COGNITIVE ECOLOGY & VISUAL POETRY:
TOWARD A MULTIMODAL COGNITIVE POETICS

by

MICHAEL BORKENT

B.A., The University of Victoria, 2004
B.Ed. (Secondary), The University of Victoria, 2007
M.A., The University of British Columbia, 2009

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)
April 2015

© Michael Borkent, 2015
Abstract

In this dissertation I offer a new approach to North American visual poetry. I develop an eco-cognitive analysis of visual poetic features and bring them into critical dialogue with other literary genres. I focus primarily on the Canadian tradition and reception of visual poetry, using it as a helpful microcosm for discussions of poetic influence and critical engagement, while also bringing it into dialogue with experimental and lyrical transnational Anglophone poetry and poetics.

I propose an interdisciplinary methodology that addresses visual poetry as a hybrid of verbal, visual, and tactile modes of communication. I discuss visual poetry from the perspective of conceptual mechanisms that produce specific interpretive possibilities, thereby offering a more robust account of how visual poems specifically interact with the materiality of print culture.

I begin by defining multimodal literature and visual poetry and outlining a multimodal approach to media that bridges traditional poetic and hermeneutic approaches. I propose a model of cognitive ecology as a framework that meets the needs of visual poetic criticism. In particular, I rely on research into perception, mental simulation, and conceptual integration to show how communicative modalities are transformed to yield synthetic multimodal understandings of hybrid texts. Furthermore, I consider common cognitive biases to expose the underlying fallacious assumptions in several poetic, critical, and popular approaches to visual poetry in Canada and abroad. I then show how my eco-cognitive framework offers a more productive understanding of the interactions between modalities. I offer critical tools which view the poems as multimodal anchors for conceptualization, thereby distinguishing between multimodal textuality and the readerly experience of it.

Finally, I develop a theory of cognitive improvisation which addresses how even illegible or abstract cues in visual poetry can prompt meaningful interpretations. I argue that all experiences of texts involve some level of cognitive improvisation, but that visual poetry foregrounds this aspect of everyday creativity. Finally, I show how this multimodal cognitive poetics extends naturally to other forms of multimodal literature, especially comics and graphic novels.
Preface

This dissertation contains original, primarily unpublished, independent research by the author, Michael (Mike) Borkent.

Permissions have been sought for all figures included in this dissertation. Copyright, along with my gratitude, remains with the authors and estates:

A much shorter version of Chapter 5 has been published as “Visual Improvisation: Cognition, Materiality, and Postlinguistic Visual Poetry” by Mike Borkent in Visible Language 48.3 (2014): 4-27. I thank Visible Language for their kind permission to include that material here.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii
Preface .................................................................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents............................................................................................................. iv
List of Figures....................................................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ ix
Dedication ............................................................................................................................. xi

## Chapter 1 - Multimodal Literatures & Literary Criticism ................. 1

1.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................... 1
1.2 Multimodal Literatures ................................................................................................. 4
   1.2.1 What is Visual Poetry? ......................................................................................... 7
   1.2.2 Canadian Visual Poetry ....................................................................................... 13
1.3 Methods and Modalities .............................................................................................. 19
   1.3.1 Critical Approaches: Poetics and Hermeneutics .................................................... 19
   1.3.2 Hybrid Media and Multimodality ....................................................................... 23
1.4 Toward a Multimodal Cognitive Poetics ................................................................. 27
   1.4.1 Overview of Subsequent Chapters ....................................................................... 34

## Chapter 2 - Cognitive Ecology & Multimodal Meaning .................. 38

2.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................... 38
2.2 Cognitive Ecology and Material Culture ..................................................................... 44
   2.2.1 Intersubjectivity and Construal ......................................................................... 51
2.3 Attenuated Cognition and Mental Simulation ............................................................ 56
2.4 Cognitive Phenomena ................................................................................................. 64
   2.4.1 Niches, Attention, and Affordances: Material Possibilities ................................ 67
   2.4.2 Fictivity .............................................................................................................. 71
   2.4.3 Gestalts, Image Schemas, and Primary Scenes ..................................................... 73
   2.4.4 Frames and Domains ......................................................................................... 78
   2.4.5 Dissonance: Frame Conflict and Frame Shifting ................................................. 83
2.5 Blending and Creativity ............................................................................................... 86
2.6 Cognitive Ecology and Multimodal Literatures ....................................................... 90

## Chapter 3 - Visual Poetic Fallacies, Contexts, & Cognition ............. 94

3.1 Reading Alternatives ................................................................................................. 94
3.2 Reading the Horizons of the Publishable ......................................................... 96
3.3 Intermedia and Representational Fallacies ....................................................... 104
3.4 Materiality and Literary Scenes ........................................................................ 112
  3.4.1 Print Hybridity and the Rise of Visual Poetry ............................................. 112
  3.4.2 Art Manifestoes and Visual Poetry .............................................................. 121
  3.4.3 Clean and Dirty Visual Poetry .................................................................. 130
  3.4.4 Late Canadian Visual Poetry .................................................................... 135
3.5 Canadian Heterodoxy and Poetic Politics ......................................................... 144
  3.5.1 Experimentation and Heterodoxy ............................................................... 144
  3.5.2 Lazy Jerkism: Poetic Politics and the Conduit Fallacy ............................... 156

Chapter 4 - Multimodal Poetic Anchors in Cognitive Ecology .................. 163
  4.1 Visual Poetry and Multimodal Anchors ......................................................... 163
  4.2 An H in the Heart: Gestalt Phenomena ......................................................... 168
    4.2.1 Barbara Caruso’s Postmodern Memorial ................................................. 170
    4.2.2 Rob Read and the Ascension of St. Art .................................................. 175
  4.3 Landscapes: Embodied Viewpoints ............................................................... 181
    4.3.1 Pondwise Barwin and beaulieu .............................................................. 183
    4.3.2 Gustave Morin’s Atomic Traversals ......................................................... 187
  4.4 Cartographic Subjects: Distanced Viewpoints .............................................. 195
    4.4.1 jw curry and peggy lefier’s Complex City .............................................. 196
    4.4.2 Daniel f. Bradley’s Traveler .................................................................. 207
  4.5 Textualizing Material Culture ....................................................................... 213
    4.5.1 Jesse Patrick Ferguson Materializes the Mind ........................................ 213
    4.5.2 Helen Hajnoczky’s Corsetry ................................................................. 219
    4.5.3 Helen Hajnoczky’s Folk Artistry .............................................................. 223
  4.6 Reading Seeing Readers ................................................................................. 227

Chapter 5 - Cognitive Improvisation & Postlinguistic Visual Poetry .......... 229
  5.1 Postlinguistic Visual Poetry .......................................................................... 230
  5.2 Cognition and Improvisation ....................................................................... 238
    5.2.1 Improvisational Creation ....................................................................... 241
    5.2.2 Fictivity and Improvisational Reading .................................................... 246
  5.3 Typographical Postlinguistic Visual Poetry .................................................... 250
    5.3.1 beaulieu’s Machinic Disruptions ............................................................. 250
    5.3.2 Mancini’s Sculpted Letters ..................................................................... 255
    5.3.3 Judith Copithorne’s i line ....................................................................... 261
  5.4 Bodily Traces: Asemic Postlinguistic Visual Poetry ...................................... 268
    5.4.1: Steve McCaffery’s Need for Speed ....................................................... 273
5.4.2 Klauder’s and Hryciuk’s Crude Gestures......................................................275
5.4.3 David Ellingsen and Michael V. Smith’s Body Poems..............................280
5.5 Postlinguistic Borderblurs: Hybridized and Rematerialized Poems..........283
  5.5.1 Hybrid Poetry: Gary Barwin Creatures Language.....................................284
  5.5.2 Eric Zboya Explodes Language ...................................................................289
  5.5.3 Visual Poetry and Improvisation Revisited..................................................299

Chapter 6 - Cognitive Futures and Borderblur: A Conclusion .................304
  6.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................304
  6.2 Sequential Visual Poems and Comics ...............................................................307
  6.3 Multimodal Questions .....................................................................................321
  6.4 Sensuous Scholarship: Multimodality for All ...............................................325

Bibliography..............................................................................................................329

Appendix A: Colophon ............................................................................................378
# List of Figures

**Figure 1:** Untitled visual poem by bpNichol ................................................................. 3

**Figure 2:** Image-text relational potentialities ................................................................. 26

**Figure 3:** Untitled poem by Steve McCaffery ................................................................. 39

**Figure 4:** “The Creatures That Led to Modern Man” by Rudolph Zallinger .................. 42

**Figure 5:** “Narcissus A, 8” by Paul Dutton .................................................................... 54

**Figure 6:** The duck-rabbit illusion first used by Joseph Jastrow ..................................... 62

**Figure 7:** “Gossip” by Melody Wessel ............................................................................. 70

**Figure 8:** untitled poem by bpNichol .............................................................................. 88

**Figure 9:** untitled visual poem by bpNichol ................................................................. 98

**Figure 10:** The emptied box of bpNichol’s *Still Water* .................................................. 100

**Figure 11:** “Easter Wings” by George Herbert .............................................................. 115

**Figure 12:** Cover image of Bertall’s *ABC. Trim. Alphabet Enchanté* ......................... 116

**Figure 13:** “Christmas Cheer” advertisement in *The Globe* (Toronto), Dec. 15, 1869 .... 117

**Figure 14:** Cover of *Punch in Canada* 1(4), March 2, 1849 .......................................... 117

**Figure 15:** Untitled poem by LeRoy Gorman ............................................................... 133

**Figure 16:** Untitled poem by derek beaulieu ............................................................... 134

**Figure 17:** ”stigation” by jw curry .................................................................................. 139

**Figure 18:** “Wife” by Marita Dachsel ............................................................................ 149

**Figure 19:** Untitled poem by Eugen Gomringer .......................................................... 149

**Figure 20:** “circular logic” by Lindsay Cahill ............................................................... 151

**Figure 21:** “H (An Alphabet)” by bpNichol ................................................................. 169

**Figure 22:** "Against Closure: a drawing for bp" by Barbara Caruso ............................... 173

**Figure 23:** "poem for bpNichol" by Rob Read ............................................................. 176

**Figure 24:** “H for bpNichol” by Christian Bök .............................................................. 180

**Figure 25:** "moon over pond" by Gary Barwin & derek beaulieu .................................... 184

**Figure 26:** "cul de sac at the end of finity" by Gustave Morin ......................................... 188

**Figure 27:** Untitled poem by Gustave Morin ............................................................... 194

**Figure 28:** "metro" by jwcurry and peggy lefler ............................................................ 198
Figure 29: Magnified and reoriented section of “metro” .......................................................... 201
Figure 30: "3 small cities in ontario i have never been to" by Daniel f. Bradley ...................... 209
Figure 31: "Black Noise" by Jesse Patrick Ferguson ........................................................... 214
Figure 32: “Viau’s Corsets” by Helen Hajnoczky ............................................................... 220
Figure 33: Untitled poem by Helen Hajnoczky ................................................................. 224
Figure 34: untitled poem by derek beaulieu ....................................................................... 234
Figure 35: Untitled poem from *Alphamiricon* by Brian Henderson .................................. 245
Figure 36: Example of fictive change simulation for top-most letter in Figure 34 ............... 248
Figure 37: Possible fictive motion paths for Figure 34 ....................................................... 250
Figure 38: untitled poem by derek beaulieu ....................................................................... 251
Figure 39: “The Jazzercise Dance of Hope” by Donato Mancini ........................................ 256
Figure 40: “Literature Prefers Metaphor” by Donato Mancini ........................................... 260
Figure 41: "The Letter i" by Judith Copithorne ..................................................................... 261
Figure 42: “A-FRACTAL” by Christian Bök ........................................................................ 267
Figure 43: An unnumbered page from the 15th century Voynich Manuscript .................... 270
Figure 44: Untitled calligraphic poem by Brion Gysin ...................................................... 272
Figure 45: “Graphetic Study Seven” by Steve McCaffery .................................................. 273
Figure 46: Untitled poem by Gerard J. Klauder ................................................................. 277
Figure 47: “clouded sulphur” by Marshall Hryciuk ............................................................. 279
Figure 48: Untitled poem by David Ellingsen and Michael V. Smith ................................. 281
Figure 49: Untitled poem by Gary Barwin .......................................................................... 285
Figure 50: “Alphabetic 6” by Eric Zboya ............................................................................. 290
Figure 51: Untitled page from *Flatland* by derek beaulieu .............................................. 295
Figure 52: “life” by Mike Borkent ....................................................................................... 309
Figure 53: “thers 2 much in my hed agen inklewding th rocks” by bill bissett ................. 310
Figure 54: “Hike” by Jillian Tamaki .................................................................................... 316
**Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, mentorship, and friendship of Barbara Dancygier. My thanks to Sherrill Grace and Vin Nardizzi, who have unfailingly provided supportive, critical, and encouraging feedback throughout the development of this work, as well as substantial doses of moral support. Of course, even with their careful attention to my work, all errors, omission, and irregularities found here are my own. I must also acknowledge my intellectual debt to Stephen Scobie for introducing me to bpNichol's visual poetry many years ago, and to Les Eleanor for introducing me to the joys of literary studies in the first place.

I will always be thankful to members of the TA “Beer Summit” and the Dissertation Writing Group, whose friendship and support throughout the course of my MA and PhD are immeasurable: Sarah Crover, Mark Diotte, Genevieve Gagne-Hawes, John Green, Paisley Mann, Eve Preus—you are the best! I dedicate the use of George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” in Chapter 3 to Mark and Genevieve (it also happens to be relevant to the chapter). Genevieve’s typically well-honed response to this inclusion: “Goddamn it, George Herbert. Always creepin’ in.” Thanks for all the good times you guys!

I thank the many poets and academics that have inspired my research, and for my family and friends who have sustained it through the years. Your ongoing interest and encouragement have meant a lot. I thank Lieven Vandelanotte and Eve Sweetser for their ongoing support and friendship. I extend my sincere gratitude to Alexander Bergs, Peter Schneck, Thomas Hoffman, and Jens Bonk at the Universität Osnabruck. The times spent
there was incredibly productive, inspiring, and enjoyable, in no small part due to the many beers and laughs shared with such good company.

I am indebted to countless conference attendees, chairs, and organizers for the opportunities to test-run my ideas and to be enriched by critical and informative responses. Many graduate students and faculty members in the Department of English have also been sources of inspiration, debate, and support over the years, for which I am grateful. I especially thank my colleagues and friends at Canadian Literature, Margery Fee, Laura Moss, Glenn Deer, Kathryn Grafton, Judy Brown, Donna Chin, Alissa McArthur, and Jamie Paris; it was a true pleasure working with you. I also thank Louise Soga and Dominique Yupangco for years of great support and laughter.

My thanks to the Department of English (UBC) for their support and mentorship, especially through Teaching Assistantships, Pedagogy Workshops, and the Faculty Research Series. I am also grateful to have received the William Royce Butler and Jean Campbell Butler Scholarship and Gabrielle Helms Memorial Graduate Scholarship. Substantial support was also provided by the University of British Columbia and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This research would not have been possible without all of this generous support.

Most importantly, none of this would have amounted to anything if not for the love, inspiration, support, and patience of my love, Brianna Brash-Nyberg, and our daughters, Madeleine and Zoë. They put up with many conference trips, late nights, and tired daytimes, for which I cannot repay.
For Brianna, Madeleine, and Zoë
Chapter 1
Multimodal Literatures & Literary Criticism

We are living through what might be the greatest age of visual poetry.

- Geof Huth

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation originates (1) from my interest in multimodal literatures, in particular visual poetry, (2) in my desire to develop a more comprehensive methodology for its analysis, and (3) in my concern with having these works inform the discourses of poetics dialogue to produce a wider, more varied, and clear view of the issues. Since multimodal literatures—such as the following untitled visual poem by bpNichol (Figure 1)—combine verbal, visual, and material modalities to prompt meanings, I draw from a range of literary, art, and cognitive theories and criticism, especially from research in cognitive science pertaining to how people understand and interpret visual, verbal, and other modalities. This interdisciplinary approach adds to the emerging, interdisciplinary field of cognitive poetics by developing an empirically-informed theoretical model of multimodal reader comprehension. Cognitive poetics is motivated by similar questions to what Benjamin Bergen presents as motivating recent studies in cognitive semantics:

1 Huth (2008, n.p.).

2 Cognitive poetics now includes a number of more specific domains of interest. For instance, Stockwell (2009) advocates for a “cognitive stylistics” approach, Oakley (2009) for “cognitive
maybe what does X mean? is the wrong question, or at best maybe it’s only part of the question. Perhaps the real question is what are the understanding processes that X invokes? How you put the pieces together and what steps you go through once you’ve assembled them may be equally important as what the pieces are like themselves. (2012, 150)

Bergen’s questions helpfully redirect analytical approaches to examine both readerly experiences of textuality (what Stockwell (2009) calls “texture”) and the underlying mechanisms that produce it.

I follow this reorientation to questions of meaning by developing a cognitive poetic framework and analyzing a variety of visual poems. Throughout the discussion, I argue against iconophobic ideals that linger in criticism and the general literary community, that tend to value the verbal modality over other visual and material modes of communication. Rather, I argue for a more dynamic, interactive and synthetic approach that examines how different modal cues motivate specific readings. Throughout this discussion, I show how visual poems strategically employ connections between perception and conceptualization.

rhetoric,” and Herman (2003, 2010) for “cognitive narratology.” Richardson (2004) offers a helpful overview of a range of these distinctive interests and methodologies. With this wide array of interests, it is at times difficult to say exactly what cognitive poetics is; however, recent years has shown a convergence on embodiment, mental simulation, and conceptual integration theory (blending) as central elements of cognitive cultural studies, areas of research I synthesize in the following chapter. The wide number of papers on these topics at recent conferences in 2013, such as the 1st International Conference on the Cognitive Humanities in Wales, and the Cognition and Poetics conference in Germany, suggest the growing recognition of the importance of these concepts.
processes to prompt responses in readers in a way that cannot value one mode over the other but must engage with them through their hybridity. Through this model I trace the processes of readerly creativity involved in developing interpretations of these hybrid works. As such, visual poems invite creative interrogations of their forms and modes through their overt, material manipulations of various aspects of the print (and occasionally digital) medium.

**Figure 1**: Untitled visual poem by bpNichol (1990, n.p.).

In this chapter, I begin by defining multimodal literatures and visual poetry and locate several challenges for their reception by both popular and scholarly audiences. I discuss how several major critics have called for a reunification of formalist approaches to literature (poetics) with critical hermeneutics to produce a “robust” poetics. The hybridity of visual poetry necessitates such an approach, but only with a more nuanced discussion of poetics and hermeneutics in relation to modalities and media, turning often language-focused practices towards their material substrates. I then show how a multimodal cognitive poetics presents a coherent framework that attends to both the reading experience, in all its modal and material richness, and the mechanisms that make it possible. I then present,
through a brief overview of the following chapters, how I address key issues relating to visual poetry through this multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach.

1.2 Multimodal Literatures

Multimodal literatures, as their name denotes, are literary artifacts constructed through the use of multiple modalities. Multimodality is best defined as “the multiplicity of semiotic resources within a particular artefact or event. It insists on combination and integration in semiosis, rather than on modes working in isolation” (Gibbons 2012, 5). For example, linguistically constructed texts, such as the traditional novel or poem, employ primarily one particular modality, whereas texts that include more than one modality (such as the combination of drawn lines and words in bpNichol’s poem above) for constructing meaning are multimodal. I will discuss shortly how modalities typically work together to some degree or another, and are not nearly as isolated as they might appear—after all even a printed novel employs visible language (type) to communicate. For now, the division between monomodal and multimodal works is helpful in denoting a general quality in how readers perceive them. Alison Gibbons advocates considering multimodal literatures as a spectrum of different forms, which vary based on their modal usages (3). She focuses on experimental novels, and here I focus on visual poetry, extending the discussion. I could of course have also included a range of other texts under the rubric of multimodal literatures: comics and graphic novels, experimental novels, children’s books, photo essays, artist books, advertisements, emblems, websites, and so on. (I do nod toward comics in the final chapter, but only briefly, by way of example of possible future developments.)
I follow Alison Gibbons (2012) in using *multimodal literature* as shorthand for this range of creative artifacts. I also use it somewhat hesitantly. Combining *multimodal* and *literature* together should not be read as a critical prioritization of the “literariness” of these works, which traditionally emphasizes the grounding of meaning in language and literacy (and often with an emphasis on figurative language). Rather, literature is used here to refer to conceptual and poetic affinities to and interactions with literary practices, linguistic and bibliographic assumptions, and other domains of overlap with traditional literary production. At the same time, each form of multimodal literature exploits different features of modalities and mediation in unique ways, and in the case of visual poetry often develops a self-reflexive, parodic, and destabilized quality to the works. Thus, multimodal literatures function as a general group through their common employment of visual, verbal, and manual modalities for meaning construction, but they often explore their subjects through different hybrid representational strategies. What has been said of comics can easily extend to other multimodal literatures as well: they are “their own thing” (Wolk 2007, 14; see Ch 1) with their own unique forms and genres. Multimodal literatures are a synthetic art form that blurs the borders between traditional visual, verbal, manual, and kinesthetic arts. I do not feel it

---

3 I hope to avoid here an analogous rendition of the erroneous over-usage of the term “graphic novel” and the resultant debates that have ensued over when it is applicable. In that case, many comics are not graphic novels, even when published in a long form (the term implies that all of them are of significant length and complexity and are fictitious), but rather include a wide array of lengths, formats, and both fictional and non-fictional content. While “multimodal literatures” is helpful, more distinctions will continue to need to be made between the different forms that fall within this umbrella term.
necessary to make claims about how multimodal literatures are and are not literature, which would be more self-justifying than helpful (and, honestly, who can really define what literature is?). Rather, I seek to show how visual poetry prompts complex conceptualization processes while interrogating received notions of language and communication. Such challenges are often considered the domain of literature, and as such, this dissertation asserts the literariness of visual poems simply by attending closely to their complexity.

Multimodal literatures provide a fascinating type of literary artifact that has often been excluded from critical purview, likely due to its exploitation and exploration of modalities and representation, experimenting with the traditional parameters of narrativity and poetics as defined by language and literacy through and through. As book history scholars like Jerome McGann (1991; 1993) and George Bornstein (2001) argue, the material conditions of production and presentation, and many other issues surrounding editing and development, play a significant role in how literature is defined, read, and interpreted. Similarly, literary and cultural critics are turning more and more towards multimodal sources and recognizing the limitations of the “literacy myth,” which places the understanding of visible language as the marker of true civility and progress (Graff 2011). Scholars in cultural and Indigenous studies argue that assumptions relating to literature and literacy are directly tied to colonial notions of cultural nationalism and progress and ignore the many other material and performative ways that cultural ways of knowing are represented and
propagated (Teuton 2010). Focusing on multimodal meaning construction, as I do here in relation to visual poetry, recognizes the importance of these different modes within a coherent model of comprehension. The breadth of representational styles within visual poetry alone reveals the inherent complexity of multimodal literatures (and other forms of multimodal communication) that requires a flexible critical methodology. To address the challenges and questions these works present to contemporary literary critics I enact a double-agenda: (1) I provide a cognitive-analytic methodology to illustrate the complexity of conceptualizations prompted by visual poetry, and (2) I show how visual poems offer crucial contributions to literary studies by exposing key questions pertaining to expressivity, modalities, mediation, and the role of the reader in navigating this complex multimodal terrain.

1.2.1 What is Visual Poetry?

Visual poetry provides a particularly useful type of multimodal literature through which to explore different issues of multimodality because of the diversity of its hybrid forms that blend or integrate the modes to varying degrees while also remaining relatively short. Thus, a wide array of forms and modal interactions can be engaged with relatively quickly.

---

4 For instance, Gingell and Roy (2012) argue for the employment of the term “orature” to recognize Indigenous non-literate (as in not documented in visible language) forms of storytelling and poetry performance which fall outside of the domain of literature and literacy, but which are none-the-less complex multimodal performances of cultural history and identity. We could also add “visuoture” or the like to acknowledge the range of the glyphic and iconic visual lexicons that inform most cultures.
Here, I should note that I am employing the specific phrase “visual poetry” rather than an older phrase often considered to be a synonym: “concrete poetry.” While visually informed works were initially popularized through the International Concrete Poetry Movement (to be discussed more in Chapter 3), concrete poetry has since come to include other forms of materially and modally-focused experimental works, such as sound and kinesthetic poetry (Balan 2002). Thus, concrete poetry has become a general term that includes several forms of materialist poetry, including the more specific form of visual poetry. Several of the poets discussed in this dissertation are involved in more than one form of concrete poetry, and as such, could also be called concrete poets, but since I am focusing primarily on one aspect of their work, and for the sake of clarity, I refer to them as visual poets.

Visual poems are “an ongoing return to and encounter with the creative ground state and the charged space of the working surface” (McElroy 2000, 10), a surface that affords a range of material and modal opportunities for expression and play. As multimodal compositions, these works employ verbal, visual (which includes typography, drawings, and spatial arrangements), and occasionally kinesthetic or manual elements (such as page turns, size, and bindings) to construct meanings. Visual poetry often reflect the spectrum of interactions that W.J.T. Mitchell refers to as “image/text,” “image-text,” and “imagetext” in
*Picture Theory* (see 1994, 89 n9), in order to illustrate the disparate, composite, or synthetic relations (respectively) between modalities.

However, as I show throughout the examples in this dissertation, the relations between modalities often transform as readers engage with a poem, and thus, the form plays dual or multiple signifying roles in the unfolding development of comprehension. For instance, in the example from bpNichol above, are these just curved lines that guide us to construct the frog from the fragments of other words, or are they also the pond’s embankment and the frog’s trajectory into the pond? Likewise, is *fr* just a word fragment, or a tuft of grass on the embankment and an incomplete glimpse of the frog before it disappears into the water, to linger in the mental ears of the viewer only as pure sound? Through this multimodality and flexibility, such works pose substantial questions to literary critics. For instance, how do we articulate the communicability of forms and images in conjunction with literary and linguistic forms, especially when such forms seem to be duplicitous? Which approaches help in the critical analysis of distinctions and connections between modes, and which hamper it? What readerly dispositions inform the interpretation of simultaneous uses of different modes, and how do these impact modal relations as meaning is constructed in the “reading” process? How do these associations reflect connections between perceptual and conceptual processes, and how does this engage with issues of seeing, reading, and

---

5 Other models of image-text relations are also available, but are less supportive of critical analysis. For example, Richard Kostelanetz (1970) offers the dichotomy of “imaged words” and “worded images,” but I find this maintains a sense of one modality always dominating the other rather than the spectral hybridity that I wish to affirm.
understanding? How can we approach these complex and dynamic connections and inferences critically? Jack David notes in a general introduction to bpNichol’s concrete poetry, that

[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. (1980, 17)

Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, in their popular Notes On Conceptualisms (2013 [2009]), describe conceptual writing—a theoretical and creative practice in which contemporary visual poetry participates—in similar ways. They observe that “conceptual writing is allegorical writing” through which “words have been given ontological heft as things” (13). They go on to show how conceptual poetry is richly invested in materiality, which includes attending to the networks of “prosody / book-object/page-object / language / external context(s) / internal text(ures)” (43). Such a focus means that, “Collage, pastiche, procedure, constraint, performance, citation, documentation, and appropriation (part or whole) may be techniques used in conceptual writing” (43). Such modes of creation that undergird this materialist allegorical writing are clearly employed to construct many of the visual poems featured in this dissertation. With language and imagery functioning in such allegorical and transfigured ways, how do we best analyze this multiplicity or conflation of representations through this compression of modes and meanings?
To return to the previous poem, Nichol’s seemingly simple visual translation of Bashō’s most famous haiku⁶ (see Bashō 2004; Aiken 2003; Britton 2002, 10) opens up the methodological problems of describing cross-modal representations and elucidating the synthetic, complex, and dynamic understandings derived from them. At the same time, an illusory simplicity clothes this complexity such that many readers do not realize how much they infer and unpack from these prompts in order to understand them, which can lead to the hasty dismissal of texts like this as banal, gimmicky, and childish. This raises the two-fold challenge of addressing, (1) how readers can come, often quite easily, to complex interpretations of prompts like those that construct the frog, and, (2) how critics might unpack the underlying complexities of this synthetic process in order to engage in closer analysis of multimodal literatures.⁷

Visual theorists have refuted the logocentrism of the “linguistic turn” (Mitchell 1994, 11), which regards visuality as “a point of peculiar friction and discomfort” (13). As such, these critics have pushed others to engage more holistically with how they describe form and

---

⁶ This poem in particular has been visually translated and reconfigured in a variety of ways by a range of visual poets, such as in the works of Barwin and Beaulieu (2005), Hryciuk (2010), and McCaffery (2007). The focus on this particular poem is in no small part due to bpNichol’s many visual translations of it, including Fig. 1.1, themselves inspired by Dom Sylvester Houedard’s own visual translation (qtd. in McCaffery’s epigraphs (2007, n.p.)). I refer to these visual poems as “transaptations” (Borkent, under review) as they both translate and adapt qualities of Bashō’s poem as well as prior visual poetic engagements. For a thorough reading of bpNichol’s poem, see Borkent (2010).

⁷ See Borkent (2010) for a detailed analysis of this poem.
meaning, recognizing a meaningfulness to forms that dissolves the easy form/meaning dualism.

Defining visual poetry based solely on distinct formalist properties is like defining comics in the same way: “impossible” (Groensteen 2007, 12-17). Some practitioners and theorists turn to the notion of “borderblur,” drawn from Don Sylvester Houédard and popularized in Canada by bpNichol (1970, 78; see Balan 1999; 2002; Emerson 2011; Scobie 1984), or the somewhat self-explanatory notion of “intermedia” developed by Dick Higgins (1965; cf Pineda 1995; Reis 1996). Stephen Scobie suggests that these ideas reflect a common self-referential feature of modern arts which seek to “examine the limits of [their] own existence” (1985, 442). Jacques Ranciere (2007) calls this self-referential turn the basis of a new “aesthetic regime,” that emphasizes the participatory role of the reader-viewer. Yet Johanna Drucker notes the inadequacy of linguistic analysis “to confront the synthetic sensibility of the present” and questions “the processes of signification so essential to these projects as they are conceived of in aesthetic terms” (1998, 13). The qualities of visual poetry

---

8 Canadian poet Stephen Cain uses “borderblur” as the title for the only section of visual poetry in his mixed-poetics book (Cain 2005), and it similarly informs Wershler-Henry’s book tribute to bpNichol, Nicholodeon (1997), indicating that this term still exhibits both theoretic and poetic appeal.

9 I should note that many critics when discussing borderblur or intermedia usually refer to the visual and performing arts, such as the works seen in Morely’s (2003), Weiner’s (2000), and Sanders and Bernstein’s (2001) compilations rather than to more popular arts like comics. For instance, Dick Higgins doesn’t include comics in his discussion (1965) or subsequent chart (Higgins 1995) of intermedia, even though they were exceptionally popular throughout this timeframe and very relevant to his discussion.
are often described or illustrated in terms of generic slippage and overlap that produce a sense of indeterminancy and “radical artifice” (Perloff 1991) caused through traditional models of generic and linguistic typological containment. At the same time, a logocentric perspective cannot sufficiently address how in visual poetry “metaphor has become a tool of both form and content” (Beiman, 1974, 200) through which “meaning … is multiplied” (221), such as the features discussed of bpNichol’s fr-o-g poem above. While scholars of visual poetry actively discuss the textual phenomena of synthesis and multiplicity, how such experiences of texts arise remains largely unexplored. Understanding how readers interact with different mediated modalities to construct poetic meanings, including knowledge of writerly and readerly expectations, uses, and interpretations (see Reddy 1979; Devitt 1993; Lakoff 1987), presents a gap in knowledge that must be filled in order for a more comprehensive engagement with such works.

### 1.2.2 Canadian Visual Poetry

In order to maintain a focus on styles of image-text interaction and comprehension within a somewhat distinct socio-cultural, literary, and historical context, I limit my engagement primarily to Canadian visual poetry in English. The Canadian poems present a helpful microcosm (with unique influences, traditions, and understandings of such works) of a wider, transnational poetic movement. Of course, international influences and ongoing poetic interactions influence the Canadian poets, and they in turn add to ongoing transnational developments in visual poetry and other experimental poetries. Visual poets play an important part in the wider “conceptualist” movement, which includes the appropriative and processual traditions of Fluxus, Oulipo, Flarf, and other experimental and
postmodern approaches that focus on documents and communicative artifacts (especially writing) as objects for remodeling and interrogation.

At the national and regional levels, individual connections, literary networks, and publishing ventures inform expressions and connections. Furthermore, the history of avant-gardism in Canada laid the groundwork for the experimental work of visual poetry (Betts 2013); after all, “avant-gardes arts communities[] are not discrete or closed communities” (7). bpNichol, a crucial figure in the development of the Canadian visual poetry tradition and in connecting Canada with the international visual poetic scene, reflects that “i [sic] could go on forever giving you that sense that there were purely canadian [sic] roots [that] helped lend us all off in this direction” (bpNichol 1972, n.p.). To a significant extent, it can be claimed that there is a coherent Canadian stream within the wider, transnational visual poetic movement.

As Jars Balan describes, the Canadian (as location)-specific roots for visual poetic experimentation are long, going back to Indigenous petroglyphic and sculptural arts (1999, 9). Much more recently, Balan describes three waves of development, which parallels Caroline Bayard’s (1989) much more detailed discussion of “new poetries” in Canada, which unfold largely along generational lines. The first wave of modern and early postmodern visual poetic expressions include works by Brion Gysin, Earle Birney, Margaret Avison, Colleen Thibaudeau, Phyllis Webb, and others (see Balan 1999, 9-13). Arguably, the popular work of Marshall McLuhan on media in the 1950s and 60s—and especially his visual essays, such as The Medium is the Massage with Quentin Fiore (1967), which enact his critical philosophy—played an important role in affirming these visual poetic developments. During this time, the International Concrete Poetry Movement, was developing a variety of models of how visual poetry functions. As I discuss in Chapter 3, these models tended to focus on more direct,
mimetic interactions between visual and verbal qualities of poems. Caroline Bayard argues that this mimeticism reflects an embrace of the iconic fallacy (1989, 22-34) and dismisses such works as largely an adolescent playfulness prior to the development of proper postmodern poetry in Canada. However, Marjorie Perloff (2007a) rightly argues against Bayard’s dismissal of early concrete poetry, showing, rather, that it established a productive discourse in which to explore cross-modal interactions in meaning construction. Perloff suggests that our contemporary new media culture has continued to support visual poetic developments through a growing valuing of hybrid discursive forms. These early practitioners kick-started an ongoing hybrid movement.

Second wave of Canadian visual poetry, which began in the late 1960s and blazed throughout the 1970s, drew wider attention from poets and their readers, and flourished especially under the inspiration and active mentoring and publishing work of poet bpNichol. This literary scene, inspired by the International Concrete Poetry Movement, is when visual poetry firmly established itself as a poetic movement in Canada, developing creative practices and affinity networks across the nation. Poets like George Bowering, Judith Copithorne, David UU, John Riddell, jwcurry, peggy lefler, and a wide range of others continued to foster experimental approaches in Canadian poetry. As I discuss as well in Chapter 3, this lateness to the visual poetic scene came with some benefits for how creators theorized their engagement with the materiality of print culture. Small press support, especially the crucial support of Coach House Books, of individual works and anthologies helped establish the place of visual poetry in Canada by the early 1970s. Important publishing ventures, such as the small press connections between bpNichol (grOnk and Ganglia presses and Coach House Books in Toronto) and bill bissett (blewointment press in Vancouver), illustrate how
aesthetic ventures linked poets across the country and supported its rapid development (see Francis 1967; Francis 1973; Nichol 1972). These presses helped consolidate a literary presence that facilitated connections abroad as well (Sharpe 1999). As I discuss in Chapter 3, through these interactions, a particularly Canadian style of visual poetry emerged, which emphasized more open and dynamic meanings.

The popularity of visual poetry at this time, however, was fleeting in its scholarly reception. To my knowledge Stephen Scobie’s essential book on bpNichol (1984), Bayard’s more dismissive assessment of concretism (1989), and Clément Moisan’s (1983) uneven comparative history were the sole monographs to critically engage with the Canadian movement, along with a few more papers sprinkled across the major journals. Jars Balan (1999) illustrates the brief scholarly engagement with visual poetry through its reflection across several editions of Gary Geddes’ popular anthology 20th Century Poetry and Poetics, which included visual poetry in the 1969 and 1973 editions but which drops any hint of it in 1985. Geddes removed the visual poetry because “the poetic groups and movements of this century now seemed to him less important than the brilliance and performance of their best practitioners” (Butling and Rudy 2005, 74; see 78 n.34), thereby suggesting that visual poetry had not withstood the test of time. “In the fourth edition, published in 1996, a sampling from Nichol was restored to illustrate the concrete phenomenon, at least acknowledging that it was part of the history of twentieth century poetry” (Balan 1999, 14). That poems by bpNichol

10 See (Scobie 1985), (Jaeger 1999), (Henderson 1989)
serve this token function reveals his dominant role in the visual poetic community, especially in Canada. However, it also shows how visual poetry has remained largely excluded from conversations about Anglophone poetry and poetics. I present one reason why this exclusion has happened as part of Chapter 3.

The third wave of visual poetry in Canada began largely as a generational shift in the 1980s, which continued to be influenced by the second wave poets. Since this shift, the movement continues to develop in theoretical sophistication and poetic complexity as a postmodern and radical approach to the materiality of signification. Poets like Christian Bök, derek beaulieu, Helen Hajnoczky, and Donato Mancini (among many others) continue to interrogate their practices from a range of positions, including poststructuralist, postmodern, and feminist theories. Poets continue to explore modal and medial possibilities, especially those which have grown through advances in digital (and printing) technologies and changing social and cultural conditions. As Susan Rudy (2010) notes, such “radical poetries” continue to open up possibilities for meaning-construction by enacting complex critical positions on and through the materiality of language. As I discuss in Chapter 3, a growing heterodoxy in Canadian poetry likely traces back to the materialist focus of visual poets and their ongoing interrogations of modes of representation. This materialist inclination will likely continue to grow as the materials for creation continue to diversify, including through access to archaic as well as high-tech creation methods. Most of the visual poems in this dissertation come from these second and third wave poets.

Throughout these ongoing developments, small, micro, and self-publishing ventures have sustained the visual poetic and wider “radical” poetic community (Butling and Rudy 2005). Just like early on with bpNichol’s grOnk and Ganglia presses, bill bissett’s
blewointmentpress, and jw curry’s Curved H&Z press, recent presses like derek beaulieu’s House and No Presses and Marshall Hyruciuk’s Neitsche’s Brolly continue to promote and sustain ongoing poetic explorations, regionally and transnationally. The differences in business models for small press and self-publishing likely allow for very different forms of work to find an audience, giving more freedom (but with a more limited distribution) to such works. Small presses have sustained visual poetry across the waves of its development in Canada. As I discuss in Chapter 4, this has led to important intertextual connections between Canadian authors. It also presents a challenge to critics hoping to access a particular artist’s works, since this wide range of materials is often difficult or nearly impossible to find, as many texts, especially micro-published works, elude the bookstores and even the archives.

It is important to note that while focusing on the Canadian literary scene, the avant garde community has always been transnational, such as through the influence in particular of European, Brazilian, American, and British creators, and vice versa. In Chapter 3, for instance, I include discussion of popular and influential transnational poetry and poetics as key areas of knowledge for understanding Canadian visual poetic expression. Transnational influences played a key role in complicating and diversifying multimodal literatures in Canada. There are certainly reasons to ignore national boundaries as well as to sustain them. As with most literatures that emerge from the periphery, affinity networks supported through small presses, mail art, and social media, rather than more populist and nationalist distribution networks through mainstream publishers and bookstores, direct interactions and support these experimental initiatives, even while limiting their exposure.

Finally, and most importantly, many of the Canadian writers discussed in this dissertation have flown under the academic radar, creating a critical need for further focus on
their works. Perhaps visual poetry has fallen prey to scholarly iconophobia or dismissals of it as too gimmicky or iconically repetitive. I will discuss here, as well as in Chapters 2 and 3, elements of critical ideology that keep these works on the periphery. Whatever the reason for this low profile, Canadian visual poems (as well as their transnational brethren) deserve much more sustained attention in order to address their offerings. This dissertation begins to address that deficit.

1.3 Methods and Modalities

1.3.1 Critical Approaches: Poetics and Hermeneutics

Discussions of multimodal literatures often come up against several background challenges, even before engaging with modal and medial qualities of the texts themselves. The history of multimodal literatures, especially in North America, has been plagued with iconophobic moral panics regarding literacy and thought. This is most obviously evidenced in the criminalization of comics in Canada and the USA in the 1950s, as comics became known as “the enemy of education” because of their employment of images (Dorrell, Curtis, and Rampal 1995: 232). Visual poetry remained under the judicial and political radar, since it was a small-market product sold largely to adults through mail art networks rather than a mass-market product presumably sold mostly to children. Nonetheless, the reception of visual poetry, as evidenced through the dearth of scholarly engagement, has also been affected by the culturally pervasive iconophobic understanding of modes:

In many people’s minds there remains a rather simplistic correlation between ‘looking at pictures’ and a deficiency in literacy, as it is frequently assumed that only those who are unable to read the words have a need for illustration. Visual literacy, except in its highest
manifestations in the work of designers and classical artists, is rarely
granted status within our education system. Teachers have been
educated to consider the movement from pictures to words largely as a
matter of intellectual progression. (Millard and Marsh 2001, 27)

The valuing of words over images reflects a commonly held belief that W.J.T. Mitchell calls
the “fallacy of the visual turn, a development viewed with horror by iconophobes and
opponents of mass culture, who see it as the cause of a decline in literacy” as well as critical
thinking (Mitchell 2002, 172; see also 1994). Similarly, W.J.T. Mitchell shows how underlying
most definitions of imagery is a fear of the image, which inoculates it as simulacral mirror
rather than acknowledging it as a communicative form unto itself.

To reform this bias against the image in literature requires an alternative perspective
on multimodality that addresses what is offered rather than (all evidence to the contrary)
what it might destroy. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet notes regarding comics, such multimodal
literatures reflect “the emergence of new content and new forms which are not always easy to
judge using the evaluative tools at our disposal, that is, those relied upon by the ‘consecrated
society’” (2010, 307). Should one believe iconophobia to be an archaic response of a bygone
era, consider the following anecdote: Jeff Lemire’s graphic novel, Essex County, was
eliminated from “the battle of the books” on the CBC program Canada Reads 2011 with a
vote of 4 to 1. The book, while lauded for its powerful storytelling, was dismissed, in the
words of two debaters, for its “lack of writing” and because “that’s not reading.” Such
statements reveal the language-dominated valuing and evaluating of texts; books and “real”
literature have been reduced to simply printed words. When images come into the mix
within this paradigm, it produces a “clash of opposites” and a perceived “struggle between
passive and active experience” (Hatfield 2009b, 133). While society continues to change, and multimodal literatures continue to gain in popularity in part due to our current multimedia environment, the modal hierarchy of word over image (never mind the employment of other modalities as well) continues to inform reading and interpretative practices.

I would suggest that scholars also face another perhaps even more difficult challenge when engaging with visual poetry. Literary criticism typically engages in scholarly discursive practices of summary, analysis, and explication, all of which rely on what Edward Slingerland describes as “necessary reductionism” (2008a). Such practices are regularly employed even on poetry, itself already a reduced form of linguistic expression. Therefore, reductionism typically facilitates analysis, and is arguably the *modus operandi* of literary criticism. In the case of visual poetry, however, these texts can rarely be reduced visually or verbally without a significant loss of meaning. For instance, with bpNichol’s *fr-o-g* poem discussed earlier, how does one reduce two and a half words and a couple of curved lines any further? The necessary reductionism of typical critical engagement must be inverted into an *expansionism* that addresses the web of connections, processes, and inferences that these works prompt. This still involves similar characteristics of criticism, such as selection, connection, and explication, but with different degrees of granularity and a reversed directionality.

The inversion of this critical perspective, along with a focus on multimodal rather than linguistic cues, requires a recalibration of traditional approaches. Jonathan Culler argues that literary criticism can be loosely broken into two methodologies, that of poetics and hermeneutics. For present purposes, poetics can be considered the analysis of systems of rules and conventions which support creative expression, while hermeneutics comprises theoretically- and historically-inflected interpretative approaches to signification. Culler
traces the development of this distinction through the recent history of a wide range of figures and movements in literary theory, noting that poetics has been largely eschewed for hermeneutics over the past few decades (he offers a variety of renditions of this discussion: see 1981; 1997; 2007). He suggests that poetics has come under fire for its perceived formalism by advocates of hermeneutical approaches “based on the impossibility or inappropriateness of the systematic projections of structuralism” (2007, 10-11). However, Culler argues that this dualistic distinction between poetics and hermeneutics (which I should point out also internalizes the dualism of form and meaning) must be reintegrated as a cooperative venture in developing a more nuanced engagement with forms and conventions in order to develop comprehensive interpretations of artistic innovations. He calls this synthetic methodology a “robust poetics” (11).

To unite these two streams of critical inquiry requires a theoretical ground that can productively combine form and meaning, which Johanna Drucker argues requires locating individual action as a part of the semiotic exchange through “its fixity and permanence as the instrument of continual invention” (1994a, 38). Drucker further shows that interactive model requires a theory that takes the substance and materiality of media into consideration (39). Such an approach connects subjectivity, which includes elements of the “somatic realm,” with a model of play within signification, such that “the concept of materiality is understood as a process of interpretation rather than a positing of the characteristics of an object” (43). Here, the dualism between form and meaning, between poetics and hermeneutics, is dismantled through their shared relation to the process of meaning development and interpretation, thereby uniting form and meaning within the readerly experience of the text-object. Rather than maintain the idealist dualism between pure thought (as subjectivist meaning) and base
matter (as objectivist form),

Drucker describes a theoretical position that one might call a synthetic and creative pragmatism (Cf. J. Cohn 2006, 39-96), and which grounds Culler’s notion of a robust poetics in the interpretative spaces of both material and representational existence.

1.3.2 Hybrid Media and Multimodality

W.J.T. Mitchell asserts that “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous” (1994, 5). Thus, media are modal hybrids in which images, words, bodies, and sounds in particular make up the multimedia social landscape. In what might be characterized as an intervention in the field of visual studies, Mitchell states:

The postulate of mixed, hybrid media leads us to the specificity of codes, materials, technologies, perceptual practices, sign-functions, and institutional conditions of production and consumption that go to make up a medium. It allows us to break up the reification of media around a single sensory organ (or a single sign-type, or material vehicle) and to pay attention to what is in front of us. (2002, 174)

By shifting the terrain of the discussion away from modally essentializing axioms, Mitchell opens up a space for a more sensitive engagement with the synthetic qualities of contemporary multimodal literatures. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield affirms this position

11 Drucker (1994a; 1994b), Hart (2004), and Spolsky (2002) argue that structuralist and post-structuralist positions remain two sides of the same coin, retaining Idealist and logocentric distinctions between form (as matter) and meaning (as Idea) even while seeking to subvert them. Hart and Spolsky further show how insights from poststructuralist critiques of formalism can be integrated into recent work in cognitive science and cognitive poetics.
by suggesting that critics “collapse the word/image dichotomy” and focus on “word and image as two ‘different’ types of sign” (2009b, 133; see also Mitchell 1994, 83-107). Both Mitchell and Hatfield thus refute any preferential treatment of modes in order to develop a more specific medial and sensual poetics.

Mitchell provides a helpful shift away from previous iconophobic models of media and promotes a recent trend towards modal specificity and integration. David Herman, a key figure revitalizing the field of narratology, also places particular emphasis on the distinction between modes and media in order to better engage with multimodal and transmedial textuality (Herman 2009, xiii; see Kress 2009; 2010). He notes that media harness specific modes by acting as environments for representation with unique potentialities and limitations. Thus, modes are sensorial channels for communication, and media are the specific ways in which technologies facilitate their combination and creative employment (see Gibbons 2012). Most media, to some degree, have conventions and requirements for blending modalities, thereby facilitating the emergence of generic and formal expectations that can be creatively engaged with. Multimodal literatures, especially visual poetry, are

---

12 One important distinction between Herman’s and my own view of print is that he views transcriptions of recordings of narratives as a shift towards “monomodal” representation, thereby ignoring the visuality of the writing and design of those transcriptions. While typically, verbal narratives prioritize the verbal channel, that it is visually represented remains significant, since this adds tonal qualities like emphasis through bolding or italics, accessibility through font choice, and so forth. These qualities of print are only possible through cross-modal, iconic constructions (see Hiraga 2005). Importantly, this hybrid view of print adds to Herman’s subsequent call to explore the consequences of mode and media “that come into play in the process of transmitting, transcribing and archiving stories” (Herman 2009, xiii).
particularly interesting is this light, since they represent different employments of the modes primarily deployed in the print medium (more so digitally as well) while also interrogating their medial resources.\(^{13}\)

To analyze a given visual poem requires specificity about how the poem explores and complicates the potential of both visual and verbal modes of representation, in particular through their interaction. In other words, how are the communicative channels being harnessed and crossed for poetic effect. The visual mode may range from realistic, artistic imagery to schematic or diagrammatic qualities to abstract shapes. Likewise, verbal elements can range from words and phrases across to letters and fragments. Each modality, therefore, has a wide spectrum of representational potential. This spectral diversity can be usefully diagrammed as I have in Figure 2, showing a range of ways that visual and verbal modalities interact with each other across a spectrum of recognizeability. There may be many of these types of relations within a single poem, supporting different inferences at different times or in different spaces. The degree of detail or schematicity of modal features impact the specificity their interactions and interpretations.

Of course, modalities do not operate in a vacuum, but respond to medial potentialities produced by the capabilities and limitations of print technologies themselves (linotype, ...)

\(^{13}\) Some critics consider comics a medium unto themselves because of the distinctive formal qualities of their construction (e.g. see Chute 2008; McCloud 1994; Saraceni 2003b; Wolk 2007). I disagree with this position, since comics remain fixed to a bounded page and limited by print technologies. As my description of mode and media should make clear, I’m approaching media in a more specific sense rather than as a loose parameter of creativity. Put simply, comics (and visual poetry) are a hybrid form within print media, not a hybrid media simply presented in a book.
mimeograph, xerograph, etc.), the paper qualities, and other material cues that may inform responses. Typographers have long known the value of well crafted letters and well-designed pages as part of the meaningfulness of the text they present (see Bringhurst 2004; Lupton 2004; Lupton and Phillips 2008; Vos 1996). Likewise, in book history and print culture studies (McGann 1993; Drucker 1994a), details of paratextual materials, editorial transformations, and production values inform discussions of how books are received. These medial qualities add to and complicate yet further the variables at play in cross-modal relations, such “that the apparently simple concept of the imagetext opens up a kind of fractal expansion of terms” (Mitchell 2012, 3). The visual and tactile qualities of these medial features, suggested by the grey circular underlay to the diagram, indicate how the materiality of the print medium always renders modalities “hybrid” (see Hayles 2003; 2004; Mitchell 2002), or as I would prefer, multimodal. Thus, this is but a crude schematic rather than a comprehensive diagram.

Figure 2: Image-text relational potentialities.
In *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the discussion of modes is “never just a formal issue” (1994, 89), but requires the creative, materialistic, and phenomenological navigation of the synthetic and disjunctive relations between modes which opens up “the relative value, location, and the very identity of ‘the verbal’ and ‘the visual’” (89). Here, Mitchell calls for a critical position that both distinguishes and blends modalities through a reflection upon the creative relationality between representations through specific media (materials) (much like in Figure 2) and the understandings and feelings they prompt in readers or viewers (phenomenology). Mitchell’s position on visual studies reflects Culler’s call in literary studies for the balancing of poetics and hermeneutics by weaving the skepticism of critical theory with the texture of the text. The study of multimodal literatures, and especially visual poetry, then brings this approach to the fore, since such works, as Johanna Drucker shows, place a particular emphasis on the role of the reader in constructing the textual meaning. To better address the material phenomenology of seeing, showing, and reading requires an account of readerly synthetic creativity that navigates multimodal textuality rather than trips over modal relations. As I will show throughout this dissertation, grounding modes and media within a multimodal, multisensory perspective helps address the communicative qualities of cross-modal relations and creativity, which opens these texts to complex critical engagement.

1.4 Toward a Multimodal Cognitive Poetics

In this dissertation, I develop a multimodal approach to the hybridity of visual poetry through the lens of cognitive poetics. Cognitive poetics is an emerging field of literary analysis that draws on cognitive science to shed light on various processes of meaning
construction and creativity. Of course, to discuss how a multimodal text comes to mean something requires that we agree upon what we mean by “meaning” and its connection to modalities and cognition.

Cognitive science has recently grown to be uniquely positioned to begin to address how and why particular meanings and creative avenues emerge out of the finitude of neurons and flesh to prompt a seeming infinitude of understandings. The critical method this dissertation develops and employs draws upon insights from second wave cognitive science,\textsuperscript{14} which shares affinities with aspects of pragmatism and phenomenology, to document the parameters and processes involved in language and image comprehension. A central theoretical position of recent cognitive science locates cognition as a dynamic interaction between the human mind, body, and environment, which is referred to as “cognitive ecology” (Hutchins 2010) or as embodiment (Chemero 2009; Gibbs 2006a; Rohrer 2007). Human meaning comes out of these interactions, and as such meaning is grounded in conscious and unconscious embodied experiences of the environment. Such a perspective is inherently multimodal.

\textsuperscript{14}Cognitive science, as I use it here, includes, but is not limited to, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, developmental psychology, visual, attentional, and ecological psychology, neuropsychology, and cognitive anthropology. The “second generation” or “second revolution,” as David Herman calls it (2010), reflects a relatively recent shift in cognitive science towards a “dynamical model” of the embodied mind (Gibbs 2006a; Chemero 2009; Gibbs and Colston 2012), to be elaborated on in the next chapter and employed throughout this dissertation. Importantly, this theoretical focus shifts away from the “representationalist” terminology and analysis of symbolic, disembodied, amodal, homunculus-oriented, Objectivist-styled constraints on thought and experience maintained by first generation cognitive scientists and linguists (E.g. Fodor, Pinker, Chomsky). More on these differences in the next chapter.
The notion that experience is structured by and reflects linguistic thought, and that we only understand experience through language, is now widely accepted in literary studies and across the Humanities. This constructionist perspective illustrates a cognitive model that divorces symbolic thought from the material world (a pervasive issue within Western philosophy: see Lakoff and Johnson 1999), with language and culture engaged in supplemental and simulacral processes to hide our bodies from our minds. I will rebut this heritage of dualistic views in more detail in the following chapter. These “disembodied” approaches have long roots (from Plato, Descartes, Saussure, etc.), and continue to be the dominant discourse surrounding language and subjectivity. For instance, Saussure famously claimed that “[w]ithout language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There is no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (112). Recent research suggests the inverse: viewpointed, sensorimotor experiences, which include object and social interactions, ground language in patterns and processes of embodied experience (see Langacker 2008; Dancygier and Sweetser 2012). Language takes a secondary role to embodied experience as it helps in definition, construal, and creative elaboration and projection of experiences, and through these capacities provides a central mode of social connection and worldly interaction. Projecting a causal power onto language itself, rather than recognizing it as a product of complex embodied processes, misconstrues the

---

multimodal experiences of human subjectivity (Cf. Easterlin 2012). Furthermore, linguistically based models of knowledge totalize the multiple modalities of human experience and expression under a single sign (Gibbons 2012, 7-20). Language is important, but it is not the basis of all meaning and cognition. The phenomenal experience of multimodal human communication and cognition is much more complex. To suggest otherwise ignores the role of sensorial experience as formative and informative facets of creativity and understanding.

Without dismissing much of the helpful critical work rooted in prior theories of language, thought and culture, the theoretical grounding of this project in second generation cognitive science repositions and upends these assumptions by locating language and literature, as well as other cultural expressions, as emergent properties of creative cognitive processes grounded in bodily, sensorimotor experiences. These experiences motivate, inform, and constrain cultural and social expressions, and in turn, social and cultural discourses interact with them as well. By engaging with these parameters and structures of sense and experience, more nuanced claims about cognitive ecology and creativity emerge (E.g. see Arnheim 2004; Oakley 2009; and Oberman, Winkielman, and Ramachandran 2010). W.J.T. Mitchell affirms, “[it] is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but

16 O’Leary (2005) makes the argument that this is the gist of Foucault’s argument for philosophy, which connects his work to those of pragmatists like Dewey. However, while it is important to keep in mind that these writers locate the efficacy of language in its intersection with social relations, this does not do away with discrepancies in how they position linguistic meaning and the influence of such a position on critical outcomes.
also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals” (2002, 171). Exploring how perception and conception inter-relate presents a crucial path forward towards a sensual, multimodal view of cognition and for a robust poetics by locating socio-cultural practices as part of embodied experiences, interweaving with each other.17

The early and influential visual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim observes that “human thinking cannot go beyond the patterns suppliable by the human senses” (2004, 232-33). This statement parallels Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological recalibrations that assert that the body is “the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (1962, 235), or in other words, “the theory of the body is already a theory of perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 203). The embodied cognitive approach nuances the connection between sensuality, representation, mediums, and reception by locating specific perceptual and conceptual features of human sensory and cognitive systems that prompt modal and cross-modal understanding. Thus, rather than affirm the notion that language overwrites the body, this dissertation will show how language and images are complexly interwoven by the embodied mind, as we think both about and through them.

17 I should note that cultural narratives and discourses can seem to impose themselves upon individuals, but research by feminist and postcolonial critics surely shows this to be a function of power dynamics and social pressures rather than language itself. The socio-cultural environment plays an important role in the development of embodied knowledge and language use, but it is also a dynamic space, in which values and concepts are always in flux.
Language, images, and other human communicative modes derive from and are motivated by facets of our embodied, cognitive interaction with the material and socio-cultural world, even when mediated by various technological environments. I develop an embodied methodology that is empirically plausible in terms of the evolutionarily\(^{18}\) and ecologically developed physiological and psychological mechanisms that inform human perceptions and actions,\(^{19}\) which motivate creative representations, and which facilitate multimodal comprehension in and across a variety of expressive modes. In this way, I respond to W.J.T. Mitchell’s “invitation to rethink what theorizing is, to picture theory and perform theory as a visible, embodied, communal practice, not as the solitary introspection of a disembodied intelligence” (1994, 178). Through a detailed understanding of the complex relationship between verbal, visual, and mental imagery within the social and material environments that facilitate communication (including, the visible page-stage and

\(^{18}\)My project has notable affinities with (the at times troublingly conjectural and reductionist) evolutionary literary criticism of scholars like Boyd (2009) and Carroll (2008; see also Slingerland 2008), in particular its emphasis on our species wide developments of cognitive capacities and features. However, I want to shift the emphasis away from the evolutionary principles of phylogeny, ontogeny, and “ultimate functions” towards the shared interest in how cognitive embodiment and attenuation works and functions now as an emergent property of the interweaving of evolutionary and ecological processes (E.g. see Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Gibbs 2006; Herman 2003; Turner 1999). After all, the individual human experience is a confluence of multiple times scales—evolutionary, cultural, familial, and personal.

\(^{19}\)This is, of course, keeping in mind the current limitations of some experimental psychological research outlined by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010). To address some of these deficits, I draw on a variety of forms of disciplinary research, in particular cognitive linguistic research which is more grounded in cross-cultural analysis, forging a robust poetics out of affinities between observations and results rather than inherent methodological or disciplinary ideologies (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Part I; Gibbs and Colston 2012).
assumptions about readership), I develop a more comprehensive analysis of multimodal meaning construction.

As a theoretical position, multimodal cognitive poetics places an emphasis on the creativity inherent in readerly interactions with literary works, and accounts for the specific features of texts that might motivate particular interpretations. As such, it shares affinities with Wolfgang Iser’s (1980) description of the reading process for “reader response” criticism, but without the dualistic presentation of The Reader (Richardson 1997). Rather, this approach presents a more detailed and plausible account of how background knowledge is coopted into meaning construction processes, or in Barthean terms, how the communally shared “work” transforms into the individual’s interpretative “text” (Barthes 1977). Thus, I point out elements of poems that might be ambiguous and produces several interpretations. Visual poems excel at presenting conflicting and contestable qualities that challenge readers to navigate them like a puzzle. I locate what I believe to be crucial features of a given visual poem, and illustrate how it both motivates and constrains particular readings. Thus, I present a predictive rather than proscriptive model of reading visual poetry. Perhaps tracing motivations and interpretations will help ease uncomfortable readers into the realms of

20 Through this model of multimodal comprehension I am not asserting a monist perspective of an archetypal reader: the embodied approach recognizes that background knowledge is always personally inflected as well as socially, culturally, and aesthetically situated. Since cognitive science emphasizes central patterns of human comprehension, this model should not be misunderstood as normalizing the diversity of a given readership as previous models of reader response are charged with doing (Richardson 1997).
multimodal experimentation. Certainly, locating the embodied parameters of comprehension exposes the processes by which reader-viewers of visual poems likely navigate the variety of hybrid cues. Explicitly detailing these processes renders them accessible to critical reflection, thereby bridging the formal analysis of poetics with the meta-cognitive, critical reflections of hermeneutics.

1.4.1 Overview of Subsequent Chapters

The following chapters (1) develop in detail the cognitive parameters and processes for multimodal comprehension; (2) explore how pervasive folk ideas about language inform the presentation and reception of visual poetry; (3) show how perceptual cues influence conceptualization in modally distinct poems; and (4), shows how abstract (postlinguistic) visual poems also derive meanings from perceptual cues and improvisational processes. I conclude with a brief discussion of connection between visual poetry and their sister multimodal literature, comics.

In the following chapter, I establish the cognitive parameters for multimodal reading experiences, contributing to and expanding the emerging field of cognitive poetics. Whereas cognitive approaches to literature have typically focused on linguistic constructions of meaning, I expand this perspective to include multimodal prompts. I emphasize that meaning is created by interactions between the brain, body, and environment (cognitive scientists call these interactions cognitive ecology or embodiment). This embodied perspective helps establish why and how multiple modalities can function seamlessly together in a given text. From this perspective, I show how visual poetry strategically activates embodied knowledge in order to prompt multiple interpretive possibilities of various textual
cues. I explore this strategic activation through a discussion of the theory of conceptual integration, which describes how embodied knowledge is selected and combined to develop novel, emergent understandings. Through the analysis of several examples grounded in this embodied theoretical framework, I show how recent studies of image and language comprehension provide theoretical tools that reveal how readers create complex meanings from visual poetic “illusions of simplicity” (Borkent 2010, title).

In the third chapter, I turn to the writings of Canadian and international poets, scholars, and reviewers to analyze how they conceptualize visual poetry. I show how often these poems are misunderstood because they challenge a common yet fallacious understanding of meaning, the “conduit fallacy.” This pervasive folk theory of language asserts that linguistic forms carry or contain meaning within them, a meaning which is then delivered, unimpeded, to the receiver. This insidious folk theory has even permeated poststructuralist analyses of these poems. I show how visual poetry explicitly experiments with and challenges aspects of this formalistic fallacy. I also clarify the claims in several visual poetic manifestoes by explicating how they construe specific aspects of this model of communication. Understanding the conduit fallacy shows how the visual poetic tradition connects to, and is distinct from, other avant-garde and postmodern traditions that interrogate received notions of representation and meaning.

The conduit fallacy is not explicitly recognized—but rather assumed—in many mainstream conversations about Canadian poetry and poetics that typically excludes visual poetry. According to this view, visual poetry employs formal gimmickry without developing true (linguistic) content, and is, therefore, at best a distraction from so-called real poetry. I challenge the way in which these representations of visual poetry locate poetic meaning solely
in figurative language. Visual poems, by virtue of their multimodality, challenge this model of poeticity by drawing on the materiality of print culture. Visual poems force the reader to reconsider the materiality of representation and mediation, often doubling semiotic possibilities (such as in the multiple readings of the lines and letters in the poem above) and setting up complex emergent understandings. I argue that a multimodal perspective on meaning engages more fruitfully with the variety and heterodoxy of contemporary poetic expressions, thereby beginning the process of integrating visual and experimental poetic approaches into the discussion of poetry and poetics.

In the fourth chapter, I show how dominant perceptual and formal cues in visual poems, such as gestalt phenomena, viewpoints, and clear modal cues, prompt complex interpretations. I argue that visual poems anchor these dynamic processes by providing perceptual constraints on what can and cannot be inferred. Thus, I show how perceptual cues inform conceptualization processes by constraining them in strategic (although not deterministic) ways. I focus on poems that maintain relatively clear material and representational cues to chart how different features motivate embodied cognitive responses. I also trace how meaningful qualities of the poem transform through cognitive activation processes, such as the changing understandings of elements of bpNichol’s frog poem above. My unique multimodal cognitive poetic approach shows where, how, and why these poems, as static marks on the page, motivate and constrain dynamic understandings and interpretations.

In the fifth chapter, I push my critical model further to explore how particularly challenging, abstract, and non-referential forms of visual poetry—which I call postlinguistic poetry—might still constrain interpretive processes. I show how these poems require a
dynamic, improvisational model of perception and meaning that pushes beyond the clear modal constraints offered by the poems in the previous chapter. I describe several types of postlinguistic poems (typographical, written, hybrid, and remediated), emphasizing how such texts are both produced and read through improvisational techniques. Such visual poems push readers to improvise new relationships to communicative multimodalities. In this way, the poems also act as art manifestoes for a creative, improvisational disposition toward print culture.

To conclude the dissertation, I show how the multimodal cognitive poetic model I develop can extend to other forms of multimodal literature, especially comics and graphic novels. I discuss how the sequentiality and emergent narrativity of comic strips are composed out of the natural extension of the same processes that I discuss for interpreting visual poems. I explore how sequential visual poems and abstract comics share many things, which suggests a spectrum of multimodal literary expression with specific semiotic potentialities. These connections raise further areas for development of this multimodal cognitive poetics, and for the criticism of other multimodal literatures as well.
Chapter 2
Cognitive Ecology & Multimodal Meaning

there is always something vegetable about the imagination, something sharply limited in range.

- Northrop Frye

I move, therefore I become.

- Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

2.1 Introduction

Multimodal literatures, including visual poetry, necessitate a robust multimodal poetics—a critical engagement that attends to literary, linguistic, and visual interests by accounting for multimodal creativity and comprehension. Visual poems, such as Steve McCaffery’s untitled visual poem seen here (Figure 3), often produce a range of interpretations grounded in the modal and material qualities of their presentation on the page. McCaffery’s poem, for instance, gives hints of stamped and overlaid letters and the word “from” on one side, and a pictographic representation of a Neanderthal man holding a club on the other, along with a sense of the printed page as a space of both action and display. As I will show through a brief reading of this poem, even in a seemingly straight-forward poem like this, many complex inferences and

21 Frye (1971, xxi).
22 qtd. and trans. in Cohn (2006, 76).
connections are made that construe understandings of language, humanity, and the nature of representation in specific ways.

Figure 3: Untitled poem by Steve McCaffery (1970; reprinted in 2002, 26).

One might read McCaffery’s untitled poem as follows: the movement of the body stepping out of the linguistic mush from left to right (along the line of reading, no less), suggests the linguistic production of the human (self) image or body (rather than the bodily construction of language) through causal connections. The causal sequence begins in rough typographic forms, stamped erratically onto the page, and includes the singularly legible and causal word from (barely visible, upside down, twice, in the upper-left quadrant). This typographic chaos ends on the mid-line of the page and transforms into or births a humanoid form (produced “from” it).
Even without interrogating these elements too closely, this transformation suggests a direct relationship between language and human form. This image might be said to show a Self being rendered understandable through language, thereby reifying the Saussurean model of language: “[w]ithout language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebular. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (1966: 112). In a way, as the figure emerges from the chaos, it embraces its humanity through the distinction of language and tool use (two characteristics commonly, albeit falsely, considered to be unique to humans). Furthermore, one might read this as the figure moving forward through language into intentional action.

So far, the poem seems a nice yet benign visual artifact. However, two troubling aspects emerge out of the combination of language and this particular humanoid image. The poem draws on a classic depiction of *Homo habilis*, the “adept tool-user” (31) from Rudolph Zallinger’s illustration of the “Creatures That Led to Modern Man” (30), or as it became more popularly known in later iterations, “The March of Progress” (Figure 4). This widely known diagram of human evolutionary development was published in F. Clark Howell’s school book on *Early Man* (1968), just two years before McCaffery’s poem. The popular diagram shows the first humanoid tool user as directly linked through several stages to contemporary hu(man)ity in a singular, progressive line. McCaffery’s poem reuses this image in a somewhat degraded state, but

---

23 See Wood and Richmond (2000) for a review of contemporary analyses of human evolution which shows tree-like groups (clades) of hominids, that branch off of the general development toward contemporary humans. Thus, many of the previously diagrammed species that were included in the “March of Progress” were alternatives rather than a part of a linear progression to *Homo homo sapien*. In
otherwise they are identical. The poem blends language into this key development of tool use in the human evolutionary lineage, perhaps to signal that language is a pragmatic, advantageous tool crucial to human evolution.

However, the evolutionary view of language that emerges also comes with several problematic readings. Firstly, the images also suggest a progress narrative toward visible language and literacy, mapping written language onto evolutionary development. Conflating progress and literacy within an evolutionary and social paradigm makes me uncomfortable: this ideology informed the long colonial history in the Americas by characterizing Indigenous peoples as savages who needed Western literacy in order to become “civilized.” Assimilationist policies sought to extinguish numerous Indigenous languages and cultural practices due, in part, to the Western prioritization of writing and literacy over orature and other expressive arts (see Edwards 2004, esp. 74). As Plains Cree Métis scholar Emma LaRocque states, “[i]t is often taken for granted that literacy is an enormous improvement in human evolution. Those of us who come from oral traditions have quite different perspectives on literacy (and evolution). In fact, literacy becomes the enemy when printed words are use for ‘extinguishment’ purposes . . . . in certain contexts documentation is to be assidiously avoided” (2010, 20). In some ways this poem connotes a similar, troublesome combination of literacy and (social Darwinian) evolution that visualizes colonial ideology. At the same time, the club might be drawing attention to the

this revised view, *Homo habilis* is included in the earliest divergent group only two times removed from contemporary humans rather than six times, as indicated in Zallinger’s illustration.
aggressive, destructive tendencies of this colonial perspective, and perhaps also the “violence of language” against things through its inherently incomplete representations (Schwenger 2001). However, the popular view of this image, reinforced by Zallinger’s caption, as of a tool-carrying rather than a weapon-wielding man, leaves me less certain about that more generous reading.

Figure 4: “The Creatures That Led to Modern Man” by Rudolph Zallinger (illustration in Howell 1968, 30), commonly referred to (and spoofed) as “The March of Progress.”

This poem also presents a troublingly masculinized view of language, since language is embodied in male form and is, therefore, the gender with inherent voice. This image of the cave-man also invokes the racialized and fallacious yet common narrative of the prehistoric man who clubs and takes possession of the woman as a marriage right (see Brody 2000, 261-63). The masculinization of language—even while illustrating a sense of power dynamics that make this reification possible (which echoes second-wave feminist critiques at the time of the poem’s composition)—remains, in my view, largely untroubled within the prompts of the poem.

Of course, there are perhaps more favorable interpretations. For instance, Geoffrey Hlibchuk considers this poem to model a linguistic theory that “indexes a body, albeit one both corpse and corporeal” (2011, 19). Such a reading shows how the poem illustrates McCaffery’s notion that “words are part of the dead and language the product of life feeding on death” (McCaffery and Nichol 1992, 31). Hlibchuk offers a “necropoetic” reading of McCaffery’s poem
as a “nested maze of interiorities spilling outward” (20), the “possible forms of life that could be birthed from these entropic nests” of bodies (21). While this reading incorporates a sense of linguistic inheritance into the time-space trajectory I discussed, I also find this reading somewhat inconsistent. If the “interiorities spilling outward” are located solely behind the person, in the inaccessible and extrapersonal space often correlated to the past (Kendon 2004; Núñez and Sweetser 2006), then the poem construes language as inherently independent of intersubjectivity, reinforcing a logocentric, transhistoric perspective. Such a construal seems to chafe against some aspects of the argument. Furthermore, the poetic integration of specific pictographic and typographic elements still raises questions regarding the intersections of gender, power, and language, which I must put aside at this point to focus on the key issues of this chapter.

A brief discussion of Steve McCaffery’s poem shows the incredible richness of meanings generated from visual poetic works. As can be seen from this cursory glance, the poem prompts a wide array of inferences and connections that cohere into specific understandings of humanity and language. Thus, we can see the productivity connections between visual and verbal modalities as they network domains of knowledge and experience to suggest specific stances on various topics. The question from a cognitive poetic perspective is: how does all of this happen? How does one see and read such a work and navigate the interactions between modalities? Why does the static figure become charged with action? How does the poem seem to quickly suggest a range of issues, some of which I have outlined, that surround the intersections between language, technology, and humanity? How do all these complex understandings emerge from such a seemingly simple work? Such questions raise the need for attention to the processes and mechanisms of cognition that facilitate this explosion of possibilities which help readers develop and navigate multiple and overlapping readings. Knowledge of such processes and mechanisms
presents an opportunity to critically engage in detail with both the materials in hand and their effects on cognition.

This chapter presents a cognitive model that helps isolate several key cognitive mechanisms that reader-viewers draw on in order to understand multimodal literatures. I do not aim to offer an exhaustive account of cognition, but rather a model of major mechanisms of comprehension and creativity that clarifies the relationships between modalities and meaning in visual poetry. Exploring the cognitive processes of meaning construction helps us to better isolate and critically engage with features of multimodal literatures. This approach also shows how such works prompt an especially active engagement on the part of readers.

### 2.2 Cognitive Ecology and Material Culture

The contemporary scientific research I draw from participates in second generation cognitive science. This recent approach to cognition participates, along with a range of other fields, in what Jesse Cohn calls the “corporeal turn” (2006, 83), which share an emerging ecological

---

24 First generation cognitive science assumes a computational, modular, and logical mind—itself governed by linguistic, amodal (nonperceptual) signs—that operates as an independent system separate from the functions of the body. McCaffery’s poem above might be said to illustrate such a position. Another “revolution” (Herman 2010) produced second generation cognitive science, which explores the dynamic, modal (perceptual), and embodied characteristics of thought that dissolve the dualistic logic of the earlier model. See Lakoff (1987) and Barsalou (1999) for comprehensive critiques of first generation approaches and their grounding within objectivist philosophy, followed by groundbreaking discussions of embodied meaning from cognitive and psycho-linguistic perspectives.
perspective on meaning and cognition. This recent advancement in cognitive science distances itself from the first dominant perspective which focused on a Cartesian, disembodied, modular, amodal, and computational model of mind, informed by work in behaviourist psychology, generative linguistics, and early Artificial Intelligence. Rather, the second generation approach grounds cognitive processes in sensorimotor experiences of the body (typically called cognitive embodiment) and its interactions with the environment (usually referred to as distributed or situated cognition). These cognitive processes are intimately networked, so that conceptual work can be off-loaded onto surrounding materials (including people, books, attire, and other things in the environment). Thus, the second generation approach to cognition presents “a fully dynamical science of the entire brain-body-environment system” (Chemero, 2009, 152) and a post-Cartesian, flexible model of experience and knowledge. Edwin Hutchins calls this networked system of embodied, situated, and distributed cognition “cognitive ecology” (2010).

Research into cognitive ecology shows that simply focusing on embodiment, as the corporeal turn would suggest, is insufficient and requires a wider eco-cognitive approach because

---

25 This line of thinking found extensive discussion and the launching of a sub-discipline in psychology through the crucial work of James J. Gibson (esp. 1979) on ecological and perceptual psychology. Gibson’s work has informed important developments in both embodied philosophy (e.g. see Johnson 2007; Noé 2004; 2009) and “radical” cognitive science (e.g. see Chemero 2009; O’Regan 2011). Of course, this work was not autogenetic, but drew inspiration and insights from phenomenology (Freeman 2004), gestalt psychology, the psychological investigations of William James, and the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey.

26 See Barsalou (1999) for a concise assessment of problems with first generation cognitive science and how the second generation approach addresses them. See Gibbs (2006a) for a more thorough description of embodied cognitive science.
of the non-corporeal facets of the environment that contribute to cognition as well. This approach finds

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 and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies through space, and evaluate our situation. (Johnson 2007, 11)

In the eco-cognitive model, objects in the environment contain information that impacts actions and interactions. For instance, even such cultural artifacts as timepieces and books can seem benign until we need to exploit them to accomplish a goal. Thus, knowledge and understanding are experientially contingent; meaning emerges out of the multimodal processes of cognitive ecology as we come to understand and interact with our surroundings, and we draw on this knowledge when making sense of representations in various modalities and media. For instance, in McCaffery’s poem, we recognize the walking figure as humanoid. Similarly, the direction of implied motion constructs the sense of a path, and through that a sense of correlational or causal motion. The contrast between the left and right sides of the poem further reinforces this causal

27 The ecological focus of this approach to meaning obviously suggests links to ecocriticism more generally. There is certainly room to make this connection, but I cannot develop it in detail at this point for the sake of brevity. As I go along here, it should become clear that the eco-cognitive approach affirms several areas of contemporary ecocriticism, such as by explicitly engaging with the limitations of human perception that reflect a physiologically determined interaction with the world that renders all meaning systems inherently anthropocentric. Furthermore, it recognizes that language construes and alters understandings of experience; representation thereby affirms or denies possibilities for conceptualization. At the same, this model also affirms the potential for experience to break our sign-systems. Thus, I affirm a biocultural model of human society much like that proposed by Murray Bookchin (1996).
connection by constructing two distinct spaces on the page. The barely visible word “from” within the stamped chaos affirms this connection by potentially labeling it as a past space or at least one from which the figure emerges. These connections between perceptual and conceptual elements motivate the reading I offered of the poem. Importantly, the eco-cognitive approach reveals critical links between perception and conceptualization processes involved in understanding the poem.

Perceptual-conceptual confluences have contributed substantially to studies of cognition and representation (for key reviews see Barsalou 1999; Gibbs 2006; and Hutchins 2010). Evidence of cognitive ecology has been especially relevant to recent changes in linguistics, in particular studies of force-dynamics in grammar (Langacker 1990; 2008), perceptual cues in semantics (Coulson 2001; Talmy 2000), systematic accounts of form-meaning relations in semantics (Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Goldberg 2003), and a non-deterministic view of categorization through perceptual phenomena like prototypicality and abstraction (Lakoff 1987). Aspects of cognitive ecology inform many other areas of cognitive scientific research as well (see Gibbs 2006a), and include models of action-in-perception in visual psychology (Arnheim 2004; O’Regan 2011), co-signaling in gesture studies (McNeill 1992; McNeill 2005; Müller 2007; Kendon 2004), and studies of creative interpretations of interfaces in new media (Chow and Harrell 2013). Recently, eco-cognitive approaches have also contributed to the analysis of other modes, such as interactions between acting and vocal expression, as well as allegorical qualities of sonic representation, in musical performance (Sharon, Fais, and Vatikiotis-Bateson 2013; Zbikowski 2002). Similarly, embodied analyses of creative extrapolations and interactions with visual art account for the phenomenological experience of both surface and depth (Arnheim 2009; Currie 2003; 2004; Johnson 2007; Zeki 2004). These areas share an interest in the relation
between perception, action, meaning, and representation while focusing on a multimodal, rather than solely linguistic, understanding of meaning construction. The eco-cognitive approach, therefore, provides a critical framework for showing how medial environments and representational modes add to understandings of cultural artifacts.

Interactions between perception and conception function through integrated sensorimotor contingencies learnt from past experience and through qualitative parallels between senses (Köhler 1929; Ramachandran 2011; Ramachandran and Hubbard 2001). Such connections between senses illustrate a synaesthetic quality to cognition and representational modalities and suggest that cross-modal interactions between various forms and meanings are significant in communication (Freeman 2007; Hiraga 2005; Perloff 2010; Taub 2001), in particular by prompting “voluntary, partial synaesthesia” in recipients (Slingerland 2008, 217). For instance, in McCaffery’s poem, the stamped texture of the left side correlates visually with perhaps the felt roughness of a stone or with visual obscurity, which suggests a quality of the language, perhaps as a gravelly or harshly produced sound, or at the very least is indistinct. The smooth form of the man contrasts with this sensual chaos, which suggests a movement from harsh perceptual indistinctness of perhaps prelinguistic noise to the clarity of intention and action as one gains literacy. The synaesthetic conflation and conversion of sight, touch, and sound imbués the reader-viewer’s understanding of the poem with a multimodal texture, fleshing

28 Studies into sound symbolism continue to affirm Ramachandran and Hubbard’s approach. For instance, mappings between sound pitch and visual height also present analogies between modalities that inform how we understand an interlocutor by presenting a form of vocal gesture (Clark, Perlman, and Falck 2013).
out the transformative nature of language. McCaffery and bpNichol, in their collaborative theorizing in *Rational Geomancy* (1992), describe this synaesthetic transformation in terms of translation (47-51), “thereby opening up the entire area of translation as one primarily of invention” (49). The multimodal integration seen in aspects of poetic interpretation are buttressed by the pervasiveness of synaesthetic metaphors in language (Lakoff 1987; Sullivan and Jiang 2013) and multimodal metaphors more generally (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009). For instance, the metaphor, THINKING IS MOVING (Lakoff 1993), facilitates the reading of McCaffery’s poem as one of the progress to literacy and beyond, in which the implied external movement of the figure connects to the implied internal nature of linguistic proficiency. Hence the visual focus on the head and foot. Similarly, the depiction of a tool in hand perhaps correlates to the metaphorical notion of UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING, in which language comprehension becomes a tool for interaction. Thus, the movement of the figure produces a refinement of perception and action within a literate space, all of which is arrived at through synaesthetic connections between visual, verbal, and sensorimotor qualities prompted by the poem.

Much like McCaffery’s visual poem, representational modalities, such as gesture, spoken and written language, and images, all prompt the activation of synaesthetic cognitive complexes. Gesture scholar Cornelia Müller notes that “we think in terms of the expressive modalities we have at hand” (2007, 109), which means that “language is at its core multimodal” (111) and serves as a form of external, situated scaffolding of cognition (Clark 2008). Since meaning emerges out of readerly activation processes, N. Katherine Hayles argues that “[m]ateriality thus cannot be specified in advance; rather, it occupies a borderland—or better, performs as connective tissue—joining the physical and mental, the artifact and the user” (2004, 72). As we have seen with McCaffery’s poem, rather than the work having inherent “conceptual content,”
This content is part of an enactive, projective, and dynamic interpretational and constructional process in the reader-viewer and can prompt racialized, gendered, and social Darwinian valences. While texts exist as material products in the world, they are meaningless until they are cognitively networked.

These conclusions are particularly salient for the discussion of a range of multimodal literatures beyond the relatively straightforward poem discussed above. Such literatures, often self-reflexively incorporate a wide array of medial and modal prompts associated with print media, such as page turns, bindings, page sizes, paper qualities, typefaces, and font sizes as part of their representational practices, as well as overt uses of aspects of visual and verbal modalities (see Gibbons 2012, esp. 29-41). Book historians like Jerome McGann (1991, 56-67) and George Bornstein (2001, 6-7) call this array of medial/modal features bibliographic codes. McGann describes bibliographic codes as “the symbolic and signifying dimensions of the physical medium through which (or rather as which) the linguistic text is embodied” (56). N. Katherine Hayles (2003) refers to them more broadly as “the material conditions of textuality.” Peter Stockwell, an

29 The poem, therefore, is meaningless until engaged by a human with the sufficient background knowledge (education, experience, etc) to network with it sufficiently to unpack its potential meaning. The book is meaningless as a prompter of social and cultural understandings significant to other organisms, but remains a potentially significant object in the environment. Thus, for a bookworm, dust mite, mouse, or another organism which would find a book an inviting environment or useful object, the book would be meaningful but in a different way.

Of course, in this chapter I am talking about human biocultural cognition, which means that meaning develops around experience and learnt parameters of engagement. At the same time, this should not be read to exclude non-human agents who might also interact with the artifact and develop their own sense of its meaning. In their case, their embodied limitations will inform their understanding of it.
important advocate and developer of the cognitive poetic approach to literature, calls such “experienced qualities of textuality” *texture* (2009, 1), which overtly signals the sensuousness of his approach to language and literature. As Alison Gibbons notes, however, experimental literatures are particularly well positioned to “pose a challenge to cognitive poetics and may subsequently play an important role in its advancement” (2012, 38) by pushing it beyond its linguistic focus to include typographic features. As with McCaffery’s poem, the recognition of the synaesthetic and multimodal processes of medial and modal elaboration on the part of reader-viewers rapidly expands our understanding of how such works push beyond linguistic determinism. In this dissertation, I join Gibbons in expanding the parameters and processes of texture to include a range of multimodal cues to show how more detailed engagement with the processes of cognition reveal the creative conceptual and perceptual assemblages, leaps, and shifts facilitated by the multimodal construction of meaning.

### 2.2.1 Intersubjectivity and Construal

As a part of cognitive ecology, representations always incorporate the individuality of personal experience and embodied viewpoint as well as intersubjective social and cultural assumptions. As Eve Sweetser observes,

> We have no non-viewpointed perception of the world: our bodies are always asymmetrically constrained in visual and manual access to the world, as well as in motion—the space in front of us is accessible in a way that the one behind us is not. And there’s more to it, which has been much less examined than the single viewpoint. As soon as there’s another person sharing space with me, my body tracks what they can see or reach, as well as what I can see or reach. (2013, 240)
When employing representations, users engage in a process of *perspectivization*, or as it is more commonly called, *construal* (Verhagen 2007). We attempt to construct a viewpoint for others, for a variety of reasons, and, in turn, try to understand their viewpoints as well, which creates an assumed intersubjective relation prompted by environmental cues (including media and representation). This projective assumption of intersubjectivity leads to the problematic discussions in many literature classes of the borders of authorial intentions and their determination of reader interpretations (a.k.a. the intentional fallacy). While we can never access the minds of others, the recognition that representational practices are generally intention-loaded practices is sufficient to prompt a wide range of intersubjective and intentional assumptions in readers that contribute substantially to the emergent meanings of texts (see Crane 2001; Gibbs 1999; 2001). Barbara Dancygier argues for viewing “literary texts as dynamic means of supporting intersubjective minds” (413). Reading intentions into actions and representations is crucial to sociality and interpretation and will play an especially significant role in the next chapters on visual poetry (especially Chapter 5) by loading intentionality onto abstract works and investing them with manifestic and speculative qualities.

The intersubjective bias of intentionality follows from the principles of cognitive ecology, since others populate and engage in the same environment and with whom we are in constant dialogue; therefore, they are both subjects and objects within this space, influencing and being influenced through modes of action and representation. Place and Fitterman call this blended positionality “sobjectivity” (2013, 38-40). Cognitive ecology oscillates between systematic cohesion and environmental and intersubjective disruption that feeds back and throughout the system. This intersubjective fluidity allows us to accommodate multiple viewpoints, to diversify our subject positions, and to understand different construal phenomena. Texts play an important
role as intersubjective disruptions. For instance, as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, many visual poems offer critiques of urban and gendered experiences and might also be said to act as art manifestoes for speculative linguistic futures. At the same time, the variability of communicative practices also requires a continual assessment of possibilities of meaning as we engage with a work, since representations never fit the world, but are “good enough” as partial prompts for creative selection and projection within the processes of meaning construction (Spolsky 2001; 2002). Construal and perspectivation phenomena within representational modalities are products of readerly inferences about prompts, and often reflect eco-cognitive biases surrounding roles, values, and domains of experience (see Barsalou 2008; Gallese and Lakoff 2005; Kiefer and Pulvermüller 2012; Verhagen 2007). Material artifacts prompt these various phenomena through their activation within an individual’s eco-cognitive network, which includes their background knowledge.30

To show how construal, viewpoint, and intersubjectivity add to the analysis of visual poetry, I turn to Paul Dutton’s poem “Narcissus A, 8” (Figure 5). This poem offers incomplete glimpses of a capital letter A. We recognize the A through the perceptual phenomena of object completion while, at the same time, recognizing its incompleteness. One might infer that the poem is constructed out of many letters that have been sliced up and pasted together, or as a single letter that has slid about the page and has been visually captured at various stages of its

30 The eco-cognitive emphasis on interweaving physiological and socio-cultural knowledges correlates nicely to Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the concept of “habitas” (1990; see Lizardo 2004), which denotes the blending of social positioning, taste, education, and other experiences that inform how we assess and interact with people and things around us.
movements, or as many letters that have been layered upon each other with some occluding others. Furthermore, the repetition of parts of the letter, including serifs and parts of the ascenders and descenders, develop a sense of interchangeability as well as difference; these letters are the same, yet distinct in the facet that is presented to the reader. As such, readers likely develop a construal of a fragmentary, multifaceted, and dramatic letter. Furthermore, similarities and differences perhaps interweave into a multi-viewpointed appraisal of the letter, suggesting that the poem represents the intersubjective conglomeration of perspectives, such as what might collectively accrue upon a letter hung on the wall of a kindergarten classroom.

Figure 5: “Narcissus A, 8” by Paul Dutton (2010).
Since the intersubjective realm that this text inhabits is informed through cultural and social discourses, this helps address how the title further construes the poem by drawing in the Grecian myth of Narcissus. The multiple glimpses and gazes that seemed to inform this poem might also be read, in light of the title, as a repetitive gaze at a singular form. Here, the viewpointedness of language is harnessed as both a literal and mythical gaze. This mythical attribution extends our understanding of the multiplied and fractured representation of the letter A, perhaps to construe it as having been broken through over-zealous attention. At the same time, language may also be construed as an inherently dubious and incomplete reflection of either the reader/writer or of the world. Yet in this duplicity the letter nonetheless holds the viewer captive. It is noteworthy that it is an indefinite article that features in this fragmented poem, since it can so easily apply to anything and nothing; it does not discriminate. Perhaps the fractured image of the A is a reflection of any or all readers or writers who has become obsessed with language. At the same time, since Narcissus becomes trapped by his own reflection perhaps the title suggests that a focus on language is a focus on oneself, that language is in some way a self-reflection. This nicely captures the sense of perception and language being inherently viewpointed from the individual’s specific embodiment. Furthermore, the frame of Narcissus also carries a caution against the downfalls of representation, since Narcissus is held captive (quite literally) by an image. The poem complicates our perspective by presenting a rippled, textured figuration of a multiplied letter that is both sign and image.

The cumulative construal of the letter A in this particular poem may present the rippling surface of language itself, which presumably reflects or gazes back at the reader. The poem, perhaps, serves as a caution against the mesmeric potential of seeing oneself in language, or of expecting a truthfulness from language, itself so multifaceted and polysemous. By butchering the
letter A, Dutton has constructed its true face as illusory, empty, indefinite. Readers are invited to traverse this illusion to enact a narcissistic fixation on the poem while also attempting to see through or beyond its hall of mirrors. The poem shows how viewpoint, construal, and intersubjectivity can be reified in a material object while simultaneously seeming to caution readers against presuming any fixed representational meaning within linguistic expression. The multiplied, rippling letter seen in this poem might very well be the intersubjective letter through which Narcissus is saved. Here the poem defamiliarizes the false-mirror of language by employing its inherent multi-viewpointedness to break its mesmerism.

2.3 Attenuated Cognition and Mental Simulation

Research into cognitive ecology clearly shows that sensorimotor (perceptual) regimes inform conceptualization through materialistic, schematic, viewpointed, and intersubjective assumptions of cognition geared for action. Thus, sensorimotor systems reuse systems designed for action in the world for conceptualization processes as well. In order to ground conceptualization in perception and action—in order to reuse, manipulate, and extend embodied knowledge—knowledge must be distanced to some degree from action; it must be attenuated (Langacker 2008, 536-37). That is, when we think about dancing, we do not actually start dancing in the streets. Except for at Mardi Gras or in flash-mobs, if that happened we would find ourselves quickly attenuated from society! In fact, cognitive processes operate on varying levels of activation and through parallel mirror neuron systems, such that perceptual systems can operate—modally and synaesthetically—by activating and networking mental imagery, memories, and environmental cues without prompting bodily action. These attenuated functions ground knowledge in sensorimotor processes while divorcing them from requisite actions; this
separation allows people to intuit, anticipate, infer, rehearse, imagine, and project understandings and emotions from their experiential pasts onto others and things in the present and into possible futures. Attenuation explains the synaesthetic and intersubjective phenomena discussed above.

Attenuated knowledge activation has recently been explained most fully through the theory of mental simulation (often, hereafter, referred to just as simulation). Benjamin Bergen summarizes simulation as “the creation of mental experiences of perception and action in the absence of the external manifestation” (2012, 14). In other words, it is the activation of embodied ecological knowledge without activating the body itself. For instance, mental simulation produced the sense of cutting, layering, and sliding ascribed to Paul Dutton’s “Narcissus A, 8” above. Simulation is pervasive in cognitive processes, including short- and long-term memory formation and activation, and is characterized by the partial de-coupling and appropriation of sensorimotor processes for perceptual and conceptual elaboration. As Bergen shows through discussions of brain scans and other empirical evidence, common mental processes like assessing objects and sounds, recalling memories, and envisioning interactions, when prompted through verbal instructions, “engage the specific parts of the brain dedicated to the different modes of perception and action” (47). Simulation is a whole-brain phenomenon that works across

I should be clear that whenever I say simulation, it must not be confused with Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) conceptual apparatus of simulacra and simulation. Baudrillard’s concepts refer to material cultural productions and their ideological implications; thus, his work more closely aligns with how discourse can augment frames of experience through metaphorical expressions rather than on mental processes per se. For a largely analogous, cognitive approach to such discursive and cultural phenomena, see George Lakoff’s (2002) work on political metaphors and frames.
sensorimotor systems as we interact with various things in our surroundings. Mental simulation plays a crucial role in such processes as forethought, object recognition, event responses, and intention recognition because it acts to integrate past experiences with present events and to make inferences about objects, things, and people surrounding us (Bergen 2012, 82-86; Oberman, Winkielman, and Ramachandran 2010).

Simulation also plays a significant role in social interactions. It helps us recognize the actions and possible intentions of others, by running our own simulation to mimic what others are doing. Vittorio Gallese (2009) suggests that simulation creates a projective, interpersonal dynamic much akin to the psychoanalytic ideas of transference and countertransference. Thus, it plays a strong role in empathy by creating that “feeling for” someone else (see Carr et al. 2003; Iacoboni 2008; 2009). Empathy derives from simulations of events, intentions, and background knowledge in conjunction with facial expressions and bodily actions. All of these combine to prompt affective understanding as we quite literally envision ourselves as an other in order to understand them (see esp. Carr et al. 2003; Gibbs 2006a; Gallese 2005; Iacoboni 2009).

Simulation establishes an intersubjective link through shared expressions which are crucial to the development of language use (Corballis 2010). It suggests why readers empathize with, or project themselves into the positions of literary characters, sympathizing with some and

32 Antonio Damasio’s The Feeling of What Happens (1999) offers a compelling overview of emotion, affect, and consciousness from an embodied perspective that correlates to simulation theory through his discussion of ‘as-if’ loops. Of course, there is much more to emotion and affect beyond simulation theory (see Dalgleish, Dunn, and Mobbs 2009), but it does clarify the prompting of intersubjective states.
despising others. Literature provides a means of engaging with a variety of social interactions and learning opportunities through vicarious, fictional simulations grounded in an intersubjective communicative modality (Mar and Oatley 2008; Keith Oatley 1995; 1999; Zwaan 2009). Simulation is, therefore, crucial to Rolf Zwaan’s notion of the immersed experincer: “Comprehension is the vicarious experience of the described events through the integration and sequencing of traces from actual experience cued by the linguistic input” (Zwaan 2004 38; affirmed by Bergen 2012, 72). As Benjamin Bergen suggests (2012, 66-72), vicarious comprehension almost exclusively exploits human-scale viewpoints. It follows that simulations are also individually nuanced:

people simulate in response to language, but their simulations appear to vary substantially.... Variation in the things people think words refer to is important because it means that people use their idiosyncratic mental resources to construct meaning. (Bergen 2012, 19)

Thus, individual cognitive ecology constrains meaning to some extent. While physiological similarities mean that people are bound to interpret things in a number of predictable ways (as reflected in consistencies across cultures in the employment of contrastive image-schemas like UP-DOWN, LEFT-RIGHT, and FRONT-BACK in metaphorical constructions), the diversity of individual experiences also requires cognitive flexibility for interaction and construal so that we understand each other even through the differences. Such flexibility has led to the development of alternativity and figurativity in meaning systems (Tomasello 1999; Turner 2014), since these systems can only be “good enough” rather than representationally perfect or mimetic in order to
apply to unique occasions and to be manipulated by individual users to their purposes (Freeman 2007; Spolsky 2002).³³

Simulation drives visual and verbal comprehension processes in both literal and metaphorical uses.³⁴ In fact, as Benjamin Bergen argues (2005), mental simulation presents a coherent argument for viewing literal and figurative language as a part of a spectrum rather than as a basic division between types of linguistic usage (conclusions that are further reinforced by critiques of the metaphor/metonymy binary: see Barnden 2010). It also functions across realistic and alternative uses of imagery and in combinations of modalities. For example, Gibbs and Matlock (2008) discuss a poster with a picture of a raised boot. Under the boot, a caption states, “You have feet. Stomp out racism in your scene” (161). To interpret this poster, “people envisioned stomp out racism by imagining their bodies in action against the metaphorical object or living entity of racism” (161-62). By activating sensorimotor understandings, the everyday, literal experience of stomping is transformed into a metaphorically and socially loaded conceptualization. As Benjamin Bergen summarizes,

to understand metaphorical language, we appear to construct embodied simulations that are slightly less detailed than ones we construct for literal language, but that are no less motor or perceptual....The idea that we’ve come to is that we take what we know about how to perceive concrete things and to perform actions, and we use that knowledge to both describe

³³ Place and Fitterman (2013) note that “Radical mimesis is original sin” (20), which I think construes the desire for linguistic determinacy rather nicely.

³⁴ Substantial evidence now shows how ubiquitous mental simulation is in modal interpretations. See Bergen (2012), Gibbs and Matlock (2008), and Ramachandran (2011) for general introductions.
and also think about abstract concepts. In this way, we bootstrap harder things to think and talk about—abstract concepts—off of easier things to think and talk about—concrete concepts. (2012, 208-09)

Thus, cognition involves a propensity for projection beyond material and perceptual constraints through multimodal abstractions (see also Gallese 2003; 2008; Gallese and Lakoff 2005). This means, at times, that a mental simulation, by using perceptual systems, in fact interferes with perception, so that if one hears about or expects something, it can alter whether or not one attends to things in your surroundings. In some cases, the imagined and the real become indistinguishable (Bergen 2012, 26-30). While simulation is attenuated from action, it can still cause interference in sensorimotor systems. Nonetheless, this perceptual engagement typically facilitates comprehension.

Competing simulations can also impede each other. Incompatible visual and verbal prompts within the same sensorimotor system cause delays in comprehension by creating competing simulations that inhibit each other (86-92). For instance, pictorial illusions like bi-stable images, which can be interpreted two ways equally, pose such a challenge. A classic example of bi-stable imagery is an “illusion” (Figure 6) popularized by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953, 166) and E. H. Gombrich (1960, 5), but first employed for psychological studies by Joseph Jastrow (1899, 312). Bi-stable images oscillate between identifications because of their simultaneously salient features, which need to be clarified either through reconstrual or framing

\[35\] See Kihlstrom’s (2004) history of this particular image and the role of Jastrow in developing the psychological study of such perceptual illusions.
(Peterson et al. 1992), thereby driving counteractive simulations that need to be disintegrated to be intelligible. In this case, one cannot perceive the rabbit and duck at the same time, but must oscillate between them, and often preferences are given to one or the other interpretation depending on experiential situatedness, including how the illusion is presented and titled. While the representation is a hybrid of both, our phenomenological experience of it is as either a rabbit or a duck or a rabbit or a duck or a .... You get the point.

![Image of duck-rabbit illusion](image-url)

**Figure 6:** The duck-rabbit illusion first used by Joseph Jastrow (1899, 312).

On the other hand, images and texts can also help support each other by priming compatible simulations of different or cooperative elements of an experiential network. As Bergen suggests, multiple simulations can run parallel to each other (2005, 273) as long as their proximity does not cause excessive overlap or incompatibilities within neuronal systems that causes “cross-talk” or cognitive noise (2012, 261-64). Simulations can also build upon each other in what Bergen calls “multiphase simulations” (2012, 148). These are particularly salient to discussions of literature, where a complex sequence of mental images develops narrative or
poetic effect. Mental simulation, therefore, plays a crucial role in activating modal prompts as well as weaving together more lengthy comprehension processes within or between them.

To be clear, this should not appear as a solely bottom up understanding of mental simulation, since it plays a functional role in cognitive ecology, and the social and cultural spheres play a crucial role in sensorimotor developments. For instance, mental simulation processes tied to understanding causal motion are impacted by the writing direction of the given language, and presumably the literacy level of the subject (Bergen 2012, 184). This directionality also impacts inferences made about other cultural artifacts such as comics (187). Such evidence reveals the impact of cultures, history, and artifacts on simulations as parts of cognitive ecology. Simulation crucially facilitates the feedback loop between the environment and resultant activations in cognition. Thus, there is a dialogic relation between prior knowledge and ongoing modal prompts that draws on this knowledge to make sense of things. Importantly, this means that simulation not only mimics actions, but also extends understandings beyond their material constraints. In line with Michael Newall’s (2011, Ch 2) work on visual depiction, simulation moves perception beyond seeing to what Newall calls “non-veridical seeing,” which is the recognition of depicted properties that support understandings that go beyond what is represented. For example, one might see a head going past a window and infer that it includes a whole person. Without this automatic cognitive process, a person sitting near a window would find the world a rather frightening place of disembodied heads. Ecological psychology refers to this phenomena of perceptual in-filling as “amodal, indirect perception” (Rock 1997). Newall suggests that understanding the subject matter of a picture means that viewers move beyond seeing to recognition and projection or seeing-in, which means we see content that is not physically there, which renders the experience of the image non-veridical.
Non-veridicality is the central problem in art criticism of “double perception” that E. H. Gombrich describes as “the complex interplay between reflex and reflection, involvement and detachment that we so inadequately sum up in the term ‘illusion’” (1973, 241-42). Mental simulation gives us a verified cognitive process with clear parameters for engaging with this transformative process from seeing to perceiving (Oberman, Winkielman, and Ramachandran 2010). What Newall and Gombrich describe as the process of moving beyond seeing to recognition and activation strongly reflects research on mental simulation that accounts for this cognitive fluidity. Simulation is a crucial mechanism for experiencing images and language by activating recognition and interactional processes and operates at a variety of scales of eco-cognitive knowledge. Distinguishing carefully between the static representation before the reader-viewer and the dynamic mental simulation that activates it helps isolate how different material features of the work prompt emergent understandings derived from the reader’s simulative processes and responses.36

2.4 Cognitive Phenomena

Within the broad framework of dynamic cognitive ecology, several dominant structures and phenomena constrain or facilitate the activation of embodied background knowledge. Furthermore, they reflect patterns of environmental engagement that are embedded in material

36 This resonates with Roland Barthes’ (1977) distinction between work and text, but builds in a relational and dynamic process for articulating how the reader develops their personal understanding (text) from the communally accessible, materially embodied literary work.
culture, which leads some researchers to refer to human meaning systems and cultures as biocultures. The recognition of how specific features of modal and cross-modal representations inform interpretations of multimodal literatures allows for a recursive tracing of how particular meanings are motivated from a text.

To interact with any environment requires an organism to figure out their physiological capabilities for interacting with specific objects around them; this requires the ability to read for affordances, for potentialities for action and interaction. As Anthony Chemero notes, this aspect of seeing beyond things—of seeing things for how they support actions rather than as simply objects unto themselves—shows that what we perceive of as meaningful “cannot be merely physical” (Chemero, 2009: 135). Affordances illustrate a projective quality of cognition that develops textual phenomena such as fictive motion or fictive change in which representations cue alternate fictive understandings, such as when we say that a long fence “runs across the field,” when in fact it cannot physically do so. Thus, this projective quality of perception informs conception.

As consistent sensorimotor interactions with things in the environment develop over time, these lead to relational patterns that support faster responses through established assumptions and inferences (although these patterns are always flexible and can be updated when incongruences arise). The more settled the patterns of relation, the more unconscious they become. Cognitive scientists have engaged with these experiential patterns across a variety of levels of granularity or specificity. Each level informs meaning construction in language and
other modalities. Object and scene affordances remain relevant, but are also encoded in abstracted orientational and directional parameters called *image schemas* (such as *UP-DOWN* or *PATH*37). While image schemas are a part of how environments and objects are understood, they can also be projected onto more abstract concepts to help structure them, such as in metaphors of morality like *GOOD IS UP* and *BAD IS DOWN*. Through image schematic structure, a conceptual system of relation emerges that can continue to connect across various images, phrases, poems, and stories. For instance, “falling into a pit of despair” maps perception to affective qualities and even moral connotations.

More complex networks of action and knowledge that connect understandings of objects, roles, and values are called *frames*, and these can be activated metonymically or metaphorically (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014). Both creative constructions of meaning are perhaps best modeled through the theory of conceptual integration (commonly referred to as *blending*), which explicitly traces how perceptual and conceptual cues are selectively projected into an emergent, synthetic understanding (called a *blend*). I will discuss all of these aspects of cognition in more detail in the following section in relation to a visual poem by Melody Wessel.

The complex integration of modalities in multimodal literatures allows them a wide degree of flexibility in how they prompt meanings across this granular spectrum of cognitive architecture. I begin at the “bottom,” or most basic and schematic of interactions, in order to

37 Image schemas, as well as other basal level conceptual structures like conceptual metaphors, are typically referred to using small capitalization to distinguish them from higher order perceptual and conceptual phenomena.
work my way up to more complex features of cognition. At the same time, all of these features or phenomena inform image and language, so this is an artificial breaking apart of features in order to highlight their functionality (see Bergen 2012, Ch. 3; Lakoff 1987; Oakley 2009). The basic configurations of perceptual systems are recruited for interpreting representational artifacts, and thereby move readers beyond a purely material engagement with textualized artifacts. By parsing eco-cognitive responses to multimodal literatures in this granular way, we can see the significance of their contributions to emergent understandings and interpretations.

### 2.4.1 Niches, Attention, and Affordances: Material Possibilities

One of the ways that we load the environment with meaning is through *affordances*. First thoroughly discussed by James J. Gibson (1979), and elaborated upon by successive ecological psychologists, affordances are best thought of as the possibilities for action that something presents to an organism. This means that they “are relations between [an organism’s] abilities and features of the environment” (Chemero 2009, 145), such that objects or things in the environment afford a variety of specific, possible actions or responses that correspond to an organism’s niche, its specific place in a dynamic ecosystem. For instance, a mug affords *grasp-ability, contain-ability* by prompting simulations of sensorimotor knowledge of its form and actions associated with it (Bergen 2012; Iacoboni 2008; Pecher et al. 2009; Zwaan, Stanfield, and

---

38 I cannot go into the details of psychological research into affordances, but Chemero (2009) and Greeno (1994) offer good, detailed contemporary summaries and engagements with the field. Mark Johnson (1987; 2007) also employs the Gibsonian notion of affordances in his discussions of embodied meaning.
Importantly, language comprehension prompts the same object interactions in mental imagery (Pecher et al. 2009; Zwaan, Stanfield, and Yaxley 2002). It follows that we can then employ our knowledge of object affordances cross-modally in order to interpret representational prompts. Anthony Chemero also points out that events alter affordances of the environment, since an organism’s actions must change in response to them (148). Thus, affordances are materially and ecologically located as well as niche specific. They are also malleable, since organisms must be able to update and adjust their interactions to the actions of or changes to the thing or object of their affections or intentions.

Cognitive research shows that biases toward action extend through to a variety of multimodal phenomena, such as linguistic and gestural content (see Arbib 2010; McNeill and Duncan 1998; Slobin 1996). This shows that affordances work cross-modally and multimodally. Therefore, through cognition material artifacts become similarly loaded with affordances as objects in the environment and much more so than just using a book as a doorstop based on the affordances of its bulk and weight. Media correspond with specific modalities that activate abilities for creative action and response. As such, they present a type of environment or niche in which creative expression and action are accomplished and in which specific affordances are available for engagement. Here we can see a ratcheting up of engagement from that of action in the world to action in and through texts. For multimodal literatures, and especially visual poetry, in a sense the page becomes a stage. Media do not afford the degree of embodied dynamicity of an actual, ecologically robust environment, but they do place unique constraints upon expression (action) and interpretation (response). As Jay David Bolter notes, “signs are always anchored in a medium. Signs may be more or less dependent upon the characteristics of one medium – they may transfer more or less well to other media – but there is no such thing as a sign without a
medium” (1991, 195-96; qtd in Chandler 2007, 55). While some visual poetic texts gesture to a space beyond mediation, they nonetheless cannot do so without the affordances of the medium (including both its technologies and conventions) through which they are presented to the world and which inform their ability to gesture (Dworkin 2013). Much like the mug with its potential for particular interactions, media also prescribe particular affordances. For print media, such affordances are largely constrained to visual, verbal, manual (ex. size and shape), and proprioceptive (ex. weight and page turns) qualities.

Creators of literary works (in particular visually salient ones) engage with the affordances of sign systems, print technologies, social expectations about bibliographic and visual representation, modal limitations, and material productions to construct their works. For example, Melody Wessel’s visual poem “Gossip” (Figure 7) largely employs pieces of letters to represent a shaped mosaic with a crumpled up title at the top. Wessel, as with other visual poets, employs the material affordances of type primarily as an artistic material rather than linguistic element within the poem. Furthermore, she breaks from bibliographic conventions and reading practices by creating dominant vertical rather than horizontal lines and making the titular word a globular mass rather than a clear, linear sequence of letters. Wessel takes letters and jumbles and sculpts their shapes to develop a form that breaks expectations while suggesting a relation to the interpersonal issues of gossip. The affordances of letters as parts of a mosaic facilitate this pictographic recalibration by signaling a writerly intentionality to the work’s unexpected pictorial presence as a smokestack or a penis with punctuation marks circling at the bottom and titles forming at the top. The reader’s sense of intentionality comes from simulating the possible routes to constructing the poem with parts of letters by recognizing the affordances of the modalities that Wessel has employed to construct phallic or industrial imagery. This glimpse of the creative
process adds a specific dynamicity to the poem’s materially static presence on the page. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, the phallic or industrial imagery also adds to interpretations of the gossip that it produces. One might contend that the poem is either situating gossip as an outcome of sexual or illicit activities or as a social pollutant. How one comes to such conclusions involves an array of cognitive mechanisms that contribute to the phenomenal experience of the poem. Beginning as I have with basic attentional experiences like affordances, I will continue to work my way up to more complex features of cognitive architecture and to a more robust reading of the poem.

Figure 7: "Gossip" by Melody Wessel (in Hryciuk, 2009, 9).
2.4.2 Fictivity

When I examine Melody Wessel’s visual poem “Gossip,” parts of the image seem to move, cycle, rise, and expand. Here we see another phenomenon through which cognition transcends the materiality of experience to reveal a “cognitive bias towards dynamism” (Talmy 1996, 213). Such perceptions of the poem illustrate a transformation of a static array of typographical marks into a dynamic image, diagram, or scene. Mental simulation helps develop this emergent experience of “fictive change” and “fictive motion” (Langacker 2008; Matlock 2004).

Fictive change denotes the subjective construal of something in terms of an alternate state of being. For instance, conceptualizing a “broken line” involves a sense of an archetypal line which breaks in the process of being represented on the page as a series of dashes (Langacker 2008, 530). By simulating the breaking of a whole line to interpret the dashes, readers develop a sense of a state prior to representation and, thus, understand both the represented and the prior state together. Other change-of-state expressions involve similar conceptual processes such that the negated state always informs conceptualization by infusing the static representation with a dynamic, transformational shadow. For instance, the central columns of Wessel’s poem appear to be made of bits and pieces of broken letters, which give a sense that language is being glimpsed in the process of cohering into words, or that it has been butchered to facilitate production. This hint of language construes gossip as the end product of a process of linguistic incompleteness or decay. The embedded title, at the top right corner of the poem, also reflects this dynamic sense of linguistic reconfiguration, since the reader must unscramble the letters in order to find the title. Between the title and the central columns, fictive change adds a dynamic quality to the poem and emphasizes the disintegration of linguistic elements in the production of gossip.
A related dynamic inference from static representations is fictive motion. Leonard Talmy (1996), in his influential discussion of various types of fictive motion, describes them as “nonveridical phenomena” that draw on perceptual experiences to inform understandings of language and other representational forms. These phenomena include “linguistic instances that depict motion...[and] visual instances in which one perceives motion with no physical occurrence” (211, emphasis mine). For instance, one might describe (as I did above) a fence that runs across the field, or a road that hugs the coastline. Through mental simulation, readers project dynamic perceptual and agentive qualities onto objects, which transforms their perceived states of being (Matlock 2004; Oakley 2009; Richardson and Matlock 2007). Fictive constructions prompt a more dynamic and dramatic understanding, such that the fence is conceived of as longer, or the road is understood to run closer to the edge than, say, a shore-side road. Furthermore, conceptualizing static objects as mobile involves inferences about trajectories and relations between static elements, including the understanding that a line of static letters can run across a page. In terms of Wessel’s “Gossip,” a repeated form, such as the sequences of question and exclamation marks, can be construed as a single form glimpsed moving repeatedly through time and space, thereby prompting a sense of fictive motion across the page. These marks also appear to circle around and into the base of the central column, thereby seeming to add themselves into the chaos at the base of the pillar of broken letters. By simulating these motion paths, one garners the understanding that this particular object is attracting attention by raising questions and generating excitement. Through such qualities, further linguistic particles (and presumably their speakers) add themselves to the production of more gossip.

Leonard Talmy (1996) describes a variety of fictive motion paths with specific qualities and functions. One major group is “demonstrative paths,” which direct attention (219-26); it is
through the imaginary line of directed attention that fictivity emerges. Talmy includes arrows as a type of demonstrative fictive motion that can include both agentive and non-agentive qualities (229). For Wessel's poem, this means that fictive motion is also involved in the unidirectional motion of the bigger column and the oscillation of the smaller one beside it. We might read these in diagrammatic terms as depicting a more dominant upward force that is complemented by a secondary oscillating force. This may correlate with the phallic qualities of the poem, which thrusts predominantly upward, but it might also suggest a back draft within the smokestack that is spewing pollution.

Putting these various fictive qualities of the poem together suggests that linguistic elements accumulate at the base, are transformed or crushed, and make their way to the top to produce the cloud of gossip. The distinctiveness of the title beside this production process suggests that it is the final product that spews out and is captured in this poem before it drops back down. The visual conspicuousness of the gossipy globule suggests a weight to it that will likely drag it back down to the base, perhaps as part of a feedback loop, which adds a further sense of its social impact and its weight in public discourse. There emerges from these fictive force dynamics a fairly specific diagram of action attached to the end product of gossip. So far, I have shown how mental simulation of fictive motion paths constructs a coherent, dynamic scene of action in Wessel’s visual poem. Mental simulation is the engine that animates these letters on the page-stage as they are eco-cognitively networked,

2.4.3 Gestalts, Image Schemas, and Primary Scenes

My discussion of affordances and fictivity demonstrates how perception integrates projections of movement and agentivity into inferences about things. This reflects the cognitive propensity to
incorporate action into perception in order to extrapolate beyond that which is represented (Noë 2004; O’Regan 2011). Gestalt psychology corroborates these findings through experiments on perceptual and cross-modal phenomena that show patterns of interpretation that extend beyond the representations themselves. These non-representational phenomena, much like affordances and cases of fictivity, emerge through perceptual processes. Gestalt phenomena include figure-ground relations, object completion, and a variety of forms of grouping based on proximity, similarity, symmetry, causation, continuity, ease of connection, and closure of broken elements (see Chandler, 2007, 151-52; Köhler, 1929). These phenomena of perception show how we typically group and schematize things in our environments to make them more manageable. For instance, in Wessel’s poem “Gossip,” the bolded font style and proximity of the letters that make up the globular title groups them and supports the notion of fictive change of the word “gossip” discussed above. Similarly, the repeated punctuation marks become grouped based on similarity and facilitate the impression of fictive motion. Likewise, the columns of broken letters are viewed as coherent forms due to their proximity and parallel figuration. Also, the fictive change that is incorporated into the columns is perceived through a retroactive object completion, or indirect perception (Rock 1997; Epstein 1997). From this truncated list of perceptual processes, it should be clear that gestalt phenomena play a crucial role in directing attention and facilitating particular inferences about forms and their relationships with each other.

Mark Johnson (1987), inspired in part by Arnheim’s (2004 [1969]; 2009 [1974]) work on gestalt phenomena and art, draws on these biases and perceptual patterns to describe basal units of comprehension and reason that he calls image schemas. These are sensorimotor regimes that reflect pervasive perceptual phenomena—such as UP-DOWN, PATH, CONTAINMENT, and FORCE—
which structure a wide array of experiences: “an image schema is a dynamic, recurring pattern of organism-environment interactions. As such, it will reveal itself in the contours of our basic sensorimotor experience” (Johnson, 2007, 136). Image schemas are multimodally constituted (Damasio 1999) and are products of perception for action. Therefore, they include qualities and types of experience tied to motion (such as vectors and force dynamics), locations of objects, and interactions with them (Zlatev 2005).

Image schemas support perceptual and conceptual inferences and mappings in the development of complex emergent meanings. For instance, image schemas support structural, orientational, and ontological understandings through basic metaphorical elaborations (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; 1999). These basic schematic qualities help structure understandings by providing intuitive parameters on conceptualization processes. For instance, the image schema of CONTAINMENT suggests an inside and an outside, the inability to transcend the contained space without a specific ability to access or rupture the barrier, and so forth. To return to Wessel’s poem, the VERTICALITY and PATHS suggested by the arrows add to the sense of gaseous or globular production implied by the plume at the top. Both the columns and the plume derive from image schemas of CONTAINMENT. This image schema reflects an important feature of the conceptualization of gossip, which is set up through insider-outsider dynamics and serves to socially evaluate and regulate behavior in many cultures (Merry 1997). At the same time, the globular, disjointed “gossip” at the top also suggests a break from the BALANCE otherwise seen in the poem, since its visual weight seems to drag the whole poem over to the side. This may reflect the common Western view that gossip is a social contaminant that mars reputations by propagating misinformation and throwing off balance the social equilibrium. The poem, therefore, develops an image-schematic network that informs more complex emergent
understandings, especially with the integration of social metaphors surrounding gossip. At the same time, it may seem to go against other cultural practices, which use gossip as a way of maintaining social balance by construing it as unbalancing the social order. Of course, this is a fictive construal rather than an actual event. Gossip currently floats in the air; we cannot be sure if it will float or fall.

Image schemas act as one type of basal cognitive infrastructure that facilitates mappings between experiential domains to construct metaphors, analogies, and other correlational groupings and creative understandings. Mappings emerge out of the activation of recurrent and abstracted patterns of experience throughout cognitive development. Joseph Grady and Christopher Johnson (1997) argue that recurrent patterns of phenomenal experience, which they call primary scenes, provide a coherent ground for making meaningful mappings (or primary metaphors). Primary scenes help show how mappings connect perceptual and conceptual facets of experience. For instance, seeing something and knowing of its existence prompts the primary metaphor, KNOWING IS SEEING, which informs statements like “I see what you’re saying.” Such a metaphor may inform a reading of Wessel’s poem, in which we see a long inarticulate process of development, from the bottom up, before finally reading the term “gossip” as the end product. This clarification reinforces an outsider viewpoint on the gossip, and shows how one might only understand what has come to pass once its come out into the open. Similarly, the primary scene of grasping an object in order to engage with it leads to the UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING
metaphor, which underpins an expression like “I get what you’re saying.” Also, connecting the form of containers for different types of content produces the basic metaphor **FORMS ARE MEANINGS**, which informs such statements as “let me build from what you’re saying.” This metaphor may add synaesthetic qualities to the reading of the word “gossip,” which appears as a tangible object at the top right of the poem. The mangled, globular form suggests that both the form and meaning of gossip is malformed, unreliable, ill-conceived, even while being perceptible in its end-state. Likewise, it looks much like a crumpled up version of itself. In a sense, the columns are producing a social text that is visually instantiated for the reader while also being crumpled up and tossed away. This emergent product is the residue of the gossip—perhaps a fallen note that was passed around the room—finally being exposed for the world to see. However, to get to a more complete understanding of how these diagrammatic qualities inform and are informed by wider socio-cultural areas of knowledge, we must turn to a more complex relational structure of cognition: frames or domains.

---

39 Each of the primary metaphors described above link perception with concepts; such connections have been of central importance to philosophical debates about language and thought. The philosophical debates focus on how the primacy of visuality helps us think in specific ways about language and thought (Jay 1993), but obscures the other embodied aspects of primary scenes, such as that provided through a focus on touch or even on sensual limitations (Vasseleu, 1998). A widened view of multimodal primary scenes, signaled by this shift in philosophy as well as in recent cognitive science, in fact provides crucial grounds for a clarified view of creative associations and interpretations through the explicit connection between perception and conception that grounds inference and mapping processes (Johnson 1981; 1987; 2007; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). This approach develops a specifically synaesthetic, multimodal understanding of metaphor and knowledge (Sullivan and Jiang 2013).

40 My thanks to Paisley Mann for drawing this “crumpled note” element to my attention.
2.4.4 Frames and Domains

As I have explained, schematic impressions of embodied experience help us interact with and make sense of our environments, and these impressions inform representational meaning systems as well. Mark Turner (1996) notes that on a broader scale, these schematic impressions are also often story-like and provide patterns of interaction that can be mapped onto novel situations. Experiential pattern formation requires a process of abstraction from individual instances by pruning and compressing multiplicity into singularity. For instance, we compress many different days into the singular concept of the cyclical day by matching up recurrent phenomena like the rising and the setting sun and moon while ignoring extraneous ones like what you ate at a particular moment on a given day (see Fauconnier and Turner 2008, esp 58). Ignoring the details does not mean that we necessarily forget the details of salient days, but that their content is compressed in favor of the recurring pattern and only decompressed when needed to explain particular features or qualities of experience or to recall a specific memory. In the later section on conceptual integration, I will examine how the ability to compress and decompress understandings of experience is crucial for understanding creativity (Turner 1999).

Charles Fillmore (1982) isolates a particularly helpful and specific type of patterning of everyday life that he calls frames. Frames are

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, 1982, 111)

One ubiquitous example of a frame, which illustrates the way in which a single prompt calls up the whole structure, is that of an economic exchange. In this frame, a word like sell activates
knowledge of merchandise, purchaser, exchange value, and so on. A single relevant prompt can activate the interactive frame knowledge of objects, roles, and event structures. At the same time, frames are not determinate, but can be updated as specific information continues to inform the situation. For instance, selling something can apply to milk as much as to one’s soul. Both instances invoke the frame of economical exchange, one with a much more nefarious outcome than the other (depending on your opinion of the dairy lobby).

Frames vary in granularity, but typically they include knowledge about roles, values, objects, and other elements of a specific experiential domain, and typically they include both locational and configurational aspects. Frames provide cognitive access to encyclopedic or schematic knowledge and exploit multimodal facets as needed (Fillmore 2003; Cienki 2007). Yet it is important to note that generally frames act much like gestalt phenomena (Cienki 2007, 173), in that they typically provide near immediate understandings of an array of interconnected things without significant detail or depth. Thus, frames work economically, as do most cognitive processes, to provide just enough infrastructure to facilitate comprehension. If we choose, we can

41 In this section I follow Alan Cienki (2007) in largely conflating Fillmore’s idea of “frames” with Croft’s description of “domains” in his analysis of metaphor and metonymy (a view affirmed by Croft 2002; Clausner and Croft 1999). Fillmore’s research has been widely cited and developed in discussions of a broader array of linguistic phenomena (see Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996), so I retain his language in my work. Croft’s work, while excellent, is also much harder for the uninitiated to parse. The similar concept of “scripts” also relate to frames as an understood sequence of events, but is largely limited to sociology and anthropology, as is the slightly different usage there of the term frame popularized by Goffman (1974), which typically means “frame of interpretation” (Cienki 2007, 173-74; see also Gerrig and Egidii 2003). To avoid confusion, I will use the most popular term in the literature that most commonly overlaps with cognitive and literary interests.
pay more attention to the frames that scaffold understanding, but only if we put effort into
drawing this background information into view. Furthermore, frames operate at different
degrees of granularity, such that some frames may contain many smaller ones within them (for
instance, gossip is a frame within a broader communication frame), and frames can also overlap
through shared features (for instance, unrecognizable language features in multiple frames
beyond the hidden spaces of gossip, such as code-breaking, travel, translation, the murmur of
conversations in the other room, and so on). Exposing how frames of knowledge are accessed as
part of comprehension facilitates critical introspection by specifying why someone might or
might not understand a given text.42

Let’s now return to Wessel’s poem “Gossip.” Gossip invokes frame knowledge of
communication, including assumptions about social interactions and cultural norms. At a more
detailed level, gossip is itself a frame that denotes a social sphere in which people are divided such
that one group of individuals can freely talk about another person or group without their consent
or the possibility for recourse to factuality. Gossip is often assumed to be only loosely grounded
in observations or knowledge of a person and often progresses to gross over-exaggerations,
misunderstandings, and complete fabrications of information. Gossip tends to have the most

42 The fact that we think we know what we know, when in fact much is lost or augmented in the
processes of perception, illustrates why introspection is often a poor explicator of processes of
understanding (Gibbs 2006b). This is an important caution for literary scholars (myself included!), who
often rely upon phenomenological introspection to guide their hermeneutic practice. Of course,
introspection and intuition are incredibly useful tools (as literary critics have amply shown), but these
tools are strengthened through knowledge of their weaknesses as well. A thorough understanding of the
building blocks of cognition, such as I present here, helps satisfy that caution to a significant degree.
social impact in societies that have bounded, strict social codes with high costs for breaking them, that have a high degree of interdependence, and where group consensus can produce collective action (Merry 1997, 69-70). Drawing on this background, the poem appears to model insider-outsider dynamics through a clear figure/ground layout and container image schema, which distinguishes between those with power and involved in gossiping and those who are excluded. For instance, by simulating the fictive motion of the circling punctuation marks, the reader also develops a sense of the emotional qualities that imbue the closed gossip circle, such that those with access to the insider social group are attracted to and excited by the potential (mis)information gossip provides, and themselves may contribute to the gossiping. At the same time, the reader-viewer is kept in the position of an outsider to the gossip by witnessing the attraction and the production of gossip but by being unable to participate in it directly; hence, we can see the fictive change and fictive motion of language being manipulated, but are unable to parse it. This readerly positioning correlates with the social power of gossip, which coheres around particular figures and can be used for social control and the harm of others.

At the same time, gossip is described as “idle talk” and “trifling or groundless rumour” (OED n.p.). Gossip is notoriously powerful in the hands of some, yet is composed in large part of untrustworthy information. Here, the fictive dynamicity of the poem also construes the content as only partly grounded in reality, since very little of the poem provides interpretable language that can be factually corroborated. It also seems to build up away from its ground. Thus, the communication frame contains moral viewpoints upon the gossiping figures and their roles, as gossip typically generates socially manipulative communication that is dislocated and ungrounded.
There is also other frame knowledge that is drawn on pictographically by the poem. As discussed earlier, the general structure of the poem resonates with the form of a phallus or smokestack (and the force and path image schemas that go with them). Smokestacks are typically unappealing features of industrial production that spew out pollutants. Something similar might be said of penises, especially from moralistic perspectives that consider spilled ejaculate as a dirty, inappropriate product. Blending the communicative frame of gossip with the frames associated with smokestacks offers a metaphorical understanding of gossip as a social pollutant. When associated with penises, gossip is construed as an unsavory, ejaculated byproduct of illicit activities, perhaps of linguistic masturbation, that may also be construed as a pollutant. Through pictographic activation of particular frames, gossip is negatively construed as the outcome of information being manipulated in a closed-off space that festers and grows until it contaminates its surroundings.

The oscillating arrow that sits beside the phallus/smokestacks indicates ongoing activities in either frame. This activeness may be read as the singular production of gossip, but it may also imply, especially in conjunction with the sense of the title beginning to fall down, that gossip breeds more gossip, that it feeds back into further social interactions. This may resonate in ecological terms as an ongoing accrual of social pollution from the smokestacks, or in sexual terms as the inappropriate (re)production of false communication, rather than a (morally sanctioned) factual linguistic utterance. Nonetheless, it should be clear that the poem appears to diagram a construal of gossip as a wasted production of manipulated language that continues to influence social relations, perhaps in a negative way.

This reading of the fictivity, imagery, and metaphorical frame blending may seem to offer a complete engagement with the poem. However, the poetic diagram opens more detailed routes
for simulation and frame evocation; for instance, it may be explicitly diagramming sexual congress, not just a generic penis. Since “[n]umerous examples suggest that gossip centers on areas where the cultural ideal is demanding and creating stress” (Merry 1997, 54), the poem may very well be commenting on moralistic and normalizing perspectives on gender and sexuality. Since gossip also establishes and maintains reputations, and it “circulates around ambiguous situations” (53), it would seem that sexuality, fits this model well by being heavily codified and sanctioned, especially in more traditional social groups, and yet also typically private, and, therefore, ambiguous and largely unverifiable. At the same time, as the Oxford English Dictionary shows, gossip has typically been gendered feminine, whereas a masculine phallic form dominates this poem, which seems to invert the traditional gendering of gossip. Furthermore, this recodification more explicitly shows that anyone whose reputation is being marred by gossip is “getting screwed.”

To some extent, due to the pictographic complementarity between smokestacks and male genitalia, it would seem that both readings can blend together. However, they are not synonymous, since each metaphorical construction has distinct entailments. For instance, the double arrow would either refer to external or internal motion, thereby presenting two conflicting locations of agentive action, and the top would signify a body rather than gaseous pollution, thereby construing the CONTAINER image schema differently. How might we deal with this cognitive dissonance?

### 2.4.5 Dissonance: Frame Conflict and Frame Shifting

As schematic knowledge of domains or areas of experience, frames act like cognitive categories and parse the world into meaningful and manageable conceptual units. As George Lakoff (1987)
argues, based on the work of Eleanor Rosch, categories are not strict containers but radially open affiliations where content is situated relationally and somewhat fluidly. Thus, something can occupy different categories at once. Cognitive categories have no distinct delineation of boundaries, although many things will certainly be either in or out. Similarly, depending on the specificity and scalarity of the frames in question, there may be overlap between multiple frames with shared content while other aspects will be very specific. Whether or not something is counted as a member of a category depends on the circumstances as well as the backgrounds of the users; the same is true of frames. For instance, there are cases of frame conflict in which readers negotiate multiple frames simultaneously in order to attempt to settle on the most coherent one. Much like bi-stable images like the duck-rabbit discussed earlier (Figure 6, pg. 62), this conflict can generate multiple interpretations out of a single prompt and depends on the frames that readers bring to bear on it. Arguably, the sexualized or polluting readings of Wessel’s “Gossip” fall into this space, in which personal biases and preferences will influence which reading one gravitates towards. Therefore, frame conflict can be employed creatively to strategically suspend comprehension or to suggest multiple possible understandings. Wessel employs an abstract shape with a duplicitous referent which allows for this double reading. The poem therefore construes impressions of gossip by prompting simulation of it as both a private and public affair that impacts both those targeted by it as well as the community at large. Frame conflict, in this case, proves more productive than frame coherence.

However, frame conflict is the marked state, while resolution or coherence is the cognitive optimum. More common are cases of frame shifting, in which an assumed frame is later dropped or updated in favor of a better fitting option. Seana Coulson (2001) shows that frame
shifting is crucial to many jokes, especially ones with a punch line, but it is also employed in metaphors, analogies, and an array of other reasoning processes. Both frame conflict and frame shifting illustrate the navigation of multiple, overlapping simulations of frame elements, as readers move through multimodal communicative events towards a cohesive understanding. Frames offer a partially abstracted infrastructure for simulative inferences, but it may take time to find the right fit for prompts, and embodied experiences add the potential of multiplicity. Nonetheless, this seeking behaviour can be rewarding unto itself, as in problem solving tasks and puzzles. The genre of mystery writing, for instance, illustrates the broad appeal of delayed frame fulfillment on a broad scale.

Frames inform perceptions of experience to facilitate comprehension and also offer affordances for strategic and creative interaction and employment. They offer a particularly useful and dynamic structure of cognition because they can be used selectively and at various levels of granularity; we see this, for example, in the harnessing of both schematic, diagrammatic, and lexical elements of frame knowledge in Wessel’s poem: “Gossip” offers different levels of specificity for action and understanding. As Mark Turner (2008) argues, frames can extend beyond and transcend their basic features and often inform metaphorical constructions. I will return to a discussion of metaphor when I discuss mappings and conceptual integration networks (also commonly called blends) in the next section of this chapter.

While frames can be strategically compressed to speed comprehension and to build affinities between different frames, they can also be decompressed. Due to the networked structure of frames, parts of a frame evoke the whole through frame evocation (metonymy). As we saw with “Gossip,” these metonymic processes import detailed knowledge from the title to help parse the diagrammatic elements of the poem. Representational modes and strategies profile
elements of frame knowledge while priming the remainder of the frame in the background. Profiling or focalization, coupled with processes of compression and decompression, give frames a degree of flexibility that mirrors the level of specificity of the prompts while maintaining connections to a wider relational infrastructure that gives all of the parts distinct and potentially expansive meanings.\footnote{Adele Goldberg (2003) calls consistent form-meaning connections \textit{constructions}, which share many features with frames: they too are abstract patterns that prompt inferences within linguistic discourse. This is a particularly beneficial approach to analyzing linguistic constructivity, conventionality, and language learning and development, but is less directly related to cross-modal analyses. Blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) offers an explanatory model of cognition that illustrates how constructions work, and, thereby, presents a more supple and multimodal approach that I employ instead in the next section.}

Frames will feature prominently throughout my analyses of visual poetry. As multimodal and dynamic networks of interaction, frames support cross-modal mappings and connections while also suggesting modally-specific conventions that constrain or redirect understanding. Thus, frames may work to support modal-specific or cross-modal connections, may expose modal resonances or discrepancies across domains, and may draw coherence from linguistic prompts that anchor pictorial interpretive possibilities (Chandler 2007, 204-06), or vice versa.

\textbf{2.5 Blending and Creativity}

As I have shown in the previous sections, cognition is geared to action in the biocultural environment. Multimodal experiential knowledge is accrued, schematized and made accessible through framed metonymic and blended relations. Using the attenuated, enactive, and
appropriative process of mental simulation, our agile minds create novel, complex, and fictitious understandings through a process Edward Slingerland calls “selective synaesthesia” (2008, 151-218). This selective activational process occurs through a specific online (in-the-moment) ability to select, project, and manipulate complex networks of conceptual and perceptual information, an ability Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (1998) first called conceptual integration theory (CIT). CIT has since come to be more commonly called blending (see Dancygier 2006). Blending helps explain how creative understandings emerge out of the activation of perceptual and conceptual mappings. It also clarifies interactions between different representational modalities, since it is grounded in multimodal cognition.

Some blends seem to be presented fully formed, such as in some visual poems, or through visual metaphors, such as the metaphorical interpretations of Wessel’s “Gossip” poem (see Forceville 1994; 2002; 2009). For example, the untitled poem by bpNichol seen here (Figure 8) offers a blend of the word “dream” with the silhouette of the headboard of a bed and breath (or sound). To comprehend such a visual blend, readers need to dis-integrate the composite representation into its component parts of a word and a bed, activating a temporary mental space for each element that reflects the content of the prompt. Mental spaces are in-the-moment understandings “set up, structured, and linked, under pressure from grammar, context, and culture. The effect is to create a network of spaces through which we move as discourse unfolds” (Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996, 11). The mental spaces for this poem involve activating at least

the frames of dreams and beds, which themselves share the frame of sleep which helps blend them together. Having a shared structure between the two mental spaces helps stabilize a temporary relation that allows dissimilar elements to also be integrated, *blended*, such as in metaphorical and other figurative constructions. In this case, the shared multimodal frame of sleep helps bring together the different focuses on dreams as mental phenomena and beds as material objects.

![Figure 8: untitled poem by bpNichol (1983, n.p.).](image)

Through the combination of mental spaces that focus on mental and physical experiences, the blend produces understandings that transcend the prompts. By integrating the frame of dreams with the material qualities of breath and a bed, readers likely recognize the
presence of the unrepresented figure sleeping there, dreaming. The poem presents a scene without a subject that readers have to blend into being (generating the blend’s *emergent structure*), as their viewpoint is initially located outside of the bed. The construction of a sleeping subject is facilitated by simulating visual allusions—to breath and the representational convention of indicating sleep through a line of ZZZZZZZs rising from a bed—grounded in the form of the word. The overlap of roles and identities between the frame of dreams (which require a dreamer) and the bed frame (which is purpose-built for a sleeper) facilitates these emergent understandings.

With the subject of the poem blended into being, the experience of the poem transforms, in particular by changing how features are read. Convention suggests that the poem be read left to right, top to bottom, which draws the reader down the word and into bed with the sleeping subject. However, once the blend is developed, the reader might readily reposition herself to mentally align her viewpoint with that of the most familiar embodied experience, that of the sleeper. In such a process, the reader becomes, in a way, the subject snoring and dreaming. The visual weight of the m/bed further anchors this conception, albeit still blocking the view of the subject that the reader might align with. Initially this dominant m is somewhat puzzling. However, by comparing the newly blended information with the initial mental spaces (called *backwards projection*), it becomes the ground of the subject, of *me*, and the poem’s meaning. Through simulation of the emergent understanding of the blend, this poem prompts the development of multiple viewpoints, subjects, and spaces of rest. This reflects the previously discussed notion of subjectivity, through which multiple positions are experienced of texts. In this case, the reader is invited into bed to dream with the sleeping yet invisible persona of he poem, while at the same time remaining distanced by the imposing m that blots out recognition.
The analysis of bpNichol’s dream poem shows how knowledge is activated, extended, and blended to develop emergent understandings that transform our understanding of the initial prompts. Whether or not one gets a blend is contingent on whether or not one can simulate the relevant information to generate a coherent blend. Composite blends like this poem present a coherent scene that at the same time pose the challenge of being disintegrated in order to be activated, re-synthesized, and interpreted. Blending analyses of frame structure and simulation processes offers a concise and explicit approach to meaning construction within the dynamic systems of cognition (Bergen 2005, 269). Furthermore, it provides a hermeneutically relevant approach to multimodal textuality and creativity by allowing critics to trace how particular texts prompt specific simulations and readings. Through this approach, we can show how the sum of a blend becomes much more than its parts.

2.6 Cognitive Ecology and Multimodal Literatures

Think with the senses, feel with the mind.

- La Biennale di Venecia⁴⁶

⁴⁵ As “a mechanism of creativity” (Turner 1999; 2014), blending offers a robust framework for discussing slippages and mappings between iconic and symbolic modes of representation such as in formal poetry (Hiraga 2005), sign languages (Taub 2001), and gesture (Narayan 2012; Özyürek et al. 2007), which makes it particularly useful for analyses of multimodal literatures.

⁴⁶ Storr (2007, cover/slogan). My thanks to Lieven Vandelanotte for drawing this wonderful slogan to my attention.
Having given a more detailed account of how ecological cognition draws dynamically on the modalities in selective and creative ways, I now turn to the broader significance of such a position. At this point, it should be clear that this stance in no way reflects the naive realism ascribed to science by some postmodernists (see Slingerland 2008), in which materiality is assumed to be constant and objective. Rather it begins from the common-sense assertions of the reality of the world we inhabit as animals, and our indebtedness to it for self-knowledge. Such a position helps locate creativity, imagination, and the complexity of literary appreciation, affection, and fascination within the interstices of embodied and ecological experiences. Rather than remain in introspection about cognition (Gibbs 2006b), it moves to find ways of uncovering the nonconscious processes that inform meaningful understandings of multimodal cues. In a way, knowledge of cognition extends introspective intuitions further by supporting or thwarting particular conclusions.

Where does this leave us regarding the central questions of print media, representations, modalities, and how we come to understand these material cues? We’ve now come to see the astuteness of Northrop Frye’s observation of there being “something vegetable about the imagination, something sharply limited in range” (1971, xxi) which opened this chapter. Frye’s comment signals that cognition is always human scale, in that it remains restricted to, and structured by, embodied constraints on mappings, it is vegetative in the sense that it is richly grounded. It takes mental work, through a variety of types of blending (metaphorical, analogical, metonymic, etc), to break from these experiential limitations. And even then, eco-cognitive experiences limit how far we can elaborate and extend understandings of the unfamiliar, in a recursive process Monika Fludernik calls “naturalizing the unnatural” (2010). One need only look at even the most extreme science fiction to see this, where most aliens and ecosystems are
bastardized versions of things in our own surroundings. At the same time, because we can selectively synthetize and recombine through attenuated processes across multimodal knowledge, we can expand these seeming limitations of the sensible exponentially. This affords us a wide range of creative possibilities and responses. We are able to project our dynamic, embodied experiences onto the most banal things to remake them in fascinating ways. Likewise, this creative interaction is relived (to a degree) by audiences, readers, and viewers through the reanimation of individually-skewed as well as socially and materially distributed knowledges that help us think and feel anew or to connect and sympathize with figures in a story, all of which gives a text what Peter Stockwell (2009) calls texture.

As Marshall McLuhan repeatedly emphasized, media act as sensorially circumscribed environments that offer modes of representation that afford particular actions and constrain others (see 1964; Cavell 2002). Through the sensorium, technologies and media act as “extensions” of human abilities and as spaces for interaction. The medium of print is constrained to visually defined representations, including static images, written language, layouts, and so on. These constraints have led to a variety of bibliographic and artistic codes that range from typographic through to generic features and from realist to abstract forms. Rather than “codes,” I prefer to call these features bibliographic and typographic frames, since we actively engage with them rather than simply decode them. Texts are not cold computational algorithms but enactive, simulated multimodal adventures in eco-cognition.

Multimodal literatures make much of the range of sensorial possibilities of print (and increasingly digital) publication forms—including both the simulated actions, sounds, and smells that images and texts evoke—and require readers to activate and navigate its multimodal terrain by harnessing simulation as a mechanism of activation to move beyond specific modal channels
(Bergen, 2012, 13). Navigation occurs through dynamic cognitive interactions between modalities, the activation of multimodal knowledge, and cross-modal connections that facilitate or constrain interpretations. The following chapters focus on visual poetry and its associated criticism, to unpack the ways it creatively exploits ecological cognition to explore the limitations of print and exciting image-text developments to carry on the pervasive human tradition of multimodal conceptualization. This eco-cognitive approach illuminates how multimodal literatures, and particularly visual poetry, are “tools for thinking” (see Herman 2003), by rendering explicit the processes by which readers think through them.
Chapter 3
Visual Poetic Fallacies, Contexts, & Cognition

Words are wild, sentences tame them.

- Dom Sylvester Houédard\(^ {47} \)

The new poetics frames a new hermeneutics, taking upon itself
the task of making society conscious of its own secrets.

- Jacques Rancière\(^ {48} \)

3.1 Reading Alternatives

Visual poems employ the visibility of written language and pictographic elements to
construct poetic meanings. In a broad sense, the diversity of poems that include overtly
visual elements ranges from acrostics, collages, found poems, and pattern poems to
palindromes, villanelles, and other forms of poetry with structural constraints. All poems,
to some extent then, might be considered visual poems, if one considers conventions and
constraints like line breaks and other formal or conceptual limits (see Levenston 1992;
Mitchell 1980). However, as Rosmarie Waldrop points out, "[w]e do not usually see words, we read them, which is to say we look through them at their
significance, their contents. Concrete Poetry is first of all a revolt against this


\(^{48}\) Rancière (2010, 127).
transparency of the word” (2005a [1976], 47). Margery Perloff (1991, 120) claims that the early visual poetry of modernist avant-gardists of the Dada and Futurist movements were the first works to purposefully harness the visibility of writing to transform and especially to layer and interweave reading and viewing practices.

This chapter addresses how such practices have been historicized, theorized, and politicized, and grounds these positions in relation to commonly held, yet fallacious, beliefs about representational modalities. Cognitive research into representational biases helps clarify how poets and critics envision the functions of language especially, which informs their assumptions about poetry. To address the theoretical and political construal of visual poetry, in Canada and abroad, I begin by describing the medial situatedness and self-reflexivity of visual poetry within the “horizons of the publishable,” in particular to emphasize the eco-cognitive role such communicative choices play in interpretations. I go on to show how the unpacking of the “conduit fallacy” is crucial to seeing what visual poetry explores and contests. The materialist inclination in visual poetry requires a detailed engagement with the conventions that inform (usual print) production in order to address how these features impact their reception. I go on to show how the long history of pattern, concrete, and visual poetry has continually returned readers to this common fallacy, exploiting various features of visible language and representational media for poetic effects. I then focus on modernist and postmodernist manifestoes about visual poetry to show how they internalize and query different elements of the conduit fallacy, continuing to question how meaning is connected to the materials of print culture.

Having analyzed how knowledge of the conduit fallacy informs both historical and poetical accounts of visual poetry, I will then turn to show how assumptions about
communicative modes also inform how it is politicized within literary and cultural scenes. I will focus on the Canadian scene by way of an under-explored example with a particularly “prudish” history (see Betts 2013). By focusing on the conduit fallacy, I expose the cognitive basis for the literary and critical sabotage (or at least marginalization) of visual poetry and other avant-garde and experimental literary works in Canada.

3.2 Reading the Horizons of the Publishable

Visual poems draw attention to and explore the affordances of the materiality of visible language in all forms and styles (including handwritten, stamped, typewritten, and stenciled forms) as well as its material substrate (such as on a post-it note, page, postcard, or pamphlet) and other medial qualities (such as specific layouts, orientations, and bindings). In many ways, visual poems explore what Rachel Malik calls the “horizons of the publishable,” which are composed of “a set of processes and practices ... constitutive of all formations of writing and reading. Publishing precedes writing and governs the possibilities of reading” (2008, 707). Of course, publishing also provides possibilities for viewing visual art in print. Visual poems develop through the creative deployment of perceptual and conceptual relations within these horizons and showcase the complexity
of the print medium and all that goes into its different forms and conditions of production, as part of their meanings.49

The following untitled visual poem by bpNichol (Figure 9) succinctly illustrates this situated, medial engagement. It comes from a small unbound and boxed collection of visual poems, Still Water (1970b), which along with three other publications in 1970 led to Nichol’s receipt of a Governor General’s Award that he shared with Michael Ondaatje.50 In this particular poem, the removal of the letter ‘p’ contributes to the evocation of ‘emptiness’, as the graphic form correlates with the word’s semantics. At the same time, the sound of the word is also prompted through an attempt to read its incomplete graphical form, which necessitates mental scanning of the word’s linear shape

49 Visual poetry has maintained this medial focus since the rise of the internet and digitization, developing a strong presence on the internet and using the expanded affordances of digital mediation to develop animated and hyperlinked works that add dynamical qualities of time and motion, as well as space (see, for example, Jim Andrew’s www.vispo.com or simply enter “visual poem” into any regular or video search engine).

50 The other texts that won Nichol recognition were his edited collection, The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete Poetry (1970a), and two chapbooks, one of lyric poetry, Beach Head, and another of short fiction, The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid”. This award to Nichol was debated in the House of Commons floor due to bawdy humor used to deconstruct the myth of Billy the Kid. Conservative MP Mac McCutcheon refered to this chapbook as a “questionable piece of literature” and “an affront to decency and a discouragement to serious literary efforts” (Davey 2012, 142). Frank Davey notes that “[t]he controversy garnered Barrie nationwide publicity—publicity that was favourably received in most of the arts community, possibly more so than the award itself.... not at all a bad thing for a Canadian writer partly grounded in Dada” (142). Ironically, Nichol’s award money would go on to financially support bill bissett’s writing and publishing of his postmodern manifesto, RUSH: What Fuckan Theory: A Study uv Language (2012 [1972]) a text which in title and content would also be profane in its own ways.
and the cumulative gestalt grouping of displaced but similar typographical parts. (Should a reader not see the visual or implied phonic connections between the parts, the poem would likely remain a largely meaningless collection of four letters on a card.) Finally, the word’s lonesome spatial arrangement on the page evokes bibliographic conventions (from the bibliographic frame) whereby pages are typically filled with print. In a way, the poem also reflects the collection’s title by emptying the page in order for it to be still.

Figure 9: untitled visual poem by bpNichol (1970a, n.p.).

Furthermore, the poem is also presented on a square cue card (approximately the size of the open space around the poem above51) contained in a small box (14 x 14 cm).

51 The recent collection The Alphabet Game: A bpNichol Reader, edited by Darren Wershler and Lori Emerson (Nichol 2007), attempts to replicate the cue cards of the original boxed publication by placing a frame around the poem approximating the size of the cards. This is an answer born of necessity, since Wershler and Emerson sought to include these poems within a bounded collection. However, Wershler and Emerson’s presentation of the poem complicates rather than clarifies it. I would suggest that it would have been better to leave the poem on a blank
This atypical presentation of the collection of poems offers the reader the opportunity to control the reading process by shuffling, arranging, and positioning the poems, rather than having them bound in a specific order and orientation. While this readerly freedom may seem somewhat innocuous, I once inadvertently extended the meaning of the “empty” poem by accidentally dropping it to the bottom of the box. This “mistake” repositioned the poem such that it then seemed to comment on the conventions of print as well as on the box itself (although the box was technically no longer empty, it was relatively so). This accident in particular highlighted the control functions of bindings and page-containment on poems in more typically bound and published works. Through this in-the-moment sensorimotor event (recreated in Figure 10), the poem seems to comment on its bibliographic context. The unexpected extension of the poem as a comment on the state of the box illustrates how bpNichol’s choice to free the poems from being bound also means that they can be dropped, lost, and otherwise altered in ways not commonly experienced by readers of poetry. Together the “empty” page, the “empty” word, the “empty” box, and other interactions, do not simply refer to “something empty,” but prompt a simulated, synaesthetic sense of emptiness through a layering of page, rather than adding a box to signal its prior material constraints, especially since this addition is not glossed elsewhere. Adding the box makes the poem a contained emptiness, rather than one that speaks to the open field of the page as a whole, as it does in the original. I should add that this is a notable issue primarily with this one poem and does not impact readings of other poems from that original boxed set, nor should it take away from this otherwise exemplary collection.
representational and material understandings. The “em ty” poem, therefore, builds the possibility of the poem representing a static, descriptive sense of something empty, as well as a more dynamic, phenomenological experience of emptiness. The poem inhabits two states of being, which can be further altered through interactions with readers.

Figure 10: The emptied box of bpNichol’s Still Water (1970b) with the “em ty” poem left behind. The University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver. Photo by author.

The other poems in the Still Water box do not engage with print conventions so directly as the “em ty” poem, rather tending to evoke nature imagery through both word and pattern. Nonetheless, they also build parallels between the modes, much like we saw with the “em ty” poem. Furthermore, all of the poems have the potential to be recontextualized or resituated through their unbounded presentation. The poems,
therefore, focus readerly attention on the modes of representation as well as onto the
control that publication technologies assert over the experience of texts and images.
These poems explore the possibilities of representation while also integrating the reader’s
experiences in ways unavailable to poems in a bounded work. For instance, consider the
impact on interpretations if Nichol’s “em ty” poem (or others from the collection) were to
be displayed in a window. The unbound and unbounded poem develops a meta-
commentary on the text, experience, and texture through its representational and
material qualities.

bpNichol’s “em ty” poem shows how the visual poetic approach adds meaning by
mobilizing the materiality of the written word, visual cues, and the page on which they
reside to explore the horizons of the publishable. My approach runs somewhat contrary
to some notions of visual poetry, which is purported to produce “an instantaneous
lightning that empties the word, deprives it of its being, at least as we know it, and makes
space for a new existence” (Henderson 1989, 28). At the same time, it is also said to
prompt a sense of prelinguistic, “libidinal excess” (McCaffery 1986 [1980], 143-58;
affirmed in beaulieu 2006). Some poems do this, but many do not. These medial qualities
and practices lead Lori Emerson to suggest that visual poetry “reflect[s] a desire to ... draw
attention to the literary artifact as both a created and mediated object – techniques which
essentially turn the artifact inside-out” (2011, n.p.). Margery Perloff refers to this
characteristic approach of visual poetry (and other avant-garde experimental forms) as
the pursuit of “radical artifice,” which is

the recognition that a poem or painting or performance text is a

made thing—contrived, constructed, chosen—and that its reading is
also a construction on the part of its audience. At best such
construction empowers the audience by altering its perceptions of
how things happen. (1991, 27-28; see also Drucker 2004, 45-68,
161-196)

Thus, visual poetry enacts this radical artifice by making visible the materiality of print
culture as a component of poetic meaning.

The aforementioned “em ty” poem by bpNichol is a good example of this
employment of the affordances of print materiality. As this example shows, the radical
artifice of visual poems reflects, augments, or unravels assumptions about mediation in
relation to textuality and visuality in print culture, itself a constantly changing composite
of developing technologies and interests. In the end, visual poems participate in an avant-
garde tradition that shows that “[a]ll books are visual” (Drucker 2004, 197). Through this
visual-material attention, visual poems “not only permit but indeed compel us as readers
to relax the visual-cognitive discipline with which we usually confine words to their
symbolic meanings—a discipline that all of us have acquired through years of training”
(Gross 1997, 31). In other words, visual poems require readers to read differently.

The exploitation of the material conditions of visible language make visual poetry
best characterized as an inter-medial and inter-generic expression (Olsson 2002; 2011;
Reis 1996; Higgins 1965; Pineda 1995). Since it commonly blurs the boundaries between
modalities as well as generic and medial expectations, visual poetry has come to be
commonly characterized as a product of borderblur—a term popularized in Canada by
bpNichol but which he attributes to British visual poet Dom Sylvester Houédard (1970,
78). Nichol defines borderblur as a “poetry that arises from the interface” (2002, 134).
This interface-conscious practice, according to Jesper Olsson, qualifies visual poetry as “media poetry” since it “has contemplated its medial and material conditions” (2002, 179). Such observations correlate it with other forms of experimental literature as well, such as the multimodal experimental novels discussed by Alison Gibbons (2012). Gibbons argues that bi-stable oscillation “is this perceptual fluctuation between looking at the surface of the page and looking through the page to immerse oneself in its content which characterises multimodal literature” (115). I, therefore, include visual poetry within her definition. Furthermore, Gibbons argues that multimodal experimental literature requires bi-stable reading practices, connected to such “illusions” as the rabbit-duck discussed in the previous chapter (see Gibbons, esp. 113-26). Bi-stability means that the phenomenological reading experience incorporates both a textual meaning and an emergent awareness that imbues the medium (in this case, of print) with a degree of dynamism. This bi-stability was seen in bpNichol’s “em ty” poem with the sense of meaning being both a description of something being empty as well as performing and embodying emptiness.

The self-reflexive and strategic deployment of print modalities and media in visual poems means that visual poets, at different times and places, have understood the communicative potential of cross-modal connections in a variety of ways, ranging from unifying and synthetic relations to disruptive and disjunctive tensions. This chapter shows how the multimodal eco-cognitive approach sheds light on the problematic yet pervasive “conduit fallacy” that informs several conceptual and political positions on the hybridity and materiality of visual poetry over the course of its development. Rather than necessarily undermine these positions, this chapter shows how a commonly held belief
about representations supports the ways in which poems are understood, not just unto themselves, but also in relation to theoretical and political poetics.

### 3.3 Intermedia and Representational Fallacies

Visual poetry mobilizes relationships between visible language, imagery, and tactility to construct meanings; therefore, how these relationships are understood plays a crucial role in how visual poetry is critically engaged with. The notion of visual poetry being a liminal, hybrid form may prompt engagements that re-enact a false split between the static immediacy of the image and the idea of sequential depth of language inherited from Gotthold Lessing’s (1874) distinctions between painting and poetry. Without dismissing Lessing’s many good observations about each form, the inherited view often presents images as static and immediate in contrast to poetry and other literary works as rich, complex, and narratively driven. From this perspective, visual poems could be said to develop both depth for images and immediacy for language, but such a position is too polarizing in its inherent valuing of one or the other modality. For example, this logic is visible in Richard Kostelanetz’s (1970) articulation of a basic visual poetic distinction between “worded images” and “imaged words.” Similarly, Willard Bohn suggests that “it is impossible to bridge the gap separating the two modes of expression” (2011, 14). Bohn argues that visual poetry requires a three-step linear process of engagement, first engaging with the immediate imagic design (as a viewer), then linguistic decipherment (as a reader), and then a synthesis of the previous operations, as a form of interaction, reevaluation, and elaboration (15-17). For some poems this may be true (as it often is in the structuralistic poetry Bohn analyzes, quite excellently I might add), but it
homogenizes the creative possibilities of intermodal constructions. Furthermore, Bohn seems to be at odds with his own claim, since he also suggests that with visual poems the “effect is direct, instantaneous, and unmediated” (14). This claim suggests immediacy to the synthesis while also dematerializing the poem from its medial qualities. bpNichol’s “em ty” poem already disrupts Bohn’s image-word-synthesis model of comprehension, since the emptiness of the word is only produced after the word is read. Furthermore, the salience of the printed page also plays a crucial role in understanding the poem, which does not fit with the suggestion that the effect of visual poetry is “unmediated,” but quite emphatically the opposite. As I will show throughout this and the following chapters, the ways in which visual and verbal qualities of poems are interpreted are incredibly dynamic and not so easily delineated. For instance, as Sabine Gross concludes from her eye-tracking study of visual poetry, typically, “readers alternated repeatedly between iconic and symbolic modes during the time they were engaging with the text, which shows that it is the interaction between the two levels rather than the information given in each that drives the reader’s interest” (1997, 28). Mobilizing the eco-cognitive model of comprehension outlined in the previous chapter helps show how modalities function in composite texts to promote bi-stability within and between modalities.

The problematic dichotomy between modalities is also challenging because it imbibes the criticism with a range of visual fallacies. W. J. T. Mitchell (2002) critiques these fallacies as restrictive and reactionary, and argues that they misinterpret how visual modalities really act and interact with other modes within media. As I discussed in the previous chapter, visual theorists like Mitchell (1994; 2002; 2012) and Michael Newall (2011) have pushed for the articulation of both immediacy and depth for the phenomenal
experience of images of various types as a process of *showing seeing* (to borrow the title of Mitchell’s article), or as I might rephrase it: *construing perception*. Visual poems emphasize the potential to defamiliarize visible language in a way that exploits it to bring seeing and reading together to develop specific construals of their topic. bpNichol’s “emty” poem above is an exemplary showcase of this hybrid unsettling of distinctions and its potential ease of integration and understanding. In the next chapter I survey a range of cross-modal strategies that these poems employ to do so, and the simulated blending networks that facilitate comprehension. But first, here, I will present a central fallacy that undergirds much of the perceptual and conceptual work that visual poems do, and which informs many of the poetical and critical conversations around them.

Visual poetry often troubles and exploits a specific and pervasive Western metaphorical conceptualization of how language functions, which dates back to Aristotle (Grady 1998, 3 n1). I follow Barbara Dancygier in referring to this view as the *conduit fallacy* (2012, 203-04). Originally, Michael Reddy (1979) documented a selective list of 141 examples of “our language about language” (to borrow his article’s subtitle), and shows their reliance upon a pervasive folk theory of language that he calls the *conduit metaphor*. The conduit metaphor, which likely accounts for around seventy per cent of all expressions regarding language use in English, conceptually structures understandings of form and meaning as follows: (1) ideas or meanings are coherent entities that can be manipulated, and thus, (2) representational expressions (words and sentences) are objects that contain the meaning within them. This visualization of meaning being contained within something employs the metaphoric construal whereby perception and access are equivalent to knowledge, such that knowledge is something that one can perceivably
grapple with like an object. Finally, (3) these communicative objects and their contained meanings are sent or transferred unaltered through a conduit to a recipient. This metaphor is reflected in statements like do you get what I’m saying? He packed a lot into that sentence; I can’t find the right word; or, building from what you said. Such statements support the notion of a word as an object that contains and carries the meaning within it. As Grady (1998) argues, this conceptualization of language is built from a network of primary metaphors motivated from embodied experiences of perception of objects, especially perceptions of their composition, purposeful manipulation, and intersubjective transference. Thus, a person mentally simulates the object interactions (and their affordances) of transference, packing, searching, and stacking prompted in the previous phrases in order to understand their metaphorical implications and to understand how language works as a composite of forms. As Grady (1998) also shows, this metaphorical structure relates to concepts about other representational acts that also attribute meanings to forms.

Simulating object relations within the conduit metaphor supports specific understandings of textuality that likely draw on early exposure to letters and words in picture books as primary scenes and frames of literacy, and especially the pervasive picture book practice which seeks to “concretize” specific referential relationships (Nodelman 1988, 2). On their own, letters are at first meaningless forms but they then transform through the synesthetetic mapping of auditory and visual forms, producing a literate experience of speedy access and control of their presumed content. As a reader becomes more naturalized to literate experience, the blended synaesthetic nature of visible language becomes less obvious, and slowly becomes compressed into a simple
reality of a singular form-content (much like the concept of the cyclical day: see Fauconnier and Turner 2008). This compression gives the common sense impression of words as containers and conveyers of meaning. As Dancygier notes, “the primary fallacy of this construal [of language] is that meaning is stable, bounded and possible to transmit intact” (2012: 203; see also Gee 2008: 6-12). This commonsensical yet fallacious metaphorical complex can only emerge through compressions of communicative and embodied features that hide erroneous and counterfactual conceptualizations.

The conduit fallacy propagates several significant errors that are especially relevant for discussions of visual poetry. First, the conduit metaphor, with its emphasis on linguistic containment, suggests that meanings or ideas are independent of the forms of words themselves, which offers a logocentric and idealist perspective that negates the role that form plays in construing meaning. In contrast, famed typographer Robert Bringhurst asserts, “Typography is to literature as musical performance is to composition: an essential act of interpretation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness . . . . Like music, it can be used to manipulate behavior and emotions” (2004, 19). The conduit metaphor does not easily concede Bringhurst’s assertion of typographical interpretation.

Furthermore, the containment of meaning divorced from form abrogates the materiality of visible language’s mediation, ignoring its speaker-dependent information (such as gesture, which typographical emphasis approximates through italicization, bolding, or capitalization), its contexts (social, cultural, historical, and medial), and its conventions (such as generic, social, and cultural codes). The modes of representational mediation contribute to how readers (and viewers) process the meaning of words and other representative modes, particularly on the page. The metaphor breaks down because
the meaning-container must necessarily transform through dynamic interactions with both the material forms of the conduit and the contextual scenes it traverses. As such, the distributed and situated elements of meaning begin to challenge the tyranny of the Logos.

These sensuous and material contributions to meaning bring into view the eco-cognitive network of the reader or viewer of representational forms, against which the conduit metaphor chafes. For the written word, reader-viewers must take up the word-object and engage in interpretation, regardless of how it came to them, the intentions of the compiler, and what prompted its initial usage (information that is not necessarily readily available to recipients of written language). While the conduit metaphor presents this reception as simply a process of opening the representational container and accessing the universally known meaning inside, an eco-cognitive approach shows that embodied processes like simulation engage with the multimodal qualities of representations. To return to the earlier example from bpNichol of the compositely “em ty” poem, the poem illustrates how the author actively plays with the conduit metaphor, taking the container and its page and making them expressive through their visuality. Thus, Nichol subverts the assumed dichotomy between form and meaning by feeding them into each other to produce a synaesthetistic understanding of the empty container and its mediated and contextualized emptiness.

An eco-cognitive approach to meaning, therefore, counteracts the fallaciousness of the conduit metaphor while revealing its relevance to the work of visual poetry. Barbara Dancygier (2012) finds a balance that sidesteps the challenges of both the conduit and intentional fallacies within this complex relationship. She observes that meaning emerges
in the process of interpretation...the author, like the speaker, constructs the text, and the reader, like a hearer, interprets it, based on the textual prompts, available contextual ground, and general knowledge, and in an intersubjective context where other viewpoints are accessible. (203)

What the conduit metaphor constrains is an account of the contributions of personal and materialistic facets of the reader’s experiences that nuance her reactions to the message which might lead to a variety of interpretations, as well as the histories and modes that inform expression in particular genres and media. Understanding representational artifacts requires the activation of modal cues as well as the projection of authorial intentionality (see Dixon and Bortolussi 2010; Gibbs 1999; 2001) to facilitate the inferences and simulations that develop meaningful blends. 52 The guise of written communication invokes the trappings of all communicative modes that typically include intentionality, viewpoint, presentation, reception, and interaction. Readers respond to and interpret the forms and functions of communicative modalities in accordance with contextual expectations, background knowledge, perceptual cues, and embodied

52 Intentions are encoded in language, even if they may be misunderstood. As Mary Crane (2001) argues, the notion of the intentional fallacy misrepresents how readers interact with works which often involves the assumption of intentionality even if it is not helpful. We are cognitively biased towards action and intersubjectivity, and, therefore, biased to include intentionality and causality within interpretations. The helpfulness of discussions of the intentional fallacy is to caution against asserting closed, authoritative readings of texts, but it does not follow that readings are therefore always indeterminately open and divorced from authorial intention. The representational choices of the author obviously still impact the interpretive processes of the reader.
reactions. The focus on form-content within visual poetry prompts the explicit engagement with the connection between perception and conception that embodied research locates as the basis of higher order cognition. The materiality of visible language and media play a crucial role in prompting meanings in visual poems that break the purported containment ascribed to words as well as images. In this way, visual poetry, so exemplarily represented here by bpNichol’s “em ty” poem, ruptures the containment of the conduit metaphor. Knowledge of multimodal cognition provides the means of explaining the complexity of this rupture.

Mary Lewis Shaw asserts upon reviewing a range of early visual poems, “the concrete poem is thus no longer a monument to language, becoming rather whatever the reader beholds. . . . Its poeticity is gained with its presence through the act of perception” (1989, 41). Similarly, Sabine Gross concludes that visual poems “not only permit, but indeed compel us as readers to relax the visual-cognitive discipline with which we usually confine words to their symbolic meanings. . . . [They] remind us of the visual aspect of writing that we have come to suppress” (1997, 31). Visual poems, like bpNichol’s “em ty” one, reincorporate perception into poetry, building up the meaningfulness of form and presenting a glimpse of multimodal communication within the limitations of print media. Such an approach emphasizes Waldrop’s assertion that visual poems make the word visible, but it also illustrates how reading conventions and materiality play a crucial role in the development of meaning.

Seeing visual poetry as intermedial foregrounds a necessary reorientation toward what we consider meaningful, by activating a multimodal approach to mediation and signification. The poems simultaneously employ and contest the conduit metaphor.
Nonetheless, while they share a consistent interest in the materiality of visible language, different poets and theorists have understood the relationship between pictorial form-meaning (as image, diagram, or gesture) and verbalized form-meaning (language, words) in vastly different ways throughout the history of concrete and visual poetry. I turn now to briefly examine these alternative perspectives in light of the conduit metaphor and multimodal cognition.

3.4 Materiality and Literary Scenes

3.4.1 Print Hybridity and the Rise of Visual Poetry

Visual poetry has a long heritage, likely tracing back to the origins of writing itself, that point of language’s visual materialization (Balan 1999, 7; Byrum and Hill 1993, 2). Throughout the history of visible language, creative engagements with the expressivity of its forms can be found. Through an etymological study of grammar and syntax, Gunther Kress and Leo van Leeuwen (1996, 18-21) show how the materiality of the written signifier crucially informed early conceptions of meaning and literacy which subjugated form to meaning, slowly concretizing the conduit metaphor as a dominant conceptualization of written language. On the other hand, Dick Higgins (1987) shows how visual poetry—especially pattern poetry that shapes the language into a visual image

53 See Drucker (1995) for examples of creative interactions with letters of the alphabet themselves. Other notable examples by visual poets include bpNichol’s ABC: the aleph beth book (1971), jwcurry’s A: 4 Views (1998), and derek beaulieu’s letter rubbings (2008) and many letraset mosaics, such as his 16 by 52 inch Prose of the Trans-Canada (2011; see Barwin 2013).
reflecting the central verbal imagery—is common across many literate cultures, suggesting a “universal ... tendency to attempt the synthesis of visual and literary experience” (1987, 3). Higgins begins his account of such hybrid tendencies with the Grecian “Phaistos Disk” from around 1700 BC (3-17), as well as in non-Western examples of hieroglyphs and ideograms. Visual poetry was recognized as a distinct form of expression by the Greeks as *technopaigneia* and by the Romans as *carmina figurata* (2011). From Higgins’ extensive overview, hybrid communication seems to be a consistent part of the material practices of literate cultures since language was materialized within them.

Much more recently in the Western tradition, typographers were (and remain) interested in developing a creative synergy between the shapes of letters and layouts and the content of the given text in order to ease comprehension (see Bringhurst 2004; Lupton 2004). While the development of printing technologies were largely a means of mass production (in contrast to its textual forbearer, the manuscript), it came to be coupled in Europe with an interest in the relationship between print style and comprehension, an interest that prompted creative explorations by some. For example, in the 17th century, George Herbert published *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633), which included his commonly known and anthologized poem “Easter Wings” (Figure 11), which patterns the text (word-objects) in the shape of wings to reflect its verbally constructed imagery of larks and spiritual flight. Interestingly, Herbert is not unique in his use of formal patterning, which can be found in many European Renaissance poetries at this time due to the growing interest in Greek literature (Brown and Ingoldsby 1972; Church 1946). Notably, each line employs its form to add
iconic meanings to the language. Furthermore, the two parts of the poem face each other, mimicking each other’s shapes, developing a perceptual link and unification of the parallel stanzas. Arguably, the book itself also takes on a wing-inness when opened to this poem, by reflecting its structure in the curvature of the pages. As such, the reader and the poet seem to take spiritual flight through the poem’s orientation and material exploitation of the printed form. Through this patterning, Herbert develops a complex iconic and metaphorical system that interweaves form and meaning (see Hiraga 2005, 58-63).

William Blake’s many illustrated and illuminated books published throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries also explore image-text interactions (see Mitchell 1994: 111-50). As Mitchell surmises, “Blake wants a writing that will make us see with our ears and hear with our eyes because he wants to transform us into revolutionary readers, to deliver us from the notion that history is a closed book to be taken in one ‘sense’” (150). Blake’s approach included the development of print technologies and techniques that attempt to reintroduce the lost employment of illumination and rubrication54 to the print age through the development of the time and skill-intensive technique of “illuminated printing,” itself a part of a wider, growing interest in developing image-text printing technologies at that time (Viscomi 2014). This interest can also be seen in the many

54 See Phillips (2013) for an informative analysis of the creative and rhetorical uses of illumination and rubrication in a manuscript of Piers Plowman; see Hamburger (2011) for a broad discussion of iconicity in script. See also Drucker’s (1995, 93-128) helpful overview of medieval philosophies about scripts.
examples throughout history of *lettres animées* (see Drucker 1995; Gross 1997), such as Bertall’s *ABC Trim* (Figure 12).

![Image of Easter Wings by George Herbert (1633, 34-35). Public domain. This version is digitally enhanced and revised to correspond with the 1633 printing, including the additional of a mid-line to reflect the spine of the book, as displayed in the Early English Books Online database (Proquest)](image)

**Figure 11:** “Easter Wings” by George Herbert (1633, 34-35). Public domain. This version is digitally enhanced and revised to correspond with the 1633 printing, including the additional of a mid-line to reflect the spine of the book, as displayed in the Early English Books Online database (Proquest)\(^{55}\)

---

\(^{55}\) Ironically, while being one of Herbert’s most well known poems, it has also been notoriously mis-printed in numerous anthologies over the years. Originally, this was to save printing costs by turning (and thereby standardizing) the orientation of the poem. A case in point: it appears in the reoriented and standardized form in the popular *Norton Anthology of Poetry* revised shorter edition (1970) and 3rd edition (1983). The orientation was returned to its original orientation in the 4th (1996) and 5th (2004) editions, but with the order of the poems reversed! Presumably someone fixed the orientation of the previously standardized version without realizing that this would reverse the order of the stanzas by drawing the second stanza up into first position. Ironically, I did not notice this reversal either. My thanks to Vin Nardizzi for bringing this to my attention and for pushing me back into the archives.
The interest in the printed mediation of language and imagery is obviously not limited to the creative arts. For instance, commercially, print technologies supported innovations with Victorian advertisers (as they do today) who employed the malleability of page space in newspaper classifieds to solicit attention in ways that bring to mind early concrete poems (for example, see Figure 13). Similarly, the growth of pulp printing of engravings, such as in popular humour magazines like *Punch in Canada* (see Figure 14), spurred on the development of image-text printing methods and technologies (in the case of the *Punch* franchise, it also played a significant role in the development of political cartoons and later comic strips: see Sabin 1996).

*Figure 12:* Cover image of Bertall’s *ABC. Trim. Alphabet Enchanté* (1861).
Figure 13: “Christmas Cheer” advertisement in The Globe (Toronto), Dec. 15, 1869. Proquest Historical Newspapers Database.

Figure 14: Cover of Punch in Canada 1(4), March 2, 1849. McCord Museum: © 2.5 Canada, M119.1.5
Margery Perloff voices a concern (reaffirmed by visual poet, derek beaulieu [2006, 81]) that the stylistic proximity between visual poetry and commercial interests like advertising and branding might produce a “dead end to the former” (Perloff 1991, 119). I do not share her concern. Not only has this proximity always been present and visual poetry continues to flourish, but it implies that market forces and popularly produced image-texts will somehow replace the creativity of poets. This seems like a thinly veiled attempt to differentiate the creativity involved in constructing (high culture and niche-market) poetry from that of creating (low culture, mass-market) advertising. Furthermore, markets likely drive technological innovation more than artistic inclinations; thus, visual poets need a variety of publication markets to help generate materials and technologies for their own projects. As Willie Van Peer (1993) argues, changes in poetic practices are historically associated with, and often foreground, changes in mediation technologies. Moreover, and perhaps ironically in this context, visual poets have also been explicitly tied to advertising campaigns by The Hudson’s Bay Company in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ross and York 2014), which paid poets like Earle Birney, Judith Copithorne, Michael Ondaatje, and P.K. Page handsomely for their works. They made $50 per poem in the late 1960s and early 70s, which, adjusted for inflation, is $337 in 2014. Another important cross-over between the arts and advertising in Canada is the work of abstract artist and illustrator, Oscar Cahén. Similarly, in the international history of concrete and visual poetry, several influential figures, including Eugen Gomringer and members of the Brazilian Noigandres group, worked in design and advertising. Rather than polarize visual poetry against advertising, I prefer to position these connections as a range of creative responses motivated by the constraints of media and technologies both
within and outside the arts. While different motivations and exigencies drive each form (including the need to earn a living), they overlap in their shared creative engagement with hybridity within the horizons of the publishable, whatever those horizons might be at any given time throughout history. Across genres and publication forms, the page (and more recently the screen) has grown increasingly and pervasively into a dynamic space for action, connection, and transformation of modalities of representation, something not seen since printing technologies replaced scribes and illuminated manuscripts during the Renaissance (itself a fraught transition that involved controversy and social stigmas (Eisenstein 2012)).

The promotion and exploration of the dynamic possibilities of representation rose most prominently and importantly with the twentieth-century avant-garde movements. French Imagism, Futurism, Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, and Vorticism, as well as the later works by the Situationists, Constructivists, Spatialists, and Lettrists offer significant and influential artistic and typographic antecedents to the ongoing concrete and visual poetry movements in terms of both methods and poetic philosophies (see Dworkin 2003, 3-30; Drucker 1994a; Perloff 1986). For instance, Gill McElroy draws a connection between the founding Lettrist Isidore Isou and Canadian experimental writer bpNichol by noting their shared understanding of language: as Isou put it in his Letterist manifesto, “the word is the first stereotype . . . the carpentry of the word built to last forever obliges men to construct according to patterns” (qtd in McElroy 2000, n.p.). Here, the characterization of language as a material for building crude patterns and stereotypes reflects the limited view of the conduit metaphor through which meaning is fixed within a malleable form. Letterists and visual poets of other stripes (including the popular Fluxus movement in the
United States) seek to break such fixity by showcasing the meaning of forms by carving them up into patterns. What is especially noteworthy of the Letterists and other avant-garde movements is their attempts to dramatically disrupt fixed pictorial, typographic, and bibliographic expectations and to expand the possibilities within literature for multimodal relational potentialities. The promotion of alternative perspectives marks a notable shift from a historical focus on representationally constrained realist approaches to an aesthetically exploratory and disruptive paradigm (see Rancière 2009, 51-82).

These movements even promoted an exploration of bibliographic and typographic qualities of expression within the poetic practices of poets considered outside their purview (Scobie 1984, 32-3), including the significant formal manipulations of e.e. cummings (see Hiraga 2005, 109-11; Webster 1999) and Charles Olson and other Black Mountain Poets (Waldrop 2005b). Arguably, the multimodal possibilities for expression afforded by publication technologies at that time facilitated these changes in creative perspectives through integration in the eco-cognitive network. The growing exploration of alternative semiotic regimes by the latter part of the 19th century set the groundwork

---

56 The Modernist avant-garde explored how formal qualities of print were meaningful, influencing both later typographic (see Lupton 2004, 25; Heller and Fili 1999, 72-91) and poetic movements (see Bohn 1986; 2001; Drucker 1994a; 1996; Dworkin 2003; Perloff 1991).

57 This important shift in perspective largely grew out of anarchist and Marxist critiques of representation as a means of gaining power and control, and the desire to break from these modes in order to promote a creative and critical thinking, individual expression, and freedom (see A. Antliff 2007; M. Antliff 1998; Cohn 2006; Leighten 2013).

58 Notably, bpNichol dedicates one of the poems in his first collection of visual poetry to cummings (2005, n.p.).
for the emergence of concrete and visual poetry and many other avant-garde and postmodern literary works. All of these approaches share an interest in breaking from the conduit metaphor’s false dualism between form and meaning.

### 3.4.2 Art Manifestoes and Visual Poetry

In 1955, two influential concrete poets and designers, Eugene Gomringer (Swiss) and Décio Pignatari (of the Noigandres group in Brazil), met in Ulm, Switzerland, prompting a rapid growth in international dialogue that included and influenced many North American visual poets (Balan 1999; 2002; Clüver 1996; Drucker 1994a, b; 1998; 1996; Vos 1996). This began the global network of the “International Concrete Poetry Movement” (ICPM) or the classical period of visual poetry, which is often considered to have run its

---

59 This poetic engagement with the visuality of written language also reflects growing interest at this time in language, typography, and media popularly promoted by Marshall McLuhan in *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), *Counterblast* ([1954] 2011), *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), and *Understanding Media* (1964), as well as in his work with Quentin Fiore in *The Medium is the Massage* (1967).

60 There may be some confusion here caused by the conflation of concrete with visual poetry. Concrete poetry—in its contemporary definition—includes a wide variety of medial or representational foci, including aural, visual, plastic, and kinaesthetic forms (see Balan 2002). On the other hand, the traditional concrete poetry movement focused primarily on visual poetry (i.e. only one of the forms currently considered a part of the contemporary understanding of concrete poetry). While many practitioners used (and some still use) concrete poetry to describe their predominantly visually-focused practices, I solely use visual to keep the historical and theoretical perspectives clear, not to imply that the initial movement is all that far removed from contemporary practice. Bracketing off that movement as a single, unified event also ignores both the diversity of approaches and voices within it, as well as the ongoing tradition of visual poetry.
course from 1955 to the early 1970s. (The *contemporary period* of visual poetry continues to explore hybrid mediality to the present, and it is this period that I focus on later.) The demarcation of these dates likely reflects a spike in critical activities in the mid-1970s tied closely to two popular anthologies put out by Emmett Williams (1967) and Mary Ellen Solt (1969). While Solt’s anthology provides the most comprehensive overview of the first two decades of the ICPM, these anthologies in no way indicate a stymying of production.

With the rise of the ICPM came a range of manifestoes, which befits it as an inheritor of the avant-garde and its interest in performativity and representation (see Puchner 2006). I will briefly consider just three central manifestoes written at the beginning of the ICPM that have informed ongoing considerations of the meaningfulness of visual poetry, in particular the role of visual and verbal modalities in readerly energized by it. As Dick Higgins remarks, “in the 1950s and 1960s the concrete poets were intensely conscious of their antecedents in dada and futurism” (3; see Scobie 1984; 1985; 1997).


Mary Ann Caws (2001) includes several visual poems as a part of her collection of avant-garde manifestoes under the categories of Symbolism (27-49), Cubism (126-30); Futurism (170-71, 190), Dada (290-91, 294-95), Surrealism (319, 335), Vorticism (344-48), and more. Strangely, her section on “Concretism” and other relevant sections completely misses the concrete poetry movement’s central manifestoes discussed here, one of the very few yet notable holes in her otherwise superb collection.
understandings and their relation to the conduit metaphor of language. These manifestoes locate three perspectives on modal hybridity and help situate the later additions of Canadian poets to the scene. They also shed light on the advantages of arriving late.

The first significant instance of the term “concrete poetry” being ascribed specifically to this form of poetry came in Öyvind Fahlström’s 1953 “Manifesto for Concrete Poetry,” which was translated by Karen Loevgren into English for Mary Ellen Solt’s influential anthology, Concrete Poetry: A World View (1969). In this manifesto, Fahlström describes concrete poetry as “created as structure . . . . It is certain that words are symbols, but there is no reason why poetry couldn’t be experienced and created on the basis of language as concrete material” (1968, 75). As such, this process produces “an interference with the material itself by means of separation . . . the newly-formed context [yields] a new material” (78). Concrete poetry, in Fahlström’s manifesto, must “break through the frontiers” (Fahlström 1968, 77-78) by re-structuring forms on the page through a process of bricolage (Bessa 2008, 14) that blends forms and meanings into each other and renders porous the conduit metaphor’s containment. Furthermore, elsewhere Fahlström states that the visual poem’s destruction of rigid linguistic forms seeks to reflect a responsivity to experience, “to the reality of their surroundings: they are neither dream-sublimation nor futuristic fantasy, but an organic part of reality I am living in although with their own principles for life and development” (qtd in Bessa 2013, n.p.). This perspective invites poets to incorporate environmental qualities into the process of transference, and for readers to activate and re-conceptualize linguistic values and ideas through a situated process of embodied action and visualization. A. S. Bessa (2013) argues
that Fahlström’s model of concrete poetry sought to balance a mechanistic and architectural model of language with an organic connectivity.

A. S. Bessa also notes that visual poetry from this perspective acts like a performance score (2008, 7), inviting, in particular for Fahlström, an aural response. More recently, writers like Michael Basinski continue to affirm “the poem’s performability” as a means of generating an “aural interpretation” (Byrum and Hill 1993, 13). In cognitive terms, Fahlström and Basinski appear to acknowledge the role of simulation of aural verbal qualities as readers activate the written and visual cues. However, as Marjorie Perloff notes of the general trend in poetry, “the speech-based poetics of mid-century has given way, more and more, to the foregrounding of the materiality of the written sign itself” (1991, 137-38). We could contend that Fahlström’s and Basinski’s emphasis on aurality inherits this speech-based model and imposes it upon contemporary works. More reasonably, I think, we might simply add that the structural cues and relations between linguistic prompts incorporate a gestural quality that promotes a sense of multimodal performability. And we should not ignore the fact that quite a few poets perform their visual poems as sound poetry, employing the poem as a score. Furthermore, Fahlström’s emphasis on the materiality and situatedness of the visual poem as performance score aligns it with the previous discussion of the conduit fallacy, since this approach views the poem as a means of opening up the conduit metaphor of language to the constitutive elements of forms and paths of transference and reception. Through performance of the visual poetic cues, the situatedness of the page and the reader’s cognitive processes imbue the cues with meanings. For ease of reference,
I will call this the external performance model of visual poetry, since it relies on elements outside of the poem informing it, making it contextually and cognitively contingent.

In contrast to Fahlström’s external performative perspective, the influential Noigandres group in Brazil—consisting of Augusto de Campos, Déciio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos—offers a different view of visual poetry. In their manifesto, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” they begin much like Fahlström, with poems that are “things-words in space-time. Dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements” (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 1968, 72). At the same time, they endorse a concrete poetry that is a “pure structural movement. . . . geometric form and mathematics of composition” (72). In this purity, the concrete poem becomes “a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back” (72), much like a self-contained industrial machine or modernist monolith of language (Bessa 2013; 2008, 8-13), controlled and clean, unsullied by the world: “Concrete [poetry] is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/ or more or less subjective feelings. . . . Its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this material” (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 1968, 72). While their

63 While here I integrate the Brazilian theorizing of concrete poetry because of their global influence on the early dialogues of the Concrete Poetry Movement, concrete poetry in Brazil underwent its own specific change in trajectory shortly after these manifestoes, a shift which was largely divorced from other post-modern developments in North America and the UK in particular. Charles Perrone (1996), while overplaying the significance of the Noigandres group within the international movement (Polkinhorn 1998), still helpfully unpacks these several phases of development within Brazilian concrete poetry that contribute specifically to that nation’s poetry and illustrate the specificity of visual poetic developments within particular social contexts.
manifesto unmistakably reflects Fahlström’s emphasis on the architectural structuring of concrete material, it turns this structure away from an intersubjective process of bricolage and performative reconceptualization and toward a linguistically internalized and determinate use of form, much like an industrial machine producing objective realism. In a way, this approach is the poetic analog of New Historicism. The Noigandres’ perspective on visual poetry, therefore, distances itself from sensuality through metaphors of industrial production (much like the Vorticists), emphasizing it as a “beautiful useful machine” (Pignatari qtd in Bessa 2008, 8) that is isolated and disassociated from its typical contexts (13-14). In fact, Haroldo de Campos “described the phenomenological tendencies of poetic Concretism as a shortcoming rather than a positive quality” (Erber 2012, 94). I refer to this as the purely internal performance model. Arguably, such a formulation of visual poetry re-enacts the conduit metaphor’s notion of words as object-forms to be manipulated and set up as a complex system that the reader will presumably receive and understand. This approach sees the self-contained poem-object as representationally transparent and objective, which construes the act of communication and reception as benign.

Contrasting these two perspectives, we can see how the Noigandres “Pilot Plan” abrogates Fahlstrom’s organic external performative qualities that disrupt the conduit by emphasizing an impersonal machinic production, internal to the poem itself. Rather than intersubjectively responding to and feeding into the world (becoming networked), the Noigandres view presents visual poems as feeding into themselves as controlled systems of meaning production. In this way, “their goal is not to destabilize language so much as to point to an entirely new means of textual production” (Bessa 13). Here, the conduit
metaphor remains, looped into itself like a poetic Möbius strip that presents a distanced, utilitarian, and objectivist position that performs its own meaning, rather than inviting readers to participate in performing the poem.

One final theorist of the emergent Concrete poetry movement is Eugen Gomringer. While Bessa (2008) largely equates Gomringer’s perspective with the Noigandres group’s on the basis of their shared connections to the Bauhaus movement, I suggest that Gomringer is somewhat less deterministic, while still affirming the importance of visual structure in constructing meaning. He described his approach as a natural, poetic simplification, restriction, and reduction of language into “constellations” (Gomringer 1968a, 67). He suggests that this process better reflects the role of language in society: “Headlines, slogans, groups of sounds and letters give rise to forms which could be models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use. The aim of the new poetry is to give poetry an organic function in society again” (67). He later confirms that “[the] purpose of reduced language is not the reduction of language itself but the achievement of greater flexibility and freedom of communication (with its inherent need for rules and regulations). The resulting poems should be, if possible, as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs” (Gomringer 1968b, 68). Thus, Gomringer advocates a “universal poetry” (68) through the complete transparency of meaning through form, as icons. Here, the conduit metaphor is adjusted to invert the traditional correlation between language and meaning. Stephen Scobie warns that “[u]nless very wittily conceived . . . such expressionist techniques are little more than gimmicks” (1984, 35); Gomringer preemptively responds to such critiques by asserting that “[the] constellation is not a dead-end or an end at all, as the literary people have said, but on the contrary that
it uses thinking and structural methods which can connect artistic intuition with scientific specialization” (1968b, 86). Gomringer’s approach articulates a space between Fahlström’s and the Noigandres group that attempts to employ both form and content together in a totality, not as a mechanistic system as the Noigandres group would have it, but as a nexus of functional and intuitive qualities of textuality and thought.

What the Noigandres group and Gomringer share is a wider modern, cosmopolitan drive to develop universalistic designs in which “the attempt to integrate pictorial and typographical elements is paramount” (Rand qtd in Heller and Fili [1999, 147]). Nonetheless, Gomringer also attempts (somewhat paradoxically) to combine this universalism with an active reader. While he does desire a representational transparency, he also suggests that visual poems are

an arrangement, and at the same time a play-area of fixed dimensions ... ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field of force and suggests its possibilities. the reader, the new reader, grasps the idea and joins in....The constellation is an invitation. (1968a, 67)

Here, Gomringer presents concrete poetry as a universal value of language arrived at through structure (much like the Noigandres group’s plan) but with Fahlström’s organic readerly engagement and interactivity.

Fahlström’s dynamic organicism, Gomringer’s invitational constellations, and the Noigandres’ self-solving linguistic systems mark three theoretical positions on the

64 See also Lupton (2004, 25) and Heller and Fili (1999, 68-93).
spectrum of approaches to visual poetry and textuality, each suggesting different implications for the relationships between form and meaning, between visual and linguistic qualities, and within the responses prompted in readers. From the perspective of the conduit metaphor, each emphasizes different aspects of it. Fahlström integrates socio-environmental qualities of performance into the process of transference through formal manipulation. On the other hand, the Noigandres group delimits meaning as determined and performed by form, leaving forms to cycle without care. Finally, Gomringer attempts to elide the challenges of transference by contemplating closing the gap between representation and interpretation through mimetic structure, where the reader engages in a delimited performance.

As I argued in the previous chapter, no artifact is meaningful until it becomes integrated into the reader’s intersubjective cognitive ecology. Thus, the Noigandres position is simply untenable as a universalist and wholly disembodied perspective. Gomringer’s articulation of this universalism is more cognitively reasonable since it locates this universal meaning within an iconic mimeticism seen in the presumed accessibility of shared visual imagery. While this position can still easily be challenged due to its assumption of an equality of cognitive activation and interpretation of imagic cues, it finds a perceptual common ground in which to locate a universal meaning, whereas the Noigandres position remains lost in logocentric abstractions. Judging from the contents of the influential anthologies by Emmett Williams (1967) and Mary Ellen Solt (1969), the concrete poems put out during the early years of visual poetry (those of the ICPM) present a general inclination for mimicry that layers communicative modes in a style reminiscent of Gomringer’s and the Noigandres group’s description of structure. In these
early stages, the more universalistic and objectivist positions seem to have been most popular, eliding the organic, fluid approach advocated by Fahlström in favor of clean and mimetic designs. As such, while these early works do explore and open up the relationship between form and meaning, the conduit metaphor remains largely secure, since they buttress the notion of transference through a simplification of content and mimeticism of form.

**3.4.3 Clean and Dirty Visual Poetry**

Through the comparison of three early concretist manifestos, I’ve shown that the functionality of visual poetic hybridity has been interpreted in three ways: through (an unreasonable) abstract systematicity, through mimetic transparency, and through a dynamic and performative multimodality. Only two of these positions are cognitively realistic since the Noigandres’ position elides the place of the active reader and her role in constructing meaningful networks within cognitive ecology. While I obviously do not ignore a mechanistic facet to this poetry, since medial and technological interests remain crucial to most visual poems, I question how meaning can be attributed to these features if it remains isolated from response.

The two remaining positions of universal mimeticism or organic dynamism continue to inform contemporary discussions of visual poetry, invoked through the now
commonly employed distinction between clean and dirty poetry, respectively. For clean visual poems, the structure clearly mimics the verbal content by employing form to largely *repeat* and *emphasize* rather than *add* to the poem’s possible interpretations. Dirty poems, on the other hand, offer less obvious connections and are rife with potential for creative engagement, where the visual and the verbal inform and transform each other and create space for readers to improvise meanings. Many subsequent poets and scholars have taken up this basic dichotomy between clean and dirty poetry, although its originator remains in question (Emerson 2011b). Stephen Scobie, among others, ascribes the dichotomy to Canada’s foremost visual poetic populist and practitioner, bpNichol (1984, 139 n16).

A recent example that helpfully illustrates the distinction between clean and dirty visual poetry is the following untitled poem by LeRoy Gorman (Figure 15), who often uses crisp letters to create minimalist poetry. In this poem, the word *fog* is broken apart and interspersed with punctuation. This portrayal transforms the simple word into a visual representation of a foggy scene with the orb of the sun or moon overhead, and

This distinction is likely a modification of Mike Weaver’s (1966) discussion between *expressionist* and *constructionist* concrete poems (Doyle 1970).

The clean-dirty dichotomy also parallels Richard Kostelanetz’s (1970) distinction between “imaged words” (patterned poems) and “worded images” (laid out words). However, Kostelanetz’s model is somewhat more prescriptive in its engagement with visual poetic elements since it requires words to exist in order to construct a visual poem, whereas dirty poems do not require verbal content. As I will show in the discussion of asemic and postlinguistic visual poetry in the following chapter, visual poetry does not require words to be meaningful.
perhaps with two ships (the lines connected to the “f” and “g”) in close proximity. Similarly, reorienting the parentheses mimics a common way of sketching wavy water. This imagistic use of letters and punctuation reinforces the basic frame knowledge of the word, while adding a further degree of specificity regarding locations, ambient light, and action. One might infer that the poem depicts a near miss between two ships or an impending disaster (in which case the orb overhead also retains its aural qualities as a shocked cry, “oh!”). Another reading might be that the two letters reflect headlands, Scylla and Charybdis perhaps, in which case the ominous atmosphere remains, but with a sense of risk and possible transformation as one moves through the liminal space from one watery location to another through the fog. In this reading, the poem also gains a sense of depth as we simulate looking and moving through the gap between the headlands, whereas the other reading constructs a viewpoint that focuses on a scene playing out across the surface of the water-page. Whichever reading one is partial to does not particularly matter, although if you are partial to both the poem fosters a bi-stability between the possibilities of surface and depth and movement and stability. The poem elegantly transforms the simple word ‘fog’ to invoke some of its ominous connotations within a specific aquatic setting, highlighting aspects of frames associated with it (including Grecian myths and perhaps global commerce and shipping). On the surface, then, this poem employs a clean, mimetic approach to focus on clarity of structural and imagistic elements to invoke a scene. Importantly, the cleanliness of this poetry need not be considered a negative quality, as too simplistic or gimmicky. This brief poem, and other clean visual poetry like bpNichol’s “em ty” poem above, illustrates how simplicity can generate a variety of interpretive possibilities.
While productive, the clean approach has nonetheless faded in prominence in contemporary visual poetry in favour of the more dramatic and less deterministic dirty approach. For example, in the following untitled poem (Figure 16), derek beaulieu has manipulated the nearly identical shapes of the letters ‘a’ and ‘g’ to develop a poetic artifact in the form of something like a looped or knotted rope. This elaborate weaving or overlaying constructs a singular, composite entity through the similarity or synergy between typographical forms. At the same time, the poem appears to construct what might be considered an extended, visual rendition of the word “gag.” The poem’s cyclicality and inverted mirroring—a visual style commonly seen within beaulieu’s book *chains* (2008) of which this poem is a part—seems to stop compositional expressivity itself by creating a Mobius strip out of the word, effectively gagging written language through its own forms. Thus, the poem mocks approaches to language that overlook the letters for the words by punning on the alternate meaning of ‘gag’ as a farcical joke. The otherwise blank page further emphasizes the singular word and its insular form, adding to the sense of binding and isolation. Here, the letters and their context enact the verbal

---

**Figure 15**: Untitled poem by LeRoy Gorman (Gorman, Bradley, and Hryciuk 2000, n.p.).
content, while also poking at critical approaches that ignore their creative, material potential.

Figure 16: Untitled poem by derek beaulieu (2008, 48).

In terms of the clean-dirty typology, beaulieu’s “gag” poem might be considered an elegant clean poem, since it mimics or enacts the meaning of the word, placing the visual in service to the verbal. However, the overt lettristic connections between the letters, which visually support the synthesis of the two meanings of the word while elaborating its form, add dirty features as well. Furthermore, this is the only poem in beaulieu’s book-length visual poetry project that uses any recognizable words at all. Perhaps we could infer, within that broader context, that this is rather a dirty poem that has stumbled across its verbal cue through structural affinities between the letters to render itself clean. In a way, in this poem the letters speak for themselves through their form by building their own word through formal affinities, and the author is simply a clairvoyant medium acting as a conduit for this formal expression. Such a reading reflects the anti-authoritative and defamiliarizing stance of most dirty visual poems. The perceptible oscillation between clean and dirty designations in beaulieu’s poem affirms Stephen Scobie’s assertion that while useful for “describing tendencies ... it is unlikely that
any given piece will fall wholly within one category” (43), and suggest that we treat the clean-dirty binary as a spectrum of sorts.66

The lasting legacy of this cleanly structured style can be seen in the poetry and poetics of contemporary visual poets, in either their continuance of its possibilities, as seen in Gorman’s work, or, more commonly, through an active rejection of it (see beaulieu 2006; Drucker 1996). By the 1970s, more dynamic and even illegible poems began to take centre stage, exploring a diversity of interactions with visible language and its mediated surfaces, often breaking the forms to explore the meanings that arise from their destruction. It is on this dirtier side of the spectrum that Canadian visual poets have largely excelled, although many, including bpNichol, continued to explore its possibilities.

3.4.4 Late Canadian Visual Poetry

bpNichol played a particularly crucial role in motivating, supporting, and contributing to the Canadian experimental arts scene. He is credited with publishing the first visual poetry in Canada with his collections _bp (or JOURNEYING & the returns) _ (1967a) and _Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer _ (2005 [1969/ 1973]), which were followed shortly by David Aylward’s _Typescapes _ (1967), Judith Copithorne’s _Release _ (1969) and

66 As I discuss in the introduction, hybridity of visual and verbal modes does not function completely as a spectrum, since both modes also present a spectrum from concrete to abstract uses. As such, the combinatory possibilities are exponentially increased. This chapter presents this more complex view, in which concrete verbal cues can be presented in abstract visual ways, and so forth.
Runes (1970), and Earle Birney’s The Rag and Bone Shop (1971), among others. While Brion Gysin’s experimental paintings or indigenous petroglyphs also serve as important antecedents to contemporary visual poetry in Canada, they have remained separate from its development until quite recently (Balan 1999). Nichol is the sole Canadian representative in Solt’s anthology of the ICPM (1969, 216), but through his active creation and promotion of visual and experimental poetics in Canada, beginning in the late 1960s, things quickly changed. Had Solt’s anthology been published in the early 1970s, the Canadian section would presumably have been considerably larger.

Through crucial communal networks and small press ventures, a poetic scene emerged that explored the intersections among visual, material, and conceptual understandings of language (Sharpe 1999). Wynne Francis documents the rise of this “radical fringe” in the 1960s (1973, 14; see also 1967), to which he attributes a widening poetic sensibility toward new expressions and questions of poetic voice, imagery, and form. At the core of these developments was a small network of writers and artists,

67 Since this is a historically focused section, I downplay the work of British-Canadian painter and poet Brion Gysin, since he worked primarily in the United States, especially with William S. Burroughs. I include Gysin instead in the discussion of meaning in abstract visual poems in Chapter 5.

Indigenous pictographic and other material cultural practices share many affinities with visual poetic sensibilities (Balan 1999, 9), however, only recently have Indigenous authors turned to multimodal literatures. Most notable in visual poetry is the recent work by Jordan Abel (2013). Comics and graphic novels have had a far wider engagement (Gabilliet 2009), particularly as a suicide prevention tool and as a means of sharing cultural knowledge (e.g. see Yahgulanaas 2009) and addressing the traumas of colonization and neocolonization (e.g. see Robertson and Henderson 2012).
including bpNichol, bill bissett, Barbara Caruso, David Aylward, jw curry, Judith Copithorne, Steve McCaffery, David UU, and others (see Balan 1999; 2002). Between these authors, a wide range of image-text interactions were developed which promoted ongoing experimentation and innovation in contemporary poetry. Several anthologies of visual poetry emerged out of this young literary scene, including bpNichol’s *The Cosmic Chef* (1970a) and John Colombo’s *New Directions in Canadian Poetry* (1971), perhaps to assert a Canadian perspective lacking (due to its lateness) in the popular anthologies by Solt and Williams.

The *lateness* of visual poetry in Canada, following almost two decades after the ICPM began, had its advantages, since it allowed the poets to learn from the clean and dirty approaches that had been previously developed by others. The poetry that emerged in Canada quickly embraced a liminal creative space that was characterized by Stephen Scobie as “dirty-clean” (Nichol 2002, 136), which I would liken especially to Fahlström’s approach discussed above. Many Canadian visual poets credit as key influences the early creators I’ve discussed, as well as the growing (somewhat late itself) English-

---

As a very crude distinction of basic aesthetics (more and better distinctions later), Canadian poets who carried on the traditional, cleanly structured aesthetic of the Concrete Poetry movement include bpNichol, Gorman, Hryciuk, Rhodes, Shikatani, Sweed, and UU. Poets who continued to develop alternative, more organic, fluid and dirty approaches also include bpNichol, as well as Basinski, beaulieu, bissett, Bök, Broady, Cain, Copithorne, curry, Hajnoczky, Mancini, McCaffery, mcepherson-eckhoff, Morin, and Wershler-Henry, among others. These alternative, dirty or dirty-clean approaches have become the predominant form of visual poetry in recent decades.
language tradition in the UK that included bob cobbing, Edwin Morgan, and Ian Hamilton Finlay (see Morgan 1968; Nicholson 2002; Scobie 1984), and in the US that featured Emmett Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, d.a. levy, and others (see Clüver 1996; Draper 1971; Vos 1987).

Many visual poets at the time and since encouraged a complete opposition to the structured and universalist approach of traditional clean visual poetry, preferring a rougher and more gestural quality. For example, “Stigation” (Figure 17) by jwcurry, one of Canada’s foremost practitioners, manifests its own visual poetics through collage. The poem presents a hole torn in a sheet of paper, through which one can glimpse a mash of letters that most clearly repeat “seems” over an underlay of upside-down letters and the phrase, “can be.” The term “SHIFT” hangs above the hole, which suggests that the sheet marks an act of distancing oneself from that which seems but is not real. The distancing effect also reflects the poststructuralist disruption of linguistic reference, which is itself only a supplemental “seeming.” Furthermore, the top of the hole interrupts the “SHIFT” at the “I.” By foregrounding the “I” while also breaking the word, the shift becomes a pun on the perceptual qualities of viewpoint (the eye of the text) as well as on the intrusion of the authorial “I” who has constructed the poem.

69 “Stigation” has a complicated publication history. While originally published in 1982 in Karl Kempton’s KALDRON #15, the photo-quality was too poor for much of the details to be visible. It continued to be reproduced in less-than-ideal form for several years. jwcurry considers the reproduction in October Is Dada Month, included here, to be the most accurate (scan generously provided by curry).
Figure 17: "stigation" by jwcurry; photograph by Mark Laba (Hryciuk 2009, 6). Used with permission.
Interestingly, this author has put together a poem that seems to mean something out of snippets of text and image that might or might not be his own. The pun of the eye/I reinforces the sense of the constructedness of the text, which the “SHIFT” already foregrounded by labeling the shift from what seems to be a more distanced perspective that recognizes the constraints of media on textuality. Through the strategic layering and manipulation of texts, the poem construes the act of poetic creation (and also reading) as a metacritical perspective on the world of language, the world that “seems.”

The poem continues to foreground a model of creation through its other components. Down the left hand side is the made-up word and title of the poem, “stigation,” with two definitional phrases interwoven into it. The first, intones an educational process, which “must be taught in sequential steps.” The second phrase asserts, “the text does not minimize,” which counters Gomringer’s description of visual poetry, discussed earlier, as a universalist reduction of language through the image. This text cannot be so constrained. Thus, this poem asserts an alternative perspective on the efficacy of visual poetry, perhaps to construe the arrangements of words as something more particular rather than universal, more materially constrained in is conceptual formations.

While it may “not minimize,” the text can be fragmented through “rearrange / ment” through the process of “stigation” expressed through the (re)compositional, active phrases, “he glued,” “he constructed,” and “he tore,” lurking on the dark periphery. This poem presents language as a material that can be cut, pasted, and transformed, while still being composed of basic insoluble building blocks. Thus, poetic manipulation can gesture beyond the illusionary qualities of linguistic representation (the “SHIFT” back from what
“seems”), but it will always be constrained to some degree by language itself and thereby cannot become universal. In this way, the conduit metaphor’s emphasis on containment is maintained, but the processes of presentation (and to some degree transference) impact reception through their materiality. The form has become a part of the meaning, rather than a transparent, inconspicuous container of meaning.

jwcurry’s poem acts as a personal art manifesto that enacts his poetic method through its materiality by visualizing disruption, appropriation, and rearrangement. The paper screen with the hole in it marks a perceptible poetic threshold or filter (which, unlike bpNichol’s earlier poem, is also not “em ty”). This poem occludes the seeming intelligibility of language (it’s overt referential nature), in order to multimodally re-construe language as an entity or object which requires distance and fragmentation for creative recombination. jwcurry encourages and enacts a perceptual “shift,” therefore, away from a naïve view of linguistic reference and conceptualization, away from the conduit fallacy. Rather than take language at surface value—for what it seems to say—the poetic approach of reconstruction, of “stigation,” actively interacts with it, not to reduce it, but to re-conceptualize it through materialist and perceptual manipulations.

Returning to the title, “stigation,” we can see how it takes stigmatism, the sharp focus (rather than double focus of astigmatism) of the camera eye (or perhaps camera “I”?), and blends it with the slightly more elongated word it seems to be torn from, instigation, which is the act of inciting actions often deemed rebellious or inadvisable. This blend metonymically invokes both whole words from their parts and suggests an emergent structure wherein clarity of sight itself incites revolutionary action. The poem further elaborates on the “shift” in perception that precludes a clarity of sight, and enacts
or instigates the collage approach to textual construction. Through the poem, the basic emergent structure of the title is run through the medium of print to enact itself as an art manifesto (including the mental simulation of cutting apart and pasting together strips of paper and text). Through the title and its representation in words and pictorial elements, the poem encapsulates a manifesto for poetic intervention and creative fomentation and clarification through destruction, complication, and transformation. This manifesto affirms a poetry that enacts Mikhail Bakunin’s assertion in 1842 that “the passion for destruction is a creative passion too!” (1980, 57). As such it also reflects Fahlström’s manifesto, much more than those by Gomringer and the Noigandres group, because it engages with the potential of multiplicity and it entices readerly creativity, rather than reducing the poem to visual and systematic clarity.

Fahlström’s emphasis on indeterminacy, openness, and readerly engagement seems to have had the most staying power (albeit not always recognized) as a poetic model in the Canadian scene. This longevity is likely due to its resonances with the popularity of poststructuralist critiques of representations (see Erber 2012), as well as Lacanian psychoanalytic literary theory (see Jaeger 1999), which place similar emphases on idiosyncratic plurality and rupture. For instance, Stephen Scobie (1984) relies heavily upon Jacques Derrida’s discussion of “free play” for his analysis of polysemy in visual poetry. Similarly contemporary poet derek beaulieu actively “endorses” poetry that is almost entirely “dirty,” particularly works that push toward chaotic and unintelligible representations, in order to showcase this polysemy that visible language affords (2006, 79). All of these critical approaches are keenly interested in how meaning arises from the interface, but they construe the productivity of the visual poetry in slightly different ways,
and often at the expense of other types of poetry. My approach, especially as shown in the following chapter, works across the spectrum of visual poetic expression—since both clean and dirty poetry remains open for consideration—while affirming the ways that multimodal representations seem to oscillate between different interpretations. As I have been arguing, attention to the tension between form and meaning within the conduit fallacy reveals one way that visual poems manipulate the materiality of visible language for creative effect and produce this oscillation or bi-stability.

Even while continuing to display features attributed to clean visual poems (Schmaltz 2012), contemporary visual poetry moves increasingly towards a diversity of synthetic and idiosyncratic engagements between modalities that do not necessarily aspire towards clear understandings but may nonetheless include crisp visual representations (see Clüver 1996). Digital technologies, in particular, facilitate this clarification and smooth coordination of representations; arguably, many earlier poems were made “dirty” through the involvement of scissors, glue, and photocopiers, which simply could not attain the crispness that digital technologies can now produce. Furthermore, the increasing variety and affordability of print technologies, as well as changing ideas regarding language, have fostered many developments. Kenneth Goldsmith (2002) attributes the ongoing advances in visual poetry especially to digital technologies, which afford more opportunities for engaging with medial constraints while also providing alternative modes of distribution.

All of these variables make it difficult to tease apart too boldly the relation among expression, technologies, and reception, except where the poem itself foregrounds these features and when one might posit reasonable cognitive constraints upon how meaning is
constructed. I will discuss these in more detail in the following chapter. The focus on the materiality of the page and the visuality of writing and images pushes readers and viewers toward a “micro-aesthetics of perception” (Weaver qtd in Doyle 1970, 92), a quality seen especially in the manifestic visual poem by jwcurry discussed above. These qualities mark visual poetry as a dramatic shift away from the form and content of lyrical “speech-based” contemporary poetry. This reorientation suggests a subtler critical relation between visual poetry’s interrogation of the conduit metaphor through language, the page, and the book, and assumed modes of representation in other forms of poetry that often seem to accept the conduit fallacy by emphasizing creative style and content as conveyed through language.

3.5 Canadian Heterodoxy and Poetic Politics

3.5.1 Experimentation and Heterodoxy

There is a wide diversity of visual poets and poems in Canada, yet there is a surprising dearth of scholarly attention to them within major journals or anthologies, two particularly important institutional markers of knowledge production and its transmission. Gregory Betts (2013) argues that Canada “has not been a good or

70 By major journals, I mean peer-reviewed journals like Canadian Literature, Studies in Canadian Literature, and Canadian Poetry. The now defunct Open Letter is the only significant (albeit not peer-reviewed) Canadian literary journal that featured regular articles on experimental works, and it had a very small circulation.
encouraging setting for avant-gardism” (7) because “the radical terms of engagement presented and embodied by avant-garde art have consistently been sabotaged by the most pedestrian and prudish terms of engagement” (8). However, the tide is changing. The growth of new anthologies (including Crag Hill and Nico Vassilaskis’ (2012) excellent international collection), and a growing number of published and republished visual poetic works (especially by BookThug and Coach House Books), are making more visual poetic texts available to a wider audience. More broadly, academic attention is also generally growing toward hybrid literary forms, especially graphic novels, and to visual literacy (Elkins 2008) and multimodality (Kress 2010; Gibbons 2012; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009). Nonetheless, visual poetic works remain marginalized.

This marginalization—which was instantiated early on in Wynne Francis’ (1967; 1973) discussions of the “radical fringe”—is often coupled to descriptive terms like

---

Anthologies provide an important, although not exclusive, institutional expression of classroom readings and of the general readers understanding of the canon (see Gerson 1990). The vast majority of anthologies of Canadian literature exclude multimodal literatures almost entirely.

71 Some of this marginality is also self-imposed, since many postmodern works are self-published or put out through small presses. It is difficult to distinguish exactly between self and institutionally imposed marginality.

This marginality is also somewhat ironic in a nation that, especially from the 1950-1980s, was actively involved in the national support of cultural projects. One would think that the Canadian nation, whose self-image seems to also be marked by marginality, would have actively celebrated this area of cultural production that was better recognized outside of Canada than within. Even the anti-institutional work of Fluxus visual poets like Dick Higgins and Emmett Williams in the United States received better exposure.
“experimental literature.” *Experimental* is, however, often “an undefined word which seems to exempt the critic from the responsibility of saying anything more precise” (Scobie 1984, 12), and could be considered “scientistic and trivializing” (Mancini 2012, 60). Donato Mancini notes that a wide variety of terms have accumulated around such works that include *avant-garde, postavant, innovative, inventive, engaged, radical, speculative*, and *postmodern* (39-45; 59-65). Mancini prefers the term postmodern which best “gesture[s] towards the irreducible plurality (in terms of divergent political affiliations, formal strategies, reading practices, etc.) of new poetries emergent in Canada since the early 1960s” (64). At the same time, Gregory Betts suggests that focusing on postmodernity elides the radical, transformative potential of visual poetry by rendering it “decadent” rather than incendiary (2010). Furthermore, as Stephen Scobie states, “‘experimental’ is a good word to the extent that it suggests writing that finds its energy in the exploration of its own limitations” (1984, 12-13) and which “violates and reshapes” the conventions of literature and language (Scobie, 1984, 13). For similar reasons, Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy (2005) describe such works as “radical.” Whichever term one prefers to capture the sense of how visual and other experimental poetries function, their acts of exploration and reconstruction play a crucial role in developing knowledge and poetic practices around the conduit metaphor and mediation by rupturing both the forms and functions of language and images. This gives visual poems—and other types of postmodern or radical poetry—crucial functions as transformers of the more dominant lyrical forms of poetry (as I will show, the forms and functions of which are also policed states).
The perceived dialogue between the lyrical centre and the radical, postmodern periphery has led contemporary poet-critic Carmine Starnino (2012a) to observe that contemporary Canadian poetry “is far too heterodox to be trapped in existing definitions of traditional and experimental” (xi). Arguably, this heterodoxy is due to migrations of experimental elements into the mainstream. Under the traditional model, this might be articulated as a movement from the periphery toward the centre. A more contemporary approach would be to articulate it as a dialogic relationship between different literary scenes which share some overlapping interests while also holding various distinct ideologies and values (Rae 2009). This overlap and dialogue help make the distinctions between different genres and particular audiences somewhat more tenuous. For instance, these connections were seen from the very beginning of visual poetry in Canada, with now canonical poets like Margaret Atwood dabbling with visual poetry (as well as illustration and comics). Other poets were also strong supporters of the movement; for instance, Margaret Avison exchanged mutually supportive correspondence with bpNichol (see letters collected in Nichol 2002). As part of a range of avant-garde and postmodern poetic challenges (including Surrealist, OuLiPo, Fluxus, Flarf, Black Mountain, Language, Conceptualist, and so on: see Betts 2013; Bök 2002) to the centrality or dominance of lyrical approaches to poetry, visual poetry helps widen the scope of

72 These poets include George Bowering, John Colombo, R. Murray Schafer, Lionel Kearns, Seymore Mayne, Michael Ondaatje, Peter Stevens, David McFadden, Victor Coleman, George Suknaski, and others (Balan 1999, 13), as well as M. Travis Lane and P.K. Page. The list becomes substantially longer when one moves into more recent decades.
possibilities for poetic expressions. For instance, Rachel Zolf represents differences in
gender, voice, interruption, and silence by using different colours of font and bold
redactions in *Masque* (2004). Likewise, M. Nourbese Philip juxtaposes different gendered,
institutional, and personal discourses and voices through different orientations and fonts
in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989; see Kinnahan 2005, 80-131).
Similarly, Mark Goldstein often explores questions of identity surrounding adoption
through visual means in his book *Form of Forms* (2012). What yesterday was deemed a
radical fringe is today moving into an acceptable (albeit avant-garde inflected) middle
ground, and perhaps tomorrow into the mainstream. This follows a general trajectory in
Canadian literature more broadly towards a diversification of modes, styles, and voices.

An especially noteworthy example of this transformation, and one that will delight
followers of visual poetry, is “Wife” by Canadian poet Marita Dachsel (Figure 18). This
poem opens her collection of predominantly free verse lyric poems that focus on the
wives of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Dachsel, either wittingly or unknowingly (it

---

73 Caroline Bayard makes a similar argument for visual poetry's influence on later poetic
styles. However, she argues that contemporary postmodern poetry has moved past the “visual
antics of concrete” (1989, 164; see also 114-118). No such disappearance has occurred, either
when Bayard was writing or now. This narrativization of visual poetry’s dissolution into
postmodern poetry reflects Bayard’s polemical stance against her understanding of iconicity.
Marjorie Perloff (2007a) reflects that “in the late ‘80s, I was persuaded, as was Caroline Bayard,
that post-concrete poetics was providing a needed “corrective” to the purported mimeticism and
aestheticized composition of the earlier work” (n.p.) which seemed to embrace the iconic fallacy.
However, she goes on to note that under present visual poetic circumstances, the iconic fallacy
seems not so fallacious anymore (n.p.). Pedro Erber (2012) makes a similar claim that concrete
poetry prefigures and instantiates the deconstructionist critique of Saussurean linguistics.
remains unacknowledged), mimics the structure of one of the most widely known, discussed, and reprinted concrete poems in the world, the untitled poem by Eugen Gomringer (Figure 19), translated by Jerome Rothenberg as “silence” (1968c), written almost 60 years before.\textsuperscript{74} Of course, that there are holes throughout the poems in this chapter will be returned to later.

Figure 18: “Wife” by Marita Dachsel (2013: 11).

Figure 19: Untitled poem by Eugen Gomringer (from Solt 1969, 91 [1954]).

\textsuperscript{74} Gomringer’s poem was originally published in Spanish in 1953, but popularized in German and English in a variety of forums (see McCaffery 2013, 12). As McCaffery (2013) shows, much has been written on this poem, but most critics focus on the structural features divorced from context, and therefore, miss the political significance of Gomringer’s constellation as a statement about the Spanish political system at that time.
Eugen Gomringer’s poem is one in which “the white space of the visual text is turned into a signifier of ‘silence’ only by the interaction between poetic structure and verbal semantics” (Clüver 2002, 164). Similarly, Johanna Drucker notes that “it is the structural relation of the words, rather than any particular image suggested by them, which gives their visual presentation value” (1998, 111), a value that reflects an iconic motivation to the poem’s meaning (Perloff 2010, 51). The poem illustrates well the clean, structuralistic, and mimetic synthesis of visual and verbal modalities common to the ICPM, of which it was a part. bpNichol’s “em ty” poem which began this chapter also employs similar features to reflect an experience of emptiness: while a tenuous connection, perhaps it could be considered a re-translation, reduction, and re-construction of Gomringer’s own poem.

Similarly, Lindsay Cahill also offers what appears to be a riff on Gomringer’s poem with her own, “circular logic” (Figure 20), which arguably extends its focus on silence to visualize the semantic structure of a particular form of discourse denoted by the title, a form of thinking that is inherently meaningless, empty. Like Nichol’s poem, Gomringer’s employs the visibility of written

---

75 I am not aware of any explicit documentation of bpNichol’s “em ty” poem being a direct translation of Gomringer’s “silencio.” However, it seems quite possible. Nichol’s poem appeared in 1970, two years after Gomringer’s popularization through the translation of his influential book as The Book of Hours and Constellations by Jerome Rothenberg (Gomringer 1968c), as well as the inclusion of “silencio” in both Emmett William’s (1967) and Mary Ellen Solt’s (1969) popular anthologies. Nichol undoubtedly knew all of these books (he himself was included in Solt’s anthology) and through them would have seen multiple iterations of Gomringer’s poem. Whether or not it was a purposeful translation, the parallels between the two poems are striking.
words as objects on the page, thereby focalizing the absence at the centre and reifying through diagrammatic form the semantics of the words. Importantly, it is only through the combination and orientation of all of the individual words that the verbal semantics is visualized (whereas, it was through an alteration of an individual word that bpNichol’s version functions). Thus, Gomringer’s poem employs the conduit fallacy’s object-containers of the surrounding words to circumscribe a lack at the centre that builds a tension between form and meaning, between voice and emptiness.

Figure 20: “circular logic” by Lindsay Cahill (2014).

Marita Dachsel’s poem, on the other hand, uses material and verbal constraints to visualize a culturally- and socially-specified role that prompts the frames of relationships, religion, domesticity, and feminism. This visualization expands the meaning of the word “wife” by prompting specific construals of these diverse frames. The word, *wife* invokes a complex combination of roles, values, actions, and processes of relationship construction,

---

76 Arguably, bpNichol’s “em ty” poem also prompts more medial reflexivity than Gomringer’s, since in a way Nichol’s poem looks out to reflect upon the page that houses it, while Gomringer’s looks in as it circumscribes a small space upon it. On the other hand, bpNichol’s poem seems relatively benign compared to the complex political resonances about authorship, power, and censorship in Spain associated with Gomringer’s poem at the time of publication (see McCaffery 2013).
all of which foster a variety of interpretations. While in Gomringer’s and even bpNichol’s poems, the forms offer explicit reflections of simulated qualities of the words and the medium, Daschel’s poem is less clearly mimetic. This openness yields more complex emergent structures and bi-stability as readers grapple with possibilities for visual construal of the linguistic prompts in conjunction with their frame knowledge. In the following analysis, I will focus on how the image-schematic structure, the semantic and grammatical representation, and paratextual information add variables that readers assess while attempting to interpret the poem. These elements construct a bi-stability within the poem between a generic construal of marriage (that reflects on the singular state of being a wife), a more specific representation of the multiple wives involved in a polygamous marriage, and a specific, albeit negated, reflection upon the polygamous husband. I will not argue for a singular reading of the poem, but rather I will suggest several possible vectors of inference that I see emerging from the poem’s multimodal connections and activations. By tracing the possibilities, I affirm the cognitive plausibility of multiple readings.

The schematic box formed by the repeated noun “wife” emphasizes the CONTAINER image schema within the conduit metaphor. This containment is further reinforced by the period after each noun, which renders each word isolated and controlled. Like Gomringer’s poem, the arrangement of the poem presents an empty space within the confines of the word-objects. This locational quality may map to the speech act of being announced and defined through a marriage ceremony as a wife, which inscribes and seeks to contain a woman within a particular culturally specified role. The religious connections to ceremonial marriage practices is further reinforced by a brief
epigraph by Australian poet, Les Murray which opens the book: “any real religion is a big slow poem, / while a poem is a small fast religion” (Dachsel 2013, n.p.). This poem seems to enact this “fast religion” through its repetitive announcing of the wife-object. Through the schematic layout, the woman, by becoming a wife, becomes materially, socially, and even religiously confined. We could extend this reading, then, to suggest that the poem visualizes the roles and values that confine women, in particular through the act of marriage, which, in the Western religious and cultural tradition, renders women subordinate to men. In a passage about Gomringer’s poem that resonates strongly with Daschel’s work, R. P. Draper notes that “the poem speaks most eloquently where it does not speak at all. But the gap could not ‘speak’ were it not for the surrounding words, and, further paradox, nothing, in any case, is actually spoken. Silence is thus contextual, and the context exists essentially in space” (1971, 330). Daschel’s poem might suggest a feminist exposure of a practice that renders women voiceless within the confines of heteronormative and patriarchal marriage. In this case, wife-ness, just like Gomringer’s silence, is also contextual and exists in the socio-culturally and religiously circumscribed spaces of domesticity and other traditional roles and values.

At the same time, if we read the paratextual information on the back-cover of Daschel’s book, we also know that this poem begins “an unflinching” collection of poems fictively “spoken by the thirty-four polygamous wives of Joseph Smith,” the founding prophet of Mormonism. Counting the number of “wife”s reveals that the poem is indeed constructed out of thirty-four nouns. The paratextual context, therefore, opens up a more specific, historicized reading of the poem as a diagram that represents the specific polygamous marriage of Smith and his wives. The religious and social frames of
Mormonism and polygamy are fraught and full of stereotypes (Bhattacharya 2013), which means that readers would respond quite differently to these connections. Rather than unpack all of them, I will focus on key features of the poem and their possible construal of these contentious frames. Most notably, each wife is isolated individually through the full stop that divides her from the others. Furthermore, rather than being named, the women are described solely in relation to their husband: “wife” continually repeats without variation, which breaks down subjective autonomy, locking the women down both socially and spatially, while the husband remains free to operate as he pleases. The sense of constraint, of the wives being boxed in, aligns with the contemporary secular (false) sense of Mormon polygamy as inherently abusive (Cowan 2008, 77-79). However, as Daschel states in her appended notes on the text, the practice of polygamy at this time “was highly secretive, both polygyny and polyandry were practices, and polygamous spouses rarely lived together” (2013, 91). This paratextual note renders this poem even more ambiguous. Perhaps while defined in their role, the unnamed women remain free outside of this religious role as spiritual wife to live their lives.

Finally, the hole at the centre of the poem offers a final construal of polygamous marriage. The emptiness is likely populated, through frame knowledge, with a husband. His absence, in the case of Joseph Smith, might reflect his enigmatic role as the religious prophet, the otherworldly sage. Furthermore, the poem might even illustrate a shared state of being between the wives that transcends the husband. On the other hand the husband’s absence also raises the possibility that he lacks any actual relationship with his individual wives beyond their religious union, since they may not share a material life together in any meaningful way. The absent husband aligns with specific paratextual
information to become Joseph Smith. At the same time, because the husband remains unnamed, and the poem untitled, the absence might suggest that the husband in this poem is an “everyman” figure to be more widely aligned with early polygamy practices. Thus, the absent husband becomes intriguingly anomalous, both historically and in comparison to received contemporary notions of marriage and Mormon polygamy.

While much more can be said about how the different features of the poem and its paratextual presentation, it should be clear that the multimodal blend of word and structure in Daschel’s poem offers a complex range of emergent structures that draws on the frames of marriage and fundamentalist Mormonism. Importantly, the poem generates two bi-stable qualities: one between reading the poem as a feminist schematic of wife-ness or a historical diagram of thirty-four specific wives of the Mormon prophet. A parallel bi-stability develops around the husband, who is both the historical figure of Joseph Smith as well as every polygamous man with many wives in early Mormon times. How one interprets these variables might suggest a historically neutral portrait or a feminist exposure and critique of polygamy.

While individual readers may be inclined to one reading over another, the bi-stabilities within the poem present at least two ways to interpret the prompts. No matter one’s conclusion, Daschel’s poem presents an ambivalent social or political commentary about the influence of social roles and contexts upon voice and relationships in gendered heteronormative culture and how gender is performed both within and beyond linguistic and religious discourses (Butler 1993). Thus, much more could be said in particular about the poems bi-stabilities and how this reflects the fraught nature of gender, religion, and power. Importantly, this poem’s oscillatory qualities also invite an interrogative,
interlocutory response, which in a sense brings voice back to the immobilized and silenced women, albeit imposed by the reader. This responsive inclination acts to situate the many lyrical poems that follow this poem as Daschel’s fictional work to give voice to the silenced wives and to reflect upon their lived experiences.

The differences between Gomringer’s and Dachsel’s choice of words obviously resist too close a comparison, even while they both seek to reflect social situations that are antithetical to voice and representation (Gomringer’s poem engages with Spain under Franco, Dachsel’s on polygamous wives). Yet, from the perspective of engaging with poetic heterodoxy, it is noteworthy that Gomringer’s poem is ostensibly the figurehead of the avant-garde International Concrete Poetry Movement, whereas Dachsel’s poem appears in a very recent collection of contemporary mainstream Canadian lyric poems. The shift from avant-garde to mainstream literary scenes over the course of approximately 60 years is apparent in Dachsel’s incorporation of a visually salient poetic device into her practice. This incorporation reflects one way that the heterodoxy that Starnino sees as a part of contemporary Canadian poetry has emerged through such devices moving from the margins toward the centre. It also shows how the materiality of mediation and signification is becoming a more central feature of creative poetic practice in general, which includes strategically engaging more regularly with the fallaciousness of the conduit metaphor by invoking forms and contexts as a part of poetic meanings.

### 3.5.2 Lazy Jerkism: Poetic Politics and the Conduit Fallacy

The emergence of poetic heterodoxy in Canada has not been received without resistance. Gregory Betts argues that
As a result of suppression, repression, censorship, and the even more tenacious habit of marginalization, twentieth-century Canadians with avant-garde ambitions have had few if any acknowledged (let alone celebrated) local models of eruptive art or artists despite the many efforts that preceded them. (2013, 8)

While Carmine Starnino presented us with the notion of poetic heterodoxy, the manifestic essay that it comes from introduces his edited collection of *The Best Canadian Poetry in English*, 2012. In that essay, and elsewhere (see Starnino 2011; Starnino, Bök, and Dobson 2013), he undermines this heterodoxy through a straw man characterization of contemporary postmodern poetry that reveals his desire to police poetic values. 77 He

77 Starnino, while controversial to some, has a steady following. He unabashedly supports a New Critical approach, most concisely affirmed in his opening remarks to “The Cage Match of Canadian Poetry” with Christian Bök on 26 November 2009 at Mount Royal University: “My concern is whether the language pays its way on the page. My ear doesn’t know old from new” (Starnino, Bök, and Dobson 2013, n.p.). Furthermore, Starnino’s concern with establishing a contemporary canon through anthologies (2005; 2012a), coupled with his critical conservatism (see 2004), makes him a troubling, yet imposing, figure. These qualities make him an easy target to some degree, but his public persona, as well as his editorial and review work, also makes him a salient figure to engage with (for instance, see Ian Rae’s (2003) critique of the posturing of Starnino and Solway in attempts to discredit Anne Carson’s illustrious postmodern poetic career). More importantly, he purports to affirm “the best Canadian poetry” (2012a) yet articulates qualities and assumptions of criticism that dramatically constrain what constitutes poetry, thereby diminishing his engagement with a wide range of postmodern works.

It is important to note that in focusing on Starnino, I do not wish to disparage his many contributions, but seek to address a broader message that he, as a popular writer, reviewer, and anthologist, continues to reinforce. Starnino is a fine critic and writer of lyric poetry, and I do not wish to dismiss the merit of his contributions to that poetic arena. However, I, like Jonathan Ball, “have long wondered why Starnino insists on writing at length about things he appears to hate” (Ball and Mierau 2011, n.p.).
suggests that postmodern works are but machinic contrivances that generate a poetic effect, “as if on automatic,” and produce “an artificial intelligence, simulated for believability, not an actual style” (2012, xvii). This is likely meant to sound like a Turing test for poetic value. Such a presentation attributes artificiality and a lack of rich meaning to postmodern poetry. Elsewhere, he suggests that “[t]he contemporary avant-garde has merchandised its boredom into life cycles of rapid self-obsolescence” (2012b, 25), which is predicated in the notion that “[p]oetic revolutions are revolutions in diction” (23). The straw-man quality of these claims dismisses the poetic value of postmodern texts that innovate through form rather than at the logocentric level of diction. Starnino’s introductory manifesto in his anthology moves from similar assertions to affirm a traditional definition of lyrical poetic style, which emphasizes originality and clarity of subject and voice. He uses such criteria to dismiss heterodox poetry produced by “fusionists” in favour of those “that real poets write” (Starnino 2012a, xvii). As such, fusionist, hybrid, heterodox and experimental poems will never qualify as real poetry since they seek to explore and undermine the very features Starnino affirms. Brad Cran characterizes Starnino’s condemnation of a large body of poetry in Canada as “lazy jerkism” (2013, n.p.), which turns the title of Starnino’s recent collection of polemical essays, Lazy Bastardism (2012b), against its author by revealing the motivations behind it.

Nonetheless, Starnino holds a prominent (albeit controversial) role in Canada’s popular critical and review culture, in its publishing industry as a magazine and book editor. In light of these areas of influence, his penchant for policing what is or is not poetry illustrates the need to clearly distinguish what these postmodern poetries add to the poetic mix. Starnino suggests that experimentation breeds superficiality, transforming
art into artifice, and seriousness into kitsch; the purportedly automatic and superficial qualities of playful experimental literature erase any significant, valuable contributions such works might make. Others, like Reinhold Grimm (1989) have also lamented the “over-whelmingly self-evident” (49) quality of some visual poems which enact an “easy poesy” (49), characterized as the “literal duplication of things” (57). As Sabine Gross (1997) elegantly shows, these claims of superficiality and duplication ignore the pleasure and alternative meanings also potentially produced through the added cognitive work these poems require to navigate their cross-modal connections and dissonances. Despite these benefits from the medial manipulations of postmodern poetry, for critics like Starnino, meaning clearly still resides within the inconsequential container-forms of words (rather than being integrated with them), and readers receive the gift of a (real) poem without difficulty or error. As such, poetic geniuses produce lyrical poetry, whereas failed writers produce postmodern poetry.

Marjorie Perloff argues in her book *Unoriginality* (2010) that a core feature of the lyrical tradition is a common hailing of originality or genius: “artificial” creative strategies like “appropriation, citation, copyright, reproduction—these have been central to the visual arts for decades. . . . In the poetry world, however, demand for original expression dies hard” (23). As Scottish visual poet Edwin Morgan observes,

> the objection commonly raised to [visual poetry], that it is ‘trivial’ and mere ‘play’, doesn’t understand that ‘play’ has a new meaning...These words, happiness, beauty, play, all seem slightly suspect today. We find ourselves asking doubtfully whether we ought to take ‘seriously’ an art form which has such a basis. But
even these doubts might warn us that concrete poetry is onto something. (1968, 220-21)

Morgan goes on to note that by shifting our focus toward poetic qualities and relations, spatiality, and associative imagery, visual poetry offers new poetic values. For instance, Marjorie Perloff argues, “What is different [from lyric poetry] is not expressivity or subjectivity as such but the authority ascribed to the speaking voice” (2004, 152). As such, by muddying up the poetic waters, postmodern poetry, including visual poetry, pushes against the genius of the author in order to show how representation and mediation prompt their own modes of creative engagement that are meaningful and new.

I would suggest that Starnino’s problem with postmodern poetry stems from the conduit fallacy. He assumes that poems must have a specific voice, stance, imagery, and subject, all of which is constructed linguistically, in order to count as poetry. In this formulation, language must by necessity be a coherent symbolic vehicle for knowledge transference. Starnino’s general rejection of experimental approaches as superficial, low-brow party tricks attempts to define the visible linguistic container and its social, medial, and generic contexts as meaningless background noise, affirming only the idealized meaning inside.78 Visual poets refute and disrupt such ideas. Perhaps Starnino’s reactive approach to such works reveals a fear that they are, as famed Futurist visual poet F. T. Marinetti decreed, “hastening the grotesque funeral of passéist Beauty (romantic,

78 See N. Katherine Hayles (2003) for an extended materialist critique of Platonic norms such as this in literary studies.
symbolist, and decadent)” (1972 [1914], n.p.). This may be cause for conservative chagrin, but not for poetic or critical concern.

Starnino’s conservative ideology reveals a penchant for linguistic hygiene, particularly conspicuous when he underhandedly praises experimental writing as something to which “no one is immune” (2012, xvii). He is not wrong, since heterodoxy runs rampant through contemporary Canadian poetry. However, the frame of immunity draws up the notions of pestilence and filth, which most readers would wish to disassociate themselves from. Yet, one might read the opening “em ty” poem by bpNichol itself as a playful dramatization of this extremist engagement with verbal hygiene by quite literally cleaning up and removing the ‘p’ in language. Edwin Morgan suggests that “the pursuit of purity is self-defeating. The best concrete poems, as it seems to me, acknowledge this fact inversely; their anatomy may be rigid and exoskeletal, but there is something living and provocative inside” (qtd from 1965 ICA exhibition notes in Nicholson 2002, 94). Experimental literatures, especially visual poems, unravel and disturb the conduit metaphor in order to present more opportunities, or affordances, for expression. For visual poetry, there are no hallowed Words, just communicative acts, situations, and medial contexts that provide dynamic environments for expression, which expand across the horizons of the publishable. For visual poems the subject is both language and what is expressed; its imagery is composed of visual as well as linguistic prompts; its voice is also its visible mark. A crucial action of visual poems is their rupturing of the limitations of the conduit fallacy—and other blended compressions of form and meaning—to illustrate how modes of representation constrain thinking and to open up new avenues for significant expression. As with much exemplary poetry, which
makes seeable the unseen, visual poems decompress or rupture this fallacy in order to facilitate a wider imagining of authorship, representation, and creativity through the materiality of the modes and media of signification.
Chapter 4
Multimodal Poetic Anchors in Cognitive Ecology

Looking. Looking and watching. Watching for the word reading. Reading the word reading. Looking at the picture of the word read. Reading the word picture.

— Steve McCaffery

4.1 Visual Poetry and Multimodal Anchors

Critics like Stephen Scobie note that visual poetry calls for “contemplation” in readers (1984, 34). At the same time, others critics refer to the readerly engagement with visual poems as “immediate and experiential” (Simonson 2008, 51), “organic” (Harvey 1976, 23), grounded in the integration of intellect and body (Dutton 2000, 31; Simonson 2008, 61), and involving “active intervention” (McCaffery 2008, 101). This contradictory combination of slow contemplation or introspection with immediate and active interpretation gives some insight into how reader’s engage with visual poems. It suggests that interpretations develop through gestalt senses as well as recursive interrogations; thus, perceptual qualities inform conceptualizations cyclically by building up from immediate impressions into emergent complexities. What these critical assertions are less clear about is what constitutes these processes or how different representational strategies

79 McCaffery (2011, n.p.).
affect them. This chapter addresses this processual deficit, in particular by illustrating the connections between perception, modalities, and conceptualization.

This chapter demonstrates the multimodal cognitive poetic approach to a range of representational qualities in visual poems and emphasizes how cognitive ecological networks with literary artifacts produce the complex unfolding of mental spaces and blends. Sabine Gross (1997) shows experimentally that visual poetry requires substantially longer cognitive processing due to the active synthesis of different sign functions (iconic, indexical, or symbolic). The challenge of critical engagement with these poems, as with other studies of multimodal communication like gesture (Narayan 2012; Sweetser 2013), is parsing the different modal and cross-modal contributions to and constraints on the complex unfolding experience of meaning construction. These other arenas of research have shown that blending theory and embodiment present helpful and clear theoretical and methodological approaches to analysis. Unlike gesture, visual poems are also fixed to the page and provide a material locus through which to locate conceptual processes (that is, without having to be mediated by videos, transcripts, and photographs to facilitate analysis). Visual poetry’s material mediation presents the opportunities for both immediacy and contemplation, by presenting a consistent artifact for embodied engagement and reengagement.

These different sign functions come from Peircean semiotics which shares many affinities with the contemporary view of cognitive linguistics (Hiraga 2005). I cannot wade into the semiotic discussion at this time, but the Percein model certainly coincides well with the observations presented here.
Edwin Hutchins’s (2005) notion of “material anchors” offers a blending framework for understanding the relationship between the materiality of visual poems and the cognitive networks that they activate and participate in. Anchors are structures or artifacts which can incorporate prior knowledge to off-load cognitive work onto the environment. At the same time, material anchors are fixed entities that both constrain and facilitate conceptualization processes. For example, a queue (which Hutchins elaborates on in detail) is a cultural practice that incorporates a perceived line (usually on the floor or down an aisle) that serves as a material anchor to track the order of arrival of patrons at a kiosk or cashier. As Hutchins notes,

> Our perceptual systems have a natural bias to find line-like structure. But seeing a line is not sufficient to make a queue. Not all lines are queues. . . . In order to see a line as a queue, one must project conceptual structure onto the line. The conceptual structure is the notion of sequential order. (1559)

With this projection, and its associated social norms, the line anchors the concept of order, allowing patrons to attend to other things, like the strategically placed magazines and other potential purchases nearby.81 Representational practices of other sorts, such as writing, arguably function as intersubjective material anchors to a degree as well by blending perception and language (A. Clark 2008; Lindsay 2009). However, Hutchins

81 See Ingold (2007) for further anthropological analysis of the cultural and social salience of lines. Coulson and Cánovas (2009) show the cognitive architecture and functionality of timelines, which Cánovas and Jensen (2013) show as a significant poetic strategy as well.
offers a caution against asserting too close a relationship between material anchors and other representational phenomena, since representations require mental activation to exist as mental spaces, whereas material anchors are sufficient unto themselves as perceptual inputs for blends. Thus, the line exists in perception and is integrated through blending into frames and with other concepts. Moreover, because of their materiality, such anchors hold the conceptual relationships fixed while other operations are performed. . . . Blending with material anchors may increase the stability of conceptual structure, enabling more complex reasoning processes than would otherwise be possible. (1562)

Material artifacts both constrain possible perceptual content (as an input) while scaffolding and facilitating further thought processes (in the blend).

Visual poems, by engaging explicitly in material manipulations of visual, verbal, and manual modalities, offer especially complex multimodal forms of anchoring that prompt perceptual and conceptual simulations and blends, but with predominantly poetic rather than functional valences. As multimodal anchors, these poems offer a variety of features for perceptual and conceptual interpretations (C.f. Forceville 2008). Viewing the poems as materially anchoring meanings is a natural extension of the critical view of the conduit fallacy presented in the previous chapter. As I argued there, visual poems explicitly unravel the notion of meaning distinct from form by exploiting the visual modality to heighten awareness of the ways in which language is mediated, formed, and transformed by the presentational and representational possibilities of multimodality and the page (and screen). The concept of multimodal anchors draws out the ramifications of
materiality in the meaningfulness of visual poetry, in particular the relationship between modalities and the ways in which they activate (and constrain) meaning construction.

In this chapter, I focus on poems that maintain relatively clear material and representational cues so as to chart how different features anchor embodied responses as well as to show how meaningful qualities of the anchor transform through blending operations. As Sabine Gross notes, visual poems do not simply duplicate elements between different modes; after all, “the two modes are not reducible to each other, and their tension is part of the process of reading visual poetry” (1997, 22). She goes on to conclude that “[b]y defamiliarizing not only signs but also the process through which they are decoded, by calling on our resources and asking us to respond to different modes of signification, they liberate both texts and readers” (31). While liberating readers to explore the materials of visual and poetic expression, the poems nonetheless constrain options for meaning construction, as all material anchors will do. I make a point of picking poems that offer some breadth across the spectrum of modal relations presented in the introduction, while focusing on cohering around a particular feature or impression, to show how similar features can anchor radically different conceptualizations. Since material and multimodal anchors network with embodied meaning processes primarily through perception, I employ several perceptual principles to connect and contrast different poems rather than offering a typology. Importantly, this helps me break beyond the dualism of previous models, discussed in the previous chapter. By highlighting readings grounded in cognitive ecology, which includes both anchors and their integration into mental processes, I open up other hermeneutic engagements with these literary works, including offering gendered, political, postcolonial, and other critical
readings. Thus, this cognitive approach supplements and clarifies rather than displaces previous approaches to literary criticism, to show how such readings are grounded in cognitive processes and anchored in multimodal textual features.

I have taken my analytical cues specifically from the multimodal cognitive model I synthesized in Chapter 2 to focus on dominant features of the visual poetic anchors. I focus in particular on gestalt phenomena such as object recognition, viewpoint, and conspicuous interactions with cultural frames. Importantly, while I focus on dominant features, many of the less dominant features are also still at work in many of the other works. While I highlight particular attributes at the expense of others for the sake of clarity, most of these features can be found in any given visual poem. Nonetheless, this discussion will show how readings are anchored in the poetic texts, and at what points inferences and blends move beyond them, which locates the spaces of constraint and freedom within eco-cognitive interactions.

4.2 An H in the Heart: Gestalt Phenomena

The poems in this section revolve around the recognition of the letter H, which the poets I discuss use to connect metonymically to famed Canadian visual poet bpNichol. H is commonly known to be his favorite letter (see McElroy 2000). It informed “hundreds of drawings, cartoons, and visual poems” (Davey 2012, 12), which led Christian Bök to consider bpNichol to be “an idolater of the letter H” (2001, 105). Frank Davey traces this connection back to an early childhood home in Winnipeg, which was located in Section H of a new development. As he notes, “[t]hose alphabetically named streets would render the alphabet non-transparent for him – making each letter a recurrently self-referential
sign” (2012). bpNichol’s obsession with the letter H was especially noticeable in his visual poetry, such as in “H (An Alphabet)” (Figure 21) where the H blends with and contaminates all letters except the H itself, which renders all letters incomplete or transformed through its presence. This is language, base H, which perhaps reflects bpNichol’s own obsession with the letter and its influence on his perception of language itself. This poem also enacts a sentiment reflected in the title of a mass market selection of his works by George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje, An H in the Heart: A Reader (1994), a (mildly romantic) title I have also borrowed for this section.

![Image of "H (An Alphabet)" by bpNichol](image)

**Figure 21**: “H (An Alphabet)” by bpNichol (2007 [1978], 48).

In this poem, gestalt phenomena play a key role in the identification of the H and in the recognition of meaningful manipulations of the letter for poetic effects, and in the ones to follow. At the same time, each poem employs these gestalt phenomena and ensuing blends to present different construals of bpNichol and his works. The letter H
reinforces a shared, intertextual frame of memorialization or homage, while the manipulations of the letter associates the poet and his works with a variety of other frames that prompt complex, emergent understandings of bpNichol and his works.

Gestalt phenomena—such as pattern recognition and object completion—draw on broad-level perceptual patterns to inform conceptualization processes. A gestalt-level focus on cognition engages with common relational patterns, such as figure-ground effects, similarity, size, orientation, and so forth. These perceptual phenomena allow an organism, in this case the reader, to act in and interact with its environments, which, in this case, is the representational space of the page. R.P. Draper (1971) describes several orientational features in early clean visual poems that show how gestalt phenomena offer a spatialized logic of the page that groups letters such that they appear to traverse, climb, or distribute themselves across the page. Such logic avoids more perspectival features that may also inform meaning construction by prioritizing the planarity of the page over the potential for figuration and depth. Nonetheless, gestalt phenomena isolate arrangements and object features to economize on perceived manipulations of the letters and page space in order to anchor simulation and blending processes.

### 4.2.1 Barbara Caruso’s Postmodern Memorial

A reader’s engagement with a copy of Barbara Caruso’s drawing “Against Closure: a drawing for bp” begins somewhat differently than for the reader of this dissertation, my framings and discussions (the paratexts and peritexts) aside. The poem, as originally
published, is printed inside a small folded card with the title and the artist’s name appearing on the cover. Perhaps ironically, this print format also allows the card to mildly enact the title by not staying folded completely shut, as it might if presented in a book, because the fold in the card is too rigid and holds the front slightly agape. While the poem remains unrecognizable, the openness of the cover offers a perceptual input that materially affirms the title through the choice of substrate. Caruso’s presentation of the poem inside a card offers a series of steps to the reading process and to interpretations, which begins with the contextual prompts provided by the title and then proceeds to the drawing and its integration of this context.

The drawing is dedicated to bp, the commonly recognizable initials of bpNichol, Caruso’s friend and regular collaborator. The full title of this work might, therefore, suggest a desire not to come to terms, not to “gain closure,” with bpNichol’s untimely death a decade earlier in September 1988. Perhaps creating this poem a decade later also attempts to refuse the closure that has inevitably been creeping in. In this sense, the title suggests the desire to remain connected to a lost friend by refusing to accept their passing. At the same time, the primary title might also reflect a common poststructuralist dictum, a theoretical position also popular at the time of composition, in which complete understandings of a text are illusory, and, as such, readings are never closed. This theoretical proposition would present the subtitle (“a drawing for bp”) as a simple

82 This rare booklet was printed in a run of only 18, signed and numbered by the author, by presspresspress in Paris, Ontario. This is a copy of number 15 from my private collection.
dedication to bpNichol as a form of commemoration and affirmation of his poetic inclinations for openness. For instance, it appears to affirm his popular quoted and reprinted manifesto, “statement, november 1969,” that appeared on the back cover of his book *Journeying & the Returns*, which was included in his first major boxed collection, *bp* (1967a), 83 from Coach House Books. In that (once published and much re-cited) statement, Nichol affirms a creative practice 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” (2002, 18). Thus, the full title of Caruso’s poem layers, or leaves in tension, two possible meanings, playing the death of a friend and the death of communicative closure against and/or through each other.

Opening the card, one sees the poem (Figure 22). Pattern completion leads to object recognition, and, if I recall my own experience correctly, one quickly sees the capital H, written with what appears to be a blunted, dark pencil on slightly textured

83 The boxed collection *bp* (1967a) is often erroneously referred to as *Journeying & the Returns* for the book that was included in it (and now often sold second-hand separate from the other materials included in the box. This misnomer ignores the envelope of visual poems, the small record of sound poems, and the small flip-book that made up the entire collection. The significance of this collection is not only for the lyrical book of poetry, but rather for its dramatic showcase of bpNichol’s breadth and quality of poetic practice. It is notable that it is the book least offensive to established, institutional tastes for lyric poetry that becomes celebrated, while the works of material and representational play are left out. This marginalization of bpNichol’s playfulness misconstrues his practice, which typically embraced play as part of the serious work of being an “apprentice to language” as a poet. Furthermore, one might read this as yet another attempt to “sentimentalize his subversiveness...at the expense of his most experimental achievements” (Bök 1998, 62), and it likely reflects another instance of the critical discomfort with visuality in literature in general (McElroy 2000, 10).
paper. The missing upper line that completes the cross-line of the H seems to come into awareness only after recognizing the letter, and materially instantiates the denial of closure (of the form) from the title, even while we have already performed closure as readers through gestalt processes in order to interpret the broken form. Furthermore, the purposeful denial of typographical closure is particularly clear when one realizes, through mental simulation of the drawing hand, that the line that forms the outline of the letter begins and ends at either end of the missing cross-line. In fact, the ends of the lines are especially dark and crisp at their terminals, which indicate an increased pressure of the hand as it began and finished the incomplete letter. Through this simulated act, another perspective on closure emerges. Here, to be against closure is a purposeful, willed act of denial on the part of the creator. This intentional rather than emotional denial presents a specific construal of communication or language production that suggests a desire for incompleteness or openness to remain within linguistic expression.

![Figure 22: "Against Closure: a drawing for bp" by Barbara Caruso (1998).](image)
Since bpNichol integrated and explored the letter H in many works, including *H: An Excursion* (1979) in collaboration with Caruso, this provides a frame for further understanding the poem in terms of authorial intertextuality. As a memorial or homage, the poem might be signaling the communal sense of loss of his unfinished oeuvre through his untimely death. It also reifies his philosophical statement about creating as many communicative exits and entrances as possible for readers. Here, the poem also remains purposefully (and non-linguistically) open in order to enact his philosophy through his favored medium and with his favourite letter. The layering of authorial reflections presents a composite memorial and testament to bpNichol’s enduring legacy. This poetic expression requires object recognition as well as object disintegration for understanding. For instance, the letter is outlined rather than written, which presents a silhouette, much like the face of the lost friend that can no longer be envisioned completely but which remains known at some level. Through this tension between presence and absence both positions present in the title are located on the page: the desire to hold onto the memories of the lost, to retain a sense of their purpose, to hold open the door to the afterlife in homage to an enduring affection, are all encapsulated in this one incomplete block-letter.

In "Against closure," Barbara Caruso has taken the specific form of the hand-drawn letter H and strategically misrepresented it. In this silhouetted form, the letter, which the conduit fallacy considers just an empty container, becomes a source of meaning, wherein she can enact Nichol’s philosophical position on language itself. The poem presents a blend with conflicted emergent structures: is this about bpNichol or about a postmodern dictum? The poem itself enacts and anchors a visual synthesis of
both positions. In this way, it reflects a bi-stable image—such as the rabbit-duck illusion discussed in Chapter 2—capable of being both-and, while reader-viewers flip-flop between understandings. Where words fail, the broken letter will suffice to communicate beyond language and to remain open to otherness, while also containing a sense of memorialization and loss. Since this tiny booklet had a print run of only 18, it was likely produced with a small audience of people familiar with bpNichol’s biography, poetry, and poetics in mind. As such, the various background knowledges I have drawn on in this analysis were likely assumed of the reader. The bi-stability that I have explored in this poem was likely a desired poetic effect. bpNichol’s long-time devoted following in the avant-garde community likely feel a tension between loss and memorialization, which Frank Davey has suggested has led “honorific criticism” (1986, 168) that renders Nichol a poetic saint (see also Bök 1998; Wershler-Henry 1998). Perhaps the opening at the top of the letter in this poem is there to facilitate this saintly ascension.

4.2.2 Rob Read and the Ascension of St. Art

Much like Barbara Caruso’s poem, Rob Read’s “poem for bpNichol” (Figure 23) also employs object recognition of bpNichol’s favorite letter and capitalizes on its horizontal cross-bar, but in this case developing the letter into something like a ladder. In contrast to Caruso, this poem also requires more movement, as the reader scans up and down the entire form. To interpret this poem, the reader must decompress the H from its expanded, laddered form in order to understand its relation to Nichol. The resultant decompression and re-blending prompts an emergent understanding that specifically construes the poetic practices and legacy of Nichol in two parallel blends.
I will begin with the initial cognitive decompression of the poem, which stems from the recognition of serifs at the top and bottom of the ladder as parts of letters. This less common feature for ladders (some do have foundation anchors for construction work) prompts the transformation of the ladder into the letter. This disintegration of the image into two frames and associated mental spaces frees them up for further simulative inference making. The H prompts an intertextual and biographical connection to bpNichol, as discussed above, to reinforce the title. Similarly, the basic ladder serves to prompt metonymically associated (cultural) frames that include construction, home maintenance, narratives (such as the story of Jacob’s ladder), representations of social and political hierarchies, and so forth. At the same time, these frames also share the associated actions (and simulations) of ascension and descent (which matches the gestalt experience of the H rising up the page), with varying degrees of detail associated with the ladder itself. The ambiguous, schematic framing provided by the ladder offers several ways of

Figure 23: "poem for bpNichol" by Rob Read (Hryciuk 2009, 70).
connecting with and construing bpNichol’s work and legacy as a form of multimodal metaphor (Forceville 2008).

The dominant ladder-like features of Read’s poem that emphasize a materialist play with the affordances of the letter suggest a construction motif. This may reflect Nichol’s own multimodal constructional work that harnesses verbal, visual, and material elements of representation to develop an array of poetic effects. For instance, Steve McCaffery (1986b) highlights Nichol’s paragrammatic practice of purposefully disrupting words by misreading or breaking them into others, such as his infamous saints in The Martyrology, Books 1-3, who are constructed out of ST words (St. Orm, St. Ranglehold, etc). While these are the dominant example, his oeuvre is replete with such instances, including his penchant for the pun. His visual and material playfulness is especially noteworthy in his trilogy of experimental books recently collected as a book of variations: love – zygal – art facts (Nichol 2013; see Borkent 2009, 65-97; 2010), which Bök (1998) argues are amongst his most innovative and experimental yet also most overlooked.

bpNichol’s work with Steve McCaffery in the Toronto Research Group, collected by McCaffery (1992), tracks their ongoing engagement with the implications of a materialist praxis. Through this construction motif, which is prompted by both the blended form and associated frames, Read’s poem gestures towards bpNichol’s own creative practices and his oeuvre. As such, the poem hints at a memorialization of or homage to a key visual poetic forebear’s practices and inspirations.

The connection to the Biblical narrative of Jacob’s dream of a ladder to heaven (and religious iconography in general) provides a important intertext with this poem that extends this memorial quality:
And he [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said . . . The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 28: 12-14, ESV).

While the poem’s religious allusion harkens back to bpNichol’s most famous, nine-book long poem, *The Martyrology*, which includes a range of visual poems in later books, the specific frame of Jacob’s dream provides further construals of bpNichol and his work. Since this is a “poem for bpNichol,” this suggests that we assign bpNichol to the role of the recipient, mapping him to the role of Jacob receiving the dream. This particular selection from the inputs presents an emergent analogy that blends poetic and Biblical lineages in which the poetic holiness of bpNichol influences generations of poetic offspring to come. This mapping motivates an emergent analogy between bpNichol’s poetic actions and their long-term outcomes; for instance, bpNichol’s poetic wanderings (throughout various genres, media, theories, stories, etc.) generate spaces for many others to later act upon. Thus, the poem presents a vision of poetic influence. At the same time, since it was published long after bpNichol’s death, the poem serves to memorialize the already clear import of bpNichol to radical poetics in Canada. Furthermore, it reunites the visual and religious in the frame of “bpNichol,” perhaps rendering him a saint (Gil McElroy’s “St. Art” perhaps), who has now ascended to poetic heaven. Read’s poem might be said to offer a glimpse of both the religious and materialist playfulness of *The
Martyrology, while affirming the wider contexts and influences of Nichol’s creative endeavors, which were often materially and visually driven.

At the same time, I do not wish to replicate the error of letting the Martyrology overshadow other possible critical readings of visual poetry associated with bpNichol (in this case, in memoriam). The metonymic openness of frames associated with the ladder, combined with the reverential affect, may easily prompt further blends. For instance, the concept of the social ladder may analogically suggest that bpNichol’s materialist praxis led to his ascension as one of Canada’s most preeminent poets and acknowledges his influence on many others. Through a seemingly simple elaboration of the crossbar of the readily recognizable letter H, Read builds a socio-culturally complex, metaphorical narrative of poetic progeny and ascendency through material manipulations.84

A similar, yet more complex analysis, might be developed around Christian Bök’s poem “H for bpNichol” (Figure 24), which builds a complex lattice-work out of the letter H that ascends and fills the page, though not always completely, but materially and consistently. In his poem, Read has modeled the ascension of St. Art, and perhaps the start of more comprehensive perspectives on bpNichol’s works and poetics (see Borkent

84 It is noteworthy that the reading I provide of this poem strongly reflects Read’s recollection of his own creative intentions (Read 2015). While we do not need an author to provide an “authoritative” reading to justify our own interpretations, the fact that a poem rendered from a single letter can prompt such a consistent response affirms the model of meaning that I have been developing.
2009), and Bök offers a similar emphasis on a material poetics, with lettristic fixations and frames of latticing, laddering, and lettering the page-stage.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 24**: “H for bpNichol” by Christian Bök (2009).

At the same time, Bök’s poem harnesses two frames that only work together partially, and have incompatibilities that render it bi-stable. As a ladder, this poem offers many entrances and exits to the reader to climb up and around the page. As a lattice, the poem could be read as inhibiting movement as a lattice fence or a brick wall, which construes the H as an impediment to mobility. Of course, lattice-works are also employed for plants to climb, which suggests a decorative quality that is neither functional, like a ladder, nor imposing, like a fence. Bök’s version of bpNichol’s H is less clearly aligned with a single construal of Nichol or his letter-work. This ambivalence constructs an instability that may reflect the wide array of responses to bpNichol’s work in general. As I
mentioned in the previous chapter, his work was both awarded and chastised for its experimentalism. Thus, Bök’s poem might represent the wider field of impact, reflecting not only the receptive audience as I discussed in relation to Read’s and Caruso’s poems, but also the unreceptive readers, and all points in between.

As these examples from bpNichol, Barbara Caruso, Rob Read, and Christian Bök all show, poetic anchors often rely on gestalt phenomena of pattern completion and object recognition to launch cascades of simulations tied to titles and more detailed manipulations of letters within the poems. In these cases, the H anchors and blends interpretations of other elements within and around the poems, producing an intertextual network with the H at its heart. In the case of these three memorializing poems (and the many others that also exist in Canadian literature), the H connects to Nichol and pay homage to him through both form and practice. This discussion shows that elements of material anchors can play a primary or secondary role in the simulation process, with gestalt phenomena often signaling that relation. While the H anchored the connection to Nichol, the manipulations of the cross-bar also anchors simulations of title and other material contents, which, in turn, inform interpretative possibilities for that initial gestalt impression. Thus, we can see how readers might navigate from the surface of the poem into its multimodal depths to develop bi-stable and multivalent readings, including historiographical and intertextual information.

4.3 Landscapes: Embodied Viewpoints

While gestalt phenomena may seem to elide the notion of embodied viewpoint for the sake of schematic relational qualities, this is not actually possible. For instance, in Read’s
laddered “poem for bpNichol,” the UP-DOWN schema requires a viewpointed perspective to develop the notion of ascendancy. Similarly, Caruso’s poem retains a sense of agentiveness or intentionality through the presumed purposefulness of starting and stopping the outline of the letter without completing its form. However, the gestalt focus of some poems tends to construe the experience of the materiality of written language as constrained objects rather than more dynamic interactive and intersubjective spaces. Viewpoint can be largely subsumed into other elements, or it can be foregrounded, which evokes particular construal phenomena. The following poems foreground and anchor more specific viewpointed construals of spaces, which transforms the page into an overt stage of action.

Where there are people, there is viewpoint. In an instructive example, Eve Sweetser (2012) discusses the transformation of land into landscape in a poem by Wallace Stevens. She observes,

A stretch of country with a human in it is no longer just a stretch of country - it is also a human’s egocentric conceptualization of that physical area. Viewpoint permeates human cognition and communication - predictably, since we never have experience of the world except as a viewpoint-equipped, embodied self among other viewpointed, embodied selves. Language reflects this fact of embodiment . . . . But it also shows in complicated and fascinating ways the possibility of a single mind accessing multiple different viewpoint affordances on the same scene. (1)

Extending these observations further, Sweetser (2013) also shows persuasively how viewpoint extends creatively across modalities. In many ways, Sweetser’s discussion parallels, in cognitive terms, what de Certeau asserted as the difference between place (as
material position) and space (as the human interaction with place: “space is a practiced place” (1984, 117)). The following poems construct specific viewpoints through multimodal means, in particular through perspectival techniques that position the reader as a participant in a landscape by illustrating place. As such, the poems anchor viewpointed experiences around which interpretations cycle. Yet, as will be shown, the types of experiences and places such a positioned approach might represent vary greatly.

4.3.1 Pondwise Barwin and beaulieu

The title of Gary Barwin and derek beaulieu’s poem “moon over pond” (Figure 25), invokes the ekphrastic titles of landscape painting, a form of painting with a long Western tradition of pictorial realism (Rancière 2007; 2009). The title prompts a frame blend of knowledge of ponds and specifically invokes a temporal moment at which a moon would be most distinct (from dusk till dawn). The title also prompts an experientially based prototypical orientation and configuration for the pond and the moon. Importantly, this frame blend provides detailed locational and temporal cues for interpreting the poem.

The poem itself is composed of two words, “frog” and “plop,” although even the frog needs to be disentangled somewhat as the g loops down into the p of the word below

---

85 This poem comes from a collection that translates Bashô’s most famous frog haiku into visual and conceptual poems: *fragments from the frag pool: haiku after bashô* (Barwin and beaulieu 2005). I cannot address translation here. I have described and analyzed other poems from this collection (to which this poem could be added) as “transaptations” (forthcoming) which both translate and adapt the various complex features of Bashô’s Japanese haiku which are otherwise nearly impossible to translate, while also responding to a longer history of its other visual transaptations.
and the o needs to drop into line. Ironically, the title is longer than the poem itself in terms of compositional units. However, the coordination and manipulation of these two words in the poem elaborates on the frame provided by the title to prompt a dynamic scene. This dynamicity arguably emerges through two interwoven and complicated blends, a pictographic blend and a summative poetic blend.

![Figure 25](moon_over_pond.png)

**Figure 25:** "moon over pond" by Gary Barwin & derek beaulieu (2005, 20).

The pictographic blend emerges through the visual reinforcement of the title through the raising of the o of frog above the other letters, which reflects the orientation of the moon over the rest of the poem. Thus, the letters do double service as both linguistic and pictographic cues. Perceptual scanning processes play an important roll in facilitating this doubling. Typically, printed text correlates letters along their x-heights to increase their legibility by presenting a straight line of letters (which assists pattern completion and object recognition). Barwin and beaulieu’s poem employs the linear x-height to help connect the f to the curved arm of the r and the circular form of the g into which the o must be reintegrated. Drawing the o well above the x-height dramatically transforms the word, ruptures its typical containment (via the conduit metaphor), and
highlights the o as a visual reflection of the title’s moon. The pattern that is being constructed is not of a typical word but of a pictorial scene. The o in plop does not need to be lowered, since its regular x-height appears to reflect the altered moon-letter above, thereby extending the pictorial effect. The o prompts a blend of pictographic landscape imagery and the word’s typographic elements; the emergent structure of this blend doubles the meanings of all of the letters as both composite elements of the word as well as environmental features. Thus, the f, r, and g perhaps double as a tree, a shrub, and a rock, respectively. Similarly the underline adds both emphasis and an edge to the pond.

At the same time, the underline of frog also prompts a sense of the pond’s surface. The orientational turning of the letters in plop, as well as visual parallels between the shapes of the letters, suggests a three-dimensional extension out of the page that prompts the simulation of the surface of the pond emerging toward the reader. The line between the two words transforms into a refraction point through the gestalt perception of typographic similarities between the two words, as well as the simulation of the pond frame in which objects at the edge of the pond are reflected off of the rippling surface of the water. Interestingly, the circular ripples within the word “plop” visually reinforce the onomatopoeic sound it represents by connecting it to the sound of splashing water. Of course, since the words are different, the refraction line is an inaccurate mirror at best. Through the simulation of this corrupt refraction blend, the line complicates the representational possibilities of the letter-image yet further. The letters have now gone through three iterations of meaning that move from simple typographical marks, to naturalistic icons, to twisted reflections of themselves. Even with this layering of meaning, the language and its typographical manipulations develop a static landscape, which
mimics the simulated blend of the title. In this way, we can see that this poetic anchor, while composed of static representations, also transforms as it is networked into and enriched by cognitive ecology.

Turning more closely to the language within the poem, which has already become multimodally and conceptually layered, there is a sense that the frog is everywhere and nowhere through its dissolution across the scene. While it is read initially through the regrouping of the fragmented word, it is through blending it with the onomatopoeic *plop* that the poetic and dynamic qualities emerge from the poem. The blending of the frog with an active sound of water likely prompts a causal simulation of the frog’s leap that produces both the sound and the ripples across the ponds surface. Running this blend back through the cascade of previous blends reveals the frog as an agent of change only after it has broken the refractive mirror of the pond’s surface, which deforms it while disappearing into sound. Through this simulation, the frog announces itself again, this time through action, and renders—as de Certeau and Sweetser would say—space as place.\(^{86}\)

As this poem illustrates, the initial fixed viewpoint upon a landscape in this poetic anchor also facilitates the incorporation of partial components of alternative viewpoints (in this case, of the frog) through the simulation of various frames and event structures.

\(^{86}\) There is also another aspect of literary experience that may inform readings of the letters as naturalistic or conscripted forms, which is the frame of literacy and handwriting exercises prompted by the line. While I have focused on the refraction point and viewpoint, this other frame might play a role in some reader’s interpretations.
While the fixed viewpoint remains anthropocentric, since this particular poem does not offer the material opportunity to follow the frog underwater, the hint of alternative agentivity briefly breaks the anthropocentrism.

### 4.3.2 Gustave Morin’s Atomic Traversals

Gustave Morin’s poem, “cul de sac at the end of finity” (Figure 26), also plays with basic perceptual and viewpointed qualities like object recognition, perspective, and figure-ground relations, but, unlike the naturalistic qualities of Barwin and beaulieu’s poem, it presents a much more abstract space through which to construe the dominant letter E.

Morin’s title initiates the development of a title blend that maps a common urban or suburban street form, the cul-de-sac (in which a street is closed off at one end), onto the more abstract notion of finitude, of fixed or determinate form. Both the concrete and abstract images of the title share the CONTAINMENT schema, and the adverbial phrase “at the edge” also presents a viewpointed location within the contained space. The cul-de-sac, itself a dead-end, is a self-enclosed, bounded space which gives resonance and weight to the more abstract notion of finitude. At the same time, being at the edge, suggests at least the potential to break from this containment and escape into infinitude. Within this blend, the title prompts an emergent structure that foregrounds several layers of culturally constructed containment, while also alluding to a potential for rupture. The ekphrastic function of the title, therefore, acts very similarly to Barwin and beaulieu’s in that it describes a location with specific qualities of being with a predominantly human focus.
The poem itself offers many qualities that function to locate the viewer within the described space, while also augmenting the conceptual formations of boundedness, urbanity, and rupture from the title blend. The letter E sits most prominently at the centre of the poem, but it is inverted. This initiates a fictive repositioning blend, in which the recognition of the letter involves a mental rotation of it from its prototypical orientation, as it would normally be experienced in literate society. Furthermore, as a figure within a three dimensionally represented space, to recognize the backward orientation of the letter involves repositioning the viewer behind the letter to look out
with it to the typical position of the reader/viewer. Through this reversal, the reader is positioned within the location of representation looking out and inhabits the viewpoint of the letter and becomes the conduit metaphor’s form or meaning. This repositioning also suggests that the reader is likely standing on and looking beyond the edge, as the poem stretches out ahead towards the horizon. At the same time, this poetic road does not quite disappear into the perceptual point of infinity, but implies its existence in the white space surrounding the poem.

This fictive positioning is contextualized when blended with the title: the cul-de-sac becomes correlated with language, and the reader becomes the source of rupture as she looks out, beyond language, down what appears to be an open, unpopulated (unlanguaged), and infinite road. Thus, we (readers and language both) look out of the dead-end, away from the confining limitations of finite language, into the unknown future. As viewers, then, this particular poetic anchor invites us to simulate the rupture of the title’s containment, which has now also become the containment of language. This potential for rupture hides in the language of the title too, which hints at the infinity that is elided by the archaic term “finity.” By decompressing this hidden abundance, the reader is primed to see the road leading out into the unknown future full of possibilities. The viewpoint that the poem anchors for readers is one that attempts to promote the visualization of thinking beyond linguistic representation, beyond the conduit fallacy’s own containments and constraints.

The perspectival reversal of literacy, I think, also alters some of the basic frame components of the original blend. A cul-de-sac is typically associated with a network of urban or suburban developments, and the road out is typically short and coupled to the
closed road of commerce and labour. These eventual disruptions to uninhibited travel do not appear in the poem’s viewpoint; rather the poem anchors the notion of the open road of exploration and potential. The emergent structure of this anchored blend construes language as a cul-de-sac carved out of potentially infinite experiences, and, ergo, representation is a boundary that must be ruptured. This construal reflects what Frederic Jameson famously presented as, to reuse his title, *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), in which he critiques structuralist notions of linguistic transparency and determinism as ahistorical and decontextualized; here we would be remiss not to see connections to the cognitive critique of the conduit fallacy I presented in the previous chapter. The linguistic framing invoked through the orientation of a single letter in Morin’s poem presents the potential for linguistic transformation, which moves us beyond the contexts and historical limitations of the contemporary Western experience of community and language caught up in a particularly controlled approach to labour and economy. We might read this poem as anchoring the complete rupture of discursive constraint, but it may also construe language as part of this infinite future that adjusts to ever changing circumstances as it moves along. Here we see the potential for ambiguity within this repositioning, especially regarding what sorts of inferences are made about the value of language within the (un)bounded spaces of the future and what happens to the ruptured socio-political space of the cul-de-sac.

Thus far I have suggested a range of ways in which the blend of title cues and the basic figure-ground features of the poem anchor a construal of language and the future. I now will turn to some more of the minutiae of the poem’s composition that add to this
reading. It is crucial to note that the scenery and road are composed out of the detritus of print media such as torn paper, coil bindings, and hole punched edges, and of punctuation marks made on a typewriter. These features add another techno-physical blend to the megablend of title and repositioned readers and language. Connecting technology to language is also crucial for two reasons. Most notably, this connection signals the indebtedness of visible language to spaces of mediation, in the past most notably associated with print media (which includes the bindings, typewriter marks, and so on, used here), but of course now include digital interfaces as well. It also presents language within this space as still unbound, quite literally by disconnecting the bindings from their moorings.

The techno-material inputs into the poetic blend also present the possibility for including further scientific frame knowledge, since the abstract style of the poem suggest a diagrammatic quality to the imagery common in scientific texts, especially in the field of physics. The poetic relationship evoked between matter and infinity in conjunction with physics, calls to mind, for me, the revolutionary work of Albert Einstein. The letter E, rather than just being one of twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, is crucial here, since it evokes one of his initials as well as Einstein’s famous formula focused on energy (which is itself already being invoked through the torn, glowing, and ionized form of the letter as well):

\[ E=mc^2 \]
This formula was presented in his paper, “Ist die Trägheit eins Körpers von seinmen Energieinhalt abhängig? [Does the Inertia of a Body Depend Upon Its Energy Content?]” (1905), which correlates energy with mass and space-time. In particular, Einstein focused on the inherent energy of objects. The focus on internal rather than expressed energy adds to the construal of language and the infinite future by transforming language from a static construct of letters into a space filled with potential energetic output. The poetic connection to the symbol for energy in physics, therefore, prompts the incorporation of a dynamic capacity within the technologies and expressions of language that work to meet the unexpected, either to invite it into the cul-de-sac of language, or to open up language itself to novelty and transformation that new experiences require. Arguably, this reading of an energized language would still be accessible to some degree through the pictorial cues of the letter’s composition, such as its glowing or vibrating form, but the frame of scientific inquiry enriches the reading.

In this reading of language, infinity, and energy, the reader’s positioning also humanizes this linguistic image, as the reader is called into this energetic and dynamic, rather than controlled and prescriptive, interpretation of the function of language. Such a work illustrates the complex megablends that can spiral out from poetic anchors. Attending carefully to Morin’s poem reveals how simulated transformations of the

87 Actually, I lie: $E=mc^2$ is the equivalent in the contemporary discipline of Physics of Einstein’s formula, which he presented as mass is equivalent to “$L/c^2$” (Einstein 1905, 641) where $L$ is energy; thus Einstein’s formula could be rewritten as $m=E/c^2$ or, as is it now known, $E = mc^2$. 
individual’s positioning interact with the assumptions of the conduit metaphor to provide productive, future-oriented understandings of interactions between language, technology and experience. In this poem, language becomes energized in contact with the infinitely unknown, and the reader is energized with it.

Morin’s interest in showcasing the technological and material contingency of language appears elsewhere in his diverse oeuvre as well, such as in Figure 27, which construes language as fodder for creation, but only through the “blood and thunder” intermediate functionality of typewriting technology and its associations and blends with notions of “progress.” In that untitled poem, Morin combines images of trade and travel (the railroad), the popular genre of the Western (“blood and thunder”), and literate and technologically supported composition. The overlap of the Western and the railroad raises two construals of composition. One reading is that through the use of railways, stereotypes (the Cowboys and Indians so common in the Western), and the myth of literacy as cultural progress, Morin presents a gestalt impression of the westward expansion and colonization of North America. In a way, this is a technologically updated version of McCaffery’s evolutionary progress of literacy discussed in Chapter 1 (Figure 1, pg. 3).
Figure 27: Untitled poem by Gustave Morin (2003, n.p.).

The poem may also offer another construal of language, however. The combination of the railway and the Western genre also raises the frame associations with banditry and train heists. In that light, the detritus of language is construed as the spoils of the appropriative writer as he collages together his work. In this reading, the poem takes on a self-reflexive quality that historicizes itself. These two (among several potential) readings are not necessarily incommensurate, but draw out frame associations that show how Morin exploits visual and verbal cues to interrogate the role of technology and literacy in society. The connection between colonial actions and discursive or creative production constructs a self-referential and self-reflexive construal of technology (as a mechanical instigator of progress or creativity) and linguistic representation. While this
poem looks to the past, the previous poem presents a similar self-reflexivity through the materiality of visible language itself as it looks to the future.

4.4 Cartographic Subjects: Distanced Viewpoints

The previous section illustrated how visual poems anchor simulations and blends of embodied viewpoints, in particular by drawing on experiential understandings of environmental cohesion, distance, and positionality. This section reorients these closely embodied assumptions by taking a “god’s-eye” perspective (Bergen 2012), which at first glance seems inherently disembodied. While the activation of frame knowledge provided by titles continues to anchor embodied inferences, the distanced viewpoint provides contextual and relational prompts that also shape understandings, in these cases of metropolitan experiences, in ways less realizable through more typical perspectives. Alternative viewpoint construction is common in developing imagery in literature. For instance, Dancygier (2014) shows that extensive non-human imagery in Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* retains embodied viewpoint qualities—what one might call personification—in order to construe understandings of various objects, settings, and events. Such evidence shows that humans typically project viewpoints onto inanimate or unfamiliar environments in order to interpret them. For instance, Woolf describes daffodils as “standing there, looking before them, looking up, beholding nothing, eyeless, and terrible” (qtd in 220). Dancygier observes that this imagery reflects embodied postures that suggests attention and readiness, yet “[a]t the basic embodied level, lack of vision makes interaction, object manipulation or purposeful action very difficult. . .. Also, the adjective “eyeless” extends the projection to an image of a human face, which adds to
the strange sense of a body deprived of its human features and incapable of acting or interacting” (221). This tension between embodied alignment and incommensurability transforms the daffodil’s vitality and attention into an inhuman alternative perception that is discomforting. Thus, even in moments of description, viewpoint can be manipulated as a means of construing things. Arguably, viewpoint is caught up in representational strategies because it helps reader-viewers simulate interpretations of things and events more easily by aligning disembodied or unfamiliar elements more closely to embodied mechanisms in order to weave them into the eco-cognitive network. In a similar way, mental simulation also helps us perceive alternative perspectives, such as in Morin’s reversed letter E in the previous section. This projective quality of cognition is tied to social cognition and intersubjectivity, and, similarly, as a means of extending embodied knowledge into unknown environments. To be able to defamiliarize one’s own experiences, therefore, requires the ability to project perceptions and concepts beyond presumed embodied limitations, and then to integrate them back into a coherent embodied understanding. This projective quality incorporates viewpoint into all representational modalities.

### 4.4.1 jwcurry and peggy lefler’s Complex City

jwcurry and peggy lefler’s poem “metro” (Figure 28) begins from a disembodied and abstract perspective but becomes more gritty and confused as the reader ranges through
its multimodal cues. The dominant correspondence between the visual grid-like layout of the poem and the title’s hidden reference to a *metropolis* suggests that the poem reflects a city map (or perhaps, albeit less likely, an absurdly complex *metro* train system). Of course, the title might also refer to the *metropolitan* citizens of the city, but arguably this inference is less dominant in relation to the map-like qualities of the poem. I will address the bi-stability of the metro, which oscillates between the metropolis and the metropolitan, later in this section. The initial cartographic prompts begin a series of simulations and blends that develop an array of interpretive possibilities.

---

88 As jwcurry has recounted to me in detail (e-mail 2015), “metro” started as a permutation word sequence poem by peggy lefler, which has been published in several iterations since 1979 (curry, e-mail). curry and lefler began collaborating and subsequently revising the text in its overlapped form since it was first printed as a matchbook cover in 1981. It then appeared in further versions as a cover for David UU’s *Metropolis*, in other magazines, and as broadsides. The outer shape began being manipulated and published in 1984, first as a random outline (which looked too much like a witch on a broomstick), then modeled more closely on first Los Angeles (which looked too much like a begging poodle) and then finally on Paris. As curry recounts: “version 7 was where we hit it right, with a visit to a map of Paris, an irregular solid with a wandering divide running through it (with the wonderful extratextual advantage that that’s the Riviere Seine, a seine in english being a kind of net)” (curry, e-mail 2015). The final version is seen here as it was published as Nietzsche's Brolly Broadsheet #2 in April 1990. It was also reprinted in several other volumes by the curry, lefler, and the publisher of the broadsheet. The various versions can be seen in jwcurry’s flickr collections *Paging Peggy Lefler* (https://flic.kr/p/c2EB1E) and in *Paging Peggy Lefer: B: contributions to works by others* (https://flic.kr/p/c2EFv3). My thanks to jwcurry for his detailed response to my request for publishing information.
The initial frame of the city and of distanced viewpoint of cartographic representation develops a diagrammatic understanding of city life, setting up abstract social relations between participants (and future blends) through the poems map-like qualities that seem to lay out public and private spaces, with the overwritten words as streets and the white-space the residential and commercial spaces between them. Such a distanced viewpoint suggests an abstract understanding of the city, such as frame knowledge of citizenry, architecture, and other broad-level features of a city. Such a disembodied perspective emphasizes a wide view of a general space over any given
embodied place. Furthermore, the city map or cartographic frame suggests a sense of objectivity. This viewpoint also offers several specific features of the particular city, most notably its wavy outer edge (which perhaps indicates that it butts up against steep hills or a body of water), its asymmetric division (perhaps caused by a river or a border), and an overall consistency to its form that suggests a tightly controlled and planned development of the metropolitan area. Through these simple cues, reader-viewers build up a more detailed understanding of the overall city, which informs and anchors further elaborations from its verbal composition.

The typographical hints of words that peak out from the streets likely draws the reader to note that the tightly packed streets are composed of letters and overwritten words, which develops a word-street blend. This blend quite literally renders this a “concrete” poem, since the words pave the streets. While the words construct the streets, they do so imperfectly, since the gaps between words allow the white space to cross and fill between streets. (One might infer from this porosity that the divide between public and private spaces is somewhat confused in the urban setting as proximity diminishes privacy.) At the same time, the distant viewpoint and overwriting of their forms diminishes their function as a modality (in a way, they seem to speak with difficulty to the urban experience) and reconfigures them as material building blocks of urban forms. The blend, however, also provides opportunities for readers to simulate aspects of the map frame that extend their understanding of the city. For instance, readers might begin to build other synaesthetic analogies by connecting the reading direction of the words to the walking and driving paths of people in the city, mentally aligning the reader with the invisible metropolitan citizens. On the other hand, these directional mappings also
suggests a one-way street design by projecting the conventions of reading onto the city streets as well. Nonetheless, the inconsistent coverage of the word-streets only also shows holes in this prohibitive directionality, which may free the citizens and allow them to range freely, much like we do as readers from our distanced viewpoint. Readers will likely differ in how much these analogies constrain interpretations of the city and the citizens. Even while the city is rigidly composed and the title so constrained through abbreviation, the bi-stability and porosity of these cues facilitates ambiguous simulations of this material anchor. As this brief synopsis shows, the blending of words with streets invokes mappings of movement and construction in conjunction with a sense of both freedom and constraint.

Close examination of the cross-written language of poem reveals that each word-street is composed of a single, repeated word, distributed and partially obscured across the surface of the city (the original form of the poem by lefler before curry collaborated in developing it as a form that he (e-mail) describes as “metropolis mimesis”). Each line is composed of the following series of terms (see Figure 29 for a close-up view of the woven words):

```
metro
metropolitan
metropole
meet
meat
metro
```

These lines cyclically repeat this sequence throughout the grid-work of the poem, which presents a puzzle for the reader. Arguably, these words inform the previous word-street
and cartographic frame blends, but inconsistently. This inconsistency arises from ambiguities within how to interpret the words individually, in relation to each other, and in relation to the situating blends. Furthermore, the words may not be easily discernible to all readers, which presents the possibility of developing partial blends and interpretations. I will briefly address each word as it interacts with the others and with the broader frames to locate interpretive possibilities that they present to the reader.

**Figure 29:** Magnified and reoriented section of "metro" to show word cycle.

The abbreviation of metropolis to *metro* appears in both the title and in select lines in the poem. As I stated earlier, the strategic clipping of metro from *polis* or *politan* renders the term bi-stable by prompting both the people or a person, while also suggesting connections to wider metropolitan experiences by gesturing to the metro (train) system. As a form of negation, these clipped possibilities remain hidden but are nonetheless mentally accessible (Dancygier 2010). In fact, through the processes of decompressing the negation, the whole word is actualized in the simulation as part of understanding it. Negation requires that we think the thing and then try to ignore it, in a way attempting to unthink its presence (Bergen 2012, 140-47). The strategically
manipulated word, therefore, might seem to restrict expression, but rather it multiplies it. This restriction, coupled to the constrained presentation of the word-streets and the disembodied viewpoint, suggests (to this reader) a repressive atmosphere.

Within the negations of the title there are also hidden yet more bi-stability interpretations. The *polis* that is hidden in the title and the poem, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“Polis” 2013), might refer to a contemporary Irish English synonym for the police or a police officer, or it might refer to the ancient Grecian notion of the idyllic city-state and the body politic. Here, again, the word choice oscillates between an authoritarian presence and a social idealism (which are not necessarily incompatible, but certainly distinct). Furthermore, understanding *polis* as the body politic suggests that the metropolitan people of this city are hidden, yet can emerge as a locus of action and hidden expression. If one sees the authoritative presence as a beneficial means of maintaining the idyllic Grecian city-state, then the reader is positioned as the engine that brings this social order into being. However, if one interprets these constraints as repressive impositions from an external author(ity), then the reader might be construed as a liberator that frees the metropolitan people from constraints by activating their presence in mental imagery.

Continuing from this ambivalent beginning, the word cycle continues with “metropolitan,” which seems to affirm or focalize one of the negated spaces associated with the previous term and title. Here, the inhabitant of the city is finally revealed as an important constituent, rather than just a negated presence or allusion with the city frame. The linear repetition of this term, however, might still show how the city constrains the individual as well, but the metropolitan presence is no longer questioned. Interestingly,
“metropolitan” is followed by “metropolice,” a visual and nearly homophonic pun of “metropolitan” that affirms the other negated space of “metro” by asserting an institutional, authoritative presence of the city. Furthermore, this presence is located directly beside the individual citizen. The visual and verbal interactions between these terms suggest a tension between constraint and freedom, between protection and coercion. This homophonic pun, therefore, bridges the individual with the city-state through law enforcement. Louis Althusser (2001 [1971]) called the process that transforms “individuals into ‘subjects’” under the civil power system “interpellation,” which renders them largely powerless against institutionalized power. Interestingly, Althusser’s first example of interpellation is that of the police officer hailing the individual and thereby drawing them into the state system of power relations (118), much like we might simulate happening in this poem through the close relation between a metropolitan figure and a member of the metropolice.

Following the bi-stable construction of the city as both an individual and collective experience of material and institutional structures, the next two lines continue in this theme of ambivalence. “meet” and “meat” develop another loose pun on metro by further constraining it. At the same time, they also may be asserting that the metropolitan and the metropolice do in fact “meet,” rather than being constituted as abstract roles or identities. Thus, these figures serve as both broad descriptors and specific entities within the city through this affirmation of their meeting. The homophonic transformation of “meet” into “meat” also suggests at least two interpretive possibilities. One possibility is that it modifies the location of the meeting, such as in a meat market or the meat district found in some cities. On the other hand, it may be perceived as a transformation of the
previous term (from meet into meat), which construe specific qualities of the interaction. For instance, it may signal the objectification implicit in interpellation as the citizen is regarded under authority, such as is described by Michel Foucault in his work on discipline and biopolitics (2004 [1976]). In this construal, two figures become distinguished in their meeting through the affirmation of one as the arm of the state and the reduction of the other to an unthinking (and dead) object of law. Nonetheless, this interpretation is only suggested rather than defined, and in tension with the possibility that meat is simply a locative label. From this ambivalent interpretive choice, we as readers are then returned, to the beginning of this cycle of bi-stability, to the metro.

Reading through the ambiguous, multiply instable cycle of puns and tensions in conjunction with the disembodied viewpoint and map blends, leaves readers with the challenge of integrating and interpreting these cues. One interpretive stream might be to embrace the top-down perspective on the word-streets as a viewpoint that affirms surveillance, control, and discipline. Foucault argues that state power is two-pronged, since it employs both disciplinary and regulatory techniques simultaneously in order to mold citizens into a homogenous citizenry: “[b]oth technologies are obviously technologies of the body, but one is a technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities [might we read here the mobile ‘metropolitan?’], while the other is a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes ” (249) which we might read as the reduction of the citizen to “meat.” Michel Foucault illustrates his discussion of regulation and control through the analysis of utopian nineteenth-century workers estates, which, surprisingly, very much reflect the focus of this poem:
One can easily see how the very grid pattern, the very layout, of the estate articulated, in a sort of perpendicular way, the disciplinary mechanisms that controlled the body, or bodies, by localizing families (one to a house) and individuals (one to room). The layout, the fact that individuals were made visible, and the normalization of behavior meant that a sort of spontaneous policing or control was carried out by the spatial layout of the town itself. It is easy to identify a whole series of disciplinary mechanisms in the working-class estate. (251)

This passage seems to reflect the potential critique of city-state power seen in one interpretation of this poem.

On the other hand, the bi-stability featured in the visual and homophonic puns that construct the poem renders any overtly political reading suspect, and may very well suggest the basis of urban society as requiring a police presence in order for citizens to meet their needs, such as procuring meat. The puns and porosities across both the macro- and micro-level suggest that the cumulative effect of bi-stability within the poem reflects a characteristic of urban experience. There is a strain within this poem between recognition and rebuke, through the actions, or potential actions, of the state and the citizens, and this comes out of both the language and its visual obfuscation of the terms and their meanings. The distanced viewpoint connected to key words and wordplay in this multimodal anchor presents a model of state biopower which is not necessarily unjust. By visualizing state control as a bi-stable relation between citizens and social institutions, including both urban planners and police forces, curry and lefler reintroduce a human-scale understanding into the distanced cityscape. As a composite multimodal anchor, much can be said about this city. Each of the terms in this cycle—metro, metropolitan,
metropolice, meet, meat, metro—individually suggests a variety of oscillating construals of urban experiences. The repetition and overwriting of these words perceptually construes them as a muddled, background experience of the city that interweaves throughout many social and material conditions, which produces a readerly texture, a megablend, that is more of confusion than coherence.

Of course, I have only scratched the surface of this poem. For instance, the cityscape is also fractured by a boundary of some sort. The lack of crossover points suggests that there are limitations to the language and structures of metro-life. This may suggest that there are environmental features, like a river or gorge, or disparate political philosophies that produce borders, such as the Berlin Wall. Readers will undoubtedly simulate details that integrate this division into the frame of city life and the cumulative experience of the cycle of street-words that build this particular poem. It turns out, in fact, that the outlines of the poem are based on a stumbled upon map of Paris (with the river Seine going through it). The choice of Paris was driven by a desire for “metropolis mimesis” without unfortunate “unwanted visual mimesis; as much as the image of a begging poodle is somehow very appropriate to Los Angeles, i resisted it as the keeper version” (curry e-mail). Yet, the connection with Paris is also fortuitous: after all, the social critique that I derived from the poem also resonated closely with critiques of power and society by a Paris inhabitant, teacher, and philosopher, Michel Foucault.

jwcurry and peggy lefler’s “metro” offers a complex reflection upon urban experience. While it remains largely ambiguous about the location, composition, and divisions of the city, the few verbal cues in conjunction with their cyclical pattern and cartographic layout prompt a range of frames, inferences, and interpretations, that either
affirm or critique the interactions between individual metropolitans and social institutions such as city planners and the metropole. The distanced viewpoint of the map presents a gestalt impression of cohesion, while the obscured yet bi-stable cycle of words that compose the city map disrupt it from inside through their inherent instabilities. Analyzing how modal cues are simulated and blended within this complex material anchor, isolates how they might motivate and constrain distinct individual interpretations of the poem. Like many poems in this dissertation, the self-reflexivity and bi-stability of “metro” foreground its own constructedness, and situates it within multiple discourses of power, representation, control, and freedom. Through these strategies, the poem withholding the opportunity for the reader to completely buy into the representational charade, as she must assess and navigate the divergences to generate a coherent understanding of the city. In this case, the distanced viewpoint facilitates a sense of coherence, while the bi-stable confusions proliferate under the surface.

4.4.2 Daniel f. Bradley’s Traveler

Much like the previous poem by curry and lefler, Daniel f. Bradley’s poem "3 small cities in ontario i have never been to" (Figure 30) also offers a diagram of urban existence, but construes it differently. Again, the propositional statement of the title prompts a blend with a straightforward relational frame between three unnamed cities and a traveling persona. Notably, the title foregrounds the unnamed cities and the provincial location which the poem’s persona identifies for the reader-viewer. In the emergent structure, then, there might be the assumption that the poem will clarify the ambiguity of the title by providing sufficient information for the reader to identify the cities within frame
knowledge of Ontario, or for them to be named within the poem itself. The phrase, “I have never been to” also prompts the frame of travel by offering an implicit juxtaposition with cities that the persona has been to. Finally, the title may prompt a sense of futurity with the hinted at “yet” that might follow the phrase. Thus, the emergent structure from the title includes an attentive traveler acknowledging a gap in knowledge, while also offering the reader a presumably recognizable location of three unknown Canadian cities.

The poem itself enacts key elements of the title that anchor and adjust key features of the title. The white blocks (which I will refer to as stanzas for lack of a better term), foregrounded on the black page, each reflect a shared formal identity, highlighted and encased, which allows them to be counted and connected to the three cities of the title. While there is little that might otherwise prompt one to think of cities from the visual poem itself, except a slight map-like quality to the layout, the fact of three stanzas blends the boxes with the title, which prompts the stanza-city blend. Through this blend, the page becomes a map of “three small cities” and transforms the letters in each stanza into a representation of each city. Problematically, the cities remain unnamed. Either the persona of the poem has playfully withheld the city information to taunt the reader, or also does not know which they are. Arguably, since the persona is able to judge whether or not he has been there, it seems likely it is a purposeful withholding of information. Through the use of an “I” statement and the visual cues from the poem, the reader is prompted to partially align their viewpoint with that of the persona, but without accessing full knowledge of the cities. The frame of “Ontario” is also imported into the emergent structure as the surrounding black space, perhaps ironically alluding to the industrial focus of the south-western Ontario economy, or perhaps suggesting the dark
corners of exploration: “here be dragons.” Several small cities in Ontario may fall into either category quite easily.

![Image showing small cities in Ontario](image)

**Figure 30:** "3 small cities in ontario i have never been to" by Daniel f. Bradley (Hryciuk, 2009, 15).

The perceptual and conceptual vagary of the poem, which now includes the partial viewpoint blending of the reader with the persona, prompts a more specific blend about the cities. The jumbles of letters that make up the cities present a visual representation of location, size, and coherence, but lack names. The poem becomes a
personal map to an unknown country and three differentiated but unvisited cities. The letters pile up at each location and wait for something to specify or represent through the process of naming and representation. At this point in the blending cascade, the travel frame becomes salient, as it provides a sense of a path of interaction into the future, through which the letters will eventually become ordered in an ekphrastic exercise of the traveler’s will. In this sense, the poem offers a map of potential future adventures and of linguistic conquest.

On the other hand, the poetic representation of the cities, through its map-like layout and the top-down perspective, might also be interpreted as an aerial view at night, such as one might experience while looking down from a plane. In this aerial-stanza blend, the white boxes are products of light pollution from streetlights. In this way, the viewpoint alignment between persona and reader is maintained, but it is not a purposeful withholding of the names but rather a statement of unknowing. In this case, however, the likelihood of future identification is less likely, unless the plane is landing. Even still, while the title takes on the tone of casual observation, the letters maintain some sense of potential definition and engagement through the metonymic connection to their typical uses, but this possibility becomes more distant. Furthermore, the letters might also offer an image of what the city actually looks like in the night, rather than simply being a heap of potential signifiers. This aerial blend, therefore, doubles up the possible inferences made regarding the persona’s motives and the degree of abstraction involved in the representation of the cities.

Comparing the map-stanza and the aerial-stanza blends reveals two possible readings grounded in the multimodal anchor. For the map blend, the viewpoint
alignment maintains a sense of adventure and future identification, or perhaps suggests the mischievous withholding of the names on the part of the persona to baffle the reader. In the aerial blend, the viewpoint alignment is more neutral and static and reflects a passing comment from a distanced traveller with little hope of future identification. These experiential frames suggest either an engaged or disengaged construal of travel. At the same time, the layout of the stanzas affirms the travel frame shared by the two perspectives through their correspondence to reading patterns, left to right and top to bottom of the page, which maps an order and trajectory onto either interaction or causal observation. Within either blended frame, the poem prompts connections between cities, locations, travel, and writing, with varying degrees of accessibility, intention, and abstraction. Here, the future act of articulation is a product of new experiences, in which the traveler gains knowledge and communicates it to others. The poem, therefore, visualizes the pre-experiential moment before expression is needed or possible.

A complex line of thought emerges when we integrate these different facets into a megablend. The travel frame, the stanzaic cities, and the blackened surroundings suggest a dynamic simulation of movement, access, and representational processes of engagement with new settings through the combination of environmental perceptions with the linguistic markers of letters. The lexically empty letters and darkened areas suggest a currently inaccessible or distant, unrecognizable, and therefore non-representable location. At the same time, the embedding of linguistic particles into the locations suggests an authorial intention to move towards language, to description and categorization, when possible. The travel frame provides the sense of movement and possibly the motivation to explore. Finally, there remains the latent potential and possibly
the inclination to conquer the experience of the unknown with words, to name the cities and their distinct features, which are only hinted at through the fractured letters. The poem, therefore, gestures toward a future involving placing names, or naming places, to render specific the generic textures that currently fill the city space.

In contrast to the previous poem by curry and lefler, Bradley’s poem maintains the distanced viewpoint to construe cities as spaces for description and creativity rather than a locus in which to reflect upon power and politics. Furthermore, curry’s and lefler’s poem engages with explicit practices of urban living, including streets, boundaries, and questions of access. Bradley’s poem, on the other hand, seems to be less interested in urban experiences per se, but rather focuses on how cities carve out spaces for naming and creative engagement, or are in fact themselves acts of creative enunciation in an unspoken language of space and form that appropriates the darkness into meaningful structures. While there are divisions between the light and dark spaces, the darkness also infiltrates the civil spaces through the visible forms of language and the lightness does not circumnavigate the fragments of words evenly. The somewhat ambivalent approach to these forms renders them unstable. Bradley’s poem multimodally anchors several complex connections between visual and verbal prompts by enfolding a sense of unknowing, exploration, and linguistic responsivity into the poem. A wandering quality even imbues the poem through the diagonal reading path that disrupts traditional reading patterns. At the same time, there remains a significant degree of ambiguity in how one might interpret the traveling persona, the jumbled letters, and the surrounding darkness. This poem, therefore, offers a much less certain poetic anchor than the previous poem, which correlates well to its content and its distanced viewpoint. At the same time, the
previous poem presented more anchoring but relied less on viewpoint alignment. In Bradley’s poem, the overlapping alignments of the viewpoints of the reader and the poetic persona prompts a collective reflection on travel, naming, and unknowing with a classically postmodern quality of instability. There will be no resolution regarding the cities, the persona’s intentions, or the interpretation of scattered letters as either pre-names or buildings with this poem.

4.5 Textualizing Material Culture

The following poems incorporate strong cross-modal connections and transformations in conjunction with explicit references to popular culture and folk knowledge to build complex blends of language and imagery. Each poem employs different blending strategies, from minute connections and transformations of letters, to broad connections between significant visual and material domains and traditions. These poems help illustrate how simulation and blending are anchored across a range of specificity through explicit cross-modal interactions (between visual, verbal, and perceived manual qualities) as they relate to emergent understandings.

4.5.1 Jesse Patrick Ferguson Materializes the Mind

Jesse Patrick Ferguson’s poem “Black Noise” (Figure 31) presents a typographically composite poem that layers typographical elements into a textile-like image. Such layering requires a significant degree of cognitive decompression in order to mobilize the poem’s elements. Thus, a dominant perceptual impression begins a series of blends that decompress and develop connections between the title and the poetic anchor. “Black
noise” is an aural impression of a salient, overwhelming silence, and is an antonym of white noise, which is sonic filler, like static on the radio, that obliterates differentiation. The title’s meaning also maps, primarily first through the word “black,” to the body of the poem with its cross-hatched black lines. At the same time, the silent “black noise,” which obscures perception, also finds its visual reflection in the poem, which looks like a woven textile or drawn haze that impedes the openness and clarity of the page. This visually noisy but largely linguistically silent poem mimics the title and anchors further interpretations. These connections between pictographic and textual cues anchor mappings between sight and sound that blend into a synaesthetic emergent structure through which readers are invited to simulate a type of sensory deprivation.

Figure 31: "Black Noise" by Jesse Patrick Ferguson (2010).
Readers will likely quickly see the single word, “intellect” (most clearly visible at the bottom-left of the poem) as the word form that composes the crosshatched “black noise” marks that spread across the page to form the poem. This recognition of a material connection prompts a further fictive blend that builds beyond the initial, poetically anchored title blend. Firstly, through pictorial conventions—especially from comics and other pop art—the stretched words might be simulated as falling down the page, especially on the left-hand side.89 Once one notices that the crosshatched lines are also composed in this way, the inferences of movement likely shifts to a sense of the word actively weaving a layer of darkness across the surface of the page. Thus, the perspective may change from a side view that construes the words as falling down (in front of) the page to a top-down perspective that construes the words as moving about on the surface of the page.90 Alternately these two perceptions could also be conflated by simulating the poem as a representation of a scene, with the right side of the poem representing a solid object, like a building, and the left side representing an open space through which the words fall. These two inferences are grounded in two distinct gestalt phenomena which

89 The location of the most clearly visible word at the bottom of the poem strategically delays its recognition by exploiting the reading and viewing bias (in the West) to begin scanning at the top-left. This perceived delay makes me posit the order of first the title blend and then the fictive blend for the cognitive processing of this poem.

90 Another poem by Ferguson presents simply the vertically-smeared words, as perhaps a precursor to “Black Noise,” and it is titled “Insidious Intellect” (2014). While fictive motion plays a role in that poem too, the title transforms the sense of falling to a sense of growth, through the upward force dynamics associated with “insidious.”
either see the pattern as a whole through shared features, or which construct a figure-ground dynamic based on different densities of overlaps and on the clarity of the referents. In either case, the poem is formed through the active re-working of the word “intellect.”

The form of the word itself seems to be smeared across the page. Simulating this transformation, reader viewers may attend to the construction of the obscuring fabric or haze, as a product of the word “intellect,” on perception. In blending these elements of the poem, black noise becomes reframed as a product of material interaction with the intellect (whether this is a function of the intellect or despite it is uncertain). Furthermore, simulating this mutilation adds the tactile qualities of purposive interaction with language and typography as a possible motivation that produces the obscuring black noise and the poetic anchor. In the emergent structure of this fictive activation of the poem, the movements and transformations of the intellect render it as purposefully mobile, as a creative or created agent on the page.

The fictively active word “intellect” itself also prompts the evocation of associated frames that begin a series or composite of frame metonymy blends. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines intellect as a faculty “by which a person knows and reasons.” Unsurprisingly when dealing with the topic of the mind, in this definition we can see the Western dualist emphasis on mind over matter, distinguishing between the space of knowledge (reason, objectivity, and language) and sensual experience. The poem arguably intervenes in this dualistic thinking, especially as an anchor composed of a purposefully transfigured word-object. The blend of definitions and materiality reconfigures intellect as a feeling and active space of engagement and reintroduces an embodied perspective in
which feeling and knowledge are coterminous and inextricable, quite literally grounding the intellect (see Barsalou 2008). The multimodal anchoring of this blend enacts this grounding function and foregrounds the interaction between perception, sensuousness, and thought.

Beyond definitional intervention, the poem draws out a series of construals of “intellect” and its related domains, since intellect is informed by and informs other words and definitions, such as “intellectual” and “intelligence,” and their associated frames. These connections are reflected later in the *OED* definition in which intellect is equated with the “power of thought; understanding; analytic intelligence.” These connections are activated as part of more precise frames that serve to help contextualize the more abstract noun by metonymically and associatively offering up different interpretative possibilities. For instance, intellect suggests different types of mental actions and abilities (intellectual pursuit, critical thinking, and intelligence tests), legal discourses around ideas (such as through intellectual property), and social arenas that develop or value the intellect (such as the academy). Such frame connections correlate strongly to ideas of knowledge as power or social gain, through which those with more intellect have more social and material capital and mobility. All of these ideas regarding knowledge have a strong UP-DOWN image-schematic logic that supports social judgments. (Of course, these ideas are intermixed with critiques of this ideology through issues pertaining to access to education, and critical discourses around class, gender, ethnicity, and race.)

Academia is the ironic space in which both the gains and the critiques comingle. The title blend construes the intellect and these associated domains as something dark that seems to obscure perception while also being redundant; in conjunction with the
fictive blend, the actions of the intellect are construed as problematic since they spread
over and obscure the open space of the page to render it useless. As a general construal,
the poem seems to dismiss the work of the intellect as awkward, distracting, and divorced
from worldly experiences. The scenic perspective of the poem, in which part of it might
be considered a building, might also connect this reading directly to academia as an
analogical rendering of the “ivory tower.” In this reading, the material space (reinforced
through figure-ground perception) is one built out of academic activities, and in which
the proper heights of intellectual growth are presumed to be achieved through the actions
of the many intellects residing in the building of their own making. The material focus of
the poem, and its associated frames, renders this building suspect and problematic, as it
produces a counter-productive black noise out of its own actions, disassociated from its
embodied materiality. Perhaps, even, this is where the intellect goes to commit suicide by
jumping from the top of the page to its death, or from the top of the building that it built
for itself, which suggests a certain self-defeatism or death-drive within academic work. As
such, the poem anchors negative construals of the work of the intellect as a
counterproductive activity, and offers a common dismissive stereotype of academics as
people who simply work to make something out of nothing. In conjunction with the
material critique of intellectual dualism, this negative construal can also extend to
reinforce the negative cultural assumption of the division between the “ivory tower” and
the “real world.”

Of course, the poem may be less dismissive than I have suggested, and perhaps
works to create a critique of only a particular downside to intellectual work, which can
appear overspecialized and inaccessible to the general reader or public and which renders
the intellect unintelligible to a particular audience. Admittedly, this reading is only marginally more optimistic. The poem is dominantly anchored in dark, obscure patterns that are produced by the intellect both as a building and as a weaving, while maintaining distinct perceptual simulations and metonymies that cannot escape, even with optimism, a negative critique of the intellect’s definitional divorce from the world and the discourses and institutions that support this disembodied perspective.

4.5.2 Helen Hajnoczky’s Corsetry

Helen Hajnoczky’s chapbook _Tight-Lacing_ (2011) develops a series of visual poems that reconstruct Victorian corset advertisements by rebuilding the corset imagery with letters and by repurposing and adding to the original ad copy as a loose type of found poetry. For instance, in “Viau’s Corsets” (Figure 32), Hajnoczky carefully manipulates letters to construct the image of a ribbed and lace-fringed corset. The careful typographic construction of the corset is precise and largely inconspicuous; it becomes somewhat more obvious through juxtaposition with the source material, since serifs and other typographic features stand out as incongruent with the original image. Hajnoczky’s found poem focuses on the bodily actions of the corset and its related discourses of presumed bodily perfection through pressure and rigidity. The interaction of the corset imagery and found poetry are prompted through the cumulative blending of two initial blends, the corset blend which is produced through the recognition of the typographically rendered corset, and the ad copy blend which is produced by reading the found poem. I have chosen to focus on these two major blends, even though they are megablends themselves, especially in the case of the ad copy, since there are many more elemental blends.
occurring within the language of the poem. Focusing on the dominant blends clarifies how they work together to offer a poetic commentary (the poetic blend) on corsetry, patriarchy, and language.

The found poem constructed from ad copy continues to nuance the emergent structure of the corset blend by emphasizing the constructional work of language and corsets. It begins with the title that highlights the “curve” the corset actively works upon “ladies,” which implies an unnatural alteration. At the same time, this artificiality dialogues with the subtitle’s reference to components that “hold[] a month,” which may allude to a woman’s fertility cycle and menstruation, a natural monthly cycle that artificial
technologies have difficulty working around. Or, perhaps it refers to the ever-changing tastes of the fashion industry, which seems perpetually dissatisfied with its own makeovers of women’s bodies. The poem goes on to showcase the mindset of the ads, which reinforce the cultural expression of the “perfect form” of the “full-busted / chest . . . [and] long-waist[]” through “pressure.” Note especially the emphasis on “busted” by locating it on the line break; this visual emphasis subtly transforms the ad copy’s focus on appealing bosoms to include the physical harmfulness of corsets to women’s bodies by breaking chest bones. This breaking is also suggested through the verbal imagery of “cut natural padding” which may be considered just a naturally produced lining of the corset, but it also subtly implies the sensation of cutting into the flesh as the pressure of the corset is tightened around the woman’s torso (her “natural padding”). Arguably, the combination of artificial pressures and transformations, along with negatively inflected puns, suggest a critique of the corset’s physiological impacts and affirm that the way a woman’s body exists is the natural way it should be, without imposed constraints. Through simulations of these various visceral images and their double meanings, Hajnoczky unsettles the discourses of feminine perfectionism found in corset ads.

Beyond highlighting the artificiality of patriarchal ideals, the poem also draws attention to the pervasiveness of Victorian corset advertisements, and their perpetuation of desires to fit in, by inviting the reader to “send for” the corsets found in “any circular.” Connecting the specific work of the corset within the social media of the printed magazine, invites a wider critique of the socio-cultural complex of patriarchy that perpetuates the dominance of an artificial image of women’s bodies. By replicating the
layout of the initial ad copy, Hajnoczky situates her work as a direct response to the advertisement, and by association the advertising world’s values, which presents a constructed vision of femininity, in all its acceptable Victorian forms, both in text and in woodcuts. Like the corsets ... the language of these advertisements constricts and shapes women, outlining in text not what women should wear, but who women are, and what it means to be a woman. Women were not only constricted by the garments, but by the corset of language itself—limited to the words that they are told describe them. (2010, 17)

Therefore, Hajnoczky actively reconstructs both the language and images of this Victorian advertisement as a way of intervening in a wider patriarchal discourse.

The poem anchors a multimodal engagement with the intersection between patriarchy and feminist critique. Both word and image are reworked to focus on their brokenness and artificiality as well as their pervasiveness. Through butchering and repurposing the multimodal ad copy, Hajnoczky simultaneously critiques, parodies, and dismisses patriarchal rhetoric in both text and image. At the same time, these very actions assert an alternative perspective, which suggest an insurgent agency within the language and imagery of that discourse to represent the artificially constrained female body writing back. Through works like these, Hajnoczky shows how a feminist perspective can add to the often male-dominated visual poetic scene. The cognitive ecological perspective illustrates the complex conceptual work that subtle manipulations to text and image can accomplish as multimodal anchors of politically and socially loaded concepts. Importantly, this multimodal anchor offers visual-verbal manipulations of both the corset and the ad copy that places the perception of Victorian patriarchy in tension with the
intentional transformation of these discourses. The juxtaposition of the historical with the contemporary furthers this anchoring function to accentuate the feminist critique.

4.5.3 Helen Hajnoczky’s Folk Artistry

Much like her corset poems, Helen Hajnoczky’s ongoing poetic project, *Magyarázni*, draws heavily from visual culture, but in this case engages with the Hungarian folk art tradition of her heritage. In her poems, such as the untitled example seen below (Figure 33), she adds letters to traditional craft iconography, thereby blending a visual and literary aesthetic. This project is relatively innovative, since, to my knowledge, folk arts have been implemented rarely in visual poetic practice.\(^1\) Not only is this visual-verbal blend beautiful, it also presents language as a purely imagic object, construing it as a part of a visual rather than written tradition. By quite literally reframing language as a part of folk art, linguistic expression is pulled from the tradition of literature and re-inscribed as a visual art, which allows assumptions about both to blend with and influence inferences

\(^1\) Few other Canadian visual poetic works come to mind that specifically reference folk traditions. Most notably, Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps* (2013) includes print overlays on Coast Salish totem poles. Judith Copithorne’s regular incorporation of the popular psychedelic style of the 1960s and 70s in her early works may also qualify, depending on how one defines folk tradition; while the psychedelic style reflects a specific and limited counter-cultural movement rather than a broadly shared aesthetic, it is well known and still used, so it may begin to qualify as a form of visual tradition. kevin mcpherson eckhoff’s *Typortraits* (2011) also draws on the Western visual tradition of portraiture; while portraiture is historically a high-cultural practice, the ubiquity of cameras has changed that substantially, perhaps transforming it into a folk art too. Hajnoczky (2010) is inspired by, and connects her work to, the floral, semantic arrangements in American poet Mary Ellen Solt’s *Flowers in Concrete* (1966).
made of the other. In particular, it defamiliarizes letters, however momentarily, from their typical association with the production of words and the conduit fallacy of meaning transmission.

Figure 33: Untitled poem by Helen Hajnoczky (Barwin and Hajnoczky 2012, n.p.).

Hajnoczky’s project employs these traditional floral patterns as a mode of presentation for visible language. This approach reframes language as a part of material visual culture, by blending visible language with the new domains of a collective, low-brow tradition. As she observes in an interview with visual poet Gary Barwin, the floral patterns are used in both embroidery by women and carvings by men; as such “much of the context that would gender the designs is absent” (Barwin and Hajnoczky 2012, n.p.).
The de-contextualized engagement with Hungarian folk tradition is purposeful, both in terms of its reflection of an artistic approach as well as an expression of personal identity. Furthermore, a folk tradition is “a collective project” of visual expression that “does not demand that you be innovative” and in which “anyone can borrow and recombine existing traditional designs to create new folk art” (n.p.). This traditional approach to collectively held representational elements fits nicely into Hajnoczky’s avant-garde interest in found, conceptual, and visual poetries, all of which incorporate practices of copying and repurposing as part of their innovative expressions. It also legitimizes her project as a natural extension of folk art values, while repurposing them into a new medium as part of (a non-semantic) poetic expression.

Hajnoczky’s decontextualized innovation in folk-art expression also incorporates personal qualities and serves to reflect aspects of her Hungarian-Canadian identity. The hand-drawn letters give a glimpse of the individual situated within a folk tradition. As she says, her visual poems “will carry evidence of my hand, such as the way I draw a letter, or the imperfect lines of my drawings. I can’t speak Hungarian perfectly, I can’t draw perfectly” (n.p.). Here, she articulates a crucial blend, mentioned above, between visual and verbal arts in relation to literacy and proficiency. Furthermore, her hand-drawn letters remain oriented to the floral design in a way that seems to transform them by subtly inverting the dominant capital “P” into a lowercase “d.” This flipped letter signals a slipperiness or lack of consistency in Hajnoczky’s linguistic usage, even while remaining visually consistent, thereby producing a tension between modalities and linguistic elements. She goes on to note that “I hope that these poems have a visceral effect on the reader, conveying the experience of a first-generation Canadian who might find their
parent’s language beautiful, but at the same time historicized, distant, unreadable, and inaccessible” (n.p.). Arguably, the fluidities within, and the tensions between, modalities helps prompt this visceral response. Her hope, therefore, is grounded in the anticipation of viewers simulating her hesitant presentation of the alphabet and the Hungarian folk art tradition, as well as making connections between individual letters, in order to recognize their use and mis-use as a reflection of Hajnoczky’s own limited knowledge and abilities within these associated spheres. (Unfortunately, readers might miss this synaesthetic blend by also viewing the imperfect lines and letters as simply signs of artistic idiosyncrasies. Nonetheless, the material qualities of the poem help anchor the blend.) The incorporation of hand-drawn letters into the floral iconography helps reinforce her personal and innovative expression within tradition in a way that pushes beyond the traditional expectations of occasional blemishes in hand-made products by, rather, overtly altering it. Her visual poetic practice itself signals her hybrid identity, as both participant in and outsider to the tradition, since she ruptures it while contributing to it. Thus, the hybridity of visual poetry emulates her hybrid or hyphenated identity as a Hungarian-Canadian, and offers a glimpse of her experience, as Fred Wah so famously called it, of “living in the hyphen” (1996, 53).92

92 While this statement comes out of his exploration of Chinese-Canadian identity, Wah expressed this notion as generally applicable to all minorities that are labeled and marginalized through hyphenation.
Hajnoczky’s combination of the Hungarian folk tradition with the alphabet also draws out another aspect of these works. As poems “that explore the intricacies of common language and culture” (n.p.), Hajnoczky positions her work in a liminal space between observer and participant, between novice and expert, between the common and unknown. The flexibility of lettristic readings (as P or d), for instance, maintains this liminality. In a way, she seems to illustrate the common positioning of recent immigrants as “cultural ambassadors,” who are asked to assimilate to a new context while also rendering their cultural heritage accessible for the new society. The poem does this by integrating elements of Hungarian folk tradition while signalling a shared alphabet, which makes the tradition seem less foreign. At the same time, while presenting some knowledge of Hungarian culture, Hajnoczky makes clear through the interview that she is in a process of working back toward a cultural heritage that she feels at a remove from, which reverses the directionality of the cultural ambassador’s role as importer. As such, the reader is drawn along with Hajnoczky as she develops proficiency in the Hungarian language and folk traditions as she embraces her hybrid cultural identity. This poetic anchor, therefore, focuses on inhabiting the liminal space of identity and resisting assimilation into one or the other modes of expression.

4.6 Reading Seeing Readers

In this chapter, I have described a variety of ways in which visual poems provide readers with multimodal anchors for re-perceiving language and images, that range from simple letters to large iconographically-rich folk practices. I have further shown how focusing on the interaction between materiality and mental activation through the concept of
multimodal anchors helps chart the development of poetic meanings, and locates spaces of both ambiguity and determinacy within this process. I am not claiming that all readers see these poems as I do, but because these poems materially anchor meaning construction processes, there are a variety of material, perceptual, and conceptual constraints on simulations and blends which can be accessed, to a degree. While there are surely more inferences and connections to be made with all of the poems I have discussed, I have shown how blending and simulation provide a crucial methodology for describing the poetic materials and what they might suggest as a construal of seeing and reading. Through this process, a synaesthetic, multimodal understanding of meaning is affirmed, while harnessing it to medial constraints, representational fallacies like the conduit metaphor, and the embodied limitations of individual cognitive ecologies (in this case, the readings here primarily reflect my own limited eco-cognitive networks).

The focus throughout on the enactive and creative development of meaning anchored in multimodal artifacts shows how readers map different communicative modalities together with a substantial degree of perceptual and conceptual fluidity. Human cognition injects itself into the materiality of these texts and renders them dynamic when they are, objectively speaking, static marks on a page. The cognitive ecological approach shows where and how this dynamism is prompted by the poems, as well as how the poems model a way of picturing language by anchoring perceptual contributions to understanding. Thus, I hope to have demonstrated what it might mean—in the words of Steve McCaffery that opened this chapter—to be, readers “[l]ooking at the picture of the word read. Reading the word picture” (2011, n.p.).
Chapter 5
Cognitive Improvisation & Postlinguistic Visual Poetry

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!

– Dr. Seuss

Improvisation is . . . the highest form of concentration, of awareness, of intuitive knowledge, when the imagination begins to dismiss the pre-arranged, the contrived mental structures, and goes directly to the depths of the matter. This is the true meaning of improvisation, and it is not a method at all, it is, rather, a state of being necessary for any inspired creation. It is an ability that every true artist develops . . . by the cultivation—yes!—of his senses.

– Jonas Mekas


94 From Seuss (1955, n.p.).

95 While Mekas (2002 [1962], 68) refers to creation processes of avant-garde American cinema, his definition of improvisation nicely reflects the position presented in this chapter.
5.1 Postlinguistic Visual Poetry

The previous chapter focused on how representational features of visual poems act as multimodal anchors for meanings and interpretations. While they varied significantly in types of visual and verbal cues, the poems nonetheless quickly activated referential associations in cognitive ecology (although not deterministically so). Examining the cascades of blends helped illustrate how knowledge of cognitive networks can be harnessed as a critical analytic methodology that identifies how types of prompts and other material and perceptual cues inform the process of embodied conceptualization. This chapter pushes that discussion further by engaging poems that challenge notions of modal referentiality and anchoring by predominantly avoiding recognizable words or images (for example, see Figure 34, pg. 236). These poems, which I refer to broadly as “postlinguistic” (more in this terminology in a moment), ask us to consider how much referentiality an artifact must contain to anchor poetic meaning construction processes, and whether there is a point at which multimodal anchoring falls apart.

These matters are productively discussed by turning to the concept of improvisation. I focus on how poets improvise these poems into being, and how traces of this creative process are materialized in the text. Readers, in turn, respond to these traces by improvising meanings and interpretations for these abstract works. I mobilize the eco-cognitive approach by theorizing the concept of cognitive improvisation to better interrogate how and why postlinguistic visual poems remain meaningful in their abstractions, especially through connections to art and writing practices in bibliographic and literary culture. Furthermore, many of these poems will be shown to act like art
manifestoes as they present speculative fictions for language and poetry. The theory of
cognitive improvisation presented in this chapter also serves as a capstone to this
dissertation’s longer discussion of issues pertaining to cognitive ecology, representational
fallacies, and multimodal poetic anchors raised by visual poetry.

Alan Riddell’s excellent international anthology, *Typewriter Art* (1975), shows that
postlinguistic visual poems have been present since the development of contemporary
visual poetry, and they express strong connections and affinities with the European
Futurist, Vorticist, and Dadaist, as well as later Lettrist, Concrete, Fluxus, and
Conceptualist movements. Similarly, postlinguistic poems have been a part of the
Canadian visual poetic scene since it started in the 1960s, and they were especially
prominent in the works of the early innovators John Riddell, Hart Broady, bill bissett,
Judith Copithorne, bpNichol, and Steve McCaffery. As Gregory Betts (2010) shows, this
anti-representational approach reflects a general postmodern desire to turn away from
Western conventions and structures in experimental poetry. Recently, postlinguistic
poems have grown in production and popularity, both nationally and internationally, a
development I consider connected, at least in part, to the increasing accessibility and
user-friendliness of digital technologies that increase the creator’s ability to transform the
features and possible uses of visible language (e.g. see Hill and Vassilakis 2012).96

96 The internet also presents a common publication platform for many of these poems,
such as in online journals like *ditch*, and in blogs and other social media. At the same time, many
poets still create, as well as publish and distribute, through print media.
In this chapter, I focus on a range of postlinguistic visual poems, which push beyond verbal or visual references to draw out the materiality of writing itself, which includes its medially and technologically derived qualities. I call these poems postlinguistic precisely because they are developed from typographic or handwritten marks and bibliographic conventions. These poems remain indebted to some degree to literate enculturation for aspects of their meaningfulness, but push toward a directly sensual experience of textuality. I prefer “postlinguistic” to derek beaulieu’s (2006a) “non-semantic” for describing such works. “Non” suggests to me that the language-based notion of semantic meaning is not relevant to this poetry. Rather, as I will show, the hint of language within this type of visual poetry, including bibliographic assumptions regarding its various published forms, is crucial to its meaningfulness and renders it “post” (after) visible language. While these poems might seem almost prelinguistic or anti-linguistic (since verbally inscribed texts are not a part of the poem), they are rather postlinguistic, since literate cultural histories and practices provide salient frames for formal interpretations. In this regard, much like the poems discussed in Chapter 3, these

97 Here, we can see some similarities between an eco-cognitive approach and Julia Kristeva’s (1980) analysis of the pre-linguistic semiotic (which is composed of emotions, instincts, and sensuousness); this semiotic order oscillates through the symbolic order through these embodied features, and can be seen especially in poetry and avant-garde practices (Kristeva 1984). As Kelly Oliver surmises, Kristeva’s “unique thesis is that language itself, signification itself, culture itself, and meaning itself are heterogenous. That is, they are composed of, and contain, nonlanguage and nonmeaning. . . . For Kristeva meaning is always made up of both symbolic and semiotic elements” (1993, 104).
poems promote meaning construction from the very forms that the conduit fallacy dismisses as meaningless. Peter Schwenger argues that such poetic works exploit assumption of language being “authoritative and even natural . . . [and] a transparent means of access to knowledge, but obtrudes itself in a dense and baffling materiality” (122). What Schwenger describes here is the poetic disruption (through materiality) of assumptions related to the conduit fallacy and the reliance of typical literary works upon a concept of clear communicability through language, whatever its form. With these poems, the word-container and its internal meaning (the conduit metaphor) is hollowed out and reconstituted as pure, meaningful form. Furthermore, these poems extend the previous chapter’s discussion of multimodal anchoring by complicating the modal inputs, which renders them more material while remaining poetic.

Generally, postlinguistic poems can be broken down into two major forms based on their development from typographical or handwritten marks (although they too have their borderblurs, which I discuss later). These two categories reflect common divisions between modes of production (machinic versus organic) and even between the verbal and visual arts (typing versus painting). Handwritten or hand-drawn poems are often referred to as asemic poems and include indecipherable scripts and pictographs as well as more gestural approaches to signification. Michael Jacobson calls asemic writing “a wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission. . . . a shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing. . . . its main purpose: total freedom from literary expression” (2014, n.p.). One would not be remiss to hear here an echo (from Chapter 3) of Eugen Gomringer’s early desire to develop a “universal poetic language” through concrete poetry in which the visual modality would develop cross-
linguistic intelligibility. At the same time, the universality of asemic texts cannot be decoded or translated, and they remain largely inaccessible. While readers might sense hints of sounds or lines of connection between letters in postlinguistic poems, they remain disjointed from typical literary productivity and offer but a partial “resemblance to ‘traditional writing’” (Jacobson 2014, n.p.).

The affinities with, and transformations of, visible language align postlinguistic poems with the visual poems discussed in previous chapters. All of these forms of poetry draw from the frames of bibliographic and typographic codes that are a part of a specifically acculturated, literate engagement with visible language, most overtly seen in the regular poetic refutations of aspects of the conduit fallacy. These codes also blend with the frames associated with visual art (and musical) creation, production, and presentation to explore the multimodal horizons of the publishable, a wide space of expression, ever expanding, especially more recently through digital means. Without at least a rudimentary grasp of these frames and their rich socio-cultural associations, the poems, especially postlinguistic ones, lose much of their poeticity. The frames of reference are often crucial to their meaning. For instance, as Craig Dworkin shows in the aptly titled chapter, “The logic of substrate,” and throughout No Medium (2013), the context of book production within a specific writing community or literary scene can render strategically

98 Often the only comprehensible linguistic prompt for postlinguistic visual poetry comes from titles (if there are any), and arguably these reflect the authors “reading” of their own asemic work. Thus, the titles are already an interpretation of the glyptolalic rebuttal of traditional meaning (more on these later).
erased texts, or even a collection of blank paper, meaningful through their associations with particular socially or culturally salient frames. Thus, the forms and processes of literary and visual art production (and arguably others as well)—which include assumptions about the creators themselves, their modes of representation, and the technologies or tools through which they create and distribute their works—all offer sources of meaningful inferences about visual poetic works. Considering visual poems as multimodal poetic anchors, as described in the previous chapter, goes a long way to address this culturally and materially situated readerly engagement.

At the same time, in contrast to the poems discussed in the previous chapter, these poems present multimodal anchors that are much more difficult to parse. While they continue to anchor simulation and blending processes, what is simulated and blended is less easily defined, especially in typical visual and verbal modal terms of pictographic, conventional, and propositional meanings. Brian Henderson describes the manipulations of visual poetry as enacting the mandate “to shift the task of reading into the task of perception” (1989, 12) through “techniques designed to desystematize meaning. . . . The play of linguistic and visual elements celebrates unique being, even imaginary being, and especially the kind of being that marks on a page can have” (14). In postlinguistic visual poetry especially, such acts of desystematization and perceptual activation occur through a creative disposition grounded in “anti-representationality and [the] embrace of illegibility” (Emerson, 2011, 122). The following poems push this imaginary exploration of marks and meaning to its limit to become the borderblur of visual and literary arts: they could just as easily be called postlinguistic paintings or drawings as poems (e.g. see Morley, 2003; Museum, 1990).
This postlinguistic poem by derek beaulieu (Figure 34), for example, seems to represent letters moving actively around the page as they interact, reconfigure, and translate each other through their alternative forms, orientations, and possible sound(ing) lines. It might be argued that the poem represents the origin of language through an analogy to the ‘big bang,’ or perhaps a transformational, pre-linguistic confusion of sounds, or a playful rupturing of bibliographic expectations to construct depth out of linearity (and so on). Such poems offer challenges to how critics describe and interpret them. derek beaulieu suggests that with postlinguistic visual poetry “the best we can strive for are momentary eruptions of non-meaning which are then co-opted back into representation by the very act of identification, pointing & naming” (2006, 84). When considering such poems, we can see how a series of questions arises: How does poetic
metaphoricity and multiplicity emerge out of perceptual phenomena? What do postlinguistic poems possibly begin to identify, point to, and name? How do readers enfold ruptures back into coherent meanings? How do readers make dynamic inferences with multiple understandings from static, lettristic rubble?

In terms of the conduit fallacy’s dualism between form and meaning, these poems might be considered pure form (paralleling work by materialist composers and artists like John Cage and R. Murray Schafer and practitioners of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting.). Nonetheless, as I will show, they remain meaningful as multimodal poetic anchors through how they are perceived and how that act of perception structures and constrains improvisational patterns of conceptualization. I draw on the embodied processes of mental simulation and blending, and especially their production of phenomena like fictive motion and fictive change, to develop the concept of cognitive improvisation to better articulate how abstract multimodal anchors continue to prompt complex interpretations. Understanding particularly the connections between perception and improvisation elucidates how the formal manipulations of postlinguistic poems remain meaningful by turning the conduit metaphor inside out.

As beaulieu’s “big bang” poem shows (Figure 34), these poems illustrate the productivity of creative, manipulative engagements with the materiality of letters by reorienting and drawing attention to the formal container of the conduit fallacy. By refusing to use words, postlinguistic visual poems nonetheless continue to explore expressivity and poeticity. These poems destroy the conduit metaphors’s metaphorical container in order to reconfigure how we conceive of it and its production. But how do such meaningful reconfigurations come about?
5.2 Cognition and Improvisation

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how visual poems network into cognitive ecology as multimodal anchors for meaning construction. Creative interactions between perception and conception grounded by these works develop the sense of emergent complexity that at first might seem hidden or insignificant, which shows how meaning arises from perception in action rather than a simple effect of “pure” reception. This is no more salient than with postlinguistic poems, where publishing technologies and media become a part of this perceptual-conceptual dynamic as an environment for creative interaction with things (and through which, in a sense, the page becomes a stage, and letters the actors and props). Perceptual experiences and the affordances of visible language foster creative expression and responses. These medial interactions can be purposeful or improvisational, with most postlinguistic poems placing an emphasis on the latter.

I use improvisation in a different sense than the more common, jazz-focused usage. I employ it in a way that correlates to the avant-garde textual history of visual and conceptual poetry, particularly seen in many Dadaist methods and in the work of creators like British-Canadian painter Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs, John Cage, and many other experimentalists. I consider improvisation to be a particular creative practice or artistic stance towards a medium and its conventions, “a state of being necessary for any inspired creation” (Mekas 2002 [1962], 68). This stance centers on eschewing, disarming, or discrediting overt authorial intentionality in order to respond to the affordances of expressive modalities in the artistic environment. Like John Cage, I “[embrace] one rarely achieved and often illusive etymological meaning of improvisation: to do something
unforeseeable” (Feisst, 2009, 49). It is a “search for the encounter of an unexpected experience or revelation” (49). Similarly, Brion Gysin developed the “cut-up method” to also pursue the unforeseeable text:

Writing is fifty years behind painting. I propose to apply the painters’ technique to writing; things as simple and immediate as collage or montage. Cut right through the pages of any book or newsprint . . . . Put them together at hazard and read the newly constituted message. (Burroughs and Gysin 1978, n.p.)

This materialist creative method (which incorporates the improvised formulation of how texts are selected and cut) also presents an unexpected text to the author as much as to the reader. Such actions “liberate the words” (n.p.) from intentionality in order to prioritize a creative and responsive disposition toward them. Postlinguistic poems cut even deeper to expose crucial improvisational issues at the heart of meaning beyond words, in particular to show how improvisation is not just the construction of the unexpected out of banal materials, but the creativity of response to these works as well.

From a cognitive perspective, Raymond Gibbs Jr. reflects that

skilled performance [of improvisation] is not generated from a prior mental decision to act in a particular way that is independent of . . . behavior. Instead, skilled human action may arise from how the individual’s frame of mind automatically selects a subset of behaviors . . . from the unlimited alternatives within the self-

99 The cut-up method was developed by Gysin, but was also employed and popularized by William S. Burroughs (often in collaboration with Gysin) in a variety of texts published in the 1970s and 80s.
organized constraint space that is defined by person-environment interactions. (2006, 77)

The improvisational stance centres on this confluence of skilled yet “automatic” (i.e. nonconscious) and dynamic responsive behaviour that can apply to any medium and its modes of representation. This stance prompts a creative process that constructs an improvisational product of sorts—the trace of an anti-authorial, materialistic engagement—for instance, the jazz performance or the textual artifact. Thus, the postlinguistic visual poem reflects a cumulative lettristic trace of the real time, improvisational interaction of the writer with the materials of textual existence, which includes the letters, the paper (both its size and weight), bindings (or lack there of), and various technologies of production and publication (pens, stamps, typewriters, photocopierns, computers, among others). Unlike musical improvisation, which is responded to in the instance of performance through various instruments, textual improvisation leaves a specter of itself for interpretation, one that reflects its means of production. For visual poetry, the medium limits the materials of improvisation through variously related representational technologies, while providing the means to showcase them. Likewise, cultural expectations, linguistic and artistic frames, and so forth, influence conventions and readerly expectations, which the poet engages as part of the literary environment. Of course, as artifacts rather than musical performances, poems can be returned to repeatedly for further scrutiny without re-mediation, which reflects Scobie’s notion of dirty visual poetry sustaining contemplation and criticism. While musical performances can be recorded, that is certainly a second-rate experience in comparison with the experience of at a music hall; this is not the case with visual poems.
5.2.1 Improvisational Creation

The compositional methods of the poets discussed in this chapter differ in dramatic ways, but they primarily engage with and reconceptualise typographical and written forms by improvising interactions with the various composite forms of print culture. The material properties of bibliographic culture include the affordances of type. Affordances are those aspects of objects or situations that provide the “possibilities for interaction” with things in the environment (Johnson, 2007, 46). Object recognition and affordance engagement crucially direct real world interpretations of actions and scenes. For instance, a large book may be used, beyond its intended purpose for reading, as a step stool or a door-stop. This example of affordances in action shows how the book is re-conceptualized and valued for its weight and shape rather than for its contents. Thus, engaging the affordances of things involves disintegrating previous understandings of the thing in order to select, alter, and reintegrate its elements for different purposes, thereby re-framing its values, role, and functions in an environment. Mental simulation plays an important role here, since we must simulate different types of engagements that the particular objects afford before we can put it to use. Simulation also works backwards for others perceiving the novel function, who can then reverse engineer a creative interaction with an object. This projective quality (both forwards and backwards) also includes engaging with the specific construal that the actions suggest about a creator’s viewpoint on the object.

Postlinguistic visual poems creatively extrapolate beyond the traditional uses, roles, or values of letters by interacting with their affordances as visual objects or things on the page. As Figure 34 illustrates, postlinguistic visual poems engage with writing to share a perceptual and affordance-based, improvisational logic that uses visible characters
while reconfiguring or ignoring most of their conventions. This creative approach suggests alternative relations with letters that push them beyond their uses as the building blocks of words, acronyms, and other symbols within specific typographic and bibliographic environments. This improvisational engagement with the materiality of specific letters foregrounds and develops the expressive quality of lettristic forms that uniformize and informs both the letters themselves and readerly expectations of them, in particular by deconstructing and re-construing the conduit metaphor. Through this creative process, the poets begin to map out new, meaningful perceptions of language and visual communication against a complex bibliographic, pictographic, and typographic history.

For example, I will compare two book-length typographically-based projects, derek beaulieu’s *chains* (2008), and Donato Mancini’s *Æthel* (2007). In his book *chains*, as well as in other projects, beaulieu uses sets of typefaces on Letraset dry-transfer sheets—a lettering technology once used by drafts-people and designers to avoid the idiosyncrasies and errors of hand-drawn letters. Beaulieu uses this technology to create typographic consistency between individual letters and within poems while also playing with orientation and partial transfers. As seen above in his “gag” poem, which comes from this collection, this consistency allows letters to slide into each other, to overlap, and to, in a

---

100 While lettraset dry transfer creates typographic consistency here, elsewhere beaulieu experiments with incomplete or manipulated transfers, along with other textual materialities tied to production technologies including pencil rubbings of fridge magnets (e.g. see *Fractal Economies* (2006b)).
sense, respond to each other since they replicate each other’s forms either completely or by “mimicking” aspects, such as shared, font-specific features like serif shapes (terminals), loops, and angles of axes. beaulieu observes that in composing his postlinguistic poems he generally attempts to respond to a sense of non-linguistic connections or a responsivity between letters in order to play letterforms off of and through each other (beaulieu 2009).

(Similarly, Judith Copithorne, another important Canadian visual poet discussed below, notes that she is “working in a more physical manner with the actual visual reactions to the various physical attributes of the piece” (Barwin and Copithorne, 2013, n.p.).) beaulieu plays with orientations and relations of letters to decompose and recompose bibliographic assumptions surrounding type and visible language. This free-flowing compositional method removes most notions of authorial intentionality, since beaulieu does not attempt to convey anything specific, but fosters, as a creative organism in a textual environment, a sensuous response to letters as meaningful, constructive forms unto themselves.

beaulieu, of course, is not alone in his approach. For instance, bpNichol’s ABC: the aleph beth book (1971), presents a series of poems produced from single letters that have been repeated and overlaid in a variety of orientations to produce mandala-like forms that allow the letter of choice to “overflow with its own being” (Henderson 1989, 1). As Gregory Betts notes, “Like Cubist works, these visual poems seem to animate the image of the letter by including the trace of its path in time and space. The result is a series of images recognizably built out of the alphabet but that has distinctly broken the familiar use and experience of the icons” (2010, 163). Much like Nichol, Brian Henderson builds balanced abstract cryptograms, diagrams, or unknown symbols, such as seen in
Figure 35, with a clarity and iconographic precision of religious cultural artefacts. In fact, Henderson describes his fascination and inspiration for the project as based in illuminated manuscripts, codices, mandalas, and other religious iconographic works in his afterword to the second edition of his work. bpNichol’s own work in this regard, of which Henderson is a scholar, likely also played an inspirational role. Such religious and poetic influences are readily seen in his poems. While in these poems the creative improvisation includes mimetic constraints to balance the formal elements of the type, the readerly improvisation remains open to incorporate religious and literary interpretations. Since these two frames of knowledge share much in common, blends proliferate: here is “the word made flesh.” Such renditions of balance and order, as seen in Henderson’s poem, illustrate the fecundity of the consistent lettering of dry-transfer Lettraset, which facilitates formal reflections, elaborations, and symmetries.

Unlike beaulieu’s and Henderson’s archaic lettering technology of lettraset, Donato Mancini, in his book Æthel, engages with digital fonts by “butchering them with the virtual razorblade” of image manipulation software and “Frankensteining them back together until the shapes on [his] screen looking back at [him are] unrecognisable as products of [his] own imagination” (2009, 26). Unlike beaulieu’s typeface constraints (ones available on Lettraset sheets), Mancini engages with a wide variety of written language forms, from Black letter (Gothic) to contemporary fonts as well as alphabets ranging from ASL hand signs to Arabic scripts. Similar to beaulieu, Mancini asserts that a process of open, responsive, lettristic engagement produces poetry in which “there’s little invention; there’s inventive recombination. The only constraint was that [he] wasn’t allowed to draw new lines. All of the lines come from lines already present in the
letterforms.” As such “Intentionality ... was severely frustrated” (26). This lack of conscious intention again contributes to an improvisational creative process, constrained by the affordances of lettristic forms but also developing and reconstructing through and beyond these understood limitations. While beaulieu and Henderson play with the affordances of whole letters in relation to bibliographic norms, Mancini decomposes the letters themselves, recomposing or reconstituting typography at a different level.

![Figure 35: Untitled poem from Alphamiricon by Brian Henderson (2011 [1987], n.p.)](image)

The removal of forethought, of intended directionality and focus other than responding to the affordances of material forms themselves, reveals the improvisational nature of beaulieu’s, Henderson’s, and Mancini’s compositional processes. The other poets discussed in this chapter reflect a similar disposition. This improvisational characteristic resounds from their poetry: one reviewer even draws analogies between beaulieu’s style and Miles Davis’ ability to “[tap] the vein of jazz” (qtd. in the author note...
of beaulieu (2008). See also Mancini (2009, 25)). Figure 34 reflects this understanding through its explosion of letters and their inferred sounds. For postlinguistic poetry, typographic and bibliographic conventions, as well as expectations regarding specific, material engagements with letters and page space, contribute crucially to their composition and reception. Letters and other forms of visual communication, or aspects thereof—in conjunction with the dearth of words, straight lines, spacing, “proper” orientations, and margins—all contribute to the readerly experience of rupture and play against the background of the conduit fallacy. The poetic alternativity makes the letteristic improvisations salient and novel. Through this improvisational engagement, beaulieu and Mancini, and other poets like them, produce poetry that points “to and away from multiple shifting clouds of meanings and constructions” (beaulieu, 2006a, 82). These poems “[challenge] the status quo of poetry and of the politics of language” (90). They accomplish this challenge by denouncing expectations prescribed by the conduit metaphor and bibliographic history, by delighting in the visuality of written language, and by exploring meanings beyond the purported containment of the word.

5.2.2 Fictivity and Improvisational Reading

Through their abstract representation of multiplicity and indeterminacy, and largely through the lack of linguistic specificity (Mancini and others do add titles, which I address later), postlinguistic visual poetry invites a creative reading process that navigates through an apparently nonsensical openness and rupture. Since postlinguistic visual poems offer no words, they seem restricted by their own materiality and visuality, divorced from conceptual or propositional meaning. While we can articulate how they
break from typographic and bibliographic conventions, as well as draw on the avant-garde tradition of typographical innovation, we still have difficulty moving beyond assignations of rupture or excess and to articulate how the forms prompt new understandings. To move beyond impressions to complex readings of letters fixed to the page, readers animate a range of features to develop a dynamic scene for meaning improvisation.

To move from stasis to dynamism, from abstract form to meaning again, reader-viewers likely improvise beyond purely linguistic or symbolic understandings by engaging with the very affordances of codes, modes, tools, and media that the poets initially responded to while constructing the poems. By reanimating (through simulation) senses of the compositional manipulations and disruptions of various forms through mental simulation, readers infer action from static things and construct interpretations from these dynamic elements. In short, this poetry impels a materially contiguous and contingent, rather than symbolic and abstract basis for meaning construction. The embodied cognitive abilities that foster textual improvisation in the making of postlinguistic poetry also support, through mental simulation the dynamic, interpretive processes of viewers. The attenuation of mental processes from physical ones allows for discrepancies between experience and representation to produce fictivity. A close look at the phenomena of fictive motion and fictive change specifically addresses the significance of improvisational processes to emergent, dynamic understandings of static representations in postlinguistic poetry, such as the cyclical and explosive inferences ascribed to the previous poems.
Fictive change, which I defined in Chapter 2 as a prompt that “denotes the subjective construal of something in terms of an alternate state of being,” prompts a reconstructive simulation in order to understand the changed state of being. For example, in Figure 34 (the “big bang” poem), the top left N is likely simulated as having broken or become altered in the processes of representation, as shown in Figure 36, rather than simply being interpreted as its own unique form. Thus, the N is broken, and has, in a way, the spectre of wholeness haunt its fractured form. This inferred change-of-state construes the extensive looping of the word as a propositional understanding, critically mocking notions of linguistic determinacy through lettristic elaborations or transformations of the constraints.

![Representation and Mental Simulation](image)

**Figure 36:** Example of fictive change simulation for top-most letter in Figure 34.

Fictive motion, as I also briefly described in Chapter 2, is derived from embodied perceptual cues of scanning an object or sequence that are incorporated into the representation, such as a line of static dots that runs across a page. This conceptualization
involves making inferences about trajectories and relations between static elements.\textsuperscript{101} In terms of visual poetry, a repeated form, such as the various sequences of letters in Figure 34, can be construed as a single form glimpsed moving repeatedly through time and space, thereby prompting a sense of fictive motion paths across the page, such as indicated by the arrows in Figure 37. (Fictive motion motivated the readings of letters exploding out or of letters moving through the confusing mass at the centre.) Similarly, a homogenous, circular form, such as the first “gag” poem, might be construed as actively and interminably redirecting reader’s eyes as we scan it, making it veridically static while feeling fictively dynamic. Fictive motion clearly locates reading of the poem as infinitely looping and gagging language in perceptual experiences. Articulating this dynamicity constructed through the scanning and the reanimation of static representations—which derives from an embodied engagement with textual and imagistic space, objects, and actions—clarifies inferences made of visual poems that extend well beyond their forms.

\textsuperscript{101} Talmy (1996) describes multiple types of fictive motion paths. Here I only focus on the basic principle, which sufficiently covers my aims. Elsewhere (Borkent 2010), I have shown how two specific types of fictive motion path reveal poetic transformation in semantically-informed visual poems by bpNichol.
Figure 37: Possible fictive motion paths for Figure 34, correlating to groups of letters and punctuation, superimposed as arrows.

5.3 Typographical Postlinguistic Visual Poetry

5.3.1 beaulieu’s Machinic Disruptions

Typographical postlinguistic poems engage with specific typographic features and conventions, in a way emphasizing the mobility of moveable type. Such poems include the previous examples used in this chapter. A glance at the earlier visual poems in derek beaulieu’s book, *chains* (2008), reveals clear typographic control through limits on the size and number of letters used, large empty margins, and an overall repetitious or reflective pattern that seems to dictate their form, similar to Henderson’s “mandala” poem (Figure 35, pg. 245, above). These formal constraints reveal a creative engagement with the affordances of typography within bibliographic restrictions that motivates and sustains the perceptual and conceptual complexity within these poems. Poems, like the
explosion of Figure 34, come and seem to break these limits later in beaulieu’s book, transforming the entire page into an active space of dynamic interaction. Such poems in particular, including the following one (Figure 38), prompt improvisational engagements that move from dynamic creation (by the author) to static artifact (as the book) and on to dynamic understandings (by the reader). How complex readings can emerge out of these improvisational responses is the subject of this section.

The dynamic inferences associated with this untitled poem exhibit both fictive change and fictive motion. At first glance, the poem appears as a near-vertical line of “l”s and a perpendicular mass of letters on either side of it. The poem can, however, easily transform into a scene of dynamic interaction through the mental reanimation of the letterforms and their relational qualities. The repetition of the “l”s vertically creates a

Figure 38: untitled poem by derek beaulieu (2008, 84).

The dynamic inferences associated with this untitled poem exhibit both fictive change and fictive motion. At first glance, the poem appears as a near-vertical line of “l”s and a perpendicular mass of letters on either side of it. The poem can, however, easily transform into a scene of dynamic interaction through the mental reanimation of the letterforms and their relational qualities. The repetition of the “l”s vertically creates a
slightly fragmented visual barrier that replicates the example of fictive change—the broken line—mentioned above, and that bifurcates the page into two distinct spaces. A series of dots that run down the right side transfers to the left at the point when a series of “j”s breaches the divide; this prompts an instance of fictive motion, with the dots construed as one or just a few dots moving down the page over time. Because the line of “l”s buckles in the middle, the poem also prompts the inference of force dynamics, with the “j”s, through fictive motion, pushing upwards and through the line, pushing or drawing the dots through in the direction of force. This point of rupture couples the cases of fictive motion and fictive change, constructing an interactive scene on the page-stage through embodied simulation.

The circular form of the “j”s on the right has an “x” in the middle that suggests a hub around which they spin. The “j”s, whose dots point into the center of the wheel, fictively spin and fling through the barrier, inverting their orientations as they enter the new space. Then they rotate in the other direction, dots out, without a notable axis, and with a growing number of new forms of “r”s burgeoning out around them. Dots also fall below. Notably, the forms of the “j”s mimic through inversion the “r”s. Perhaps this indicates a transformation, a fictive change, of the “j”s in moving across the barrier, rather than simply the presence of a different letter on that side. The dots represent the part of the “j” that keeps it from turning into an “r,” and their removal supports the lettristic mimicry and sense of transformation.

The poem, as I have described it, focuses on the breaking of a barrier and the transformation of the “j”s into “r”s. In light of this, we might conceive of the liminal symbols caught in the breach—the few “a”s, a “b,” and the number “46”—as the broken
and bent bodies of “j”s sacrificed in the rupturing of the barrier, or as other letters that tried to cross and failed. One can speculate further here, but any “reading” ought to examine the affordances and fictive simulations that connect these forms and which motivate interpretations. However, a second facet of the literate reader’s cognitive ecology supports the leap from form (which I have already shown to be dynamic and meaningful) to more elaborate, poetic understandings.

Letters, not just abstract forms, make up these poems, which places these works into a typographic, bibliographic, literary, and visual history—domains pervaded by the conduit fallacy. Since cultural and social conventions and expressions inform embodied, felt experiences, they affect interpretative processes prompted by these works. Formal inferences will vary between readers, based on differences in experiences and background knowledge, including language type (Bergen 2012). Through this situating of embodied cognition, the previous spatial reading now extends into a poetic reading of the grapheme, of the “inarticulate mark” (beaulieu 2006a, 80), and the specific visible language that informs it. By elaborating on readerly expectations of common typographic forms, a possible interpretation of the poem could be that the wheel of machinic language breaks through a perceptual barrier to birth new forms that are free from mechanization.

102 Other interpretations of this poem surely exist, such as of the form bursting forth like a fungus rupturing the bark of a tree or like a plant growing out of an embankment. Such readings draw largely on the same fictive changes and motions discussed above but add another layer of inferences based on these general forms and processes that are mapped on to the poem through shared schematic, diagrammatic or even pictographic features reflected in these other experiential frames. My reading lays the groundwork for these other elaborations.
and which appropriate the movability of moveable type. Alternatively, machinic language breaks down in engaging a new experiential space that refuses it as it is and re-animates it in alternate, recycled forms (after all, these are new uses of old letters). In either sense, the deconstructed containment of language gives rise to creativity by trespassing into new arenas and responding to them, de-mechanizing or refusing expected linguistic representation. Combining fictive dynamics of forms with literate experiences invokes an understanding of the poem as a diagram of a theory of language, in which users break beyond the confines of the conduit metaphor to revel in embodied forces and experiences at work within representative modes and the medium.

Furthermore, through its reliance upon recognizable letters, beaulieu’s poem remains connected to the frame of literary history, in terms of both production and reception, especially regarding sound patterns such as rhythm, intonation, rhyme. The repetition of letters creates a visual sense of a percussive rhythm, especially through the fictively moving line of “j”s (which simulation voices rhythmically). Similarly, the growing, cycling motion of the “r”s might be simulated as a growing vibrato or growl. And, finally, scansion conventions fall prey to the transition point, labeling it with a quatrain’s s rhyme scheme: aaab). Of course, the repetition of letters also fulfills, in this case, the convention of consonance. Yet with these trappings of poetic discourse, this poem refuses symbolic communication, forcing a poetic sensibility onto the raw materials of visible language without determining what that sensibility might say. Nonetheless, the materials of the poem suggest a dramatic interaction between the machinic qualities of letterforms as they move through different spaces. From the perspective of an embodied reading, it focuses this energy on the reanimation and alteration of letters, thereby
revitalizing the poetic eye and its graphemic extensions prior to articulation, injecting the
dynamicity of the body into typographic space, opening up new perceptions of writing.
The poem gestures through postlinguistic language toward a poetic, transformative
future, offering, in a sense, a poetic manifesto to transform linguistic usage. By
reconstructing typographic codes while keeping the letters recognizable and largely
unaltered, beaulieu’s poem prompts an improvisational reading, fostering a sense of a
creative, speculative future expansion anchored in and extending from the present.

5.3.2 Mancini’s Sculpted Letters

Donato Mancini’s poems, in his book Æthel (2007), also elicit improvisational readings.
In contrast to beaulieu’s hard, machinic Lettraset poems which compose new forms out
of old, overlooked ones, Mancini’s poems, such as “The Jazzercise Dance of Hope”
(Figure 39), decompose and recompose the letters themselves through digital
manipulation, leaving glimpses of their former selves. Nonetheless, Mancini’s works also
elicit fictive motion and fictive change. While we cannot trace exact letters in space, the
interconnected, recognizable aspects of decomposed letters (such as calligraphic stems,
loops, and dots) and the overall twisted form lend it an organicism in two ways. First, the
reader likely infers, through simulation, the authorial hand that carves up letters (rather
than places them, like beaulieu) to construct the poem, exemplifying fictive change (as
was shown in Figure 36, pg. 248). The reader also reanimates the represented forms by
scanning them, interpreting them as fictive change or motion. Furthermore, this poem,
located on the right-hand page, faces its title from across the spine of the book,
prompting the reader to scan across the fold in order to focus on it. This break between
title and figure adds to inferences about its fictive activeness: in a sense, the poem becomes dislocated, quite literally, from its title and is dancing across and off the page.

Figure 39: “The Jazzercize Dance of Hope” by Donato Mancini (2007, n.p.).

The title’s location and content also adds to the poem’s interpretation by directing inferences about the poem towards the specific movements and roles of dance. As Mancini notes, his titles exploit experiential links and categories which “[open] a set of associative paths that determine multiple potential readings. ‘Free’, maybe, but finite” (2009, 29). A title does not delimit a specific reading, but rather introduces a complicating, constructional variable that lends directionality to improvisational interpretative processes.
The title encourages at least two possible routes for mental simulation that derive from inferences about different perspectives on the poem and their types of associated fictivity. The first option sees this representation as a lone (I think feminine) figure moving upright through space as an energetic jazzercize dancer, her arm outstretched above the dot of her head and her hips jutting to the right. From this perspective, the Frankensteined letters become the energetic movements of the woman traversing the page-stage. The letter-figure fosters the reconceptualization of language into a linguistically nonsensical yet quasi-representational, imagistic form that reflects the health and creativity of “jazzercize.” Through the openness and playfulness of an almost signifying act, it reveals the hopefulness behind expressivity as well. The fictive motion attributed to the form, motivated from experiential, embodied knowledge of dance coupled with the scanning of the undulating shapes, prompts this sense of health, creativity, and hope, promoting a view of the nonsensical as a beneficial and dynamic state for language.

However, while maintaining the perceptual and conceptual parameters of the exercise-dance routine, we might also construe the poem as a diagram of the foot patterns or body movements for the exercises (the exercise sheet for the jazzercise routine or dance itself), which changes the viewpoint to viewing the page-stage from above. In this case, the shifting forms direct and pattern the future actions of a dancer as she swirls across the dance-floor. The poem, from this aerial perspective, prompts a sense of fictive motion, since we can conceive of it as a sequential enactment by a single figure over time. Furthermore, a certain degree of consistent looping within the poem visualizes the rhythmic patterning of the dance/exercise that the body enacts on the page-stage. At the
same time, the poem prompts fictive change, as the letterforms posit a fictive state of (altered) being. This still carries the hallmarks of the previous reading—health, creativity, hope—but revokes its fictive performativity through the futurity presented by the frame of the prescriptive exercise diagram (perhaps this is the very definition of hope for a future performance). In this reading, the poem becomes a manifesto for a free, energized typography, in a sense calling for a revolutionary, lettristic dance rather than allowing it on the page, diagramming a hoped for future state for type and creative action through a static present.

In both of these readings, the readerly activation of the forms as a dynamic performance or diagram becomes particularly meaningful through the directions of the title. While the form certainly suggests dance-like and energetic qualities, the title specifies ways of conceptualizing it and, to a degree, its affective calibre. At the same time, the title can hardly be taken at face value—just like the poem—in particular regarding jazzercise, a hybrid exercise-dance regime often characterized as kitschy and lacking in gracefulness, unlike dance proper. The simultaneous juxtaposition and redundancy of combining “jazzercise” with “dance” prompts an ironic or facetious tone, which undermines any sense of blithe hopefulness. The dynamic mental performance of the representation enacts a sense of hopeful health on the page as we read, but the title both affirms and denies it. This duplicity, conferred as well through the conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives upon the poem itself (present/future, horizontal/aerial)—and reminiscent of the classic examples of perceptual illusion like Jastrow’s duck-rabbit discussed in Chapter 2 (Figure 6, pg. 62)—adds a self-reflexive and self-effacing quality, and so emphasizes the representational fluidity within modalities. While the poem might
seem to envision a typographic revolution through the sculpted, dancing letters, and expressing vitality outside of the constraints of the conduit metaphor, its conflicting compositional qualities, especially prompted by the directive framing of the title, also suggest a naiveté to the hope of typographic rebirth.

Another poem by Donato Mancini, “Literature Prefers Metaphor” (Figure 40), also combines conflicting lettristic qualities and layers to prompt conceptual depth. Two formal features suggest metaphoricity, even without the title, which makes the title less directive and more ekphrastic than the previous example. At first glance, the transformed black letterforms prompt similar inferences of fictive change as in his previous poem. However, within this mixed form, new letter-like elements, especially tails and serifs, glint out of the internal white space as well. The co-presence of black and white letterforms constructs a bi-stable relationship between two incompatible elements, while also modeling literary notions of duplicity, duplication, and depth often associated with figurative language. Here, the looping qualities of the form mean that we likely cycle around the bends, folds, overlaps, and junctures of the poem to scan for a beginning or an end and for a point of recognition to offer coherence or intelligibility to these involute forms. Instead, we remain caught in a perceptual tension between recognition and bafflement. Metaphorically speaking, this poem holds us in a state of excitation between a tradition of expressivity and its manipulative deconstruction.
This poem actively and interminably cycles and transforms perceptions of language to visualize literary and figurative productivity, which includes adding layers that build what appears to be a three dimensional object that can stand on its own. As the poem’s title (somewhat facetiously) suggests, the preference for metaphor—for interpretive layers, difficulties, and transformations—drives literary creativity and production. Such features leads psycholinguist Rolf Zwaan (1996) to characterize “literary” texts as “inconsiderate,” since they require much more cognitive work to parse and interpret. This poem enacts this inconsiderateness through the lack of words and the perception of fictive motion and fictive change. Nonetheless, through improvisational engagements with recomposed typographic forms, it offers an interpretive structure that moves from linguistic bafflement to a sense of creative energy that affirms its ekphrastic title. Here, as in many other visual poems in this chapter, the form of the conduit is multiplied and energized, to reveal, in this case, the productive excitations and transformations inherent to literary experience or, as it is sometimes referred to in cognitive poetics, texture: the inconsiderate work is also a beautiful and challenging text.
5.3.3 Judith Copithorne’s i line

The influential, long-active visual poet, Judith Copithorne (see Barwin and Copithorne (2013) and beaulieu (2012) for overviews), also develops a poem that fixates on recognizable letters, much like beaulieu’s, but in order to explore perception and subjectivity through a more gestural quality, somewhat like Mancini’s style. In “The Letter i” (Figure 41), Copithorne employs the repetition of but one typographically identical letter: ‘i.’ Yet, from this extreme constraint emerges complex ideas.

![Figure 41: “The Letter i” by Judith Copithorne (2014, n.p.).](image)

The minimalistic, ekphrastic title of Copithorne’s poem foregrounds the ‘i’ as pure letter, perhaps to defamiliarize it from its common use as a personal pronoun (a distancing effect further emphasized by rendering it lowercase), or perhaps to metonymically cue all of its possible usages, as lone letter or as a vowel. The understated, descriptive title leaves the poem largely open for interpretation.

---

103 See Barwin and Copithorne (2013) and beaulieu (2012) for recent interviews and overviews of Copithorne’s ongoing projects and approaches.
The poem itself might be considered an archetype for fictive motion, by presenting a long series of the letters slipping and sliding around the page as a *fictive motion blend*. At first glance, this may simply be a pun on the notion of the “wandering eye,” in this case diagramming the wanderings and inviting the reader to trace the lines. The poem also seems to reflect the images produced from eye-tracking studies of reading, which show how the eye jumps around in the process of comprehending and interpreting verbal prompts.

Visually following the different paths presents an immediate challenge, since the readily recognizable letters run lines around and over each other, and with beginnings and endings occurring at various intervals. The poem offers a puzzle to the reader even before trying to address what it might mean: where to begin? If one starts at the top left corner, the line quickly runs down and breaks apart in the middle of the page. The same goes for many other lines. Attempting to follow the lines of letters leads quickly to confusion, yet with a distinct sense of movement: bounces, leaps, slides. What to make of this chaotic scene?

In animating this dramatic sight, readers might bring back into play the frame of the letter itself, from the title and from the poem, and particularly its pronominal usage, which develops a *pronominal blend*. As the dominant assertion of a personal, subjective viewpoint, the *i* brings up the abstract frames of self and identity. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson observe that the idea of a subject and a Self develops from a folk theory of essences, “according to which every object has an essence that makes it the kind of thing it is and that that is the causal source of its nature” (1999, 282). This essentialist bias is found in blending theory as well, through the vital relation of identity which facilitates
mappings and projections between mental spaces. For people, this notion of essence or identity develops the sense of a singular bodily subject in conjunction with a conscious Self. Lakoff and Johnson document several metaphors employed for understanding the nature of the subject-Self blend. They distinguish between the two features of identity by noting that the subject is

the experiencing consciousness and the locus of reason, will, and judgement, which, by its nature, exists only in the present. . . . The Self is that part of the person that is not picked out by the subject. This includes the body, social roles, past states, and actions in the world. There can be more than one Self. And each Self is conceptualized metaphorically as either a person, an object, or a location. (269, emphasis in original)

Lakoff and Johnson argue that the subject and Self become a basic and neutral concept, which further augment metaphors of self to conceptualize the self in different moments in the ever-changing present. I will continue to use the language of blending to describe their metaphors, as I think it better reflects the contingent and fluid qualities of these mappings. 104

104 In the cognitive linguistic and psycholinguistic literature there continues to be two dominant models for describing the unconscious processes underlying meaning: conceptual integration theory (following Fauconnier and Turner (2002)) and conceptual metaphor theory (following Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999)). The major figures in these two models see them as largely compatible, but continue to espouse their different sides. I employ the blending model, as I see it better reflecting the dynamic processes of mental simulation and meaning construction, which in turn lends itself better to literary analysis. As I also show through my analysis of the
Conceptualizing the Self as a person, object, or location (or, arguably, any combination thereof), construes the Self’s roles and functions in substantially different ways. For instance, seeing one’s Self as an object lends itself to concepts of self-control, bodily control, and self-motivation (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 270-72). It can also help conceptualize different attentional experiences, like losing yourself in an activity (273) or being beside yourself with emotion. Similarly, conceptualizing a self-subject composite helps develop ideas of the split-self, reflected in a phrase like “I wasn’t myself today,” or when combined with locational and temporal qualities, to register transformations of the self from being one way to being another (see Emmott 2002). Thus, the Self is an incredibly dynamic and flexible conceptual frame that at the same time relies upon the essentialist notion of location or containment identified with a single bodily subject that grounds all of these construals in embodied experiences.

Copithorne’s visual poem arguably diagrams several construals of self-knowledge. For instance, the fictive motion paths may simply document the movements of an individual subject in her life. Since there are breaks within the leaping lines, perhaps this person is losing control of her Self, either in an attempt to attain something or perhaps to flee something. The diagrammatic qualities also suggest a temporal quality to the movements. Furthermore, perhaps the poem traces the transformation of the Self over conduit metaphor in the previous chapter, and through the analysis of Copithorne’s poem here, conceptual metaphors work easily within the blending framework.
time, which develops a sense of unease with former states and produces attempts to recreate oneself through starting over again. The split and translocated sense of Self then also correlates the seemingly frenetic movements of the letter with an anxious searching for one’s Self, for a lost or desired state of being. The range of possible interpretations that develop from such simple visual and verbal cues are broad (perhaps of adventure narratives or nightclub romances), but remain contingent on the traces left by a specific subject in space which in turn develops a sense of a coherent identity or Self through the mental simulations of the reader-viewer.

The **up-down** image schematic elements of the lines also add possible inferences in relation to the action in terms of a basal space or state. The ascendency and return from this state may prompt other domains in which personal movement is schematized, such as in the case of social hierarchies. The poem, therefore, may suggest the unrecognized work of someone attempting to climb the social ladder but failing or perhaps hitting a glass ceiling and collapsing from the imposed limitations. The second option, however, seems less likely, since the movements tend to be smooth curves, which suggest that if there are limitations imposed on the actions of the subject, they are self-imposed.

As a subject in motion, nonetheless, the horizontal and vertical movements draw up a range of subjective and intersubjective frames like community, productivity, and so forth. Such frames add gendered, classed, or racialized inferences to the fictive motion, since the assumption is that the embodied subject’s contexts and experiences impact the expressions and achievements of the Self. For instance, Copithorne uses a lowercase “i” rather than an upper-case “I,” which transforms its typical usage as a personal pronoun.
and reconstrues it. This alteration may assert an alternative positionality of the Self against the dominant discourse by refusing to speak with the typically male-gendered “I.” Such a move suggests a rebuttal of the male “I” in favour of the diminished space of female expressivity. The active movements of the “i” illustrate an autonomy that moves beyond the constraints of discourse. I think this reading also aligns with a racialized, intersectional perspective, since there are several connections between gendered and racialized discourse frames that the alter-pronoun might prompt. Thus, with the possibility for external or internal motivations and limitations for the Self, there are a variety of ways of interpreting the traced movements of the “i”.

Many other poets have also developed poems that focus on construing a single letter. Perhaps most popularly, bpNichol’s *ABC: an aleph beth* (1971), mentioned previously, develops mandala-like forms through repeated iterations of a single letter around a central axis. More recently, Christian Bök sprinkles visual poetic “fractals” throughout his book *Crystallography* (1994), including “Fractal A” (Figure 42). In this particular poem, the letter A enacts itself through its configurations, which double its representational presence as both individual A’s and as larger A-fractals, as both elemental component and a larger conceptual work. Furthermore, the poem oscillates between pyramidal rigidity and a sense of fictive advancement up the page like an avant-garde battalion that is assaulting linguistic communication itself. This avant-garde advance reflects, to some degree, the misogynistic and war-inflected imagery and rhetoric of the Italian Futurists. In contrast to the open and dynamic movements of Copithorne’s “i,” the masculine qualities of this poem are especially noticeable, such as the rigid, phallic pyramids thrusting upward, which resemble military formations or spaceships in a 1980s
videogame, or perhaps function as a diagram of unimpeded upward mobility. In the context of its host book, these potentially problematic features reflect a deconstructive interaction with scientific discourse through a blending of figurative language and organic chemistry, which perhaps signals the inherent masculinity of scientific discourses, specifically in chemistry as well as in the more widely held belief in scientific progress.

Figure 42: “A-FRACTAL” by Christian Bök (1994, 21).

In this poem, language is refracted rather than transmitted (Bök 2002, 103) to enact a disavowal (or, dare I say, dis-a-vowel) of verbal representation for the sake of an alternative form that recursively builds balanced pyramids of A’s within A’s like a self-replicating, exothermic chemical reaction. As Sonnet L’Abbe notes, “This poem works for me with a kind of mathematic elegance. It achieves a beauty of design, a precision and
simplicity that appeals—as the title asserts—fractally. Like a piece of Baroque music, it is all pleasing proportion and symmetry” (L’Abbé and Sinclair 2012, n.p.). One might say this poem is simultaneously an elaboration, parody, transfiguration, and mediation on A-ness, pleas( ur)ing the reader through form rather than proposition. In contrast to Henderson’s earlier poem (Figure 35, pg. 245), which constructed a mythopoeic rune out of extant letters balanced and mirrored off of each other, here Bök presents a sense of organic, molecular sophistication that energetically advances through language.

As these previous poems show, typographic postlinguistic poems activate a range of sensorimotor simulations and perceptual cues (sometimes including their titles) to promote the development of event structures and frame blends. These multimodal representational strategies construe how letters are conceptualized by actively drawing the reader into an improvisational relation to visual and verbal forms on the page-stage. Arguably, the employment of typographical marks in these postlinguistic visual poems in particular prompt a blend of machinic control and regulation with creative transformation or interruption. Fictive motion and fictive change are especially salient products of simulation that activate these networks of knowledge while injecting dynamics into static forms and spaces.

5.4 Bodily Traces: Asemic Postlinguistic Visual Poetry

Asemic postlinguistic visual poetry overtly foregrounds the creative, expressive hand, such as with illegible handwriting, scrawls, calligraphic marks, hieroglyphs, erasures, or redactions. In this regard, they overlap strongly with areas of the visual arts. This extreme borderblur raises the question, again, of what is especially “poetic” about such works. One
particularly salient response is that, just like with the typographic form of postlinguistic poetry discussed above, the asemic variant of postlinguistic visual poetry relies on literate background knowledge in order to recognize the visual allusion to linguistic expression and to prompt the improvisation of meanings and interpretations. Throughout these poems, hints of visible linguistic expression are glimpsed yet refused in a variety of strategic ways. This anti-representational refusal of propositional meaning redirects readers to embrace a material and embodied expressivity that is often abrogated by the conduit fallacy. These works widen the field (perhaps to the extreme limit) of reading to promote the embrace of a multimodal embodied perspective on meaning. While readers may become dismissive of such works as “not reading,” that is one of the points of such work, especially if they raise with this response questions about what defines literacy and reading.

Asemic works are reminiscent, for instance, of the writing in the famous, enigmatic, and indecipherable 15th century Voynich manuscript (e.g. see Figure 43), which has inspired many contemporary asemic works, including the popular encyclopedia, *Codex Seraphinianus* by Italian artist Luigi Serafini.105 These works,

---

105 The Voynich Manuscript has also inspired other forms of multimodal literature beyond visual poetry. Notably, it features the comic book, *Marvel Adventures: Black Widow and The Avengers* #18, by Paul Tobin and Ig Guara (2010).
Figure 43: An unnumbered page from the 15th century Voynich Manuscript (original in colour). New Haven: Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library MS 408.
especially the Voynich manuscript, have inspired many attempts to break what is perceived as a hidden code but is in fact gibberish (Rugg 2004). Code-breaking attempts inevitably fail and in a sense break the code-breakers instead. To describe the *Codex Seraphinianus* (and arguably by extension other asemic works past and present), Canadian critic Peter Schwenger notes that it is “not-a-writing that becomes the abstract material manifestation of language . . . it simultaneously invites and withstands attempts at interpretation” (2006, 121). One can see another variation of this emphasis on improvised handwriting in Brion Gysin’s experiments with calligraphic poems (inspired by the Chinese and Japanese calligraphic traditions), such as seen in the untitled poem below (Figure 44). The handwritten version of postlinguistic material engagement is especially grounded in simulated inferences, which makes these poems seem more embodied and organic than typographically formed works. For instance, Gregory Betts notes that Judith Copithorne’s handwritten visual poems from the 1970s, “attempt to bring the body into the text by breaking the monotony and standardization of text. Anticipating Derrida’s work on the signature in the 1980s, Copithorne’s visual poetry asserts an authorial presence and authenticity through her cursive hand” (Betts 2010, 167). In Copithorne’s case we can also hear an echo of the feminist call for “écriture féminine,” for the inscription of the gendered body and experiences into text. As Hélène Cixous argues, “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (1976, 875). At the same time, postlinguistic poetry disowns verbal communication, and so this particular form of visual poetry might seem divorced from the motivations of feminist and gender critics (as well as postcolonial critics) to open up a space for marginalized voices. While Judith Copithorne’s “The Letter
“i” reveals how a feminist perspective can be affirmed within the postlinguist sphere, it is certainly constrained as a vehicle for authorial voice. Handwritten postlinguistic visual poems draw on a sense of authorial presence while retracting a clear sense of intersubjective communication. As such, the authorial mark is left open, for better or for worse, to interpretation and improvisation. As I show, this openness to improvisation critiques authorial control while presenting an opportunity for viewer-readers to actively interrogate the material and expressive conditions of textuality.

Unfortunately, I was unable to secure permission in time to include this poem, The poem is composed of hand-drawn calligraphic-like marks that overlap in a repeated pattern. Similar poems can be found in the “Images” section of briongysin.com, including this especially salient example: 
http://briongysin.com/?page_id=1063&pid=17

**Figure 44:** Untitled calligraphic poem by Brion Gysin (2001 [1977], 265).

Several poems discussed in previous chapters might also be considered asemic, or to have asemic qualities, such as the hand-ripped, reversed E in Gustave Morin’s “cul de sac at the edge of finity” (Figure 26, pg. 188) or the hand-drawn folk art of Helen Hajnoczky’s *Magyarázni* project (Figure 33, pg. 224). The following poems add to the discussion of these previous works by showcasing a broader range of asemic techniques, while revealing and analyzing how these material works prompt dynamicity through cognitive improvisation that builds toward meaning.
5.4.1: Steve McCaffery’s Need for Speed

In “Graphetic Study Seven” (Figure 45), Steve McCaffery offers a poetic engagement with writing by tracing the hand in motion, while in motion. The poem presents a series of titled lines. Each line mimics handwriting to a degree, which fictively moves across the page. Upon glancing at the page, the viewer would also notice that the lines grow increasingly bold and agitated. We simulate the actions of the hand that produced such marks and infer a pressure and movement coupled with a lack of legible writing. One might simulate an illiterate or extremely agitated attempt at writing from these marks. It is only after noticing such qualities of the lines that one might connect them to their annotations to build a mental scenario of their creation.

Figure 45: “Graphetic Study Seven” by Steve McCaffery (2002, 361).
The column of speed annotations that correlates with the agitated lines quickly changes the inferences one might make of them. Initial simulations include the assumption of intentionality associated with the practice of writing; by adding the annotations the frame of travel at increasing speed, typically associated with cars, alters the positionality of the creator. Now, we re-simulate the lines as marks produced while driving. Now the intentionality of the creator seems to not be linguistic communication, but to trace the bumpiness of the road. The form of the lines within the frame of written communication might support the graphological conclusion of authorial agitation. However, now the presumed agitation of the writing hand is neutralized by reflecting the bumps in a road’s surface as a car travels over it. In a way, this poem reflects the car writing (what we might call an auto-graphical work) through the passive writer as medium. This neutralization of embodied movement through containment in a car helps reframe the poem as a work that is disinterested in the writing subject, which is in a way objective (and object oriented in its reflection of the car and the road). This disembodied perspective further draws in the frame of scientific discourse through the jargon-like term “study” and through the diagrammatic or table-like quality of presentation. Through disembodied auto-graphia, the poet seeks an objective reflection of speed and its impact on the line, itself only a minimal expression of embodiment as the writer moves his pen linearly across the page like a human seismograph (or perhaps auto-graph). The question now of the line’s relation to writing seems to have been annulled; it is but a trace of inexpressive, constrained movement that has dissolved the author function.

This neutralized construal of written language, leaves the reader to puzzle over what this poem might mean. The annotations and the overall form of the poem prompt
two dominant contemporary discourses of humanity, science and technology, two arenas that have, tellingly, also fascinated the avant-gardes. I would suggest that the poem construes the inexpressive trace as a reflection of neutralizing factors of science and technology that erode the presumed authenticity of embodied expression. The asemic yet auto-graphic line becomes politicized here as a statement about the loss of expression through technologies and the neutralizing effect of objectivist discourses. After all, the annotations would have needed to be written before or after the technologized movement rendered expression null. This poem, therefore, might offer a counter-position to the Italian Futurists, who saw speed as the ultimate source of power and expression. Or it might offer a corrective to McLuhan’s positivist view of technology (as speed) as constructing a global village. In this case, the construction of this village destroys communication, which reflects an anti-cosmopolitan and pessimistic position on the very things McLuhan praised. The emergent simulations of the silenced body in relation to technology and scientific discourse raise concerns rather than instatiate a celebration.

While this poem relies to some degree on linguistic inputs, the postlinguistic lines are crucial to its poetic meaning and require the reader to improvise modes of expression beyond the constraints imposed upon the body.

5.4.2 Klauder’s and Hryciuk’s Crude Gestures

In the following untitled poem by Gerard Klauder (Figure 46), there are very few linguistically salient features; rather, the poem challenges engagement with a particularly harsh, overwritten text. How might we “read” such a thing? One the one hand, it is a work which clearly engages in a meta-textual experience. No words are clearly
distinguishable in the haze of letters and scribbles, except perhaps hints of the words “everywhere,” “out,” and “flow,” but these are difficult to parse from the spreading and overlapping letters that occupy the lower edge of the poem. Yet, these elements prompt simulations of expressive modes like typing on a typewriter (through the Courier font) and certainly an energetic scrawling with ink on paper. There is also a smearing or rubbing out of the ink which dominates the center of the poem. In fact, most distinguishable marks are located on the periphery, some seemingly handwritten and a few typewritten. While distinguishable they remain illegible. This distinction between center and periphery offers a figure-ground relation, but with a figure that is dominated by smudged darkness and a periphery that borders on but never quite reaches legibility.

The contrast between light and dark also draws on metaphorical frameworks around morality, mortality, and so on. Similarly the long lines at the top suggest a censorial presence that is actively redacting the underlying text. When all of these qualities are combined, an emergent structure of moralistic annihilation coupled to expressive forms emerges. This poem, perhaps, presents language as inadequate to represent experience; as such, linguistic representation enacts a “murder of the thing” (Schwenger 2001) through the constraint of typographic and bibliographic norms. The poem charts the edges of expressivity, while maintaining a sense of physical, material engagement with the tools of writing (the typewritten letters), print, and literate expression; thus, the poem refuses to encapsulate any of this in language and relies on alternate forms of expression. Klauder offers a sense of language as a prison-house of identity and meaning (to roughly parrot Jameson), but he also maintains the expressivity of gesture and the pounding of the typewriter’s keys to circumnavigate the determinacy of
words. Here, the prison bars (perhaps reflected in the redaction lines across the top of the poem) are found and blown apart.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 46:** Untitled poem by Gerard J. Klauder (Hryciuk, 2009, 57).

Importantly, this entire reading is based on the simulation of non-linguistic elements. The metaphorical and richly moralistic yet fraught understanding of expression and language comes through only in an enactive framework that draws out the significance of these presumed improvisational bodily actions of creation. This poem
perhaps suggests a deep suspicion of or even anger with the efficacy and authority of language and authorship. Klauder offers a visual refusal to communicate through energetic and synaesthetic connections and tensions between embodied expressivity through gestural traces and glimpses of the abstract frames of morality, writing, and authorship bound up in print media.

Similarly, “clouded sulphur” by Marshall Hryciuk’s (Figure 47) also offers a suspicion of or anger with printed representations while also developing a pictorially mimetic quality. In this case, the emotive emergent structure is prompted through repetitious over-writing, perhaps accomplished with a stamp or a roller. In simulation, the poet has quite literally and repeatedly stamped out the representations on the page, a process indicative of uncontrolled rage or another forceful emotion. In this case, the improvisation is one of a strong affective bodily response that is experienced by the reader as fictive motion and fictive change.

Underneath the dark, obscuring swaths of ink, we catch a glimpse of the edges of what appear to be two photographs, which prompt the frame of photography and the sensation of fictive change. In the original poem (unlike the grey-scale version reproduced here), the photographs also give hints of something red, but recognition of anything within them is thwarted by the overlay of ink. The anger invoked through the simulation of repeated stamping is now directed toward specific photographs. The reader is left to improvise sources or topics of such a vicious response to the printed artifact, such as of an adulterous lover (the red suggests an erotic encounter, perhaps with a lady in red), the death of a loved one (this time the colour represents blood), or the like. With
this, the illegible text reflects an almost pure emotive quality and bodily response, to which readers are invited to ruminate on the cause.

Figure 47: “clouded sulphur” by Marshall Hryciuk (2010, 5). Original in colour, including hints of purple and red underneath the black ink.

Finally, let us return to the title, “clouded sulphur,” which is the name of a very common, yellowish butterfly (*Colias philodice*) in North America. One might infer that the images in the poem that are covered over are of butterflies, or that the poem itself depicts the smashed bodies of them (perhaps at the edge of a puddle, where they often congregate). The blend of a creature and print culture also presents an opportunity to
improvise new interpretations of the poem. Perhaps the stamping is an illustration of anger at an insect that in its larval form can be a pest on food crops, which detracts from the ledgers of industry. Or, perhaps this is not a depiction of the destruction of a common insect, but an ecocritical commentary on the inability of both images and language to represent such a creature in a way that does justice to it. Here, the anger is directed at representation itself. In this way, the poem invokes the common poststructuralist adage about the failure of language and images to represent the Real, in this case even one of the most banal and common of summer pollinators.

5.4.3 David Ellingsen and Michael V. Smith’s Body Poems

In counter-distinction to the constrained yet mobile body in McCaffery’s poem, and to the gestural and forceful traces of Klauder’s and Hryciuk’s works, David Ellingsen and Michael V. Smith’s book, Body of Text (2008), offers a meditation on the expressivity of the uninhibited body itself, such as in the following untitled poem (Figure 48). Ellingsen and Smith’s book collects a series of photographic sessions, at which Smith, clad in a black body-stocking, is photographed by Ellingsen in a wide variety of postures. Of course, exploring letters through the shape of the body has a long history in alphabet books like Bertrall’s ABC. Trim. Alphabet Enchanté, the cover of which I included in my brief history of hybrid media in Chapter 3 (Figure 12, pg. 116). As can be seen in the following example, however, many of the photographs seem to only reflect hints of letterforms (in this case perhaps an h or an m), rather than overt letters. By gesturing toward without producing letters, the poems materialize the book’s title on the page and
pun on how one might typically understand the phrase “body of text” in bibliographic terms as the main source of pseudolinguistic content. At the same time, the body is obscured through the high-contrast lighting and the body stocking, diminishing his individual distinctiveness and rendering his body almost generic. Nonetheless, the body remains recognizable as a body (and while often a seemingly androgynous one, occasionally clearly male due to the bulge of genitalia), and prompts simulations of embodied movement, especially to attempt to comprehend the actions and postures. At the same time, the postures themselves remain illegible in terms of typical “body language,” since they do not present a recognizable gesture like a salute or a wave. Similarly, the positions would make for a very bizarre yoga manual, with this particular example being one of the few that may qualify as a productive pose.

Figure 48: Untitled poem by David Ellingsen and Michael V. Smith (2008, n.p.).

Smith improvised a range of positions, all photographed by Ellingsen. With Ellingsen and Smith’s photo-poem, mental simulation of bodily states, in conjunction with a sense of typographical forms, construct an emergent understanding of language as
bodily potential and of bodily states as inherently expressionistic. The visual poems in this book make an explicit invocation of textuality and literary practice by presenting a literal body of (or for) text, while lacking the possibility of a linguistically-constructed meaning. This is the ultimate invitation to improvisation. As one reviewer noted upon the arrival of the book,


The range of inferential possibilities for these poems is solely anchored by bodily shapes, which align it predominantly with interpretive practices from the visual or theatrical arts. And yet, the book’s publication as one of poetry and text maintains its association with bibliographic culture, which asks that it be considered within that frame. As the same reviewer notes, “Linguistic and cerebral flexibility are always impressive, and the idea of these body positions as language strikes me as just the right kind of thought experiment” (n.p.). These poems prompt a metaphorical (or even literal) relation between the performative space of language and the body by illustrating the theoretical position in gender studies that the body is formed in discourse (through gender performativity) and to a lesser extent discourse reflects the body (Butler 1993). Presenting the body as a constitutive part of literary culture queries the materiality of the page as (quite literally) a mediated, dynamic stage of identity performance. Ellingsen and Smith’s postlinguistic photo-poetry offers another variation on “writing the body” by intervening in two discursive modes (photography and language) that often promote unhealthy and unreal
perspectives on bodies, especially of women. Through these poems, the dominating male gaze is returned to itself in a form of reverse objectification. Simulating these poems potentially invokes a self-reflexive improvisation of identity formation and transformation in a male reader, and similarly affirms a feminist position to language as it might be in the future, no matter the gender of the reader.

5.5 Postlinguistic Borderblurs: Hybridized and Rematerialized Poems

I suggested previously that two forms of postlinguistic visual poetry dominate the scene, the typographical and the asemic. Furthermore, these two types seem to reflect, to a degree, a common juxtaposition between the verbal and the visual arts, through their types of creation, representation, and production. However, there is borderblur even within this crude typology, as one might expect, through the implementation or hybridization of both forms across a range of creations (we saw a hint of this in Klauder’s redacted poem above). A disruption of this dualism was also glimpsed in Mancini’s digitally transformed fonts in which the hand and the machine combined to re-tool language. The following poems hybridize and rematerialize aspects of postlinguistic poeticity by blending typographical and hand-produced qualities within them, while further harnessing the possibilities of technology. These poems, much like the previous ones, open up questions about construal, authorship, and creative transformations. Furthermore, they highlight how visual poetry harnesses background bibliographic and artistic frames through the appropriation of texts, images, and fonts, as is done by other conceptualist approaches (see beaulieu and Betts 2011; Place and Fitterman 2013). All
typographically produced visual poems do this to some extent, since they collage together poems from typefaces designed by others. The following postlinguistic poems foreground this appropriative quality as texts and images become material fodder that emphasize creative manipulations and improvisations that also hybridize and rematerialize the typographic and asemic approaches.

5.5.1 Hybrid Poetry: Gary Barwin Creatures Language

The following postlinguistic poem by Gary Barwin (Figure 49) presents a complex blend of bodies and type. The pictographic drawing of a deer standing in the grass blends seamlessly with two clasped human hands that replace the deer’s head. A solitary W floats overhead. The letter aligns this poem with the typographical form of postlinguistic poem. Similarly, the blended image affiliates the poem with the focus of asemic postlinguistic poems on the artist’s hand, in particular through the overtly drawn quality of the image, which emphasizes the marked surface through cross-hatching and other cues. These cues are simulated as the active hand drawing, fictively constructing the

---

106 Barwin collaged these images together from public domain images found in the ClipArt ETC online archive (http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/) produced by the Florida Center for Instructional Technology (Barwin 2014). The image for the hands comes from a shadow-puppet diagram (which includes that shadow-image), originally published in The World’s Book of Knowledge and Universal Educator (1901). The image of the (male Fallow) deer was originally published in the eighth volume of Ellsworth D. Foster’s The American Educator (1921). The original illustrators of the images are unknown. Barwin has also produced a video in 2012 (http://youtu.be/pdlYfnHnuIkJ) that features many more of these collage poems as illustrative images for his voice-over reading of “Inverting the Deer,” a lyrical poem published in The Procupinity of the Stars (2010).
image, perhaps as a type of fictive change to the blank page. For instance, typographer Adrian Frutiger famously observed that “When I put my pen to a blank sheet, black isn’t added but rather the white sheet is deprived of light” (Art Dictionary 2014, n.p.).

Beyond this sense of the page transformed, the image also prompts simulations relating to the realistic representation of the body of a deer and of clasped hands. These representational cues push beyond the typical focus of asemic texts on abstraction and gestural communication. At the same time, the sense of pictorial referentiality is unsettled through the combination of the fawn’s body with human hands, as well as the blending of the body with the ground through indistinct feet. The combination of body and hands
constructs a visual blend or metaphor that perhaps alludes to the classic mythological image of the centaur. The poem, however, inverts the classical image by reducing people to hands (rather than heads and torsos) and the horse to a (yet un-differentiated) deer, thereby changing the classic figure of beastly nobility into an unspeaking figure of a wild and malleable beastly materiality. The rooting of the feet in the ground further immobilizes this charismatic classical figure. The blending of human/other-than-human creatures prompts the construction of a complex emergent structure that perhaps hints at a mute animality within humanity, or perhaps an odd type of personification.

The hands that replace the deer’s head are also held in a mimetic shape, blending the functions of the head with the hands perhaps to suggest a figuration of the tactile mind or of a tactility at the centre of perception, much like the eco-cognitive framework elaborated on in Chapter 2. The atypical and mimetic configuration of the hands also suggests other frames, such as sign language, clapping, and shadow puppetry. (While the poem does not necessarily delimit this reading, the original image is in fact from a shadow puppet illustration that includes the shadow of a dog’s head behind it). These manual forms of communication add to the frame of verbal communication prompted by the floating ‘W,’ thereby widening the scope of the frame to multimodal communication in general. There are several possible readings of the ambiguity of the hands. Perhaps they are congratulating themselves on their exquisite drawing of the fawn’s body or their casting of the type. Casting, here, can be read as referring either to the hands “throwing” the “W” into air, or to typecasting, which is the process of making type from molten-metal for letterpress printing. The loosely correlated forms of the hands and the “W” imprinted upon the sky also suggest that the hands are playfully casting a shadow,
although what they produce is an unexpected letter rather than the expected shadow-sign of a dog’s head. In a way, this breaks apart frames for simulation by suggesting puppetry while negating the shadow, which prompts the frame of communication while withholding its productive signs. Barwin (2014) notes that a theme of doubling runs through the poem, from the doubled subject, the double hands, and the W (double U) in the sky. The letter further adds to this sense of playful doubling by mimicking and inverting the shorthand for drawing a bird that typically looks like a handwritten M (in a way this is a double inversion, from hand to type, as well as M to W). These double meanings reflect a bi-stability within the prompts and the emergent understandings of the hybrid poem.

The possibility that material and tactile play (with the hands) can produce a living language (the flying W) from the hybrid body suggests a causal event structure as part of the emergent understanding. Here, the unintentional hands release language (or maybe a sound) into the world, perhaps to reflect the inherent communicability of creaturely sensuality and materiality. The hybridization of typographical and hand-drawn modes of postlinguistic representation facilitates this reading. This interpretation suggests that the poem is a salient reflection or enactment of a particularly Canadian version of avant-garde poetics commonly called "Pataphysics [sic]," which has been derived from, and

---

107 "Pataphysics (quotation mark included) is an imaginary science of impossibilities developed originally by Alfred Jarry. It is not supposed to make sense, but has been widely influential in philosophy and experimental literature (Hugill 2012). Christian Bök explores Jarry’s
popularized by, the research of bpNichol and Steve McCaffery as the Toronto Research Group (see McCaffery and Nichol 1992). This distinctly Canadian variety of ”Pataphysics opposes literary “mysticism, treating literature not as a mythopoeic but as a cyborganic phenomenon” (Bök 2002, 81). This cyborganic quality is causally mapped in the poem through the interactions between organisms, environment, and the letter flying in the sky. Barwin’s poem suggests a material, bodily relationality between things in the environment as a locus for linguistic creativity but which also seems to lack intentionality because of the head that has been replaced by manipulating hands. Here, meaning is arrived at as a product of sensual and material play rather than the typically assumed locus of intelligence. This poem could be said, therefore, to also represent the definition of improvisation offered at the beginning of this chapter by showing how an engagement with affordances and connections (even between similarly shaped heads and hands) leads to a complex array of activations and emergent understandings that require the reader to improvise meanings. The poem also interrogates concepts related to knowledge, legacy in detail and notes an important Canadian transformation of this avant-garde poetics: “Canadian ”Pataphysics adds another vestigial apostrophe to its name in order to mark not only the excess silence imposed upon Canadians by a European avant-garde but also the ironic speech proposed by Canadians against a European avant-garde . . . . A parody of parody itself” (83). The work of playfulness and parody within the Canadian tradition makes it distinctive within this wider global tradition. The inclinations of this particular poetics are also strongly correlated to the visual poetic focus on the conduit fallacy and materiality as a type of exploratory, experimental poetics.
language, materiality, and intelligence through the hybrid borderblur between typed and
drawn postlinguistic poetry.

**5.5.2 Eric Zboya Explodes Language**

While hybridity blurs the borders between postlinguistic forms, another form of
postlinguistic poem produced through remediation challenges the definitions further. In
his project *Algorithmic Translations*, Eric Zboya creates poems with some analogous
qualities to beaulieu’s untitled “big bang” poem that helped open this chapter (Figure 34,
pg. 236). Similar to that work, the poem is produced through chance operations that
dissolve many notions of authorship while also pushing the boundaries of how
postlinguistic visual poetry is defined. Zboya’s author statement notes that he “utilizes the
algorithmic computations found within graphic editors to translate and transform an
already existing text into a work of visual art” (2011, n.p.). Zboya inputs a source text and
the algorithm translates the spatial locations of the linguistic elements in the source into a
three-dimensional abstract visual display. Gary Barwin calls this process of moving from
visible language to mathematical code to visual product “Translation 2.0” (Barwin and
Zboya 2013, n.p.). The visual product of the algorithm is unique, since his algorithms
cannot replicate outputs, and so any source text can generate a multitude of visual poetic
translations. For example, “Alphabetica 6” (Figure 50) is an algorithmic translation of
American experimental poet Charles Bernstein’s own typographical postlinguistic visual
poem “Alphabetica” (1996). Bernstein improvised a digital poetic artifact, and Zboya
utilized algorithms as a form of improvisation to rematerialize and even remediate it
digitally and mathematically. Thus, Zboya presents a doubly improvised postlinguistic
visual poem by taking a postlinguistic work as a found poem source for further transformations.

Figure 50: “Alphabetica 6” by Eric Zboya (2011, n.p.).

“Alphabetica 6” is a dynamic abstract image that seems to explode on the page as a product of mental simulation in perception. While a clean and intricate figure, the poem also has a sense of craftedness, as though it was composed with India ink or watercolour paints. Its digital composition is only given away by the occasional abrupt edge or
pixilation. As such, the poem straddles the line between mechanical and organic production, between machinic purity and manual idiosyncrasy. At the same time, the dramatic explosion calls up a range of frames, such as of cosmic or military events. The title seems to have a descriptive function, and suggests another crucial frame for interpretation, the alphabet, which sets up a metaphorical relation between the explosive qualities and language. Much like beaulieu’s poem above, this explosive quality likely maps onto language as a creative force and adds, by association, an author function. Now the creative mechanism of the algorithm is tied to the linguistic inclinations of an author even while inhabiting an abstract, postlinguistic space. Perhaps the poem reflects the origin of ideas and creativity in the author’s mind, the explosive power of poetic precision (which would appeal to the Italian Futurists, were they still alive). Nonetheless, the title and the poem blend into an emergent understanding of a beautiful dynamism in language. Gary Barwin observes that

these marks aren’t the creative writhing of an actual winged creature, but instead, a constructed text. From the inky heart of the image to its delicate translucent fluttering, its calligraphic brushing, Zboya explores the poetry of the made mark.

... Language writes its own Rorschach test. (Barwin and Zboya 2013, n.p.)

The algorithmic background knowledge that I have discussed, which accompanies “Alphabetica 6,” helps to further our understanding of textual creativity. Zboya’s approach shows how a variety of digital and mathematical approaches treat language as
pure code, and remediate and reduce its linguistic qualities into pure dynamic visual form.

Through the increasing functionality of digital tools for constructing alternate realities for text and image, visual poets will continue to explore the horizons of the publishable. This digital exploration includes Donato Mancini’s transformed fonts and Zboya’s algorithms, which produce static images displayed in a variety of ways (both poets have published their works in multiple forms—digitally, books, and as silk-screens and prints in art galleries). These digital tools also facilitate the production of animations with increasing ease. For example, Helen Hajnoczky’s short poem video, “earknowseye: a poem for a. rawlings” (2014), briefly presents Canadian poet a. rawlings’ name as a sequentially constructed jumble of orange letters on a grey background, with the final poem resembling beaulieu’s Letraset poems. Other artists push further into the processes necessary for producing such works by programming their own text production and manipulation software. For instance, artist-progamer Jason Lewis, who runs obx: laboratory for experimental media at Concordia University, has developed several resources that incorporate creative user dynamics into custom-built design programs to facilitate the strategic and user-dependent transformations of text. For instance, by designing the NextText framework and programs like Mr. Softie (http://www.mrsoftie.net/), with former computation arts student Bruno Nadeau, these computer artists explore “how qualities unique to media presented via computing machinery can be articulated—both conceptually and technically—in support of new techniques for incorporating meaning into the presentation of texts” (27). Interestingly, many of the resultant works of static and animated texts qualify as postlinguistic, which
might not be an accident. Lewis and Nadeau argue that digital approaches have not yet broken out of the “print bias” inherited from the long history of publishing with moveable type and its resultant bibliographic codes and frames. Digital experimentation, through algorithms, animations, and program development are all ways in which visual poets are currently exploring the horizons of the (digitally) publishable. As part of this future-focused approach to affordances and possibilities of type, the postlinguistic impulse has found a helpful accomplice in digital technologies for promoting a future textuality.

While digital advancements in textual publishing and production will continue to transform the state of visual poetry, other poets, like derek beaulieu, explore less high-tech approaches by deconstructing the assumptions behind the “print bias.” Thus, either digitally or analogically, both approaches work towards unearthing the inherent potentialities of communication. For instance, beaulieu takes literally the title and premise of the 1884 satirical science-fiction novella by Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions*, which is set in a two-dimensional world oblivious of three-dimensionality. beaulieu painstakingly traces out connections between the letters of the original text (e.g. see Figure 51), transforming the linguistic representation into a two-dimensional graph that flattens out the language into a more adroit rendition of the original premise: represent a world populated by polygons. The creative process beaulieu used was simple: as he states,

I began by photocopying each page .... I then identified each unique letter on the 1" line of each page, and traced a line—using a light-table, ink and a ruler—from the first occurrence of each letter
on the 1st line through the 1st appearance of each of those same letters on each subsequent line. (qtd in Perloff 2007, 107)

Through this simple system, an alternate reality is created, sketching traces of lettristic action across the page and turning the page into the two dimensional state it describes. Of course, this translated text would change with every new edition of Abbott’s book, which itself reflects the ongoing life of books in multiple dimensions. Furthermore, the concept of rematerialization remains the same in beaulieu’s work as in Abbot’s source text, but beaulieu turns this conceptual structure back onto the source text to, in a sense, re-satirize and nullify itself. As Christian Bök notes, beaulieu

literalized this dimensional perspective within his own rereading of the narrative, thus reducing the shapely letters on the page to nothing more than direct, lineal traces. Each line henceforth represents a kind of alphabetic trajectory, plotting a set of lingual vectors, all of which transect the plane of the textual surface itself. (2007, n.p.)

beaulieu captures the essence of narrative by showing a simultaneous diagonal progression of many lines that transcend the hegemony of the horizontal, sequentially written line.
In a review of *Flatland*, Gregory Betts notes that “Concrete and visual poetry has thoroughly deconstructed the icon, but here is a book that deconstructs the hegemony of the poetic line. [b]eaulieu explodes the mundane tyranny of striped poetry for the universal openness of constellated poetry” (2008, n.p.). Furthermore, Bök notes that “[n]arrative now finds itself distilled to an array of diagrammatical crisscrossings that
almost depict the polygonal traceries of the flattened, fictional characters described in the novella” (n.p.). Thus, beaulieu visualizes the satirical work of Abbott’s original novel, which pushed against the normative constraints of Victorian society, by himself satirizing the normative prosaic line as a simple movement of letters in space. Betts suggests that “[b]eaulieu’s unreadable book synthesizes Abbott’s satirical use of space with Mallarmé’s idealistic rupture of space. It embodies its own romance of the crisis of form” (2008, n.p.). This crisis of form is a crisis of the conduit fallacy, in which form reduces linguistic meaning to an endless tracing of materiality. At the same time, this formal innovation is produced out of Abbot’s narrative conceit. In a way, concept begets form begets a visualization of alternative reading and viewing practices.

These texts, which are further removed from notions of textuality than many of the earlier poems, nonetheless align with the discussion of bibliographically- and eco-cognitively-grounded improvisation. Improvisational creation occurs in developing an unexpected relation to textuality through a seemingly de-authorized process of creation or the digital transformation of its representational spaces. The conceptualist framework, once produced out of response to a text, produces the unexpected and novel engagement with it. Similarly, responses to such works typically involve improvising interpretations of the conceptual ground in relation to the product, much like how one might assess the novelty and expression of a jazz performance. Furthermore, the visual poem mimics the constructional concept and elements of verbally constructed meaning in the original text, which aligns this form of postlinguistic poem with the mimetic qualities associated with clean visual poetry. At the same time, these poems differ subtly from the traditional clean definition of overt visual mimicry of verbal content within one space by reimagining (and
re-image-ing) the linguistic content in the process of rematerialization. For instance, beaulieu’s *Flatland* project seems to illustrate the conceptual framework of the original, while also distilling the experience of narrative as both simultaneity and sequentiality through the traces of prosaic transformation. Thus, the poem enacts a synthesis of perception and conception while being removed from verbal cues.

Eric Zboya’s “Alphabetica 7” and beaulieu’s book length tracing, *Flatland*, inhabit the borderblurs between manual and mechanical, analog and digital, presentation and representation, between visual art and poetry. These poems challenge notions of poetic meaning, while anchoring dynamic processes of improvisation. Such works challenge readers in unfamiliar ways, and may cause some to question the merits and poeticity of these poems. Likely readers of these works are those connected to the contemporary avant garde and conceptualist schools of poetry and visual art and will be inclined to linger and contemplate the twists and turns, the transformations and demarcations. Nonetheless, those less familiar with these forms may struggle with or even dismiss them. As I argued in Chapter 3, to ignore these works is to ignore the challenges they raise to received notions of poetry, language, mediation, materiality, and meaning. For instance, the poems in this chapter showcase especially how mental simulation of abstract dynamism, in conjunction with brief titles and associated frames, can produce a range of multimodal blends with rich poetic resonances that remain anchored in these basal prompts. It would seem, even as improvisational and mediational processes continue to inform the production of visual poems, readerly improvisation brings them into a comprehensible relation to embodied experience. As multimodal anchors, these poems present perceptual cues that open up unexpected frames of relation which constrain
improvisational processes, but which cognitive processes return to meaning through the
dynamic processes of anchoring and improvisation. To return to a notion described by
derek beaulieu, by articulating how different features and modal prompts anchor
simulated phenomena and blends, this model reveals the processes by which “momentary
eruptions of non-meaning . . . are then co-opted back into representation” (2006, 84), or,
as I would put it, meaningful emergent understandings.

Such algorithmic and procedural approaches to poetry production are common in
the conceptual poetry practices that trace back to the European avant-garde. These
practices continued in the Oulipo movement in France and the Fluxus and conceptualist
movements in North America, in particular John Cage’s work with chance operations
and Burroughs and Gysin’s cut-up method of textual production. Many visual poets are
also conceptual poets and vice versa. These works intersect through their shared interest
in language as material, and in processes of defamiliarizing, rematerializing,
appropriating, and transforming language. Zboya’s work shows how conceptual poetry
(such as the concept of language as code) and visual poetry intersect through the
algorithmic manipulation of code systems, and beaulieu’s emphasizes the spatial
architecture of the page.

Even though their connection to linguistic and visual expression is a step further
removed from bibliographic culture than the previous typed, asemic, or hybrid poems,
these rematerialized poems still align with notions of postlinguistic visual poetry because
they confront and put pressure on issues of representation, referentiality, and mediation,
in particular by emphasizing the formal composition of visible language on the page and
by overriding or defamiliarizing aspects of its linguistic connections. Such works push the
meaningfulness of form to its limit and seem to render language empty, thereby completely turning inside out the conduit fallacy. At the same time, they also put pressure on definitions of visual poetry as well.

5.5.3 Visual Poetry and Improvisation Revisited

As my analysis of postlinguistic visual poems indicates, such poems present a decisive challenge to critical models that begin with a traditional linguistic and propositional view of meaning. A dynamic, embodied approach, on the other hand, facilitates articulations of how forms and their connections to bibliographic elements offer perceptual cues for improvisation that prompt poetic complexity and depth from apparent visual and verbal nonsense. A visual poetic work, as Christian Bök notes,

> does not celebrate a functional technology so much as satirize the linguistic dysfunction of the object itself, its potential to be deployed in any way imaginable, despite the standard function for which it has been normally designed. (2002, 85)

Focusing on improvisation illustrates the creativity that cycles around such works and their interrogation of visible language in its typographical, hand-written, and other forms of production and publication in order to embellish on the poetic ramifications of such non-standard uses. For instance, to return to some earlier poems, derek beaulieu composes with lettraset with its mechanically crafted and ever recognizable letters; they are poems that riff off of typographic and bibliographic affordances to reconstruct perceptions of language, which range from cyclic confines to transformative ruptures. beaulieu’s poems prompt reorientations and reconceptualizations of extant linguistic artifacts that injects novelty and fictivity into the typographies of daily life. On the other
hand, Donato Mancini’s “Frankensteined” poems actively decompose and reconstruct letters themselves by dissecting affordances to compose alternative ones while maintaining vestiges of their former lettristic selves. His poems prompt a strong sense of fictive motion as we scan for points of recognition, with the fictive change glimmering out only once we notice the facets of transformed letters within. Similarly, asemic and remediated forms of postlinguistic visual poetry gesture to the embodied and technological motivations and constraints on communication. These approaches employ illegibility, diagrammaticity, algorithmic flexibility, and so on, to reorient the reader to facets of expression, materiality, authorship, and mediation.

At the same time, the seemingly open field of improvisation presented by postlinguistic poems can be coupled to revelatory titles, which adds another variable to interpretative processes, as they present the only point of authorial assertion in response to the unexpected artifact. These titles act as an expression or record of readerly improvisation in response to the poems, which then guide subsequent viewer’s interactions. The titles throughout this chapter present surprising congruencies with the postlinguistic poems, confirming the meaningfulness of the oft-ignored lettristic and gestural forms that these poems make salient through their recombination or annihilation.

Many visual poems, especially postlinguistic varieties, might be said to act like speculative fictions for language; they revel in undercutting any sense of stability that written language affords by showcasing novel interactions with type, writing, lines, schemas, and page-space that contrast the static containers of the conduit metaphor with the dynamicity of improvisational, eco-cognitive creativity and response. As Catherine
Bayard notes, such poetic works “charge material with possibilities of meaning” (Bayard 1989, 172), or even more accurately, they harness and explore the meanings of textual materiality and digitization. Visual poets engage in improvisational methods informed by the affordances of visual-verbal culture and its means of production while also seeking to disrupt the readerly expectation of authorial intention. Here, the intention is expressed through improvisation that is materially exhibited and mediated and which renders language, authors, and media strange. Readers respond to such artifacts through mental simulation to improvise postlinguistic nonsense and bibliographic backgrounds into meanings. The material creativity on both sides of the artifact shifts understandings of meaning away from linguistic determinacy and towards sensations, patterns, and fictive projections grounded in organismic experiences of the world. This is true for all of the visual poems discussed in this dissertation. Furthermore, this sensuousness surrounding multimodal poetic anchors reflects nicely the epigraph by avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas that began this chapter in which he defines improvisation as the cultivation of a state of mind focused on the senses. The multimodal, embodied approach employed here interweaves perception and conception to help unpack the material and conceptual affordances and proliferations these poems and their poets revel in. This approach addresses how the static forms of visual poems prompt contemplation, critical depth, and multiplication of meaning through improvisational cognitive processes, which in turn reveals the transgressive and transformative poetic understandings of language they prompt in the reader.

The inculcation of the reader’s creative responses in poems that reconfigure language and literature also makes them into what Martin Puchner (2006) calls “art
manifestoes,” which actively engage with performativity and representation to assert positions of creativity. In visual poems, vestiges of the conduit remain, but with kinks, holes, and eddies disrupting and energizing expressivity through a tactile engagement with, and reanimation of, the materials, forms and modes of communication. The eco-cognitive approach exposes the poetic and dynamic richness of these poems by illustrating the creative uses of visual and linguistic modes, thereby helping us feel our way out of the postlinguistic, lettristic dark.108

While asserting that an improvisational logic or inclination informs both the creation and reception of visual poetic works, I do not mean to imply that all improvisational developments and outcomes are the same, nor that there do not also remain stable representational qualities. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the marks of the poems trace a variety of constructional processes, all of which inform poetic meanings, both through modal and cross-modal cues. At the same time, there are consistent parameters on cognitive processes that constrain and bias them. These processes also provide, as Mark Turner says of blending theory, “a mechanism of creativity” (1999). Such mechanisms present a methodology for unpacking how meaning emerges from both the legible and the illegible and incomprehensible text.

108 I may be speaking here as much of logocentric criticism as of the poetic artifacts; both present a (very different form of) need for multimodal engagement in order to widen the discourse.
Improvisation is necessary for the creation of novelty in literature and experience. All creative acts include an improvisational aspect, as creators engage the affordances of and possible connections between various communicative possibilities, be they modal, formal, generic, or medial. Creativity requires improvisation through embodied constraints to prompt new construals of experience and creative thinking in others. The tension between improvisation and convention is inherent to intersubjectivity and communication. Of course, it is impossible to determine exactly how representational and formal qualities of a given intersubjective artifact (such as a visual poem) will impact the understandings of readers or viewers. Examining visual poems as multimodal material anchors for readerly improvisation nonetheless allows for the assertion of a shared common ground based on the compositional features and likely frames of knowledge that the poems activate, thereby presenting a method that predicts readings and responses that can also be empirically investigated (such as the reader-response and eye-tracking research of Gibbons (2012) and Gross (1997)). Tracing connections through cognitive ecological networks allows for clarity surrounding how such multimodal works motivate and constrain specific meaning-making improvisations, even for texts that explicitly challenge the intersubjective assumptions of communication and the conduit fallacy.
Chapter 6
Cognitive Futures and Borderblur: A Conclusion

th revolushuns nevr ovr
– bill bissett

6.1 Introduction

We have at this point come somewhat near the outer limits of visual poetry and cognition (or at least as far out as I can reasonably go in one dissertation). As I have shown, a wide variety of poems can be addressed through the multimodal perspective offered by cognitive ecology, poetic anchors, and improvisation. I have developed this model to affirm the generative heterodoxy of contemporary experimental poetry by addressing how modal qualities prompt cognitive effects and dynamic meanings, while simultaneously circumventing the latent iconophobia and logocentrism of previous approaches. The survey of poems did not seek to be comprehensive, as there are too many Canadian creators and works to engage with in such small space (never mind thinking on an international scale). Rather, I sought to signal salient strategies of multimodal poetic expression in order to illustrate how knowledge of cognition addresses these hybrid forms by grounding their poetics in formal and representational strategies that connect perception and conception.

109 Quote used as epigraph by Beaulieu and Betts (2012, 113). The source text is unknown.
Furthermore, the interactions and inspirations of various authors and critics within the Canadian literary scene add specificity to the arguments about poetics, the conduit fallacy, and Canadian poetic heterodoxy, as well as more specific close readings of several poems, especially those memorializing bpNichol. Canadian visual poetry is distinct in its embrace of a dirty poetics that self-referentially and radically interrogates questions of aesthetics and meaning. Johanna Drucker has described this approach as an ongoing trend towards “an intensification of hybrid syntheses of visual and verbal means” (1996, 57; see also 128-29). While obviously being influenced and influencing visual poetry internationally, especially as we saw in the poetic theories discussed in Chapter 3, Canadian poets offer a particular salient exploration of the visual poetic possibilities that are a product of intimate underground mail-art and small press networks in Canada (Sharpe 1999), and in response to the Canadian ambivalence or outright hostility to avant-garde and postmodern textual experimentation. While strongly inflected and infected by international avant-garde and postmodern interests, Canadian visual poetics has its own unique instigators who have pushed Canadian visual poetry in distinctly complex directions. Gregory Betts refers to this poetic approach as “a revolution by dissolution” in which “the turn to the body represented a redemptive turn away from an over-rational, Apollonian social contract [implicit in language]” (2013, 72). As Betts goes on to show, this sense of revolution was quickly accompanied by a sense of disillusionment rather than utopianism. He notes, however, that disillusionment “means to break free from illusions” (74), so while it was less focused on linguistic revolution, it remained invested in questioning and challenging assumptions and illusions surrounding representation. The eco-cognitive approach to Canadian visual poets reveals exactly how
their poems mobilize and critique fallacies and biases surrounding communicative modalities to enact this embodied revolution of disillusionment.

At the same time, from a typological and semiotic perspective, Canadian visual poetry presents a helpful microcosm for studying features of visual poetics that appear around the globe. While adjustments would need to be made to engage with different cultural and social norms, alphabets, scripts, and other linguistically and bibliographically derived reading assumptions, the overall multimodal cognitive poetic approach can easily be extended to engage with other creators, regions, and global dynamics. This framework further supports a range of critical readings, such as of subjectivity, sexuality, affect, sociality, and politics, by grounding them in specific modal features of textuality and the resultant phenomenal qualities of texture. The theoretical approach I have taken locates visible language and print culture (and other material, mediatory artifacts) as part of a cognitive and intersubjective network of mind, body, and environment, and as such it stays close to the cognitive literature, but shares affinities with many others. Methodologically, it both describes the poetic artifacts and their production (much like an art or new historical approach), while also paying particular attention to how meaning is produced through responses to the materiality of language, in a way analogous to a materialist and poststructurally-inflected reader-response theory. In this way, I blend the classic tension between art historical and book culture descriptions of materials to more nuanced engagements with the phenomenological processes of seeing, seeing-in, and seeing-as (Newall 2011), and in literary terms, between reference, free play, and the reading experience. The framework also compliments philosophical discussions of consciousness, embodiment, and phenomenology, which nuance the discussion of reader
response and meaning construction.\textsuperscript{110} By locating key features of the poetic texts and their correlated cognitive responses, I show how knowledge of cognition helps direct analyses of these hybrid texts while connecting them to other critical perspectives.

\textbf{6.2 Sequential Visual Poems and Comics}

Of course, visual poems are but one form of visual literature, and often the creators themselves work in other artistic forms and commercial ventures like advertising and design. For instance, bpNichol wrote visual poetry, but also wrote experimental comics, several children’s books, and scripts and songs for the children’s television shows \textit{Fraggle Rock} and \textit{The Raccoons}. In all of these forms of hybrid expression, Nichol explores the medial constraints on meaning construction, often by building self-reflexive qualities into the stories. His approach, even in genres written for children, develops a medial and modal awareness that both entertains and educates. As I have shown, such an education occurs through most visual poems, through their interrogation of media and communicative modes and through their performative, manifestic qualities. Similarly, other forms of visual and experimental literatures also develop a self-reflexive and interrogatory stance and require a multimodal approach to address their complexities (see Gibbons 2012).

One aspect of complexity which I have up till now ignored is overt sequentiality in visual poems beyond cases of fictive motion. Sequential poems are common in books of visual poetry, in particular works by bpNichol (2005 [1971]), John Riddell (1977; 1988; 1989), Judith Copithorne (1969), and Hart Broudy (1979). For instance, permutational or process poems often reflect a transformation of one element into another, typically across several pages, to develop an emergent concept (for a one-page example, see Figure 52). Other visual poems employ more fragmentary methods that blend sequentiality and simultaneity on one page, such as seen in Steve McCaffery’s famous large-format poem Carnival, which offered both linguistic and postlinguistic cues, visually cut-up (a la Gysin) and smeared around a large broadsheet. The amoebic-like shapes of cut-up typewritten and stamped texts seem to writhe on the page. The poem highlights the extensive and overpowering effect of fictive change and fictive motion in one piece and signals the central need for an improvisational response that weaves these pieces together. Still other visual poems, such as bpNichol’s “Transformational Unit,” present a series of visual poems on separate pages, which seem to interact with each other through shared visual features to create a unified yet staggered expression. In many ways, these different employments of sequentiality help to develop a prolonged experience of fictive transformation and offer a range of construal and viewpoint possibilities. At the same time, this longer form of visual poetry continues to prompt the same cognitive parameters and processes discussed throughout this dissertation. However, sequentiality also brings into the conversation about visual poetry a quality shared with another form of multimodal literature, comics.
The differences between visual poetry and other multimodal literatures can at times be more semantic than experiential. Hybrid literatures always blur the borders. For example, the visual poem, “thers 2 much in my hed agen inklewding th rocks,” by bill bissett (Figure 53) presents a series of twelve asemic glyphs in a three by four grid layout, which is like a classic comics layout. The grid arguably presents the twelve glyphs as a single group, with distinctive variations between elements, and supports a linear relation between the glyphs that mimics other visible languages. Scanning these forms reveals their many shared features, such as the lines and brackets that run around the outside, but each glyph is unique. These presumably meaningless shapes become meaningful through their mimicry of actual glyphic visible languages (thus, they prompt the frame of symbolic communication) and through their visual interactions with each other created through shared features and the grid (perceived formal mappings). The glyphs are symbolically inaccessible, which implies a sense of fictive change from a prior state of comprehensibility. Fictive change also occurs by scanning along the lines to reveal a
sequential transformation of the glyphs, which, in the case of the top-most line, includes the fringe diminishing in size while the brackets become bolder. Further transformations continue throughout the poem. From such limited sets of forms, connections, and transformations, we can infer constraints on the improvisational process of creation. The individual glyphs lack any pictographic realism, which suggests an open and fluid creative process. At the same time, the shared and transformational features of the poem suggest that, like other visible languages, there are constraints on the number of abstract features for graphetic expression.

Figure 53: “thers 2 much in my hed agen inklewding th rocks” by bill bissett (2008, 21).
I need not belabor the connections between poetic anchors and improvisational aspects of poetic meaning, which is again relevant to the discussion of emergent meanings in this poem. Here I want to turn directly to a related form of multimodal literature, comics, which presents a productive future avenue for development of a more robust multimodal cognitive poetics.

It should come as no surprise that there are important overlaps between the domains of visual poetry and comics in Canada. In fact, numerous visual poets and comics artists influence and attend to each other’s works. bpNichol, in fact, fostered two literary movements in 1967 by becoming one of the first visual poets (certainly the most popular) with the publication of *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* (2005 [1967]) and *bp* (1967a), as well as the first underground and avant-garde comics artist.

---


112 One poem from this volume, “Blues,” is the only example of Canadian visual poetry in Solt (1969, 216), indicating, for the most part, the relatively late arrival of visual poetry to Canada.
in Canada with *SCRAPTURES: Sequence eleven* (1967b; see Bell 2006). Nichol would continue to publish both forms of multimodal literature throughout his career and would support and mentor others in their own explorations of these literary approaches. The overlaps between these domains continue.

With regards to Bill Bissett’s “thers 2 much in my hed agen inklewding th rocks,” a particularly notable connection between visual poetry and comics comes through a discussion of *abstract comics*, which are experimental works that explore the relation between abstraction and sequentiality (see Molotiu 2009; 2012). The important theorist, anthologist, and creator of abstract comics, Andrei Molotiu, defines them as sequential art consisting exclusively of abstract imagery. But the definition should be expanded somewhat, to include those comics that contain some representational elements, as long as those elements do not cohere into a narrative or even into a unified narrative space. The use of ‘abstract’ here is specific to the medium of comics, and only partly overlaps with the way it is used in other fine arts. (2009, n.p.)

Bissett’s postlinguistic poem aligns well with Molotiu’s definition, since the glyphs provide abstract images and sequential relations with but a glimpse of narrative cohesion, as the slow transformations of the glyphs create a perceptible event structure. But such an

---


114 BpNichol played an important supportive role in the creation of the award-winning documentary *Comic Book Confidential* by Ron Mann (1988), which is dedicated to him. Mann discussed the film extensively with bpNichol and accessed his extensive comic book collection regularly.
event structure remains abstract, with the title adding a description of a state of mind in bissett’s characteristic employment of pseudo-phonetic words. The abstract sequential transformation seen in bissett’s poem does not align with what Molotiu considers narrative, even though it presents an event structure, since it does not engage in the construction of “narrative space,” in story-world building, per se. The similarities between the twelve separate glyphs presents the possibility of reading them sequentially as a single glyph undergoing a (fictional) transformation, perhaps loosening the bars that hem it in in order to become more mobile. (Is it just me or does the last glyph, on the bottom right, seem to suggest a figure walking out of it? Interestingly, it reverses the order of reading by walking back into previous panel, perhaps to cycle the newfound identity back through the event-structure to build a narrative.) bissett’s visual poem/abstract comic shows how sequentialized marks can present a sense of identity, connection, and transformation. A poem like bissett’s illustrates the borderblur and overlap between different arenas of multimodal literary production. This crossover also reveals an area of future development for a multimodal cognitive poetics: cognitive comics studies.

Comics scholars have attended closely to the cultural and institutional contexts (e.g. Barker 1989; Beaty 2012), the forms and histories of production (e.g. Bell 2006; Gabilliet 2009; 2010; Smolderen 2014), and the variability of representational modalities (visual, verbal, and manual) in comics and graphic novels. Typically in this criticism, the reader is imagined as the creative engine that bridges the gaps and “tensions” (Hatfield 2005) between the medium’s modalities and forms; examples include McCloud’s process of “closure” (1994) or Groensteen’s notion of “iconic solidarity” (2007). However, these discussions are underdeveloped in that they do not adequately explain how readers
accomplish this crucial feat, which a multimodal cognitive poetics can. Despite a history of structuralist, semiotic, and linguistic analyses of comics, “few of these disparate works are motivated by a central theory of language, graphic expression, or comics” (Cohn 2012, 96), and they often include preferential treatment of modalities instead of attention to the medium’s hybrid character (Miodrag 2013). Cohn attempts to balance the discussion through a cognitive theory of “visual language” (compiled in 2013) which unfortunately employs formalisms and hierarchies from the fields of generative linguistics and first generation (disembodied) cognitive science that present a static view of perception and meaning. This perspective insufficiently accounts for interactions between modalities in comics, which rely rather on the flexible and dynamic interface between perception and meaning (Kukkonen 2013). The multimodal and dynamic approach I have developed surrounding visual poetry can naturally extend to comics to explore how readers improvise connections among modes, panels, sequences, and layouts.

As with visual poems, the synthesis of modal cues in comics often means that the prompts require disintegration, elaboration, and re-integration. Others present distinct verbal, visual, and material prompts that need to be activated and placed into intelligible relations. Both of these processes require creative improvisations to find the best fit. For works that present referential prompts separately, for instance as words in a sentence or as dialogue and images in a comic, the reader must elaborate on and combine disparate elements as they construct an emergent understanding about the congruities or incongruities in the composite text. Conventionalized sequential relations, such as the line of a sentence or of panels, help motivate certain mappings through the inference of causal implications (Coulson and Cánovas 2009). Nonetheless, as Charles Hatfield (2009)
asserts of comics, there are always tensions between different types and levels of representation. Multimodal cognitive poetics offers a means of articulating these connections and tensions. For example, in Jillian Tamaki’s one-page comic “Hike” (Figure 54) each panel depicts two people at various points on a hike together. To understand and interpret each panel, viewers must simulate the actions of the figures and their interaction with each other and the features of their depicted environment. Through these simulations, viewers develop frame knowledge by projecting actions and possible intentions onto the figures within the various frames. Likewise, the viewers add multimodal nuances to their mental imaginings of the events. Thus, viewers activate the representations, but also project beyond them, imbuing them with embodied knowledge that both perceives and sees beyond (or fills details into) the representations simultaneously.\footnote{As Michael Newall (2011, esp. Ch. 1) discusses, there is a long history of tension between the perceptualist (seeing) and illusionist (seeing-as) schools of art theory. Newall argues that both approaches need to unite in order to show how both the surfaces and inferred depths work together across a variety of styles of representation.} In terms of improvisation, reader-viewers activate background knowledge to make sense of limited cues, guided by perceptual biases and by importing relevant frames of interpretation and connection.
Beginning at the first panel, the woman points beyond the view of her partner and the reader to indicate a direction of movement or a sight ahead. The attire of the figures indicates that they are out on a hike (which the title of the comic already told us), and so we blend the gesture with frame knowledge to infer that she is leading the way toward a destination. Her facial expression, along with her companion’s, indicates enjoyment and excitement about the hike as well. The frame knowledge of hiking offers further details.
about roles (leader or guide and follower), trails (paths to destinations), variable qualities and levels of difficulty of the paths, and so forth. Subsequent panels add details and constrain variability across these features of the basic hiking frame by extending more specific prompts into the blend. For instance, the figures regularly alternate leading and drawing each other’s attention to details, thus avoiding the possibility that the woman is a guide. Likewise, the various scenes they traverse suggest that they are experienced hikers, moving across waterfalls and up steep inclines. Furthermore, their facial features are simulated as enjoyment, since they are regularly smiling at each other and showing wonderment at their surroundings.

To make these inferences about the unfolding events, the reader must simulate information about each panel as well as fill in connections between the panels in the sequence. Each panel profiles the hikers in a different environment. The repetition of the same figures facilitates the blending of them together as the two figures moving across various spaces. We saw a similar process of blending sequential images into a unified event structure in bissett’s grid of glyphs earlier. Similarly, blending shared features together is crucial for understanding Tamaki’s mini-comic “Hike,” as it establishes the narrative quality of a single couple moving through a variety of environments, which develops an extended portrayal of the two people together. The emerging understanding of the first five panels is that of a happy couple contentedly exploring a rich, dynamic environment together. Likely, the focus on this single couple also draws up the frame of romance, and a happy one at that. They, after all, do not appear to be arguing while walking. The hiking and romance frames suggest that this comic is enacting the common LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), often heard in spoken language.
when people say things like, “they’re in for the long haul,” “their love knows no bounds,” and “we made it through the hard times.” The pictorial depiction of a literal journey along with the affection shown between the two figures visually inscribes this metaphor throughout the panels of the comic.

The final panel, which incorporates the only dialogue in this entire comic, offers a salient and surprising juxtaposition to this developing understanding of the couple because it is the first presence of speech and of what is said. The imposition of language into the active but non-linguistic comic marks a significant switch in style. Readers have likely grown accustomed to engaging with each image as its own visual composition. The intrusion of language is also an imposition on the semantic level, when the characters agree to something counterintuitive in relation to the visually depicted narrative: “this isn’t working.” The finality and incongruousness of this summation clashes with the happiness and romance frames that have emerged through simulation over the previous panels. It raises the question of what the problem might be exactly. Are they simply uncomfortable sitting and watching the sunset together, or is there more to it? Is this the end of the relationship we as readers have constructed?

The final verbal interaction in the comic is salient because in previous frames there are visual indications of dialogue, through open mouths, eye contact or shared gaze, and gestures; all of these features now come to be revised in light of the dialogue we as readers are finally allowed to hear, which seems to indicate the demise of the relationship. This transformation of previously assumed information is an example of a frame-shift, where inferences are recalibrated and backwards projected through the previous prompts and their emergent structures. This frame-shift raises the question of why, what, or how is
it not working, when they seemed so contented? In a way, perhaps the key to this problem is language itself, since it seems that only in the panel in which they speak to each other (or at least where we have auditory confirmation of them communicating) does their relationship dissolve. Here we see how biases towards perceptual links and frames end up potentially prompting erroneous mappings by suggesting comprehensiveness to identities, roles, and frames, when in this case it would seem that these ingrained assumptions confuse the situation. Tamaki’s comic shows a disjunction between actions and communication, employing the specificity of representational modalities to deliver a surprising finish. Arguably the comic offers an extended pun on the phrase, “take a hike,” by beginning with an enjoyable everyday activity and turning it into its alternate meaning as a relationship-ending idiom.

Tamaki’s comic “Hike” shows how tracing the functional role of mental simulation through the blending framework, including its insights into perceptual and frame mappings, illuminates how sparse prompts can produce complex understandings of multimodal literatures. Putting the attenuated eco-cognitive processes of mental simulation and blending together offers a means of tracing creative processes in understanding, as embodied knowledge is extended well beyond its original, experiential foundations while in dialogue with things in the world. Because blends have composite emergent structures, critical analysis of their components leads to a more thorough engagement with both the parts and the whole of a given work. In fact, through dynamic simulations of emergent understandings, the sum of a blend becomes much more than simply a sum of its parts. Sums of a series of blends, such as in “Hike,” go that much further still. Blending offers a concise and explicit approach to meaning construction in
dynamical, simulative systems, allowing critics to trace how even complex texts prompt simulations or “readings” (see Dancygier 2006; 2012), while including the relevance of all modalities and other material facets of bibliographic culture. Such connections between blends and megablends, and between perception and conceptualization, allow for a comprehensive theory of meaning that addresses both the meaningfulness of segmentarity (versus narrativity) and graphemic variability in comics (Bennett 2014; Gardner 2011), while also engaging with more complex narratological issues. Thus, the cognitive underpinnings of sequential and non-sequential interactions add to critical analyses of a range of key issues and narrative contents.

This discussion of a relatively straightforward comic following that of postlinguistic poetry also showcases the flexibility of multimodal cognitive poetics when it comes to distinct qualities of modalities. As I explained in the introduction, both visual and verbal modalities function across a spectrum of representation from the concrete and referential to the abstract and opaque. Comics often employ both modalities in their clearest form, presenting narration and dialogue beside representational imagery, to freeze moments in time and space (which also leads to regular, and to some extent erroneous, analogies to film). However, abstract comics and many visual poems put pressure on the presumed clarity of these modalities by emphasizing their flexibility, prompting a wider degree of improvisation in order to develop a response or meaning. What this range of representational qualities shows, is, as Peirce argued in his discussions of semiotics, that sign functions are porous and fluid, transforming in accordance with the whims and needs of both creators and reader-viewers as they interact with the different features and affordances of a given artifact (see White 1999). No sign is ever
stable, but transforms as it is integrated and activated in the eco-cognitive network. While at first glance images may seem to simply replicate and present spaces, whereas words develop temporal complexities, both modalities are much more flexible and offer the potential for a wide range of construals and innovations. Multimodal works present clear evidence of the flexibility of modes of representation and offer unique tools for thinking through the materiality of print culture and the material contiguity of embodied cognition.

6.3 Multimodal Questions

Many other genres and forms of multimodal literatures, such as children’s books, online works, coffee table books, and so on, present further arenas for theoretical development and critical analysis of the impact of medial parameters on meaning construction. Alison Gibbons outlines a helpful list of multimodal features in experimental novels, including layouts, typography, colour, images, text-images (concrete poetry), meta-fictive materiality, footnotes, self-interrogation, flipbook construction, mixed genres, and so on (2012, 2). I have engaged with most of these features in a synthetic manner, but this explicit list helps gesture to yet further material arenas of medium-specific analysis, such as colour and footnotes. I have, at the same time, also isolated further patterns and processes of cognitive interaction with multimodal works that complement Gibbons’ approach. For instance, Gibbons shows how experimental fiction promotes bi-stability between image and word and between material surface and readerly constructions of story-worlds. This bi-stability foregrounds the dynamic processes of readerly engagement and is a common feature in many of the visual poems discussed in this dissertation as
well, but for the development of non-narrative effects and concepts. The employment of complementary and overlapping multimodal cognitive poetic approaches in both cases shows the crucially productive interactions among materiality, perception, and conceptualization at the core of both visual poetry and experimental novels.

Nonetheless, other discourse types offer further data to engage with in relation to other literary questions, such as genre expectations in relation to lyric poetic heterodoxy that I touched on in Chapter 3 and in other arenas of visual and plastic arts. The model I have developed to trace how modes activate and blend strategically, synaesthetically, and recursively has the potential to address how meaning is constructed and reconstructed in other hybrid media and genres. Furthermore, grounding the analysis of multimodal texts in contemporary cognitive science allows for further empirical research to test conclusions and for cognitive science to mobilize literary research. Few scholars have engaged in empirical research surrounding multimodal text comprehension (aside for Gibbons (2012) and Gross (1997)). Nonetheless, testing these approaches helps address the diversity of reader responses to hybrid forms. Research from gesture studies, for instance, offers one area that can further expand the analysis of multimodal literatures, such as Narayan’s (2012) excellent blending analysis of gesture and viewpoint comprehension in relation to a panel from a comic. Of course, such research will need to include distinctions between natural, multimodal language use and mediated multimodal communication.

The multimodal cognitive model I present, grounded in the synaesthetic networking of cognitive ecology and attenuated processes of mental simulation and blending, offers a robust means of unraveling how readers likely come to particular
conclusions. Much as embodiment has played a significant role in presenting a holistic, unifying perspective for psychology (Glenberg 2010), the eco-cognitive perspective offers similar potential to literary criticism, which is already at the forefront of analyzing the mediated phenomena of texture. Given the wide range of psychological investigations into embodied meaning, much more can be said about the cognitive processes involved in literary comprehension. For instance, embodied parameters of attention and action that influence information activation and integration (Simons and Levin 1998; Noë 2004; O’Regan 2011) which correlate to the influence of genre expectations and lexical priming in text comprehension (Zwaan 1994). Similarly, the diversity of ways in which language and other modalities construe the world impacts perception and action (Casasanto 2005), as postmodern theories of discourse have argued (albeit too deterministically—discourse does not overrun the world around us: see Slingerland 2008). Cognitive linguistics already implements cross-cultural research in order to distinguish between universal and socio-cultural conceptualization and representational processes and practices, which can arguably add to our understanding of different cultural discourses and to the theorization and practice of translation and adaptation (Borkent, under review). Focusing on the eco-cognitive processes at work in textual comprehension facilitates the analysis of the

116 A multimodal cognitive poetics can also be mobilized for pedagogical purposes. As multimodal literatures support learning in multiple literacies (Jacobs 2007), critical pedagogical reflection on the knowledge and processes needed for understanding needs to be all the more nuanced (Jewitt 2008). A multimodal model of cognition is certainly helpful, if not necessary, for such purposes.
situatedness of knowledge and how perception can motivate different types of conception (e.g. see Núñez and Sweetser 2006).

Finally, the affective resonance of literary works is a richly embodied, phenomenal experience of reading (Miall and Kuiken 2002). While the relationship between affect and representation has undergone considerable research in recent years in the Humanities, explicit connections to cognition, like the relationship between embodiment, simulation, and social cognition, push it further. David Miall has been an especially important advocate of an empirical approach to the role of feelings and emotion in literary comprehension.\textsuperscript{117} Embodied interpretations of the emotional qualities of materiality and textuality, such as how the physical weight of a book influences judgments about its conceptual importance (which affirms the notion that bigger is better),\textsuperscript{118} suggests that materiality plays a significant role in print culture, publishing practices, canonical

\textsuperscript{117}For recent work into emotion with direct relevance and insights for literary studies, see the work of literary critic David Miall (2006; 2011) and Miall and Kuiken (2002). See also the relevant work orchestrated and or developed by psycholinguist Rolf Zwaan (Zwaan 1996; 1999; 2004; Zwaan and Madden 2005; Kneepkens and Zwaan 1995; Pecher and Zwaan 2005) and cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley (1995; 1999; 2009; Mar and Oatley 2008).

Innovative emotion research by Jesse Prinz on morality (2004; 2007) and Antonio Damasio (1999) on consciousness also adds to discussions of textual interpretation by clarifying the motivations for extreme emotional responses (such as joy, disgust, and rage) to works, and for how such responses are produced through unconscious embodied mechanisms.

\textsuperscript{118} See the fascinating, groundbreaking, and influential study by Jostmann, Lakens, and Schubert (2009) on the metaphorical relationship between weight and importance, such that heavier works are conceptualized as more important. Their follow-up study (Schneider et al. 2011) reveals a bi-directionality to the WEIGHT IS IMPORTANCE metaphor, such that objects are perceived as heavier when they are described as more important as well.
developments, and so on. While socio-economic practices of sales and distribution obviously play an important role in the development of literary scenes, embodied metaphors can add to analyses of how the explicit use of a book’s material qualities adds to its perceived value. These compatible areas of investigation suggest important avenues of pursuit in multimodal approaches to text, textuality, and texture, which push beyond current, linguistically-determined approaches in cognitive poetics to the sensuous realms of multimodal literary production and response.

6.4 Sensuous Scholarship: Multimodality for All!

Of course, many scholars do not work on multimodal literatures or may not be inspired by questions of print and book culture. Scholars of predominantly verbally constructed texts may rashly dismiss multimodal poetics as unnecessary for their work. Without rehashing the discussion in the introduction, which argued that all media are hybrid media (most literature is written in visible language and displayed in a wide array of forms, after all), there are wider issues and consequences of a general multimodal approach for literary criticism and theory.

I presented the methodology as motivated by visual poetry, which required a cross-modal account of meaning to clarify critical readings. However, the cognitive framework that addressed this need is a general theory of meaning, not just of visual poetry, which at its core emphasizes the creativity inherent in responses to textual prompts. I presented this model as a means of breaking down the division between poetics (forms) and hermeneutics (meanings) by showing their multimodal and cognitive interdependency. Such a break down is especially necessary for the discussion of visual
poetry, since these poems put significant pressure on the inherent dualism of that prior critical division. I have shown through many examples that texts gain layers of meaning as readers work through the implications of what is in front of them. Often these layers of meaning also oscillate and transform through contemplation of the text. Drawing on the work of Alison Gibbons and on research into illusions, I discussed this flexibility of signification in terms of bi-stability. I have shown, through this framework, how and why representation and meaning are unstable and how reader-viewers stabilize them. Words and images become meaningful and dynamic as readers interact with them. Yet, through this interaction, texts are populated with the embodied backgrounds and biases of the reader, contaminating it and transforming its representational features. Thus, the eco-cognitive theory affirms the crucial insight from poststructuralism that meaning is porous and unstable, and locates this instability within specific mechanisms of cognition that are structured in such a way as to see schematic connections and to infer beyond the known into the unknown. As Ellen Spolsky (2002) argues, cognitive approaches to language and culture help elucidate how and why this instability is a necessary precursor to usability and novelty, since human culture and cognition require flexibility and changeability to match changing socio-political and ecological environments. The eco-cognitive framework acknowledges how intersubjectivity and embodiment motivate stability while dynamical responses promote improvisation and innovation.

Much of this semiotic flexibility is due to the attenuation of cognition, which allows the production of blended mental imagery that is divorced from actuality, yet grounded in it. As Dancygier (2014) argues, literary imagery incorporates embodied, viewpointed biases that strategically construe depicted events by simulating implications
in mental imagery. This manipulation of mental imagery facilitates viewpoint alignments and conceptual (frame) transformations. While I have shown this to be a common feature of visual poems, including postlinguistic ones, these are features shared by most representational forms. Thus, literary critics are presented here with a tool for articulating the promotion and manipulation of multimodal mental imagery\(^\text{119}\) as a general feature of material culture. Blending has been employed especially well for literary analysis (Dancygier 2006; 2012), but at times needs to affirm its roots in multimodal embodied cognition. For instance, in presenting an excellent blending analysis of narrative layering in Art Spiegelman’s graphic biography, *Maus*, Oakley (1998) largely ignores the visual contributions of imagery and layouts which strengthen and add to his interpretations. By emphasizing the need for detailed attention to multimodal contributions to mental imagery and meaning, the eco-cognitive perspective on textuality becomes a productive tool for transmedia studies by showing how different modal and multimodal prompts can construct analogous mental images and conceptual developments. Thus, this framework helps build interdisciplinary bridges by establishing consistencies and compatibilities between analyses while affirming multimodal and discursive flexibility and novelty.

By widening the critical field in this way, I advocate for the ongoing interdisciplinary porosity that has always informed departments of literary and cultural studies, but which has stagnated to a degree when it comes to erroneous and competing

\(^\text{119}\) I add multimodal to the discussion of mental imagery to highlight that imagery, in this case, is not simply visual, but a robust simulation of necessary information from relevant frames.
understandings of communication, many of which are derived from the conduit fallacy. The tensions between fallacious assumptions has promoted a “crisis of representation” in which different models fit different agendas with often contradictory conclusions (see J.Cohn 2006). As I argued in Chapter 3, they have also promoted a culture of literary philistinism when it comes to experimental and multimodal literatures. The eco-cognitive model grounds different critical investments within the network of material, representational, and activational parameters of common and communal contexts, intersubjective needs, cultural and social discourses, and personal idiosyncrasies. This position sustains scholarly work within an interdisciplinarily supportive and supported theory of meaning, while also providing the means to critique the import of modal and material features in a variety of artifacts. As such, multimodal cognitive poetics, in particular with its focus on cognitive ecology, works to both supplement and supplant aspects of ongoing critical approaches.
Bibliography


———, e-mail messages to the author, February 25-March 2, 2015.


Read, Rob, e-mail message to the author, February 25, 2015.


Appendix A: Colophon

This dissertation is set in Avenir, Minion Pro, and Baskerville. All headings and captions are in the sans-serif typeface Avenir, which means “future” in French, and was designed by the influential Swiss typographer Adrian Frutiger. The body of the work is set in Minion Pro, which is an award-winning font by American Robert Slimbach, designed for Adobe in 2000 as an OpenType update of Minion, which was designed in 1990. Renaissance-era fonts inspire Minion, and the name comes from the traditional naming system as well. It is a perfect example of the Poundian maxim: “make it new.” Block quotes are all in the serif typeface Baskerville, which was designed in 1757 by John Baskerville. The design was intended to improve upon old style typefaces while remaining more tempered than more modern designs. Acclaimed American typographer and type designer, Bruce Rogers, revived and popularized the contemporary form of the Baskerville typeface. It is now even used by the Government of Canada for its wordmark on official letterhead and websites. The composite of these types captures a sense of the topics and foci of this dissertation: it embraces the future of cognitive literary studies through the future-focused works of avant-garde Canada. It also remains indebted to much that has come before, while seeking to update perspectives and approaches through an interdisciplinary and contemporary methodology.