

# **A Study on Visual Literacy: similarities between visual strategies in Portuguese Concrete Poems of the 70s and contemporary ads**

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## **Abstract**

Of late, there has been renewed interest in Portuguese Concrete (or Experimental) poetry of the 60s and the 70s. Experimentalism is a recurrent tendency in literary history and, by deliberately choosing to designate their own production as such, Portuguese poets such as E.M. de Melo e Castro and Ana Hatherly were foregrounding the disruptive character of their production and of their literary tenets. Concrete poetry rebelled against the previous poetic practice and the inadequacy of the existing language of criticism to describe the new materials of the poems: in fact, Concrete poets were establishing a renewed literary and philosophical theory on which they based their conception of poetry as a matter of global perception, where the poem is no longer a token of meaning conveyed by whatever significance might be encapsulated in the words chosen; rather, full meaning lies in its materiality and in the words and their combinations on their physical support as visually significant elements. This will to transcend the boundaries of linguistically-bound signification also led to a reassessment of the creative uses of visuals in areas such as advertising, since, notwithstanding basic differences as to the purpose of both practices (ads ultimately want to sell, poems offer aesthetic fruition for its own sake), there is a coincidence of strategies that provides the reader/viewer with new experiences in world perception: ads appeal to all our senses simultaneously, the better to make us adhere to their worldview, and visuals play a major role in this. That is also the approach in Concrete poems, which frees literature from its 'slavery from the word'. A new type of visual literacy is thus reclaimed by these poets for the proper decoding of their practice (which, ideally, will no longer be word-bound) – similar to the comprehensive creative freedom that advertising has traditionally enjoyed.<sup>1</sup>

**Key Words:** Experimental poetry, literary practices, linguistic boundaries, visual literacy, advertising, worldviews.

## **1. Introductory note: Portuguese Experimental Poetry (PO.EX) and its basic tenets**

The aim of literary experimentalism in general is to overcome limits, and transgression of previous conventions is one of its favourite tools to achieve that goal. Portuguese Experimental Poetry (henceforward referred to as PO.EX) was not an exception. Within the political context of repression that characterized the 60s in Portugal, PO.EX poets were simultaneously defying prevalent social values as well as the literary and critical canon<sup>2</sup>. The small group of poets that expanded the creative boundaries of poetry writing at this time were the same ones who were producing a strong body of literary criticism with a didactic purpose. Their marginal status at the time (the ‘causa ingrata’ referred to by the poet Ana Hatherly)<sup>3</sup> is confirmed by the lack of institutional attention given to the movement:

The fact that most important and influential books published in Portugal rarely mentioned their activities, aesthetics, and works seems to explain the dismissal of concrete poetry by official criticism as well as its absence in the general curricula of literary studies. And the main works, published in journals and artist’s books, were unavailable in most libraries and bookstores until Mendes de Sousa and Ribeiro’s anthology was published in 2006.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for this lack of visibility can be attributed to several factors: one of them clearly has to do with the difficulties inherent to the reading and interpretation of a new poetic practice, where the very conception of genre which governed previous critical interpretation is deliberately disrupted and new poetic forms appear and evolve,<sup>5</sup> where the written words and their respective combinations in the poem are still valued for their intrinsic semantic meaning (as they traditionally are) but, rather, they are treasured for their visual creative potential. In fact, according to the poets themselves, the ‘newness’ of this approach is debatable, since the origins of visual poetry can be traced back at least to the fifteen century<sup>6</sup>. The concern with visual matter within this group of poets will also assume different forms, which also accounts for a certain lack of cohesion that impairs public visibility. The following excerpt explains the eclectic nature of the corpuses produced – some of which already tentatively explore and

incorporate other codes - apart from verbal text and visual material - in their poetic endeavours:

Salette Tavares addresses the verbal plasticity of the other arts with the use of materials for the construction of her object-poems and her graphic poetry, such as jewellery, tapestry and pottery. Ana Hatherly explores the visual resources of handwriting and calligraphy; Herberto Helder develops refined combinatory techniques, foreshadowing experiences with computers and cybernetic literature; António Aragão explores photocopying and electrography; and Ernesto M. de Melo e Castro, a pioneer of video-poetry, explores digital media, quite ahead of his time<sup>7</sup>.

Concrete poets were rebelling against the compartments where contents and forms were traditionally shut,<sup>8</sup> proclaiming that aesthetic perception is, first and foremost, a form of perception by itself, notwithstanding its specific character – its role as a communication act will only be accomplished when global fruition takes place.<sup>9</sup> This comprehensiveness in terms of perception, which encompasses appeals to all sensory organs at once, will only be achieved by the fusion of different signs and codes, in a permanent will to experiment with diverse possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Thus freed from the physical boundaries of the printed word, the poetic object is read in terms of *inter-contamination* of the diverse codes and channels that support it (or even constitute its essence); hence the transformation of words as tokens of signification or semantic capsules into *image-things*,<sup>11</sup> where their visuality as a conveyor of meaning is enhanced.

This semantic disruption is aimed at obtaining ‘the maximum poetic information’<sup>12</sup>, where the reader becomes an accomplice or a co-performer in the process of achieving full significance. The poetic output is seen as a work in progress, since these poems emphasize the dynamic quality of the experience, as a replacement for the more static character of the printed poem.<sup>13</sup> This dynamism, however, can hamper immediate legibility, since occidental readers have been educated to read a text according to a left-right axis, and from top to bottom, apprehending the words as chains of meaningful semantic units, which begin with the first word of the poem and end with its last one. Whatever rhetoric devices might direct our imagination to other codes (such as repetition, alliteration or rhyme) they are nevertheless word-bound: according to the traditional canon, words rule. When we are faced with Concrete visual poems, practical issues such as the following arise at once: ‘How to read? From front to back, left to right, or both in reverse?’<sup>14</sup>, a set of questions that still reveals a degree of subservience to conventional temporality and page layout imposed by the verbal code. On the

contrary, these new poems demand something else, since, ‘[a]s visual shape, the whole text, like a graphic figure, asks to be perceived instantaneously and simultaneously.’<sup>15</sup> It is precisely in this matter of the instantaneous grasping of meaning conveyed by different codes working all at once that we may find one of the most obvious points of contact between the two acts of communication that constitute the theme of this article: Concrete poetry and advertising.

## **2. Advertising discourse as (the ultimate) multi-modal experience?**

This crossover between a specific type of poetry and advertising might strike one as downright heretical – had it not been proposed and put to practice by at least two of the major names in Concrete poetry. In fact, the Portuguese poet E.M. de Melo e Castro produced essays where he reflects on some striking similarities between the two discourses;<sup>16</sup> on the other hand, Brazilian poet Décio Pignatari (who, with Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, was one of the founders of the Concretist movement), apart from owning an advertising agency for several years, also produced commercial ads for a number of products, which are often included in anthologies of his poetic output<sup>17</sup> - therefore, if we err in establishing such a parallel, we do so in good company.

To lay the basis for this comparison, the following excerpt can be used to describe a very specific act of communication encased in *texts*:

They are [...] spatio-temporal structures in which highly reduced verbal material has been submitted to a rigidly controlled process. They are almost completely impersonal: there is no lyrical “I” in these texts, nor is there a narrative voice. Rather than communicating a subjective experience or formulating a “message”, they exploit the visual, aural, and semantic qualities of their verbal material and explore the possibilities inherent in the accidents of phonic and visual correspondences.<sup>18</sup>

This excerpt describes the shared features of Brazilian Concrete poems during the “heroic phase” of the movement. However, it is not difficult to read it as a formal characterization that could be applied to a plethora of contemporary commercial ads, where the content is apparently unrelated to the product or service at stake and where the notion of game, playfulness and visual creativity seem to surpass the underlying commercial imperatives. Both discourses, albeit

for different purposes, strive to ‘reactivate the codes, thus arriving at new mechanisms for producing meaning’.<sup>19</sup>

As we said at the beginning, we are aware that building a bridge between poetry and advertising may be risky. And the biggest risk lies, perhaps in the esteem (or lack of it) the public feels towards these two genres: in fact, advertising is often the object of mistrust, since it has an ‘hidden agenda’ that everyone over the age of three is familiar with – i.e. to sell<sup>20</sup>. When ads attempt to minimize that obvious purpose, they are routinely challenged on grounds of untruthfulness, shallowness, irrelevance – all of them breaches of conversational principles that most of us feel should apply to a purpose-oriented, well-defined and pragmatic discourse such as advertising. On the other hand, poetry, as literature in general, is attributed an almost sacred status reserved to art and artistic fruition, where the emphasis lies not so much on the ulterior purpose of the communication act, but on the communication process itself. Poems are art, whereas ads are not, and definitely, for classification purposes, the two cannot be put in the same shelf. Conversational (or everyday) principles that we demand of ads do not apply to poetry or literature, since their purpose is encased in what they are: ‘What is the truth, relevance, clarity, brevity or politeness of a novel or a poem?’<sup>21</sup> This dichotomy between the loftiness of ideals of poetry and the tainted character of advertising is apparent even in Melo e Casto’s essay (referred to above), where the two discourses are shown to have several similarities:

It is [...] to be expected that there will be different advertising discourses that fit the different media and communicational supports, and, in a similar manner, that are appropriate to the different receivers. And this is where the major difference from poetic discourse can be found, since, in it, the emphasis is put on its own construction materials and its addressee is the universal individual, whereas in advertising discourse [...] the emphasis is put on a well-defined addressee and the purpose of the text is to lead that addressee to action, which is not exactly a textual action, since its scope lies beyond the reading process, i.e. to buy something [...].<sup>22</sup>

Following the above excerpt, Melo e Castro’s essay presents a number of examples that confirm this pragmatic and mercantilist character of ads, which makes this genre a closed one. In fact, his conclusion is that similarities are superficial, since their very nature separates them – and poetry easily emerges as the winner from this parallel, since it is the only discourse that can effectively embody transcendent and universal doubts and hopes of individuals:

Also centred upon the elements of its own construction, but not necessarily conclusive in an univocal manner, it is the poetic text that, in its openness finds the problematic space where meaning becomes probabilistic. In it, comparisons are not merely comparisons, analogies are not merely analogies and metaphors themselves tend to be the construction of another reality, where totality is holographically projected. Meaning unfolds in meanings and fragments contain the whole.<sup>23</sup>

Advertising comes out of this strife as the ‘ugly sister’, whose main asset is that of providing a (deceptive) sense of closure to a word that should be infinite in all its possibilities. For Melo e Castro, as for a number of academics who write on the subject of advertising and its effects on the social system,<sup>24</sup> ads are almost poetic (but not quite) – their mastery in the use of creative strategies is begrudgingly acknowledged – but they are always seen as inherently manipulative, devious and particularly dangerous because they so closely resemble ‘the fine arts’.

There is an evident fear of hybridism when it comes to advertising. If there is something stable in terms of genre definition about ads is precisely their refusal to stay put: ads will borrow whatever they need from other discourses for their own purposes. This is healthy miscegenation, some would say, very similar to what happens constantly with a myriad other discourses. On the other hand, this is vampire-like behaviour, ‘drawing blood from everything that might be useful’, as detractors of advertising would put it.

When reading Melo e Castro’s essay with the eyes of someone who analyses contemporary ads, what strikes us immediately is the fact that he is imposing a rather restricted and formulaic view on what advertising, in general, is like. It is a fact that he provides examples to illustrate his characterisation – however, they are all of the same kind: ultimately fact-oriented, with more or less explicit promises to a well-defined public. Effectively, they correspond to the cliché of the classic detergent ad, a prototypical advert of the slice-of-life type, which has been so exhaustively used that it has almost become a parody of itself – and has even been used as such in recent ads, who intertextually nudge their viewers to play with, enlarge and expand advertising tradition – rather in the same way Concrete poets did when they started their avant-garde movement, incorporating the visuality of the words they were working with as yet another layer of meaning, adding a palpably dynamic dimension to an otherwise static and stable poetic construct.

This emphasis on the visual code (either in the visual materiality and iconicity of advertising logos<sup>25</sup> or in contemporary ads (which so foreground the sensorial appeal of their images as to displace commercial imperatives to the back of viewers' minds)<sup>26</sup> is indeed similar in its inner functioning in both discourses, regardless of ultimate purpose. Increasingly more, we are confronted with ads which position themselves as objects of aesthetic fruition, which can function as such even for publics other than their intended target audiences. In fact, they work as cinematic, holistic or even delirious experiences of a global appeal, as described in the following extract:

The woman written with five letters is a signifier – she cannot look at me. On the contrary, the woman that appears in the spot is not only an iconic sign that lies on the basis of that metaphor [...] but also a visual gestalt that is able to capture me with her glances at a delirious mirror – delirious because I feel looked at and recognised by a woman who is not there and does not look at me, i.e. an imaginary woman<sup>27</sup>.

This is a part of the analysis of an ad for a perfume. Or does it try to explain the workings of a Concrete poem? Although the first option is the correct one, it could undoubtedly apply to both.

### **3. Conclusion**

Although a partial parallelism between Concrete poetry and advertising has been proposed (or even put in practice) by Concrete poets themselves, the points of interference were normally drawn at a rather superficial level, i.e. in terms of most evident creative strategies. In this comparison, advertising draws the short straw and is relegated to a sort of artistic limbo, since, according to these perspectives, it is condemned by the fact that it is a discourse with an agenda, whereas poetry's aims are selfless and universal, therefore establishing its constructs as artistic. This paper has tried to establish a more deep-seated kind of similarity, regardless of the ultimate aim of these two discourses. Effectively, in the same manner Concretism opened new perspectives and paved the way to newforms of artistic expression, recent trends in advertising have instituted innovative ways of appealing to the public, by interweaving the different codes at their disposal in the different media – which also become a part of the message itself. Many contemporary ads are objects of contemplation and sensorial fruition, which make to most of the means and physicality of their material supports, and

*A Study on Visual Literacy: similarities between visual strategies in Portuguese  
Concrete Poems of the 70s and contemporary ads*

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where all codes concur to convey a global message – a message which will still make sense and appeal even to those who have no intention of acquiring what is being advertised and fall outside the target audience intended.

**Notes**

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- <sup>2</sup> Rui Torres, 'Poetics and the Politics of the Portuguese Experimental Poetry.' In *Enquadramento Teórico e Contexto Crítico da PO.EX: Volume 1 – Cadernos e Catálogos*, edited by Rui Torres (2008), <http://www.po-ex.net>.
- <sup>3</sup> Ana Hatherly, 'Perspectivas para a poesia visual: reinventar o futuro.' In *Poemografias: Perspectivas da Poesia Visual Portuguesa*, edited by Fernando Aguiar and Silvestre Pestana (Lisboa: Ulmeiro, 1985), 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Rui Torres, 'Concrete Poetry in Portugal: Experimentalism and Intermediality.' In *Poetica*, 74 (2009), 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Rui Torres, 'Poesia Experimental e Ciberliteratura: por uma literatura marginal izada.' In *Enquadramento Teórico e Contexto Crítico da PO.EX: Volume 1 – Cadernos e Catálogos*, edited by Rui Torres (2008), <http://www.po-ex.net>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ana Hatherly's anthological work *A Experiência do prodígio - Bases teóricas e antologia de textos visuais portugueses dos séculos XVII e XVIII*. (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 1983) traces this concern with the visual in literary history back to the fifteenth century, a least, which would confirm that the trend, in itself, is not new but, rather, used in a new manner by the Concretist movement.
- <sup>7</sup> Rui Torres, 'Concrete Poetry in Portugal: Experimentalism and Intermediality.' In *Poetica*, 74 (2009), 33.
- <sup>8</sup> Eunice Ribeiro, 'Concretismo: experiência(s) de "intercodificação".' In *Enquadramento Teórico e Contexto Crítico da PO.EX: Volume 1 – Cadernos e Catálogos*, edited by Rui Torres (2008), <http://www.po-ex.net>.
- <sup>9</sup> Salette Tavares, 'Forma e Criação.' In *Brotéria* 81 (1965), 605.
- <sup>10</sup> Eunice Ribeiro, 'Concretismo: experiência(s) de "intercodificação".' In *Enquadramento Teórico e Contexto Crítico da PO.EX: Volume 1 – Cadernos e Catálogos*, edited by Rui Torres (2008), <http://www.po-ex.net>.
- <sup>11</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, 'Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry.' In *RiLUnE*, 5 (2006), 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Eunice Ribeiro, 'E.M. de Melo e Castro: experiências poéticas com corpos radiantes.' In *Enquadramento Teórico e Contexto Crítico da PO.EX: Volume 1 – Cadernos e Catálogos*, edited by Rui Torres (2008), <http://www.po-ex.net>, 107, our translation.
- <sup>13</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, 'Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry.' In *RiLUnE*, 5 (2006), 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, 'Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry.' In *RiLUnE*, 5 (2006), 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Claus Clüver, 'Reflections on Verbivocovisual Ideograms.' In *Poetics Today*, Vol 3: 3 (1982), 138.
- <sup>16</sup> E.M. de Melo e Castro, 'Ah! Você Comparou!... Notas sobre alguns padrões de interferência entre o texto poético e o texto publicitário.' In *Voos da Fênix Crítica- Volume II* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 1998).
- <sup>17</sup> Pedro Reis, *Poesia Concreta: uma prática intersemiótica* (Porto, Edições Universidade Fernando Pessoa, 1998), 74.
- <sup>18</sup> Claus Clüver, 'Reflections on Verbivocovisual Ideograms.' In *Poetics Today*, Vol 3: 3 (1982), 137.
- <sup>19</sup> Pedro Reis, *Poesia Concreta: uma prática intersemiótica* (Porto, Edições Universidade Fernando Pessoa), 128.
- <sup>20</sup> Elsa Freitas, 'Advertising the Medium: On the narrative worlds of a multimedia promotional campaign for a public service television channel.' In *Intermediality and Storytelling*, edited by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin & New York, De Gruyter, 2010), 259.
- <sup>21</sup> Guy Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising: New Edition* (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), 154.
- <sup>22</sup> E.M. de Melo e Castro, 'Ah! Você Comparou!... Notas sobre alguns padrões de interferência entre o texto poético e o texto publicitário.' In *Voos da Fênix Crítica- Volume II* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 1998), 102, our translation.
- <sup>23</sup> E.M. de Melo e Castro, 'Ah! Você Comparou!... Notas sobre alguns padrões de interferência entre o texto poético e o texto publicitário.' In *Voos da Fênix Crítica- Volume II* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 1998), 105, our translation.
- <sup>24</sup> Among others, Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements* (London & Boston, Massachusetts, Marion Boyars, 1987); Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication* (London & New York, Routledge, 1982) and Michael L. Geis, *The Language of Television Advertising* (New York, Academic Press, 1982).
- <sup>25</sup> Claus Clüver and Burton Watson, 'On Intersemiotic Transposition.' In *Poetics Today*, Vol. 10: 1 (1989), 87.
- <sup>26</sup> Elsa Freitas, *Taboo in Advertising* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia. John Benjamins, 2008) 60.
- <sup>27</sup> Jesus González Requena and Amaya Ortiz de Zárate, *El Spot Publicitário: las metamorfosis del deseo* (Madrid, Cátedra, 1995), 60.

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