

Writing the Modern City: Visual Poetry as Urban Cartography

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Abstract—This article explores how modern visual poets translate the sensory and spatial complexity of the city into poetic form through innovative layout, typography, and language. Focusing on three case studies from different cultural contexts – Vasily Kamensky’s Russian Futurist ferro-concrete city poems, Augusto de Campos’s multilingual concrete poem “cidade/city/cite”, and Kyōjirō Hagiwara (萩原恭次郎)’s Japanese visual poem “View of the Early Summer Street from the Veranda” (“露臺より初夏街を見る”)—the study shows how each work functions as a visual and semantic map of the modern city. Through comparative close readings grounded in global modernist poetics, spatial semiotics, and translingual aesthetics, the article argues that these poems operate as metapictures—self-referential verbal-visual artifacts that collapse the boundaries between reading and navigating. In doing so, they exemplify a spatial poetics that renders the poem as a cartographic space of modern urban experience.

Keywords—visual poetry, urban cartography, modernism, spatial poetics

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century, the rapid growth of modern cities and new media technologies compelled poets across the globe to rethink the form and function of poetry. No longer bound by linear syntax or uniform print, poetry became a site of visual and spatial experimentation. From Mallarmé to Marinetti’s Futurism, avant-garde poets began treating the page as a visual field, capturing the fractured, polyphonic, and kinetic experience of urban modernity. As advertising, signage, and multilingual stimuli transformed the city into a textual landscape, the poem, too, became a map—a construct of space, sound, and symbol.

This article examines three such poetic cartographies across different socio-historical periods and global contexts: Vasily Kamensky’s Russian ferro-concrete poems (1914), Augusto de Campos’s Brazilian “cidade/city/cite” (1963), and Kyōjirō Hagiwara’s Japanese “View of the Early Summer Street from the Veranda” (1925). Though separated by geography and time—pre- and post-WWII—they share a common strategy: dismantling linear discursiveness in favor of spatial, auditory, and typographic experimentation. These poems are not simply read; they are navigated, inviting the reader to traverse textual space like a city, where meaning emerges through visual arrangement and sensory resonance.

Through comparative close readings and theoretical engagement with spatial semiotics and global modernist poetics, this study argues that such works function as metapictures: hybrid text-images that reflect on their own modes of representation. Ultimately, visual poetry across these periods offers a translingual and transnational way of reimagining urban experience—one that mirrors, critiques,

and maps the changing contours of modernity itself.

II. VISUAL POETRY AND THE MODERN CITY: A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Experiments in visual poetry have frequently emerged in response to periods of intensified urbanization and transnational cultural exchange. At the turn of the twentieth century, artists and writers across various contexts confronted the challenge of representing the simultaneity, fragmentation, and velocity characteristic of modern urban life—phenomena that traditional, linearly structured verse struggled to adequately express. In Paris, Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (1897) marked a foundational moment in this development by deploying the printed page as a spatial field. Through an arrhythmic constellation of words and the strategic use of blank space, Mallarmé initiated an entirely new use of the page – attempting to render thought as spatial montage.

Approximately a decade later, the Italian Futurists, led by F. T. Marinetti, advanced these innovations by deliberately disrupting conventional syntax and scattering text in their manifestos and *parole in libertà* (“words in freedom”). Such techniques aimed to emulate the overwhelming sensory environment of the modern metropolis—the noise, speed, and fragmentation of mechanized urban life. Marinetti’s 1915 poster-poem *Montagne+Vallate+Strade x Joffre* and his typographically explosive *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914) exemplify how visual and aural dissonance could be encoded through the materiality of language itself, generating a poetics of typographic chaos that mirrored the cacophony of the industrialized city.

Concurrently, other early twentieth-century poets sought to forge direct connections between poetic form and urban imagery. In his collection *Calligrammes* (1918), Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term calligramme to describe poems whose visual form corresponded to their semantic content. Notable examples include “Il pleut” (“It’s raining”), in which the text descends in slanting vertical lines to simulate rain on a window, and a poem shaped like the Eiffel Tower—both of which exemplify an effort to diagram subject matter visually on the page, transforming the act of reading into an act of viewing.

These formal experiments were not confined to the European avant-garde. Apollinaire’s Russian contemporary, Vasily Kamensky, was deeply engaged with such developments and extended them in his own work, as will be discussed in the following section. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, poets in Latin America were likewise responsive to these international currents in visual and spatial poetics, contributing to a broader, transnational reimagining of the

poem as a visual and material object. By the mid-20th century, the theory and practice of Concrete Poetry emerged, treating words as concrete materials to be placed in space rather than as transparent vehicles for ideas. The Brazilian Noigandres group – Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari – explicitly cited Mallarmé and Apollinaire as forebears in liberating the graphic disposition of text in the Concrete Poetry manifesto “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” (1958), while paying tribute to the “culturemorphological” poets who founded the movement’s *paideuma*,

precursors: mallarmé (un coup de dés, 1897): the first qualitative leap: “prismatic subdivisions of the idea”; space (“blanks”) and typographic innovations as substantive elements of composition. pound (the cantos) ideogrammic method. joyce (ulysses and finnegan’s wake): word-ideogram; organic interpretation of time and space); cummings: atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic valorization of space. apollinaire (calligrammes): the vision more than the praxis. futurismo, dadaism: contribution to the life of the problem [1].

The Brazilian concrete poets saw the spatial design of the poem as key to forging a new universal language for poetry, one that could transcend local languages and speak to the global modern experience.

In their 1958 *manifesto*, it was proclaimed that the concrete poem should be a “totally new object” made with “total responsibility before language,” akin to an engineered product [2]. Haroldo de Campos even described the poem as a “dynamic structure” and “structure-content” – a structure to be built, explicitly invoking architectural and structural metaphors [2]. This architectonic view of poetry – poet as builder, poem as constructed space – resonates strongly with the notion of the poem as urban cartography. Just as a city planner arranges spaces or an architect designs a building, the 20th century experimental poets arrange words in a deliberate spatial layout to produce a certain experience or meaning. It is no coincidence that Kamensky, decades earlier, had called his visual poems “ferro-concrete,” referencing reinforced concrete construction. Both Kamensky and the later concrete poets shared the intuition that a poem could be built or mapped on the page, rather than written in a single line, thereby reflecting the structures and networks of modern life.

Another key aspect of this global visual-poetic movement is its translangual and intercultural character. Urban centers are polyglot hubs, and many visual poems integrate multiple languages or at least make themselves legible beyond a single tongue. For example, Brazilian concrete poet Décio Pignatari’s well-known piece “Beba Coca Cola” (1957, see Fig.1.) deconstructs the English/Portuguese slogan “Drink Coca-Cola” into an iconic pattern, mixing languages to comment on global consumerism.



Fig. 1. “Beba Coca-Cola” by Décio Pignatari (1957).

Such works use extremely simple, internationally familiar words and visual shapes to communicate across cultures. Similarly, Apollinaire included fragments of English and Latin in some calligrammes; and Futurists like Kamensky incorporated foreign names and onomatopoeia. This trend reflects what we might call the semiotics of space in a cosmopolitan context: by leveraging universally recognizable signs (whether images, letters, or symbols), poets could create visual universality – a poem that a viewer from any country might grasp at least in outline. As we examine the cases of Kamensky, de Campos, and Hagiwara, we will see that each engages with multiple languages or symbols, effectively designing poems that act as semiotic bridges between cultures.

Visual form and spatial arrangement allow meaning to “travel” in ways that conventional language often cannot. In this way, visual poetry of the modernist tradition turns the space of the page into a meeting ground of languages, analogous to the city itself as a meeting ground of diverse peoples.

Having sketched this background, we now turn to our first case study: Vasily Kamensky’s urban visual poems, which vividly demonstrate the poem-as-map concept in the context of Russian Futurism.

III. VASILY KAMENSKY’S FERRO-CONCRETE CITYSCAPES

Vasily Kamensky (1884–1961), a founding member of Russian Futurism, was among the first poets to explicitly analogize poetic form to modern industrial structures. His 1914 artist’s book *Tango with Cows: Ferro-Concrete Poems* comprises fourteen visual poems printed on sheets of wallpaper and is widely recognized for its bold typographic experimentation and spatial innovations. The term “ferro-concrete”—referring to reinforced concrete—signaled Kamensky’s intention to align poetic practice with the aesthetics and materiality of the emerging modern city: durable, unorthodox, and physically constructed on the page like architectural form. In these poems, Kamensky rejects linear syntax and conventional grammar in favor of free-floating lexical elements that must be navigated visually. The result is a series of dynamic visual-verbal tableaux that evoke the sensorial chaos and multiplicity of urban life: the cacophony of telephones, the exhilaration of flight, and the cultural heterogeneity of the modern metropolis. Even the title *Tango with Cows* captures this contrast, juxtaposing cosmopolitan sophistication with rural absurdity.

Among the most illustrative works in this collection is “Constantinople,” a poem that functions not merely as poetic representation but as a literal cartographic rendering of the city in language. On the surface, “Constantinople” appears as a disordered scattering of Russian words and fragments across the page, without syntactic coherence or a discernible reading order. Lexical items such as матросы (“sailors”), муллы (“mullahs”), чайки (“seagulls”), and Ай Софи (Hagia Sophia) appear in isolation or near-collision, gesturing toward recognizable features of Istanbul’s historical and cultural landscape [3]. This verbal constellation mimics not a narrative but a perceptual encounter—one that resists linear progression and instead demands spatial interpretation. The reader is compelled to scan the page as if surveying an urban topography, assembling impressions of a vibrant, multilingual port city from a fragmentary set of signs.

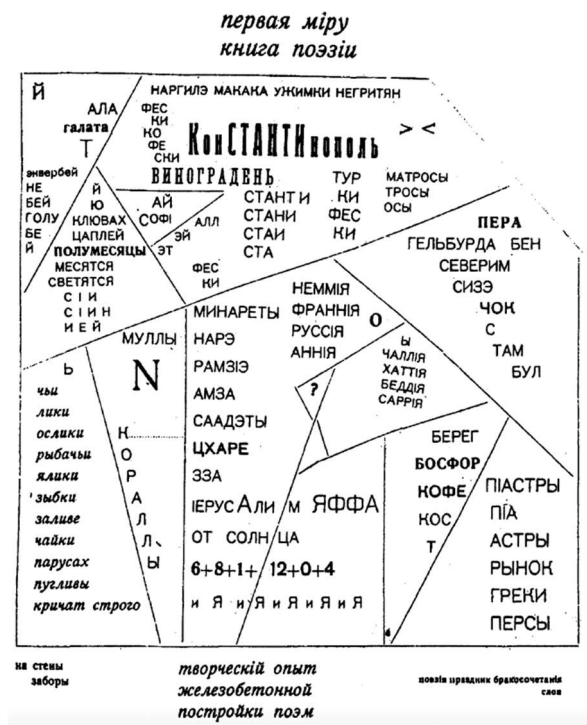


Fig. 2. "Constantinople" by Kamensky (1914).

The spatial logic of "Constantinople" (see Fig. 2) is rooted in Kamensky's personal experience as one of Russia's earliest aviators [4]. Rather than composing a linear travelogue, Kamensky sought to simulate the panoramic, simultaneous perspective afforded by aerial flight. Aviation historian Scott W. Palmer characterizes the poem as a "literal word-map" depicting the city's architectural features, inhabitants, and urban neighborhoods as experienced from overhead [5]. The poem's layout, in this sense, is not merely expressive but mimetic: its arrangement mirrors the fragmented visual logic of a bird's-eye view. The reader's eye moves discontinuously across the page, replicating the process of scanning landmarks from above. Kamensky thus transforms reading into an act of visual exploration, where meaning emerges not through syntax but through spatial association—a poetic analogue to sightseeing. The poem abandons narrative coherence in favor of collage, evoking the simultaneity of urban experience and the multiplicity of modern perception.

"Constantinople" also exemplifies the intercultural and translingual ambitions of Kamensky's poetics. Writing in Russian about a Turkish city for a domestic audience, Kamensky selectively incorporates Turkish elements and proper nouns to mediate a foreign cultural environment through visual means. Crucially, this mediation occurs without explanation: there is no discursive framing, no narrative interpretation. Cultural references—sailors, mullahs, mosques, seabirds—are presented as isolated visual cues, accessible even to readers with limited linguistic competence. For example, a non-Russian reader might not understand the word *матросы*, but could infer its maritime meaning from context and spatial proximity to other nautical terms. In this way, Kamensky's poetics circumvents traditional linguistic barriers by mobilizing spatial arrangement and typographic emphasis as semiotic tools. His visual technique approximates a universal legibility; meaning is carried by form as much as by content. The reader is invited to decode

the poem through recognition of shapes, cultural icons, and the logic of juxtaposition—an approach that anticipates later developments in global concrete poetry.

Kamensky's broader corpus in *Tango with Cows* continues this synthesis of spatial structure and urban modernity. In "Telephone," (see Fig. 3) for instance, he fragments and repeats letters to visually simulate the trilling ring of a telephone, transforming auditory sensation into typographic rhythm.

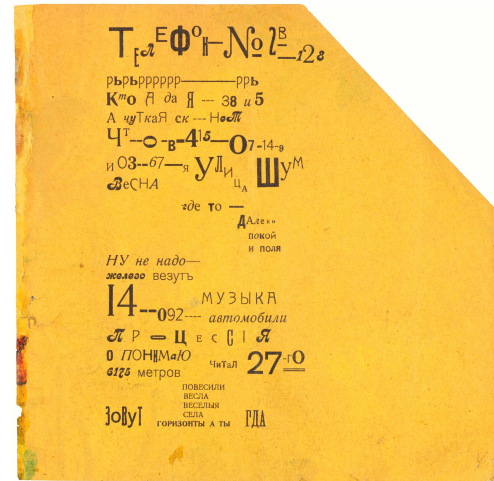


Fig. 3. "Telephone" by Vasily Kamensky (1914).

These poems do not merely represent their subjects; they embody them through spatial form. Kamensky's poetics exemplify what might be termed spatial mimesis—the principle that the poem's formal arrangement performs its semantic content.

Moreover, Kamensky's use of unconventional materials—such as wallpaper for the printed pages—contributes to what might be described as a multisensory poetics. The tactile, visual, and spatial dimensions of the text converge to produce an experience that transcends the limits of linguistic comprehension. This compositional strategy anticipates a foundational principle of concrete poetry: that the poem may function as a universal object or "poem-product," apprehensible through visual design regardless of the reader's linguistic background. Kamensky's avant-garde poetics thus prefigure later international movements in visual and concrete poetry, particularly in their commitment to translingual accessibility and semiotic experimentation. His work offers an early and compelling model of how language, when liberated from syntactic constraint and deployed in visual space, can serve as a cartographic tool for navigating the complex terrains of modernity.

IV. MAPPING THE MODERN SELF: HAGIWARA KYOJIRO AND THE VISUAL POETICS OF TOKYO

An illuminating parallel to global experiments in spatial poetics can be found in Hagiwara Kyōjirō's visual poem "View of the Early Summer Street from the Veranda" (露台より初夏街上を見る, see Fig. 4), published as the concluding piece of his 1925 collection *Death Sentence* (『死刑宣告』). Written in the wake of the Great Kantō Earthquake, the poem captures a moment of urban reconstruction and psychic disorientation in interwar Tokyo. Its spatial layout—

words radiating from a central “O,” repetitions of “水” (water), “水光” (water-light), and “水煙” (water-vapor), scattered alongside fragments such as “ピストル” (pistol), “椅子” (chair), “力” (power), and “金貨” (money)—evokes a visual and sensory field hovering between observation and dissociation. Taro Ayumu has interpreted the central imagery as referencing the glittering fountain of Hibiya Park, with its rising jets of water dispersing early summer sunlight into mist and light, symbolizing a fractured modern urban sensorium [6]. Yet beyond environmental perception, the poem suggests an introspective dimension—one that spatializes the fragmented consciousness of the subject amid Tokyo’s expanding modernity.



Fig. 4. “露臺より初夏街上を見る” by Hagiwara (1925).

It is in this sense that Hagiwara’s work resonates with what William O. Gardner calls the “modern self” in 1920s Japanese modernism. Drawing on Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideals, Protestant inner-life discourse, and successive waves of European philosophical influence, Japanese avant-garde intellectuals of the Taisho period, including Hagiwara, grappled with the precarious project of defining a “modern self”. As Gardner observes in *Advertising Tower* (2006), the “self” in Japanese literature of this era was not a stable liberal subject to be simply realized, but a variable term “to be reworked, reconstructed, and repositioned.” [7]. In this light, “View of the Early Summer Street from the Veranda” can be read not only as a visual cartography of post-disaster Tokyo, but also as a formal experiment in locating the “self” within an overwhelming field of urban signs, sounds, and stimuli. The poem’s lack of syntactic cohesion and its typographic dispersion mirror the destabilization of subjectivity in an age of atomized individualism.

Moreover, Hagiwara’s emphasis on inner experience as the true locus of modern art—stated in his 1924 claim that “the significance of the new art... comes only from the power of the self” [7]—aligns with this shift from collective identity to individual interiority. The act of reading this poem, which demands perceptual navigation across scattered visual cues, becomes an allegory for the modern subject’s effort to reassemble meaning and agency from a disjointed urban existence. Much like Kamensky, Hagiwara transforms the poetic page into a cognitive and perceptual terrain—but here, the modern city becomes both mirror and maze for a self that is no longer coherent, but continually under construction. In

this regard, the poem does not simply map the city; it maps the self as it dissolves and reforms within the visual and ideological structures of early 20th-century modernity.

This notion of a modern poetic subject constituted through spatial disjunction and typographic dispersion would later resonate deeply with the work of Niikuni Seiichi (新国誠一, 1925–1977), one of Japan’s most influential visual poets. Niikuni’s early exposure to Hagiwara’s work informed his own radical departure from metaphor and lyricism toward a poetics of pure materiality — where words, stripped of narrative function, became visual and sonic elements to be arranged in space [8]. While Niikuni would later engage directly with the international concrete poetry movement—collaborating with Pierre Garnier and translating the works of the Noigandres poets—he ultimately proposed a distinct framework under the term spatialism. As he clarified in his 1969 essay “The Intersection of Painting and Poetry”:

Although both Garnier and I share a spatialism that treats language as a material language, we do not directly belong to the poetic lineage of concrete poetry. [...] Spatialism, broadly speaking, is a concept of experimental poetry that includes concrete poetry. However, in Garnier’s case, ultimately, material language is conceived as a release of energy, and through this energy, the return of language brings about a rediscovery of the human being as a cosmic existence within the space that has been secured for the expression of language itself. As for me, I attempt to reclaim the primal human experience through the symbolization of linguistic energy within a cosmic aesthetics [8].

In this cosmic reorientation of poetic language, one can still discern the echo of Hagiwara’s introspective modernism—now transmuted into a metaphysical project that sought to transcend the individual self through the energetic agency of words.

V. AUGUSTO DE CAMPOS AND THE VISUAL SYNTAX OF THE GLOBAL CITY

Following Kamensky’s cartographic scattering and Hagiwara’s typographic dispersion, “cidade/city/cite” offers a different kind of urban mapping—one that replaces visual fragmentation with linguistic compression. First published in the early 1960s, this poem constructs a vertical matrix of language that does not depict a particular city but rather distills the idea of “city-ness” into a multilingual, semantic block. The title alone—cidade (Portuguese), city (English), cité (French)—situates the poem within a cosmopolitan frame and announces its translingual ambition from the outset. What unfolds on the page is not a narrative or a descriptive urban scene, but a verbal architecture: a compact structure built from a single continuous string of morpho-semantic units.

Visually, the poem consists of a dense, uninterrupted sequence of syllables—

“atrocaducapacaustiduplielastifeliferofugahistoriloqualubr imendimultipliorganiperiodiplastipublirapareciprorustisagasi mplitenaveloveravivaunivora”

—followed by the aligned repetition of the word “cidade / city/cité.” At first glance, this central block may appear unreadable or absurd, but it operates on a precise linguistic mechanism. Embedded within the string are dozens of recognizable stems or word roots that, when mentally affixed with the suffixes “-cidade,” “-city,” or “-cité,” yield complete

words in Portuguese, English, and French. These are not arbitrary constructions: they are cognates—words with shared etymological roots and near-identical meanings across the three languages.

For example, from the string we can extract *atro-*, which yields “*atrocidade*” in Portuguese, “*atrocitiy*” in English, and “*atrocité*” in French – all meaning atrocity. A bit further we find *dupli-*, giving “*duplicidade / duplicity / duplicité*” – meaning deceit or doubleness. There is *felici-*, which forms “*felicidade / felicity / félicité*” – meaning happiness. Later, *veloci-* becomes “*velocidade / velocity / vélocité*” – meaning speed. And so on through a catalogue of urban conditions and abstractions. Indeed, de Campos’s poem generates a whole series of such triads, including terms for multiplicity, elasticity, ferocity, fugacity (transience), historicité (historicity), loquacity, publicity, simplicity, tenacity, vivacity, voracity, and more. The full lexicon emerging from *cidade/city/cité* reads like a portrayal of city life in the form of pure concepts: the metropolis is at once atrocious and felicitous, elastic and ferocious, full of duplicity and multiplicity, velocity and voracity. Crucially, all these concepts transcend any single language – they exist in a shared Latin-derived vocabulary that connects Portuguese, English, and French (a nod, perhaps, to the heritage of Latin in shaping “civilization” and “urbanity” as concepts). Augusto de Campos thus constructs the poem as a tower of Babel in reverse: instead of languages fragmenting understanding, here three languages converge on the same ideas, each language’s word fitting interchangeably into the same mold. The reader is thus invited into an act of decipherment, parsing the monolithic text into a polyphonic list of urban qualities and phenomena. In this way, “*cidade/city/cité*” performs a multilingual cityscape, building the city not from images or landmarks, but from the semantic building blocks that shape our collective conception of what a city is.

The interactive, puzzle-like nature of “*cidade/city/cité*” exemplifies a hallmark of concrete poetry: the reader as co-creator of meaning. Just as Kamensky’s reader must visually assemble the city from scattered words, de Campos’s reader must insert the known suffixes (“*cidade/city/cité*”) repeatedly in their mind to unlock the poem’s message. As poet Gabriel Rosenstock keenly noticed, “The concrete poem asks the same thing of the reader as does the haiku – to complete it. Fill in the silence.” [9]. In “*cidade/city/cité*”, the “silence” or blank that the reader fills is literally the gap between the word stems and the word “city” in each language. By mentally completing each fragment, the reader completes the poem. In doing so, the poem enacts a tiny drama of translation and translanguaging understanding: one oscillates between Portuguese, English, and French, but the meaning remains steady, reinforcing a conceptual common ground.

Augusto de Campos’s visual poetry is also notable for evolving with new media and retaining relevance. “*cidade/city/cité*” itself has been reinterpreted in various forms over the decades – including kinetic typographic animations and even musical settings [10]. This speaks to how robust the poem’s concept is: just as cities grow and change, the poem’s form (being essentially a template of roots and suffixes) can migrate to different platforms (print, digital, video) and still convey the interplay of urban qualities.

In one sense, “*cidade/city/cité*” is about the city; in another sense, it is a city—a city of words. It has infrastructure (the repeated suffix acting like roads or scaffolding), it has inhabitants (the word-roots representing ideas/people), it has a unifying plan (the grid-like block layout), and it even has chaos and cacophony by design. In this way, de Campos reinforces the article’s central thesis: the poem can operate as a semantic cityscape, a model city built of language that readers navigate as they would real urban terrain.

VI. CONCLUSION

Writing the modern city through visual poetry is an act of translation—across not only languages, but also modalities of experience. It translates sensory perception into visual form, lived space into textual space, and fragmented modernity into structured poetic design. Through our comparative study of Kamensky, Hagiwara, and de Campos, we have seen how visual poetry operates as a form of urban cartography: mapping everything from the fragmented skyline of Constantinople, to the metaphysical disorientation of interwar Tokyo, to the multilingual abstraction of “city-ness” in São Paulo. In each case, the poet moves beyond linear syntax and sequential verse, instead composing the poem as a spatial diagram, where words, syllables, and symbols become coordinates in a semantic and visual field. These works are not merely texts; they are hybrid artifacts—simultaneously poems, images, maps, and conceptual objects. They require new reading practices that engage not only the intellect but also the eye and the body, repositioning the reader as an active navigator of the poetic space.

Grounded in global modernist poetics, these visual experiments emerge as transnational responses to the epistemic crises of modernity: the disintegration of stable meaning, the sensory overload of the metropolis, and the polyphonic confusion of globalized communication. In this context, the semiotics of space becomes an essential strategy for bypassing the limitations of linear discourse. Typography and visual form offer a shared symbolic language that can operate across linguistic and cultural borders, enacting translanguaging and transcultural dialogues on the page. Visual poetry, then, becomes a modern lingua franca—not based in a single vocabulary, but in the universal human capacity to interpret spatial relationships, shapes, rhythms, and visual patterns.

Understood as a mode of urban cartography, visual poetry offers more than formal innovation; it offers an epistemological framework for understanding the complexity of modern life. Like effective maps, these poems abstract without erasing, compress without distorting. They translate emotion, politics, and perception into structured form. Whether evoking the aerial dynamism of Kamensky’s Constantinople, the post-traumatic dispersion of Hagiwara’s Tokyo, or the multilingual density of de Campos’s “*cidade/city/cité*”, these works model new ways of seeing the city as text, and the poem as spatialized experience.

In an era marked by accelerating urbanization, linguistic hybridity, and visual saturation, the poetics of space remains profoundly relevant. These works remind us that reading need not proceed linearly, nor be confined to semantic interpretation. To read a visual poem is to navigate—to wander, to orient, to decode. And in doing so, we re-enact the

experience of dwelling in the modern city itself: fragmented yet patterned, disorienting yet richly meaningful. Visual poetry, then, not only reflects the city—it teaches us how to live, read, and find meaning within its shifting, polyphonic grid.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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