled—
>
> to be impressed (in-pressed?) by this
> primordial "theater of cruelty"—
> by its keelhaul sorcery[22]

Eshleman's poems may also be interspersed with descriptions and rambling meditations inspired by his cave experiences – crawling on hands and knees, or on his belly, squirming through human-sized tunnels or sometimes walking haltingly, stooping.[23] The illustration on the online version of his book *Juniper Fuse* is a direct reference to the sort of images peopling his imagination.

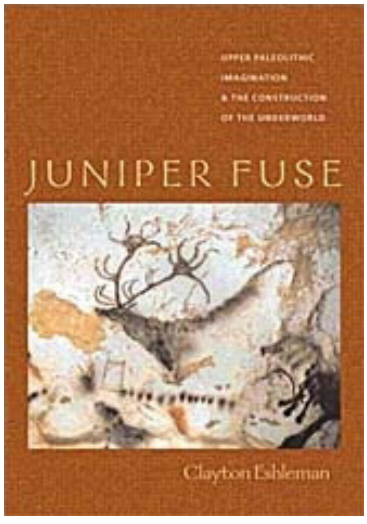

FIGURE 6: Book cover of Clayton Eshleman's online version of *Juniper Fuse*
Source: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & The Construction of the Underworld
Online Edition: Spring 2004
www.raintaxi.com/online/2004spring

[22] ESHLEMAN. Notes on a Visit to Le Tuc d'Audoubert, p. 308-313.

[23] For a fuller grasp of this aspect of Eshleman's work, see his *Juniper Fuse*: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld.

As a brief example of his reflections on the cave experiences refracted in his poems, a few lines will suffice:

> If one were to film one's posture through this entire process, it might look like a St.-Vitus dance of the stages in the life of man, birth channel expulsion to old age, but without chronological order, a jumble of exaggerated and strained positions that correspondingly increase the *image pressure* in one's mind (…)
> In Le Tuc d'Audoubert I heard something in me whisper me to believe in God and something else whispered that the command was the rasp of a 6000 year old man who wished to be venerated again – and if what I am saying here is vague it is because both voices had to sound themselves in the bowels of this most personal and impersonal stone, in which sheets of myself felt themselves corrugated with nipples – as if the anatomy of life could be described, from this perspective, as entwisted tubes of nippled stone through which perpetual and mutual beheadings and birthings were taking place.[24]

Prose texts like this prove doubly interesting, both as instances of a poet's reading of his own poetry and as comments on his sources of inspiration. Such texts encourage other readers to plunge into the mythical dream-like world evoked by this curious interlacing of verbal and visual appeal.

The kinds of relationships established between poetry, the arts and the media are too many to be exemplified. As a further illustration of their variety, I would like to refer to more indirect relationships than those described so far. Such relationships crop up for instance in allusions to well-known titles of artworks or in the emulation of specific pictorial techniques. Keith Waldrop, a leading publisher of experimental poetry, includes both types of references in his work. He sometimes resorts to verbal collage, akin to the well-known cubist technique, but also frequent in the whole of Western literature. Waldrop thus describes his book *The Antichrist* as "Bram Stoker's *Dracula* with most words removed."[25] Alternatively, the use of pictorial allusion is found in the *book Ceci n'est pas Keith and Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie: Autobiographies*. These autobiographies of the poet and his wife Rosmarie Waldrop, also a poet, are of course named after René Magritte's famous painting, "La trahison des images" ("The Treachery of Images"), which shows a pipe painted so realistically that it could be a model for a tobacco store advertisement. (In fact, the Belgian surrealist, a superb draftsman, once worked in advertising.) However, below the picture of the pipe the viewer finds the words *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [This is Not a Pipe]. The seeming contradiction, discussed in Michel Foucault's homonymous book, in fact embodies some philosophical implications of Magritte's art: the differences between verbal and plastic language, as well as the illusory character of art, indeed of all human attempts at representation or even communication. The words on Magritte's canvas remind the viewer that, contrary to pictorial language, often based on similarity, verbal language relies on difference. The painting of a pipe is not the object we call pipe, but only the image of this object: we could never smoke it. So also, however talented the artist, and whatever medium s/he uses, s/he can never get to "truth" or "reality"– a measure of the narrow limits of human knowledge. By embedding a reference

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[24] *Apud* HOOVER. *Postmodern American Poetry.* A Norton Anthology, p. 311-312.

[25] *Apud* HOOVER. *Postmodern American Poetry.* A Norton Anthology, p. 247.

to Magritte's work in the title of his and his wife's autobiography, Keith Waldrop warns against an ingenuously literal reading which takes the text as true to the biographees' actual life experience. As in the other citations in this paper, the reference to the visual arts plays an expressive role the authors seem loath to give up.

Of course, in itself the exploration of relations among the arts is nothing new. Though the passage of time may bring different media into play, poetry has always sought such alliances. In this connection, the French vanguard was no exception, permeated as it was by experimentation. At the dawn of European Modernism, between 1893 and his death in 1898, Mallarmé played with an experimental poetics, saturated with the then emerging cinematic technology. "Un coup de dés," a visual poem, could be called cine-poetic, whereas "Le Livre," an unfulfilled project, was planned as a poetic performance which would include electric lighting and the projection of images.[26] Keeping up with this tradition, postmodern poetry frequently resorts to similar alliances, perhaps strategically, in tacit recognition of the difficulty to compete with so many new forms of expression. The literary text becomes a mediator of other semiotic systems, and vice-versa. Moving beyond the experiences of the North-American authors quoted so far, poetry sometimes even breaks its bond with verse and almost does without words. To help elicit an imaginative response from the public, verbal language may of course show up in titles – and, frequently, only there. A new aesthetics of the look is inaugurated, establishing a singular hybridism, a continuous tension between the legible and the visible. One is reminded of W. K. Winsatt's verbal icon, his concept of the poem as a physical entity, made denser by multiple relations and analogies with non-verbal artifacts- vases, sculptures, melodies:"the poem should not mean/ But be." McLeish's celebrated lines come in handy here.[27] The poetic – a cluster of indefinable, supra-verbal qualities, including conciseness, sensuous impact, richness of allusion and imaginative power – extrapolates the limits of the verbal.

In certain creations, visual images complement words, sometimes almost replacing them altogether. The poetic becomes a vestige is projected into image-thoughts. In the interface between the verbal and the visual there emerge new perceptions of forms, meanings and metaphors. This alliance between contemporary visual creations and the poetic makes increasing demands on the viewer's creative participation. As an example, I would like to mention a 2001 video by the English artist Sam Taylor Wood. In 2004, the video could be seen at the Tate Modern in London together with other works grouped under the title *Memento Mori*, the Latin phrase looking back to the still life, a genre particularly associated with seventeenth-century Dutch painting. In canvases representing game, sea-food, flowers and fruit, this type of painting has always served the theme of the precariousness of life and beauty. In the twentieth century, artists like Francis Picabia, Patrick Caulfield and Keith Edmier brought forth instigating forms for the rejuvenation of the genre – a renewal also illustrated by the video on display at the Tate Modern. Resorting to modern technology, it makes true the ancient painter's dream to create images representing changes brought about by the passage of time.

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[26] Cf. WALL-ROMANA. Mallarmé's Cinepoetics: The Poem Uncoiled by the Cinématographe, 1893-98, p. 128-147.

[27] MacLEISH. Ars Poetica.

Taylor's video registers the process of decomposition of fruit in a bowl. After appreciating the freshness and the bright coloring of the initial images, the viewer watches the gradual deterioration of the fruits. Little by little, they lose their freshness and color, until they crumble into a shapeless gray mass, corroded by worms - a reminder of the fate allotted to all living beings.

FIGURE 7: Sam Taylor Wood, *Still Life*, 1
Source: www.zmgzeg.sulinet.hu/london/London/xx/

FIGURE 8: Sam Taylor Wood, "Still Life", 4
Source: www.zmgzeg.sulinet.hu/london/London/xx/

The images become genuine visual metaphors for a topos of the poetry of all times, summed up in the phrase *Memento Mori.* An interesting detail: in the video, the knife traditionally found beside objects in a still life has been replaced by a pen, underlining the fact that the poet's has been substituted for the painter's tool.

A similar construction can be detected in "Forms without Life," another still life exhibited at Tate Modern among the collection of objects entitled *Memento Mori*. A 1991 installation by Damien Hirst, the English artist well-known for his use of carcasses of animals, "Forms without Life" consists of shells and other seaside objects. Chosen for their shape and translucent sheen, and displayed in a glass case, they again suggest the ephemeral character of life and beauty: now empty, the lovely objects once sheltered living creatures, which had to die before we could admire their involucres. In consonance with the tenet of conceptual art, such artworks emphasize the construction of meaning rather than the object itself. More than ever, the processing of the text informed by a knowledge of art history falls back on the onlooker.

There is no harm in repeating. Poetry, or, if you like, the poetic, hovers among the multiplicity of media made available by increasingly sophisticated technologies. It would be idle to try to demarcate their frontiers, languages, and manifestations. Postmodern art privileges intermedial, transmedial and multimedial texts, which draw on different sign systems in such a way that the visual, kinetic, and verbal aspects of their signs prove inseparable. Diversified and expanded, they can only be enjoyed, entangled in the proliferation of the media.

Abstract

Starting from the postmodern tendency towards the erasing of frontiers between the arts and the media, the essay analyses the frequent intermedial relations in postmodern poetry in English.

Keywords

Intermediality, Literature and the other arts,
Postmodern poetry in English

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