

“BABEȘ–BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF LETTERS

PhD THESIS

**THE INTERMEDIAL ASPECTS OF VISUAL POETRY
(CONCRETE POETRY, LETTRIST POETRY AND
COLLAGES)**

SUMMARY

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR:
Prof. univ. dr. PÉNTEK JÁNOS**

**CANDIDATE:
SÁNDOR KATALIN**

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KEY-WORDS

intermediality, medium, the heterogeneity of medium and discourse, taxonomic models of intermediality, poststructuralist concepts of intermediality, visual poetry, concrete poetry, collages, the context and the "ideology" of artistic movements (concretism, lettrism, visual poetry), digital poetry, performativity

SUMMARY

The aim of the present thesis is to problematize the intermediality of visual poetry, referring especially to concrete and lettrist poems and collages.

As I also emphasized in the studies preceding this research (Sándor 2002; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2009), this question can be dealt with in a productive way within the theoretical frame of intermediality in which the somewhat marginalized, peripheric terrain of visual poetry can be brought back into the focus of research. The topicality of the investigations related to the intermediality of cultural products and to the problem of the medium (conceived as being constitutive in the process of representation) is indicated by numerous international conferences, volumes, periodicals and associations in which the "theory" and the methodology of intermediality become par excellence interdisciplinary.

In the present thesis I will discuss not only various theories and concepts of intermediality but mainly the intermedial aspects of visual poetry, which proves to be a difficult term to define.

Petőfi S. János – trying to define a specific figure of visual poetry, namely concrete poetry – affirms that if we define a "traditional" poem as a text in which the physical appearance of the text is not a primary constitutive element of meaning, then we can conceive concrete visual poetry as a text in which meaning is primarily shaped by the visual, physical aspects of words (Petőfi 1998. 98).

The physical aspect of the text as a constitutive element of meaning is certainly a productive observation, but we can also remark that neither in "traditional" poetry (as Petőfi calls it) is the visuality of the text irrelevant, though it may not have a primary

function in the construction of meaning. So the distinctive feature between visual and "traditional" poetry does not have a strictly exclusive aspect.

The rhetoric of visual poetry is often described as untranslatable into the medium of speech and voice. This concept emphasizes the differences between the media of language, between orality and writing. According to Kibédi Varga Áron the oral presentation of visual poetry is actually its "betrayal": if we take into consideration only the verbal, linguistic aspect, a part of the meaning disappears (Kibédi Varga 1997. 306). At the same time, from the perspective of phonocentric conceptions (in which language is primarily connected to presence, speech and voice) due to this untranslatability into the medium of speech, visual poetry is often interpreted as a discourse which deprives language of its oral dimension. In these approaches the visual rhetoric of the text appears at times as secondary, deviant or decorative, as a sort of compensation for the "losses" caused by "silencing" the oral form (Sz. Molnár 2004a. 52). From such viewpoints the relation between oral and written language is represented as hierarchic in which the iconic aspect of writing can "only" be a compensation compared to the orality of language.

Although Christian Moraru (referring to the writings of Charles Olson) does not discuss the *tropos-topos-typos* "trinity" of visual poetry with the intention to define it, he uses certain concepts which can be productive in a larger framework as well. Moraru states that in the linguistic material of visual poetry more functions intersect with each other. The word is not only *tropos*, not only a rhetorical figure of language but also *topos* and *typos*, in other words: the meaning we construct is also shaped by the spatial position (*topos*) and the typographic form (*typos*) of the words in space. These three concepts prove to be productive mainly because Moraru does not fix the relations that can emerge between the *tropos*, *topos* and *typos*, consequently these can describe figurative and non-figurative visual poetry, as well as different image-text relations: metaphorical, metapoetic, (self-)reflexive, tautological etc. Nevertheless it is clear that also in texts that are not considered visual poetry or prose, the written word has a specific spatial position and a visual figure which can be significant or meaningful.

Another criterion for describing the heterogeneous discourse of visual poetry could be that the visuality of the text shapes interpretation in a (self-)reflexive way and

the mediality of writing is re-inscribed into the text in a transformative, reflexive manner. The fact that we usually look *through* the text and not *at* the text might mean that we perceive language as something immaterial, medially transparent, as if it were a pure, disembodied conceptual language. In visual poetry the medial transparency of writing is dissolved, writing is foregrounded as image, as visible text distributed through space. In this sense – according to Balázs Imre József – visual poetry questions the self-evident, “natural” linearity of poetry in general, and can be considered poetry about poetry (Balázs 1997). However, if the visibility of the text is limited only to this metapoetic moment, then it will become a neutral(ized), general aspect without being capable of problematizing the reading process itself.

All the above-mentioned aspects can be used to describe the intermedial discourse of visual poetry but they do not prove to be strict criteria for any definition.

If visual poetry comprises the large field from *carmen figuratum* and calligram to concrete and lettrist poetry, then besides the constitutive and self-reflexive aspect of mediality we should also take into consideration certain institutional and disciplinary conventions or contexts of attribution through which an intermedial work of art is offered as visual poetry. We can ask: on what conditions can a picture that does not even contain readable texts (as in collages, typograms etc.) raise questions about language, text and textuality, and in what sort of discursive and institutional framework can it be considered visual poetry?

Sz. Molnár Szilvia does not approach visual poetry from the perspective of traditional poetics; she affirms that visual poetry is not a genre with fixed criteria but rather a discursive order in which the same verbal and visual elements manifest themselves differently according to the communicative conditions of certain historical periods (Sz. Molnár 2004a. 100). Sz. Molnár does not reduce the heterogeneity of different artistic practices to a system of fixed criteria, but considers this heterogeneity a starting point from which the definition of visual poetry appears not as a solution but as a problem.

In this thesis I discuss visual poetry in specific historical contexts: concrete and lettrist poetry will be problematized within the context of the artistic movements and poetic programs which considerably marked them. I also reflect on the way collages –

which can also be related to visual arts – have become a figure and a poetic strategy of visual poetry. Due to the fact that I treat this subject from the perspective of intermediality – the approach being theoretical rather than historical – the primary purpose is not the clarification of the problems of canonization, or the place and the historical significance of certain movements. Still the problem of historical contexts cannot be neglected because the reception of visual poetry is inseparable from the self-definition and the programs of the respective movements (e.g. concretism, lettrism).

The movements and their “ideology” – which in most of the cases can be situated within the paradigm of the neo-avantgarde – should be reinterpreted precisely because certain theoretical discourses establish a too direct connection between the self-definition, the manifests and programs of the movements and the works of art themselves (which appear in this way as the aesthetic realizations of the programs). It is obvious that the rhetoric of visual poetry can correlate with the ideologies and projects of various movements but not as their unproblematic translation into the sphere of artistic practices. So I treat these movements as contexts which provoke a critical reassessment precisely by being ideological constructs with their own (self)contradictions, revealing at times discrepancies between the declared projects and the concrete artistic results.

From the perspective of historical contexts it is also possible to treat the self-referential, autopoetic aspect of visual poetry in a more complex way. Thus, in the German concrete poetry of the 1950s (or even 1960s) the decontextualization of words and the self-reflexive discourse “purified” of any “outer” referentiality is explained in certain approaches as a sort of reaction against the ideological, propagandistic discourse of the Third Reich. On the other hand, the decontextualization of language can also be linked to the structuralist conception of language as *langue*, as an abstract system extracted from the contexts of communication. In the same way the lettrist project of “atomizing”, decomposing language to the level of meaningless sounds and letters, can be linked to the crisis of representation and expression or to the experience of the unspeakable after the second World War. Moreover, in some socialist countries in which the use of language in different cultural fields was regulated by socialist politics, certain neo-avantgarde discourses and even the self-referentiality of visual poetry proved to be difficult to define ideologically, eluding the predictable opposition between official and

unofficial discourses. This ideological elusiveness could be a possibility of avoiding (or tacitly criticizing) the politically and ideologically authorized cultural structures of the period.

Although I discuss problems related to historical and ideological contexts, my aim is not to define the position and the “affiliation” of certain authors in relation to specific movements or paradigms. Many authors I refer to (e. g. Steve McCaffery, Henri Chopin, Szombathy Bálint, Géczi János, Zalán Tibor etc.) cannot be linked to a single movement or are not primarily canonized as authors of visual poetry. The re-evaluation of the neo-avantgarde in the history of Hungarian literature for example is a very complex process precisely because in the work of certain authors only some parts can be considered neo-avantgarde (Deréky 2004. 19).

Before discussing the intermedial relations of visual poetry I found it necessary to problematize some conceptions and theories about intermediality itself. Thus, in the second chapter (INTERMEDIALITY – IN THE MIRROR OF THEORIES) I examine different approaches, concepts and typologies, as well as questions related to the theoretical antecedents of intermediality. The problem of interart relations proves to be of the same age as arts and the history of arts; certain figures as *ut pictura poesis* from antiquity and classicism (affirming the kinship of arts) or *paragone* from the Renaissance (affirming the rivalry of arts) continually return in different historical and theoretical contexts.

In the more recent research we can observe that the interest in the intermediality of cultural phenomena increases, and the study of image-text relations is not limited to the textological and semiotic approach in which these were conceived as intertextual relations whereas the different media, including pictures were treated as texts. So the study of intermediality extends towards media theories, theories of communication, poststructuralist iconology, philosophy of art and language, cultural studies etc.

In this second chapter I discuss certain attempts to define and categorize intermedial representations. These attempts are based on a semiotic and taxonomic understanding of intermediality and describe the heterogeneous intermedial relations as separate categories or as relations of exchange, combination, substitution, transposition between different media (e. g. the authors Kibédi Varga, Plett, Wolf, Rajewsky stb.).

From a methodological point of view the taxonomic approach of intermediality can be productive if it remains an open and descriptive system and does not become an end in itself.

Acknowledging the methodological “virtues” of taxonomic systems, I think that those approaches can be truly productive which do not neglect or reduce the heterogeneity and the intermedial differences of the studied phenomena for the sake of well-defined categories. Such approaches (e. g. Joachim Paech, Myokku Kim, Henk Oosterling etc.) show us some possibilities of observing the medially mixed cultural phenomena and to treat intermediality as a modality of reflecting on the mediality of culture and the cultural aspects of mediality. In these conceptions which go beyond formalistic, taxonomic models, the intermedial phenomena are not perceived as static categories but are placed back into the pragmatics of reception.

In their approach to intermediality Joachim Paech, Henk Oosterling, Myokku Kim for example take into consideration the interdependence of the material and the conceptual, of the semantic, discursive and the non-discursive, corporeal dimensions of cultural products, the heterogeneity of intermedial relations or the ideological aspect of the discourses on image-text relations. Intermediality is not perceived as a totality or a simple combination of different media but as a tensional field of medial differences, as the reflexive and transformative re-inscription of mediality in texts and representations whose appearance it enables.

In the present paper I discuss three specific figures of visual poetry (concrete and lettrist poetry and collages) in three different chapters due to the fact that these figures can be related to different historical contexts and “ideologies” and can display different image-text relations. In concrete poetry writing is not only a readable text but also a visible image, a non-linear text distributed in the typographic space. In lettrist poetry the decomposed writing manifests itself mainly as image, and in collages the text is the fragment of a larger context, oscillating between the readable and the unreadable. (However, these different word-image relations can be combined within the very same text.) This methodological separation resulted in the following chapters: INTERMEDIALITY IN CONCRETE POETRY, LETTRIST POETRY AND INTERMEDIALITY and TEXT AND IMAGE IN THE TEXTURE OF COLLAGES.

Conclusions

In this inquiry it became clear that reading visual poetry can be a self-reflexive and critical practice because these somewhat “strange”, marginalized intermedial texts urge the re-evaluation of the preconceptions and strategies of interpreting images and texts. At the same time one can reflect on the way in which some peripheral genres reveal or emphasize the internal heterogeneity of certain media conceived as monomedial or homogeneous.

Concrete poetry (e. g. the poems by Gomringer, Heisenbüttel, de Campos, Kolár etc.) can be perceived as an attempt to extend the limits of language in which – through the non-linear distribution of writing – both the verbal and the non-verbal conditions of reading are revealed. In concretism language does not appear as purely conceptual but as an embodied language, whereas reading is not a medially homogeneous practice but is shaped by the iconicity of the text, by the empty, non-discursive spaces between words, by the breaks and the “silence” of writing.

From the perspective of image-text relations figurative concrete poetry tends to display a shift from naming and convergence towards divergence, towards the scattering of the correspondence between image and word, which can be related to the modernist experience of losing the common system of reference between words and things. In non-figurative concrete poetry the shaping of the typographic space, the non-linear distribution of writing, the combination and variation of linguistic elements are meant to foreground not the referentiality but rather the materiality of language.

In lettrist poetry and in typograms (e.g. the works of Isou, Broutin, Szombathy, Gécsi, Tandori, L. Simon etc.) the non-semantic use of writing as visual material seems to extract even the last verbal elements from the process of reading, apparently replacing the problem of medial heterogeneity with that of monomediality. Although lettrist poems minimize the linguistic elements and foreground the physical aspects of language, they do not exclude the verbal dimension altogether: even if writing becomes image, this image always displays writing and the process of verbal representation. Hypergraphics as a (new) mode of writing suggested by lettrist authors, combines different sign-systems

evoking in this way the cultural memory of writing: from pictograms to mathematical signs, from iconic signs to the latin alphabet, from drawing to calligraphy. Another argument in favour of intermediality could be that lettrist works are “prepared”, announced, “justified” and made accessible by poetic manifests and theoretical discourses which actually function as ”pre-texts” for the poems. (Referring to abstract painting, W. J. Thomas Mitchell speaks about a similar problem, namely the interdependence of theory and painting, which he calls *ut pictura theoria*.)

In the collages of visual poetry (e. g. the works of McCaffery, Géczi, Zalán, Szombathy etc.) the (unreadable) text often functions as image, but here both text and image appear as fragments or quotations of larger contexts: from literature and painting to science and mass-media, from the anonymous found objects to the cultic works of culture. In collages the use of words and images becomes a contextual practice, more precisely a confrontation of different contexts. We can observe the “eruption” of images in the sphere of verblability (and vice versa), which marks an important difference between the perception of language in collages and the concretist ideology about a decontextualized language, “purified” of referentiality. This “impurity” and medial heterogeneity of collages can expose the “ideology” and the problematic, contradictory aspect of certain modernist tendencies to purify the medium of language or painting to get to its “essence”. Collages can show us – among others – that decontextualized language is merely an (ideological) abstraction of certain movements or theories.

The study of intermediality has also made clear that the relation between texts and images is not relevant only from the perspective of mediality. More precisely: neither the problem of mediality can be restricted to technical and material aspects, but extends to the symbolic practices, the ideological and institutional contexts of the medium. Thus collages do not only combine texts and images but also display a reflexive (or at times critical) attitude towards tradition and different cultural phenomena, and by confronting canonical and marginal, artistic and non-artistic discourses encourage their rethinking. In concrete poetry not only the image-text relation is raised as a problem but also the discursive and medial conditions of seeing and meaning-making.

The above-mentioned figures of visual poetry can become the antecedents of certain intermedial practices in the digital medium. In the sixth chapter I discuss the way

digital texts become flexible or even unstable, offering the readers the possibility to alter or re-create images and texts. In some texts the iconic-calligrammatic aspect which is based on a static, compositional correspondence can be replaced by correspondences between different temporal processes and performative acts. Those texts and multimedial installations which involve the human body in the process of reception expose the act of reading and communication as a process in which not only discourses, concepts and ideologies confront each other but also media, bodies and non-discursive practices.

Although from the perspective of cultural criticism some works of visual poetry are considered a weak self-referential discourse, I would still emphasize the critical potential of reflecting on the medium and intermediality. Ideological constructs can be questioned precisely by revealing their constructedness, as well as their institutional, discursive and medial conditions. As Hans Belting points out, the more we observe the medium, the more incapable it becomes to conceal its own strategies. The less we observe the visual medium, the more we concentrate on the image, as if images could exist in themselves (Belting 2008).

The present research could be extended in more directions. One of these would be a more emphasized orientation from the poetics of the image-text relations towards their “politics”, their ideological dimensions. Here I discussed this dimension by referring to the conceptions of language and image, reading and seeing in different literary movements, displaying their self-definitions and self-contradictions as well. The question of intermediality could also include the socio-cultural aspects of the use of different media, as well as the way image-text relations become hierarchical or “tense” in certain historical periods. Another productive direction would be to further examine the intermedial practices in the digital medium and the way this “new” medium recycles and “re-invents” the conventions of “older” media. In such an approach we could examine not only the technical, material aspects of the medium but also the experience of constructing virtual identities and communities, of using and re-creating texts and hypertexts, of using the body, of being embodied and dis-embodied at the border between the real and the virtual.

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