FEELING VISUAL POETRY: A MULTIMODAL COGNITIVE STUDY

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1.   Introduction

In his cognitive study of visual poetry, Reuven Tsur (2000: 763-769) demonstrates that visual poetry generates a witty, intellectual effect in readers, rather than a sentimental one. Whereas it is true that this is a general tendency, the aim of my present study is to explain how feeling emerges from visual poetry's multimodal structure, in order to prove that feeling is actually an important part of visual poetry as well. It may be not as central as in lyric poetry, buy it plays its role and therefore it should be studied. For this purpose, I have developed a multimodal iconicity model, which I have put into practice by analyzing some visual poetry examples.

1.1.   A multimodal and cognitive definition of visual poetry

First of all, I am going to try to define visual poetry from a multimodal cognitive perspective. Even if there is a lot of controversy around the definition of visual poetry, a good starting point could be Tsur's (2000) consideration that visual poetry assembles different expressions that have in common a special graphemic patterning which transcend the textual dimension. In this sense, visual poetry is a multimodal expression of the lyric genre, formed by elements in two different modes: textual and visual. Furthermore, there is yet another specificity of a great part of visual poetry: the fact that the signifier of the textual mode can stand as a sign of the visual mode (for example, in calligrammes). On the other hand, as it is lyric, it shares some conventions of the genre, considered as a prototypical effect in its cognitive conception (*cf.* Stockwell, 2002: 27; Freeman: 2007a: 1178). These conventions are adapted to its multimodal configuration: a high modal density, a special attention in the signifier (in each mode) which generates

'organized violence against cognitive processes' (Tsur, 1992: 5), a sense of timelessness and some sense of rhythm (verbal or spatial).

2.   Towards a theory of multimodal poetic iconicity

After having defined visual poetry from a multimodal cognitive perspective, in order to explore the connection between feeling and visual poetic form (and content), I will extend Margaret Freeman's (2020) poetic iconicity theory to a multimodal perspective. Freeman's theory belongs to the Cognitive Poetics framework and, more concretely, is based on Fauconnier and Turner (2002) conceptual blending model, which has already been successfully applied in multimodal studies, for instance by Zbikowski (2009), despite the soft critics of some other researchers like Charles Forceville (2009). The conceptual blending theory improves the traditional conceptual metaphor theory since it no longer assumes a unidirectional relationship where a source is projected into a target, but it describes a bidirectional relationship between two input spaces, which are undifferentiated – allowing a much more flexible description of metaphorical relationships. The features in common from both input spaces are mapped into the generic space and this mapping allows new features to emerge (for both input spaces) in the blended space (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002: 41-47).
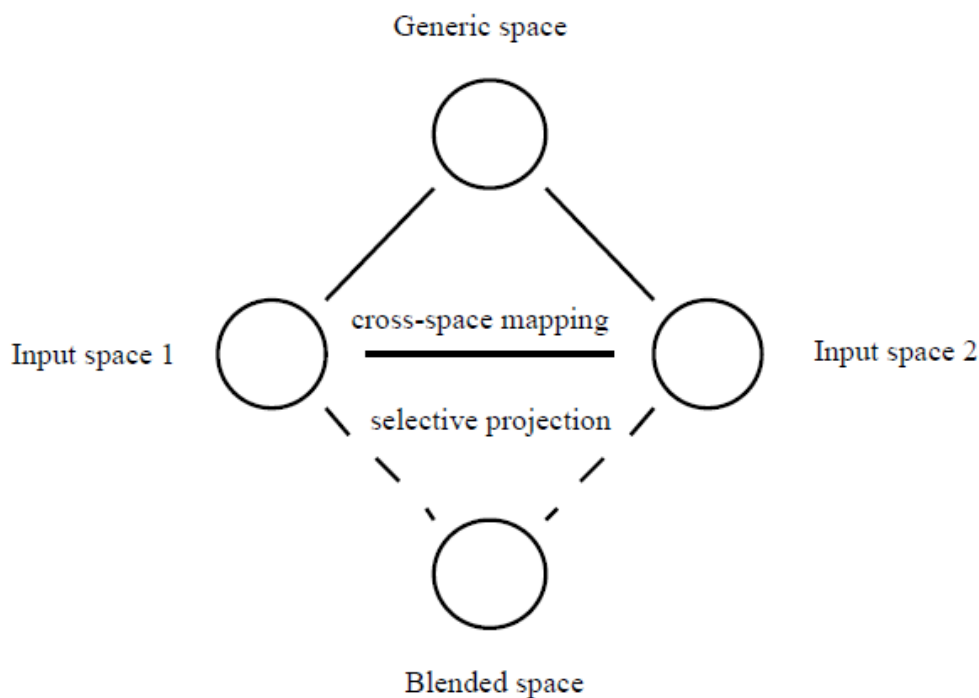
Generic space

cross-space mapping

Input space 1

Input space 2

selective projection

Blended space

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the conceptual blending model (Fauconnier and Turner, 2003: 59).

Freeman (2020: 29-30; 103-105) applies this model to Charles Pierce's triadic structure of icon (as image, diagram, and metaphor), considering the specificity of poetry. In fact, Masako Hiraga (2005: 51) had already done the same operation, but the difference with Freeman is that the later does not consider poetic iconicity and add-on, but a intrinsic property of poetry (Freeman, 2008: 359-360). Besides, Freeman takes it a step further to connect the poetic icon with the perceived feeling. She states that the poetic content (considered as the image in Peirce's theory) and its form (the diagram) are linked by a metaphorical process *through feeling* to create a poetic iconicity (Freeman, 2020: 105-108; 172-173). Note that here iconicity doesn't stand for its traditional conception as resemblance to an object, but to the property of a sign to be linked to a sensorial or emotional experience (*cf.* Freeman, 2020: 28-36).
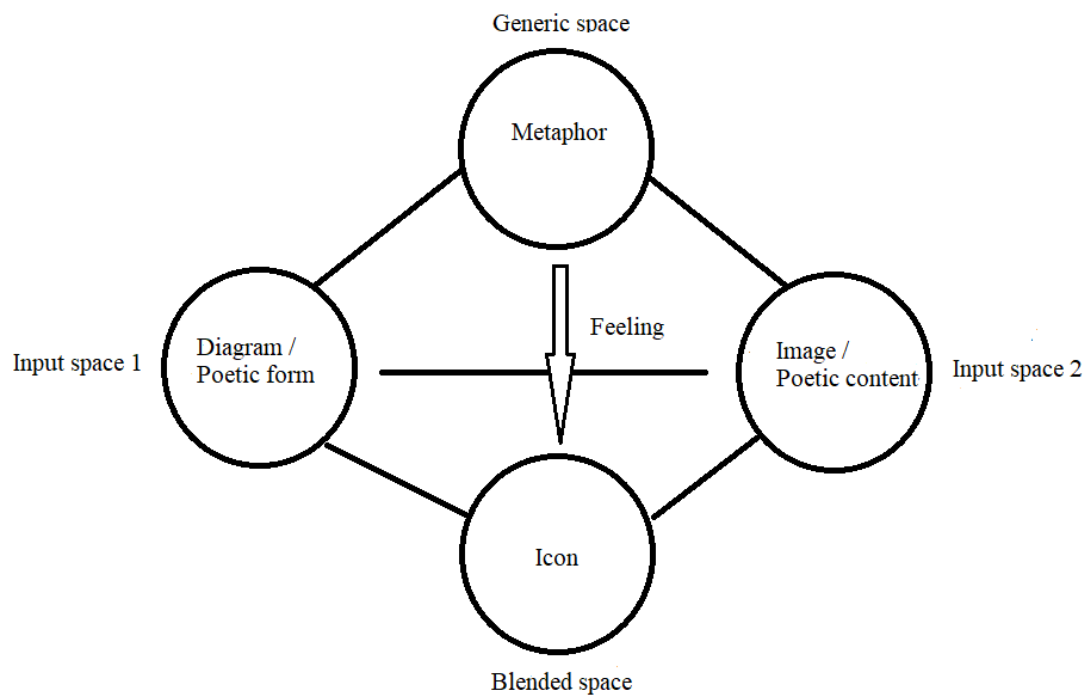
Figure 2: Schematic representation of Margaret Freeman's poetic iconicity model.

Extending Freeman's theory to a multimodal perspective, I propose that, in visual poetry, textual and visual modes operate as input spaces, which are metaphorically associated through feeling to create multimodal poetic iconicity.
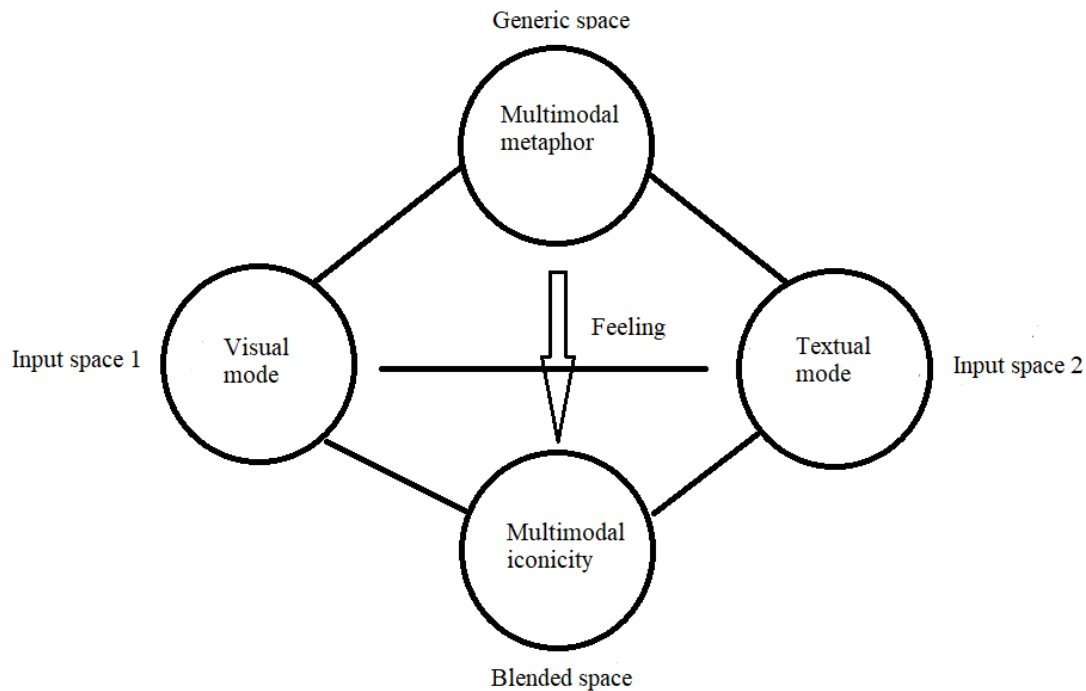
Figure 3: Schematic representation of the multimodal poetic iconicity model.

Furthermore, I have developed a typology of the types of intermodal relationships, based on previous studies:

1.   According to the interdependency of the elements: it can be an equality or inequality relationship (Martinec and Salway, 2005: 142).

2.   According to the nature of its semantic union: expansion (elaboration, extension, and enhancement) or projection (locution or idea) (Martinec and Salway, 2005: 142). Unsworth and Cléirigh (2009: 153) state these relationships are bidirectional, a fact which is accounted for in the present theory.

3.   Applying Martínez-Falero's (2022: 154) lyric theory, expansion relationships could be separated into three types, as they can be built by analogy, contraposition, and contiguity (projection is always built by analogy).

4.   Finally, following Bohn's semiotic theory of visual poetry, three kinds of interaction can be differentiated according to the mode of each related item: textual-textual, textual-visual, and visual-visual. (Bohn, 1986: 69)

3.   Discussion

David Machin (2009) discusses different problems in multimodal analysis. Regarding the 'icon problem', he wonders how we can analyze the interaction between

the linguistic and the visual elements, given that the later reference directly to the world, whereas the first ones symbolize it. This may be the reason why both modes can be fused in poetry, since, as stated before, poetry is iconic and therefore has a direct link to the experience of the world.

Another issue which would be solved from this perspective is the one discussed by Charles Forceville (2009: 30-31): the problematic verbalizing of a nonverbal metaphor while doing an analysis. Forceville talks specifically about the traditional Conceptual Metaphor Theory sentences like MAN IS WOLF. However, from the conceptual blending perspective, it is not necessary to define in such a restrictive way the interaction between the two input spaces, but it can be described in a much more complex way (*cf.* Fauconnier and Turner, 2002: 47-48; 119-131).

Finally, the explanation of the arousal of feeling by the present theory should not be confused with the pathetic fallacy. In fact, Freeman always talks (as well as I do) about *perceived* feeling, i.e., about the feeling experienced by a hypothetical or an actual reader or critic – certainly not about any fallacious feeling present in the poem itself or in the images evoked in it.

4.   Analysis

Having developed the theoretical framework, I have put it into practice by analyzing three visual poetry examples. I have chosen these examples from different periods and movements in order to explore the possibilities of visual poetry. Regarding the methodology, it should be noted that I have chosen a hermeneutic approach: the purpose of the analysis is to explore possible and/or new meanings for the visual poems. The reason for this choice is that Freeman's theory has been developed in this sense. Nevertheless, there is no reason why the present theoretical framework could not be applied to explain reader-response or other empirical approaches in future studies.

4.1.   'Il pleut' by Guillaum Apollinaire

I will start with the calligramme 'Il pleut' (Apollinaire, 2018: 191) - 'It rains', also translated as 'It is raining' - by Guillaume Apollinaire. Considering just the visual elements, following Kress and Van Leuwen visual grammar (Kress, 2009: 59), it is quite obvious that its ideational meaning stands iconically (in its traditional sense) for the title and one of the semantic centers of the poem ('it rains'), being each letter a raindrop. This

is an equality projection textual-visual relationship. Besides, rain has also an important symbolic charge: it stands for the celestial influences in the earth or as a fecundating agent (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2018: 671).

From the interpersonal perspective, the interaction with the image is such that the reader is obliged to move our eyes from up to down, following the rapid fall of the raindrops, which generates a spatial rhythm. From the cognitive perspective of embodiment (that is, the fact that thought and perceptions are mediated by the body experience), the movement of the eye is important as it can have iconicity effects (Freeman, 2020: 122), as I will show later for this case. In fact, this phenomenon is due to what Mike Borkent calls 'fictive motion', which 'occurs when readers or viewers conceptualize static objects as mobile' (Borkent, 2014: 15).

Considering the textual mode, the 'raining' is thematized from the beginning until the end and appears in relation with the memories ('souvenir'), the reunion ('rencontres'), the regret and the disdain ('dédain') – in short, associated with a sad and nostalgic feeling, which is a conventional companion of rain in the lyric genre, as well as it is quite conventional the subtle merging of rain and tears ('pleurent') in the poem. From a rhythmical point of view, there are some sort of versicles which start at the top at end at the bottom, setting the main pauses of our reading. Besides, the accentual rhythm within each versicle is not constant, and the fact that the text is disposed in an unnatural direction slows the reading. Of course, this generates a contrasting extension relationship with the rapid and constant visual rhythm of the rain.

Applying the multimodal iconicity model, the visual and the textual input spaces are mapped into the generic space, where the rain is the common feature, but this relationship allows new connotations for the rain to appear in the blended space: the sad and nostalgic feeling is reinforced by the harsh contrast between the visual and textual rhythms and by the downwards eye movement, given that down is conventionally conceived negatively.

However, there is another element that I have not analyzed: the fact that each raindrop is a letter, that the rain is made of words. If this is merged with the symbolism of the rain, letters and words appear as a falling celestial influence received by the poet, where the 'fecundating agent' would be, through a conventional metaphor, his inspiration. Furthermore, this interpretation is enhanced by the text, since at the beginning of the poem

it says that 'it's raining female voices as if they were dead' ('il pleut des voix de femmes comme si elles étaient mortes') which could be a reference to the Muses. Thus, the final result is a multimodal icon of the rain as a sad and nostalgic celestial inspiration for the poet.
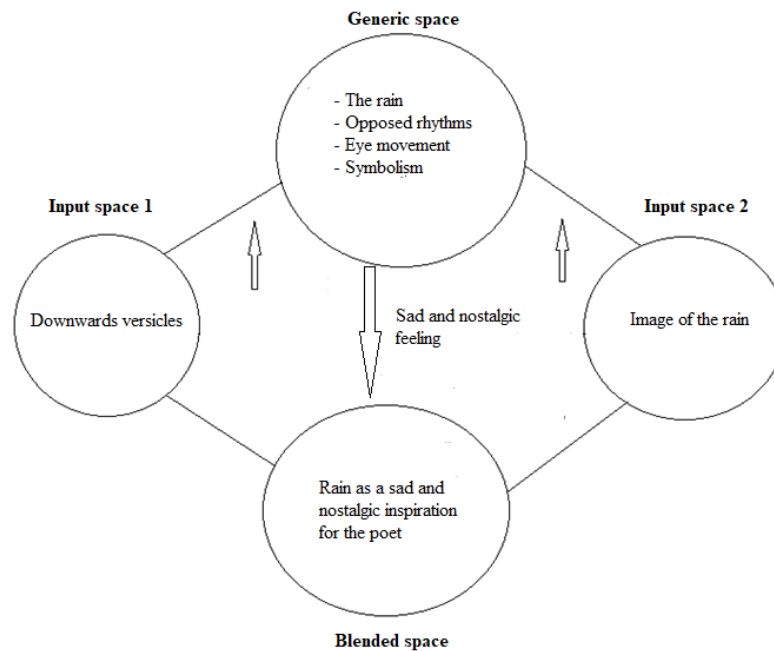

Figure 4: Multimodal poetic iconicity in the calligramme 'Il pleut' by Apollinaire.

4.2. 'Moon Shot Sonnet' by Mary Ellen Solt

Stepping now into Concrete Poetry, one of the main visual poetry movements in the XXth century, I will analyze the visual poem 'Moon Shot Sonnet' (Perloff, 2021: 183) by the poet Mary Ellen Solt (Gilmore City, USA, 1920-2007). There is no longer a text in its traditional sense, although there is something that resembles it, made of non-linguistic signs. Solt stated that she constructed this visual poem by using the 'markings on the first photos of the moon'. These markings are disposed in lines of five (standing iconically for the five accents of a iambic pentameter), which are disposed in some sort of two quartets and two tercets - the sonnet's traditional structure.

In this case, the textual mode is dependent on the visual mode - more concretely, it is iconically created by the visual mode. Therefore, this time it will be even harder to separate the textual analysis from the visual one. However, considering first the visual mode, there are two main references from an ideational perspective: a framed picture (more concretely, of the moon, following the paratext) and the structure of a sonnet. From

an interpersonal perspective, our eyes follow two paths or visual rhythms. On the one side, there is a spatial orientation of the marks of the picture framing, which generates a *fictive motion* to the center of each of the four framings. On the other side, there is also a spatial horizontal rhythm (which could be called iambic) of the lines or verses: each mark (as a verse's accent) followed by a space (as a non-accentuated syllable).

Considering now the textual mode separately, there is only the structure of a sonnet without actual words which would concretize its content, but just meaningless marks (at least from a linguistic point of view). Therefore, it is an abstract sonnet which keeps only its marked rhythm.

Applying the multimodal poetic iconicity model, there are some features in common between the visual mode (the framing marks) and the textual one (the sonnet's structure): it appears clear that they share the versal horizontal rhythm, but there is also a mapping between the orientation of the markings and a prototypical semantic structure of a sonnet – as both put the focus into specific elements or parts of the whole, or they point to a certain center for the image or poem. The generated feeling can be the fun which the reader may experience because of this ingenious association – because, even if it has an intellectual origin, having fun is a feeling. As a result, the multimodal iconicity emerges with new features for both the sonnet, which appears as something scientific, a technical artifice, but at the same time something that captures a certain picture of the world - as well as the photography as a poetic elaboration of reality.
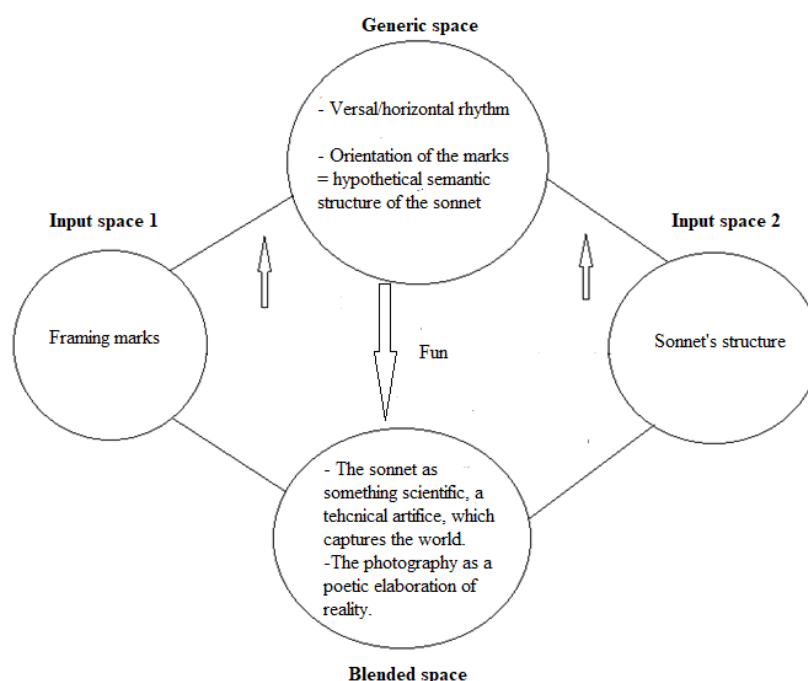

Generic space
- Versal/horizontal rhythm
- Orientation of the marks = hypothetical semantic structure of the sonnet

Input space 1
Framing marks

Input space 2
Sonnet's structure

Fun

- The sonnet as something scientific, a tehcnical artifice, which captures the world.
- The photography as a poetic elaboration of reality.

Blended space

4.3. 'Anhelo vertical' by Clara Janés

Now let's take a look at the third example: 'Anhelo vertical' (Janés, 2006: 23) - 'Vertical yearning' - by the Spanish poet Clara Janés (Barcelona, 1940). This time, the modal configuration is even more complex, since it is formed by a composition of a visual poem on the right along with a prose poem on the left, as well as a quote from Emil Cioran at the bottom of the left page. The visual mode, which I will analyze in the visual poem, has only a few elements from an ideational point of view, but very significant because of their symbolic power. There is a *collage* consisting of a pomegranate's photograph with falling *O* letters which represent iconically the pomegranate's grains. From an interpersonal perspective, there is again a downwards movement of our eye while looking at the poem. The pomegranate has different symbolic possibilities, according to Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2018: 538), as well as Cirlot (2004: 236): it can symbolize reproductive or divine fertility, in relation with Persephone's myth, but also perfection, eternity and the union of the multiple, as it has the form of a circle made of smaller circles.

Considering the textual mode, there are three main associative fields in the prose poem: life, death and a cosmic space. This generates a semantic rhythm, driven by the contraposition between life and death, which follow each other. They are related by contiguity to the cosmic space, that is the passive scenery of this circle of life and death. Furthermore, Cioran's quote ('Death introduces a certain order in the infinity') establish from the paratext a clear analogical relationship of enhancement with respect to the prose poem's main associative fields, as well as the pomegranate's symbolism.

Applying once again the multimodal iconicity model, the visual and textual mode share two contraposing ideas: the creative circle of life and death against the perpetual existence of cosmic space, or, from another point of view, the cyclical fertility of agriculture (as in Persephone's myth) against the infinity. This generates a multimodal iconicity which merges both contraries into a single truth: the cycle of life and death 'introduces a certain order in the infinity', using Cioran's quote, since it is the mark of the passing of time.

In this iconicity process, the main vehicle of feeling is, once again, the 'fictive motion' of the visual poem: it could be said, as I did at the beginning, that the grains – which represent each individual existence, portrayed as a circular letter O since it's one

iteration of the circle of life and death - are falling to the wide bottom of the page, to the void of cosmic non-existence. However, another possibility is that O grains are floating *up* to (re)join the pomegranate, which could be interpretated as if each existence, each individual cycle, would rejoin the big cosmic circle of life and death. Each way is a different sentimental reading which introduces different connotations: positive, for the upwards movement to a common fusion, and negative for the downwards falling to the void. Nevertheless, either way, the 'vertical yearning' of the title would be the desire to live and die to complete a cycle which would introduce an order and some sort of sense to the cosmos.
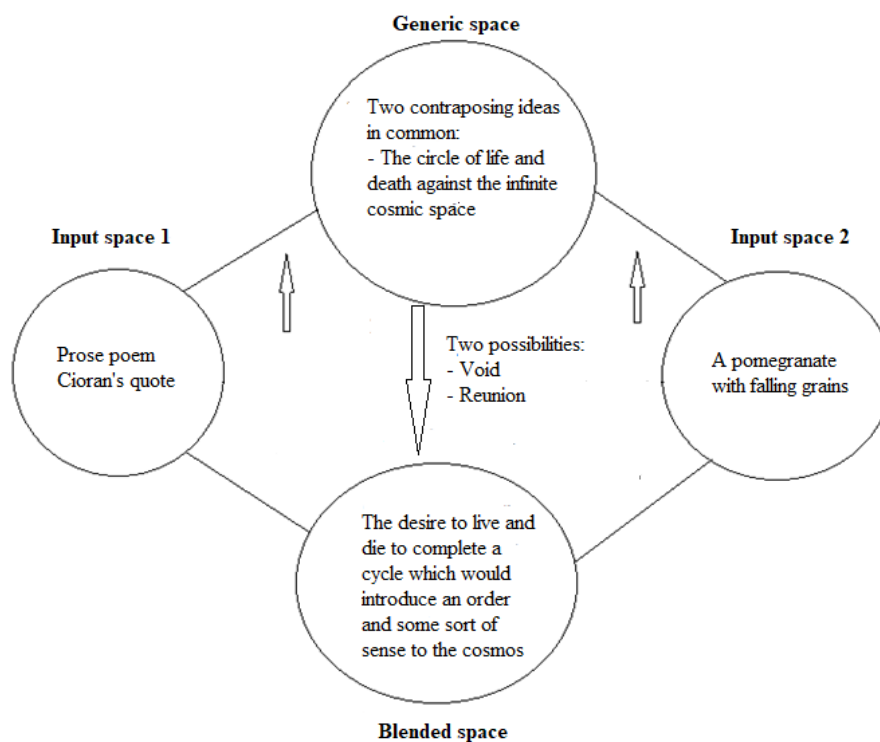
Figure 6: Multimodal poetic iconicity in the visual poem 'Anhelo vertical' by C. Janés.

5.   Conclusions

First of all, throughout the analysis it has been proved, as I stated at the beginning of my presentation, that feeling is involved in visual poetry and plays an important role. To arrive to this conclusion, I have extended Margaret Freeman's model of poetic iconicity to a multimodal perspective, and I have applied it to a successful analysis of three quite different examples of visual poetry.

This shows that, on the one hand, the multimodal approach should be addressed more often in Literary Studies, since, if we do not narrow our sights to the textual mode,

literary theories can be extended into wider perspectives, taking into consideration the different affordances of other modes, as I have shown for the iconicity and the metaphorical processes. On the other hand, it proves the epistemological strength of cognitive theories to explain and analyze feeling.

Finally, the success in the application of the present theory strongly suggests that it could be applied to other kinds of multimodal poetry, such as sound poetry or cyberpoetry – as well as to other methodologies: as it has been discussed, it could be used to explain the results of reader-response or other empirical studies.

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