

Modern Visual Poetry and Ecology: Towards Establishing “Eco-Visual Poetry” As A New Poetic Genre

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Abstract:

In no other age in the history of literature did poetry witness this great change as much as it does in ours. Poetry moves 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. Modern visual poetry is the mirror of the contemporary society which has declared the death of postmodernism and the appearance of new era of fragmentation, chaos, hyper-reality and techno culture. The new era is always concerned with ecology as one of the most important issues. That is why, the present paper aims at presenting a new subclass of visual poetry that is eco-visual poetry. The paper discusses eco-visual poetry as a new born genre of poetry that is associated with visuality, ecology, and literature. Thus, it defines eco-visual poetry as a new genre of poetry.

Keywords: Visual Poetry, Modern Visual Poetry, Ecology, Eco-visual Poetry.

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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. 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.

Like other forms of visual arts, visual poetry is the artistic form of art that expresses feelings, philosophy, emotions, and the imaginative expressions of the artist and his society. It represents the optical process of creativity made by an artist or a designer using his own tools. For presenting the typical modern visual poem, the poet utilizes mediums such as ceramics, collage, *origami* drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, etc.

Modern visual poetry reflects the most modern techniques of writing and reading literature. In addition, it highlights poetry's ability to discuss the most recent themes and issues such as ecology, fragmentation, chaos, and absurdity. Modern visual poetry's themes and issues refuse the visual limitation of the genre as they assert visual poetry's freedom and creativity.

Amongst the development of the genre, visual poetry was always associated with the most recent issues as well as the most recent *avant-garde* movements. Modern visual poetry, like contemporary forms of literature, is opened to new arenas, themes, and strategies such as feminism, identity, fragmentation, media, and ecology. Modern visual poems reflect an experimental trend of mingling poetry with recent human activities, either these experiments are literary genuine forms or de-aesthetic combination of artistic-literary works. In this regard, visual poetry represents the process of restructuring the originality that inherited the traditions of both poetry and art.

In spite of the variety of movements, forms, and experiments adopted in modern visual poetry, the genre's recent productions preserve poetry's role in reflecting and discussing the most recent themes and issues, namely ecology which is an umbrella term that discusses the connection between any complex system and its surroundings. The term involves many categories such as eco-criticism which means the study of literary works from an environmental perspective through investigating how the literary works deal with the theme of environment (Glotfelty & Fromm 18). Under the wide definition of ecology, eco poetry can be defined as the poetry which has a strong ecological emphasis or message that makes the literary work not only associated to nature but the whole work must be naturalist.

The early connection between visual poetry and ecology was noticed in Mary Ellen Solt's work, *Flowers in concrete*. Flowers were one of her major concerns. Through her poetic works, she introduces an ecological awareness of flowers and plants species. One of her most outstanding eco-visual poems is "Forsythia." Unlike traditional poems, the title of the poem appears at the end of the page. In "Forsythia," each letter of the word Forsythia expands to create a visual branch which "made out of a word." Mary Ellen Solt managed to create nine branches made of nine words. Each word represents one of the tree's characteristics. Solt visualized the line "forsythia out race springs yellow telegram hope insists action" to present a vivid eco-concrete visual poem.

The poem can be described as a concrete poem rather than a visual poem as it depends mainly on the rearrangement of the text without using any illustrations or symbols. Moreover, it emphasizes the notion of intermedia of visual poetry as it mixes two human activities. The first activity is poetry and the second is painting with words:

As a visual poem, the poem must be seen in its original form with its yellow background, which creates the vital effect of the poem. Danet writes:

More contemporary example of a "concrete" poem is "Forsythia" by Mary Ellen Solt (plate5.1), in which the brilliant yellow background and arrangement of the letters of the word "forsythia" dramatically express the idea of the blooming forsythia in spring. (198)

Besides the unique rearrangement of the letters of the word "forsythia," the yellow color creates a state of interaction between the reader and the text. Thus, the poem is a "calligram," with a unique use of color. The poem appears as intermediate between painting and poetry. Moreover, the use of dots and dashes of the Morse code reflects the relation between visual poetry and minimalism movement (Kempton 8).

Here, it is worth mentioning that, based on Solt's ecological awareness, "flowers and plants" were her major concern. Most of her poems have the element of "a flower or a plant." In other words, Solt interested in "flowers and plants" in order to raise the reader's ecological interest.

Reading an eco-visual poem requires defining the main principles of ecology such as Empirical ecocriticism, ecofeminism, eco-spirituality, eco-feminism, bioregionalism, eco-disaster, power-over concept and war-nature relationship. All these concepts can help the reader to establish a logical reading of any ecological literary work.

For example, it is difficult to understand the following poem without taking into consideration the main concepts of ecology:



(Beach, “The San Francisco Earthquake” qtd. in Herman, 2006)

Mary Beach's poem, (1919-2006) "The San Francisco Earthquake" is a combination between the verbal element and the visual element of photography. This combination of intermedia creates a poster-visual poem that portrays the disaster of San Francisco earthquake as it focuses on the impact of the ecological disaster on females. Depending on the principles of advertising, the poem creates a very specific ecofeminist scene using both verbal and visual elements. The poem depicts a single event or scene that makes the poem look like a printed paper which is designed to be attached to a wall or vertical surface.

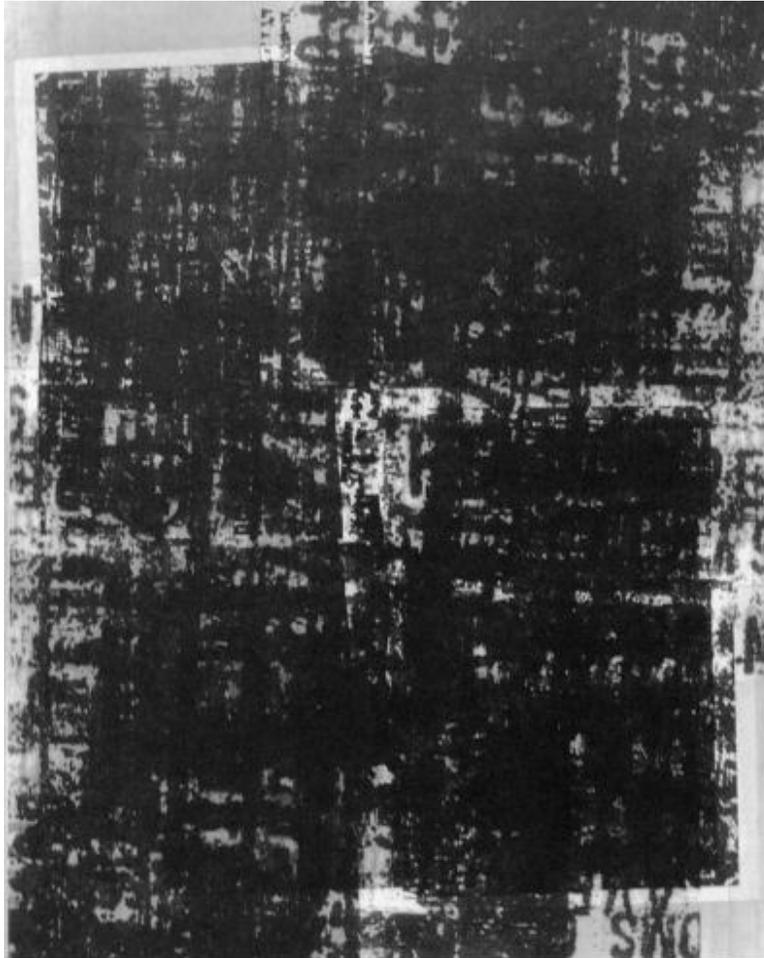
Visually, the main intermedia of the poem is represented by photography. The use of black and white has a great significance as it represents certain topics such as suffering, old crafts, and human emotions (Abdulah par.6). Furthermore, the use of a black and white photo instead of colored one highlights the importance of the event as a historical ecological disaster. The photo gives the reader a clue to the main objective of the poem. The Black and white photo of the women makes a gloomy and emotional effect of the poem. All these visual elements, besides the ecological perspectives of the poem highlight the independence of eco-visual poetry as an individual genre with very specific features.

The verbal element of the poem "Now" reflects poster poems' technique of "advertising" as the poem appears to be an advertisement that announces a certain event. Furthermore, the use of arrows and exclamation marks in the

poem reflects the Minimalist effect in visual poetry as Minimalism aims at employing symbols, dots and dashes as Morse code that convey a certain message.

Thus, the poem achieves one of the key features of eco-visual poetry, as described by James Engelhardt, is that it must be associated with the world in a method that implies responsibility. In other words, eco poetry must be connected with other models that explore and assume engagement (Marxism, colonialism, feminism, etc.) (Wehr 356).

“Clouded Sulphur” is an eco-visual poem, written by a Canadian poet called Marshall Hryciuk (1951-) to represent a “suspicion of or anger with printed representations while also developing a pictorially mimetic quality” (Borkent 280). The poem is a representation of a repetitive over-writing that refers to an uncontrolled rage or another forceful emotion (Borkent 281). The poem is a pure improvisation of influential bodily response that is created by the reader/receiver who is responsible for shaping the poem’s meaning:



(Hryciuk, louded sulphur, qtd in Borkent 279)

Hryciuk's poem consists of two visual elements: the first is a photograph distorted by swaths of ink and the second is an unclear text. The photograph also gives hints of something red, but recognition of anything within them is thwarted by the overlay of ink. To Michael Borkent, the poem is dominated by the theme of anger: "The anger invoked through the simulation of repeated stamping is now directed toward specific photographs" (278). The poem is a

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de-aestheticiazation of poetry as it lacks the fundamental elements of any poetic work such as form, stanza, lines, etc. Here, it is worth mentioning that de-aestheticiazation is a very remarkable aspect of eco-visual poetry.

In terms of ecology, this anger can be defined as “nature wrath” that expresses itself in a desire to punish humanity for their crime against nature. Backing to the two visual elements of the poem, the photograph represents nature beauty which is destroyed by the human swaths of ink that represents humans’ misuse of nature. The title of the poem “clouded sulphur,” is the name of a very yellowish butterfly (*Colias philodice*) in North America (Layberry et. al. 103). This beautiful yellowish butterfly depicts the beauty of nature that is distorted by man. This title emphasizes the ecological interpretation of the poem as it symbolizes the beauty and simplicity of nature. The rare verbal element of the poem represented by three ambiguous letters in bottom right of the poem reflects that visual poetry dependence on the non-representative language can convey the meaning and the message of the poet more effectively than the traditional verbal language represented by the text.

Ecologic Sonnet is an experimental visual poem by the Portuguese poet Fernando Aguiar (1956-). Aguiar’s poetry always utilizes media such as photography, painting, and other forms of intermedia. He designed “Soneto Ecológico” or (Ecological Sonnet) in 2005 as a visual poem that totally neglects the verbal element:



(Aguiar , *The Last Vispo Anthology* 100)

The sonnet measures 110 x 36 meters and it figures seventy trees. The poet substitutes the traditional poetic elements, namely rhymes, rhythm, form, and rhetorical language with ecological and visual element in order to convey the theme of his work. In this regard, Adam Plunkett describes the poem mentioning:

Here is some visual poetry: the benches look like rhymes — neat, parallel, along the lines of concrete; the trees like themes, scattered, repeating with different leaves; the three rectangles of grass and the smaller one in the background like the three quatrains and final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet. This is easy to see, which makes it easy to lose track of its strangeness. Most photographs represent life, not art, let alone abstract relations between the sounds of

words — yet the photograph's title gives the park the abstract form of a poem. (par. 2)

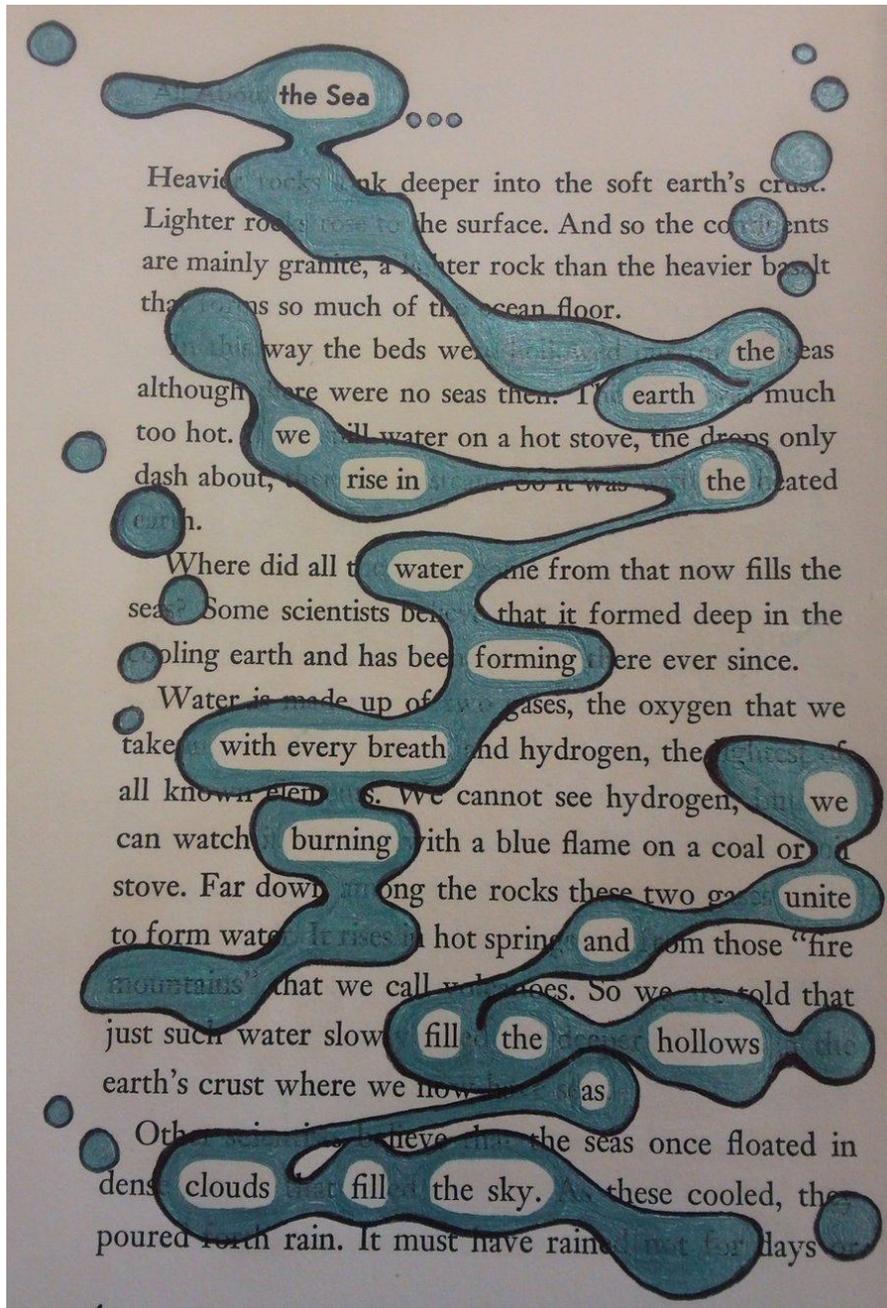
Thus, the poet attributes the title from the name of the well-known very specific form of poetry to shock the reader with not only an innovative poem but also with a para-literary poem that substitutes the poetic elements with the medium of photography.

Generally, the poem is a de-aestheticization of poetry. It does not contain any verbal elements. Like many eco-visual poems, the poem must be discussed according to both artistic level and literary level. On the artistic level, the poem has the identity of being photography with no verbal description. However, on the literary level, the poem neglects the text as the main device of poetic elements as well as a medium of communication. However, the poem achieves its communicative function as it conveys the poet's intended meaning:

The park is clear when it stands in for the abstract parts of a poem but is much harder to make sense of as the content of a poem, the words and symbols and images the form can give life to. "Ecologic Sonnet" is most affecting in the tension between these two ways of seeing the photograph, a tension that will be great fun for staunch critics of traditional forms. The empty park is designed elaborately for an experience no one is having — like, one might say, the traditional sonnet. (Plunkett, par. 3)

Thus, Aguiar's poem is a literary work without words which reflects eco-visual poetry's ability to produce a creative artistic work which discusses ecology in a communicative way with no words.

Unlike Aguiar's poem which holds only a verbal representation of visual poetry, the following poem represents both verbal and visual elements for conveying the author's ecological message. The poem is written by unknown author who writes under the pseudo-name of "Crriezona" such as many modern visual and experimental poets who write using nicknames:



(Unknown Author, Criezona, *Deviantart. Gallery*)

The poem is a concrete-visual poem with a Minimalist and Fluxes features. It challenges the traditional writing in order to present a visual poem, with an emphasis on the verbal element only. In other words, the poem does not totally neglect the verbal element as it creates a fusion of a traditional verbal element with a slight use of the visual element through drawing on the “light blue color,” as a visual element that supports the verbal element of the poem: the sea/ the earth/ we rise in/ the water forming/ with every breathe/ we burning/unit/ and fill the hollows/ as cloud fill the sky.

In terms of ecology, the poem reflects the human-nature unity represented in ecology through the concept of “Gaya hypothesis.” “Gaya” is “mythological figure” which is developed to include a broad term that includes ecological concerns including “the biosphere”, the evolution of organisms, global warming, salinity of seawater, and atmospheric oxygen levels (Cook 47). All these concerns aim at the habitability of the earth. The Gaia hypothesis is mainly a teleological philosophy that emphasizes connection between all elements in nature as each element is spiritually and biologically connected to others. Here, human beings and nature are completely interconnected as the human body is a minor representation of the huge surrounding nature.

The verbal and visual elements of the poem are interrelated as they emphasize the importance of some nature’s elements, namely water, earth, and sky. The original unhighlighted text is a part of a scientific book that discusses

natural issues. That is to say, highlighting the text that is associated to ecology rather than nature emphasizes an important ecological feature that any ecological literary work must be naturalist rather than natural. In other word, the poem does not discuss the theme of nature as aesthetic concern but it focuses on the ecological crisis asserting the unity of humans and nature in the spiritual ecological concept of Gaya.

The poem reflects the correlation between poetry and ecology that discusses the interpretation of any work related to nature and environmental concern, namely wilderness, ecosystems, landscapes, ecology, the built environment (architecture), life, and embodiment. Here, it is worth noting that the eco-visual poem is a mediation that establishes an interpretive task of linking ecological facts and principles with a number of human artistic and literary activities (Clingerman, et al. 1).

To sum up, visual poetry can cope up with the most recent human concerns in the magic realm of literature to introduce more subclasses of the genre such as eco-visual poetry. Eco-visual poetry reflects visual poetry ability to break the limitation of the visual element to open the genre to new horizon of creativity that is able to discuss the most recent trends and issues of modern society. The present paper defines eco-visual poetry as the naturalist poetry that is represented by visual elements rather than verbal expressions. The paper elaborates the main characteristics of eco-visual poetry. These characteristics include: de-

aestheticized works that may not contain any verbal elements, writing with a pen name, the poem must be naturalist not only natural, and the effect of multi-cultural and multilingual artistic and social movements. Consequently, eco-visual poetry can be dealt and discussed as individual genre of poetry.

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