

# A HERMENEUTIC READING OF MODERN VISUAL POETRY<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

During the last three decades, poetry has moved indiscriminately towards visuality, fragmentation, and digitalization. This change has led to the appearance of modern visual poetry as an individual poetic production with specific characteristics and techniques after years of being a mere experimental poetic activity. The characteristics, themes, and techniques of modern visual poetry as a newborn genre require a well-established mechanism of explaining, interpreting, and construing it in order to be well-perceived. The process of reading and understanding any text not only necessitates perceiving the literal meaning of the text, but also it requires understanding its deeper meaning as well. This interactive sender-receiver reader-writer's relationship has many objectives such as enjoyment, locating specific information, identifying the theme, and evaluating the text through a critical understanding. All these objectives will never be achieved without adopting a deep well-established mechanism for reading and understanding the text. In this regard, the presents paper aims at introducing a comprehensive understanding if visual poetry depending on the main principles of hermeneutic as a theory and methodology of understanding the human intellectual productions.

**Key words:** Hermeneutics, Visual Poetry, Multimodal-visual poetry

## INTRODUCTION:

To understand any text in an appropriate and logical way, it is necessary to perceive the explicit and implicit elements of the text. On the one hand, the explicit elements include the text itself and the relation between its entire parts. On the other hand, the implicit elements involve the author's major concerns, reasons for writing, and the relation between the text and the author's other intellectual productions. Consequently, it is necessary to shed light on hermeneutics as an intellectual methodology and approach concerned with interpreting, construing, explaining and analyzing the text as a human mental production.

Born in the womb of theology, mutated as a philosophy to discuss and analyze all kinds of texts either religious or secular, hermeneutics has emanated as one of the most effective intellectual behaviors which is able to interpret any human activity due to its comprehensivity and logical approach. Hermeneutics was mainly associated with interpreting the religious text. Afterwards, philosophy was able to generalize the theory to include all intellectual human productions, epically literature as it paved the way for breaking the borders between religious and secular hermeneutics to introduce the modern version of the theory.

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### **Visual Poetry: The complicated Genre**

Visual poetry is one of the most renewable genres of literature which adopts many techniques and mediums of both writing and reading that complicate the process of reading and interpreting it. That is why, the new genre is selected to be read and discussed through hermeneutics theory. Modern visual poetry adopts a wide range of movements, forms of plastic arts, and human activities. Recently, these movements and artistic forms have changed visual poetry from just a mere literary production into intermedia or a complicated piece of art of multiple human activities.

Generally, literature is the art of creative works that can be conveyed through word of mouth or written texts. However, modern visual poetry has changed this definition. Modern visual poetry redefines literature as creative pieces of art that combines both verbal and visual elements as mediums of communication.

Throughout the ages, poetry proved itself to be the crucible of all human activities and philosophies. It is a renewed movement which can fit the most recent movements and philosophies. Poetry can be briefly described as a mirror of the age in which it is written due to its ability to reflect the philosophies, trends, people's psychology and even the historical and political atmosphere of the age. Some poets imitate the previous masters' of poetry, while others want to destroy all the previous traditions of poetry.

Visual poetry is an interdisciplinary genre which is difficult to define, categorize and read. That is the why, hermeneutics, as a theory and methodology, is selected as the device by which the new genre can be explained and interpreted. The overlapped techniques used in the genre, besides the variety of influential movements make it difficult to understand. Thus, it is necessary to follow a well-formed mechanism in order to illustrate, explain, interpret, and construe this new complicated genre.

In spite the difficulty to define the genre, most literary theorists define visual poetry as the logical development of concrete poetry; however, modern visual poetry redefines the genre as intermedia in which non-representational language and visual elements are used as aids or substitutions for the traditional verbal elements. The genre represents an experimental poetic practice which is associated with an intermediate. As a multimodal literary genre, visual poetry can be defined as a combining employment of visual, verbal, and manual or digital human artistic activities that aims at constructing the meaning through introducing different hybrid representational techniques of writing or designing the poem (Huisman 41).

Through ages, many poets tried to create typical visual poems; however, they did not dare to break the traditional patterns of poetry. They were too close to produce a real visual poem, however, they failed. Richard Bradford considers John Milton's long poem, "Paradise Lost" one of the first conscious attempts to create a visual poem, as the poem adopts visual effects for conveying the main idea. He writes the following: "Milton's achievements are many, but the one with which he has not so far been credit is his role in the foundation of visual poetry" (14).

### **Visual Poetry through Ages: A Hermeneutic Reading**

A deep look into Robert Herrick's poetic production reveals two kinds of visual poems: the first appears in his "This cross tree here" in which he visualizes his text into the shape of cross without adding any illustrations. The second is a collaborative visual poem. For example, "Gather ye rosebuds," presents Herrick's poetic textual production. This poetic textual production was a source of inspiration for the English Pre-Raphaelite painter, John William Waterhouse, who turned Herrick's text into an unconscious form of visual poetry.

During the Renaissance, many metaphysical, religious and philosophical poets such as George Herbert (1593-1633) designed their poems in the shape of wings, altars, eggs, axes, and pan pipes in an attempt to make unconscious visual poems. In other words, they did not intend to create a real visual poem rather than to make something new, challenging, and more poetic. Herbert's "Easter Wings" and "The Alter" represent the early successful attempts to create a real visual poem as the poet tries to create a visual interpretation of the poem's meaning.

In hermeneutics, the purpose and the interpretation of these metaphysical poems differ from an age to another. During the Renaissance, especially the seventeenth century, the era of their production, the poems reveal the revival of interest in ancient Greek poetry in which the shape has a great significance in conveying the meaning

(Westerweel 67).

### Modern Visual Poetry and Hermeneutics

During Modernism, the poems were viewed as a new bid for the continuous renewing and breaking the traditions in each age. However, they are still innovative poems rather than being visual ones. Modernism and postmodernism represented the first spark for visuality in poetry. Imagists and objectivists such as William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), and Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) focused on the central image in the poems. Their innovative poetry inspired many contemporary concrete poets such as Mary Ellen Solt (1920-2007) to adopt concrete poetry as an individual school of poetry, which revives Herbert's "Easter Wings." Hence, postmodernism deals with "Easter Wings" as a concrete poem which depends on the rearrangement of the text. Nowadays, in the age of modern technology, the poem reaches the level of visual poem as it can be portrayed through many modern mediums such as ipads and mobile phones. The new term, visual poetry, has appeared to substitute many previous subclasses, including concrete poetry. Consequently, under different cultural, philosophical, historical, and artistic circumstances, the poem's understanding differs from an age to another.

During the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century, Mary Ellen Solt, Vasily Kamensky, and Ian Hamilton Finlay-along with three Brazilian poets, Augusto de Campos (1931- ), his brother Haroldo de Campos (1929-2003), and Décio Pignatari (1927-2012), in addition to a similar group in Europe and Noigandres group-created a new subclass of visual poetry which depends on visualizing the text by rearranging the text without the use of any outer visual factor (V. Smith 219). This new subclass is "concrete poetry." The main objective of the concrete-visual poets is to destroy all traditional forms of poetry in order to introduce innovative forms of poetry which depend on the rearrangement of the text. Thus, the early wave of concrete poetry created a new innovative form of poetry, which no one has introduced before (*Bohn, Reading* 120).

In hermeneutics, most concrete poems bear many different interpretations. The use of melancholic expressions, strange words, dots, dashes, and the unique rearrangement of the text in concrete poetry necessitates special hermeneutical principles, such as "authorial intention" and "part-whole" in order to perceive the meaning of the poem.

Besides the various explanations of concrete poems which are concluded through hermeneutical principles, another important hermeneutical principle must be taken into consideration. This principle depends on investigating the circumstances and the motives beyond writing the poem. By investigating the hidden facts about any concrete poem, the reader will discover that most concrete poems are a part of many *avant-garde* social and artistic movements.

It is worthy to notice that Objectivist and Imagist poets, especially William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, have a great influence on the presence of the modern visual poetry as they give the earlier and contemporary visual poets the inspiration to break the traditions of poetry and to make the poem recognized both verbally and visually. The early Imagist poets deal with the poem as an object "no ideas but in things" (Tashjian 59). In this regard, they deal with poems as "Machine made of words" (Halter 33).

The poem is not a typical visual poem; however, it reflects Williams' notion of central object which paved the way to the contemporary visual poem (MacGowan, *William* 6). In other words, Williams creates a poem in which the reader's mental imagery is responsible for turning it into a visual poem. In addition, the use of colors is very unique and interesting. For the first glance, the poem seems meaningless. However, the poet's strong adaptation of imagism power of visuality is able to transform the poem into a painting made out of Williams' inspiration.

In brief, Williams is not a quintessential visual poet. However, his style of writing, which depends on the use of luminous words and cubic way of seeing, increases the perception of colors and images within his poems. His strong desire to break the traditions of poetry has encouraged modern visual poets to create the contemporary form of visual poems rather than to create high-imagery poems. Consequently, free verse can be regarded as the first spark of modern visual poetry. In addition, the remarkable visual and concrete poet, Mary Ellen Solt, highlights this point by considering her friend and her most influential poet, William Carlos Williams, as an adviser and source of inspiration because Williams' poetry depends on introducing a central image within his poem besides making his poem to be seen through words (Rourke par. 2).

Like William Carlos Williams, all the early pioneers of concrete poetry consider the poem as an object or a description of itself (Bohn, *Reading* 125). The traditional poem is a reaction of external factors such as nature, feelings, philosophy, moralities, etc. Whereas, the concrete poem does not need this external factor as it has the ability to describe itself through the rearrangement of the text.

Some poets such as E.E Cummings (1894-1962) present concrete visual poems as experimental ones through which they introduce a special case of innovation, which represents Modernism or postmodernism. Like visual poetry, experimental poetry cannot be understood without regarding the visual element. For example, Cummings's "in Just-", "she is Brand", "there" and "Grasshopper," in addition to Dylan Thomas' poems (1914-1953) such as "vision and Prayer," are experimental poems with visual characteristics. In spite of the strong visual element in these poems, it is better to describe this phase of experimental visual poetry as "pre-concrete" era of visual poetry as it paved the way to the concrete poetry in 1950s (Bernstein, personal interview). The most outstanding poem in this "pre-concrete" era is Cummings' "Grasshopper":

*r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r*

**E. E. Cummings, 1894 - 1962**

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r  
 who  
 a)s w(e loo)k  
 upnowgath  
 PPEGORHRASS  
 eringint(o-  
 aThe):l  
 eA  
 !p:  
 S a  
 (r  
 rIvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)  
 to  
 rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly  
 ,grasshopper;

(*No Thanks*, 13)

E.E Cummings is always familiar with *avant-garde* styles, especially the Calligrammes of the French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). Cummings began as Modernist, changed to Imagist, and finally obsessed by Dadaism and Surrealism (Taupin, *The influence of French symbolism on modern American poetry* 247). This strange and unique mixture in Cummings' poetic career creates a strong sense of "intermedia" in his poetry. This "intermedia" is the major drive for all upcoming visual poems.

Depending on the principles of experimental poetry and believing in the power of visuality, Cummings introduces his "Grasshopper" in order to defamiliarize poetry through reconstructing the text. For the first stance, the reader notices a strange meaningless poem which contains shattered unrelated letters and symbols. However, on contemplating the entire poem again, the reader can perceive an image of a grasshopper which leaps, upgathers, disintegrates, and rearranges.

Generally, reading visual poems hermeneutically depends on three main levels which must be taken into consideration: explaining, construing, and illustrating. The first is "explaining" which depends on clarifying the

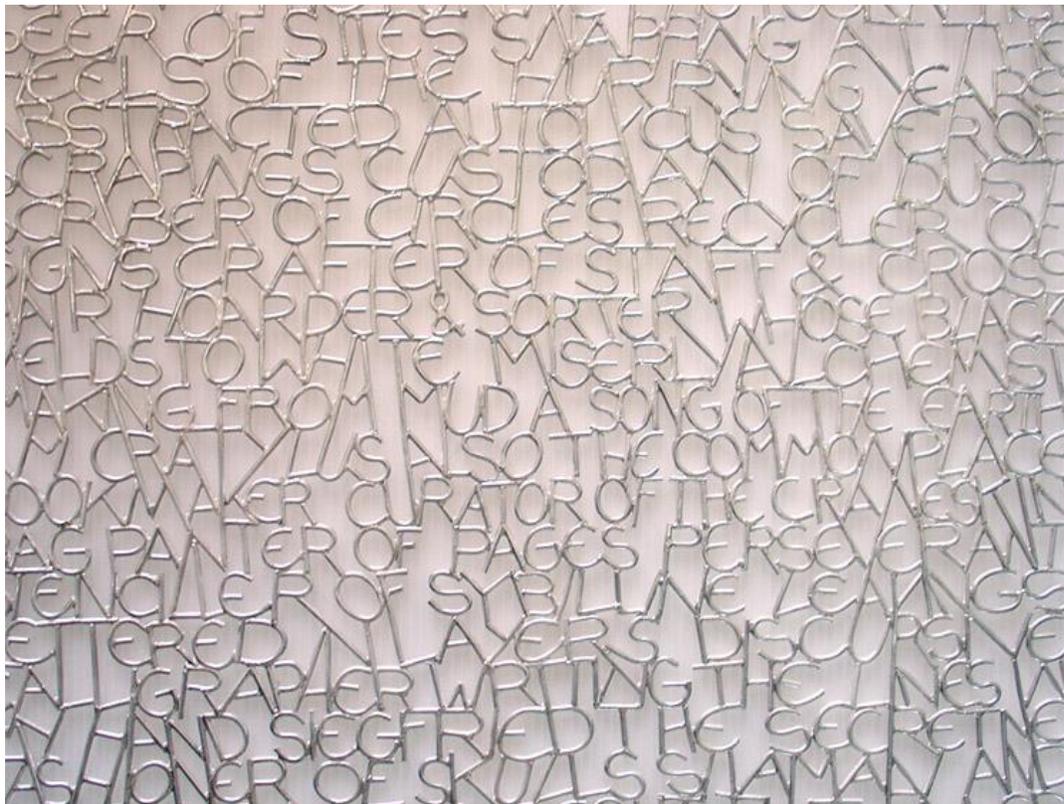
meaning and removing obscurity. The second is “construing the meaning” which is used to make an assumption based on evidence. The third level of the hermeneutical practices is “illustrating.” Illustrating means to shed light upon certain hidden points (Enani, personal interview).

Adopting hermeneutics theory, as a device for understanding, the poem reflects the poet’s affiliation with the *avant-garde* movements. This affiliation is the key guide for understanding the poem. The poem is heavily influenced by the visual poetry mother movements such as Minimalism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Fluxes. This influence clearly appears through the use of unfamiliar punctuation, spacing the words and the reduction of language. Another point to be taken into consideration is that the poem adopts the phenomenon of lexico-grammar, which emphasizes the interdependence continuity between vocabulary and syntax (Eggins 26).

### Modern Visual Poetry: *Avant-garde* and Hermeneutics

To give a full comprehensive hermeneutical description of modern visual poetry, it is necessary to be fully aware of four major features of the genre. The first is associated with the most influential *avant-grade* movements that affect the genre. The second is fragmentation as a major concern of the genre as a postmodern literary-artistic production. The third is the multi-cultural dimension of the genre. The fourth is the medium of writing and reading the visual poem, such as sculpture, paper, painting, photography, video, etc.

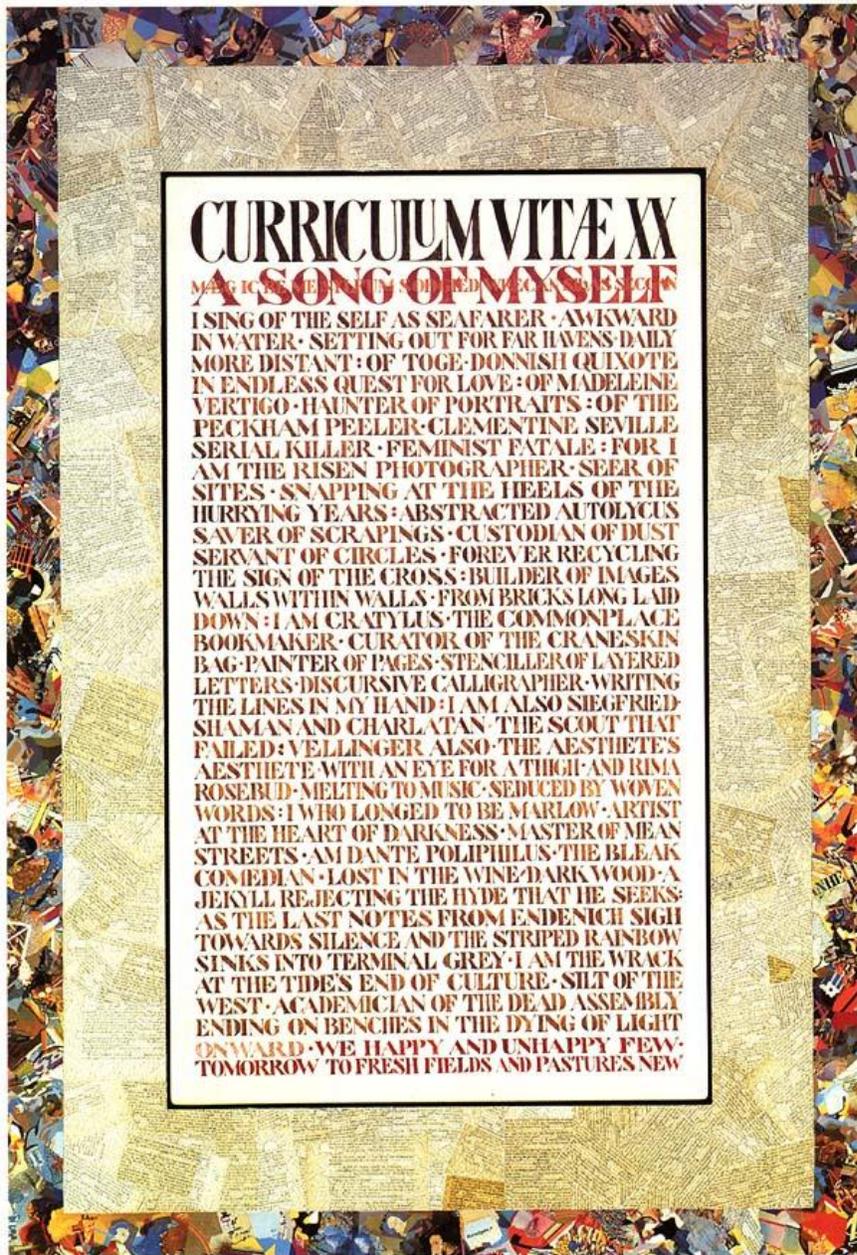
For example, the following poem “Self Portrait in Silver” is designed by the English artist and poet, Tom Philips. The poem is intermedia as it represents a combination of the verbal element of poetry and the visual element of sculpture. The visual element of the poem reflects a strong sense of Futurism and Dadaism as the poem emphasizes innovatively, fragmentation, visuality, and intertextuality.



(Philips, *Self Portrait in Silver*)

The verbal element of the poem represents a self-portrait in alliterative verse. The verbal element adopts the same meter of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem “Beowulf.” This reflects the postmodern feature of intertextuality or *pastiche*

in modern visual poetry. The verbal element is attributed to number XX in the series of paintings called *Curriculum Vitae*. This highlights another feature of intertextuality of the poem. This intertextuality reflects how the genre adopts various activities, cultures, techniques and identities in order to create a whole artistic life in one piece of art.



(XX - *Curriculum Vitae*)

Intertextuality or *Pastiche* is an important feature in modern visual poetry as many visual poems attribute remarkable and known poems to their newly produced poem in order to emphasize the multi-cultural aspect of visual poetry as interdisciplinary human artistic-literary activity. Despite intertextuality is considered a recent literary technique, it represents a European literary tradition of attributing Classics to newly-produced literary works in order to make them more authentic and original. The verbal element in *Curriculum Vitae* represents an imitation of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1819-1892):

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
 And what I assume you shall assume,  
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,  
 I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass...

(Song of Myself, *Leaves of Grass* 52)

Whitman's poem is written in free verse style as he praises words "as simple as grass." The two poems reflect a strong influence of Transcendentalism which emphasizes the power of innovation and talent (Goodman 1-5). The poet expresses a desire to "live amongst the animals" and to find divinity in the insects. The two poems reflect the concept of "self" as the two poets introduce themselves in the poems as narrators in order to increase the sense of Transcendentalism in their poems.

In hermeneutics, Tom Philips' poem cannot be understood without applying four hermeneutical principles: 1) authorial intention; 2) part-whole/whole-part; 3) reading the text through its symbols; and 4) Existentialists reading. Firstly, "authorial intention" reflects Tom Phillips' tendency to use clear and bold intermedia forms, such as painting, sculpture, and textile. Secondly, "Part-whole/whole-part's relation" highlights the triple relation between three literary and artistic works: Philips' "Self Portrait in Silver," his *Curriculum Vitae*, and Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." In other words, each one of these three literary-artistic works represents a reference or a guide for understanding the others. Thirdly, "reading the text through its symbols" reveals Philips' association to Futurism and Dadaism as the main drives for his visual elements in his poems. Fourthly, the Existentialists reading of the poem focuses on the author's desire to express himself in terms of Transcendentalism and authenticity as the poem asserts his own personality, spirit, and artistic directions.

### **Multimodal Visual poetry: A Hermeneutic Reading**

In the twenty first century, visual poetry has begun to take the form of multimodal poetry or what can be called inter-disciplinary art activity in which the poet introduces various interdisciplinary art activities. For example, in photo-poetry, the poet takes a photo and comments on it in a poetic language. Nowadays, poetry has a strong association with modern technologies. Some modern visual poets employ 3D effects and multiple animation effects to formulate their visual poems. During the twentieth century everything was clearly oriented toward visuality such as cinema, comics, movies, newspapers, advertisement, etc. Consequently, poetry had to cope up with this visual revolution through the gate of visual poetry.

Recently, modern technology had a great effect on visual poetry. The modern modes of culture and human activities such as videos, advertisements and cinema, besides plastic arts found new freedoms, new possibilities, and new areas of creation through dealing with visual poetry as one of the modern trends that tries to merge art with literature. One of the most challenging forms of visual poem is photo-poem or poetic photography, in which the poet takes a photo with his camera then he tries to describe this photo in a poetic language (Sanders 3). One of the famous collections of photo-poems is composed by Tracy Cooper and photographed by Paul Romagnoli, under the name of *Sea, Sands, Poems, Pictures*.

This collection of poems asserts three facts of visual poetry, especially its subclass, photo-poem: 1) many visual poems are collaborative works as they are composed by a poet and designed or photographed by another artist or painter; 2) visual poetry asserts the notion of intermedia as it includes, besides poetry, other human activities; 3) visual poetry is an attempt to popularize poetry through portraying people's daily life.

This book of photo-poems highlights the fundamental principles of poetry. In other words, it avoids the problem of de-anesthetization of visual poetry. In this book of poems, the poet writes his poem in an individual page which comes after another separate page which contains the photo. For example, the following poem opens with an illustration in order to pave the way for the key idea of the poem:



(Cooper and Romagnoli, *Sea, Sands, Poems, Pictures* 14)

The illustration represents a black and white photo which includes an archaic old boat by the sea. The use of black and white has a great significance as it represents certain topics such as suffering, old crafts, and human emotions (Abdulah par.6). Furthermore, the use of black and white photos instead of colors looked as if one was going back in time, seeing history. Thus, the photo makes up the reader's elementary understanding of what will come next through the upcoming text. The atmosphere of the poem will be gloomy, nostalgic and emotional:

# Old Boat by the Sea

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Left to ruin ... weather-beaten, washed ashore?  
 A trinket, a treasure  
 bearing blemishes, cracks ...  
 some say eyesore ...  
 yet the craft indigenous remains ...  
 the vessel  
 its presence isn't in vain ...  
 one can only guess at its history ...  
 one's mind can evoke fantastic imagery ...  
 was it tossed to and fro,  
 or in the storm did the course charted  
 she maintain?  
 why was she left?  
 why is she wrecked ?  
 did she ride waves high?  
 did her occupants perish?  
 what was her fame?  
 on the sand by rocks and weeds  
 she remains ...  
 to what does her objectivity pertain?  
 ... old boat by the sea.

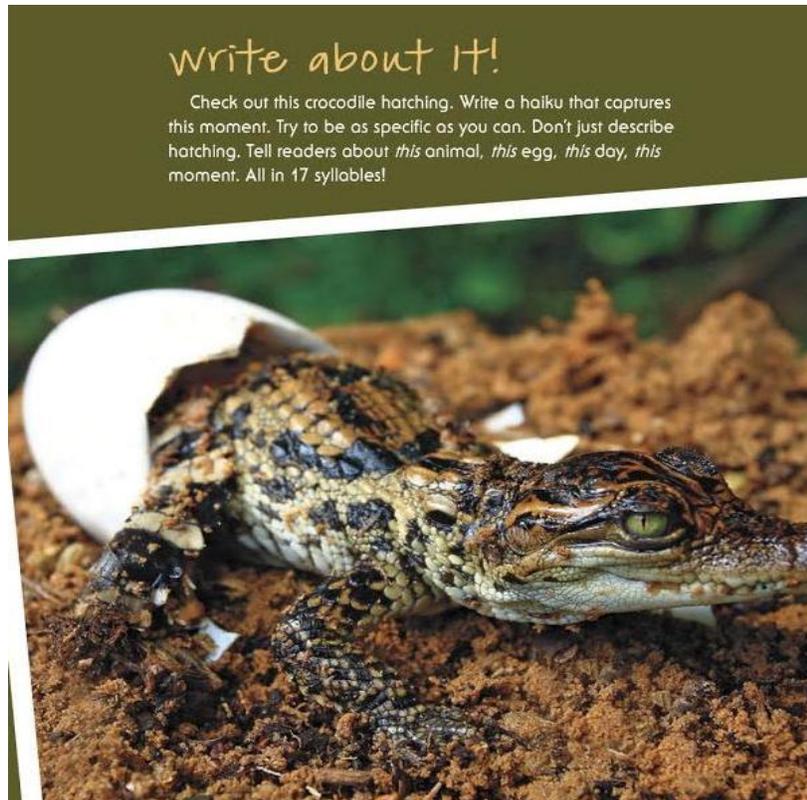
(Cooper and Romagnoli, *Sea, Sands, Poems, Pictures* 15)

The first part of the poem, which represents the visual element, paves the way to the second part, which contains the verbal element of the poem. There is no introduction within the poem. There are no opening lines as the visual element in the poem acts as an opening line, which introduces the theme of the poem. The first line of the poem depicts the boat's "ruined," "beaten" and "washed away" status, through a question mark which emphasized the poet's surprise and sympathy for the boat's condition. The use of "trinket" and "treasure" asserts the boat's past glory. The poet reaches the highest point of depression, mentioning "some say eyesore..." However, he challenges the gloomy atmosphere, made by both verbal and visual elements, asserting that "yet the craft indigenous remains..." Here, the poet announces that the craft will survive and challenge all difficult circumstances.

After that, the poet substitutes the term "boat" by the term "vessel" as an attempt to glorify this poet. Again, the poet challenges the gloomy atmosphere by transforming the old and destroyed image of the boat into a sign of originality and inspiration. The poet uses the biblical expression "tossed to and fro" for describing the boat's movement against waves and winds as a sign of its power and originality. It is worth mentioning that the heavy use of ellipsis (...) asserts that the poet does not need to add more words, perhaps because the visual element in the poem has reinforced the reader's understanding of the verbal element.

Besides that, the heavy use of rhetorical questions in the poem is an attempt to cast a shadow on a certain point through using an impressive and persuasive device. This point may be the metaphorical use of the boat to describe poets and poetry. This boat represents poetry which suffers from marginalization; however, the iconic poetic works still inspire and encourage the modern poets to introduce new poetic works. The poet's message here is that poetry will survive with the originality of archaic works besides the newness of modern poetic movements such as visual poetry.

In this respect, it is necessary to mention that visual poetry aims at popularizing literature by blending it with other human activities and various forms of plastic arts. Furthermore, it tries to destroy the traditional concepts of Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, and even postmodernism by creating new arenas of thinking and creativity. In the following poem, the poet popularizes his poem by blending two human activities into one piece of art:



(Salas, *Picture Yourself Writing Poetry* 14)

The poem reflects the use of photography for reinforcing imagery in poetry. The poet emphasizes the flexibility of poetry by mixing it with other human activities such as photography. Here, the poet asserts that there is no contradiction between poetry and photography as the poet can write his poem in *haiku*, and then he can reinforce his poetic imagination with taking a photo. As a device of imagery in visual poetry, photography helps the poet not to miss any details within the scene. The significance of taking a photo of a newborn crocodile lies in expressing the coming of the newborn genre of poetry. The poem is not written in *haiku*; however, he mentions the term in order to show his poetic knowledge and his ability to write traditional poems as well as visual ones. Besides the innovative visual technique of photography, the poet uses letters in italics as a traditional visual technique. Consequently, the poem highlights visual poetry connection with populism through linking poetry to daily human activities or what is known as “socio-cultural response to art and literature.” This response appears in visual poetry’s connection with photography.

**CONCLUSION:**

To sum up, visual poetry is a complicated newborn genre of poetry which entered the realm of literature as a set of human artistic activities, philosophies, and *avant-garde* movements. There is no accurate definition for visual poetry; however, it can be generally defined as the kind of poetry which utilizes both visual and verbal elements. Visual poetry can also be defined as intermedia between poetry and other human activities including painting, sculpture, and modern technological use of graphics. The genre has long and fascinating roots as it dates back to ancient times and continued to fit any development in the human artistic mentality. Due to the unfamiliar techniques used in visual poetry, it is necessary to follow a well-established theory and methodology to elucidate the new genre. Accordingly, hermeneutics is recommended to explain, construe, and illustrate this new kind of poetry which is heavily influenced by plastic arts and *avant-garde*. As a final point visual poetry can be analyzed and understood through the main principles of hermeneutics, such as authorial intention, "part-whole relationship," and linking the poem to the author's age and his other works.

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