

Constructing Meaning through Visual Form: John Ecko's Concrete Poetry

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between visual form and verbal meaning in John Ecko's *Signs of Life: A Book of Visual Poetry* (2009) through the theoretical perspective of Structuralism and Semiotics. It analyses how typographic choices such as spacing, shape, and layout contribute to the interpretive process. In doing so, the study demonstrates how visual organization enriches the reader's interpretive process. Through close textual and visual analysis of selected poems, this study reveals that the visual aspects of Ecko's poetry are indispensable to interpretation, challenging interpretations that privilege the verbal dimension of the poems. This study contributes to scholarship on Concrete Poetry by showing that Ecko's visual architecture is not merely decorative but essential to the construction of meaning and to guiding the reader's interpretive process.

Keywords: concrete poetry, John Ecko, semiotics, structuralism, visual form, visual poetry

1. Introduction

Concrete poetry occupies a unique position at the intersection of literature and visual art. The layout and visual arrangements are integral parts of the poetic text and meaning does not emerge from words only, but also from their visual organization on the page. While concrete poetry has traditionally been discussed as a form of visual experimentation through the relationship between visual form and verbal meaning, contemporary visual poets such as John Ecko demonstrate that the spatial designs produce emotional and psychological and meaning.

Concrete poetry is sometimes referred to as visual poetry. It is a poetic form that uses shapes to create a visual image of the topic or the main idea of the poem. It is a poetry that embraces/adopts the main features of poetry (concision, concentration, and reduction) to a whole new level. Concrete poems tend to "use space" to attract the attention of the reader by their artistic and physical appearance. Sometimes, concrete poetry is referred to as pattern poetry because its typography represents a shape that at first glance might look abstract (Padgett 1987).

In her (1985) thesis, Tineke Bierma traces the history of concrete poetry as early as 300 B.C., where some poets have created poems in the shape of a shepherd's pipe or wings. Around 400 AD, the poems took the shape of an altar and a syrinx. During the Carolingian period, Eugnius Vulgar created grid poems in the

shape of an organ. And in the 16th century, this type of poetry was frequent; there were poets who wrote poems in the shape of an ax or a cross. Later on, the poets of the 17th century experimented with more shapes such as a flower wreath, a heart, and a shepherd's cottage. Furthermore, the picture poem was considered an "occasion poem" (Gelegenheitsdichtung), referring to the occasion it was written for. A prime example is the poems of George Herbert (1633) "Easter Wings" that is in the shape of wings as seen in figure (1), and "The Altar" as seen in figure (2) in the shape on an altar.

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
 Though foolishly he lost the same,
 Decaying more and more,
 Till he became
 Most poore:
 With thee
 O let me rise
 As larks, harmoniously,
 And sing this day thy victories:
 Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne
 And still with sicknesses and shame.
 Thou didst so punish sinne,
 That I became
 Most thinne.
 With thee
 Let me combine,
 And feel thy victorie:
 For, if I imp my wing on thine,
 Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Figure 1. "Easter Wings" (George Herbert n.d.b)



The Altar.

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant reares,
 Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
 No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

A H E A R T alone
 Is such a stone,
 As nothing but
 Thy pow'r doth cut.
 Wherefore each part
 Of my hard heart
 Meets in this frame,
 To praise thy name.

That if I chance to hold my peace,
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.
 O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
 And sanctifie this A L T A R to be thine.



Figure 2. "The Altar" (George Herbert n.d.a)

After the years (1640-1680), picture poems have disappeared for it to later reappear in (1865). Lewis Carroll published Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The story "The Tale of a Mouse" was printed in the shape of a tail (Padgett 1987). The reproduction in Figure 3 is from CC's Poetry Page (2019).

THE TALE OF A MOUSE *

"Fury said to
 a mouse, That
 he met
 in the
 house,
 'Let us
 both go
 to law:
 I will
 prosecute
 you. —
 Come, I'll
 take no
 denial;
 We must
 have a
 trial:
 For
 really
 this
 morning
 I've
 nothing
 to do.'
 Said the
 mouse to
 the cur,
 'Such a
 trial,
 dear sir,
 With no
 jury or
 judge,
 would be
 wasting
 our breath.'
 'I'll be
 judge,
 I'll be
 jury,'
 Said
 cunning
 old Fury:
 'I'll try
 the whole
 case, and
 condemn
 you
 to
 death.' "

Lewis Carroll.

* By permission of the Macmillan Company.

Figure 3. "The Tale of a Mouse" (Carroll 1865)

The French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) wrote *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*), first published in 1897. An important precursor of concrete poetry, the poem uses varied type sizes and spatial arrangement to invite readers to connect its visual form with its meaning (Mallarmé 2007). Another influential figure is the poet Guillaume Apollinaire who published a bundle of visual poems that he called *Calligrammes* (1918) in which he created visual poems whose shapes are related to their subject. For instance, in his poem "Il Pleut" "The Rain" (1918), the letters stream down the page in uneven lines like raindrops. Apollinaire produced different poems whose shapes convey their main subjects (Padgett 1987).

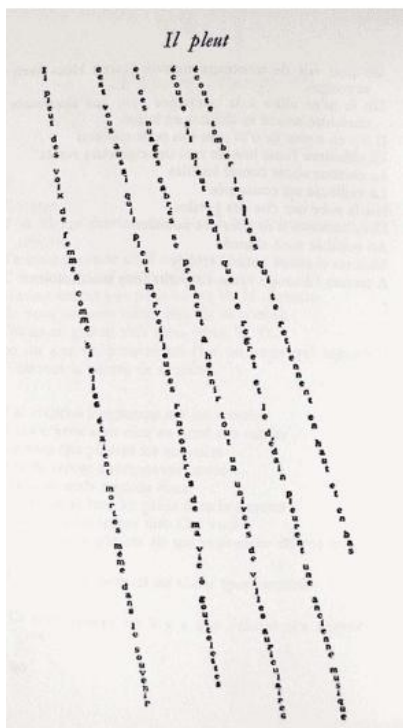


Figure 4. Apollinaire's "Il Pleut" ("The Rain") (1918) (Fall from the Tree 2018)

In the 1950s, the concrete poetry scene was led by Eugen Gomringer who was influenced by the Swiss sculptor Max Bill who called for the freedom of art over the binding linguistic rules that restrict its aesthetics; therefore, Eugen Gomringer used the term "Concrete Poetry" to describe a literary work that is characterized by Concrete tendencies. His collection *Constellation* (1954) took the form of lines. The movement of Concrete poetry flourished when Eugene Gomringer met Decio Pignatari in Germany. Pignatari was the leader of the Niogandres group along with Harold and Augusto de Campos. During their meeting, Eugene Gomringer and Pignatari agreed to call this new experimental poetry "Concrete Poetry". In 1956, the Niogandres organized an exhibition of concrete poetry in São Paulo. In 1958, they published their "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" (Solt 1970).

Building upon the innovations introduced by the twentieth-century concrete poets, *Signs of Life: A Book of Visual Poetry* (2009) by John Ecko extends the traditions of concrete poetry into new thematic and expressive contexts by incorporating digital techniques, particularly the creative use of keyboard characters and spatial arrangement. Ecko has received limited scholarly attention, his visual poetry reflects innovativeness in the development of contemporary concrete poetry. His poems invite multi-layered readings in which topography and verbal language interaction create meanings that go beyond visual experimentation.

This study examines Ecco's unexplored employment of spatial design as a semiotic resource for constructing psychological meaning through a qualitative close reading framed by Structuralism and Semiotics.

2. Literature review

Concrete Poetry has been understood as a literary form that integrates visual and verbal expression in the production of meaning. Emmett Williams (1967) defines it as a new poetry that focuses on the visual aspect of poetry, so that the poem is seen as a picture. Affirming that reading the poem as a picture is not a new type of poetry because it has already been done by the Greeks, Babylonians, and by poets who drew their literature on the walls of caves. While Mary Solt (1970), emphasizes that the term "Concrete Poetry" refers to an experimental poetic movement which appeared after the First World War and was used on a global scale. Adding to that, it is a type of visual poetry that concentrates on "physical material" that makes the text i.e., reduced and concentrated language. Some poets use letters or fragments of letters; some reduce the syllables; each poet manipulates the language in a way that fits their aesthetic need. This type of poetry creates a relationship between space (the page) and language, with the objective of making the poem to be seen before it is being read. Ultimately, it is a type of poetry that unshackles the poem from its traditional and linguistic constraints. Similarly, Max Bense (1965, as cited in Solt 1970:73) argues that concrete poetry is material art because it uses its material functionally, not symbolically; it is nothing but itself, and the "togetherness" of the words is its fundamental building block. The dimensions of linguistic elements are used in a way that meaning and structure (reciprocally) express and determine each other. The concurrence of the semantic and aesthetic function of words occurs on the basis of the exploitation of linguistic elements that can be presented in the literary work in syllables, sounds, morphemes, and letters. The constructive principle of concrete poetry reveals the artistic dependence of language on analytical and syntactic abilities.

The relationship between form and content has long occupied literary critics. Wimsatt Jr. (1947) states in "Concrete Universal" that the meaning of a concrete poem is represented in its form and "unifying principle". He defines the poem as a unit of characters, actions, words and metaphors. Wimsatt asserts that a good poem must have the principle of individuality and uniqueness. More recently, Yousef and Awajan (2026) similarly examine the relationship between content and form in the poems of Mosab Abu Toha, emphasizing how language, structure and literary techniques contribute to poetic meaning. Likewise, in "Art as a Technique" (1917), building and revising Potebnya's idea that "Without images, art—including poetry—is impossible", Shklovsky introduces the concept of defamiliarization, encouraging on presenting familiar objects in unfamiliar ways to disrupt habitual reading. Shklovsky noted that Potebnya considered poetry to be "thinking in images" whereby images help explain the unfamiliar through the familiar. The function of the image is to make the meaning easier for readers to understand (Shklovsky 2012). In a similar vein, Almazaedah and Abuhammam (2026) similarly

examine the role of linguistic features and different poetic styles function within Arabic Andalusian poetry. The “Image” in concrete poetry does not only refer to the figure of speech, but it is also the shape the poem takes from its constructed and designed lines. Defamiliarization is one of the main features of concrete poetry. This perspective provides a useful theoretical foundation for examining the interaction between visual form and verbal meaning in contemporary concrete poetry.

Since the relationship between form and content has long been critics' concern, particular attention has been devoted to the reader's role in interpreting the interaction between verbal language and visual form. Both Williams and Solt emphasize that the reader is an important participant in creating the poem and in helping the poet deliver its structure by taking the poem as an object on its own. Emmet Williams elucidates that the poets of the fifties wanted the visual part of their poetry to be “structural” defining it as: “a poetry that often asked to be completed and activated by readers” (Williams 1967). Furthermore, Eugen Gomringer (1954, as cited in Solt 1970:67) asserts the main purpose of concrete poetry, that is to challenge readers. He describes it as a game; the poet chooses the playground, and the readers try to figure out the main purpose of the game to then finally join. Following the same thought, in Barthes “From Work to Text” (1989), the text requires from its reader “practical collaboration” to enjoy the literary work and figure out its meaning. The goal of concrete poetry is to engage the reader in the production process of the text; readers will connect the letters to form words, lines to create a sentence and the outlines to figure out the shape of the artwork.

This also aligns with Barthes's activity of “Structural Man” in “Style and Its Image” (1989); readers will take the poem, decompose it and recompose it by connecting its lines and understanding the purpose of the poem's shape. Readers of concrete poetry will recompose the poems using their own experiences and add their own reflections to it. This is further examined in Khrais's “Art and Poetry: The Power of Form” (2013), which explores the relationship between visual art and poetry, stating that unlike traditional poetry, the meaning in concrete poetry is not only derived from language, but it also requires the reader to examine the poem visually. Khrais draws on Culler's concept of “naturalization” to explain how readers tend to interpret unfamiliar texts by linking them to familiar patterns. Once the process of “naturalization” takes place, the communicative function will be restored. Affirming that the reader actively participates in the production of the meaning when decoding the visual elements of the poem.

Meaning in concrete poetry is generated not only through words but also through the visual organization of the text. McLuhan, Fiore and Agel (2001) highlights the importance of the medium as being part of the message; it is part of the meaning in concrete poetry. The use of various tools and the utilization of the page's design enhance the message and the reading experience for the reader. Similarly, drawing on Umberto Eco's semiotic theory, Terence Hawkes broadens Eco's view that signs stand for something significant; they might signify social, political issues or might even represent the human psyche. These visual signs might be produced *organically* by the shape of the poem in this context, or *instrumentally*

by “means of technological expansion of the body”. When the medium makes an organic factor dominant over the other, it will affect the nature of the discourse; thus, the medium will affect the message (Hawkes 2003:111).

These theoretical views have been extended in studies of contemporary concrete poetry. Kurt Beals (2020) further examines in his article the significant role of concrete poetry in commenting on socio-political issues. His essay calls for a new way of examining concrete poetry, which forms a manifesto for the response of the postwar era. Beals explores the poetry of Max Bense, the Niogandres, and Eugen Gomringer, and how these poets utilize communication and information theory with science and design to keep up with the postwar world. Beals stresses on the relevance of concrete poems and literature under the domination of technology and mass media (Beals 2020). These ideas are also reflected in Greg Thomas’s (2019) book *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland*, which explores the capacity of concrete poetry to engage in a social critique and questions of borders and identity. Thomas highlights how Ian Hamilton Finlay breaks the traditional literary norms in Scotland to unite linguistics with the image. Furthermore, Thomas discusses Bob Cobbing’s utilization of orthography which is how sound is represented by printed symbols to create a sophisticated blend of text and sound. These studies further demonstrate that concrete poetry utilizes multiple modes of expression to convey meaning.

Another significant contribution is Rudaina Abdulrazzaq Mohammed Saeed’s (2021) article, where she discusses how concrete poetry bridges literature with visual arts, exploring how concrete poetry relies on typography; the arrangement of the text on the page, font size, spacing, etc. Her article also sheds some light on the vital role of concrete poetry as a tool for raising awareness of dire issues and concerns such as social injustices worldwide (Mohammed Saeed 2021). Furthermore, Hopkins (2025) illustrates in her article that concrete poetry should be read visually and linguistically. The poem is about language and structure, but most importantly, it is about its lines, spacing, and shapes which also aid in delivering the message and creating meaning. By examining the concrete poems of the African American poet N.H. Pritchard and his avant-garde style and how he transforms language into visual patterns, where the poem is being read as an image (Hopkins 2025).

Overall, previous scholarship highlights the significance of visual form, reader participation, and semiotic interpretation in concrete poetry. Building upon these theoretical foundations, this study argues that John Ecko’s *Signs of Life: A Book of Visual Poetry* (2009) shows how visual aesthetic design functions as a means of constructing psychological and socio-political meaning.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative close-reading methodology guided by Structuralism and Semiotics. The selected poems are drawn from Ecko’s digital book *Signs of Life: A Book of Visual Poetry* (2009). These poems illustrate Ecko’s integration of linguistic expression and visual form to engage with social and

psychological issues. The analysis explores the use of spatial and visual organization, verbal signs, and typography to determine the contributions of these elements in constructing the meaning.

4. Result and discussion

John Ecko is the pen name of the contemporary American poet and writer Scott Scherr. His published works include *Signs of Life: A book of Visual Poetry* (2009) *Almost Human* (2011), *Kingdom of the Young* (2011) and the *Don't Feed the Dark* series (2015). This study examines selected poems from *Signs of Life*, focusing on the relationship between the form and the content.

John Ecko's *Signs of Life: A Book of Visual Poetry* (2009) is a collection of visual poetry that discusses issues from love to hate, politics to religion, the beautiful to the morbid; this book explores "the many footprints left by the human race for the better, and sometimes the worse." as described by Ecko himself. The following poems exemplify Hawkes's (2003) discussion of Umberto Eco's (1976) view that visual signs hold social or psychological significance. They provide concrete evidence of how their visual forms convey the meaning of these poems.

In "Terminal Reception" (2009), Ecko employs words and makes use of the empty space to create the shape of a T.V, with letters arranged in a structural pattern to form the antennas. Instead of describing mass media manipulation, the poem embodies it visually, positioning the reader in the place of the viewers in front of the T.V screen. This visual structure becomes a vital sign that emphasizes the poem's warning about the passive consumption of entertainment media. Ecko here warns citizens against being addicted and manipulated by T.V channels and the mainstream media, stressing that this simple box has the power to control and change people's minds and sometimes lives. The wordplay in "inner-tame" suggests that the audience may be brainwashed and manipulated by the mass media which implies the internalized process of mass media to influence the identities and thoughts of individuals. By situating the statement "WE NOW RESUME WITH REGULARLY SCHEDULED PROGRAMMING OF YOUR LIFE" at the center of the screen, highlights on the idea that media programming goes beyond entertainment to the programming of everyday life, and the usual program of manipulation will resume and continue unless people start to become more aware, let go of the remote control, and choose what they watch carefully. By this, Ecko blurs the distinction between message and medium. The reader does not read about television; the reader encounters the poem through the visual logic of a T.V set, illustrating how simultaneously form and content operate in constructing meaning. Consequently, the poem demonstrates that the form is not just aesthetical it is communicative, the shape of the T.V functions as a semiotic sign which its meaning appears through the interaction between the verbal text and the visual composition requiring the reader's interpretation.

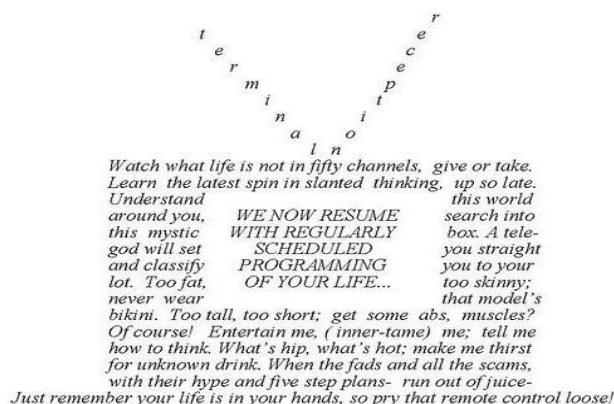
Terminal Reception

Figure 5. "Terminal Reception" (Ecko 2009)

While "Terminal Reception" critiques the influence of mass media, Ecko expands his social commentary to a political one. "Peacemaker" (2009) is another poem that addresses concurrent socio-political issues. Gunmakers disguised as peace makers, who claim to be righteous and often advocate for peace and peace treaties. The poem's lines created the shape of a peace sign that extends to an arm, then space and lines on the page were manipulated to create a hand gun. Through this visual transformation, the poem exposes the strategies of those who seek ultimate power, who are not bothered by the number of the victims they kill in order to rise to power; they only need to shed some blood, "it takes nothing to cause some dying", and it is simple for despots and tyrants to reap the souls of even babies in their pursuit of absolute power. Those acclaimed peace callers, who urge a ceasefire, are actually the ones who pull the trigger. This gradual extension of verbal lines extending from a peace sign into an arm holding a gun, reinforces that the visual form is inseparable to the construction of its political message, through this interaction between the verbal text and visual signs the meaning emerges.

Peacemaker

For the sake of precious
 peace, let us end hostilities. Make a pact,
 sign a treaty; reunite two groups of
 greedy; Game of blood-
 shed put to pause;
 relay arms, sharpen
 your claws. When
 the battle scars
 are mended, drop
 the ruse, for peace has
 ended. Same old story, song and
 dance; who will give true
 peace a chance? Does it al-
 ways end the same, war
 eternal, peace; the game? For one
 root of war is lust, to gain the most of
 all that rusts. Anot -her is that ancient hate;
 forgets that we are all one race. Then there's always
 quests for power, who can build the greatest tower. Those territ-
 orial disputes; eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Place your
 reasons on that line; make excuses,
 blot out the crimes. Takes not-
 hing to cause some dying;
 kill some babies, start
 some crying. Does any-
 one remember peace?
 Who will make the bomb-
 ings cease? Have we
 filled our cup as yet?
 Or must it overflow
 with death? Some say
 give peace the only gun, make
 all nations comply
 or run. Will
 this put to
 ground the fakers? Bullets blazing; here cometh Peacemaker?

Figure 6. "Peacemaker" (Ecko 2009)

While the previous poem demonstrates how visual shapes construct political meaning, Ecko also relies on empty spaces as a meaningful visual element; visual space carries as much significance as words in concrete poetry. As the saying goes: "silence speaks louder than words", the deliberate use of empty space in the poem "Dare to Live" (2009) contributes to the poem's meaning. Ecko, in this poem, employs digital typography, particularly keyboard characters and symbols, to create the shape of a hollowed man with a question mark for a face, and uses words and lines to draw the shadow of that man. While the poem invites multiple interpretations, the function of the visual space intensifies the poem's call for self-discovery and embracing one's authentic identity. As the poem suggests, many people have been hiding behind the "shadow of expectations", the more they struggle to please people and meet their expectations, the closer they are to hallowing themselves. The typed question mark represents the identity crisis the person goes through, questioning one's identity, dreams, and purpose that might be shattered for the sake of people's expectations. Rather than functioning

independently, form and content operate as interdependent elements through which meaning is created. This relationship is evident in this poem, where the visual arrangements of shapes and spaces reinforce the poem's semantic effect.

Dare To Live

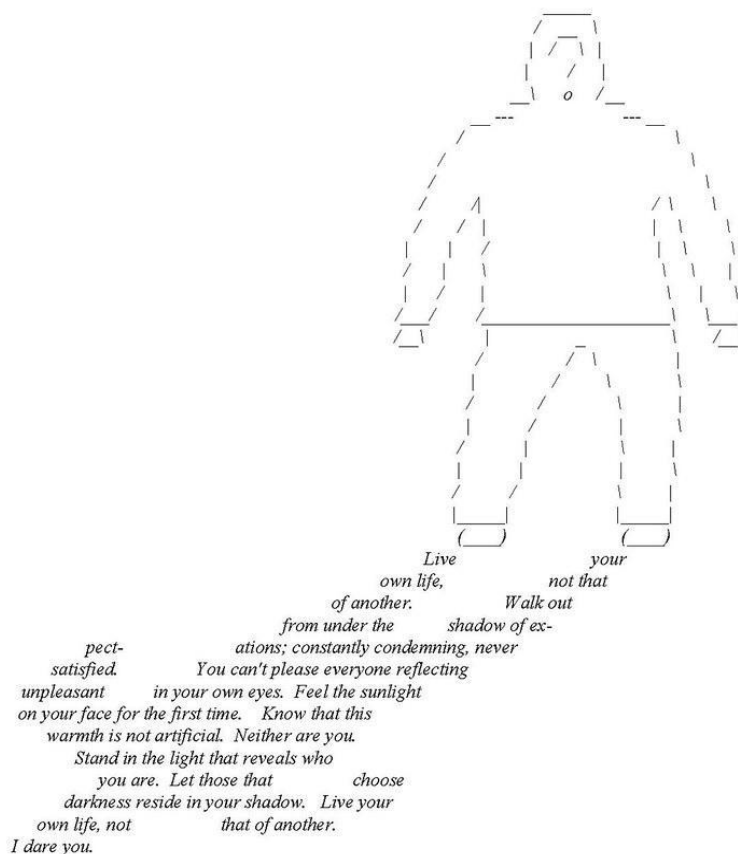


Figure 7. "Dare to Live" (Ecko 2009)

"Ajar" (2009) further illustrates Ecco's exploration of predatory and morally deviant personalities. Through the visual structure of a lurker concealed behind a half-closed door the poem evokes a sense of uneasiness for the reader and an immediate glimpse into the psychology of the predator before they read the verbal

text. The partially opened door does not reveal the lurking figure's full body which mirrors the uncertainty experienced by the victim. This deliberate concealment transforms the empty space surrounding the figure into a visual sign of intrusion, intensifying the psychological tension that is revealed throughout the poem.

After encountering the text, the reader realizes that the lurker is familiar with the place, knows the locations of the rooms and kitchen utensils. The stalker is intimately familiar with the victim's routines, preferences, and domestic space, such detailed knowledge suggests a disturbing pattern of prolonged observation. Therefore, the visual composition of the poem reinforces the psychological tension; the stalker's knowledge of the victim's place and habits destroys the sense of security that is associated with the home.

Ajar

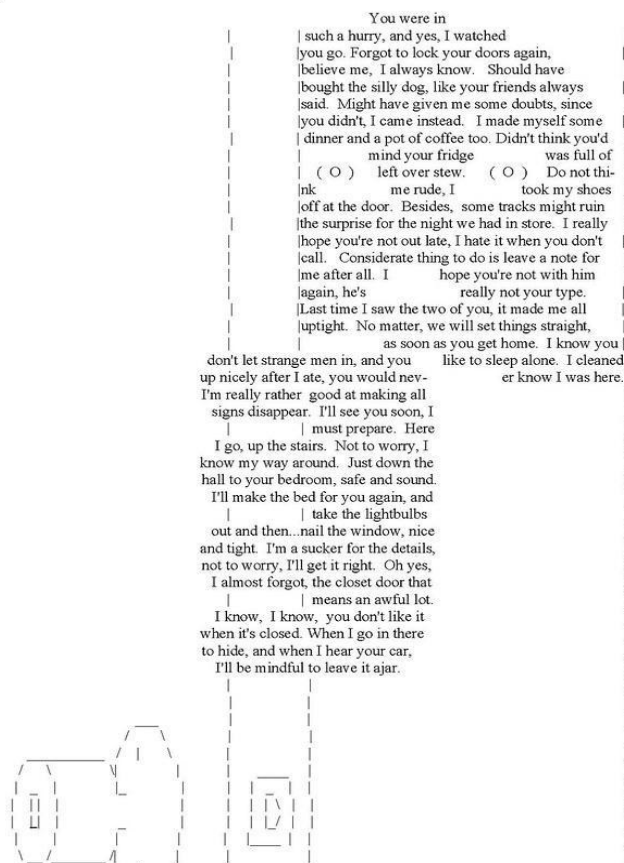


Figure 8. "Ajar" (Ecco 2009)

Eco, in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986), explains how the text can generate multiple meanings elaborating on what his fellow semioticians

has argued before that signification is located exclusively in the text: "The text is the locus where the meaning is produced and becomes productive (signifying practice)" (Eco 1986:25). The semiotic structure in Ecco's poems is sufficient to produce the meaning; the signifier and the signified operate as an integrated semiotic unit making it impossible to separate the visual arrangements from the conveyed meaning. The poem "Ai (Love)" (2009), which means "love" in Chinese, is created using the Chinese symbol "爱" "Ai" for love. For some readers, the "爱" sign may be unfamiliar; however, after unfolding the textual narrative of the poem, they will recognize the meaning of the visual sign. Readers in this poem are being challenged to connect the lines to create the poem. The meaning will not be realized unless the reader connects the codes to form the full content of the poem. Thus, the answer to the readers' questions about meaning is within their grasp. Chandler (1994), underscores that meaning is created according to a "complex interplay of words". As an active reader, the process of interpreting concrete poetry and constructing meaning by untangling the given codes in words or shapes, according to semiotics, reveals the reality of the literary work. Hence, revealing its meaning and connotation in reality.

Ai (Love)

In
 any language
 she is beauty, absent of vanity.
 Love is the first rose at dawn and the last
 at the end of eternity. She is a baby in a mother's arms, the
 soothing voice and guide through persistent storms. The quest of all life and the
 point of departing; she is the dream from where all dreams
 have their starting. Love is something far beyond
 the
 fancy
 eye. She
 hold to rules
 ed archers
 ute and
 this po-
 man-
 serve
 and
 kind.
 each one of
 will rescue all hearts
 She will open our eyes
 to the truth inside, that separates pure gold from foolish pride. Love gives without motive, asking nothing in return.
 compas-
 fire, by
 does
 a
 can
 the hardest
 stone weep. Love can kill the will of the warrior who lays the sword down for a song. Love can sprout poets like wild flow-
 ers in summer, even in fields barren for so long. Love is the ever after and the answer to all questions unasked. She
 will
 prove her
 worth in
 refiner's
 and she
 under every task. Love is what makes profound the giving of insig-
 nificant things. She takes what little there is to hold, and makes a mo-
 ment sing. Love is the
 light in
 seek. She
 of hope
 surely
 dawn at
 of all
 turned
 hate
 with
 false
 of
 and Love will
 rust- Faith,
 passions
 darkness,
 and violence
 to dust.
 the dusk
 man's
 folly re-
 When all
 fade away
 and all
 show
 Hope,
 come
 back for us.

Figure 9. “*Ai (Love)*” (Ecko 2009)

Ecko's experimentation with visual form extends to the technique of defamiliarization, by reversing the conventional relationship between the familiar and unfamiliar, Ecko invites readers to perceive the human race from the perspective of an alien observer. Rather than depicting aliens as destructive invaders, Ecko constructs a visual pattern of the face of an alien who ironically critiques anthropocentrism; moral and social deterioration of humanity lamenting that “it's a wonder we still find life at all!” Earth in the text is portrayed as a space overwhelmed by violence, hatred, disease to an extent that the alien visitor abandons it in disappointment. Ecko here, reverse and challenge the popular conspiracy narratives and redirect responsibility for the world's destruction toward human civilization. Portraying human cruelty and decay as more destructive and the imagined alien invasion they fear.

Signs of Life

A disturbance on the surface of the
 planet filled with tears.
 It's been the longest time
 since we've visited
 this sphere.
 Last we came,
 inferno reigned,
 and madness
 filled the sky.
 There was
 a blast over
 eastern half,
 and chilling
 bloody cries.
 We would
 not inter-
 vene, be-
 cause to
 them, we'd
 Thinking
 ical mush-
 once again,
 for so we've
 ion. What
 with perfect
 they kill
 learned
 so, for
 whatever
 that is
 worth.
 each
 sign
 life
 we
 find,
 they
 are
 quick
 in the
 "earth".
 It's a
 wonder we
 still find life at all.

seem supreme.
 not to advance technolog-
 room dreams. So we departed
 in sorrow from the planet. "When?"
 named this place forever bent on obliv-
 motivates these roads of hate they pave
 ease? We ponder never returning again;
 much like a disease. At least we've
 why they named this place

With
 new
 of

to put them

Figure 10. "Signs of Life" (Ecko 2009)

"The Ghost of the Mary Celeste", is one of Ecko's most visually intricate concrete poems. Ecko transforms the entire page into a semiotic landscape; the typography and spatial arrangements, irregular spacing creates instability where the page may seem to be moving, creating the experience of a violent storm where the page itself becomes the ocean. At the top of the page, the lines are constructed to create the shape of clouds and the diagonal scattered marks become the rain, the narrative itself almost disappears through the rain, making the reader struggle to go through the text just as the way sailors struggle sailing through the storm. Inspired by the haunting story of the mysterious disappearance of the 1872 ship Mary Celeste. The ship left New York and headed to Italy in November, with a large amount of alcohol cargo and ten people. On the fifth of December, the ship was discovered deserted and adrift near the Azores. The ship was only missing a lifeboat; its cargo was untouched, its crew inexplicably disappeared, after the formal investigation in Gibraltar, no foul play was found (Tikkanen 2026).

This historical mystery serves as the foundation of Ecco's visual reconstruction of the event. The central visual structure that emerges from the sea resembles a sea monster evoking the legendary maritime threat, the function of this visual representation surrounds Mary Celeste reinforcing its mystery associated with the ship's disappearance. At the bottom of the page, the faint outline of the ship depicts the ghostly trace of the vessel rather than its realistic representation

The Ghosts of the Mary Celeste

I'll tell thee a tale of the Mary Celeste; of Captain Briggs,
his family and crew. A month to sea and a journey ill ended, in winter of eighteen-seventy-two.
Late one evening waves assaulted the beam, alarms were raised and crew was roused from sleep. Across the ocean,
storms beset the sail as something stirred beneath the keel and deep. Alas! His load of spirits from the West!
Barrels, nine in all, received a beating. The crew reported smell of vapors foul, the captain
knowing well the kegs were bleeding. Explosive consequences entered mind,
the captain did not waste a moment's time.

"To stern!"
He ordered, "All hands leave the ship!" The raft was lowered into darkened
sea. All ten on board, the skiff was dragged in tow, as lightning rocked the
night with morbid glee. Ole' Mary, all ahead on through the night, and under heavy
sail she captured wind. The captain and his crew / were soon distressed, for toline
had / come loose to their chagrin. Bat-tered / by the swells and hopeless cause,
the / crew of captain Brigg's began
to p / ray. The raft was sinking fast
into the deep, as Mary Celeste
was sailing away. The crew
was grim and filled with heavy heart. Then all gazed up
lost in horrific start. The Mary Celeste was found
the next day, adrift on the ocean with sails in the wind.
A second ship came alongside and hailed; but no one would ever
answer again. Once aboard, they searched the Mary Celeste, found

>
/ / /
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/ / /
nothing but silence and shadow and at the helm, the ghosts at rest.

Figure 11. “The Ghosts of the Mary Celeste” (Ecko 2009)

Collectively, the analyzed poems reveal how consistently Ecko employs visual structure as an integral part of mean-making. Across the selected poems typography, verbal signs, and visual organization interact to construct meaning that would be incomplete if conveyed through linguistic expression alone. The analysis further demonstrates that Ecko employs visual strategies to engage with and

comment on social and psychological themes while illustrating the inseparability of form and content which is a defining characteristic of concrete poetry.

5. Conclusion

Concrete poetry has evolved into an international movement that enables poets to express diverse social, philosophical and cultural concerns through the fusion of visual and verbal language. This study investigated the relationship between form and content in John Ecco's concrete poetry through the theoretical perspective of structuralism and semiotics. The analysis demonstrates that Ecco's visual configuration and the verbal text serve as an integral semiotic element that actively participates in meaning-making. Through the spatial layouts, symbols and typography, Ecco transforms the page into a meaningful plane in which form and content operate as a constitutive element to the poetic experience. Ultimately, Ecco's poems demonstrate the meaning in concrete poetry emerges through the inseparable interaction between visual and verbal language inviting readers to interpret the poem as both a linguistic and a visual text.

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