



Universidad
Carlos III de Madrid



Versión “preprint” del documento publicado en:

Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology.
Vol. 13 (2), 2016, pp. 125-136

Lyric simultaneities: from “Words in Freedom” to Holopoetry

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Abstract

Early 20th century Futurist attempts in visual poetry can be related to technology-based poetic creation and current digital experiences. This essay seeks to enhance the understanding of Media Poetry by identifying the existing connections between the “words in freedom” and Eduardo Kac’s Holopoetry. This example of interactive and immaterial creation represents a crucial contribution to redefine poetry’s relevance to contemporary global networks and also a milestone to understand the future of virtual and immersive writing spaces.

Keywords

Futurism, Holopoem, Interactivity, Intermediality, Media Poetry, Simultaneity, Virtual Reality, Words in freedom.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his colleagues launched their systematic action program as a result of the impact of new technologies in their creative process. Attracted by the illusion of an unmediated experience, they proclaimed the death of the book and developed a particular approach announcing that all the artistic disciplines should be transformed by new technologies. In their manifestos, essays, speeches, and artworks an effort to mix media combinations beyond the confines of the printed page or the canvas can be perceived.

This insistence led them to work across media borders and explore the media-specific idiosyncrasy of each respective medium more than one century ago. In this regard, the Futurists assumed a pioneer position since they focused their artworks, performing acts and manifestos on pursuing the ways in which media interact, replace and cooperate with each other in the cultural sphere. Their method turned out to be a pioneer contribution to Media Art, and more specifically to Media Poetry. Among the experimental works created with, through and for media, this paper pays attention to Holopoetry as an updated version of Futurist postulates on visual poetry, that sought to free words from the page and can be taken in consideration in order to explain the roots of the principle of intermediality.

In *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928*, Willard Bohn suggests that “Combining painting and poetry, it is neither a compromise nor an evasion but a synthesis of the principles underlying each medium.” (1986: 2). Unlike the so-called ‘figurative poetry’, ‘ideograms’ or ‘calligrams’ created at that time, Futurist poems are not just a bridge between image and text but also the conjunction of the rest of disciplines in a unique and polyexpressive artwork. As Filippo Marinetti pointed out: “On several parallel lines, a poet will launch several chains of colors, sounds, odors, noises, weights, densities, analogies. One line, for example, might be olfactory, another musical, another pictorial” (2013).

A new awareness of the printed page led him to examine the spatialization and visualization of the poetic message to “achieve the most complex lyrical simultaneities” for capturing the motion and speed of urban landscapes. Marinetti announced the introduction of “onomatopoeic harmonies” to render the sounds and noises of modern life, as well as a “typographical revolution” to emphasize the expressive force of words, and a “multilineal lyricism” for multisensorial play. In *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* [Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature], he also proclaimed the destruction of syntax and the abolition of the punctuation in order to achieve a sort of analogic juxtaposition: “Analogy is nothing but the immense love that connects distant, seemingly different and hostile things. It is through very vast analogies that this orchestral style, at once polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphic, can embrace the life of matter” (Marinetti 1912).

In this text, he also mentioned the potentiality of “imagination without strings” and “words in freedom”, two concepts that, one year later, he would develop in the manifesto of *Distruzione della sintassi–Immaginazione senza fili–Parole in libertà* [Destruction of Syntax–Wireless Imagination–Words in Freedom].

The imagination without strings and words-in-freedom will transport us into the essence of matter. With the discovery of new analogies between things remote and apparently contradictory, we shall value them ever more intimately [...] with words-in-freedom we might have: Condensed Metaphors. —Telegraphic images. —Sums of vibrations. —Knots of thought. —Closed or open fans of movement. —Foreshortened analogies. —Color Balances. —The dimensions, weights, sizes, and velocities of sensations. —The plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility, without the concentric eddies produced by words. —Intuition’s moments of repose. —Movements in two, three, four, five different rhythms. —Analytical explanatory telegraph poles that sustain the cable of intuitive strings. (Marinetti 1913).

WORDS IN FREEDOM

The revolutionary idea of “words in freedom” was a work in progress open to continuous experimentation. Giovanni Lista summarizes two main aspects: the interaction between codex based on synesthetic and synoptic principles that results in multi-sensory experiments; and the impact of typographic innovation together with the material components of the Futurist poetry, including the format of the page, ink colours, typefaces, texture of the paper, book-binding technique, and so on. (2009: 293).

In fact, the aim of Marinetti, and colleagues such as Ardengo Soffici, Fortunato Depero, Paolo Buzzi, Carlo Carrà and Francesco Cangiullo, was to immerse the observer in the so-called “polyexpressive” experience, an all-embracing process that would appeal to all the feelings and senses simultaneously. Hence, this creative procedure required both the fusion of all aesthetic fields and a participative role of viewer, only possible by virtue of an intermedial approach closely related to the cognitive concept of analogy based on an expressive typography. In order to do this, they developed a roadmap for visual poetry in which the icons and the letters of the alphabet became signs and shapes with the ability to express any kind of feelings and emotions, appealing simultaneously to all the senses of readers and viewers. From that moment, the words started to call attention to themselves. They were no longer perceived as transparent signs, but assumed an artistic value as a result of the creative typography.

My revolution is directed against the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page itself. For that reason we will use, in the very same page, *three or four different colors of ink*, and as many as twenty different

typographical fonts if necessary. For example: *italics* for a series of swift or similar sensations, *boldface* for violent onomatopoeias, etc. The typographical revolution and the multicolored variety in the letters will mean that I can double the expressive force of words. [...] The typographic revolution that I've proposed will enable me to imprint words (words already free, dynamic, torpedoing forward) every velocity of the stars, clouds, airplanes, trains, waves, explosives, drops of seafoam, molecules, and atoms. (Marinetti 1913).

As these proposals required a remarkable effort by the typesetter because of their revolutionary typographic style. The Futurists did not hesitate to create their own newspapers and magazines as *Lacerba* (1913-1915), *La Balza futurista* (1915) or *L'Italia Futurista* (1916-1918), among others. In these publications, they disseminated their visual analogies, multilinear lyrics and word-paintings, inspired by the success of the pre-Futurist international magazine *Poesia* (1906-1909), founded by Marinetti in Milan. They also launched Edizioni futuriste di *Poesia* and Edizioni di *L'Italia Futurista* where they published their anthologies.

Gabriella Belli affirms that until 1911 Futurist writings looked much more innovative than their painting experiences (2007: 49). As noticed by Lista (2009: 294), the first period of Futurist experimentation in visual poetry was dominated by the principle of *dynamis*, turning visual poems into a multisensorial seismograph of modern rhythm. Together with their polyphonic reflection on urban experience, the physical value of the page progressively started to emerge as a result of the Futurist typographical revolution.

Marinetti tried to synthesize both perspectives in *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912-1914), his first book of "words in freedom". He depicted the *hinc et nunc* of a violent battlefield scene using the onomatopoeic recreation of the noises of different types and the incorporation of lyric equations. Syntactic destruction and the presence of an agglomerate of "words in freedom" sought to affirm the "beauty of the speed" in "multilinear lyricism" so as to achieve "the most complex lyric simultaneities". In *Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica* [Geometrical and Mechanical Splendor and the Numerical Sensibility], Marinetti explains the idiosyncrasy of his lyric equations:

I create true theorems or lyrical equations, introducing numbers which I've intuitively chosen and placed within the very center of a word; with a certain quantity of + - × +, I can give the thicknesses, the mass, the volumes of things which words otherwise have to express. The arrangement + - + - + + ×, for example, serves to render the changes and accelerations in speed of an automobile. The arrangement + + + + + serves to render the clustering of equal sensations. (E.g.: *fecal odor of dysentery + the honeyed stench of plague sweats + smell of ammonia*, and so on in "*Train Full of Sick Soldiers*" in my *Zang tumb tumb*) (Marinetti 1914).

In 1916, Edizioni futuriste di *Poesia* published Francesco Cangiullo's *Piedigrotta: parole in libertà* [Piedigrotta: Words in Freedom], a masterpiece of visual poetry in which he described the celebration of a Neapolitan festival.

Three years later he presented the first Futurist book-object: *Caffèconcerto. Alfabeto a sorpresa* [Café-Chantant. Unexpected Alphabet] in which he represented a spectacle of variétés. In 1923 with *Poesia pentagrammata* [Poetry on the Staff], Cangiullo explored the relations between figurative poems and music.

Some of the most interesting projects of visual poetry are Paolo Buzzi's *Conflagrazione* (1914-1918) [Conflagration], an experimental handwritten diary, and Marinetti's anthology *Paroliberi futuristi* [Futurist Free-wordists], which was announced in 1915 in the flier *Parole, consonanti, vocali, numeri in libertà* [Words, Consonants, Vowels, Numbers in Freedom] but it was never published. In 1932 the founder of Futurism finally published *Parole in libertà futuriste tattili, termiche, olfattive* [Futurist Words in Freedom, Tactile, Thermal, Olfactory] an essential reference work for the European avant-garde, the highest expression of multisensorial research in Futurist poetry. The book was printed in metal sheet to render the mechanical aesthetics and to realize Marinetti's old dream of creating a book made of nickel. It also implemented the main postulates of *Il Tattilismo* (1921) [The Tactilism], a Futurist manifesto on sensory stimulation and one of the earliest forms of interactive art.

It is worth emphasising the contribution of the free-wordist Ardengo Soffici who became the theorist of “imagination without strings” and his “synoptic tables”. Meanwhile, Fortunato Depero paid attention to the potentiality of abstract verbalization and, as a result of his interdisciplinary research, he created a new conceptual language called “onomalingua” [onomalanguage], based on onomatopoeic sonority to communicate feelings instead of concepts. His most famous book, *Depero Futurista* (1927) [Depero Futurist], also known as “libro imbullonato” [bolted book], anticipated the mechanical book. In *Numero Unico Futurista Campari* (1931) [The Unique Futurist Issue Campari], included in *Liriche Radiofoniche* (1934) [Radio Lyrics], and later in *Fortunato Depero nella vita e nelle opere* (1940) [Fortunato Depero, his Life and Works], Depero gradually turned to the graphical and linguistic experimentation characteristic of his unfinished volume *New York. Film Vissuto* [New York. A Lived Film].

Another distinctive Futurist contribution to the cultural renewal of the early 20th century is the influence of collage paintings and film editing processes in visual poems and word-paintings (see Fernández Castrillo 2013). These poems are based in “the spatiotemporal” perception of a unitary dimension instead of as the presence of an absence (Bonito Oliva 2007: 18). This process of radical transformation forced the Futurists to conduct a fresh reevaluation of their artistic practices. They intended to show their specific idiosyncrasy in order to create mixed media artworks. An unclassifiable example of “acceleration of life” is Gino Severini's *Danza serpentina* (1914) [Serpentine Dance] published in *Lacerba* or Giacomo Balla's *Manifesto per la mostra alla Galleria Angelelli in Roma* (1915) [Manifesto for the Exhibition at the Galleria Angelelli in Rome].

These practices can be related to current efforts from Comparative Media Studies to define the impact of new technologies on the creation, dissemination, and reception of knowledge through theories on intermediality in the digital age. Werner Wolf supports that, in a narrow sense, the term “intermediality” refers to the participation of more than one medium, or sensory channel, in a given work, whereas, in a broad sense, it is the media equivalent of intertextuality and it covers any kind of relation between different media (1999: 35-36).

The audience's attitude toward the printed page played an important role in Futurist visual poetry, anticipating the characteristic involvement in contemporary practices and the emancipation of the user in the digital age. Jean-Pierre Goldenstein points out that one of visual poetry's major functions is to force the reader to investigate an infinite number of paths, preventing him from deciphering a preexisting sense (1986: 160). Willard Bohn studies in depth the reader's role in visual poetry: “[...] the poem cannot be reduced to a single meaning, since each reader brings something different to the text [...] In carrying out the procedures connected with consistency building, readers are continually forced to modify their interpretations [...] The average reader doesn't have a chance of reproducing the author's thought patterns and associations.” (2001: 30).

The critic Friedrich W. Block (2007) claims that, in media poetry, movement transforms into animation and interaction becomes participation. He enumerates the specific criteria to distinguish such poetry from other textst-based creative expressions: 1) the mechanical, algorithmic generation of texts (supporting or complete), 2) electronic linkage (in the computer, on Intranet or Internet) of fragments and files of the same or also different media types, derived from this the 3) multi- or non-linearity of both text structure and individual reading matter and if required 4) multimodality and animation of texts in the broadest sense 5) interactivity as a 'dialog' between machine (hard and software) and user as a (dependent on the programming) reversible or irreversible intervention into the display or data base text, as a telematic communication between different protagonists on the computer network; derived from this 6) the shift or even de-differentiation of traditional action roles such as author, reader, editor (2007: 231).

Contemporarycommunicative environments redefine poetry through the use of the software in order to enhance experimental user generated contents that combine hypermedia and interactive texts with social networks, for instance, or use mobile phone apps, immersive installations, and neurocommunication systems. Due to their immaterial condition, media poems can be downloaded, navigated or reconfigured by users. Eduardo Kac explains that these processes take “[...] language beyond the confines of the printed page and explores a new syntax made of linear and non-linear animation, hyperlinks, interactivity, real-time text generation, spatio-temporal discontinuities, self-similarity, synthetic spaces, immateriality, diagrammatic

relations, visual tempo, multiple simultaneities, and many other innovative procedures.” (2007: 10).

In terms of Lars Elleström: “[...] printed poetry is essentially spatial. Very rarely, virtual space is perceived as a result of illusive depth in the two-dimensional visual appearance of the poem, whereas virtual space in the sense of illusionary worlds is often created.” (2010: 23). Similarly, Adalaide Morris states that media poems do not have a fixed configuration and seem to bend the founding constraints of the lyric and the narrative. In this regard, the immaterial nature of current poetic practices constitutes a revitalization of Futurist principles (2006: 7). Media and technology are the instrument for the “imagination without strings”. As in the case of hypertext, “the digital word is virtual, not physical” and “the resulting textuality is virtual, fluid, adaptable, open” (Landow 1996: 216-218). Alan Golding also associates the electronic text with “instability”, “variability”, “fluctuation”, “change”, and defines it as “fluid signs” and “signifiers in motion” (2006: 250).

Futurist strategies developed in visual poetry, as the “multilineal lyricism” or “words in freedom”, become embedded in the commands and interfaces of computer software as Marie-Laure Ryan sustains: “The digital revolution of the last decade has let words on the loose, not just by liberating their semantic potential, as most avant-garde movements of the past hundred years have done, but in a physical, quite literal sense as well.” (1999: 1). Lori Emerson defines these creative processes as performatic events “complete with their own set of viewer/viewed relation” (2002-3: 91). Katalin Sándor adds that: “the artistic practices of visual print poetry, of pattern poems, calligrams, concrete poetry, lettrism, and colleagues have come to function as a continually recycled 'resource' for digital poetry.” (2012: 147).

As Marinetti intended, the extension of the idea of language to non-linguistic elements provides an effective illusion of the simultaneity of experience (Dickey 1994: 144) to produce an immersive and multisensorial creation. Inspired by the new possibilities for visual poetry, in 1983 Kac and Fernando Catta-Preta created the holopoem *Holo/Olho* (1983) [Holo/Eye] with the aim of “freeing words from the page” to enable “different levels of readerly interaction and participation” (46). The multifaceted artist explored the potential benefits of using holography to create simulations of three-dimensional text objects, taking the word into a new dimension. In this case, the image of the words HOLO and OLHO is activated by light reflection. Therefore, the verbal material assumes an intangible nature defined by photons. He explains that: “[...] I was not interested in creating physical, three-dimensional object-poems, since this sculptural approach also belonged to the tradition of visual poetry [...] I wanted to develop an immaterial poetry for the information age; that is, poetry native to the new cultural environment of digital global networks, with its dynamic data flux and distributed communication systems. (2007: 45).

In Holopoetry the possibility of using dimensional typography within real space brings the opportunity to establish an ephemeral perceptual environment

where the final result depends on readers's behaviour and their observational position.

Through multiple viewing zones holopoetry promotes new relationships between the appearance-disappearance of signifiers, which constitutes the experience of reading a holographic text and our perception of the organizing factors of the text. In this sense, visual perception of parametric behaviour of the verbal elements heightens awareness of meanings. As readers move they continually shift the focus or center or organizing principle of their experience by looking through dispersed viewing zones. The text they experience stands against the fixity of print and for the branching of holographic space [...] ("Holopoetry" 132).

Holopoems are interactive because texts change depending on the movement of viewers, as it occurs for instance in the fractal holopoem *Quando?* (1987-1988) [When?]. This 360° hologram can be read from any angle and, depending on the perspective, the text could lose its meaning and the floating words are transformed into abstract forms. By this contribution, Kac achieves the Futurist desire to create an immersive and participative experience based on the principle of simultaneity and dynamism. He argues that no text can be fully controlled by its author and that the reading process is an interplay dependent on reader's behaviour:

I try to create texts which can only signify upon the active perceptual and cognitive engagement on the part of the reader or viewer. This ultimately means that each reader "writes" his or her own texts as he or she looks at the piece. My holopoems don't rest quietly on the surface. When the viewer starts to look for words and their links, the texts will transform themselves, move in three-dimensional space, change in color and meaning, coalesce and disappear. This viewer-activated choreography is as much a part of the signifying process as the transforming verbal and visual elements themselves. (1995: 56).

Among the large amount of interplays between text and space conducted by Kac, *Omen* (1989-1990) is one of the most interesting holopoems based on the parallax effect. In this case, he creates a smokefilled space in which the word "eyes" appears and disappears, suggesting a myriad of readings. This example underlines the immaterial and fluid essence of holopoetry.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided a link between Futurist first experimentations and Eduardo Kac's interdisciplinary projects which inaugurate a technology-based hybrid poetic language. After experiences with holopoems, Kac expanded his experimental field to navigable hyperpoems. However, holopoetry constitutes his most original contribution as the substitution of traditional printed page and the possibility to bring a text into virtual existence are crucial objectives in contemporary media poetry. VR applications and real-time user generated content platforms allow new ways of manipulation, navigation and interaction

with on-line visual poems. But there is also an increasing number of performative projects focused on the important role of the word that allow fully immersive experiences in a real physical space.

With the advent of digital technology, the construction of signifying networks of “words in freedom” remains in the artistic and scholarly spotlight, as it occurs with work by cyberpoets such as Loss Pequeño Glazier or Richard Kostelanetz, forerunners of media poetry like Aaron Marcus; and digital artists such as Jeffrey Shaw or Peter Weibel, among others.

The new poetry contributes to establish innovative interrelationship strategies between authors, audiences and the artwork. The search for “lyric simultaneities” through digital visualization techniques delivers interesting intermedial practices, established on similar inspiring principles early 20th century avant-garde creations. Contemporary interactive cyberspaces and immersive virtual techniques constitute a framework for the consolidation of an intercreative participatory culture.

Note

English translations of Futurist manifests are based on Rainey, Lawrence, Christine Poggio, and Laura Wittman, eds. *Futurist Manifesto's. Futurism: an anthology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

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