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“Repetition – is never the same”.

## On some Translations of Greek Visual and Concrete Poetry

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Lilia Diamantopoulou

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“The question of repetition is very important. It is important because there is no such thing as repetition” – this is the central statement of Gertrude Stein’s talk entitled *How Writing is Written*, held in 1935.<sup>1</sup> She explains that although all stories are told in the same way, they always have differences and due to these minimal differences, repetitions are no longer repetitions. Correspondingly, we can argue that also translations are repetitions, which at the end are no repetitions.<sup>2</sup> This argument is not new for translation studies in general but it can’t be underlined often enough that the impossibility of ‘one-to-one’ translations becomes particularly clear in texts which are not otherwise transferable than in a creative way. Concerning this matter Julio Plaza states in an article about how to translate visual and concrete poetry: “to create is to translate, to translate is to create” adding that “translation and creation are the opposite sides of the same coin”.<sup>3</sup>

Supplementing this, Max Bense (1962: 136) notes that repetition is a basic principle of concrete poetry.<sup>4</sup> He refers to Gertrude Stein’s well-known phrase “a rose is a rose is a rose” from the poem *Sacred Emily* (1913).<sup>5</sup> It is not coincidental that this phrase is employed by Michael Mitras as the motto of his

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- 1 Stein (1977: 158); for more in-depth lecture of Gertrude Stein’s poetics of repetition see Lobsien (1998).
  - 2 For further lecture on translation and repetition see Edwards (1997: 48–65). On the aesthetics of repetition in general see Hilmes – Mathy (1998).
  - 3 Plaza – Mundy (1981: 46).
  - 4 Dencker (2010: 177–267) summarizes computer originated works which are based on repetition into a separated group naming them “computer-controlled productions”.
  - 5 Stein (1998: 395).

work *Subtle Modifications* [Διακριτικές Μεταβολές] (Athens, 2004).<sup>6</sup> One of the most representative visual poems in this collection is the poem *The Difference* [Η διαφορά] (Mitras 2004: 21, see here Fig. 5). The word ‘repetition’ is repeated serially, while in the last sentence it is stated: “– is never the same –”. What initially appears as a paradoxon (because it is of course the same word), is resolved, when one observes what actually constitutes the difference, which is obviously that the word ‘repetition’ lies each time in a different position within the text. Yet another reader may see another meaning in these lines, as the poem is open to interpretations.

I am taking these thoughts as a starting point to introduce into a project of creative translations of visual and concrete poems, a result of a seminar held in winter semester 2017/2018 at the Department of Classical Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, with the title *Reading Pictures – Viewing Texts: Greek Visual Poetry from Technopaignia to Hypertext*.<sup>7</sup> The seminar covered all the possible combinations of image and text from ancient to modern times; finally the focus was on translating a selection of representative poems of the Greek *Visual Poetry Group* (1981) and the calligrams of George Seferis. In the following I will make some preliminary remarks to both forms and I will close with presenting some of the translated examples.

### The Calligrams of Giorgos Seferis

There are preserved eight calligrams of Giorgos Seferis. They are published in two phases: the first two poems were published in 1944 in *Logbook II* [Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Β'], in an exclusive edition, promoted privately by the author.<sup>8</sup> These two poems are: a) the heart-shaped dedication *For Maro* [Της Μαρώς] (see here Fig. 1), placed at the beginning of the volume and b) a visual poem entitled *Sails on Nile* [Πανιά στο Νείλο].<sup>9</sup> In the second edition of this collection of poems in *Third Booklet* [Τετράδιο τρίτο] (December 1945) both calligrams are printed in a linear and nonfigurative form. The only remainder of its original form is the new title *Calligraphy* [Καλλιγράφημα], which substituted the previous *Sails on*

6 For an analytical presentation of Mitras' work see Kostiou (2006) and Amanatidis (2006).

7 The participating students were: Anna Marie Blažková, Ching Yin Chan, Bernadeta Kurešová, Catarina Neves, Chara Rouvoli, Anna Šmídová and Viktor Wintner. I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to them all.

8 Seferis (1944); preserved in Gennadius Library, Folder 2.5, Nr. 295.

9 Ibid., 6, 34. The poems have been translated into Czech, see Seferis (2011: 185 and 201).

*Nile*. A further variation from the older edition is that visualized initials, which were used also for non-visual poems, are eliminated in most instances in the second edition. The printed version of 1945 compared to the older edition makes in general a very seldom use of pictorial elements. It also has to be noted that these are the only two poems that Seferis decided to print in lifetime.

In 1976, the remaining six visual poems were posthumously published by Giorgos Savvidis as a separate group in *Notebook of Exercises II* [Τετράδιο Γυμνασμάτων Β'] in a section he entitles *Calligraphies* [Καλλιγραφήματα] (1941–1942).<sup>10</sup> Savvidis comments the choice of the title *Kalligrafimata* in his notes to the edition of 1976 as follows:

*This general title (which was borrowed from the French term calligramme and was used once in Logbook II) can be applied to poems where the verses are calligraphically written in a way that they form a graph relevant to the theme of the poem. The typographic layouts of the verses, as well as the punctuation are owed to the editor. If there were two manuscript versions of the same poem, there was always preferred the more artistic one.*<sup>11</sup>

All visual poems of Seferis can be dated exactly, except one. They were all written between October 1941 and November 1942. Several of these poems even were written on the same day. The poems *If you touch the lyra* [Αν αγγίξεις τη λύρα], *What have you lost, unfortunate* [Τι έχασες δυστυχισμένη] (see Fig. 2) and *Unbearable exile* [Ξενιτιά ανυπόφορη] were written on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1941. The poem *And the flowers cried* [Και τα λουλούδια θγάλαν μια φωνή] was written in October 1941 as well. Another phase in which several poems were written, was in autumn 1942: *The pyramids* [Οι πυραμίδες] (see Fig. 3) on November 15<sup>th</sup> and *Invasion* [Επιδρομή] (Fig. 4) only two days later (November 17<sup>th</sup>). The last calligram was written on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942 (the poem *Sails on Nile* [Πανιά στο Νείλο]). Only the visualized dedication *For Maro* [Της Μαρώς] cannot be dated

10 The edition contains the following visual poems: *If you touch the lyra* [Αν αγγίξεις τη λύρα], *What have you lost, unfortunate* [Τι έχασες δυστυχισμένη], *Unbearable exile* [Ξενιτιά ανυπόφορη], *And the flowers cried* [Και τα λουλούδια θγάλαν μια φωνή], *The pyramids* [Οι πυραμίδες], *Invasion* [Επιδρομή]. Seferis (1976: 108–119).

11 Ο γενικός αυτός τίτλος (δανεισμένος από τον γαλλικό όρο *calligramme* και χρησιμοποιημένος μια φορά στο Ημερολόγιο Καταστροφών, Β') αφορά ποιήματα που οι στίχοι τους είναι καλλιγραφημένοι με τρόπο που να σχηματίζουν μια παράσταση σχετική με το θέμα του ποιήματος. Η τυπογραφική διάταξη των στίχων, εδώ, καθώς και εν μέρει η στίξη, οφείλονται στον επιμελητή της έκδοσης. Όπου υπήρχαν δύο χειρόγραφα του ίδιου ποιήματος, προτιμήθηκε πάντα το πιο καλλιγραφημένο. Savvidis in Seferis (1976: 168).

precisely. Perhaps it was written in 1944 when the first edition was completed for publication. Hence the calligrams of Seferis were all written during his exile. Seferis' diaries reveal that in May 1941 he was in Egypt (in Port Said), and after June 16<sup>th</sup> 1941 he moved to South Africa (Pretoria), where he stayed until April 1942. Thereafter he went again back to Egypt.<sup>12</sup> According to this chronology the poems from October 1941 were written in South Africa, whereas the poems from autumn 1942 were composed in Egypt. Different allusions to South Africa and Egypt testify that the places where Seferis had to stay during his exile, influenced his work on calligrams.

In October 1941 Seferis is located in Pretoria, South Africa. He holds the position of the secretary of the Greek ambassador. In Pretoria Seferis feels cut off from the world, looking for some literature to read, but it seems almost impossible to find something adequate. He absorbs whatever he gets in his fingers: a collection of Edward Lear's poems, will guide him to his own limericks, for which he invents even a new word: the playful word 'lirologimata'. Apollinaire leads him to calligrams, and a borrowed poetry book of Cavafy, which he copied out by hand since his own typewriter was left back in Athens, will preoccupy him in his well-known study on Cavafy.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Nanis Panagiotopoulos of October 24<sup>th</sup> 1941 he complains:

*Thank you for sending me Cavafy. What an odd coincidence! A few days ago I borrowed his poems (Segop[oulos'] edition) from someone who happened to bring them from Alexandria. I had today copied almost half of them, making a note of my comments on each one as I copied it out. It is strange how much one discovers in an exercise like this. [...] So I continue here the life of an intellectual and transcriber of the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup>*

12 This chronology can be reconstructed from the records in Seferis' diary *Days IV [Μέρες Δ']*. See Seferis (1993).

13 For the difficulties to find books see Seferis (1993: 120 and 125–126); for the lack of a typewriter Beaton (2003: 317) and Seferis (1944: 2). For the connections to Apollinaire see Chidiroglou (1983), Fragkopoulou (1989) and Petropoulos (2000). For his limericks see Paschalis (Seferis) (1989).

14 English translation by Macnab (1990: 42f.); Σ' ευχαριστώ για τον Καβάφη. Κατά παράξενη σύμπτωση, εδώ και λίγες μέρες δανείστηκα τα ποιήματά του (έκδοση Σεγκόπ.) από κάποιον που τυχαία, φαντάζομαι, τα έφερε από την Αλεξάνδρεια. Ως τα σήμερα είχα αντιγράψει σχεδόν τα μισά, κρατώντας και σημειώσεις των σχολίων μου πάνω στο καθένα καθώς προχωρούσε η αντιγραφή. Είναι περίεργο πόσα καινούρια πράγματα ανακαλύπτει κανείς, με κάτι τέτοιες ασκήσεις. [...] Έτσι προχωρώ εδώ, με τη ζωή ενός διανοουμένου και αντιγράφes του μεσαιώνα. Seferis (1993: 156f.) in *Επίμετρο 1941*.

The returning to the manuscript is surely not irrelevant for the literary form of the calligram. This was the frame in which he created his first four pattern poems.

### Visual Poetry Group (1981)

In 1981 three friends decided to establish a literary group called *Greek Visual Poetry Group 1981* [Ομάδα Οπτικής Ποίησης 1981] influenced by the Italian *poesia visiva* and the actions of *Gruppo 70*.<sup>15</sup> They organized the first international exhibition of visual poetry in Greece, which took place in Patras, and published a catalog of visual and concrete poetry. One of the main and still most active members of the Group is Michail Mitras (\*1944). As it was mentioned in the beginning, repetition is one of the most commonly used stylistic devices in Mitras' oeuvre.

An equally representative form of his production consists of illegible texts and thus – to continue using Max Bense's categorization of concrete poetry – unreadable texts are counted among the non-semantic abstract poems. Among them we find corrected or censored texts and unreadable collages (see here Fig. 7).<sup>16</sup> The poem *Speech loss* [Απώλεια λόγου] (Mitras in Stefanidis 2003: 46) is to be singled out, as the loss of speech may also be understood as the loss of free expression and can be discussed as an opposition to censored and forced expression.

Another notable example is the *Unreadable poem* [Δυσανάγνωστο ποίημα] of 1996 (Mitras in Stefanidis 2003: 45). It is rather a painting than a poem, portraying the difficulties of writing poetry, and is ultimately rendered illegible through a palimpsest-like overlay of writing and constant corrections. It does not actually depict the process of writing, but is a 'sketched' poem, in which no single letter is recognizable. One could say the emphasis is rather placed on the representation of the 'unreadable'.

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15 These three were: Stathis Chrysikopoulos, Ersi Sotiropoulou and Tilemachos Chytiris. The Group increased to more members but its basic actors were the following: Dimosthenis Agrafiotis, Yiulia Gazetopoulou, Costis Triantafyllou, Sofia Martinou, Michail Mitras, Kyrillos Sarris, Ersi Sotiropoulou, Natasa Chatzidaki, Alexandra Katsiani and Thanasis Chondros, Stathis Chrysikopoulos and Tilemachos Chytiris. For a broader presentation of the group, its members and its actions see Diamantopoulou (2016: 420–439). For the Italian influence see Donguy (2006: 3) and Giannouloupoulos (1983: 7–17).

16 Some of the examples are published in Giannouloupoulos (1983: 78–80 and 82), in Mitras (2004: 14, 90, 96, 109, 123, 134), as well as in Stefanidis (ed.) (2003: 44–46) and Kokkini (2011: 19).

Most of these illegible or hard-to-read poems are texts, to which the reader on first sight can't ascribe any meaning. One begins to understand only at a second and closer look. This failure or lack of comprehensible writing, or in other words the intentional illegibility of letters is precisely the subject of this form of picture-texts. Expressing it with Mitras' words: "The reader/observer should be reaffiliated to a subjective reception of the text/image, free of the stipulations and attributions of meanings projected through a mass-media consumer literature."<sup>17</sup>

The general desire to differentiate and distance themselves from the mainstream culture, from the commercialization of literature (bestsellers) and from the information flood of the mass media, has emerged as one of the main concerns of this particular group. In response, poems become abstract, illegible, incomprehensible, they use a stripped-down language; they are intended to stimulate the subjective reception. Distancing themselves from a cliché language that also conveys cliché thinking, this is what the poets of the generation of the 70ies sought to achieve. However, the result can also lead to an elitist poetry designated only for a small circle of like-minded people. One of the results is that these poets are usually excluded from the current literary canon.

As with concrete art, concrete poems too, especially in their extreme version, remain detached and free from content restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Consider for example, a number of illegible, inaudible poems, or the *Roman Pictural* (1967) by Dimitris Kontos, which can rather be viewed than be read.<sup>19</sup> Such a turn to abstraction has not to be seen only as an aesthetical, modernist phenomenon. In the case of Modern Greece, times of literary repression, as for example during the Colonels' dictatorship in the 60ies and 70ies, may have triggered the regeneration of a more encrypted form of poetry. A focus on the form could distract from a potentially explicit content, or: if only the form remains, there is nothing left to censor in the content.

One last, fundamental point is the encounter with and the reflection on language. This has proved to be a diachronic theme in the investigation of visual poetry in the Greek-speaking world. This encounter is also reflected in the definition of concrete poetry in Giannouloupoulos *Anthology* edited in 1983: the language of visual poetry does not simply describe, it is:

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17 Mitras *Why I like visual poetry* [Γιατί μ' αρέσει η οπτική ποίηση] in Stefanidis (2003: 46).

18 Giannouloupoulos (1983: 8–9).

19 See <http://dcondos.gr>.

*Concrete poetry does not mean ‘telling a story’, the rendition of contents or the linguistic cover of some content. It involves the de-monstration of language in programmed sequences, concentrating on the de-monstration of language. Concrete poetry does not speak of something, it is. The existence of a linguistic sign is more important than substance. In other words: we don’t say anything with language, but we assign language the task to say something.<sup>20</sup>*

Giannouloupoulos sees in the new use of language a liberation and detachment from national languages. Visual and concrete poetry employ language at another level: letters and words as well as pictures in their extreme form become again content-free signs. Freed from national languages, these signs now and ideally can be seen as a universal language:

*The meaning of concrete poetry does not emanate from the alteration it introduces into spoken language, but from the modification of the concept of the word it introduces into a universal language, and that this takes place in an outer space age. The meaning of concrete poetry is thus truly supranational.<sup>21</sup>*

Several poets experimented with language since then, with the result that poetry has been renewed through a propensity for innovation and intermixing of various media. Nonetheless, visual and concrete poetry have yet not managed to reach a wider audience. An obvious way out of this dead-end would be a new kind of reader/recipient, versed in texts as well as in images, both literate and visually receptive.

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20 *Συγκεκριμένη ποίηση δεν σημαίνει «αφήγηση μιας ιστορίας», μετάδοση περιεχομένων ή γλωσσικό περίβλημα κάποιου περιεχομένου. Σημαίνει επί-δειξη της γλώσσας μέσα σε προγραμματισμένες τάξεις, με ιδιαίτερο βάρος στην επί-δειξη της γλώσσας. Η συγκεκριμένη ποίηση δεν μιλάει για κάτι, είναι. Μεγαλύτερη ουσία έχει η ύπαρξη ενός γλωσσικού σηματοπισμού, παρά η ουσία. Δηλαδή: δεν λέμε κάτι με τη γλώσσα, αλλά βάζουμε τη γλώσσα να πει κάτι. Giannouloupoulos (1983: 9).*

21 *Το νόημα της συγκεκριμένης ποίησης δεν προέρχεται από την αλλαγή που εισάγει στην καθομιλουμένη αλλά από την τροποποίηση της έννοιας της λέξης που εισάγει στην παγκόσμια γλώσσα, και που αυτό γίνεται σε μια εποχή διαστημική. Το νόημα της συγκεκριμένης ποίησης, λοιπόν, είναι όντως υπερεθνικό. Giannouloupoulos (1983: 15).*





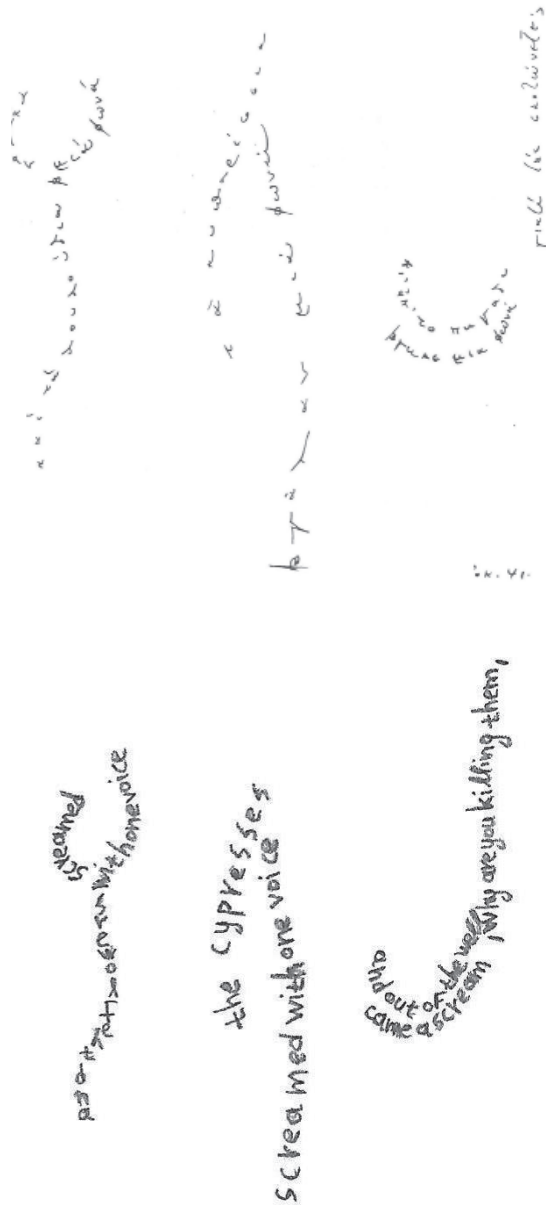


Fig. 1: Giorgos Seferis' dedication *For Maro* [Της Μαρώς] (Seferis 1944: 6) and the caligram *And the flowers cried* [Και τα λουλούδια βγάλαν μια φωνή] (Seferis 1976: 114). Visual representation by Chara Rouvoli based on an English translation correspondingly by Keeley - Sherrard (transl., ed.) (1967: 267) and Lilia Diamantopoulou.



Fig. 2: Czech translation (*Co jsi ztratil, nešťastníče, a své oči necháváš smáčet a topit se, jako by byly zalévány deštěm? Hledáš snad moře nebo jsi klidem všech moří ty sám, nešťastníče?*) and visual representation of Giorgos Seferis' calligram *What have you lost, unfortunate* [Τι έχασες δυστυχισμένη] (Seferis 1976: 110) by Anna Šmídová, based on an English translation by Lilia Diamantopoulou.

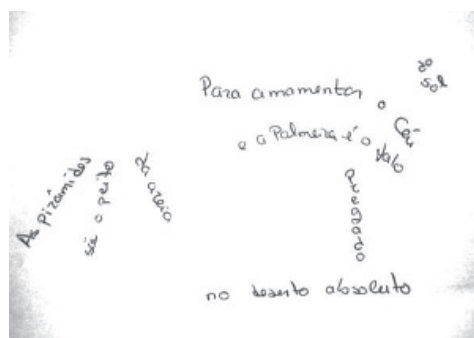
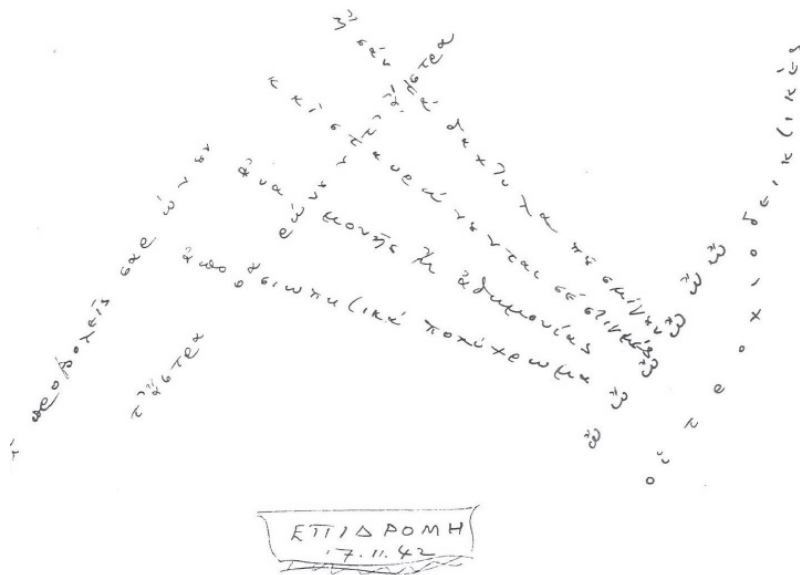


Fig. 3: Portuguese translation and visual representation of Giorgos Seferis' calligram *Pyramids* [Οι πυραμίδες] (Seferis 1976: 116) by Catarina Neves based on an English translation by Lilia Diamantopoulou.



### Vpád

Svetlá reflektorov sledujú hviezdy,  
 sledujú hviezdy,  
 ako tykadlá veľkých švábov  
 alebo ako prsty, čo sa jeden cez druhý prepletávajú  
 vo chvíľach očakávania či netrpezlivosti,  
 pestrofarebné visuté body,  
 0 0 0 0 0,  
 dráhy letiacich guliiek...

Fig. 4: Giorgos Seferis' calligram *Invasion* [Επιδρομή] (Seferis 1976: 118). Slovak translation by Viktor Wintner based on an English translation by Lilia Diamantopoulou.

## Η ΔΙΑΦΟΡΑ

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— ποτέ δεν είναι το ίδιο —

### *Rozdiel*

*To, čo sa dokola*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*orakuje, orakuje, orakuje, orakuje,*  
*- nie je nikdy o tom istom -*

Fig. 5: *The difference* [Η διαφορά] by Michail Mitras (2004: 21). Slovak translation by Viktor Wintner based on an English translation by Lilia Diamantopoulou.

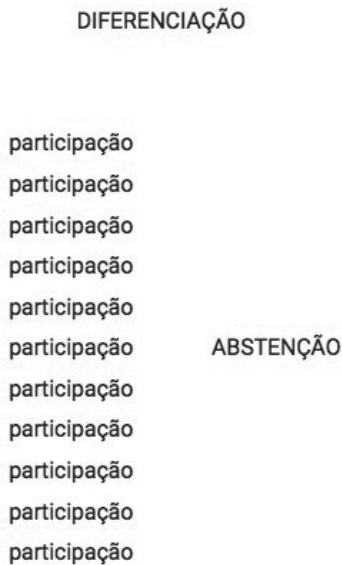
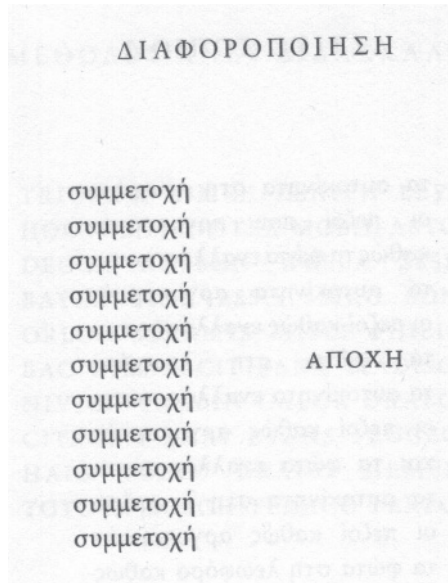


Fig. 6: *The differentiation* [Διαφοροποίηση] by Michail Mitras (2004: 48). Portuguese translation and visual representation by Catarina Neves based on an English translation by Lilia Diamantopoulou.



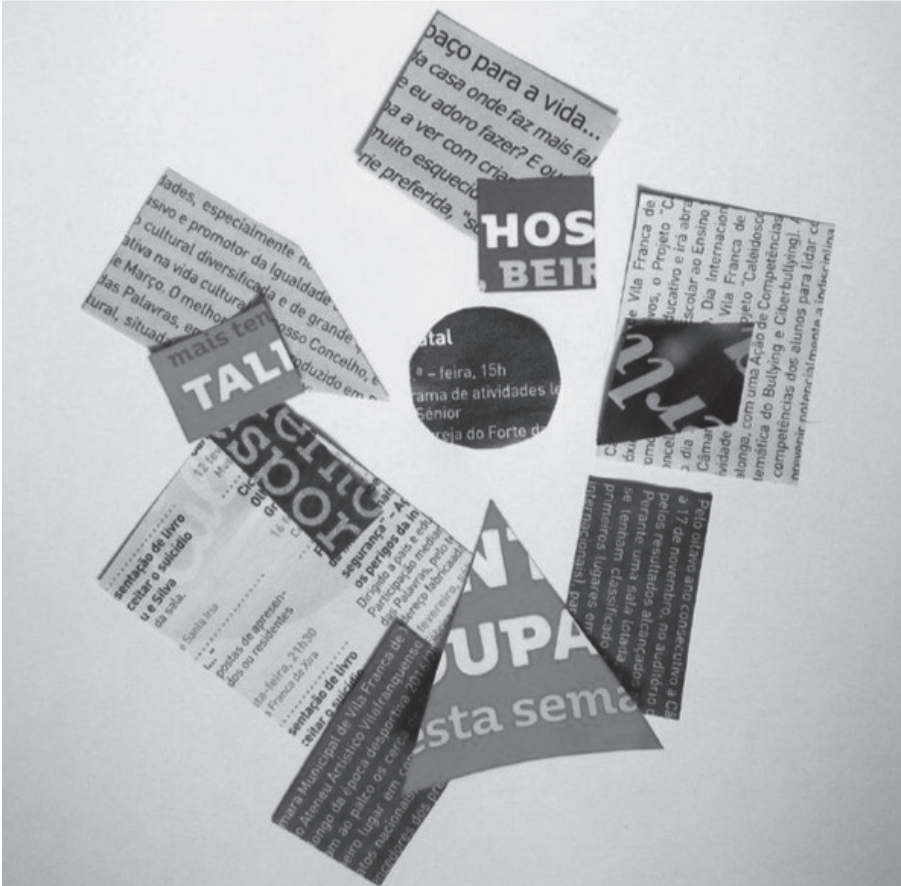


Fig. 8: Catarina Neves, collage *For Mitras* (2018).

Catarina Neves chose to ‘translate’ Mitras’ visual poem in a creative way, creating her own collage giving it the title *For Mitras*. She commented her work as following: “This collage is inspired by Michail Mitras’ *Collage* (1983). My attempt is to create a visually interesting image, with the aid of geometrical shape cutouts, of different Portuguese newspapers and magazines, where the words, despite being the foundation of the work, have no real meaning. The words are transformed into images. They lose their meaning as words and gain a new one as shapes. I didn’t use only different shapes, but also colors. I’ve decided as well not to glue the pieces flat to the paper, to give it an extra layer that is created



visually through shadows. This also adds instability to the image, as it is possible to get the sense that these pieces will easily move out of their place. It's possible to see various shapes that seem to converge to the center, where there's the only circle shape of the entire collage. [...] My intention is to represent stability in the middle of chaos. In an apparent mess with loose, overlapping, upside down, different color and shape cutouts, one can find a certain balance in the glued blue circle shape in the middle."

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