

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# FROM AVANT-GARDE TO THE DIGITAL AGE: RECONCEPTUALIZING EXPERIMENTAL CATALAN POETRY

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### **Text and image before the digital**

Much ink has been spilled in regard to the topic of the text (script) and image relationship. A fully comprehensive examination of the interactions between script and image in twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetics should cover a period spanning from the first avant-garde's visual poetry, through the 1960s experimental poetry—concretism, lettrism, phonetic and process poetry—and culminating in today's digital and electronic poetry. In order to limit the length of the essay I will, however, primarily focus on the two periods that bookend contemporary experimental poetry (with a special emphasis on the digital), leaving the 1960s, which I only mention briefly, for a future investigation. Such an examination also requires that we first determine the changing understanding of the analogy between the visual arts (painting, photography, film) and the verbal arts (poetry, prose).<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay will be to investigate how metaphors (visual and aural) have played a key role in the relatively seamless fusion of verbal and visual meaning in experimental poetry, starting with the historical avant-gardes and then proceeding to the digital

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *analogy* here, rather than *relationship* or *correspondence*, because it goes further than just establishing relationships and comparisons between two things, in this case, painting and poetry. It does so with the purpose of determining important similarities between the two items compared, often by defining one in the terms of the other, while maintaining a distinction between them. I will use the term metaphor for more specific, poetic instances of comparison. Yet, aiming to destabilize the clear-cut categories that separate language into figurative and literal, I will occasionally use the terms interchangeably.

age. Additionally, we shall see how in digital poetry the fusion of word and image is enhanced through movement and sound, in a process of synthesis that also plays a role in subject formation. By triggering affective responses through mobilizing complex metaphors and by eliciting the active response of readers (who also act as viewers and users), digital poems work to create viewing subjects willing to approach an inter-semiotic poem, and to position themselves so as to cooperate creatively with the computer in an interdependent process of making meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Spanish and Catalan writers and artists, by virtue of their singular location at a cultural crossroads between Europe and Latin America, the “old” world and the “new,” have had a special insight into the newest trends in experimental poetry coming from both sides of the Atlantic. In addition, it has not been unusual for Catalan artists to be at the forefront and even to anticipate the latest trends in experimental poetry. In this essay I trace the word/image relationship as manifested in contemporary digital poetry by first making a digression through its roots in the historic avant-garde and by using Spanish and Catalan works as my texts for analysis.

The inter-artistic analogy has a lengthy tradition going back to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica*—and his often mis-interpreted dictum, *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>3</sup> This Horatian simile, which translates “as is painting, so is poetry,” had limited application in its original context, but was extended during the Renaissance at which point poetry and painting became known as “the sister arts.”<sup>4</sup> In his seminal study *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (1940), Rennselaer W. Lee states that during the Renaissance the sister arts were acknowledged as different “in means and manner of expression, but were considered almost identical in fundamental nature, in content, and in purpose.”<sup>5</sup> Some early modern theorists considered any composition, whether a painting,

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<sup>2</sup> Dealing with far-ranging topics such as love, disability, or the nature of communication, recent digital poems require the reader to enter into an iterative process with the machine, thus entering a hybrid space of collaboration.

<sup>3</sup> The key passages can be found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* II, 1; VI, 19-21; XXV, 26-28; and also in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* 1-13; 361-65.

<sup>4</sup> Horace’s complete quote has more to do with similarities in how a painting or poem can be appreciated and interpreted, through either a close viewing/reading, or examining the work at a distance, and taking it in at a glance. For Horace, the analogy between painting and poetry was a rhetorical strategy used to make a specific point, not to advocate for the interchangeable nature of the two arts. For a lengthy exploration of this subject see Trimpi 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Lee 1940, 197.

sculpture, or even prose, to be poetry (applying the meaning of *poiesis* as creation), pushing the analogy to efface any differences between the arts.

During the Enlightenment, Gotthold E. Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) posed a serious challenge to the notion of the sister arts. Lessing focused not on the similarities but rather on the differences between poetry (script-based arts) and painting (also sculpture and architecture), advocating for the "purity" of the arts, and revealing an early modern rationalist desire to establish limits and well-defined categories. In this case, purity is the notion that medium specificity should be respected, and that the artwork in one medium (say painting) should not be contaminated by the influence of another medium (say poetry). Lessing was making an early argument for media specificity, for artistic "purity," and by extension, advocating for the apartheid of word and image. He qualified painting as a spatial art and poetry as a temporal one, a difference that he viewed as irreconcilable. The difference hinges on the idea that spatial art is experienced only after its creation, while the temporal is experienced as it unfolds in time, as it comes into being.

By now Lessing's separation of painting and poetry into the spatial and temporal arts has been thoroughly problematized, both by more contemporary theoretical accounts and via avant-garde and experimental artistic praxis. W. J. T. Mitchell, among many other critics, has long championed the cause of literature's spatiality, arguing that "spatial form is a crucial aspect of the experience and interpretation of literature in all ages and cultures."<sup>6</sup> The spatial/temporal division becomes even more ontologically unstable once we question the separation between process and finished product, given that the evolution of a visual work of art, a painting in process, for instance, is also a temporal activity. Precisely one of the avant-garde's strategies was to bring forth the process, to make the creation of the art object a visible part of the "finished" product, blurring the line between a work in progress and the final work.

While important differences between the arts do exist, so do grounds for an analogical treatment of the relationship between script and image. Metaphor can be a useful tool to sort out both similarities and differences, between script and image, and between the arts.<sup>7</sup> Despite modernism's attempts to produce a theory that maintained the division of the arts in practice and criticism, a growing promiscuity and hybridization in the arts (especially post-1960) has dealt a death-blow to notions of genre and

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell 1980, 273.

<sup>7</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson define metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (idem 1980, 5).

artistic “purity,” notions further compromised by the increased intermediality brought about by contemporary digital arts. Although there might not be a unified theory of the arts toward which to strive, Mitchell states that some of the arts, such as painting and poetry, are not *in essence* different, displaying “no difference, that is, given for all time by the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent or the laws of the human mind.”<sup>8</sup> Inhabiting the limit where the arts overlap has its rewards. Mitchell has advocated for probing aggressively into this territory without fear of transgressing the limits of the inter-artistic analogy, pursuing what he describes as a “road of excess,” the dangerous crossing of disciplinary boundaries. In order to do that, according to Mitchell, we must “abandon our cautious reverence toward the generic laws that divide image from text.”<sup>9</sup>

However, just because the categories of text and image have been systematically destabilized over the course of the twentieth century, it does not mean that an inter-artistic analysis of twentieth-century poetics is unproblematic. Such an analogy-driven task is complicated by the following question: how can one establish comparisons between the poetry and painting of the historical avant-garde, considered as “traditionally” analog modes of representation, and contemporary modes of digital production—digital poetry or art—which are supposedly ontologically different? One possibility is to question the notion that “digitality might be embedded in analogicity and perhaps vice versa in an ongoing recursion-regress,” as Whitney Davis posits.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly indiscernible, and often hybrid, the digital and the analog commingle in contemporary art forms, resulting in a de-differentiation—a loss of specialization in form or function—of the terms. Hence, according to Davis, “the representational value of their distinction (if any remains) can only be generated figuratively in analogies to this condition.”<sup>11</sup> This proposition would mean that the only way to define either category, digital or analog, would be strictly through metaphoric, figurative means (through analogy). The idea of a possible hybrid recursivity that recycles the digital (processed by a computer and coded in binary, discrete units) into the analog (processed by a human and coded in continuous units) and back, connects with Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of remediation as a reworking or

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchell 1987, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell 1987, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Davis 2006, 73. Davis takes to task the supposition that the analog mode entails a notion of approximation, of inexactitude, and of continuity, while the digital mode points to precision, repeatability, and discreteness.

<sup>11</sup> Davis 2006, 84.

reusing of old media by new media. “All current media,” they write, “function as remediators, and remediation offers us a means of interpreting the work of older media as well.”<sup>12</sup> Quite possibly, the digital has incorporated, indeed remediated, the analog by including formerly analog genres—photographs, paintings, films, literature—within new digital formats. The analog, on the other hand, has also mutated to incorporate the digital, or the aesthetic appearance of the digital, for instance television’s use of multiple windows, an aesthetic adopted from the World Wide Web. As such, ontological differences between analog and digital have increasingly come into question.

The comparison between historical and digital literature entails an exploration of the limits (temporal and spatial), and a scrutiny of the polysemic interstices between the arts. Such an approach promotes, in Mitchell’s words, “the study of the social construction of visual experience,”<sup>13</sup> much in the spirit of early twentieth-century and contemporary artistic production. The ultimate purpose of this essay is to work through the earlier part of the twentieth century in order to understand how contemporary digital poetry uses metaphor to explore the overlapping spaces between script and image, recycling and expanding the historic avant-garde’s visual and typographic experiments through the added capabilities afforded by the digital computer.

### **The historic Catalan Avant-garde poetry: Synthesis of text and image**

Preceding F. T. Marinetti’s *First Futurist Manifesto* (1909) by a few years, the Catalan poet Gabriel Alomar laid out his concept of *Futurisme* in a 1904 lecture at the Ateneu Barcelonès.<sup>14</sup> *Futurisme* differed considerably from the (later) Italian *Futurismo* and its right-wing machine-worshipping excesses. Until 1910 when Ramon Gómez de la Serna published a Spanish translation of Marinetti’s brand of Futurism (as “manifested” by the Italian poet in *Le Figaro*), Alomar’s humanist Futurism (and its call for artistic

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<sup>12</sup> Bolter and Grusin 1999, 55. Bolter and Grusin provide several examples of how new media re-use older media, for instance, how “television can and does refashion itself to resemble the World Wide Web, and film can and does incorporate and attempt to contain computer graphics” (ibid.).

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell 1994, 35.

<sup>14</sup> For a translated and annotated version of the lecture see Merjian 2010, 401-8.

renovation) was among the few forward-thinking proto avant-garde propositions around.

In 1905, *moderniste*<sup>15</sup> poet Rafael Nogueras Oller published *Les Tenebroses (The Dark Ones)*, a book of poetry that Joaquim Molas has qualified as “profoundly revolutionary” (*profundament revolucionari*).<sup>16</sup> The book is ethically charged with an element of social protest against the Catalan industrialist class, Nogueras being both deeply religious and an anarchist. Molas explains that Nogueras brought the violence of his political convictions to the territory of poetic form. Combining free verse, poetic prose, and an unapologetically direct, colloquial language, Nogueras attacks the hypocrisy and amorality of the Catalan bourgeoisie in lyrical experiments that predate many “original” developments of the avant-garde, and which begin to challenge notions of the division between visual and textual signification. For instance, Nogueras uses collage-like sentence fragments which anticipate the cubist poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Reverdy, and presents nonsensical juxtapositions well before Dada or Surrealism. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his poem “*Una esse*” (“An ‘S’”). Its verses, arranged to represent the letter S, also signify a drunkard’s oscillating itinerary, both his physical movement and his mental divagations. The role of the word as a privileged vehicle for communication is questioned as the graphical image of the drunk’s path becomes indispensable for the metaphoric significance of the poem. The verbal content represents the intoxicated monologue of a petit bourgeois stumbling home after a drinking spree.<sup>17</sup> The mutual reflection of form and content in the visual (simultaneously spatial and temporal) organization of the poem functions to place text and image on an equal footing. The formal subversion is doubled by the poem’s text, which mercilessly satirizes the man’s thoughts of greatness. By doing so Nogueras ridicules and exposes the hypocrisy and vanity of the *menestral* (petty bourgeoisie) class. Critic Joan Ramon Resina has established a connection between the poem and anarchist publications of the period, such as the working class

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<sup>15</sup> Similarly to *Futurisme*, Catalan *Modernisme* is not related to High Modernism but rather to Latin American and Spanish *Modernismo*, a late nineteenth-century artistic movement, which had its equivalent in *Art Nouveau* or *Jugendstil* in architecture, or Decadentism, Prerafaelism, and Symbolism in painting and literature.

<sup>16</sup> Molas 1983, 28. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> The *petit bourgeoisie*, known as the *menestral* class in Barcelona (shop keepers and tradesmen for the most part) were often the target of artistic ridicule on account of their obsessive preoccupation with material accumulation and disregard for spiritual, artistic, or social concerns.

weekly magazine *L'Avenir (The Future)*.<sup>18</sup> He does so not just because of shared ideology, but also due to shared formal strategies that have the effect of destabilizing semiotic codes. Or as he states: “the use of a visual technique with caricaturesque intentions, relates to the use of iconic elements in the anarchist press” (“el empleo de una técnica visual con fines caricaturescos se relaciona con el empleo de elementos icónicos en la prensa anarquista”).<sup>19</sup>

Following an argument that recalls Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Resina presents a compelling analysis of the points of political and aesthetic contact between anarchist publications and the initial phase of the Catalan avant-garde. These were early examples of how the avant-garde would understand the poetic text, not just as a verbal semiotic undertaking, but as a complex interplay between visual, textual, and political codes, articulated through metaphor and figurative language. A wonderful example can be found in the way Josep Maria Junoy (1887-1955), a prominent Catalan avant-garde poet, addressed the interplay of text and image.

Junoy, a trained journalist and artist, belonged to the wealthy Catalan bourgeoisie. In his youth he had worked as an art dealer in Paris where he was influenced by the latest literary currents. Junoy’s initial contribution to the avant-garde was as an art critic, and he wrote about Futurism and Cubism in Catalan periodicals such as *La Publicitat*. In the spring of 1912, he organized a Cubist exhibition at the famed *Galerias Dalmau* in Barcelona, where other members of the avant-garde—such as Joan Salvat Papasseit, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, and Federico García Lorca—had exhibited work previously. This exhibition included works by internationally renowned avant-garde artists such as Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Marie Laurencin, Marcel Duchamp and Juan Gris, among others, and was reviewed enthusiastically by Junoy.<sup>20</sup> Fully immersed in

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<sup>18</sup> Only five issues of *L'Avenir* were published, all in 1905, by Felip Cortiella and other contributors

<sup>19</sup> Resina 1997, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Between 1914 and 1916 Barcelona’s importance as a locus of the avant-garde grew exponentially because of the influx of artists dislocated by WWI and others arriving from Latin America. Among the recognizable names to pass through or live in Barcelona in that period are: Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, French cubist painters Robert and Sonja Delaunay, Marie Laurencin, Albert Gleizes, Swiss painter-boxer Arthur Cravan, Russian constructivist painters Hélène Grunhoff, Olga Sacharoff, and Serge Charchoune, Dadaist Swiss painter Francis Picabia, Uruguayan painter Rafael Barradas (originator of *vibracionismo*), and writers André Breton and Max Jacob.

**This is a partial preview of the essay.**

**To read the entire essay please see *The Future of Text and Image: Collected Essays on Literary and Visual Conjectures*. Ed by Ofra Amihay, Lauren Walsh. Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2012).**

**Available for purchase:**

**<http://www.amazon.com/The-Future-Text-Image-Conjectures/dp/1443836400>**