COGNITION AND THE CONCRETE POETRY OF bpNICHOL:
TOWARDS A COHESIVE METHODOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines visual and concrete poetry by the influential Canadian poet bpNichol and the related scholarly criticism. Visual poetry is multimodal, employing the materiality of the book, page, words and letters, as well as artistic flourishes, playful engagements with conventions, and so on, to broaden the reader’s perception and understanding of language and communication. Previous scholarship has varied widely in engaging visual poetry, and in particular with bpNichol’s, in part by focusing on a schism between the pictorial and verbal content or by suppressing the contribution of visuality to the meanings of these texts. Thus, the material and visual focus of this poetry challenges how scholars discuss textual meaning and how it connects to other works, poetic philosophies, and theory.

This study offers a framework developed from research in Cognitive Science which illustrates how language and images synthesize through cognitive processes rooted in metonymy, metaphor, and iconicity, best articulated through Conceptual Integration Theory (also called blending). The cognitive view of language traces connections between the body and the mind, illustrating the inextricable links between perceptual and conceptual meanings through embodiment. This view of language and meaning allows for connections between images and texts on various levels of knowledge. This methodology promotes a more expansive and holistic engagement with Nichol’s oeuvre, showing connections between his poetry, prose, and poetics. While it certainly has affinities with previous scholarship, the cognitive model also qualifies some conclusions in important ways, primarily by placing emphasis on the construction of meaning from both visual and verbal prompts rather than a tension between these representative modes. The cognitive perspective offers a means of discussing the generativity of simplicity in multimodal poetry with clarity and alacrity through a more organic view of meaning.

Due to the prevalence of multimodal texts beyond visual poetry, the final chapter of this study illustrates how the cognitive methodology can contribute to studies of comics, children’s books, advertising, culture-jamming, graffiti, and media ecology. This study contributes to the broader discussion of materiality and meaning by illustrating the complexity of cognition involved in understanding multimodal texts.
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Dedication:

I dedicate this work to my loving and ever supportive wife Brianna Brash-Nyberg and to our daughter Madeleine. They have put up with many maddeningly absent-minded moments as I dreamt of letters, for which I am forever grateful.
Chapter 1: Introducing the Literary Line

1.1 Introduction

This project stems from a long love-affair with the works of bpNichol. While engaging the critical writings around his work, I realized that much of it did not correlate to what I had experienced. This tension between what was being written about the poetry and the experience itself led to this project, in an attempt to do both justice (and to have an excuse to keep reading). The project progresses in a linear order. In this chapter, I address the broader context of concrete poetry as an international movement and what it is that brings these texts under the same roof. I then connect this to bpNichol’s more immediate Canadian context, within which he was most influential and the skewed responses of the literary and critical communities to his visual poetry. This critical context leads to a discussion of different frameworks that have been suggested for dealing with concrete poetry and their eventual demise. I then suggest a new route out of this theoretical quagmire through recent research in cognition and language. Chapter 2 continues to outline a cognitive methodology for addressing the material specifications of concrete poetry. Chapter 3 shifts to examining in detail the criticism of Nichol’s visual poetry over the past four decades, noting how it connects in important ways, but also creates friction, with the cognitive research as well as Nichol’s own poetics. Out of this reorientation I engage in close readings of Nichol’s poems to illustrate how my methodology can construct a nuanced account of the synthetic experience of reading these works. This journey concludes, admittedly too quickly, by panning out from this engagement with visual poetry to other multimodal experiences that can benefit from a Cognitive methodology.
1.2 Making Visible Language Visible

Written (visible) language, believed to have arisen out of the pictographic and then hieroglyphic (iconic) languages, finally morphing over time into the complex phonetic and alphabetic or ideographic (symbolic) languages we see today (Firmage 4-6; see Coulmas for a more extensive discussion). The visual manipulation of language as poetry has a long history as well, possibly as long as visible language itself (Balan, “Cantextualities” 7), and certainly as old as the “Phaistos Disk” from around 1700 BC (Higgins 4). As Dick Higgins has most comprehensively documented (and Bowler and Massin have also shown), visual cues have been long standing, important parts of textual production, seen in various types of pattern poems, calligrams, ideograms, illuminations, diagrams, and so forth, from the time of the disk on. This long history of visuality in language is, however, largely and problematically ignored in recent scholarship around language and visual literatures, making the work paradoxical in its disregard of visuality and materiality (but more of this in a moment).2

This long visual history also makes it somewhat difficult to ascertain the exact, historical turn point to “concrete poetry” and to define what it is. The term “concrete poetry” is a grab-bag one (see Clüver, Drucker, Reis, Solt, Vos, Williams, and others),3 which even by the late 1960s

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1 bpNichol refers to the work of concrete poetry as uncovering the history of language, including its mystic and runic aspects (see Billingham; Nichol Meanwhile 111), and was inspired by the (somewhat problematic) descriptions in Ezra Pound’s and Fenollosa’s texts on Chinese ideograms (113).

2 Dick Higgins provides a fitting and illustrative scholastic anecdote about George Herbert’s famous pattern poem, “Easter Wings:” One scholar “concludes that it [the poem] shows a ‘dangerous preoccupation’ with the visual element” and another, “the fine critic Helen Vendler…prints and analyze it without even noting its visual aspect, let alone its tradition” (16).

3 Higgins is the only scholar I know of who states that concrete poetry is “clearly defined” (3), perhaps simply to give himself a definite end (1955) to his historical overview of pattern poems.
was “used to refer to a variety of innovations and experiments….There are now so many kinds of experimental poetry being labelled ‘concrete’ that it is difficult to say what the word means” (Solt 7). However, while the term continues to grow ever more amorphous, especially with the rise of digital technologies and online experiments, the loose genre of writing to which it refers still has consistent elements that categorize it. Mary Ellen Solt, one of the first cataloguers of the movement and genre, states that

[d]espite the confusion in terminology, though, there is a fundamental requirement which the various kinds of concrete poetry meet: concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made.…Generally speaking the material of the concrete poems is language: words reduced to their elements of letters (to see), syllables (to hear). Some concrete poets stay with whole words. Others find fragments of letters or individual speech sounds more suited to their needs. The essential is reduced language. (emphasis in original, 7)

While viewing this style of poetry as a “reduction” of language may be contested, since it often highlights or expands the traditional sense of language (which I will illustrate in Chapter 4 and briefly discuss regarding Nichol’s poetics in Chapter 3), the focus on the materiality of language and the page on which it resides is clear, whatever the terminological variants the authors espouse, be they “experimental,” “avant-garde,” “visual,” or “concrete” poetries. For the sake

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4 See www.vispo.org, www.ubu.org, and even www.youtube.com for many examples of how digital technologies are being employed in visually poetic ways.

5a.) Johanna Drucker’s essay “Experimental/Visual/Concrete” in Figuring the Word attempts to disentangle these terms from each other through a historical analysis, although the success of her distinctions is still debatable since they still largely reflect the egocentric and eccentric beliefs of the authors rather than material specifications of the texts—something arguably necessary for defining a generic term.

b.) It should also be noted that some visual artists are doing interesting and important work using text, in what could be called visual poetry, but which they would be offended to have referred to in such a manner, since they view themselves as artists rather than poets and don’t view language (and thus, the super-genre within language,
of simplicity, I have chosen to use the terms visual or concrete interchangeably throughout this work, especially since those are the terms most often used to describe bpNichol’s work (by himself and others). However, while I am focusing on visual poetry, sound poetry also easily fits into discussions of concrete poetry as well. This has led some scholars to posit a hierarchical model of categorization, where visual poetry and sound poetry are contained within the broader category of concrete poetry (Reis; Vos). Nonetheless, many critics when discussing concrete poetry focus only on visual texts, especially when discussing the “International Concrete Poetry Movement” from 1955-1970, of which Nichol was a part and continued beyond. I will discuss poetry) as being a dominant feature of their works, even if it is an important building block for it (Mancini, conversation).

c.) Pedro Reis offers a more comprehensive discussion of why questions of genre have been so problematically tied to concrete poetry, especially in relation to questions of the fluidity of categories, audience reception (both academic and public), historic continuity, and how we engage with poetic forms. Reis posits, based on discussions by Higgins and Kostelanetz, that concrete poetry is an “intermedia,” a blend of various genres without a generic classification unto itself since it often dabbles in many other media like advertising, comics, manuals, and so forth (293-95). I would suggest rather, that the focus on particular material features, such as the visual character of language, act as a generic prototype marker, allowing the genre to interact with other generic features through this rubric (thus, using a more contemporary view of genre as radial categories (Lakoff Women) rather than the fixed constructs assumed by Reis). Thus, the intermedial focus—what bpNichol (via Houédard) calls “borderblur” (Cosmic n.p.; Meanwhile 134)—based primarily on materiality and visuality (and sonic connections in the case of sound poetry), associate these various poems together under the generic guise of concrete/visual poetry.

6 Sound poetry has come to be included in the category of concrete poetry (see Balan “Concrete” and Scobie What. Strangely, Doyle doesn’t include it in his discussion and definition of concrete poetry). As I say, I will focus on only the visual type of poetry, as a material mode limited to the page and sight (although the sounds of words as they are invoked in our minds are still clearly a part of this poetry). However, this is not to say that a Cognitive model is incompatible with sound: for an interpretation of sound through music, see Johnson’s Meaning, Chapter 11: “Music and the Flow of Meaning”).

7 1955 is the date generally accepted across the scholarly literature (see Balan “Cantextualities,” Bann, David, Doyle, Drucker, Scobie, bpNichol, Vos, etc) as the birth of the International Movement, marking the meeting of two influential concrete poets, Eugene Gomringer and Decio Pignatari. However, concrete poetry was being written before this date in disparate parts of the globe without necessarily any knowledge other works. After this meeting, communication links between Europe, South America, and North America began to be forged. Concrete poems have a long, although contested and individualistic (rather than international), history—most scholars accept Mallarme’s work to be the first gesture towards concrete poetry, rather than earlier pattern poems or
briefly some historical perspectives of Nichol’s writing in Chapter 3, but leave the broad debate to historians since my main focus is on the poems themselves and how they construct meaning. In the end, I have chosen to focus on visuality, not because the sonic poetry is any less interesting, but as a means of containing the project.

Concrete poetry presents linguistic content in a strongly visual (or phonic) manner, thereby manipulating the “primacy” of the words themselves through their material connection to other presentational/communicative modes. By breaking, highlighting, placing, sequencing, and adding to the materiality of language, these poems mark the form, the materiality of the page and language, as essential in the construction of meaning. For example, a very simple poem by bpNichol states em ty in the middle of an otherwise blank page (Still Water, n.p.). David notes that the whole collection of poems which this poem comes from “require only a single glance to produce their full impression” (David “Writing” 127) and are “light hearted” and “demand no more of the poems than a quick smile” (128). Barbour, on the other hand, views this collection as a “test for meditation, and an effective example of the old adage that less is more” (Barbour 310). Furthermore, this poem could also offer a traditional concrete poet an argument for the circumvention of language by presenting the visual enactment of the word’s meaning, much like Solt’s reference to Gomringer’s poem “silencio” as a poem in which “[e]verything comes from the material: a design (or system) organic to the word as a material object, its inherent message, ideograms (for examples of scholarly histories tying concrete poetry to other visually experimental movements such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Cubism, see Clüver, David, Doyle, Drucker, Higgins, Peters “Theory;” Reis, Scobie [bpNichol, “Dreamed,” and Earthquakes], Solt, and Vos).

David suggests that “[w]hat saves Still Water from banality is its brilliant physical production” (“Writing” 127). Arguably, David misses or ignores the conceptual and perceptual complexity hidden within the simplicity of the poems, if the box in which they come is what saves them.
and the space it occupies which can be utilized as semantic content” (10). Nonetheless, if we consider how meaning emerges out of this brief representation, the full poetic effect is lost without still knowing the semantic meaning of the word and the conventions that place it there. By knowing the word in English, we can see the missing ‘p’ while simultaneously, through its phonographic mimicry, acknowledging the whole word in our minds rather than two very short words side by side. This allows us to conceptualize the word as an empty container, playing on the common conduit metaphor in which words are containers for meaning (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 10). Likewise, the word on the page emphasises typographic conventions of filling pages with text (albeit ironically, since the page is not in fact empty). The fruitfulness of the poem, then, comes from the cross-mappings between visual (formal) and verbal (semantic) cues which a purely visual or linguistic interpretation of this work would deny. This multimodal construction of meaning has led some scholars to refer to concrete poetry as an ‘intermedium’ because “they represent a conceptual fusion of elements” (Reis 293). bpNichol (via Houédard) refers to these poems as “borderblur” (*Cosmic* n.p.; *Meanwhile* 134) because it is a “poetry that arises from the interface” (*Meanwhile* 134). This occurs through an “intersemiotic practice” (Reis 295) such that “semiotic interpenetration in Concrete poetry may be seen as a more complex production, in which the articulation of meanings is made by the interaction of several components” (294). As I will argue more fully throughout the course of this study, the blending of various perceptual and conceptual modes is at the core of what makes visual poetry poetic but also makes it difficult to approach consistently, which in turn has produced “no accepted critical vocabulary for concrete poetry” (beaulieu [sic] 79). This study addresses the issue of vocabulary and posits the language and findings of cognitive poetics as a means of addressing this deficit. To do so, I synthesize recent research of cognition and language with the literary and critical
history of the Canadian poet bpNichol, starting from the literary context within which Nichol worked.

1.3 Concrete Canada and bpNichol: A Textu(r)al History

Glimmerings of the concrete poetic sensibility in Canada began simultaneously with the international movement in the 1950s with the visually leaning poetry of Earle Birney and Brion Gysin (Balan “Cantextualities 11; David, “Visual” 253; Nichol Meanwhile 44, 134). However, it wasn’t until the publications of bpNichol (and bill bissett to a lesser extent) that Canadian visual poetry—as clearly focused on the materiality of language and the page—became recognized internationally, especially through Nichol’s inclusion in the anthologies of Mayer, Solt, and Williams, and in presentations at galleries and readings across Europe.

The wide distribution of Nichol’s and others’ concrete poetry is largely attributed to the invention and use of photo-offset technology rather than the mimeograph (New 224) which led to the proliferation of small presses and magazines across Canada (Moss and Sugars 236; New 222-28). Many of these presses were supportive of the “experimental” poetics of the time and important in disseminating this work (Balan “Cantextualities 13; Butling 65; Sharpe; Woodcock

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9 Scobie views Birney’s work somewhat less graciously as “headed in that direction (bpNichol 33), but holds Nichol as the first significant concrete poet in Canada.

10 It should be pointed out that this technology was not employed universally by the small presses, most notably by the magazines TISH and blewointment in Vancouver, which Nichol was in contact with and published in, which were still mimeographed (Barbour “B. P. Nichol” 308).
128), especially *blewointment* in Vancouver (1963-78)\(^{11}\) and bpNichol’s *Ganglia* magazine and press (1965-67) and *grOnk* publications (1967-1980) in Toronto. These presses, among others like Coach House and Oberon, helped spread the word/image, forging networks of common interest nationally and internationally (Bayard 103-109; Butling 65).\(^{12}\) While the new technology allowed for low budget publishing so essential for the growth of concrete poetry in Canada, more importantly it “freed up the printed page to concrete poems” (New 224).\(^{13}\)

bpNichol quickly became one of the key promoters and practitioners of visual poetry and poetics in Canada, positioning him now as one of the essential fore-bearers of the craft in Canada.\(^{14}\) In fact, later Birney expresses his thanks “to bp nichol, & his generation, for turning

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\(^{11}\) While *blewointment* certainly contributed to visual poetry publishing in Canada it in fact continued using the mimeograph after the new technology arrived, not out of necessity but for political and aesthetic reasons (Bayard 59, 290n15).

\(^{12}\) Nichol’s inclusion in Solt’s famous international anthology is attributed to his work with grOnk (Solt 47).

\(^{13}\) Henderson extends this discussion into a McLuhan-inspired reading of technological and linguistic connections; he asserts that the “trap of language in a technological age is a mechanical trap” (22). Strangely, he concludes from this that “[i]n order to break the barriers of communication, the word must be oral rather than visual” (23), indicating a mis-reading of McLuhan’s problematically worded notion of the acoustic environment, which in fact McLuhan viewed as reintegrating with “the sensorium” which “assumed that visual space is natural space,” thereby “proposing an organicist (and ultimately ecological) model” (Cavell 83).

\(^{14}\) bill bissett, Judith Copithorne, David uu and others also cast influential shadows (all included in Colombo’s Canadian anthology), but arguably far less so than Nichol. As Douglas Barbour points out, “[h]is influence has been felt in the 1970s as other writers adopted similar approaches to language, at least in part because he had shown the way” (Barbour 308; c.f. McCaffery Interview 92). Likewise, “[i]n any discussion of experimental poetry in Canada, the central figure is bpNichol” (Scobie “I Dreamed” 213). Nichol’s influence, in what Davey calls the process of “writing from” rather than “writing about” (“bpNichol” 9), can still easily be seen in recent visual poetry publications such as those by Barwin and beaulieu, beaulieu, Bök *Crystallography*, McCaffery *Basho*, Mancini, and Wershler-Henry *Nichelodeon* (also an editor of the new bpNichol reader, *The Alphabet Game*), among others. Ball (in “Blurring”) articulates some of the important inheritances from Nichol in beaulieu’s poetry. This diversity of authors alone offers an argument for Nichol helping kick-start a poetic tradition in Canada, especially through the consistent interest in his work. Nichol notes that “there were purely canadian [sic] roots that lead us all off in this direction” (quoted in Scobie, *bpNichol* 32). Similarly, Jars Balan suggests, years later, that “[g]iven the decades of unbroken activity in the genre, it is perhaps now possible to speak of an indigenous tradition, though it will take
[him] on” to the full potential of visuality as a poetic tool (qtd in Scobie, *bpNichol* 33), something he was previously aware of only as a potential creative process rather than an actual, personal enactment (see *Creative* 79). bpNichol first asserted his creative voice (or better, eye) with the small, boxed collections *bp* (containing the small book of concrete, *JOURNEYING & the Returns*) in Canada in 1967 and *Still Water* in 1970, as well as many other small pamphlets, chapbooks, and paraphernalia. However, as Nelson Ball notes, ”the most extensive and representative selection of bpNichol’s typewriter concrete,” to come out at that time was *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* (Introduction 9), which was (re)published by Ball in 1973 because Nichol was “concerned that very little of his concrete poetry was available in Canada” (9), even though internationally he was already “Canada’s most famous concrete poet”.

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15 Birney started publishing clearly visual poems himself soon after bpNichol, the first three appearing in *The Cosmic Chef: An evening of concrete*, compiled by Nichol. He was later featured as well in *Four Parts Sand* (Oberon) with bissett, Copithorne, and Suknaski, before publishing his solo book, *Alphabeings & Other Seayours* in 1976.

16 Frank Davey notes that between 1965 and 1968 Nichol published 29 books and pamphlets of mostly concrete work (bpNichol 560–561). *jw curry’s “Notes toward a beepliography”* gives a true sense of just how prolific bpNichol’s small press publications were throughout his life (this list being published two years before his death in 1988). Caruso also offers a more specific and personal discussion of Nichol’s work with SeriPress, and Sharpe offers a more expansive view of Nichol’s work with Ganglia Press. Butling offers a discussion of this prolific production as an expression of bpNichol’s humanist and artistic emphasis on a gift economy in the arts.

bpNichol also wrote computer code, creating textual animations, in *First Screening*. This work has only recently received both material (digital reconstruction, from the original into contemporary coding: available at www.vispo.com/bp) and critical attention (see Andrews; Andrews et al.; and Huth).

17 Nichol originally published *Konfessions* in London, England in 1967 with Bob Cobbing’s Writers Forum Quartos, but it wasn't distributed in Canada (Ball 9). Nichol changed five poems in the 1973 edition from Coach House Press from that of the 1967 one. The re-release in 2004 of this essential text offers a collected edition, bringing both sets of poems into print together.
(Bowering in Nichol “Cutting” 38; see also Barbour 308). The publication of Konfessions, clearly promoted Nichol’s (visual) poetic presence in Canada, due especially to the larger print runs than his earlier, very limited editions (of bp and Still Water). As Stephen Scobie notes of these and later poems, bpNichol’s “visual concrete poems…are the most witty and elegant ever produced in Canada….they exemplify the virtues of what might be called ‘pure’ concrete poetry: playfulness combined with a deep sense of beauty, the reeducation of the eye to the visual possibilities of language” (“I Dreamed” 214).

With all this praise and publicity, it is surprising that these visual works were largely overshadowed by the publications of two of his other works Two Novels (1969) and The Martyrology (1972), which were more widely (and perhaps easily) responded to by the academic and literary communities (Ball, Introduction 9), in part due to the popularity of the long poem at that time (Davey “bpNichol + 10” and “Exegesis;” Derksen 50; see Kaboureli for more). This disregard continues. While Nichol’s lyric and fictional works have received much critical attention (Billingham; Miki Tracing; Miki and Wah; Niechoda; Open Letter 6.5-6, 10.418) and garnered him a Governor General Award in 1970, his visual poetry has seen relatively little focused discussion (Ball, Introduction 9; McElroy 10; Bök “Nickel”). Granted, this oversight is due in part to the fact that “[m]any of his [bpNichol’s] texts have proved ephemeral, sometimes because of the scarcity of copies and limited circulation provided by ‘presses’ so obscure as to

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18 While Open Letter has long supported visual and experimental writings, the scholarly papers have nonetheless generally focused on The Martyrology. In recent years there is a growing trend, observed in the scholarship of Open Letter as well (see 13.5 and 13.8), towards a more comprehensive engagement with Nichol’s visual works. However, visuality as material for criticism still regularly slips into the realm of the unobserved, assumedly banal, or uncontested. The critical space of vision and perception as meaningful and constructive has still largely to be opened up. However, the trend towards engaging with materiality does show a willingness to engage with this facet, but, as Johanna Drucker notes, it also shows the lack of theoretical tools to engage with it.
make even the epithet ‘small’ seem an exaggeration” (Billingham 2)\textsuperscript{19,20} Nonetheless, the lack of critical engagement also reflects the critical views of the visual and verbal arts, which place(d/s) images and texts in distinct camps (McGilroy 10) and viewed visual literatures like comics and concrete poems as “low” art. However, Nichol spurned this view as “mental laziness and a lack of attention to craft” (Billingham 66): “This whole business of saying ‘I spurn that’ is really just an admission that one doesn’t know how to deal with it” (Nichol qtd. Billingham 66).

Nichol’s oeuvre illustrates his innovative and synthetic mind at work and his lack of regard for the scholastic, theoretical, and cultural divisions of mediums and expressions: he produced literary works across many genres, often melding them within single texts. As Wershler-Henry and Emerson note, “Nichol’s writing is...borderblur” (332). His works employed the forms of comics, computer programs, sculpture, postcards, novels, and many other genres to material advantage. The separation of visual and verbal arts into separate fields makes it noticeably more difficult to discuss his work with ease, but is a challenge he intended. After

\textsuperscript{19} Thankfully, \textit{Grain Magazine} has republished some of bpNichol’s Christmas postcards, never before reprinted, in 32.3 (2005) 27-38, 85-100.

Most reprints of Nichol’s work have occurred in anthologies. Wershler-Henry notes the problematic and negative effects of some anthologists, most notably Bowering and Ondaatje on Nichol’s work by “ignoring the importance Nichol placed on the material qualities of his publications, and on the small-press publishing context” (“Argument” 40), including typographic (40) and cover image changes (41). These alterations were in part prompted by a major publisher’s lack of flexibility, ironically altering Nichol’s work by moving away from the small presses that he called home.

\textsuperscript{20} Nichol’s focus on small press production also made him an influential figure in the emerging comics community in Canada (see \textit{bpNichol Comics} for some examples, but keep the warnings of Stephen Cain in mind). According to John Bell, bpNichol was the first to publish a small press comic in Canada, with his publication of “Scraptures” in 1967 in his magazine \textit{grOnk}, tying him to the “Comix Rebellion, 1967-1976” (107). This movement, including Nichol’s work, later emerged as a key influence on the alternative comics of 1975-1988 by artists like Chester Brown and K.G. Cruickshank, with these later artists “picking up where bpNichol and the Coach House comix artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s had left off, pushing comics to the limit stylistically and thematically” (126).
the publication of *Konfessions*, Nichol moved steadily away from the typewriter which “determine[s] the appearance of the poems” (David “Writing” 129), especially through its imposition of the grid (McElroy 12),21 towards other styles of visual poetry that were primarily handwritten or drawn (Scobie *bpNichol* 44), or other “greater plasticities available” (Dutton 35), such as rubber stamps. Arguably, his work in *Love, Zygal, art facts*, and *Truth* are his most experimental and innovative texts, but they are also the ones amongst the overlooked (Bök, “Nickel” 66), their availability to wider audiences through well established and highly regarded publishers (Coach House Books, Chax Publishing, and Mercury Press) not withstanding. Therefore, there is clearly a skewed scholastic perspective on visual poetry, well beyond the days of *Konfessions*, which arguably has roots in the broader critical, theoretical, and cultural assumptions around images and texts. To engage with Nichol’s poetry, we need to first step back a moment and clarify our view of the major critical issues at play in the criticism.

1.4 Multivalent Concrete Frameworks

Concrete poetry’s multimodal construction of meaning by blending language, visuality, and other formal and conceptual communicative means has impacted the ways in which

21 Nichol appreciated “the typewriter’s tremendous advantage (that each character occupies exactly the same space as any other character which allows for the permutational nature of such approaches)” (*Meanwhile* 98). Although no scholar discusses it, to my knowledge, this stylistic shift may be due in part to the fact that “in 1941, IBM broke the grid” (*Wershler-Henry Iron* 254). With the invention of type writers that didn’t use the same amount of space for each letter, the geometric patterns that many concrete poems relied on became more difficult to produce. This may have been part of what prompted the move towards other modes of production. Interestingly, while Nichol appears to have become bored with the typographical grid, his interest in the grid-like frame of comics never wavers, a form that he wrote on and experimented with throughout his career (Dutton 37-42).
theoretical frameworks have engaged with it, making the results multivalent as well. The variety of models for analysis posited for concrete poetry range from basic di- or trichotomies like “worded images” and “Imaged words” (Kostelanetz “Introduction” and Old) and visual, phonetic, and kinetic (Weaver summarized by Solt 7), to interacting quadrants of demonstrative, connotative and expressive meanings (Skaggs), to Marxist-poststructuralist emphases on “an economic interplay of meaning and eruption” (beaulieu 83; see McCaffery, North for similar emphases) to an emphasis on universality and totality through form (Gomringer), which I’ve already noted is highly problematic. As one would expect, these theoretical models for concrete poetry attempt to isolate the relationship between visual and verbal cues. In examining these cues, different aspects of the relationship between visual and verbal communication are emphasized in their role in constructing meaning. Many emphasize an emptying of the sign in favour of the raw power of vision, the breaking of the economy of the sign by returning the gaze back to its materiality and its presentational media (beaulieu; Gomringer; McCaffery). Thus, these theoretical models have preferences regarding images and texts, but as I will show, often lack a capacity to articulate the synthetic aspect of most visual poems.

The major frameworks for discussing visual poems generally are curatorial or theoretical, perhaps reflecting the different interests of visual and verbal arts critics. Kostelanetz’s and Weaver’s curatorial di- and trichotomies prioritize the dominant modalities of the poetry, be they words and images or the kinetic, visual, or phonetic, which seem to value equally the different modes. However, the models prove unhelpful in criticism because they do not address how the

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22 This presentation is very similar, but less nuanced, to Barthes’ discussion of advertising, as discussed by Forceville (Pictorial 71-74), which Skaggs doesn’t seem aware of.
modes synthesized,\textsuperscript{23} leaving us with disparate parts and a tension between them. Similarly, Skaggs’s quadrants of representation, which focus on “three general classes according to the \textit{mode of emphasis} by which they communicate” (469, emphasis in original)—the expressive, denotative, and connotative aspects. This sketch of a framework looks promising at first glance, but it doesn’t articulate how images represent these aspects and how these aspects facilitate synthesis with the words. Again it leaves them muddled and largely still in tension.

Finally, the most prevalent view of concrete poetry, built from theoretical and metaphorical views of language as an economic system from post-structuralist and Marxist discourse, is succinctly articulated by beaulieu. beaulieu’s view locates concrete poetry as a disruption of communication, hinging on the assumption that it “interferes with signification and momentarily interrupts the capitalistic structure of language” (beaulieu 80, via McCaffery in \textit{North}).\textsuperscript{24} This model emphasises the role of visuality as negation, making paramount imagic \textit{disruption} of meaning over construction of \textit{alternate} or more complex meaning. This particular focus on disruption gives images the primacy in interpretation, but only in their negation of standard linguistic content, without being allowed the status as meaning bearers unto themselves as they (re)construct or (re)frame the verbal cues. Here we have a model that does engage with how visual and verbal cues synthesize, but it makes imagery completely nonsensical (in that we

\textsuperscript{23} Solt’s main criticism of Weaver’s approach is that his “definitions and classifications are most clarifying when applied generally, but when we are confronted with the particular text or poem, we often find that it is both visual and phonetic…It is easier to classify the kinetic poem, because it incorporates movement, usually a succession of pages; but it is essentially a visual poem, and its words are, of course, made up of sounds. (7)

\textsuperscript{24} I am not arguing that beaulieu’s (and McCaffery’s) approach does not yield important insights into aspects of practice and meaning construction; however, it does not yield a holistic interpretative model for the diversity of poetry but only a small subculture of it in non-semantic, highly abstract poems (these are most prevalent in the works of the “3\textsuperscript{rd} generation” that Johanna Drucker describes, which are most playful with deconstructionist models of language and mechanical means of textual production, such as with photocopiers, typewriters, and so forth).
can’t make sense of it and therefore it disrupts meaning). I question the validity of this model since I’m inclined to let the image, in its colloquial sense, speak its “thousand words,” and have meaning.

These different models of reading/viewing concrete poetry emphasize and operate under the assumption of the tension that W.J.T. Mitchell notes between language and images, forcing the repression of one or the other (28). Some of the approaches emphasize meaning as entirely linguistically bound, either by not articulating the meaningfulness of images within their frameworks or by containing them as meaningless interruptions, which in the end promotes tension over synthesis, senselessness over coherence. This is due to a strong rootedness in the history of Saussurean semiology and formalist or Objectivist philosophy and the deconstructionist, poststructuralist, and postmodern responses to and reaffirmation of aspects of them (which I will discuss more later), all of which have been collectively called the “linguistic” turn (Mitchell 11). Underlying this view of language is the assumption that it is arbitrary, systematic, and mono-valent, disassociated from the world and sensual experience, making it seem hollow at best. These assumptions impact profoundly how concrete poetry is read, at least

25 It should be noted that Mitchell, in attempting to work around this tension, in the end re-submits to its pervasiveness, just in perhaps a more nuanced manner:

If I were compelled to imagine the shape of a new disciplinary formation that might emerge from efforts to theorize pictures and picture theory, it would have a thoroughly dialogical and dialectical structure, not in the Hegelian sense of achieving a stable synthesis, but in Blake’s and Adorno’s sense of working through contradiction interminably. (418)

This conclusion reinforces the tension between image and text by discouraging any synthetic space between image and text, something Mitchell can’t seem to avoid. I hope this study shows that a knowledge of cognition can help locate a synthetic space within or beyond this tension as well.

26 Lakoff and Johnson, in Philosophy in the Flesh, discuss this important metaphor of mind and its implications on discussions of philosophy of language in detail. I will discuss this further in Chapter 2 as well.
with theoretical eyes, since it is working with the materiality of a fraught system, and therefore, is always examining/revealing that particular facet of its nature. In the end, as Drucker notes,

What is evident is that the terms of poetic tradition or linguistic analysis adequate for a critical understanding of earlier work is inadequate to confront the synthetic sensibility of the present—work which poses profound questions about the identity of poetic and artistic practices in terms of their cultural identity as well as about the processes of signification so essential to these projects as they are conceived in aesthetic terms. (134)

Drucker points to a hole in the critical frameworks that engage with concrete poetry. It is here that I believe knowledge of cognitive poetics\(^\text{27}\) can offer some closure, especially regarding the roles of language, materiality, and perception in meaning construction, by articulating a different model of communication and signification.

### 1.5 Cognitive Poetics: Easing Tensions

While I will present important findings about cognition in more detail in Chapter 2, the research basically, by way of introduction, views meaning as tied to broader experiences than

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\(^{27}\) Cognitive poetics is a blanket term for the emerging interdisciplinary interest and application of Cognitive Science in discussions of literary texts. Relevant fields that contribute to the cognitive poetic discussion include primarily Cognitive Linguistics (in which I include the subfields of Cognitive Grammar, Cognitive Semantics, and Cognitive Rhetoric), Cognitive Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Psycholinguistics, Neurolinguistics, and Neurobiology.

I should point out that the term cognitive poetics was first coined and used in the work of Reuven Tsur (most notably in *On the Shore and Toward*). However, the interdisciplinary field as I describe it has since moved well beyond the work he is doing, some of which is rich and enlightening and some of which is deeply out of sync with recent research.
just linguistic signification, and that in fact our linguistic systems (as well as other meaning making practices throughout culture, such as art, music, clothing etc) are deeply and richly influenced by our bodily engagements with the world of things. As such the cognitive research refutes the Cartesian split, and instead affirms embodiment, the importance of body-mind or the phenomenal mind, in constructions of meaning, following in part from Merleau-Ponty, Dewey, and Peirce. Therefore, bodily actions and perceptions like grasping, moving, and proximity, help construct the conceptual spaces of the mind. The mind-body, which finds meaning in the world of things, grounds how we can interpret seamlessly the multimodal presentation of these poems because of a shared or schematic connection between perception and conception. The cognitive view, thus, parallels some assumptions made in Peirce’s work around the nature of signification\(^{28}\) by recognizing a rich relationship between signs, the world, and ourselves (Gottdiener 9), which presents a less structured but more realistic engagement with language and the broader human experience of meaning making and communication (Gibbs; Keane; Kimmel; White).\(^{29}\) This approach views language quite differently than “literary criticism and philosophy [which] are concerned about the erosion of foundations where truth claims lack validity because philosophy is writing and all writing is only a mode of representation” (Gottdiener 3). I would suggest that the growing interest in materiality, affect, visuality, Peircean semiology, and other

\(^{28}\) See Masako Hiraga’s *Metaphor and Iconicity*, for a more thorough discussion of how Peirce’s concepts of index, icon, and symbol coincide with frameworks being posited in cognitive science.

\(^{29}\) There is also a longer tradition in developmental psychology (especially Piaget; see Zlatev for a reassessment of Piaget’s work through recent research in Cognitive Science) and gestalt psychology (Johnson, in *Meaning*, draws heavily on this research in his discussion of meaning and art, showing how it is congruent with broader themes in Cognitive Science. Johnson, in this same work, also assesses the historical relevance and compatibility of embodied phenomenology and American Pragmatism with current studies of cognition. See also the work by Jan Zwicky in which she also explores the connections between visual perception, gestalt psychology, and metaphor (work that is compatible with much of the research in Cognitive Science, although she doesn’t make this connection herself).
ways of discussing experience and meaning is perhaps a disciplinary and methodological shift to circumvent the fraught space of linguistic signification so strongly tied to the history of theory and the literary establishment. Concrete poems are a part of this history but encourage a broader recognition of visual signification and thus draw that theoretical system into question. Through often iconic, metaphoric, and metonymic mappings between visual and verbal modes, concrete poems construct complexity out of simplicity, not just tension and obscurity. These complex constructions, which exist at the junction between the material and conceptual realms, between the concrete and the abstract, while being neither wholly indexical nor symbolic, enact a poetic exercise in materiality or a material exercise in abstraction, which thereby negotiates the fusion of both material and conceptual knowings and opens up the complex mappings between and within these different realms. Signification and representation in the Cognitive view engage these multimodal facets of experience and meaning, especially since language is only a part, not the whole of the equation. The Cognitive research I present, therefore, offers a framework for understanding and articulating these connections and their emergent meanings.

To return to bpNichol’s concrete poetry: no critics, to my knowledge, have yet turned to the clearly relevant studies of cognition—for example, related research in gestalt psychology or psycholinguistics—to explore the interconnections between perception and conception, vision and language, which the poems necessitate. This may corroborate Christian Bök’s inflammatory comment, that past engagements with Nichol’s poetry were an attempt to “sentimentalize his subversiveness…at the expense of his most experimental achievements” (62), or worse still, simply offer a dismissive nod. Nonetheless, I will show, in Chapter 3, that an intuitive

30 If in fact all concrete poems simply exposed this fraught system of signification through tension, they would quickly become banal indeed, since that would be all that they could do, unless they lose the visual cues.
engagement with these aspects of meaning and knowing is prevalent within the criticism. Discussions of Nichol’s oeuvre, and other concrete poems, often slide into descriptions of reader’s involvements, bodily inclinations, and so forth that step outside of the domain of pure language, even when the writers are attempting to argue for it. A good example of intuited embodiment occurs in a statement from one of the first anthologists of concrete poetry, Emmett Williams:

[t]he visual element in their [concrete poets’] poetry tended to be structural, a consequence of the poem, a “picture” of the lines of force of the work itself, and not merely textural. It was a poetry far beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be completed or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation—the word, not words, words, words or expressionistic squiggles—using the semantic, visual, and phonetic elements of language as raw materials in a way seldom used by the poets of the past. It was a game, perhaps, but so is life. (vi)

Williams does not discuss what this means for the critical discussion around this work, here ending his introduction. I posit in this study that only through an understanding of the conceptual and perceptual linkages and cognitive apparatuses needed to interpret this multimodal genre can criticism venture towards a more comprehensive understanding and discussion of these works, and so trace the games of language and life found on the page.
Chapter 2: A Cognitive Poetic Model for Concrete Poetry

2.1 Overview

Concrete poems provide a considerable hurdle for careful critical analysis since they work with two basic modes of communication (or what Lopez-Fernanadez calls “languages” [2]), both visual and verbal. While in cases of “radical concrete” (beaulieu 87), where there is no semantic content (for instance, in texts made up of one letter or parts of a letter that create a pattern on the page), the interpretative strategies may be clearer because they are largely visual art, many concrete poems meld both modes equally as a visual-verbal synthesis. For this study, I will focus predominantly on texts that employ both communicative means in more or less equal parts, primarily to illustrate how knowledge of cognition can illuminate the processes of interpretation at work while reading/seeing/experiencing these ‘texts,’ showing how the two modes of communication can synthesize seamlessly. This in turn will lead to more cohesive discussions of the poems. Often these semiotic modes meld in the poems to construct new and rich meanings out of apparently simple words or phrases. While seemingly easy to interpret, the requisite variety of interpretative strategies previously employed upon these melded communicative modes has created a rather obsequious mix of critical musings and silences (which I discussed briefly in Chapter 1 and I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3 regarding criticism of bpNichol’s poems). To engage concrete poetry with clarity and alacrity requires first isolating the critical tools and terms upon which discussions hinge. My methodology for analysis is rooted in conceptual models from cognitive poetics, in particular the notion of embodiment and its association with image schemas and simulation. These concepts prompt the iconic, metaphoric, and metonymic mappings shown with Fauconnier and Turner’s blending
model and further elucidate the complex interrelations of visual and linguistic cues in this style of poetry, creating an approach to this multimodal genre that is consistent with other studies of literary and non-literary texts (such as work by Dancygier “Blending,” “Text,” and “What,” Forceville, Freeman “Momentary,” Hart “Performance,” Hiraga, Oakley “Conceptual,” Stockwell, and Sweetser “Suburbs” and “Whose,” among others). The analytical framework I outline here offers an approach that is consistent with our growing knowledge of how the mind works, and it is hoped is, therefore, better equipped to offer insight into mixed-media, where often theory has struggled to make sense of how we make sense of it all.

2.2 Embodiment

Embodiment, in Cognitive Science, has taken on a variety of meanings (Rohrer, “Embodiment”), so I will start by isolating the key aspects for this argument.¹ Most basically, the concept of embodiment,² disregards the Cartesian split of mind and body, accepting rather that body and mind are inextricably connected and that the body influences the mind in constructing meaning, which includes but is not exclusive to language.

As Tim Rohrer describes, the notion of embodiment emerged out of work around the age old question of how language works to construct a shared meaning between people. The

¹ Tim Rohrer isolates 11 different usages of the term embodiment in cognition studies (which includes psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, neurobiology, neuropsychology, and more). These various usages are not mutually exclusive but rather focus on different aspects of embodiment relevant to the various methodologies and interests of each discipline. I have attempted to adhere to the most commonly accepted notions of embodiment (or as it is referred to by some critics, like Elizabeth Hart, experientialism [“Cognitive” 6]) relevant to language use, primarily drawn from Cognitive Linguistics and Psycholinguistics.

² Older variants of embodiment were posited earlier in different philosophies by Merleau-Ponty, Blake, and Dewey (see Johnson’s Meaning and Gibbs’ Embodiment for more). This term is very different from the usage by Butler and others, who focus on the socio-linguistic (see Hart “Performance” for more).
Objectivist, \(^3\) formalist tradition, in opposition to the cognitive one, has responded to these questions by “positioning meaning as something abstract, propositional, and symbolic” (25). This is the model adopted by Chomskyan generative linguists and other formalist theories of language including those promoted by Ferdinand de Saussure, especially in their shared notion of the arbitrariness of the sign and the relegation of semantics as secondary to syntax. Subsequently, this model was also adopted by poststructuralism “which tends, in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure, to elide the mediating role of the human mind in its models of representation” (Hart, “Cognitive” 7). As Saussure asserts, “[w]ithout language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebular. There is no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (112).

Studies of cognition disagree with this assertion of the primacy of language in conceptualization through the understanding that bodily experiences influence and motivate it. As Sarah F. Taub notes, the purely symbolic nature of mind in the formalist model allows for the components of language (lexicon, phonology, syntax and semantics) to be

seen as *autonomous*; that is, rules for one component do not affect any of the others. Such a model has no mechanism whereby the semantic component can influence the physical forms of language. It is thus not capable of handling the

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\(^3\) Mark Johnson, in *The Body in the Mind*, examines in detail the claims of Objectivist theorists of language and shows how a Cognitivist model supports or undermines their various claims. Importantly, he recognizes that Putnam is right about this issue—things are only meaningful ‘objects’ *for us* when we grasp them within some scheme, network, or system of meaning structures. Words do not simply refer to objective states of affairs independent of human beings. *People use words to refer to objects*, and they must employ intentionalistic structures of meaning to do this. How we carve up the world will depend both on what is ‘out there’ independent of us, and equally on the referential scheme we bring to bear, *given our purposes, interests, and goals.* (Johnson *Body* 202)
The cognitivist theory of embodiment connects these different components of language, motivating meanings that are creative and new yet still comprehensible in common discourse. The false dichotomy used within the formalist tradition, and its offspring poststructuralism, of arbitrariness and predictability when examining signs and signification is circumvented by cognitive linguistics through the notion of motivation which requires neither since it is rooted in embodied concepts (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy* 464).

To be able to answer questions around these inexplicable, motivated linguistic components which influence each other, cognitive linguists have chosen “to answer such questions with an empirical examination of what constitutes shared meaning” (Rohrer, “Embodiment” 26) through the understanding that “the primary purpose of language is not the objective description of the world, but instead to communicate and share experiences” (26). Rohrer continues that language, rather than being a disembodied, linear, rational system that seeks truth statements—the heart of formalism—is a network of embodied conceptualizations that find expression in language and are motivated by the desire to direct attention and to share experience (26). Clearly, this does not mean that there are no aspects of language systems that are arbitrary (a natural process of systematization and conventionalization), but large facets of them are more clearly and holistically understood through the embodied model.  

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4 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their chapters on Analytic Philosophy (440-468) and Chomsky’s theories of language (469-512) in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, offer a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying assumptions and metaphorical parameters that constrain formalist theories of language than Taub, but her description is more concise and to the point for this project. Slingerland also criticizes quite comprehensively the postmodernist and poststructuralist models and legacies from an embodied view.

5 I am not arguing here that all language is purely, transparently motivated, but rather that there are pervasive aspects that are clearly not arbitrary and require an embodied model to explain. Furthermore, as Bolinger notes, “[a]rbitrary and conventional is a fitting description of distinctive sounds, less so of words, even less of sentences,
experience of the body correlates meanings between language users. Thus, language reflects cognitive apparatuses that have been formed and informed by embodied experience.\(^6\)

Here we return to the most basic, summative question for a cognitive approach to language, the question of the body. Now the question about language is not just how we share meanings, but it becomes “how does the bodily apparatus itself shape our linguistic categorizations and conceptualizations?” (Rohrer, “Embodiment” 26). Extensive examinations of categorization and prototypes (Lakoff, \textit{Women}; Rohrer, “Embodiment”; Stockwell), conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson \textit{Metaphors}; Johnson \textit{Meaning}; Kövecses \textit{Metaphor and Language}; Taub), grammatical structures (Langacker, \textit{Concept} and “Cognitive”), semantics (Talmy, “Fictive” and \textit{Toward}), and so on confirm the influence of the phenomenal body on language through basic, embodied information contained in these linguistic structures.\(^7\) This research has led to some key assumptions about embodiment. Mark Johnson states that

\begin{quote}
[human meaning concerns the character and significance of a person’s interactions with their environment. The meaning of a specific aspect or dimension of some ongoing experience is that aspect’s connections to other parts of past, present, or future (possible) experiences. Meaning is relational. It is about how one thing relates to or connects with other things. (\textit{Meaning} 10)
\end{quote}

As he later surmises,

\begin{quote}
a n embodied view of meaning looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures in interaction with their changing environments. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of
\end{quote}

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\(^6\) While this seems intuitive it is not a methodological consistency within linguistics or literary studies where formalist assumptions have reigned supreme.

\(^7\) I should note that while these more recent studies work with a more complex understanding of embodiment, earlier, influential work by Miller and Johnson-Laird certainly was envisioning a similar view of perception and language.
and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies through space, and evaluate our situation. *(Meaning 11)*

The notion of embodiment assists us in examining language, since it gives an epistemological basis on which to ground more abstract meanings, thereby assuming that abstractions are constructed from, or motivated by, concrete, bodily perceptions and conceptions.\(^8\) Thus, Lakoff and Johnson’s widely accepted model of embodiment states that

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[t]he \text{embodied mind hypothesis therefore radically undercuts the } \text{perception/conception distinction. In an embodied mind, it is conceivable that the same neural system engaged in perception (or in bodily movement) plays a central role in conception. That is, it is possible that the very mechanisms responsible for perception, movements, and object manipulation could be responsible for conceptualization and reasoning. (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy* 37-38)
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This assertion is essential to much research in cognitive linguistics and other language-focused fields in Cognitive Science, and holds that the environment-organism coupling is not just important but essential for most levels of conceptualization.\(^9\) Furthermore, it is

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\(^8\) Lakoff and Turner provide this in the form of the “grounding hypothesis” for metaphor, which explains metaphorical mappings moving from a concrete source to an abstract target (*More* 112-114). Jordan Zlatev offers a similarly rooted, but alternate view for grounding language through the notion of mimetic schemas, more specific variants of image schemas, which are “dynamic, concrete and preverbal representations, involving the body schema, which are accessible to consciousness, and pre-reflexively shared in a community” (334). These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, but rather emphasize different aspects of image schematic conceptualization in relation to representation and cognitive development. In either case, they offer more-or-less the same grounding required for this discussion.

\(^9\) Leonard Talmy discusses this false separation of perception and conception and offers a new term *cepttion* in their place that is consistent with Cognitive Linguistics. I do not use this simplification because, while it reflects more accurately a holistic model of language and thought, it negates the facile, nuanced discussions of higher order phenomena in language, such as mental spaces, blending, etc) and makes it more difficult to isolate how the body specifically alters the mind. As Johnson notes, while we really have a body-mind, talking about the body and the mind is still necessary to maintain discussion, partially out of respect for its long history in Western philosophy and culture (*Johnson Meaning* pp), but also because it is a commonly held division as a folk philosophy across cultures (Lakoff and Johnson *Philosophy*, see the chapter on “Mind” especially). In the end, the discussion of body and mind need to happen within the qualifying light of the body-mind rather than with the negation of the notions of body and mind.
also understood that the bodily influence on conceptualization is not prescriptive, but
descriptive. We cannot say what the embodied influence will look like, but we can see
when embodied concepts motivate particular language (and other communicative)
forms. In this sense, an analysis of concrete poetry is looking at it as a richly motivated
form that communicates through both visual and verbal means which are infused with
embodied concepts.

In Cognitive Science, many aspects of language use are explained as motivated by
embodiment (for example, grammar, iconicity, metaphorical and metonymic mappings,
polysemy, and so on) and can play out on any level of usage from words to gestures to complex
narratives. Thus, “the embodiment hypothesis makes an analogy which argues that conceptual
and perceptual processes share many of the same physiological and neuropsychological
subprocesses” (Rohrer, “Embodiment” 38). There is emerging evidence from MRI analyses that
support this understanding as well, since people who perform an action activate the same region
of the brain as people who read about it or see it, thereby providing neurophysiologic support for
an embodied view of language (Lakoff “Overview;” Oakley “Image schemas;” Rohrer,
“Embodiment” and “Image schemas”). There are similar studies coming out of cognitive
psychology and psycholinguistics that show a link between the cognitive linguistic and
psychological views of language (Gibbs Embodiment, “Metaphor,” “Making;” Gibbs and
Matlock; Matlock “Depicting” and “Fictive”). While there is further research to be done into the
extent to which this basic assumption influences higher-level frameworks, embodiment has been
sufficiently shown in a considerable number and diversity of arenas that it has become almost

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10 Johnson in Meaning, argues for an embodied view of aesthetics, ranging across the different expressive
 mediums of sound (in music), vision (in visual art), and language. Francis Steen also relies on the assumption of
 embodiment for his cognitive account of aesthetics.
uncontestable in cognitive studies of language. As I will show in Chapter 4, understanding embodiment is essential for understanding how readers interpret and find meaning in the many cues in concrete poems; embodiment offers a way—in part by diffusing the dichotomy of perception and conception—around the tension between image and text and illustrates the synthesis so central to their meaning.

2.3 Image Schemas, Simulation, and Fictive Motion

At the lowest level of embodied conceptualization, that most close to Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of where perception and conception coalesce, are image schemas. These basal knowledge structures are commonly considered prelinguistic, since they are employed by children long before language development (Zlatev). However, Zlatev is quick to point out that this does not mean, as some researchers assume, that image schemas are only a part of the “cognitive unconscious” (see Lakoff and Johnson’s Philosophy for their formulation of this conclusion), but that they can still be engaged consciously (as others, such as Gibbs “Psychological” and Kimmel discuss as well).

13 Fonargy’s work also lends itself to image schematic readings, but he does not himself connect his research into iconicity and motivation to embodiment and cognitive research.

14 The original text in which Johnson formulates the notion of image schemas is in The Body in the Mind, but I use a more recent formulation, which is slightly more carefully nuanced in relation to recent research.

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11 Lakoff and Johnson also make an important point about cognitive studies and its use of diverse methodologies to provide convergent evidence for embodiment: “The more distinct methodologies with different assumptions there are that have to converge, the less likely it is that assumptions will predetermine the results. As convergent methodologies for accumulating evidence pile up, the probability that the ‘evidence’ merely reflects assumptions gets vanishingly small” (Philosophy 468). This statement counteracts poststructuralist claims that the assumption of embodiment would produce the results (467), since this is not an assumption of many of the methodologies that have in the end produced the evidence. It was through independent inquiry that this knowledge emerged; “embodiment” as an explanatory frame came later.

12 However, Zlatev is quick to point out that this does not mean, as some researchers assume, that image schemas are only a part of the “cognitive unconscious” (see Lakoff and Johnson’s Philosophy for their formulation of this conclusion), but that they can still be engaged consciously (as others, such as Gibbs “Psychological” and Kimmel discuss as well).
a dynamic, recurring pattern of organism-environment interactions. As such, it will reveal itself in the contours of our basic sensorimotor experience. Consequently, one way to begin to survey the range of image schemas is via a phenomenological description of the most basic structural features of all human bodily experience. (Meaning 136)

Examples of image schemas include CONTAINER, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, UP-DOWN, SCALARITY, VERTICALITY, COMPULSIVE FORCE, and many others (and are generically referred to in small caps). These basic, embodied concepts are reflected throughout human constructions of meaning-forms. While there is certainly still some contention about aspects of image schemas (Gibbs “Psychological;” Grady “Image Schemas;” Hampe; Zlatev), overall, in the cognitive literature, image schemas have become an accepted basal component of language study, especially in relation to conceptual metaphor and blending (Kövecses Metaphor).

Image schemas are important for this study for two reasons. Firstly, they have already been shown by Margaret Freeman to be important in literary analysis of poetic style, since “a cognitive linguistic approach can help to identify and articulate a poet’s poetics and thus contribute to an explanatory account that distinguishes one poet’s poetics from another” through an analysis that “can help to illuminate the conceptual principles that underlie a poet’s theory of poetry” (74). Thus, the embodied view of language, through image schemas, helps focus the critical reader on key aspects of conceptualizations at the heart of the poetic experience. In the end, as Todd Oakley notes, this style of analysis “produce[s] better, more reliable literary interpretations” (Oakley, “Image schemas” 223).

15 Johnson’s original list of image schemas in The Body and the Mind draws extensively from an analysis/observation of organism-environment coupling, but that list is not necessarily exhaustive nor uncontested (Oakley “Image Schemas;” Grady “Image Schemas”)

16 This assertion has clear implications for materialist discussions in media and cultural studies, which I touch on in Chapter 6.
Secondly, understanding image schemas is essential to the analysis of concrete poetry because the poems prompt and rely on experiential information. Because of their clear link to proprioception, exteroception, and perception (and arguably, at least in part to interoception), image schemas provide the level of cross-mappings between visual and verbal cues in the poems because they are expressed conceptually in either modality. As Gibbs and Colston note, “[i]mage schemas exist across all perceptual modalities, something that must hold for there to be any sensorimotor coordination in our experience. As such, image schemas are at once visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile” (349). Furthermore, image schemas are an essential component of metaphors and other constructions (Johnson *Meaning*; Kövecses *Metaphor*; Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors*). Thus, image schemas facilitate or motivate the conceptual blending and mappings that occur at many levels within the visual poems and are thereby essential components of the poetic meaning.

While there is fairly strong consensus around the existence and pervasiveness of image schemas, the way in which they are expressed and understood is still debated. There are two views as to how they come to be experienced and interpreted and these spring from different cognitive theories of mind. While these aspects of the cognitive descriptions of mind are still being debated on some levels, they change how we view the action of a poem unfolding as we

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17 As Timothy Clausner, Beate Hampe, and Joseph Grady illustrate, research and hypotheses surrounding image schemas are still undergoing changes, especially in relation to how they mediate experience, assist in constructing meaning and how dynamic or limited they are. Furthermore, questions are ongoing about what proprioceptive or affective aspects are critical to which image schemas. Joseph Grady offers ways to categorize schemas in a hierarchical structure in relation to these components as image schemas, response schemas, and superschemas (44-50). Interestingly, superschemas offer a way of acknowledging schemas that have nonperceptual dimensions and which can be recognized as “the reification of abstractions” but which “are typically neither sources nor targets of metaphor” (49). Grady mentions Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of *ontological metaphors* (an example of which is EVENT) as an example of a “ubiquitous pattern of construal” which to think of in terms of “metaphor is perhaps a terminological question” (49). Michael Kimmel also offers a discussion of images schemas as situated or compounded as a means of engaging the cultural expression and manipulation of image schematic knowledge.
read. While some define image schemas as representational structures in the mind (see Grady “Image Schemas” and Lakoff Women), more and more research on image schemas have led researchers like Johnson (Meaning), Gibbs (“Psychological”), Gibbs and Colston, and Gibbs and Matlock (“Psycholinguistics”) to argue against a “representational model of mind” in favor of a view of image schemas that

reflect[s] experiential gestalts that never get encoded as explicit mental representations. A different possibility is that image schemas might be characterized as emergent properties of our ordinary conceptual systems and therefore are not explicitly represented in any specific part of the mind. (Gibbs and Colston 370)

Thus, image schemas offer evidence that meaning and thought are not explicitly linguistically focused, but are experientially influenced, online or “in the moment”, embodied expressions or engagements. From this, Gibbs and others have concluded that the mind undergoes a process of simulation, rather than representation and decoding, when engaging with language and other meaningful acts (“Metaphor”). As Gibbs surmises, “[t]his perspective on image-schematic reasoning suggests that many aspects of perception, cognition, and language use are intimately tied to both real and imagined bodily action” (Gibbs, “Psychological” 117). In this simulative view, which Johnson also affirms in his most recent work on aesthetics and meaning (Meaning 161-4), image schemas are embodied concepts that influence both our bodies (in action and perception) and our minds (in conception) in the online process of meaning construction.

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18 Raymond Gibbs offers much more evidence for this assertion in his book, Embodiment and Cognitive Science, and another discussion of the implications of this data in his articles “Embodiment” and “Metaphor.” Also see Teenie Matlock’s various works, as well as articles in Pecher and Zwaan’s edited text, Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking, for further evidence of the simulative (action and perception-based) theory of embodied mind rather than the representational model, in particular the articles by Gibbs “Embodiment,” MacWhinney, Spivey et al.
As Gibbs and Matlock discuss, studies of simulation have now placed it as an assumed process in psychology (“Metaphor”), and Lakoff notes the same for neuroscience, counteracting some of his earlier views (“Overview” and “Neural”). Simulation functions on many levels of human activity, from linguistic interpretation to mental imagery to fictive constructions. It is argued, then, that simulation is an essential component of understanding fictive situations, be they metaphorical expressions or extensions or assumptions of action (such as in handwriting—see Matlock “Fictive”). More importantly to concrete poetry, simulation is also essentially tied to the interpretation of perceived experiences (i.e. through ties to visually-cued information).

In linguistics, Leonard Talmy has extensively documented cases and types of fictive motion. This occurs in cases when something that is experientially known as stationary is conceived of in terms of movement. For example, the phrase *the fence ran across the field* attributes motion to a factively rooted entity. Talmy posits that these types of description reflect our embodied experience, in this case scanning across the field to encompass the fence. This experiential process is then reflected in our conceptualization and presentation of it in language through fictive motion. That this fictive attribute does not confuse readers is due to simulation, wherein we accept the embodied aspects of scanning the fence, or whatever the requisite experientially-rooted cue is, to understand the words. Furthermore, Matlock has shown that in fact, active verbs such as *run* and *go* used in fictive ways influence how an object is perceived or understood (“Depicting”). In her study, a fence that is perceived to *run* rather than just be, such as in the phrase *the fence is across the field*, is considered *longer*. Thus, simulation prompts a different meaning for the two sentences that are otherwise considered factively identical. Teenie Matlock’s study determines this through having participants draw the objects from carefully constructed sentences that either have or do not have fictive motion in them and then comparing
the drawings. In this way, the drawings betrayed the simulative process underneath conception. Importantly, Matlock also points out that drawings themselves also present fictive motion through various line usages and shape changes. She refers to Scott McCloud’s key work on comics as supportive evidence that fictive motion is not just in language but also in art work, which is expanded on in Gibbs and Matlock’s discussion of the simulative processes used in interpreting a poster (“Metaphor” 161). In concrete poetry, this means that some lines, action verbs, and perceived movements of letters can help construct various interpretations through simulative language and visual processing.19

Image schemas, simulation, and fictive motion as embodied understandings offer a critical connection between embodied experience and poetic experience so essential to understanding concrete poetry. By connecting perception and conception, movement and meaning, and the simulative essence of fiction and fact, these notions offer a means of connecting the visual and verbal cues at the heart of the synthetic experience of concrete poetry.

2.4 Mental Spaces

To further elucidate how blending of different conceptual elements occurs during the process of reading a concrete poem, we must look beyond the most basic element of knowledge to the layers of usage in which they are embedded. The theory of mental spaces was developed by Gilles Fauconnier to help articulate how various meanings, in linguistic terms constructions, can arise out of simple re-combinations of words (Mental Spaces). Fauconnier and Turner

19 Talmy’s description of some types of fictive motion, such as demonstrative paths and access paths easily translate into visual representations as well.
describe mental spaces as “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action…[and] can be used generally to model dynamic mappings in thought and language” (Way 40). Fauconnier expands on this definition to emphasize that mental spaces contain elements and are structured by frames and cognitive models. Mental spaces are connected to long-term schematic knowledge such as the frame of walking along a path, and to long-term specific knowledge, such as a memory of the time you climbed Mount Rainier in 2001. The mental space that includes you, Mount Rainier, the year 2001, and your climbing the mountain can be activated in many different ways and for many different purposes. (“Mental Spaces” 351)

Mental spaces can be conceived of as bridging basic and complex conceptual knowledge, allowing both the notion of paths, an image-schematic conception, and more complex activities and images to combine in innovative ways as we use language or other communicative tools. Also, importantly, mental spaces are online partial constructs, meaning that they are activated while engaging in the process of meaning-making (i.e. while we think). As such, mental spaces are not fixed but are malleable within the communicative context, and in the end are only as complex as they need to be to suit the occasion (i.e. they are economical). These spaces make up the basic building blocks of language use and are highly flexible and generative.

However, to be generative, mental spaces require a broader framework to help construct them. The experiential or conceptual knowledge that is associated with any thing, be it a “dog” with its need for a leash, toys, food, grooming, and so on, is essential in allowing a mental space to shift as it interacts with further communication. For example, “the dog barked at the toy” and “the dog bit the neighbor” are two very different statements with very different ramifications on how we think of the dog and its actions and what we would expect to hear about next. This background knowledge, be it expectations of behavior, associated objects, or so on, lays the
necessary groundwork for shifts in or highlighting of meanings and is essential to understanding how meaning can be specifically constructed over the course of a sentence, paragraph, or whole narrative. In the case of concrete poetry, where the prompts are so minimal for constructing meaning, the associated experiential and conceptual knowledge for various words and objects is crucial for constructing more complex mental spaces. To understand this process—something keenly relevant to linguists interested in semantics and constructions—the cognitivist view of frames and framing is needed.

2.5 Framing and Metonymy

Earlier in the presentation of mental spaces I quoted Gilles Fauconnier, who alludes to the notion of framing as important in mental space construction, but he doesn’t emphasize or clarify this point there. However, for concrete poetry, where access to as much information as possible through very limited means is essential to understanding, where whole mental spaces can be invoked through very limited allusions, references, or associations (either visually or verbally), the notion of framing is crucial (and something Fauconnier and Turner spend more time discussing in \textit{Way}, especially in relation to simplex networks [120-122]). Charles J. Fillmore first developed the understanding of frames that I will be using here (and what Fauconnier means when he uses the term) under the study of Frame Semantics.\footnote{I should note that there are a couple of different approaches to framing that are currently circulating in Cognitive Poetic discourse. For an alternative approach to frames see Peter Stockwell, whose usage is more consistent with the notion as “perspective” rather than as conceptual/semantic framework. I use Fillmore’s model since it correlates more fully with other models and research being engaged with in Cognitive Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, and other studies of cognition, and is more generally accepted and employed in the literature. However, it should be noted that these two models of frames are not incompatible, since Stockwell’s perspectival cues are a part of the role values which are essential to Fillmore’s more extensive model.} In his work,
Fillmore shows how meaning is constructed through the relationships between words (and their composite experiences, objects, actions, etc), and that to understand the single term requires a broad, associative system to other terms. Thus, framing is any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the other things are automatically made available. (Fillmore, “Frame” 111)

Frames exist as large, composite knowledge sets and, as Fillmore points out, conflates the binary of encyclopedic and lexical information (“Double” 290). Also, importantly for the a study of concrete poetry and for a cognitive linguistic discussion of knowledge, Fillmore points out that “[w]hile the task of linguistic semantics must be to explain how text meanings are developed, the knowledge which is called on for achieving this task is not limited to linguistic knowledge” (quoted by Cienki 173). This means that embodied understandings of the world and social experience (what he calls “interactional frames” and roles [173]) are essential to the constructions of frames, and they are not necessarily constrained by language but rather include broader human experiences which language taps into (the micro and macro-level embodied experiences: see Gibbs Embodiment and Kimmel for different approaches to integrating basic level embodiment to more complex human interactions).

Since frames create connections between various smaller units within a larger system, the concept of framing ties closely to, and is at times coterminous with, metonymy since these smaller units of meaning invoke larger frames when they are used (via frame evocation or frame metonymy [Fauconnier and Sweetser]): as Radden and Kövecses state “metonymy, like metaphor, is part of our everyday way of thinking, is grounded in our experience” (335), and can be mapped within and between the ontological realms of forms, concepts, and things and events (337). Concrete poems use frame metonymy both visually and verbally in constructing and
blending meaning, specifically by invoking a frame and relaying on the relevant knowledge being employed in mapping to other prompts (Barcelona; Radden and Kövecses). By referencing a small part of the whole frame, a concrete poem can create cross-mappings between mental spaces through invocation and evocation of broad knowledge systems with very concise cues.

The nature of these cues can vary from image schematic connections that invoke a particular conceptual metaphor and its associated knowledge: for example, the path image schema can invoke the pervasive LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, which in turn activates particular mappings which highlight or motivate particular meanings. More importantly, the visual cues come in the form of rich images, which can be propositional (Johnson Body 23), and, as mental imagery, can activate all related knowledge as well. This imagery is more important for motivating particular meanings in concrete poems because “the image or mental picture will always be of some one particular thing, which may not share all the same features with another thing of the same kind. The schema, by contrast, contains structural features common to many different objects, events, activities, and bodily movements” (24). Thus, the schema activates a particular embodied gestalt (which may be related to abstract, conceptual frames) while rich imagery can activate particular frames of more concrete information.

For example, the concrete poem “Attempted Diagnoses” (Figure 2.1), the title term diagnoses evokes the frame of medical examinations, the doctor-patient relationship and their roles, and assumptions about diagnosis being either an answer to sickness or at least an end unto

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{Barcelona articulates metonymy as a mapping between domains and (sub)domains rather than as simply a referential process within a single domain. This shift in definition helps focus the discussion on the highlighting function of metonymy within domains. Coulson likewise explores a similar phenomenon in semantics, which she calls frame-switching which also serves a similar figure-ground function.}\]
itself as a label for a problem. The poem proceeds to visually and verbally explore the attempts at this answer, assumedly provided by a doctor to a patient, using our knowledge of key roles within this frame. Interestingly, this poem never says *sick* while always visually (and occasionally phonically) alluding to the answer. Without the frame of medicinal knowledge, the angst of mis-diagnosis central to the poem would not be as pronounced or even recognizable. Thus, frame metonymy tied to one simple word creates a mental space that can be mapped onto the visual experience of the poem and allows for the construction of more complex meanings. More broadly for concrete poems, imagistic information can function as easily as words to cue a frame by presenting a simple aspect that draws in related information. For example, “Water Poem 5” (Figure 2.2) uses a flowing cursive script of the word *water* to present a rich image of water as well—note that this is not an image-schema but a more complex image (Hart 42) which can still be essential to metaphor and simulation (Gibbs *Poetic and Embodiment*)—which evokes a broader frame for interpreting the poem. Thus, the image forces a richer mapping between the word (which, interestingly, is always secondarily observed by readers of the poem)\(^{22}\) and the referent than would otherwise not occur if the word was, say, printed across the page. Furthermore, the image of water tied to the cursive script lends itself to a metaphorical reading of language as charting the surface of a dark abyss with unknown creatures, and so forth. In either case, visually or verbally, frames are essential for interpreting the poem, and metonymy helps facilitate this process by evoking and highlighting this knowledge. Thus, this cognitive process is very frugal yet evocative in its use of prompts to construct meaning.

\(^{22}\) This is a personal observation from three different presentations of this poem in talks over two years (2007-2008), where afterwards observers commented that they didn’t realize that it said water at first but simply observed the image.
Figure 2.1 “Attempted Diagnosis” from bpNichol’s *art facts: a book of contexts* (18-19). Note that this poem originally appears on two separate pages, so it should be read as a single path, not two facing columns.
2.6 Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending)

As has become clear by now, the interactions between image schemas, mental spaces, and frames requires the notion of mapping, the transference of meaning from the different layers of conceptualization to others and from mental space to mental space. Even the qualification of attempted to diagnoses in the title of the previously mentioned poem forces a change in the mental space of diagnoses, highlighting particular aspects of its associated frame. The finality of a diagnosis is rejected by the fact that by attempting diagnosis the physician has yet to find an answer for the sickness. This poem requires a combination of the frame of basic medical knowledge around diagnosis, the mental space modification provided by the qualifier, the
evocative spelling pattern of ‘sick,’ and the image-schema of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL (called the PATH schema from now on) that allows these to coalesce.

It should be noted that the PATH schema is seen in two key ways in this poem. First, the PATH schema is employed in the notions of both attempted and diagnoses as linear concepts. The attempt places the subject in process, with an assumed goal ahead. Likewise, the diagnosis assumes a process that moves from a patient’s experience of sickness, through tests provided by the doctor, to the final goal of naming and treating the disease, the diagnoses of the title.23 Secondly, the image-schema is present through the visual structure of the poem itself which lists various misspellings of sick in a single column down two pages, which a dedicated reader would follow through to the end. These image-schematic cues prompt further meaning construction, but to explain it, we require a framework from cognitive linguistics, Conceptual Integration Theory (also called blending), which allows us to compile these various cues into a meaningful whole.

Blending, developed extensively by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (“Metonymy,” “Principles,” Way) among others, is used to explain how various aspects of different inputs or mental spaces are combined to generate elaborate meanings or mental spaces (and how they constrain and motivate particular readings).24 The basic structure of the blending model

23 It has been observed by Sonnet L’Abbe, in personal conversation, that “diagnoses” is also a term used by mechanics with cars, which then requires a further level of qualification provided by the scanned “sick” of the poem. However, for the sake of clarity, I have focused on the dominant frame of medicine for this reading, since the mechanical usage of the term is arguably a metaphorical extension of the original usage from the medical realm (using the metaphor CARS ARE PEOPLE).

24 Gibbs points out that while blending theory is an elegant and malleable approach to constructions it still has to resolve some discrepancies within the literature regarding empirical testing and its relationship to the various levels of representation:
requires at least two inputs which connect through cross-mappings and perhaps a broader topological relation of a generic space (see Figure 2.3). These two (or more) input spaces project relevant information into the blended space which produces an emergent structure. This structure can then project back into the original input spaces to offer insight, or it can then contribute to a larger constructed meaning in a text. This model dictates that the two inputs contribute salient information to the blend, but they are not wholly subsumed in it. Likewise, the blended space produces an emergent structure (a unique mental space) that is distinct from the original inputs. This new mental space can be the final product of a blend, or it can go on to be blended, extended, compressed, altered or negated as the context dictates (be it in conversation, a novelic structure, etc). As Barbara Dancygier notes, “[w]hat blending achieves through such a formation of new mental spaces is a degree of clarity and simplicity…needed for new meanings to naturally arise and be easily manipulated” (“What” 6). This malleable model has been used for analysis of meaning construction in as diverse areas of study as narratology (Dancygier “Blending,” “Text,” and “What;” Oakley “Conceptual”), mathematics (Fauconnier

Thus, people’s varied abilities, from perception to motor control to language and problem-solving, may not all rest on the same representational base (e.g. featural representations, structured representations, mental models, image-schematic representations). Although it is unclear whether blending theory needs to address perception and motor-control per se, it must acknowledge that different kinds of representation may suit various aspects of cognitive behaviour. In general, further elaboration of the representational status of blending theory in terms of its ability to describe diverse cognitive experiences would be most welcome. (“Making” 353)

I believe this study offers some positive in roads, at least in regards to Gibbs’ query about representation.

25 This model arguably extends from, or even replaces, the unidirectional “A is B” model of metaphor theory. Fauconnier and Turner posit the “single-scope network” as “the prototype of highly conventional source-target metaphors” (Way 127). However, other forms of blends, simplex networks (which function strongly in metonymic mappings), mirror networks, and double-scope networks, allow for other mapping possibilities which emerge throughout discourse (see Way 120-135 for an overview of these different expressions of the blending model). Joseph Grady has argued that the similarities between the metaphor and blending models makes them highly complementary (“Metaphor”).
and Turner, “Principles” and *Way*), semantics (Coulson; Dancygier “What;” Sweetser *From*), iconicity (Hiraga; Taub), metaphority (Oakley “Conceptual;” Sweetser “Suburbs” and “Whose”), gesture (Parrill and Sweetser), and sign languages (Taub). As may be apparent from this list, and what is essential for this project, Turner and Fauconnier “emphasize that blending is not restricted to language. Blending is common, for example, in visual representation, from Renaissance and early modern paintings of the Annunciation to contemporary newspaper cartoons” (407).

**Figure 2.3** A basic model of a blend (conceptual integration) from Fauconnier and Turner (“Principles” 272).

Returning to the poem, “Attempted Diagnoses,” it is possible to map the emergent structure as comprised of the various cues from the text. However, the questions of which cues construct which mental space, whether there are multiple blends that contribute to the overall meaning, and how best to relate the visual and verbal cues, are still somewhat vague. For
example, we could rightfully say that attempted and diagnoses become a blend that provides an emergent structure that also metonymically creates the frame for interpreting subsequent information. Arguably, this could be seen as the primary blend that constrains the mappings and emergent meanings of subsequent blends. However, how do we then move to interpret the list of non-words that follows the title (only some of which are vaguely mimetic of the word ‘sick’)? If the present model of blending is followed, then non-words would be mapped to non-words, which clearly yields nothing more in terms of emergent meanings. The list requires a different approach to the blend, since it must blend the pseudo-linguistic and the visual information together to construct meaning, rather than focusing primarily on the linguistic information. In other words, we have slipped into an iconic reading of the poem, a space where visual form and linguistic meaning interweave.

2.6.1 Iconicity

Masako Hiraga separates the functionality of visual form and linguistic meaning in the blend model she uses to analyze the significance of metaphor and iconicity in poetry (104); as such, linguistic meaning is constructed and then interacts with the form. She positions visual form as mapping onto purely linguistic meaning through imagic and diagrammatic iconicity, as a parallel blend beside the linguistically-contained one of “meaning.” Imagic iconicity occurs when “the relationship of form and meaning is immediate and mimetic” (58). Diagrammatic iconicity is when something “exhibits structural correspondences between form and meaning navigated by conventional metaphors” (61). Hiraga’s framework, which illustrates imagic iconicity mapping to the original linguistic input spaces and diagrammatic iconicity occurring during the blend and backwards projection to the form, illustrates an important distinction
between the independency and dependency of the two types of iconicity. While imagic iconicity can occur without input from a blended space through structural or mimetic mappings to the inputs, diagrammatic iconicity relies on metaphorical constructions within the emergent structure to exist. This distinction is important in my analysis of concrete poems since both types of iconicity are manifest in them, making for iconic complexity at the heart of this “simple” style (Drucker touches on this as central to the genre too [39]). The connection between metaphor and iconicity reflects Hiraga’s reliance upon Charles Sanders Peirce’s triadic approach to semiotics through the fluidity of diagrammatic, iconic, and symbolic signs, which focuses us onto the multiple mappings that are at work in concrete poetry.26 For the sake of brevity, I won’t focus on Peirce’s complex of signs, but will focus primarily on the iconic nature of this poetry, with the recognition that diagrammatic and symbolic information flits in and out of these interpretations, as due their fluid nature. The transience of iconicity within per/conception is expected by Peirce, who notes that “a great distinguishing property of the icon is that by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction” (105-106); this is what Peirce calls the icon’s “capacity of revealing unexpected truth” (106). These observations illustrate the salience of iconicity in meaning construction, as a doorway from simplicity into complexity.

26 See also John J. White’s discussion of the importance of clarifying uses of Peirce’s system, which emphasizes that signs “usually occur in hybrid rather than pure form. Or, to be more accurate, our chosen reading of them (given that semiosis involves attributing certain sign-functions rather than positing innate semiotic properties or attributing objective sign-status), is on the whole likely to involve a complex, sophisticated response to various elements of iconic, indexical, and symbolic potential” (84). White offers this clarification of Peirce in response to his observation that fellow scholars of iconicity hold different sign-states as clearly demarcated and definitive expressions rather than as fluid and malleable. Webb Keane also offers a similar critique, and extends this to discuss structuralist models of language and meaning which fail to engage with the potential and openness of icons especially in their implications for materialist cultural studies).
2.6.2 Form Mimic Meaning or Meaning Mimic Form?

Masako Hiraga’s framework engages well with the Peircean notion of the complex interconnectedness of signs via the hybridity of icon, index, and symbol, and elucidates how these aspects can interdigitate though different types of iconicity. However, her separation of meaning and form to explain iconic mappings within the blending framework poses a methodological inconsistency with the cognitive linguistic assumptions about embodiment and perception/conception discussed above. Moreover, this division is particularly problematic for dealing with concrete poetry, since in this genre form and meaning are often difficult (dare I say near impossible) to fully excise from each other. While Hiraga does discuss visual poetry at one point, she maintains that metaphorical and iconic mappings are a result of “mapping from the form onto the target” (Metaphor 108, emphasis mine). As Jack David notes about bpNichol’s concrete poetry:

[w]e have grown accustomed to seeing words as symbols only; now let the words be visual symbols and objects. This is Nichol’s interpretation of allegory – to speak otherwise than one seems to speak. Here, the letters look otherwise than they seem to look. (“Introduction” 17, emphasis in original)

As David states earlier in the same work, central to concrete poetry is “the concept of ‘language as material.’ Language as innate building blocks” (“Introduction” 11). Thus, meaning and form are interwoven in the concrete poem through the allegorical treatment of the materiality of language.

That form and meaning are integrally or even inextricably linked in visible language (writing) is not an observation limited to scholars of concrete poetry but is also shared by the renowned typographer Robert Bringhurst (and others typographers like Ellen Lupton and Gunnar
Swanson as well). While Bringhurst isn’t overly clear on exactly how he sees type and meaning interacting, he alludes to different influences through metaphorical descriptions of typographic actions. Bringhurst defines typography as “a craft by which the meanings of a text (or its absence of meaning) can be clarified and honored, or knowingly disguised” (Bringhurst 17), thus assigning a co-constructing aspect to the form of the letters. “The typographer’s one essential task is to interpret and communicate the text. Its tone, its tempo, its logical structure, its physical size, all determine the possibilities of its typographic form. The typographer is to the text as the theatrical director to the script, or the musician to the score” (20); thereby, Bringhurst designates form an interpretive role, and he later refers to it as an illustration of the text. Thus, typography constructs, interprets, and illustrates meanings. Similarly, Johanna Drucker notes that it is clear that significance inheres in the written form of language as much on account of the properties of physical materials as through a text’s linguistic content…[w]riting’s visual forms possess an irresolvably dual identity in their material existence as images and their function as elements of language. (57)

Both Bringhurst’s and Drucker’s observations correlate well to Marshall McLuhan famous dictum, “the medium is the message” (7). In his analysis of the medium, McLuhan in fact includes a discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville, “the first to master the grammar of print and typography. He [Tocqueville] was thus able to read off the message [from the typography]…as if he were reading aloud from a text that had been handed to him” (13). All of this, however,

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27 bpNichol even uses a typographic chart of the font Radiant as the body of his found poem “The Ascension of William Blake” (Truth 39). To my knowledge, this is the only time that Nichol uses typographic works so overtly, but clearly he was attuned to the visual capacity of typography on many levels.
forces the conclusion that the distinction between form and meaning is in fact not as clear as is often assumed.28

To limit meaning to linguistic prompts fails to acknowledge the communicative nature of form and image.29 As Ron Burnett, among many others, shows in his book How Images Think, images convey or limit thought in distinct ways and are becoming ever more pervasive and persuasive. To ignore this is to ignore the importance of studies of media ecology, aesthetics, materiality, and so on, which seek to acknowledge the complex interplay between images and language. Recognizing this interplay, W.J.T. Mitchell proposes the need or push for a pictorial turn away from the linguistic turn discussed by Richard Rorty.30 He argues:

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather a postlinguistics, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex, interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. (16)

28 Research into gestures further corroborates this assertion, especially through the realization that gestures often act metaphorically and are largely image-schematically rooted (see Cienki and Müller Metaphor and “Metaphor,” Coulson and Oakley, Duncan et al, Langacker, McNeill, and Müller for more).

29 Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier recognize this in their expansive discussion of blending and creativity in various meaningful acts in society, ranging from newspaper stories to high literature to non-Euclidean geometry to notably, advertising and visual metaphors. See Webb Keane’s application of this assertion, using Peircean semiotics, to develop an analysis of textiles and culture, whereby forms carry meaning across cultures more clearly than words.

30 Mitchell summarizes Rorty’s description of the linguistic turn as “a development that has complex resonances in other disciplines in the human sciences. Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of ‘textuality’ have become the lingua franca for critical reflections on the arts, the media, and cultural forms. Society is a text. Nature and its scientific representations are ‘discourse.’ Even the unconscious is structured like a language” (11). This description, according to Mitchell, is based on Rorty’s book, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, and his edited book, The Linguistic Turn in Philosophical Method.
Mitchell argues for a turn to a broader model of knowing and conceptualization that does not rely solely on linguistic definitions of meaning. Underneath this argument is the assumption that pictures—forms—communicate, thereby disrupting the lingua-centric definition of meaning and, by extension, disrupting the traditional model (dating back to Plato) of iconicity as mimesis. It is here that a cognitive poetic perspective can offer a way of reconciling image and text in the critical discourse, through an engagement with iconicity through the key assumptions of embodiment.

While the distinction between form and meaning is fraught with problematic inconsistencies, intuitively revealed by typographers and scholars of concrete poetry and the visual arts, and these inconsistencies have permeated discussions of iconicity (White), prominent iconologists Max Nänner and Olga Fischer, in their introduction to their edited collection of essays entitled *Form Miming Meaning*, assert the “all-important proviso…that the act of interpretation must always proceed from meaning to form and not the other way around” (xxv). Likewise, Max Nänner, in another paper, enshrines William Carlos Williams’s phrase “[f]orm is never more than an extension of content” as his epigraph (Nanny, “Alphabetic” 174). Nänner emphatically maintains that “all iconicity is semantically motivated. It is the meaning of the text or the semantic context that alone determines whether a linguistic sign or literary element has iconic force” (Nänner, “Alphabet” 174). Interestingly, these distinctions are sustained while simultaneously referring to cognitive linguist Eve Sweetser’s statement that “our linguistic system is inextricably interwoven with the rest of our physical and cognitive selves” (Sweetser 6, quoted by Nänner and Fischer xx), indicating an awareness of the cognitive model of embodiment and natural language. The focus on meaning as separate from form, and prescriptive

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31 This same quote is attributed to Creeley by Olson (17). I am uncertain as to who is in fact the originator.
of form, indicates a lack of sincere engagement with the implications and ramifications of the cognitive research, which emphasize quite a different approach to iconicity.

In light of this tradition in research into iconicity, it is easy to see how Masako Hiraga maintains the form-meaning dualism in her analysis, but it indicates a need for adjustment of her framework. While her framework offers a clear picture of aspects of iconicity, it ignores the understanding that image-schematic concepts construct meanings independent of linguistic input via embodied perceptions. In this way Hiraga maintains a lingua-centric view of meaning (like other theorists have when dealing with concrete poetry, as I discuss in Chapter 1), without nurturing the new cognitive linguistic information that dispels this myth. If we accept that image schemas and other embodied per/conceptualizations are rooted in engagements with the environment, and that these different forms, such as CONTAINER, PATH, and so forth, carry and construct meaning, then I posit that it must be asserted that form is meaning and must be regarded in its own right as equivalent to linguistic inputs. What I am proposing, then, counters some of what is asserted about the nature of iconicity, mainly by maintaining that meaning and form are not so easily extricated from each other but simply communicate differently.  

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32 This assertion is further corroborated in work by Leonard Talmy and Teenie Matlock (“Fictive”) regarding force dynamics and fictive motion in language, which indicates a vast array of embodied information that is motivated by forms and other perceptual cues, especially orientational, formal aspects like facing, pointing, and radiating. This work led Talmy to dismiss the distinction between conception and perception in preference of ception.

33 It should be noted that I am not disregarding all of the literature on iconicity with this assertion. Much of this work is still largely relevant to discussions of how form invokes, motivates, or constrains specific meanings in texts, but some of it needs to be qualified and adjusted in light of the cognitive understanding of embodied meaning and language. Interestingly, some of it, such as Fonagy’s work, engages already with embodied concepts but it’s not clear to what extent he realizes it (especially since some of his work also borders on formalist and generative models of language).
2.6.3 Redefining Iconicity in the Blend

Since the cognitive view of meaning is that it emerges out of the simulation of the embodied mind, then an understanding of iconicity must maintain this basic tenet. I have argued that separating form from meaning disrupts the embodied, holistic model by ignoring the meaningfulness of other perceptual cues and the online, simulative process that reading and viewing employs. Iconicity, therefore, must be redefined with the understanding that visual and verbal forms both communicate and blend during the online process of reading a poem and are, thereby, influential in the construction of mental spaces. Iconicity is a mapping between two languages, formal and linguistic. As such it does not have to be unidirectional, since iconicity and the blending model both allow for constructive fluidity.\(^\text{34}\)

Nänner and Fischer offer a helpful diagram of different types of iconicity. In this diagram, a cognitive linguist would quickly recognize the image-schematic information in many of the categories. For imagic iconicity they offer the various modes of linguistic exchange: “oral/aural,” “tactile,” and “visual” (xxii)—visual aspects most notably correspond to image-schematic cues, but Mark Johnson has shown clear image-schematic aspects to oral/aural and

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\(^{34}\) This redefinition, in which iconic meaning is constructed and motivated through embodied responses operates well away from the “iconic fallacy” which asserts that “a sign has the same properties as its object and is simultaneously similar to, analogous to, and motivated by its object” (Bayard 24). This assertion is easily dismissed, but to dismiss it does not address the various ways in which iconic mappings occur and prompt meaning. Bayard uses the concrete poem of Gomringer “silencio”—which consists of a block of the words “silencio” printed three wide and three deep, with the middle one missing—to asserts that “[i]f one is accustomed to associate the idea of iconism with an [sic] visual relationship between similar spatial properties, the suggestion that Gomringer’s poem is similar to a perception of silence seems somewhat whimsical” (24). However whimsical it may seem, in fact, the image-schematic and conceptual metaphoric mappings do construct an iconic relationship, an experiential simulation, between spatial, perceptual, and conceptual meaning, working from the conduit metaphor of language, where words are objects, and from the notion of the phonetic space as being “filled” with sound, among other embodied understandings (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 10).
tactile experiences in music and art (Meaning). More importantly, in their description of key aspects of diagrammatic iconicity, Nännny and Fischer refer to “centrality vs. peripherality,” “distance/proximity,” “sequential ordering,” and “repetition” (xxii), all of which are, or are rooted in, image schemas. Furthermore, they mention “analogy” and “grammaticalisation” (xxii) which are also explained in the cognitive linguistic model using image-schematic and embodied cues. Since every entry in their diagram reflects an image-schematic basis, it can be concluded that image schemas are important in defining iconicity, and I would posit, for producing iconic mappings in the first place. Because many linguistic expressions and visual cues both have image-schematic conceptual aspects, I suggest that it is this common, embodied variable that facilitates mappings between these two languages. It is reasonable to assume that in this sense image schemas, due to their embodied pervasiveness in the simulating processes of online meaning construction, allow for us to seamlessly correlate these two modes of communication into one whole, the concrete poem. This assertion is reinforced by the research into the multimodality of images-schemas, embodiment, and the process of simulation (Gibbs “Psychological;” Gibbs and Matlock; Matlock “Depicting”).

A revision of Hiraga’s blending model of iconicity, which better corresponds to studies in cognition and to the troublesome genre of concrete poetry, would, at its most basic, look more or less like the original blending model of Fauconnier and Turner, with one input being visual cues and the other linguistic cues (see Figure 2.4). Clearly, within these two inputs could be

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35 Fonagy also offers detailed discussion of oral/aural motivations of iconicity in language, especially in relation to emotions (something of key interest to metaphor theorists as well—for example, see Kövecses Metaphor and Emotion, Metaphors of Anger, and Lakoff’s Women).

36 See Parrill and Sweester for another possible diagrammatic representation of iconicity and blending (but for gesture). Their model also allows for the co-constructive aspect of form, but emphasizes a uni-directional shift.
subsequent blends (such as the title words of “Attempted Diagnoses” discussed above, and likewise for a more visually complex poem within the visual field). Furthermore, imagic iconicity can be seen in the cross-mappings still between visual and verbal inputs, but they are mutually constitutive, rather than governed solely by language. While “Attempted Diagnoses” creates a conceptual frame linguistically, which the visual information correlates to with its PATH schema and negative spaces, other concrete poems, such as “untitled” which I will discuss in Chapter 4, works the other way around, with the visual prompts promoting the majority of iconic mappings and meaning construction. So, while some poems may prefer visual or verbal elements (reminiscent of Kostelanetz’s dichotomy of “imaged words” or “worded images” [“Introduction” and Old]), neither can be said to inherently dictate imagic iconic mappings, unlike the original definition of iconicity which prioritizes linguistic meaning.37 This is even more important when it comes to diagrammatic iconicity, since it can now reflect back from the emergent structure of the blend (which is both visual and verbal) to both inputs, rather than just to form, as in Hiraga’s model. This revision allows for a more succinct reading of the poems, in which emergent structuring of the form influences the running of the blend back into the initial linguistic input as well, not just from the blend back to “form” (see especially my discussion of “untitled” in Chapter 4 for why this is important). Visual poetry shows that iconicity is more extensive, infusive, and generative than originally thought.

37 Lakoff’s work on Neural Linguistics indicates a similar conclusion, through the binding of neurons in circuits linking form and meaning in a multi-directional network in ways which correspond as well to the discussion around image schemas, conceptual metaphors, frames, and blending (“Overview”).
2.7 Conclusion

While iconicity is not the only element of importance in concrete poetry, it explains the essential integrative and generative process that binds the visual and verbal inputs, and correlates to our understanding of embodiment and image schematic information. Iconicity, within the cognitive understanding of perception and conception, facilitates a more comprehensive and comprehensible critical engagement with this poetic genre. Moreover, with the blending model one can acknowledge the metaphorical extensions (largely a product of iconic hybridity or fluidity) within the poems as well. One particular metaphorical construct of note that resounds
through the materiality of concrete poetry is the CONDUIT metaphor. Expressions of this metaphor are commonly used by language users to describe language and asserts that IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS, and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING (Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors* 10). Lakoff and Johnson note that one researcher estimates that this metaphor makes up 70 percent of descriptions of language (*Metaphors* 10). Metaphors like this, as I will show later, become reified in iconic ways in visual poetry and are essential in manifesting their meanings through visual and verbal cues. Furthermore, the connections between iconicity and metaphor can integrate into a broader blending network (via frames, blends within the inputs, metaphorical entailments, and so on). Allowing each ‘language’ a formative role in construction and interpretation allows for a more holistic approach that doesn’t preference the image or the text and is still consistent with a simulative model of mind (which I will show in more detail in my analyses in Chapter 4). It would seem that this model can side-step the theoretical shortfalls of previous methodologies, which led Johanna Drucker to despair that there is no theoretical framework available that could deal properly with this type of poetry (134). As will be shown, using this cognitive poetic model as the basis for an interpretive methodology that incorporates the embodied mind into readings of texts allows for a more holistic engagement with the vast variety of visual poetry available, and is none-the-less compatible with aspects of many of the previous models but qualify or constrain their assertions in particular ways.
Chapter 3: Journeying through Criticism and Poetics & the Return to Embodiment

“pure wrought Nichol is multivalent when lettraset as well as resistant to common corrosions”
Earle Birney’s “Addition to the Great Canadian Dictionary”

3.1 Critical Engagements: An Overview with Commentary

bpNichol’s visual poetry is undeniably a substantial and influential literary contribution, both nationally and internationally. Christian Bök suggests that the lack of focused engagement with Nichol’s more adventurous works indicates perhaps an attempt to “sentimentalize his subversiveness…at the expense of his most experimental achievements” (Bök, “Nickel” 62), in large part due to the disproportionate focus on his long poem *The Martyrology*. As Wershler-Henry puts it, “reading *The Martyrology* as the triumphant centerpiece of Nichol’s oeuvre is to do both it and his other texts a major disservice” (“Argument” 37). Few scholars overtly engage the visuality of much of Nichol’s work and his concrete poetry within or outside *The Martyrology*. The critical disregard for Nichol’s experiments with concrete poetry (both visual and aural) comes with a price, since, as Nelson Ball observes, “[a]n understanding of this earlier [concrete] work of Nichol’s is essential to a full appreciation of much of his later writing” (Introduction 9). Likewise, Stephen Scobie states that bpNichol’s visual poetry is essential in “any consideration of Nichol’s development” (bpNichol 51), since many of the concerns of *The Martyrology* and other works are reified and experimented on within Nichol’s visual poems.\(^1\)

\(^1\) A.) Brian Henderson provides a useful connection through the notion of processual poetics that ties the visual permutations of some of bpNichol’s visual poems to much of the word play in *The Martyrology* (23), which also ties in part to my later discussion of the broader perspective of paragrammatic aspects of Nichol’s writing. However, Nichol’s processual visual poems are arguably a very small part of his visual work.
Nichol himself wrote “an essay in the form of a letter” to Mary Ellen Solt “to illuminate in some sense [his] course thru the language since it does seem to be motivated by a number of disparate senses of language & (for [him]) a continuing process of discovery” (**Meanwhile** 113). In this letter, Nichol notes how his experiments with sound, comic strip drawings and frames, the geography of the page and language, visual vocabulary, single letter signs, and so on, all contribute to his various writings, including *The Martyrology*, by sensitizing him to sound and the page. This indicates a need for serious critical engagement with Nichol’s use of visuality and materiality.

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I should point out that Steve McCaffery argues that Nichol’s view and work with processual and projective poetics is substantially different from that of Olson and others (“Silent”). Nonetheless, there are still clear links between Olson’s discussion of proprioception and Nichol’s emphasis on the body as mediating language and landscape through geomancy (**Billingham** 24-25). The cognitive poetic reaffirmation of the importance of proprioception has already been discussed, which connects clearly to processual poetics through its emphasis on paths and other structural and material cues that help compose the text—in this sense processual poetics is itself another iconically motivated art form.

B.) It should also be noted that not all scholars are drawn to the notion of cohesion within bpNichol’s work. Wershler-Henry states that “[a]rguments for the coherence of that chimerical subject [the ‘teachable text’] and for the revolutionary nature of *The Martyrology* hold only as long as Nichol’s more difficult and ultimately more rewarding texts remain safely out of sight” (45). I only agree with Wershler-Henry to an extent (and Bök, who offers a similar sentiment in “Nickel!”), largely due to the theoretically inspired assumptions about literature and postmodernity that prompt this conclusion and the connections even between books like *Zygal* (which they use as evidence against cohesion) which still show strong connections through schematic and occasional thematic parallels. Also, the usefulness of some of the criticism around the connections between this ‘central text’ and his other works, including comments I mention next by Nichol himself about the cross-pollination of his visual poetry and his major works, indicate that there is at least some degree of cohesion here. Nonetheless, Wershler-Henry’s emphasis on looking at the texts first, before attributing connective components to a larger design, is a fair (if obvious) caution. After all, “Nichol’s approach to theory and poetics tended to be eclectic and anti-systematic” (**Billingham** 18), so why not his poetry too. In this regard Markotic’s comments regarding **Gifts: The Martyrology Book(s)** 7& are helpful: “*The Martyrology* is not a container for various ‘separate’ projects, but a procession of concurrent tangential ones. Serial poems, although often numbered, do not conventionally suggest an enforced linearity based on one after another after another….The seriality does not accommodate the content but travels multidirectionally. These poetic clusters are generative and organic for Nichol, providing a method of serial composition” (185). In this sense, the connection between the poetics and poems is not a simple one-to-one decoding process but a larger conceptual project that coheres in a rhizomic manner. This approach is congruent with the cognitive poetic model of blending, especially if one examines the schematic and material anchors and frames (for example the material and conceptual puns that Nichol was so fond of) that allow for the generative construction of a semblance of a whole, through action, word, or letter.
Gil McElroy posits that the problematic scholastic space that Nichol’s poetry inhabits is a product of the history of scholarship around language, literature, and art: “Visual poetry, it seems, would be claimed by neither camp [of the literary or visual arts], regarded as little more than the bastard child of a brief and embarrassingly unfortunate transdisciplinary fling” (10). This comment reaffirms W.J.T. Mitchell’s similar observations of the schism between visual and verbal arts, reified in the tension between images and texts that I discussed influenced many early models of concrete poetry. However, as Billingham notes, “Nichol was inclined to accuse writers and critics who denounce concrete work out-of-hand of mental laziness and a lack of attention to ‘craft’” (66): “[t]his whole business of saying ‘I spurn that’ is really just an admission that one doesn’t know how to deal with it” (Nichol qtd in Billingham 66).

Nonetheless, the scholarship which has focused on bpNichol’s poetry has made significant contributions in outlining various approaches to and connections throughout his oeuvre, offering clear inroads to a more coherent engagement with his visual work as well.

There are three major approaches that the scholarship takes when examining Nichol’s work, including his visual poetry. The individual focuses relate partially to the temporality of the scholars themselves in relation to the history of bpNichol and visual poetry nationally and internationally and partially to the theoretical models that were in vogue when they were writing, as would be expected. These different approaches influence interpretations of the poems, largely by framing them in specific ways through assumptions about language and history.

### 3.1.1 Cult Histories

Davey (“bpNichol + 10” and “Exegesis”), Bök (“Nickel”), Wershler-Henry (“Argument”), Billingham, and Emerson all note the elegiac, “honorific criticism” (Davey, “Exegesis” 169) that many of bpNichol’s contemporaries mix with their scholarship, altering the
ways in which the texts are viewed. In a sense, the death of the author, quite literally in 1988, resurrected him in the scholarly works through the integration of personal longing and biographical anecdotes into the readings of the texts to which the author is supposedly dead, if we accept Barthes. Davey perceives a “considerable tension between those whose preoccupation is their memory of the person Barrie Nichol and those whose preoccupation is the body of texts know as bpNichol” (“bpNichol + 10” 10). This sentimental scholarship creates a focus on the autobiographical and fosters an uncritical acceptance of “sloppy” work because of its affective weight (Davey “bpNichol + 10” 10). Christian Bök scathingly critiques this approach which has dominated the earlier scholarship as “vampiric flattery” (“Nichel” 63), “recycling his celebrity as a commodity” (63) in a “cult of personality” (64) involved in “literary necrosis” (72). Bök goes on to show that this scholarship has misrepresented Nichol’s work in *The Martyrology* as the most innovative of his oeuvre, when in fact it is the most institutionally safe and easiest to sympathize with and reinforces personal connections to Nichol’s work (64-66). In this way, the critics have bought into a nostalgic and self-affirming rather than a critical view of the texts themselves. It would appear that bpNichol’s contemporaries have institutionalized his work through misrepresentative means (see Bök “Nickel,” Burnham, and Davey “bpNichol + 10” for more). Frank Davey emphatically notes that “we are forgetting that while *The Martyrology* is his most visible work it is not necessarily a ‘central’ work” (“bpNichol + 10” 7). This explains in part the skewed scholarship of Nichol’s works, as well as the sea-change seen in the move away from personal histories and honorific sentiments to textual criticism in recent work. As I said (along with Davey, Bök, and Emerson), the autobiographical emphasis is largely, and expectedly, a generational bias, something which younger scholars are shifting away from since they have no personal history with bpNichol to influence their writing and reading. From a cognitive perspective this is an important trend to note, since it has dominated the criticism and
accounts for the less-than-critical assertions within it (such as around “Allegory #7” in Chapter 4). Also, this criticism acts as a frame for further work, such that to continue to talk about Nichol’s poetry often requires a break from certain biased perspectives.

3.1.2 Concrete International

Another history important in the reading of Nichol’s work, shared with broader discussions of concrete poetry, ties to the intellectual and material history of concrete poetry itself. Examining the criticism around concrete poetry reveals an inferiority complex about the form evident particularly in overt and peculiar self-justifications like, “Concrete poetry is serious poetry....It is more than creating beautiful patterns” (Colombo 2), and more subtly in the long-winded historical connections to the European avant garde movements of Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, et cetera, which act to justify it as part of a longer tradition (beaulieu 79). While this work describes the important emergence of the materialist sensibility of concrete poetry, in particular for Nichol the work of Apollonaire and Mallarmé, these long-winded recounts of well trodden scholarship appear now to be a sub-generic convention in the Concrete Poetry criticism, whereby one must pay the obligatory homage to the great traditions preceding it to justify talking about it all, consequently leaving little room for more detailed discussion of the genre. It has also led to a degree of protectionism of the generic form, without letting the works speak for themselves (see my critique of Perloff and advertising in Chapter 5). This historical focus on tracing creative and ideological paths is clearly helpful for locating bpNichol’s, and other

\[\text{2} \text{ Jo\-anna Drucker’s work on this history is by far the best and most carefully nuanced.}\]
Canadian authors, visual work within this lineage (see Scobie bpNichol), and, furthermore, offers the potential for a critical examination of the movements’ regional diversity. While it is important, I will largely ignore this broader history, partially because it is well documented, but mostly for scope. Furthermore, I seek to illustrate a framework for looking carefully at textual expressions of this movement, thereby positing a consistent space to enact this broader conceptual and perceptual comparative criticism.

3.1.3 Theories of Language and Meaning and Reading Visuality

Besides the two major historically-related trends in the scholarship, there is also, and I would argue more importantly, a strong focus on theory and interpretation, largely rooted in the deconstructive-poststructuralist-postmodern and psychoanalytic vein(s) that came to prominence in the 1970s academy with the rise of theory. This theoretical focus is often tied to the two previous historical approaches as well, but I’ve separated it because it influences much of the scholarship and substantially contradicts much of the cognitive model I have outlined in the previous chapter (unlike the historical facets). Ironically, the deconstructionist and poststructuralist approach to this poetic form, in its attempts to break from structuralist and objectivist views of language, becomes banal and simplistic in its conclusions about bpNichol’s concrete poems, since all of the poems reveal the fraught system of signification. In fact, for me the most illuminating and generative aspects of the discussion often occur where theory is left

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3 However, these connections should be carefully made. As Drucker notes, bpNichol is especially difficult to place within the Concrete tradition because of his broad, creative focus that often steps outside of traditional concrete terms and conditions in an “hybrid eclecticism, with its synthetic capacity to absorb material” (130).

4 The notion of a regional emergence of Concretism and visual poetry in Canada is hinted at in Balan (“Cantextualities” 14), Barbour (308), Scobie (bpNichol 32 and “I Dreamed” 213), and even Nichol (Meanwhile 44) but is not fleshed out by any of them.
out and the scholars rely on close reading and intuition. This critical bifurcation illustrates a
tension between the theory and the poetry, where the poetry, as experienced, prompts a different
view of language, even if the theory of the time cannot accommodate it. In this light, I will
briefly discuss the post-structuralist, Lacanian, and postmodern approaches to and conclusions
about visual poetry, showing how a theory of embodiment, rather than theory that fetishizes the
symbol, reflects and explores better the experience of the reader.

Brian Henderson offers one of the more comprehensive analyses of Nichol’s concrete
poetry. However, his work steps quickly away from the meanings being constructed in the
poems into theoretical and philosophical connections that represent the poetics behind the
poetry. While this certainly reveals clear connections to Kabbalistic or runic ideas surrounding
the alphabet (reinforced by the work of Billingham and Peters *bpNichol’s Poetics*) , Henderson
does not detail this engagement with language, but only hints at this poetry fracturing the sign-
(signified, referential system (i.e. a direct continuation of Saussurean semiotics and the
poststructuralist critiques of it). Interestingly, he goes on from there to say that “[t]he central
strategy of radical [sound and concrete] poetry in the face of this division [between sign and
referent] is to create an identity between being and meaning by blocking, twisting, or canceling
the action of reference, allowing the sign to overflow with its own being…. [which] helps to
create an iconicity” (1). While iconicity is certainly an important part of this poetry,
Henderson’s conceptualization of it is flawed in its focus on nothing (the blocked or canceled
reference). Iconic meaning is not constructed out of nothingness—a spontaneous generation
model of meaning which reflects meaning as solely symbolic and disjointed from experience (a
very Lacanian view of this work, which Billingham effectively dismisses as ill suited to Nichol’s
poetry and poetics [49-53])—but out of schematic and experiential cross-mappings between
meaning and form. In most cases, the referential content of the words is not cancelled but
opened up to broader connections through the imagistic cues. While this may seem nit-picky, it is important for clarifying the complex cognitive work at play in concrete poetry. Henderson falls into the common trap of the unmotivated, arbitrary sign of objectivist semiotics, which ignores the motivated layering of meanings tied to form through iconicity. This in turn forces him to read concrete poetry as simply re-presenting the fraught nature of language.

Likewise, Jaeger’s discussion of Nichol’s play with alphabets, where the author overlays or connects a single letter with itself to form patterns (for example, see Figure 3.1), enters into this same absurdist rendering of meaning: “Nichol’s alphabets dispense with a signified in order to foreground the signifier as full presence, yet the letters are not empty in the sense that they do not signify at all; they signify vacancy, the concept of absence” (71), which he quickly ties to Lacan’s view of fantasy and lack which Lacan constructs from a purely symbolic view of human perception. Here, letters become hollow because they no longer tie to symbolic constructions and thereby lack any meaning. However, this reading sidesteps the overt materiality of these works, thus ignoring meanings prompted by the forms themselves.

There is definitely an intentional presence highlighted in these poems, seen “in the play of the light through the letters” and “the form of the letter when it overlapped with itself” (Nichol in Barbour 310); the lack and fantasy is largely a theoretical overlay. Jaeger slants Nichol’s play with the letters as

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5 Scobie falls into a similar dilemma, when he notes that “the sign is empty; we are all orphaned in language. As Nichol longs to reach the (m)other through the diversity of language, that very diversity demonstrates the impossibility of concluding the quest” (17). The confusion in this passage comes from the tension between the abundance of language rather than its emptiness, which motivates the ongoing process of experimentation, replete with unending possibilities motivated by the variety of communicative means. Here, the deconstructionist phrasing articulates a contradictory ideation from the (still connected and sensible) diversity and multiplicity that we find discussed just three pages later. As I will show, as Nichol explores communication he steps well beyond a strictly symbolic view of language.

6 Mark Johnson (Meaning 224-234) and Scott McCloud (118-126) discuss in detail how even simple lines and forms prompt affect meanings.
aesthetically meaningful objects towards assumptions that words are the carriers of all meaning, and, therefore, the letters on their own must be empty. Nichol’s emphasis on or imposition of solitary letters throughout his works as essential in the construction of the poetry indicates that their material presence is far more important than their apparent emptiness. I am not convinced that Nichol’s use of letters simply “present the signified as insignificant” (Jaeger 71). Rather, his focus on the materiality of letters (as objects rather than conceptions) moves to a view of signification that is not limited to symbolic conception but focuses on the perceptual and experiential aspects of language (in typographical, spatial, and affective ways tied to their form). The alphabets that Jaeger discusses are complex designs often appealing to a visual balance, linking, and radiance not possible with the original forms of the letters. Likewise, they focus on the multiplicity or excess of lettristic presentation, metonymically invoking the many uses for each letter. As such, they spiral and link through space, perhaps as they move through the dictionary, as primary or secondary or tertiary in word formation (as in “a” is for art, cat, spat, sora, et cetera—with each “a” being in a different visual location). My view also accommodates Nichol’s attraction to a runic model of language (throughout Billingham), which involves letters mystically and iconically invoking a larger experience of being rather than emptiness. Thus, the runic, iconic, material and visual readings of this poem chafe against the symbolist emphasis of a Lacanian framework, but are more congruent with both Nichol’s and a cognitive poetic engagement with language and experience. These possibilities are unacceptable in Jaeger’s reading, not because of limitations motivated by the poems but through theoretical impositions that stilt the reading of the text.
One final push from the theoretical side of the coin has been by Bök (“Nickel”) and Wershler-Henry (“Argument”) for a postmodern reading of Nichol’s work, based on anti-institutional perspectives and the shift away from clear signification found there. While deconstructive and post-structuralist views of signification mark this criticism prevalently, it does attempt to position itself in line with Nichol’s “resurrectionist” and “liberationist” poetics (Bök 11), although this view seems inconsistent with the anti-humanist perspective they espouse.⁷ Arguably, while their postmodern focus helps sustain their views, Bök’s and Wershler-Henry’s strong critiques of previous scholarship (along with the critiques of Davey too [“bpNichol” and “Exegesis”]), in the end it is their push towards a qualitative view of the texts rather than mythopoeic and honorific criticism that contributes most to more recent research, primarily as a clear break from scholastic tradition.

⁷ I would argue the resurrectionist and liberationist ideals in fact derive from Nichol’s humanistic perspective I discuss in the later section on his poetics, since they attempt to move beyond the trap of conventional language to open up poetic experience to the other.
3.1.4 Recent Transformations

Recent critical engagements\(^8\) with Nichol’s oeuvre have moved away from purely Objectivist theoretical or historical readings. This work appears to be shifting towards representing the experience of the text as readers first (picking up on Bök’s, Davey’s, and Wershler-Henry’s critiques) and only then attempting to track these understandings into theoretical or social frameworks, where necessary, unlike the bio-historical and theoretical emphases of previous scholarship. The research reveals experiences and thoughts largely congruent with a cognitive poetic reading of language, perception, and meaning, but which could be further refined using the cognitive information.

The close-reading model of assessing Nichol’s work has its own short history too.\(^9\) Harvey’s discussion of Nichol’s use of language and experience, tracks closely to the various material methodologies and their technological, social, and linguistic influences and are influence by a belief in “an aesthetic of pure form” (19). In Harvey’s reading, through McLuhan, of Nichol’s engagement with the “total semantic environment of the global village” (20) the formalist/objectivist view of language as the sole arbiter of meaning is initially thrown out. Harvey acknowledges that “[r]ejecting the conventional association of language and meaning, Nichol prefers to view language itself as intrinsically meaningful” (19), by which he

\(^8\) In these comments I am considering primarily the critical papers in Miki and Wah’s collection of essays from 1996 and Open Letter 10.4 (1998), 13.5 (2008), and 13.8 (2009).

\(^9\) There are obvious connections between New Historicism, Reader Response Theory, Cultural studies and cognitive poetics. There is not sufficient room to trace those connections. However, they clearly underlie the particular approaches throughout these histories that I am offering as well. I have focused on the dominance of the formalist lineage, at the expense of the other theoretical frameworks, largely because of the central impact it has had on subsequent theories and scholarship of visual poetry and its clash with the cognitive poetic model I am affirming.
means letterforms and other aspects of written language. However, Harvey is highly inconsistent in his discussion of Nichol’s assertion that “communication does not just mean language” (cited 20) when he attempts to reposition it as Nichol’s “interest in form rather than meaning” (20)—disregarding the fact that “Nichol would not argue that form can be separated from content” (Billingham 53) by replacing the primacy of language right after he dethrones it. This is a common problem throughout his analysis. The formalist/objectivist view of language clearly cannot be done away with, even when the texts and the author prompt for it and as such Harvey flips-flops between the views of language as pure meaning and the multiplicity of experiential meaning within and beyond “language.” However, he does highlight important formal features of Nichol’s visual works, most notably diagrams, etchings, line drawings, mosaics, montage, and the processes of seriality and flow (21-22), which contribute to a discussion of how the texts construct meaning through various aesthetic cues. Furthermore, he acknowledges that “Nichol moves us beyond language to a new, unified awareness of the poem itself as an organic form” (23), indicating perhaps an embodied perception of the poem as experientially reflexive and constructive. Strangely, at this point Harvey feels obligated to step back from this bold assertion to return to the safe haven of linguistic meaning, asserting that “[h]is widely acclaimed collection of poems hp (1967), explores a distortion of the physical world as the poet creates a new aesthetic world” through language, thereby throwing out the power of the visual (and thereby multimodal) representation that these texts employ. Likewise, later, the organic nature of the poems is further dismissed through the assertion that “the physical world has become merely a source for the poet’s images” (25, emphasis mine), relegating any visual reference as purely pedantic mimicry, emptying these poems of the carefully crafted cross-mappings between visual and verbal meaning that they employ through the assumption that “language is the poet’s mystical instructor, it has little reference in the physical world” (27).
Even more strange, Harvey later returns again to embodied understandings through a stress “on multi-layered perception through a new, more compact poetic language” (28), through which “[t]he natural and linguistic barriers of conventional art yield to a more plastic, organic art form directly related to intuitive perception” (29). Clearly there is a confusing crisis of definition around meaning revealed throughout this work. However, more positively, I think this tension indicates that even at the height of ‘theory’ the embodied, organic view of language and experience (as perceptually connected) was evoked by Nichol’s poetry, if not overtly recognized.

Recent scholarship has continued this trend, but continues to turn away from formalist/objectivist-based views of language towards a broader experience of the texts: what has emerged is an emphasis on the paragram, seriality and “pataphysics (Billingham; Bök “Nickel;” Hlibchuk; Markotic; McCaffery “Paragram” and “Silent;” Peters “‘Pataphysical;” Zultanksi), process as research (Huth; Peters “Theory”), the book-machine (Simonson), and the reader as co-creators (Dutton; Emerson; Jaeger; McCaffery “Silent”). What I want to emphasize at this point is that all of these approaches attempt to articulate how meaning (in a broader sense than just language, usually) is constructed in various ways throughout the texts. The conclusions, though somewhat disparate, confirm a shift towards an embodied perspective, emphasizing a broader view of how meaning is constructed. Furthermore, the features and interests described are arguably central to Nichol’s poetry and poetics, which I will elaborate on shortly. The nuanced view of cognitive poetics offers a means of clarifying these discussions and linking them together with Nichol’s poetics.
3.2 bpNichol’s Poetics

3.2.1 Prologue

Before jumping into an admittedly very brief description and discussion of his poetics, it seems prudent to note that bpNichol was not overly consistent in his theoretical associations or assumptions, which is especially evident when reading the collection of theoretical statements, *Meanwhile* (Perloff, Review 354, 355). As Billingham notes, “Nichol’s approach to theory and poetics tended to be eclectic and anti-systematic” (18), or, as Simonson frequently refers to it, “ex-centric.”

Nichol’s gregariousness has led his creative and theoretical works to be characterized in a multitude of different ways: as pre-modernist, postmodernist, and neo-modernist (Bök; Woodcock), structuralist, deconstructionist, poststructuralist, and postmodern (Bayard; Billingham; Bök; Scobie *bpNichol*), and anarchistic, utopian, nationalistic, individualistic, Romantic, and mystic (Billingham; David “Visual”; Foster; Moisan; Scobie *bpNichol*; Wershler-Henry), among many other things. While these views seem uncompromisingly disparate, the scholars that derived them did so from assessments of various statements and poems by Nichol, as all good scholars do. This illustrates Nichol’s theoretical inconsistencies while simultaneously highlighting his undaunted exploration around the margins of theory and literature which necessitates and substantiates this obvious borderblur.

However, what is more revelatory in the critical literature is the recycling of select statements by almost all of these scholars, revealing, nonetheless, a schematic, or rudimentary view of poetics that seems to persevere through Nichol’s work, no matter the framework it is based on.

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10 Nichol’s theoretical promiscuousness may mean that any consistency in interpretations of Nichol’s theoretical statements can largely be traced to the influence and knowledge of Steve McCaffery in their work together as the Toronto Research Group (TRG), as can be seen in their collaborative book, *Rational Geomancy* (Perloff, Review 355; McCaffery Interview 77), or to the critical readers of his poetics selecting and consolidating it in some form or another, rather than himself. I will show that this is only partly the case and that at the core, there are consistent concerns seen throughout Nichol’s work.
aligned with. I would argue that these central views around which other, more inconsistent statements revolve, indicates a more intuitive rather than theoretically rigorous engagement with language and poetry. While there is certainly debate within the scholarly literature about Nichol’s view of language and community, my representation here attempts to faithfully acknowledge his major perspectives. bpNichol’s focus throughout his career on a few major features of communication is what holds together his poetic philosophy. In the end, Nichol’s poetics boils down to a desire to break out of the “language trap,” to build community, to engage with the materiality of the book and its content, to connect and alter the world and thought through language and experience, and to engage the reader in new ways through the texts. As I will highlight, these perspectives also reveal a strong sense of embodiment, especially in their connection to materiality and visuality.

3.2.2 On Beyond Zebra!

“…through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well.”
Said Conrad Cornelius o’Donal o’Dell.
“So now I know everything anyone knows
“From beginning to end. From the start to the close.
“Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes.’

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!

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11 It can be argued that my reliance on the scholarly circulation of Nichol’s statements to ascertain the core texts of Nichol’s poetics may in fact misrepresent his poetics. However, judging from the fact that much of the research has been written by friends, colleagues, and contemporaries of Nichol who had the opportunity to engage him face-to-face, their consistent return to particular texts indicates the authenticity of these texts in voicing or reflecting his views. While, as I’ve stated earlier, Nichol’s theoretical stance is highly fraught, my turn to affective resonance with peers may in fact be the safest method of determining key statements. There is also, clearly, the possibility that he simply changed his mind a lot. I leave that as it may.

12 While I am emphasizing the connections to materiality and visual poetry, these interests permeate his oeuvre, including the lyric and prose forms, so this synthesis of his poetics is relevant as well to the broader discussion.
A letter he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, “You can stop, if you want, at Z
“Because most people stop with the Z
“But not me!
“In the places I go there are things that I see
“That I never could spell if I stopped with Z.
“I’m telling you this ‘cause you’re one of my friends.
“My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!
...
You’ll be sort of surprised what there is to be found
Once you go beyond Z and start poking around!
So, on beyond Zebra!
Explore!
Like Columbus!
Discover new letters!
....
So, on beyond Z! It’s high time you were shown
That you really don’t know all there is to be known.

-Dr. Seuss, u.p.

There is hardly a better place to start discussing bpNichol’s poetic philosophy than with a quote from one of his favorite books, On Beyond Zebra! by Dr. Seuss. In this simple scene, we catch the motivation behind much of Nichol’s work, the sheer delight in adventuring through language and experience, constructing new ways of knowing, beyond and through the alphabet. Nichol articulated this as his desire to move out of “the language trap”13 the mainstream view of language not unlike Conrad Cornelius o’Donald o’Dell’s. As Nichol says, “we have trapped ourselves by stifling language and ...it is only thru liberation we have a chance of growing & taking our proper place in the world” (quoted in Billingham 44). Nichol asserts that

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13 Bayard and Billingham offer comprehensive descriptions of how Nichol’s view reflects his eclectic meshing of contemporary language theory, which is somewhat inconsistent with that theory when extended to its expected conclusions (or reflects simply incompatible theories as well).
WHAT HAS BEEN CONSTANT TILL NOW HAVE BEEN THE ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES WE HAVE PLACED ON THE POEM. WE HAVE PLACED THE POEM BEYOND OURSELVES BY PUTTING ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OURSELVES & THE POEM. WE MUST PUT THE POEM IN OUR LIVES. (ABC n.p., caps in original)

As Simonson notes, “[i]n Nichol’s opinion, ‘rules’ of reading, and the cultural biases that inform those conventions, cornered writers and readers alike” (59), as we have already seen in some of the criticism. The shift of focus, through especially his visual poetry, to that which is beyond and around from that which is contained and controlled in traditional views of language acts as a series of “eye-cleaning practices” (Nichol qtd David Introduction 12) and is essential to any discussion of Nichol’s poetics.

Also central to Nichol’s poetic practice was a strong sense of community, which for him was enacted both in lifestyle and literature (Miki, Afterword 491-491). This is seen in his establishment and engagement with small presses (discussed earlier), his mailing out of poems to anyone who wanted them, the occasional passing out of free copies of his magazines on street corners, the mentoring and teaching of other writers at York University, and importantly his work with Therafields, as a lay-therapist (McCaffery Interview). As Pauline Bunting describes, this emphasis on community engagement led to a life work (both poetic and otherwise) that fostered a “gift economy.”

One of bpNichol’s first poetic statements was in this same vein and was attached to the box-book *hp* in 1967. It reveals a strong connection between poetic praxis and community, and a humanistic drive that can easily be sentimentalized or dismissed14 but which is none-the-less

14 Bök dismisses Nichol’s humanism in much too cavalier a way, primarily because it doesn’t conform to his postmodern ideal of post-humanist tendencies that he sees in the visual poetry especially, but rather “reaffirm[s] a faith in meaning, despite questioning every basis of writing” (“Nickel” 65). In fact, I think the humanist inclinations are formative in the opening up of communication that we see in these works, and still coincide with Bök’s readings of openness and promiscuity in the poetry, but reflect Nichol’s humanist tendency towards multiple entrances and exits. Ironically, Bök falls into the (language) trap of accepting Nichol’s terminology as a
Nichol writes in “statement, November 1966”

now that we have reached the point where people have finally come to see that language means communication and that communication does not just mean language, we have come up against the problem, the actual fact, of diversification, of finding as many exits as possible from the self (language/communication exits) in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other.

 [...] there is a new humanism afoot that will one day touch the world to its core. traditional poetry is only one of the means by which to reach out and touch the other. the other is emerging as the necessary prerequisite for dialogues with the self that clarify the soul & heart and deepen the ability to love. i place myself there, with them, whoever they are, wherever they are, who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as possible. *Meanwhile* 18

Here, early on in his career, Nichol already asserts a sense of communication in line with the cognitive poetic definition of meaning, which occurs through a broader range of communicative forms than just language. This sensibility continues to grow throughout his career as he explores various material and conceptual practices for writing/drawing. Similarly, elsewhere Nichol more specifically notes that “concrete [is] an attempt to use communication tools in a new way and thus promote new understandings of the multi-levels of language” (quoted by Billingham 56), “[t]he only way to get into it is to play, to examine the structure, to evolve new meanings and new relationships” (Nichol, *Meanwhile* 139). It may seem like visual poetry is the ultimate expression of Nichol’s humanistic perspective, since it uses multiple modes of communication, thereby asserting multiple entrances and exits and new relationships. However, he cautions in his “Scattered Notes 1966-1971” that

theoretically rigorous assertion with a strong historical rootedness, rather than as a slippery definition that, while seemingly whimsical, asserts an attempt to participate in the broader human experience through multimodality.
concrete can become as big a trap as anything unless one stays open and flexible and is willing to keep seeking new exits and entrances with regard to the poem [...] i have seen signs of some sort of purist movement [of concrete poetry] which i think would be a great error ... the purist movement seems to me an attempt to halt the process of renewal that the movement began. (Meanwhile 30)

Nichol’s playful approach to all of his writing, and especially his borderblurring pieces, assert this anti-purist philosophy. Simonson, Barbour (“Heavenly”), and others have documented Nichol’s creation of entrances and exits throughout his poetry and fiction through formal and thematic devices, such as the visual splitting of words, multimodal constructions, or openness within the subjective perspective. These tactics are not simply banal deconstructive gestures but a poetic expression of Nichol’s “new humanism” and the desire to move beyond, through, and around language to meaning and experience.

Nichol’s interest in moving language into a more complex relation to other communicative systems led to his research into form, especially into the frame conventions of comics and the material impact of pages as they contribute to and/or limit meanings. While his actual comics are arguably a small part of Nichol’s oeuvre, the form was important in sensitizing him to page geography and framed perspectives (especially important in his “Allegories” series of visual poems) and the notion of nonlinear prose and broken narratives (jokingly depicted in “Fictive Funnies: Syntax Dodges” [with McCaffery, 111] where a character falls through “a hole in the narrative sequence” because of a pun). As Scobie notes, “the central point is the ambiguity of the frame, poised between its temporal function, as a comic-book convention for narrative progression, and its spatial function, as the delimitation of a drawing” (bpNichol 52).

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15 In Zygal he also explores other symbol systems, like mathematical proofs, to question how we attach meaning to symbols and objects through connective systems.
Furthermore, Nichol’s emphasis on perspective, the variability of frames,\(^{16}\) images, and words as images all point to an exploration of materiality and meaning through a revisionist approach to the central notions of containment, pacing, and linearity so essential to the book and comic forms, and the movements of language within them.\(^{17}\) In this sense, the page and book can be seen as a “field of dynamic relationship” (McCaffery and Nichol 42), moving away from a sequential model, which “liberates the book from the limits of genre” (43), setting up new communicative relations through orientation, proximity of parts, and a multiplicity of voices and heterogeneity of texts (44). Thus, “[w]orking within & without the standard one frame unit of the comic strip i was able to image a language change” (Nichol qtd. by Scobie 52), moving beyond the book form of the language trap.

Nichol’s inclination to shift and adjust communication practices on all levels of construction, from the letter to word to page to book, is rooted in a (largely paraphrased and adjusted) belief in Alfred Jarry’s made up ‘science’ of “pataphysics [sic].\(^{18}\) As Nichol notes:

> the way I think of “pataphysics is that very often you climb a fictional staircase that you know is fictional; you walk up every imaginary stair, you get to your imaginary window and you open your imaginary window, and there is the real world. (bpNichol qtd. cover of 2nd ed. *The Martyrology Book 5*)

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16 See Nichol’s explorations of frames in *Love* and in the playful montage with McCaffery (111), among others sprinkled throughout his work.

17 Nichol explores how the form of the book manipulates or constrains expression in two major essays, “The Book as Machine” with Steve McCaffery (59-96) and “The Book as a Unit of Composition” with Frank Davey. These works argue that the linearity (p1, 2, 3...) of the book reinforces the linearity of language in sentences, paragraphs, sequences, and narratives, which is reinforced though our bodily experience of time (Nichol and McCaffery 59). This linearity of form also lends itself to rendering the page invisible because sentences, paragraphs, et cetera, can overrun it without a loss of meaning, unless these conventions are fore-grounded through a focus on materiality.

18 This term is spelled either “pataphysics or ‘pataphysics. I have used the double quotation mark simply because it is what bpNichol used.
The “pataphysical impulses in Nichol’s work can be seen easily in its employment in paragrammatic practices like his perpetual extrapolation through and out of letters and words to new associations and directions (Billingham; McCaffery “Paragram;” Zultanski). Thus, “[h]e favours the idea that we participate in the production of reality through selective acts of attention, perception, intentional focus. He tends to believe in a reciprocal, if not causal, link between world and word” (Billingham 50). Interestingly, while many practitioners of “pataphysics laud it as a means of moving through the fictive and arbitrary structures of language and into Objectivity, Nichol’s is a “subjective ‘pataphysics” (Zultanski 110), roving through language and experience as a means of opening it to broader meanings and so to the other.

Nichol’s practice of opening experience and meaning through the theory of “pataphysics, still tied to his “new humanism,” also has one further facet. The central interest of the poet is to draw readers on through a multiplicity of experiences and meanings, shifting the basis of communication under their feet in the process. Through the shifts, Nichol encourages active readers, ones who “organize it themselves” (qtd in Scobie What 50), who start to question and adjust language with or beyond the poet, rather than passively watching the poet play. Thus, they are invited to “abandon those expectations, play a while and see what emerges” (Nichol Meanwhile 138). Furthermore, the “style is disregarded in favor of reproduction of actual states of mind in order to follow these states thru [sic] the particular traps they become in search of possible exits” (Nichol qtd. David Introduction), thereby drawing the reader into or through generative states of mind about language and meaning. Scholars throughout the various foci and theories agree that Nichol’s writings emphasize the reader’s role in meaning construction (see, among others, Billingham, Dutton, Harvey, Henderson, Jaeger, McCaffery “Silent,” Scobie What, Simonson). Paul Dutton notes that the poems were never complete until the reader had
run the course of the puzzles and questions within them (31). More importantly, the discussions surrounding this particular aspect of Nichol’s work return to some intriguing and poetically cognizant terms. Nichol’s visual poetry, especially, is “immediate and experiential” (Simonson 51; Scobie What 34), grounded in the integration of intellect and body (Dutton 31; Simonson 61), is “organic” (Harvey 23), and involves “active intervention” (McCaffery, “Silent” 101). Here we can feel the undercurrent of embodied cognition at work.

Returning, finally, to the cognitive framework I outlined in the previous chapter, it is difficult to ignore the pulse of embodiment throughout Nichol’s poetics. It is pertinent to note that the embodied theory of metaphor, posited by Lakoff and Johnson in Metaphors We Live By, was on Nichol’s poetic, ex-centric radar. McCaffery notes that Nichol was aware of their work (Interview 87), and in fact Nichol had introduced him to other discussions of proprioception as well, especially in relation to a writing and movement therapy program (78). Nichol’s approach to language and materiality—and his humanistic desire for entrances and exits—themselves reflect a broader understanding of meaning production, rooted in perceptual and conceptual representations. Likewise, his analysis of the book and page evoke the image schematic, visually motivated cues, of containers, paths, proximity, and orientations. The motivation to reconstruct the book and page through material practices, is a desire to reorient that reader to these essential prompts, creating new routes though the pages (for example, off through the middle of the page to the next in “Two Pages on the Nature of the Reality of Writing” [Meanwhile 131-132], rather than conventionally from the bottom to the top of the next). Likewise, the focus on the container of the page rather than the book—for example, the poem from still water, discussed in the previous chapter, which is composed solely of the phrase/word em ty. These reconfigurations of the conventions of the page and the book articulate a new entrance/exit from the “trap” of readerly assumptions by evoking, highlighting, and manipulate
them (as frames—both materially and cognitively). Furthermore, the simulative aspect of these poems, which prompt experiential meaning rather than solely propositional meaning, ties to the “pataphysical impulse to move through language to a new sense of reality, by moving through the creativity of language to a new embodied understanding. All of this ties back to the emphasis on the active reader, because the reader’s cognitive apparatuses, by simulating meaning, are acting out the processes of fragmentation, reorientation, and multiplicity, and, more importantly, finding meaning in them.

3.3 A Cognitive Synthesis

Turning from Nichol’s poetics to the broader criticism, it is possible to see how the cognitive framework can synthesize many of the prior views, both to his poetics and to each other. Wershler-Henry points to a space where “systems of knowing [...] may seem irrational or startling, but are, nevertheless, reasoned (qtd. Bok, “Nickel” 68). Arguably, this is caused through a deeper flow of meaning below the levels of propositionality (through image-schematic mappings, and so on), constructing a sense of connection and motivation in the midst of apparent linguistic chaos. By shifting to a system of signification that starts below language, at the level of confluence between perception and conception, we can articulate more fully the mappings that connect some of the disparate interests and how meaning emerges out of them. Returning to the focuses of recent research, we can trace the conceptual/perceptual roots of the paragram and “pataphysics, which are also tied as well to the notion of seriality or simultaneity as linearity and multiplicity, to process as research, to the book-machine, and to the description of the reader as co-creators, some of which I have already touched on in discussing Nichol’s poetics. As I said earlier, these recent emphases and connections already lend themselves to an embodied view of
meaning and experience, but this framework can articulate more clearly how meaning is constructed in these various texts.

One central trope that is regularly referred to in many recent critical views is the paragram, and it serves as a clear connection point with the cognitive poetic model as well. This trope offers a dual or multiple reading created by “a displacement from the literal (which would bind writing to an order of mimesis) to the letteral that opens up writing to the productional processes inherent in the words themselves” (McCaffery “Marttrology” 193). The duality inherent in the paragram, which McCaffery attributes to the tension between semantic and syntactic structures, forces metaphorical, analogical, and paradoxical readings (and in these categories puns flourish—to Nichol’s glee, I’m sure). A paragrammatic description of Nichol’s work, originally employed by Steve McCaffery and now a recurrent feature in much of the scholarship (see Billingham; Bök “Nickel;” Hlibchuk; Markotic; McCaffery “Paragram” and “Silent;” Peters “’Pataphysical;” Winger; Zultanksi), offers a conceptual framework for Nichol’s play with words and a way to discuss disparate but visually (letteristically) related meanings: as such “the poem—and its author—presents a theory of simultaneity” (Winger 10) which the paragram describes. A good example of paragrammatic play, and one McCaffery employs in his description, comes from *The Martyrology: Book IV* (n.p.):

```
i want the world
absolute & present
all its elements
el
em
en
t’s
o
pq
r
```
Reading these lines, we have the simultaneous experience of “all its elements” breaking apart and back to and through the alphabet, as both words and letters. The break down of “elements” into its parts extends in two directions. Firstly, we have the experiential and conceptual, although unspecific, simulation of elements as parts for a bigger whole, such that the lines “el / em / en / t’s” employ imagic iconicity (through letteristic replication/mimicry) and grammatical iconicity (through the conception of elements being smaller parts of bigger compounds, extending metaphorically to letters and words). However, the paragrammatic aspect is enacted by the extension through another layer of imagic iconicity (this time aural), which maps to the letters of the alphabet, l, m, and n. This emergent order of letters then carries on, experientially extrapolated into “o / pq / r.” Here, the alphabet is extended as a serious of abstracted absolutes, the letters. The visual parallelism between the two sections reinforces this iconically as well.

This paragram, derived from the desire to have “the world / absolute & present / all its elements,” extrapolates the world through the natural elements into typographic elements. By simulating these structural and conceptual linkages, the natural and linguistic worlds draw together on the page and in the mind. True to form, the next passage continues to somersault through paragrammatic playfulness, moving visually and linguistically from the prompts to another series of meanings:

or b d
bidet
confusion of childhood’s ‘kaka’
the Egyptian ‘KA’
soul
[…]

Again, the imagic and linguistic connections between letters reconstruct the alphabet into the word “or” and invert the “pq” into “bd.” The “bd” then extends to incorporate the lonely “t”
from earlier into “bidet,” and off into scatological and ontological humor. And so the paragrammatic play continues, oscillating between world and letters, the sacred and the profane.

This example shows meaning emerging out of different mappings and prompts, a “pataphysical experience no doubt, as fictive and factive worlds collide, all of which are iconically and metaphorically motivated. These cognitive processes underlie and affirm McCaffery’s assertions that the paragrammatic experiences in *The Martyrology* and elsewhere are “an anamorphic operation of the word on its own material interiority, decomposing or *distorting* itself into its phrasal implications and fragmentary possibilities which then acquire the status of a *produced meaning*” (“Martyrology” 194). While McCaffery implies incredulity through his italics at this apparent distortion and meaning production, from the cognitive poetic view, these mappings are easily motivated through perception and conception in the creative and generative framework of blending and frame evocation and shifting, simulating to produce meaning through iconicity and metaphor. However, McCaffery concludes that “what this ‘comic stripping of the bared phrase’ motivates is the radical undecidability of meaning, for the proposal, constantly implied, is that the word can never be reduced to a *single* signification” (194), and thus the paragram “opens up its ‘other’ within a totally ungrounded representation” (195). Arguably, these conclusions (while poetically written) mis-represent the paragrammatic experience shown here, since we do see a visual grounding of meaning (through iconic and frame mappings) and motivated constraint on their decidability within this space. However, McCaffery’s assertion later on, that “Nichol insists upon (and in this insitence [sic] significantly parts company with the canons of Sausurrean linguistics) is not simply a motivated relation of the sign to its meaning, but a necessary, complex transphenomenality of *all* writing” (196), is more in line with my analysis, although it’s somewhat incongruent with his. While he continues to affirm a relativistic and postmodern view (202), he also affirms the processual, flipping
actions of the reader’s mind as it constructs meaning from the fragmentary texts, much like Scobie’s notion of “a free play of open-ended referral and deferral” (What 22). Through this experience, “[t]he word becomes act, non-imagistic, dramatizes its own dialectical transformation and consequently obtains the status of a multi-determined peak” (McCaffery, “Martyrology” 203). While arguably this process through the prevalence of iconicity is imagistic, just in a schematic manner, the point remains: paragrams prompt broader engagements with the materiality of language on the page and in the mind, creating entrances and exits. The motivated mappings that cartwheel meanings, prompts a “pataphysical process, employing the simulated construction of broader associations. In this sense, Nichol moves through language as a means of researching the possible permutations and connections motivated by it. As I’ve shown, cognitive poetics illustrates the processes underlying these conclusions, qualifying them at times. Here the multiplicity of meaning is constructed in conceptual and perceptual leaps and bounds, but is still traceable and motivated.19 It further confirms Billingham’s assertion that “[o]ne could argue that the very process of experimenting with forms brought about a conviction in the creativity of language lacking from purely abstract linguistics: the investigation of performance rather than competence showed Nichol escape-routes from the trap” (Billingham 53). In this example, and in many others, the concrete practice of visual manipulation of words found throughout Nichol’s oeuvre prompts broader conceptual and perceptual meanings (a “side-by-side” experience [Winger 16]), offering the multiple entrances and exits (for meanings

19 These mappings between and through perceptual and conceptual meanings help address the confluence in seriality of linearity and multiplicity discussed by Markotic, primarily through our ability to double-scope blend (to blend disparate domains of knowledge) through structural and metaphorical connections (see Turner “Double”). In particular the emphasis within Nichol’s writing on paths and containers, and his continual play within and through these schemas, creates a strong perceptual and conceptual network that facilitates cross-mappings. These align with the paragrammatic sensibility in that they motivate alternate and disparate readings, while remaining in a perceptual union. This lends itself further to the argument that there is at least partial cohesion within Nichol’s oeuvre, base beyond the linguistic strictures of thematic readings in the perceptual and conceptual content that surrounds them.
emerge and dissolve rapidly throughout the cart-wheeling of just one poem) so essential to Nichol’s humanistic drive.

The processual, paragrammatic practice found in *The Martyrology* (especially books 4-6) also occurs in his permutational concrete poems, such as “Cycle #22” from *Konfessions* which moves through the phrase “drum anda wheel” by fitting it into the rubric of two columns of 4 letters and one of five such that the next line reads “anda drum andaw” then “heel anda druma” and so on. In reading this poem the reader responds to the visual and verbal rhythms of the words (the drum) and cycles through the phrase (the wheel), thereby visually and phonically performing the poem while developing different letter orders that correspond to the original drum and wheel. This is an exercise in imagic and diagrammatic iconicity, constrained yet generative.

Likewise, the paragram can be seen in the more abstract “Aleph Unit” sequence which uses the shape of the letter “A” to move from the letter, to framed perspectives of rich images of the material world, and then beyond into abstraction, constructing a multiplicity of evocations and meanings within the shifting shape of the letter A which is never fully lost (*As Elected* 41-48). Each of these examples (as well as “Blues” in the next chapter) employs the same paragrammatic sensibility, reading through visual and aural resonances between words, within words, and beyond words towards other permutations of meaning. In this way, the more lyrical paragrammatic play within *The Martyrology* is seen in the concrete/visual poetry as well, both earlier typewriter and later free-hand forms, indicating that in fact, while thematic

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20 Huth’s discussion of working through the coding of Nichol’s computer concrete poetry/animation *First Screening* also illustrates this sense of repetition and multiplicity as he moves through reconstructing the experience of Nichol’s original, recognizing the patterning and rhythms that move through the presentation of words in space and words as space. While Nichol’s program is less focused on letteristic punning, he uses the temporal and mobile aspects of the visual field on the computer screen to create new processual connections, offering another paragrammatic experience in a different medium.
resonances may not connect these works the material sensibility and “pataphysical inclinations certainly do, creating a perception of cohesion within seemingly disparate works, a cohesion “created by presumption and intuition” (Winger 14) through the materiality of the book, page, word, letter, and other spaces. More importantly, the paragrammatic process and multivalent meanings that are visually and verbally motivated correspond to a deep philosophical drive to open up language beyond conventionality; thus, “is not an empty gimmick, but a device that invites re-reading and reflection” (Dutton 43), a device that actively engages the reader.

Much of the recent criticism note Nichol’s highlighting of the role of the reader (see Andrews; Billingham; Dutton; Emerson; Jaeger; McCaffery “Silent”; Winger). This emphasis occurs in Nichol’s “inviting the reader, at all times, to complete puns, lines, translations, research” (Winger 11), to trace with him (via the simulating mind) the handwritten line that transgresses the margins of the page (Truth 139-140), to engage the breakages and resurrections of language (Bök), and so on, moving through language and experience. More importantly, the collaborative air to the poems brings the reader into the writing process. As such, Nichol draws the reader into “his desire to admit the non-ideational, emotional, and perceptual aspects of language at a conscious level of composition” (Billingham 53-54). Nichol’s humanistic drive to open up language and to draw the reader into and through the poem, ties to his intuitive understanding of the embodied mind at work on the page and in the world, as I discussed above. It is in this regard that I posit that recent critics are turning back to a more authentic representation of Nichol’s work, as they shift the focus from nostalgic celebrations and theoretical quagmires to the reader’s paragrammatic and co-creative experience. This criticism opens up a space for recognizing the embodiment so essential for the workings of the reader’s mind in engaging the materiality and sensuality of perception and conception. Importantly, as Lori Emerson notes, bpNichol’s “poetry points towards how we have outgrown the
Cartesian/positivist mind, and teaches through the embodiment of what is being taught how we might begin building a new language for a new art” (“Nicholongings” 29).

With sensuality and cognition in mind, I want to turn briefly to the oft forgotten artistic contemporaries and anthologists of bpNichol, who stand more on the periphery of the critical commentary but seem in many ways to have the clearest intuitions. An emphasis on sensuality and blending of broader experiences of meaning, although not often taken seriously it seems within the criticism, is pervasive in the discourse surrounding concrete and visual poetry. As Birney noted, early on, “[v]erbal art today is constantly going out to the other arts for aid in reaching the primitive sensuousness of man” (Birney Creative 79); as such “[concrete poetry] doesn’t seek to demolish language but to make language yield those enjoyments offered the viewer of non-objective painting” (Birney Creative 81). Likewise, the visual poet Judith Copithorne notes that

Poem-drawings are an attempt to fuse visual and verbal perceptions. The eye sees, the ear hears, movement is felt kinesthetically throughout the body and all these sensations are perceived in heart, belly and brain. The aims are the same as in other forms of literature and art: concentration and communication, delight, immersion in the present moment. (Oberon, n.p.)

Colombo also affirms how “we should respond to it [art] physically, and appreciate its sensuous aspects—the sounds of the words in a poem, even the appearance of a poem on a page. Indeed artists deal in experiences, not directly with ideas or feelings, but experiences out of which ideas and feelings emerge. So experience these poems!” (Colombo 3). Thus, concrete poetry is poetry “far beyond paraphrase,” a poetry of “direct presentation” (Williams iv). As such, “reading poetry, far from being a passive process, is an intensely active one. Increasingly, contemporary
poets are demanding the imaginative participation of their readers in order to ‘complete’ the poems” (Colombo 79). Perhaps this is wishful thinking on my part, but I see an intuition of embodiment in all of this. How better to engage with notions of our “primitive sensuousness,” our fusion of “visual and verbal perceptions,” our bodily responses, and the active “imaginative participation of the readers” than to have a theory that can in fact articulate these facets of human experience in a meaningful way, through simulation, image schemas, iconicity, metaphors, and frames? The evidence suggests that the cognitive poetic approach can synthesize the historical and theoretical tensions into an active, critical engagement with Nichol’s (and others’) works.

As we’ve seen from the history of the criticism sketched out in this chapter, “pure wrought Nichol is multivalent when lettraset as well as resistant to common corrosions” (Birney “Addition” 155). Nichol’s work has gone through a long series of multivalent theoretical and critical responses, to which we can now add cognitive poetics, some of which could be called corrosions in their dissolution of the inherent beauty of the texts. It is hoped that the cognitive approach only facilitates a respect for the complex and meaningful aspects of these works, and acknowledges Nichol’s desire to move beyond language to a more meaningful experience of communication (and thus community as well), and to engage readers through the sensuousness of the page and their minds.
Chapter 4: Cognitive Poetic Readings

The cognitive poetic tools I’ve outlined—which are just a selection of possible ones to be employed—expose the creative ways these texts work with(in) our minds, something with which the extant criticism of bpNichol’s visual works struggles. The attempt to discern the processes necessary to emerge at a comprehensive or comprehensible meaning of the texts—and, thus, the attempt to represent somewhat authentically the experience of the reader\(^1\)—reveals the complexity at the heart of these seemingly simplistic poems. More importantly, the cognitive poetic model better addresses the diversity and pervasiveness of visuality or materiality in Nichol’s oeuvre, most notably his visual and concrete poems.

In this chapter, I will approach a variety of Nichol’s poems, spread over the many years he composed them. This approach illustrates two things. Firstly, it shows that his earlier work, while often simpler, still engaged similar problems around meaning and materiality and employed similar techniques that he refined over the years. Secondly, I will show the diverse styles of poems which the cognitive framework can engage with that still fall within the diverse borderblur of Nichol’s visual poetry. I will discuss both typewriter and handwritten poems, abstract and representational poems, lettristic and comic poems. These diverse styles each offer different challenges and insights, but are all accessible through this framework.

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\(^1\) By this I mean the shared meaning of a text, rather than the subjective details which are undoubtedly a part of the differences between individual frames and experiential details (that compose primarily aspects of the inferential details which are still motivated by the texts) that are always a part of the literary experience. Someone will always get more out of one thing than another, but that does not mean that the entire text is completely different and without a commonplace to ground discussion. The cognitive poetic approach can help articulate that commonplace and help show what motivates the different readings that emerge out of the different inferences of individual readers as well.
4.1 Blues

Nichol’s earlier typewriter concrete, most notably the works in *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, manipulate letters and words within the technologically imposed grid of the typewriter (David, “Writing” 132), employing it as a meaningful, formal or formative construct. This grid, while seeming mechanistic and anaesthetic, nonetheless allows for artistic embellishments that construct richer meanings. “Blues” (Figure 4.1) is easily bpNichol’s most commonly known poem, as it is in most of the national and international anthologies that include his concrete poetry. Strangely, it is also amongst the least analyzed and often misinterpreted of his poems, seen as being about some abstracted “life” and the evolution of love. However, I will show that in fact there is a lot more happening here, which requires a serious engagement with the generative capacity of the visual as well as verbal cues. In “Blues,” Nichol mirrors the word ‘love’ along a perpendicular plane (treating it as an object to be manipulated—an elaboration of the CONDUIT metaphor as WORDS ARE OBJECTS), constructing a geometric pattern that visually and semantically represents the nature of love and its expression in the musical form of the blues, with all of their layered affective, aural, and conceptual meanings.

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2 Gary Geddes has had a fraught relationship with Nichol’s concrete poetry. This poem was included in the first and second editions of *20th Century Poetry and Poetics* (1969 and 1973), was then removed in the third (1985), since “the poetic groups and movements of this century now seemed [to him] less important than the brilliance and performance of their best practitioners” (Butling 74, see 78 n.34 as well), placing Nichol’s work as a lyricist over his work as a concrete poet. Nichol comments that “I am still irked by Gary Geddes’ comment in his revised edition...that concrete poetry has not stood the famous test referred to” (qtd in Billingham 66). However, Geddes did include Nichol’s concrete poetry again in the fourth edition (1996), hopefully indicating a reconnection or reappraisal of the work and its historical and literary relevance.

3 See footnotes 4 and 5 for more details on this misinterpretation and reasons why.
Firstly, the title of this poem prompts the frame of blues music and perhaps a depressed mood (arguably a subdomain of that same frame, acting to highlight the tone of the poem before we enter into our reading/viewing). This frame knowledge begins us down a path of meaning construction, since it primes us to engage the sounds, patterns, and affective registers of the letters and words of the poem in particular associative ways.

On viewing the text of the poem itself, one is struck by the balanced, visual configuration of the words, and the words themselves, which emphasise “love” and “evol” and a long line of “e”s and two short lines of “o”s. Arguably the words/letter groups “love” and “evol” stand out quickly to us as readers (assuming a Western prioritizing of text over image), so I will start there. In keeping with the musical frame, which regularly laments the woes of love, Nichol is

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4 I am using the original version, rather than the anthologized versions in *H in the Heart*, Colombo’s *New Directions*, Nichol and David’s *As Elected*, and Solt’s international anthology. These newer versions use an enlarged, and typographically cleaner version (a sans-serif font rather than the typewriter’s original serif), reprinted on the cover of Nichol’s book *love*. This presents a very clean and domineering presentation, out of step with Nichol’s earlier work in *Konfessions* which is more gritty and restrained. In this poem, especially, the grittiness may in fact add to the sense of blues music as an earthy, rough-around-the-edges style. While Nichol obviously approved of the new version, I use the older one here as a gesture to his earlier work with the typewriter and because I like the grit.
“paraphrasing an old blues—‘love, oh love, oh careless love’—to slant the reading of ‘evol’ towards ‘evil’ (Nichol, *An H* 139), as he notes on a version of the poem. However, this clearly does not preclude a reading of “evol” as evolve or evolving, thereby adding a sense of time and process to the reading as well. Thus, evol develops a paragrammatic sense, in which “evil” is produced though sound iconicity and “evolve” through visual metonymy. However, evil and evolution need not be incompatible, since the broad frame of (to some extent stereotyped) blues music has as one facet a pervasiveness of storytelling which often tells the listener of passive, unacknowledged contentment that shifts into “careless love” and its production of evil and sorrow, illustrating the evolution of a relationship, usually in a negative direction. Thus, in terms

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5 David quotes *The Captain Poetry Poems* as removing all notions of evil from this poem, and thus “[t]he correlation, therefore, is meant to be between love and evolution, not love and evil” (“Writing” 132). However, this reading ignores the title of the poem (which he had to be aware of since he edited an anthology with Nichol that includes it). Furthermore, and more importantly, this reading misquotes a poetic sequence that in fact cycles through love to evol to evil, questions this second connection through the comment “i’ve / overworked it / a dozen times,” but then returns to say “how impossible to overwork them” (np), in essence counteracting the first assertion but affirming the tension between words and their generative paragrammatic offshoots. David takes the first question without the response as a means of promoting his reading, which ignores both the Captain poem’s cyclic nature and the title before him. Furthermore, using the Captain poem as a response to “Blues” seems somewhat temporally problematic, since Captain was published in 1970 by a very small Canadian press, but “Blues” wasn’t distributed in Canada until 1972 (although it was originally published in 1967 in Britain, so it isn’t completely inconceivable). It seems incongruent for the Nichol to publish a comment on a poem that the audience would largely have been unaware of, especially since he was keenly aware of his readers (which prompted the reprinting of *Konfessions* in the first place).

6 Moisan seems to misattribute the paragrammatic reading of “evol” as evil and evolve to Nichol in *New Directions*, p77 (163). However, the comments Moisan notes are by John Colombo, the editor, and quite simply ask the reader a few questions, such as “[w]hat word does ‘evil’ resemble, and why is the resemblance appropriate to the poem?” In fact, as far as I can tell, these questions, and the lack of Nichol’s original title (a huge editorial omission! but possibly due to the use of the typographically cleaner cover image of love rather than the original publication in *Konfessions*), are what prompt Moisan’s complete misreading of this poem through the word ‘live’ (a reading I can’t bring myself to integrate into my text, especially for its snobbish disregard for the “mere word game”: aka. visual composition). I quote his analysis in full here, but question its “profundity:”

bpNichol has composed a concrete poem around the word LOVE, in which the letters are inverted to coin the word EVOL which signifies EVIL EVOLVE (*New Directions*, p.77).

The poem is based on a diagonal row of E’s, and the transformation from LOVE to EVIL: it also implies another word: LIVE. What at first appears to be a mere word game is actually a profound remark on the psychology of love; love which so often becomes a hell, is life itself. (Moisan 163)
of blending, the frame of the blues, as one input, maps to both “words” (emergent structures themselves of small iconic blends) which in turn highlight the loving, evil, and narrative aspects within the frame. These two inputs blend to produce the emergent structure of a more specific understanding of the music of blues as shifting from love to evil and bemoaning this troubling progression.

However, there is clearly more going on here. The visual aspects of the poem further develop our experience of the blues. The schematic image produced in the geometric presentation of the words, in part prompted by the frame of blues music, appears as a guitar, the central instrument of that musical form. This reinforces and highlights the music frame. On the other hand, the patterning of the words also places love into balanced opposition to its mirrored self “evol,” creating a perspectival prompt that locates love and evil as almost complete, reflexive opposites yet inextricably linked through their shared letter “e,” their refraction point. The geometric orientation of the letters, employing the limiting and motivating grid of the typewriter, forces the mirroring of love above to evol below in straight lines not possible on later technology, which engages our image schema UP-DOWN and, more importantly, its associated conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN. These visual cues located specifically in the material space of the page blend with the linguistic prompts construct diagrammatic iconicity through their metaphorical connections to the content of the poem provided by the first frame-word blend. The emergent structure is a poem that balances good and evil visually as well as linguistically within the frame of the music (which is also highlighted by the guitar), all the while emphasising the letter “e” that ties them together (and less so the “o”s that run parallel to the “e”s).

The analysis of this poem is incomplete without an examination of the letters that mirror love and evil together. The long lines of vowels mark a clear phonic connection to the “blues moan” (Nichol An H 139), emphasizing Nichol’s somewhat ironic comment that this poem is “a
purely visual poem that depends on a sound reference” which is “visually derived” (139). The imagic iconicity through sound (i.e. onomatopoeia) prompts through frame metonymy the common wail that is typical of the music, linking both love and evil through the emotionally laden moans “oooo” and “eeeee.” More importantly, the affective resonances of the vowels blend with the image schematic content as well (and its associated conceptual metaphor of good and bad), motivating two readings of “o” through the conceptual metaphor LIGHT IS UP and DARK IS DOWN. Interestingly, the “oh” of ecstasy in love imagically links to the “oh” of agony in evil, perhaps somewhat humorously relating the petite mort of orgasm to the grande mort of the lover’s murder. Thus, the visually derived aural cues blend with the specific musical and affective emergent structures of the frame, language and schematic perceptions, to construct a complex experiential gestalt (and one which arguably employs paragrammatic methods to do so). In this poem, we move through the careful enactment of a blues song, visually translated, evolving from ecstasy to agony. By blending the connections of sounds, words, and visual aspects through iconic, metaphoric, metonymic, and image-schematic mappings (some of which are limited by the grid), we simulate within the frame of blues music the complexity and balance of those compositions. In the end it seems like we can hear B.B. King bemoaning his story while perhaps even glimpsing his guitar.

4.2 Allegory #7

“Allegory #7” was published in a series of “Allegories” in Love: A Book of Remembrances. All thirty-two allegories employ comic-derived artistic styles to comment on language and meaning. The comic conventions and poetic expression seen in these poems would grant the argument that they are cartoons, but I have included it here because it falls under the guise of borderblur by presenting a poetic message focused on the materiality of visible
language. Also, this series has been widely regarded in the criticism as visual poetry rather than comics.\textsuperscript{7} Broadly, the allegories’ “mandate is to shift the task of reading into the task of perception” by representing language and reality as “highly ambiguous. What kind of reality do they represent?... transformation and contradiction are the keys to this poetic play” (Henderson 12). Henderson concludes that the allegories concern themselves with “transformation of the self and of the world through the agency of the word, both systematically and rationally as well as dramatically and intuitively” (15). While his presentation of these poems is mostly in line with a cognitive poetic interpretation, I would argue that in fact Nichol is pushing farther than just allowing language agency in the world, but is showing a connection between language and the world that is informative both ways.

\textbf{Figure 4.2:} “Allegory #7” from \textit{Love: A Book of Remembrances} (n.p.).

\textsuperscript{7}This is of course a problematic criterion since comics have largely been ignored by the literary establishment. Thus, the inclusion by critics of this work as a poem rather than as a comic may simply be a means of sidestepping a sticky terminological issue and thereby granting it access to the academy.
Jack David provides a possible allegorical reading of, which I give in its entirety:

In “Allegory #7”…large printed letters—here, the capital I or possibly an H—are the framework. The two vertical I’s represent the two tablets of Moses: on one is written the letters A-L; on the other, “and yet?” Allegorically, the letters of the alphabet stand for the Ten Commandments. But the drawing gives another point of view. Here I might explain that the cartoon character is Captain Poetry, Nichol’s major personal, and one who signifies traditional poetry. In the drawing, the central image of Captain Poetry is melting into a pot, just as the Israelites melted their gold to produce the Golden Calf. Captain Poetry stands for the traditional uses of language, and his destruction is language’s destruction. On the perimeter, another Captain Poetry is observing the melting, and his smile means possibly that he agrees with Nichol’s view that language must be broken up in order to revivify it. (“Visual” 265)

Scobie accepts this reading outright, noting only that other readings may be possible and he wouldn’t want to limit them (his emphasis). He also notes that it doesn’t account for the character in the right-hand panel as possibly being the “protean Milt the Morph” (What 49), Captain Poetry’s alter-ego nor the empty frames beyond it all. Rather than engage with these omissions, Scobie engages in the honorific criticism Bök condemns by using it simply to emphasise that it “makes clear the potential range of suggestion and meaning with which Nichol is able to invest his drawings” (What 49). This exposition of the allegory, along with Billingham’s similar analysis, leaps too quickly to lettristic fetishism and mythopoeia, while not addressing some of the structural prompts and the key question of the right-hand frame, “and yet?!” While being consistent with the deconstructionist proclivities of the authors in affirming “language’s destruction” and the “fragmentary and

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8 Scobie misattributes the writing of this analysis to Bayard and David in Out-posts, since it is in fact a reprint of David’s work in “Visual.”

9 David’s analysis is inconsistent in a few ways. If the poem presents language as the 10 commandments, does this mean that by melting Traditional Poetry (as he asserts Captain Poetry to be) into the false idol (of what, deconstructed poetry?) mean that in fact the Holy Word of moral conduct is being contravened? This could easily be seen as a reaffirmation of the literary tradition, since the breakdown of Tradition is the “sinful” aspect of the poem (the Israelites were not being sinful until they took their gold belongings (in this case, poems) and melted them down to make the calf). By extension this reading would view modern, especially experimental verse for the
fragile nature of the subject” (Billingham 69), the text itself offers another reading that contravenes theirs, at least in part.

David assumes a very religious take on the term “allegory,” possibly in trying to make it cohere to the supposed pinnacle of Nichol’s poems, *The Martyrology*. While this frame is certainly evoked by the term, the word itself simply describes the extended metaphorical rendering of one thing through something else, either perceptually or conceptually. Thus, structural and ideational mappings between two subjects construct different emergent meanings. With this in mind, I will look at the possible mappings that offer allegorical interpretations and explain how the cognitive poetic vocabulary can help clarify the meanings this poem motivates.

In examining this poem I will work through the perspectival layers of its presentation (three layers total, with the body of the central figure acting as the first contained space/layer—the figure in the ground), noting how each connects and extends the previous one. Firstly, the central figure of Captain Poetry arguably does not represent traditional poetry since often poems ascribed to him are just as playful with traditions as any found in *The Martyrology* (see Nichol’s Captain for example). While lyrical at times, the Captain’s poems regularly and facetiously most part as evil! Furthermore, there appears to be no prompt for the view that language is revivified in any way, since it remains in both a constructed form at the top of the next panel and utterly absent with the happy figure. Does then the “and yet?!” offer a flippant response to literary moralizing, such that the figure would then seem to be saying “I’ve melted it all and there don’t appear to lightning bolts coming down from above, so there.” Or, is the deconstruction itself viewed as pointless, in that “and yet” life goes on. In the end, this partial reading of the prompts, while somewhat motivated by the poem, offers more problems than solutions. This doesn’t even begin to look at the frames as letters, which further problematizes the moral of language’s destruction.

10 Between Scobie and David we see both the honorific criticism and the faulty emphasis on *The Martyrology* that I discussed in Chapter 3, which was so influential at the time but detracted from the analysis of exciting texts such as this one.

11 I should point out that David inverts the figure-ground relation to construct his reading, by taking the grounded frames to be tablets and then reading the figure through them. While this is acceptable as a reading through context, it seems somewhat incongruent with the obvious focus on different layers within the construction of the poem. I choose to focus on the perspectival layers, partially because it is an embodied motivator, but mostly because it sequences and constructs meaning in a more fluid manner, as I show.
break apart lyrical apparatuses to look beyond them (for example, see his “sonnet” in Captain [n.p.]); as such, the figure must be viewed as a writerly persona at the very least. The Captain’s face and body are connected by shifting, shaky lines to an object in his hand, most likely a writer’s pad of paper. The lines can easily be understood through simulation as fictive motion, as I’ve discussed, and prompt the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema. These lines create an active connection between the Captain and the paper while also prompting the conceptual frame of writing and the associated actions, mediums and markings. This active mapping prompts the beginning of the allegorical reading, by blending the figure with his page through the active process of writing, left to right, top to bottom. The emergent structure of this blend prompts an experiential simulation of handwriting and its related, metaphorical entailments around subjective expression as putting one’s thoughts down (as objects) on paper (ie. the CONDUIT metaphor), where the material essence of the Captain (the lines of his image) becomes the content of the page (the lines of his letters). Likewise, in this emergent space, writing is fully and literally embodied, through the simulated material blending with its author. This highlights the actions within the writing frame and the notion that one places something of oneself on the page while writing, in effect fulfilling the goal of the schema of writing but also constructing an allegorical reading of what actually makes up the letters (in this case NOT ink but the figure’s body).

With this writing-author emergent structure in mind, we move to examine the two frames that sit behind him (using the notion of the frame from comics as a perspectival space rather than the cognitive one as conceptual domain). This shift in focus is prompted by iconic and metonymic mappings between the handwriting of the primary blend and the alphabet of the first frame (through form miming form and action invoking associated forms). As an aside, this alphabet, simply by being the first twelve letters of the alphabet seems incongruent with David’s reading of them as the ten commandments but rather serves as a generic metonym for letters and
language themselves. The shift in focus from central figure’s handwriting to lettristic figures also extends the PATH schema from the original layer while maintaining the emergent structure through imagic iconicity. However, once we emerge in the first frame the imagic iconicity prompted by the identical shape and opposing position of the second frame demands comparison in another blend, thus, extending the PATH yet further.

In the second frame we have a simple landscape presenting Captain Poetry (or perhaps his alter-ego), birds, clouds, and sand, with the caption “and yet?!” It is a frame rich in imagery and inferences but is also questioned by the commentary. The smiling face of the first figure is replicated in this frame, highlighting once again the role of the writer which was slowly lost on the path through the alphabet. Arguably, this is not Captain Poetry’s alter-ego, since the happy expression and even consistent representation of only half his face prompt an assimilation of the two figures through imagic iconicity. However, the question asks us to reconceptualize this figure, who until now seemed comfortable simply embodying language. To answer this question, we need to look carefully at what the poem has constructed so far.

Through iconic and metonymic mappings and fictive motion we have shifted along a path from body to handwriting to abstracted alphabet and back to the body, going almost full circle. What I am showing here, then, is that the structural and ideational ordering of the different layers, within the initially prompted frame of writing and the CONDUIT metaphor, motivate iconic mappings in a cyclic pattern, prompting the conceptual alteration of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema. The frames then act as containers for concepts and events in this process. Schematically put, we move from subject₁ to object₁ (writing) to object₁° (alphabet) to subject₁°. The shift produces a complex blend which “and yet?!?” comments on.

The cyclic path that blends author and writing draws us through abstraction back to the author. This process seems to dissolve the author into language, reflecting Billingham’s assertion of fragmentation and fragility, but at the same time he is perfectly happy in the sun
when we return. Interestingly, the author moves, via fictive motion, through letters to a new perspective, since he is now engaged in a richer environment or has stepped back for a better view. In simulating this movement, through the various fictive and iconic movements, we shift through abstraction to a richer space. Here we can see Nichol’s “pataphysical and paragrammatic impulses at play. By emphasising the movement through language to a broader, more complex frame, he asks the reader to simulate the “pataphysical and authorial experience of stepping from the world through language and fictivity back into a new and enriched reality, thereby affirming Henderson’s focus on transformation rather than Billingham’s on fragmentation. The key question of “and yet?!” asks for contemplation of this process, “which also suggests exciting possibilities, the inherent potential for hidden contents, the revelation of something unexpected concealed within the ordinary” (Billingham 69).12 Importantly, this prompts us to move one step further, to take another turn in the circle, with questions in mind, to the seemingly blank third layer of two panels; this is prompted by the iconic linking between the double panel form of the second and third layers, but with the noticeable twist again in their layout. Arguably these panels invite the reader to move yet further through creative and “pataphysical experiences on beyond zebra!

In “Allegory #7” iconic and metonymic mappings, fictive motion, and metaphors of writing motivate a cyclic movement into, out, and beyond the conceptually and experientially rich frame of language and writing. In this poem, Nichol posits a view of language that seeks to transcend the boundaries imposed upon it by tracing its interaction with broader experiences, not simply to destroy it. Language is always present in the first three panels, not as a limitation but as a prompt for the process of discovery of new meanings and perspectives. The panels then

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12 Billingham’s reading of this poem is also inconsistent, primarily due to her attempt to navigate a deconstructionist perspective of language and subjectivity while at the same time attempting to embrace the opening of possibilities at the end (which she strangely doesn’t link to the empty third layer). While her conclusions seem in line with mine, they are arrived at in a very convoluted and at times illogical manner.
construct an allegorical relation between language and life, showing an infusion of both into each other. In some regards, this poem presents a “pataphysical argument for embodiment in language, in the sense that our bodies become language and by working through language we better know our bodies and our world.

4.3 untitled

No scholars, to my knowledge, have focused on any poems from *art facts or truth* other than with apt, but vague, generalizations about them being bpNichol’s most experimental and innovative (Bok “Nickel” 66). Visual or concrete poetry makes up only about a third of these texts, but many of the other poems also employ dramatic material practices, much like the paragrammatic process I discussed in the previous chapter. The following untitled poem is one that I have returned to numerous times over the years. It was through a cognitive analysis that I was able to determine its illusive complexity, its simple elegance, that held me captive for so long.

Figure 4.3: untitled poem from *art facts: a book of contexts* (109).
This poem presents only two and a half words and two short curved lines. Arguably, we can start with the words as the central prompts for a relational system, although the visual linkages are not far from view. The two letters, “fr,” pose primarily a puzzle, since they are not inherently meaningful as words. The words “pond” and “glop” become our main focus, and occasion the initial blend.

The pond presents the first possible relational frame. This word prompts a location its associated things, actions, and objects. The glop invokes the sound of movement into a liquid, but also qualifies the word pond. This initial blend of the pond frame and the sound produces an emergent structure of a pond with something entering into it, thus also changing the meaning of “glop” to something moving specifically into water. With this initial “frame blend” we now go back to reinterpret the poem.

The blend of the emergent structure of the frame blend with the visual content of the poem allows us to interpret the drawn lines, which initially can be anything we’d like as a schematic image, such as a vase, snake, whip and so on (unlike the rich image of “Water Poem 5” in Chapter 2). The pond frame blends with the curved lines to prompt an emergent structure of the cross-section of a pond, thereby highlighting the location as the edge rather than middle. Importantly, the schematic view prompts us to view the words as objects (an elaboration of the CONDUIT metaphor), whereby the orientation of the words themselves reflects specific aspects of the pond too. The “fr” becomes grass on the edge of the pond, blowing in a breeze. The “pond” becomes the visible surface, while “glop” metonymically prompts a body of water, reinforcing its location since water is experientially assumed to be under the surface of the pond and the originator of the sound. Thus, in blending the initial frame blend with the visual cues, the poem begins to take on more specific, locational features.

However, the lines, which I have focused on developing a specific location through the schematic blend also indicate fictive motion, prompting another blend. The lines almost
physically touch the letter “r” and “g,” seeming to connect them through the hole, the “o,” in the surface of the pond. Again, the iconic mappings prompt the words as objects. This specific connection cues us to see the individual letters as constructive, not just the words themselves, since the line directs our attention to specific ones in specific places. This further reinforces the “fr” as a lettristic puzzle rather than word game. In simulating the motion of the “fr” to the “o” and eventually to the “g,” the reader constructs a “frog” out of disparate, select letters. This blend highlights the agent of motion and instigator of sound within the pond frame.

However, the emergent structure of the frog causes us to re-assess the inputs and emergent structures that constructed it, prompting yet another blend. Here we have the pond, location, action, letters and words as objects, and the newly born frog. In the blend we simulate the movements of the frog, through which we reinterpret the drawn lines again, this time as factive rather than fictive motion. Importantly, the “fr” now becomes both grass and a glimpse of the frog before it disappears through the surface of the pond into sound. Now, the motion lines denote the factive movement of the frog while still reinforcing the location and cross-sectional perspective of the pond and motion. Furthermore, the abundance of circular shapes in the two words emphasize, through diagrammatic iconicity the agent’s actions presenting ripples in the water.

In the end, through interpreting and simulating key prompts in this poem, we have developed a very specific scene in our minds. It’s quite easy to see this poem as encapsulating a moment while walking near a pond, in which we catch a glimpse of something in the grass, hear a splash, and see ripples appear on the pond. Most of us would conclude we’d disturbed a frog, which had jumped away, disappearing from sight into sound, still sensually present but very much beyond view. Thus, the reader blends perceptual, conceptual, and experientially relevant cues to construct a far more complex emergent structure with propositional content than in the
original representation. Without our facile cognitive capacity to blend these multimodal cues, the frog would remain glimpsed but ill-conceived.

4.4 Concrete Conclusions

Through the illustration of select cognitive apparatuses at play within these poem, we can see how various material aspects of communication, both linguistically and visually prompted, synthesize to construct meanings well beyond the linguistic content. From this perspective, the examples I have shown don’t necessarily reveal the fraught nature of linguistic expression but reveal how verbal and visual aspects layer and blend meaning on top of meaning, requiring the reader to move through the creative acts of interweaving the image and text into a generative, synthetic whole, derived from the materiality of visible language (prompted in part by the CONDUIT metaphor) as much as from its message. The iconic, metaphoric, and metonymic aspects of both form and content prompt complexity where simplicity lay.

The cognitive poetic reading of these texts offers rich and informative connections to bpNichol’s intuitions about communication as well. His humanistic drive to open up entrances and exits within the poem finds expression here. The entrances are found in letters, words, and images and the rich perceptual and conceptual content they bring; the exits are far more complex than initially imagined. His desire to break out of the language trap, to explode conventionality, finds meaningful presence in the loops and tricks these poems play with our beliefs about language and reality, offering “pataphysical and paragrammatic interventions in even the most common of experiences—listening to blues music, writing on the beach, and disturbing a frog. Even the simplest poem deserves contemplation rather than dismissal, since, as we now know, under the guise of a word comes a textured and intelligent, meaningful experience. In the end, the poems encourage a broader view of poetic expression and what it means to communicate by
bringing the reader into an experiential game which they must unravel and interpret. In this regard they move beyond the linguistic drive for propositional statements and truths towards a richer experiential knowing. As many critics have intuited, this poetry requires an active reader. The cognitive poetic method of interpretation I have demonstrated here helps locate the spaces of generative poetic action in these simple texts by tracing the conceptual and perceptual mappings that construct meaning. It is hoped that it has shown them to be anything but banal.
Chapter 5: Cognitive Poetics and Other Multimodalities: Material and Theoretical Extensions

While the previous chapters have focused on applying cognitive poetics to the visual poetry of bpNichol, there are clearly broader applications for this multimodal framework. In this chapter I will briefly address specific scholastic spaces that can benefit from an embodied understanding of meaning and the frameworks that construct it. This methodology can inform theoretical, descriptive, and investigative aspects of many fields, but I will focus primarily on directly related mediums and their cultural spaces.¹

5.1 Comics and Children’s Books

A discussion of the multimodal features of comics (including graphic novels²) easily extends out of my analysis of bpNichol’s “Allegory #7.” As a simple description, the main

¹ Cognitive poetics offers important embodied frameworks for research broadly related to cultural and material theory, archaeology, sociology, and other such fields (see Correa-Beningfield et al, Kimmel, Kövecses Language, and Yu for some focused discussions of particular cognitive research in some of these fields). Keane’s and Küchler’s descriptions of iconicity and cognition in culture can easily accommodate a cognitive approach, while the cognitive research can further clarify their articulation of how things can be “vehicles of associative thought” (Küchler 209). Likewise, this framework can help clarify the linkages that Preston and Latour explore between things and their uses, particularly by employing the concept of embodied simulation as essential in decompressing the action of artifacts in various situations. Discussions of embodiment and blending will also add to Preston’s modeling of function, in particular how changes in meaning and application are motivated by embodied engagements with form (this would add to Appadurai’s similar argument as well). Thus, the cognitive view of embodiment extends and nuances Graves-Brown’s discussion of how meaning is motivated by things, not just read on to them (4). As he notes, in a passage about culture that sounds awfully like the argument for cognitive embodiment and meaning: “Culture exists neither in our minds, nor does it exist independently in the world around us, but rather is an emergent property of the relationship between persons and things” (4).

² I would argue that in fact there is very little difference between comics and graphic novels (the binding with staples or glue aside), other than an institutional acceptance of one over the other. As I noted with Nichol’s “Allegories,” calling comics by any other name, either as visual poetry or graphic literatures, is largely a means of gaining access to critical discussion in the academy than a serious formal distinction. For example, many comics like Spiegelman’s Maus and Moore and Gibbons’s Watchmen were released as serialized comics but only came
feature of the comic form is “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McLoud 9). Thus, comics are the sequential presentation of perspectival frames, in which texts and images (not always but) often inform each other and which subsequently combine. Through this basic construction, a narrative of some sort is typically presented and the reader is required to inter-relate the frames to understand the story. A key requirement of this form then is the ability to blend diverse images and texts between neighboring frames into a comprehensible (extended) meaning, what McCloud calls “closure” of the “gutter” between frames (66-67). This involves the conceptual blending of visual and verbal cues through iconic, metaphoric and metonymic mappings once again.

Scott McCloud notes how the content (both imagistic and pictorial) in neighboring frames blend to construct a sense of action, time, scene, subject, and aspect (figure and ground shifting) (70-74). For example, in the purely pictorial presentation of a moment (Figure 5.1), the reader must inter-relate the two nearly identical images (imagic iconicity through structural resonance) and then, noting the small differences in mouth and eye movement, simulate the action that constructs this change. The blending of the two images illustrates a shift in the woman’s demeanor, smiling while closing her eyes, a rich metonymic, experiential prompt. The

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3 See Scott McCloud’s comparison of different styles of panel-to-panel transitions and especially the “non-sequitor” which is the only transition, of five options, that doesn’t blend together cohesively (70-74).
two simple representations prompt the reader to simulate and construct a moment of contentment. This is just one simple example of how the sequential nature of comics constructs narratives with rich perceptual and affective content.

![Figure 5.1](image)

**Figure 5.1** Example of two frames without textual cues which indicate a moment-to-moment shift as well as affective content (McCloud 70).

However, the sequential form of the comic medium can also form more complex narrative structures, through which the artist and author adjusts the medium to complicate the story. For example, in Moore and Gibbons’ famous comic *Watchmen*, color patterning⁴ and schematic pictorial mimicry cause structural and metonymic, and thereby conceptual, blending of frames from either end of Chapter V, so that pages 1, 2, and 3 map to pages 28, 27, and 26, respectively. This causes an iconically motivated circular link which constructs a meta-commentary between the opening scenes in which a character wonders “who’s there?” and the final revelation of the identity of a key figure. Likewise, the final lines note how both the images and text create a chapter in which “everything balances” and which raise the question, “what immortal hand or eye / could frame thy fearful symmetry?” from Blake (28). In this way, the

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⁴The dominant colors throughout the pages I discuss are red and orange, often visually associated with fire and violence, constructing an iconic and metonymic link too. While these colours have affective registers for readers too, evoking passion and so on, I can't go into the importance of this here for the sake of brevity.
author and artist have coordinated the blending of a linear narrative, with a self-referential circularity (both verbally and pictorially), which in turn links to a bigger question in the story of who is in fact responsible for the traumatic events that are effecting the main characters? The blending of textual and pictorial cues within the frame and between frames sequentially construct the main thrust of the narrative, but the iconic mappings construct a meta-narrative that illuminates key aspects of the story.

Similar features can be noted in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, through his presentation of a dual narrative of the present day author telling his own compositional and personal story as well as his father’s World War II experiences as a Jew. Oakley has observed the complex narrative levels that Spiegelman constructs and interweaves and explains them through the blending model (“Conceptual”); however, he focuses almost completely on the verbal content and neglects to articulate how the images influence the story. For example, at one point Oakley notes a narrative linking between a historic account to present moment through the repetition of the key work “stable” in the dialogue (334-5). However, he doesn’t notice that in shifting between the two stories at this point, pictographically the roles of oppressors and victims are reversed further impacting our interpretation of the present-day frame: in the historic moment, the father is being verbally abused by a Nazi soldier, with the last frame focusing on the Nazi’s clenched fist shaking in the air. With the turn to the present-day narrative, the father is sitting in an authoritative position over the son, shaking his finger at him (again centrally located) and pointing at an ash he dropped on the rug. The shifting of the role, through gestural and positional (and therefore imagically iconic) mappings, visually emphasizes an important recurrent theme in the story, by illustrating the son’s perceptions of his father in the present day situation and linking them to the formative nature of past traumas. I’m not doing this aspect of the story justice, since it is far more nuanced than how it appears here. However, I want to
emphasize that these three frames of the comic draw this parallel visually and iconically, something Oakley overlooks by focusing purely on the linguistic content. Even in a medium that is so pictographically driven it’s hard to think of it without images, it appears that the criticism (no matter how smart on some levels), still prioritizes the text over the image. It seems redundant to say, but the content of the story is richly furthered and explored pictographically, often only so, through which the writer illustrates a parallel experience which requires an iconic, metaphoric, and/or metonymic reading of these cues.

While I’ve shown the importance of blending between frames, complex blends also occur within them. Another example from *Maus* which I will articulate in more detail builds from the stories dominant imagistic cat and mouse metaphor (for the Nazis and Jews, respectively). Spiegelman’s characters (and Oakley) never comment on it in actual words but it plays out extensively throughout the narrative of the Second World War and serves to tie the Jewish ancestors to their children in the USA (the narrative of the author’s present) solely through the pictorial representations.5 Interestingly, the mouse identity also serves, at times, to illustrate the author’s own insecurity with his Jewish heritage or the sense that his Jewish heritage is something put on for present society, by showing his mouse face to be a mask. For example, in Figure 5.2 we see the author wearing his mouse mask, slumped over his drawing board. In this one panel we have a visual compression of two time frames, with the contemporary author literally residing in/on his gruesome familial history. The complex visual blend, with his room being carpeted with the bodies of dead mice displayed as the bodies in common graves at the concentration camps, wallpapered with the swastika, and a watchtower of a camp outside his

5 Also a part of this pictorial metaphorical construction is the presentation of non-Jews, non-Nazis as pigs, in essence portraying a sense of duplicity and moral shallowness that manifests itself in scenes of betrayal in the narrative.
window, informs the verbal content as well. While the verbal content locates two specific instances for Spiegelman’s depression, the commercial interests in his work and his mother’s suicide, the pictorial content extends this such that we can interpret this depression as one that is rooted in a longer, traumatic history in which the author is metaphorically dwelling to write his story. Also, the images of the swastika on the wall and the watch tower metonymically evoke the covers of the serials and volumes this section is contained in, creating an iconic and metaphorical mapping to the present frame’s comment on “at least fifteen editions are coming out,” by highlighting the conflation of the act of composition and the final product itself. Through these pictorial prompts and constructions the author’s depression is contextualized and extended.

Figure 5.2 A panel from the section “Time Flies…” of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (201).
Finally, this context is further blended with the comment from outside of the visual field of the frame, “We’re ready to shoot,” rendering it darkly ironic due to his (metaphorical) location as a mouse on top of a pile of murdered mice. The comment again clarifies more richly Spiegelman’s depression, since it directly blends his experience of fame with the holocaust, as being singled out and shot either due to fame or ethnicity. Thus, while the next frame has a cameraman and an interviewer, this panel sets up a complex, blended perspective for engaging with his fame and which later explains his desperate reactions to the media mob that engulfs him.

While my analysis of both *Watchmen* and *Maus* doesn’t do either complex work justice, it does serve to illustrate how an understanding of cognitive processes can help articulate how the complexity within these narratives is constructed and interpreted by the reader. It further shows how this methodology for close reading can account for visual and verbal iconic, metaphoric, and metonymic mappings throughout a more clearly defined media of image-text interaction, but which also incorporates more subtle image-image and text-text blending as well. Also, in these cases it is interesting to compare the differences between the crisp and colorful mainstream presentation in *Watchmen*, and the rough, black and white, underground comic presentation in *Maus*. While both construct self-referential blends through iconic mappings, the dominant colors and some subtle schematic parallels in the panels of *Watchmen* facilitate the imagic iconicity that promotes the self-referential moment, while the black and white presentation of Maus necessitates more overt pictorial connections (primarily via metaphorical blends) to create a similar conceptual space. We can see then through this cognitive analysis the potential to articulate both the commonalities within comics as a communicative medium and the differences between sub-genres.
One possible sub-genre of the comic form, which for bpNichol’s sake I must touch on, is children’s books, which often employ pages as condensed or singular frames. These texts again employ very similar blending practices as comics between images and texts and frame to frame, but in simpler ways by connecting the words with the images more directly. In this form, the use of language and images to blend and prompt simulation of actions and engagement with objects is what makes these texts so important to literacy. While I won’t include a complex analysis of any texts, the commonalities with comics are obvious, so I hope the prior discussion of them serve to show the conceptual apparatuses at play here too.

5.2 Advertising

It has been posited that a natural segue out of a discussion of concrete poetry into a broader textualized space—rather than through comics and children’s books—is through advertising. In response to this, Marjorie Perloff questions “whether the conflation of Concrete poetry and advertising isn’t a kind of dead end for the former” (Perloff, Radical 119). However, her question is somewhat misdirected. Perloff examines a logo for a literary magazine designed by the Brazilian concrete poet Décio Pignatari, a stylized presentation of the acronym of the journal. She correctly notes that logos serve the “function primarily as recognition symbols: as

6 Alphabet books are one form of children’s books that are strongly related to concrete poetry through their construction of letters forms from relevant things. These books serve as a frame for appreciating bpNichol’s ABC: an aleph beth book, since it directly references these works while constructing a poetic field within them or perhaps reframing them as poetic spaces themselves).

7 I am using the term here to describe the most prevalent use by commercial interests, with the recognition that there are other successful yet less prevalent forms of advertising and other media presences employed by special interest groups and non-profit organizations like Greenpeace as well (Dale).
soon as we see them, we know a particular object” (119). Thus, the logo acts as a metonym for a larger capitalist and ideological venture. However, while the logo may have been composed by a concrete poet (shame on him for making a living), and may reflect in part that work—one could imagine the use of one of bpNichol’s alphabets being employed in a similar way—the decontextualizing of the poems from the larger work (like ABC) along with a limited conceptual construction from a few letters thereby loses the broader blends we’ve seen in other concrete poems. Thus, while a concrete poet made the logo the link largely ends there, and, more importantly, the poems live on.

Such is the case with simplistic logos; however, when one opens up the discussion of more complex advertising ventures the cognitive links with visual poetry become more obvious. The conceptual work in advertising itself often forges conceptual links between visual and verbal prompts to construct new gestalts, as documented by Forceville (“Metaphor;” Pictorial), and as such are closely related to the poetic actions of the earlier texts. While Forceville focuses on this experience as solely metaphorical, and attempts to develop a categorical scheme for pictorial simile and multimodal, pictorial, contextual, and hybrid metaphors, among others (see “Metaphor” for a summary), his work arguably over-complicates and slants a rich field of inquiry by focusing on only metaphorical mappings while ignoring the metonymic and iconic aspects that are essential for generating many of the meanings. As I’ve shown, the blending model (which Forceville ignores outright), is far more malleable than a simple, linear model of metaphorical mappings. Thus, the cognitive poetic model can explain the emergent structures of various styles of advertising more easily, without having to rely on categorical statements, by linking the different tropes together into a synthetic and simulated meaning.

The simulative aspect of cognition is also of particular interest in the case of advertising, since advertisers want to prompt people into consumer action. By presenting advertisements that
prompt the simulation of positive conceptual and physical action, the company potentially generates an active and positive affinity with that product. For example, Forceville discusses a Dutch advertisement for Dove hair cream (Figure 5.3) in which a container of the product is shown open, slightly on angle with a spoon in it and with the lid floating in the air (“Metaphor” 464-5). Forceville’s translation of the caption and subsequent analysis reads

> “Your hair, too, sometimes deserves a treat”.... resulting in the metaphor: hair-silk is ice cream. The spoon in the hair-silk ad is, in this example, the most important contextual element that cues the source domain “ice cream” (or a similarly creamy luxury food). The mapped feature is the notion of spoiling oneself with luxury food. (464-5)

While I agree generally with this analysis, it doesn’t account for the container that is in the middle of being opened, and again relies upon linguistic content for interpretation which is arguably secondary and only reinforces the central pictorial blend in this case.

Figure 5.3  Dutch advertisement for Dove hair cream from Forceville (465).
I would suggest that the picture encourages simulation on the part of the viewing consumer (ironically in both senses of the word). The placement of the lid in the air, the container at an unnatural angle (ie. clearly not sitting on a surface), and the spoon already halfway into the hair-silk act as motion cues. These cues have important image schematic components, such as the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema for direction of motion which associates with the UP-DOWN schema to experientially designate up as action and down as inaction. These schemas mark the container, lid, and spoon all as active or moving. The schematic content prompts the viewer to simulate the experientially required actions of moving the lid down out of the way, indulging in scooping the (ice)cream, and continuing the process of picking up the jar. Through experiential simulation the viewer performs the owner’s role in the consumer frame by consuming the product (both literally and metaphorically). Importantly, the simulation primes the picking up of the Dove product at the store, the necessary precursor in the consumer frame that sits behind the blend we’ve seen. This advertisement, furthermore, through the assumed affective response of enjoyment tied to picking up and eating ice cream maps that same affective cue to the picking up and using of the product. This is a smart advertisement, subtly and simply constructed. While most consumers may make it to the caption which reinforces the visual blend of the ad, the metaphorical and simulative work has already transpired, setting up a (possible and) pleasant consumer experience.

Forceville’s example serves two purposes. Firstly, it illustrates how a cognitive poetic model provides a more fluid, less terminologically cumbersome, and more productive interpretative framework. Secondly, this example illustrates how a broader knowledge of cognition can help to isolate the “power” of advertisements, not just as metaphorical constructs, but as socially loaded texts that prompt simulation of experientially relevant information to complete them and in so doing reinforce the mental predilection towards capitalist consumption.
So, while Perloff worries about conflating these two forms, arguably the active space of advertising is far distanced from the concrete poet where one simulates an active and often critical engagement with language, space, and materiality, the other simulates persuasively towards the ever present goal of consumerism.

5.3 Culture Jamming and Graffiti

While advertising simulates towards consumer action, there is a growing trend of counter-consumerism called “culture jamming,” best articulated in the magazine *Adbusters* and the writings of its creator Kalle Lasn as well as Naomi Klein. While often viewed as anarchistic and nihilistic, this movement attempts to counteract the persuasion of advertising by altering its material against itself, which I would argue is remarkably positivist. The material playfulness of culture jamming places its sensibilities quite close to that of the visual poets, as it recognizes the richly evocative and communicative aspects of lines, images, and texts. The work of this movement looks very similar to advertising by necessity, since it superimposes or alters various cues in commonly recognized advertising ventures to shift the dominant frames employed by them to construct a counter-argument. A wonderful example is a *Adbusters* spoof of the Calvin Klein advertisements for the “Obsession: for men” line of cologne (Figure 5.4). Normally these ads have a very fit man posing in his underwear, looking somewhat indifferently out of the page with often a slightly suggestive pose. The title of obsession prompts its associated frame with the roles of the obsessor and the thing obsessed over. By blending the term and frame with the image the ad presents someone who is the focus of sexual desire since he is not obsessively viewing anything, taking on the role of the thing obsessed over. However, through the desire to be obsessed over, the ad confers onto the reader the role of the obsessor as well as the desire to
be obsessed over. Very simply, by simulating these gazes tied to the product, the viewer is in essence told that they need this cologne to become obsessed over.

On the other hand, the spoof ad, which we recognize as such because of strong parallels (imagic iconicity) between words, font choices and sizes, figures and poses, and other material cues, presents a similar man but who is looking down the front of his underwear. Through this simple shifting of the disinterested, un-obsessed gaze towards himself, the spoof advertisement adjusts the entire original blend. While originally the term “obsession” blends into an attractive social situation (at least for some), making by extension for an attractive brand, in this case the scene becomes comically self-obsessed, and by extension recalibrates the view of the brand as also self-serving. Thus, the spoof ad becomes a comedic critique of the original ad and its
function within the larger corporate drive for capital, by causing the reader to reassess who is obsessed with what. While the humor of this advertisement is certainly important, the underlying refutation of the capitalist drive of advertisements is its central conceptual action, and is principally driven through metonymic and iconic connections through form to the a particular advertisement or campaign.

As I hope this brief example also shows how the communicative frameworks I’ve discussed with concrete poetry, in particular the use of frame evocation and metonymic and iconic mappings, are especially salient for a discussion of culture jamming (as well as its “illegal” close relative graffiti), since as a social movement it works carefully to reconceptualize existing advertising blends by reframing or reconstructing the existing work, not just for economic critique, as this example might imply, but also for broader social commentary on values and beliefs. As such, it constructs self-referential and critical blends out of pre-existing, socially salient conceptual and perceptual frameworks.

Importantly, this example also extends the discussion into a more actively social space, shifting the focus out of textual analysis to social interactions and cultural analysis (although, obviously, this level is present in the textual analysis as well in the guise of evoked frames). Culture jamming requires sensitivity to broader cultural spaces and information technologies: this particular example requires a viewer who is aware of the advertising campaigns of Calvin Klein, at the very least, so as to make the imagic connections necessary for understanding. In this way, both graffiti\(^8\) and culture jamming use public spaces to promote a diversity of

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\(^8\) Distinguishing these two acts is somewhat problematic since they can mean a few things. Graffiti is generally considered an illegal defacement of public or private property. Likewise, while culture jamming often employs legal means of distribution, it can also use “illegal” locations. Much of Banksy’s work, for example, is both graffiti and culture jamming (for work like his see www.stencilarchive.org and www.stencilnation.org). However, there are stylistic differences within graffiti arts that make for further distinctions. Graffiti tags, used to identify artists and occasionally communicate to other graffiti artists (as a sub-cultural dialect), often use stylistically modified
conceptual and perceptual meanings. For example, one of Banksy’s very official looking graffiti works on a wall in Westminster, England, among other places, states, “BY ORDER OF NATIONAL HIGHWAYS AGENCY / THIS WALL IS A DESIGNATED GRAFFITI AREA / PLEASE TAKE YOUR LITTER HOME” (58). Hilariously, the sign fooled both other graffiti artists and the federal agents across the street (60). Through this work which blends official typography and diction with a counter-discourse, Banksy offers a subtle critique of assumptions of governmental control of public spaces and who gets to share what where. By evoking the frames of various societal assumptions (of government, decorum, public spaces, etc), Banksy creates a dialogic space out of a strictly controlled medium. Likewise, the culture jamming promoted by Adbusters may at first appear self-aggrandizing since it circulates the culture jamming ideals only on the page, producing arm-chair jammers; however, it often shifts the focus from reading to action through directions to cut out pages and post them in public spaces as well (thereby at the very least prompting mental simulation of the actions). Through this encouragement of active social engagement, the social sphere becomes a space of textual competition between the advertisers (and other major sources of cultural imagery, including governments) and the culture jammers and graffiti artists, among many other interested parties. On the streets a conceptual and perceptual war is waging: as McLuhan stated, “World War III will be a guerrilla information war, with no division between military and civilian participation” (qtd in Lasn xviv). A cognitive model of meaning can articulate more clearly the conceptual and perceptual armaments of the warring factions, be they texts, images, colors, or spaces, and who is caught in the crossfire.

_typography and vast swaths of color, rendering the untrained eye illiterate. The conceptual and perceptual work required in deciphering a tag is actually very similar to that of visual poetry, requiring a melding of perceptual and conceptual cues._
5.5 Media Ecology, Posthumanity, and Virtual Realities:

Entering the Electronic Age

While there are many other prevalent multimodal texts,⁹ I want to shift the focus more broadly. To address the various communicative means that shape our cultural and medial environment, we need to go yet further beyond advertising and print culture to discuss media ecology, which I’ve already been sliding towards. Even in name alone this approach prompts an embodied view of people in their environment. The cognitive poetic model I have outlined views embodiment in its most natural sensuousness—bodies, objects, things, forces, etc. However, now we need to move out of the idealized evolutionary savannah of proprioceptive experiences into the electronic, technological age we live in, where these bodies are far more complexly engaged with. The cognitive view of embodiment is not outdone here, but extended, by articulating the aspects of the rich techno-informational environment which motivate meanings.¹⁰ By articulating how we engage with this environment and the medial technologies that construct it and the conceptual and perceptual meanings they reinforce, the cognitive research is again helpful.

Frank Zingrone, a media ecologist, argues that all mediums and information are manifest within a tension between simplicity and complexity, what he calls a state of symplexity. He suggests that our minds work to take disparate information and assimilate and simplify it in meaningful ways:

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⁹ One example I must acknowledge is the cubist layout of newspapers (McLuhan Mechanical 3; McCaffery and Nichol 63) which lends itself to a discussion of form and meaning, this time along the lines of the metaphor SIZE IS IMPORTANCE and relations of content to the figure-ground and proximal aspects.

¹⁰ See Gibbs Embodiment for a largely relevant discussion of how these layers interdigitate.
This simplifying aspect of cognition suggests that the entire point of consciousness is its role in establishing equilibrium between the simple and the complex...through our use of pattern recognition. Patterns are dynamic, organic, and alive. (44-5)

Zingrone’s description rings of the extensively documented process of conceptual compression by Fauconnier and Turner in *The Way We Think*, through which we blend common experiences and information to comprehensible and manageable components (for example, our circular concept of time present on a watch), and the conceptual and perceptual processes of frame construction. It is only when necessary that we decompress the information through metonymic highlighting, frame evocation, or symbolic interpretation. In this way, much of what Zingrone describes is the embodied mind at work in a complex environment.\footnote{Interestingly, Zingrone does much of this only from a few older texts: one from 1971 by the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler and a couple of other psychoanalytic discussions of language from the early 80s. More recent research will help nuance Zingrone’s argument greatly.} Zingrone employs an older conception of embodiment as largely a socio-discourse phenomenon (via Butler and others) which the cognitive literature now undergirds and qualifies. Importantly, by shifting the focus more directly on simulative and proprioceptive aspects of meaning, the cognitive poetic model can help detail how electronic media motivate specific communicative experiences rather than chaos, making some of Zingrone’s (and some other humanist media ecologists’ like Postman’s) conclusions less apocalyptic by locating agency within the conceptual and perceptual constructs that are employed within them. While the dictum, “[a] medium is a technology within which a culture grows” (Postman 10), emphasizes the aspects of technologies that construct and constrain meanings (a very iconic view of technology), it often removes the agency of the embodied mind engaging with the technology. While some media ecologists seem to believe that technology prescribes or creates its own meaning, which McLuhan decried as “techno-somnambulism” (qtd in Graves-Brown 3), it is rather the embodied mind engaging with it that derives or affords it...
meaning. A simple example to point to is our programming of computer technology with regular office features like desktops, folders, and trash cans, all of which experientially extend our bodies into the virtual spaces. These iconic mappings are motivated by our embodied minds engaging with the potentialities the technology affords and the functions we wish it to engage in. Computers an information technology are ordered in such a way as to mimic our experiential knowledge of spaces in which this happens, allowing our minds to easily simulate the appropriate, even if virtual, actions and responses to features within that new system. While the technology certainly facilitates more easily some expressions and actions over others, it certainly doesn’t create these. The manipulation of things and the meanings they are ascribed, either materially or virtually, are a product of the embodied mind at work. All too often the body-mind and its experiential knowledge is lost in these discussions, relegating meaning somehow to the disembodied movement of things or capital without the materially informed minds that ascribe them value. Hayles notes in her discussion of virtuality and cybernetics that

> Although researchers in the physical and human sciences acknowledged the importance of materiality in different ways, they nevertheless collaborated in creating the postmodern ideology that the body’s materiality is secondary to the logical or semiotic structures it encodes. (192)

The humanities has fallen under this same misidentification of the body as semiotically insignificant (Rohrer “Body” 339). Cognitive poetics offers a way of articulating the significance of the “body’s materiality” that permeates the broad meaningful structures of our lives, both images and texts, actions and things, virtual and material.
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Appendix

A schematic of possible routes (other than 1 through 12) through *The Martyrology, Book 5* (from Hlibchuk 90).