"DOOR ALWAYS OPEN. FOR A NEW ERA'S DAY": AUGUSTO DE CAMPOS'S "MACINTOXICATION"

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Abstract A reading of Augusto de Campos's minimalist whale's song, *Canção noturna da baleia,* its references and sonic possibilities.

Keywords Whale song, Moby, Morgenstern, Macintosh

In May 1992—now thirty years ago!-- I received an enthusiastic letter from Augusto de Campos, detailing his new interest in the Macintosh computer and all that digital activity could do for poets and artists:

> I myself have a small Macfamily "workstation" (computer, scanner and printer) and am becoming more or less macintoxicated. . . As you see, I am each day more involved with computers.   In fact, although I am sure that knowledge of new technologies by itself is no warranty of great art, I could say, invoking J[ames] J[oyce's] verbivocovisual blessings ("door always open. For a new era's day"), I have the presentment of the futuriment that—in this *fin-de-siécle* pressure of [the] present—the future of futurisms is *there*. Et tout le reste est littérature. . .
>
> With all my ☀️☀️☀️ wishes,
>
> Augusto

In the *fin de siècle* of the 1990s, Augusto could not have anticipated how dark the early decades of the new century would turn out to be, beginning with 9/11 /2001 and culminating, at our own moment, in the spectre of dictatorship in both our countries. Technology in itself is indeed "no warranty for great art."   And yet . . . the imaginative, inventive Augusto has continually renewed himself, working with the range of new media. From thpe short concrete poems of *Noigandres* in 1953, to the *Popcretos* of the 1960s and the *despoesia* (unpoetry) of the *1990s,* to the astonishing performance pieces—

language, music, film, graphic art-- of the 2000s, and most recently the beautiful translation miniatures he calls *plaquettes,* Augusto has never stopped innovating and looking to the future.

I want to illustrate Augusto's uncanny ability to renew himself by looking at what I have called a "differential" text—that is, a text that morphs from one medium or genre to another, creating new semantic possibilities. *Cidade* would be one example, *Codigo* another. But let me here look at how Augusto's minimalist concrete poem, "The Whale's Night Song" ("*Canção noturna da baleia*),[1] became, more than a decade after its composition, the germ of the visual-musical piece *Call Me Moby*, performed by Augusto with his innovative composer-performer son Cid de Campos.[2]

Canção Noturna da Baleia) first published in *Despoesia* in 1994 [figure 1]*,* alludes to the famous German poem *Fishes Nachtgesang* by Christian Morgenstern, which consists of alternate long and short vowel scansion marks, as used in Latin and Greek poetry [see figure 2]. Morgenstern's poem is mimetic: its shape outlines the torso of a fish, and the scansion marks have been said to signify heartbeats, movements through the water, and so on.

Augusto's *Canção Noturna* is quite different: it occupies a single square black page, the grid made of 17 horizontal lines, each containing 23 spaces. In every even line (2,4 . . .) the spaces hold 23 white lower-case *m's*, whereas the nine odd lines, beginning with line 1, bear a set of spaced letters constituting words, embedded—and almost buried-- in a sea of further identical white *m*'s. The 9 lines of text contain a total of 29 consecutive words, with marked line breaks; the only words repeated are "a" ("the") and the first-person pronoun "me."

When one first looks at Augusto's geometric grid, reminiscent of the conceptual poems of Carl Andre, it looks like a field of *m's*, very spare and minimal. Sonically, the visual refrain of *m's* creates a long murmur—the backdrop against which other sounds appear. The *m's*, as the last line, which is in English, makes clear, all refer to *Moby Dick,* Melville's infamous white whale that Ahab,

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[1] See Augusto de Campos, "Walfischesnachtgesang," *Despoesia* (São Paulo, Brasil: Editora Perspectiva S.A., 1994), 112-13. I have written about the concrete poem itself for *Art in Print*, 8, no. 4 November-December 2018), 12-13; but the section here on the poem has been extensively revised.
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFY066KItYI&t=39s. Here first Cid and then Augusto chant the poem itself. There are a number of other versions that feature Cid and Augusto reciting or intoning the poem. The 2008 version https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaPyeiIv4VA, for example, features cellist Adriana Calcanhoto making dissonant, scratchy sounds from the upper register of her instrument—intermittent sounds that offset's the popular song rhythms. The 2008 ersion begins with the image of an old engraving of *Jonah and the Whale,* against the background of ocean waves.

the ship's captain, and his crew are hunting. "Call me moby": Augusto's refrain aligns "moby" with the "m"-word "me" and is a play on the opening sentence of Melville's great novel:

> Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating circulation.

In the novel, Ishmael (the name in the Old Testament connotes illegitimacy) is the quintessential outsider, just as Ahab, the desperate whale hunter, represents overweening pride. But in his text, extractable from the **m** grid, Augusto fuses Ahab's story with the Biblical story of Jonah and the Whale:

a brancura do branco	the whiteness of white
a negrura do negro	the blackness of black
Rodchenko Malevich	Rodchenko Malevich
o mar esquece	the seas forget
Jonas me conhece	Jonah does know me
só Ahab não soube	yet Ahab's not aware
a noite que me coube	of the night I must bear
alvorece. . .	dawn's light everywhere
call me moby	call me moby

The English translation here is by Augusto himself in an email of 2018; note that he translates lines 5-8 very freely so as to replicate the rhyme of the original. Augusto's poem is, in any case, an eight-line stanza that lifts out of the sea of **m's,** an enigmatic little poem with the rhyme scheme *aa(b)ccddc*, followed by the unrhyming refrain line, "call me moby." In English, "moby" rhymes with "me" in line 5 and the rhyme scheme is a little different: *abcdefffe*.

The incantatory rhythm of these short, abrupt, strongly stressed lines invokes, not Melville's narrative of the whale hunt, but the dissection, in the novel's forty-second chapter, of the meaning of the word *white*. In "The Whiteness of the Whale," the narrator Ishmael tries to account for his own irrational fear of the white whale, whiteness being the "visible absence of color," the "dumb blankness" signifying "the heartless void of annihilation." But in Augusto's version, the "whiteness of white" does not invoke horror so much as mystery, a mystery he finds in its relationship

to its opposite, the blackness of black. Indeed, for Augusto the white/black opposition also has an aesthetic dimension: it is, for example, the relationship of two of the greatest modern artists, Rodchenko and Malevich. Rodchenko was deeply influenced by Malevich's famous *Black Square* of 1915. But he was soon to turn from the sensuous texture and "spiritualist" depth of Malevich's Suprematism to the Constructivist emphasis on the materiality of the paint itself, as in the opaque "black-on black" paintings he exhibited in Moscow in 1919, alongside five white-on-white paintings by Malevich. And soon Rodchenko abandoned "bourgeois" painting altogether for the new art of photomontage.

The question of sameness and difference thus haunts the poem. Black and white, Rodchenko and Malevich and then Jonah versus Ahab. In each case, both alternatives are necessary: Jonah the prophet, having been swallowed by a whale, understands ("*conhece*") the poet's obsession; Ahab cannot:he is the captain of the ship but a failed hunter of whales. It is the sea, meanwhile, that forgets (*esquece*) both the "good" and the "bad" things it has swallowed. In the same vein, unlike Ahab or Ishmael, Augusto's narrator accepts the darkness of night as his lot, all the while looking ahead to the dawn coming up. *Alvorece*: literally, *it dawns*, and further, the verb's root being *alvo*, which also means "target," white light, far from being dreaded, is here the poet's goal. The cycle of nature can—and, after all, must— be accepted in all its strangeness. Hence the abrupt shift to English and the conclusion "Call me moby." I know, the poet seems to be saying, what *whaleness feels* like.

If Augusto had put these words into a short linear poem, as I have typed it above, it would be a kind of disjunctive Symbolist lyric in the Mallarmé tradition. It is the grid of the original poem, together with its sonic possibilities that makes it resonate. The individual words, from pronouns to proper names, are given the same weight as the continuous clusters of white ***m***'s so that their weight is barely felt. They wash up, so to speak, and disappear again in the waves of the sea. What remains in the end is merely a highly suggestive cluster of soft consonants and open vowels: *moby*.

Canção noturna da baleia: Augusto de Campos's minimalist whale's song, written under the sign of Morgenstern, Melville, and Malevich—there are those ***m's*** again!—is a model of what Gertrude Stein, whose poetry Augusto has so brilliantly translated,[3] called "Using Everything." In poetry, Augusto reminds us, every phoneme and morpheme, every visual inscription makes a difference: there is, as is so characteristic for Augusto, no waste motion, no filler. Read aloud, his *Call Me Moby*

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[3]See Augusto de Campos, "Gertrude Stein," in *Porta-Retratos*, translated and introduced by Augusto de Campos (Santa Catarina: Editora Noa Noa, 1989).

"catches" twenty-nine words in the grid-shaped geometric sieve lowered into the water, words the poet's voice transforms into an incantatory whirlpool, culminating in the repeated but curiously unresolved command to the audience to *callmmmmmme-mmmmmmm-moby*.

Now consider what happens when Augusto, with the accompaniment of Cid, turned *"TheWhale's Song"* into a "verbivocovisual" performance piece to be adapted for various venues. I myself attended a performance of *Call Me Moby* at the *Poetry Is Risk* (*Poesia è* Risco) Festival at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2012.[4] And then again in Budapest in 2016, when Augusto and Cid performed it for the Pannonius Festival. At MOMA, Augusto gave the following Introduction:

> When Melville wrote his famous *Moby Dick*, he thought that whales were dumb. Today we know that they are great singers. It occurred to me to make a poem from the whale's point of view. The novel begins with the words of the survivor narrator, "Call me Ishmael." My poem reverses his words. Of course here the whale is also a metaphor for the poet but written more from Moby's side. And then we have in Malevich, the whiteness of the white painting and the black response of Rodchenko.

The whale sounds are sung by Michiko Hirayaa. They create a minimalist background noise against which we see and hear Cid Campos strumming chords on his acoustic guitar—chords that are very tonal and melodic—whereas Augusto chants the lines of the poem as a kind of voiceover for the images on the screen—images of blue ocean waves [figure 3]with heavy whitewater and once or twice, the white shape of what seems to be a whale popping up from the waves. Augusto's English rendition of the "song" is played off against Cid's Portuguese one in statement-response structure. Meanwhile, the ocean water on the screen gives way to the grid of white rectangular cubes that quickly morph into *m's*. Or are they waves? Then the *m*'s fade out, leaving the grid of white cubes (now alternating with tiny spheres and cylinders), which are again swallowed by the ocean. And the piece culminates in the alternation of Augusto and Cid intonating "Call me Moby!"

The main song concluded, there is then a moment of silence before Augusto steps forward to chant the following passage from the Gershwin song, "It ain't necessarily so":

> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale
> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale

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[4] For the MOMA performance, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFY066KItYI&t=39s.

> For he made his home in
>
> That fish's abdómen,
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> Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale.

It is Jonah, not Ishmael, who knows what it is to be *inside* the whale, and so Augusto's is truly "The Whale's Song," in all its mystery and terror. What began in 1990 as a *despoesia*, an "unpoem"—a spare, almost severe minimalist grid, whose letters spell out the words that we almost fail to make out at first glance, becomes, a decade later, a work that fuses music, film, and poetry so as to dramatize the dialectic of black and white, night and dawn, Ahab and Jonah, Ishmael and Augusto himself. There is, in Augusto's citation from *Finnegans Wake*, "a door always open. For a new era's day." Tout le reste, as he also knows, citing Mallarmé, est littérature.

Bio Marjorie Perloff is a distinguished international scholar of modernism and contemporary literature and arts. Among her books are *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century, Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media, and Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays.*