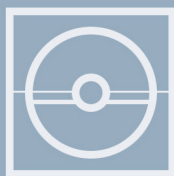

The Poetics of Poetry Film



We live inside the web of memories

Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection

SARAH TREMLETT
with over 40 contributors

Preface

As an artist and writer, I began exhibiting paintings and writing on the arts in the mid-1980s. My practice progressed into making short narrative films (2001) and then combining experimental films with text as videopoems in 2005. With a background in arts journalism (and academic and small publishing – producing books on wood engraving for Silent Books), my aim has always been twofold: to explore the fascinating and often complex mindsets of artists at work, whilst bringing their ideas to a wider audience.

The Poetics of Poetry Film expands on an M.Phil.-awarded research project (2006–14) entitled: ‘Re: Turning – from Graphic Verse to Digital Poetics – Historical Rhythms and Digital Transitional Effects in Graphic Poetry Film’ (Tremlett 2014b).¹ I examined how minimal, contemplative, visual text-on-screen could remediate page-based Concrete and verse prosody, through two types of motion (or temporal patterning): metronomic repetition and cyclical rotation.

These dynamics echo the traditional structure of the ‘turned’ poetic line of page-based verse but under the new ‘moving’ form of ‘screen verse’. Primarily my research explored how contemplative effects on the page can be remediated as audio-visual poetic effects, supported by philosophical precepts, such as an understanding of forces in (ancient Chinese) dualist philosophy. Relevant papers on the subject (presented and published at the *Consciousness Reframed Conferences* IX, Vienna, 2008 and X, Munich, 2009) include: ‘*Mattered* philosophy, female subjectivity and text in art’, in *New Realities: Being Syncretic*, by Springer Wein (Tremlett 2008), and ‘*Some Everybodies* – Design and non-dualist filmic experience’ in *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, Intellect Books (Tremlett 2009b). Later, at the *For the Earth* symposium at VideoBardo videopoetry festival, Buenos Aires in 2012, I also presented the paper ‘The Word as a Leaf’.² This investigation led to me being described as a ‘visual philosopher’ by Karina Karaeva, curator at the National Centre for Contemporary Arts (NCCA), Moscow.

As a researcher in the philosophy of poetry film (where theory and practice constantly inform each other), my work centres on interrogating a philosophy of audio-visual poetic language. This is primarily demonstrated through the formal aspects of

poetry film (particularly the relations between oral and visual prosody). In today's political climate, poetry films are often vehicles for philosophical belief, where silenced subjectivity and repression hold sway. As such, in this publication I argue that the historical divisions between Western philosophy and poetry can be re-evaluated as a *merging* of traditions, symbiotically reinforcing and extending each other within the genre of poetry film.

Tom Konyves

I first met the unparalleled Tom Konyves when he contacted me about my film *Some Everybodies* (Tremlett 2009c), which I presented at Bury Festival of Text (2009). Tom curated a screening for the event which included another of my films – *Blanks in Discourse: 03* (aka *Mistaken Identity*) (2005). *Some Everybodies* utilizes the slowing down and freezing of film, exploring perceptions of narrative time against 'real' time and space. Putting forward the idea of MIX as a digital screening event to Lucy English after The Chichester Poetry and Voice conference (2010), it was uppermost in my mind that we should invite Tom to speak, as the leading theorist on videopoetry.³ I count this festival and Tom's support at this time as formative in my career in poetry film.

Since then I have received commissions (*Filmpoem*/The Poetry Society), judged at festivals (Newlyn Film Festival, Light Up Poole, Liberated Words), and given talks and presented papers and screenings at such venues as: VideoBardo, Argentina; ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival; Tarp Audio-Visual Festival, The National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, Lithuania; Lyra Poetry Festival, Bristol; Poetry International, The South Bank Centre, London; REELpoetry, Houston, Texas; and Encounters Short Film and Animation Festival, Bristol. I have also exhibited at such festivals as: ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival, Germany; Visible Verse, Canada; Rabbit Heart, United States; Ó Bhéal Poetry Film competition, Ireland; The Poetry Society, London; Athens Video Poetry Festival, Greece; *Filmpoem*, United Kingdom; the Big Poetry Weekend, United Kingdom; the Visible Poetry Project, United States and at Voices and Silences – a British Council-funded solo exhibition in Klaipeda, Lithuania. In 2012, with spoken word poet Lucy English, I co-founded the first MIX conference and Liberated Words CIC, a poetry film organization whose aim is to screen top international poetry films alongside those made in regional group workshops, often including lesser-heard voices, such as those living with Alzheimer's or autism. Listed in *Who's Who in Research: Visual Arts* (Intellect 2013), I am a Fellow of The Royal Society of Arts and the Society of Women in Philosophy, qualified in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and support a number of environmental organizations.

The Poetics of Poetry Film examines the formal characteristics of the poetic in poetry film (film poetry and videopoetry), particularly in relation to lyric voice

and time as an audio-visual *lyric aesthetic* often underpinned by a philosophical or ethical approach to practice. Poetry films are a genre of short film, usually combining the three main *elements* of the poem as: *verbal message* – voice-over or on-screen narration – or subtitles (repeating or replacing voice), and as visual text-on-screen; the *moving film image* (and diegetic sounds); and additional non-diegetic *sounds/music* to create soundscape. The often complex interweaving of the elements could be said to give poetry films their uniquely associative character. Their intertextuality and multimodality – between the moving word (phonic or visual) and the moving film image (alongside a subtext of musical associations) – creates the opportunity to engage in deeper analyses in relation to theories within both film and linguistics; for example, Soviet montage theory, narratology and structuralist theory. They are often between three to five minutes in length, where a shorter duration is pragmatic for festival release. As such, condensation of narrative creates its own formal dynamics particular to the genre.

A ‘film poem’ historically abjuring verbal language for experimental cinematic language (see Chapter 1), depends on its audio-visual rhythms and tonal qualities to create aesthetic effects. It goes without saying that there are crossovers between definitions. The poetry film often contains and capitalizes on the same aesthetic effects as the film poem, so that where I discuss structure, rhythm, tone or mood, the term film poem can, where applicable, be transposed for poetry film. The description ‘video poem’ is often used as another term for a poetry film, whereas a ‘videopoem’ does not illustrate a separate poem, but in the combination and composition of the elements it is in itself an original screen-based poem. I will be referencing Konyves’ understanding of the videopoem throughout this book, but with amendments (see Chapter 2 for further elaboration).

In practice, many artists today ignore these potentially overlapping categorizations, adapting terms for their own purposes; or alternatively working between terms. I consider myself as both a poetry film-maker and videopoet, and I make and produce films under the name POEM FILM. Importantly, however, poetry films and videopoems are *not* vehicles for poets solely reciting to camera, unless within a narratively defined scenario. Ultimately, all forms hinge on creating the *perception* of a relationship (or non-detonative absence of one) between the elements, and it is this dialectic that creates such an exciting ‘imaginative leap’ (Konyves 2011) for the audience.

Poetry film ‘design’ is often entirely due to chance associations; however, I identify basic principles that can be seen across different forms of the genre, focusing on the whole *through* the individual elements. In doing so, I will try not to obliterate the *ineffable* alchemy at work (see Figure 1). As French film director Abel Gance (1889–1981) argued, ‘the marriage of image, text and sound is so magical that it is impossible to dissociate them in order to explain the favourable reactions of one’s unconscious’ (Gance in Nin 1963).



FIGURE 1: *Five Miles (Simple Brush Strokes on a Naked Canvas)*, Marc Neys, Howie Good, 2015. Film and music copyright © Marc Neys (Swoon).

In terms of theorizing an audio-visual lyric aesthetic, I firstly outline a historical context, particularly citing Eastern ‘poem paintings’, as well as more recent Western art historical and linguistic theories. I propose that poetry film (film poetry) and videopoetry can extend both Concrete (visual) and lyric poetry (and subjective expression) and historical understandings of poetic form, within a lyric aesthetic that can also be termed an audio-visual philosophical practice where relevant (Tremlett 2019; see also Jakobson 1987).

Examples of historical theorists previously cited by contemporary academics in relation to poetics in the moving image include: the Russian Formalists (whose thinking can be seen to be encapsulated by Viktor Shklovsky [1893–1984] in his famous essays ‘Art as technique’ [(1917) 1965] and ‘Art as device’ [(1917) 1990]); the axial concept of the poetic in film-making by Ukrainian-born, American experimental film-maker Maya Deren (1917–61); and the structuralist poetics of Russian-American linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982).

In addition, I will also be referencing Russian philosopher of language and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) concepts of *heteroglossia* and *the dialogic imagination* ([1975] 1981) which will be re-examined in terms of voice and narrative. However, foremost in terms of historical context lie the lesser known but now central *lyric* concepts within the Futurist manifesto (Marinetti 1909) and ‘The Futurist Cinema manifesto’ (Marinetti et al. 1916a) itself. As co-director of *Liberated Words*, identifying the significance of Italian poet, art theorist and founder of Futurism Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti (1876–1944) might not seem surprising. However, whilst we may superficially associate the artist and the movement with a machine-fuelled machismo, creating typographic and oral

destruction of semantics and syntax in favour of the sound poem and fragmented visual text, it is important to look deeper.

Marinetti divides his manifesto into categories beginning with ‘The Futurist Sensibility’, in which he says he ‘invented *essential and synthetic lyricism, imagination without strings*, and *words-in-freedom*, [and which] deals exclusively with poetic inspiration’ (1909, original emphasis). Here Marinetti does not find it inimical to combine a subjective expressive lyric sensibility with an objective approach, deconstructing language (highlighting iconicity and materiality), and being firmly aware of audience perceptions. He defines his new *multilinear lyricism* as encompassing the lyric simultaneity of sound, music, colour and analogy with the pictorial (1909).

Importantly, this is further expanded in ‘The Futurist Cinema manifesto’ (Marinetti et al. 1916a) which is heavily influenced by the synaesthetic and theosophist approach of Italian Futurists (and brothers) painter Arnaldo Ginanni Corradini (1890–1982) and playwright Bruno Ginanni Corradini (1892–1976) (later known as Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra):

Cinematic analogies [...] Cinematic poems, speeches, and poetry. We shall make all of their component images pass across the screen [...] Cinematic simultaneity and interpenetration of different times and places [...] Cinematic musical researches [...] objects removed from their normal surroundings and put into an abnormal state [...] Filmed dramas of disproportion [...] Linear, plastic, chromatic equivalences, etc., of men, women, events, thoughts, music, feelings, weights, smells, noises (with white lines on black we shall show the inner, physical rhythm of a husband who discovers his wife in adultery and chases the lover – rhythm of soul and rhythm of legs) [...] Filmed words-in-freedom in movement (synoptic tables of lyric values—dramas of humanized or animated letters—orthographic dramas—typographical dramas—geometric dramas—numeric sensibility, etc.) [...] Painting + sculpture + plastic dynamism + words-in-freedom + composed noises [intonarumori] + architecture + synthetic theatre = Futurist cinema. This is how we decompose and recompose the universe according to our marvellous whims

(Marinetti et al. 1916a)

In essence this manifesto aims much higher than it can reach, bearing in mind that silent, black and white cinema has to be read into with a fair degree of theorizing to achieve any sense of total synaesthesia or ‘polyexpressiveness’ (see Chapter 1). Nevertheless, it also provides an almost comprehensive blueprint for a *multimedia synthesis* between poetry, film, music and painting (including both the lyric and visual word) achieved by digital poetry film-makers and videopoets today.

It goes without saying that any validation of Italian Futurist aesthetic approaches does not espouse their driving association with for example, Facism and chauvinism, nor Marinetti's provocative and declamatory activist performances where people were arrested (Strauven 2009). In terms of contemporary poetry film-makers it is important to go back to the manifestos themselves, and reread them in terms of a dynamical lyricism (including the destruction of verbal and visual text-based syntax) forging links between the word and the moving image. Both the Futurist manifesto (Marinetti 1909) and the Futurist Cinema manifesto (Marinetti et al. 1916a) are equally important in contextualizing poetry film and its relationship to voice, visual text and the sound word or 'acoustic typography' (Strauven 2009), later developed and known as Concrete poetry. From the foundation of these manifestos, we can extrapolate on subsequent filmic renditions of both the verse and visual text in all its forms.

As a researcher, I have read over 250 publications on subjects that include historical and contemporary theories and analyses of form in: poetry film; film poetry and video poetry/videopoetry; poetry (lyric, verse, media, visual – pattern, Concrete, graphic; spoken word, performance, Beat, oral); film (experimental and feature film); art; music theory and digital sound design; linguistics; philosophy; feminism; and theories of perception.

Extending far beyond the page and the live poetry event in its reach, the poetry film and its worldwide channels of dissemination provide a powerful platform for minority voices, whilst paradoxically fostering exciting new collaborations. The rise in the Internet, social media and accessible digital software has made it possible for everyone to make short, poetic films, confirming Barbara Rubin's extraordinarily early prophecy: 'We are going through the reflection age. Living through subjective reflections' (Mekas [1972] 2016: 280).

Poetry films are also rich with altruistic and spiritual convictions; they are even endowed by some with embodying the maker's loving spirit. In contrast, academic or cultural knowledge creation has traditionally gained validation through objective analyses. Kudos has not been derived from focusing on the spiritual or abstract concepts such as love. As British ecopoet Helen Moore observes, one academic lecturer told her, that unlike him 'you are allowed to talk about spirituality'. With a world at war, in financial and political turmoil, and with an environmental disaster on our hands in our lifetime, artists are now voicing their call to action. Ethics has entered aesthetics with a vengeance, identified through such terms as 'connective aesthetics' (Gablik 1992). Yes, poetry films often embody an empathetic philosophy, just like poetry; today the subjective, *lyric inner voice* is back.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank Lucy English for her role in Liberated Words, whilst this book was being written, and all the highly talented contributors for their insights and individual approaches, especially Alastair Cook, Marc Neys and Dave Bonta for giving up precious time for interviews. I am particularly indebted to Tom Konyves for his early support; Thomas Zandegiacomo del Bel for his in-depth essay on ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival, and a valuable overview of leading participants around the world; Charles Olsen for his incisive and revealing interviews with leading Spanish and Portuguese videopoets; Javier Robledo for his enlightening essay on VideoBardo (and Dr Claudia Kozak for her fine translation); Marisol Bellusci for contextualizing videopoetry against 1960s experimental poetry in Argentina; talented performance artist, poetry film-maker, leading campaigner and not least Hollywood actress Beata Pozniak for her time and revealing thoughts; Enzo Minarelli's important contribution on orality and polypoetry, giving a wider historical perspective on the field; Valerie LeBlanc for her generous and insightful Foreword; Matt Mullins for kindly allowing me to include extracts from his interview with George Aguilar for *Atticus Review*; Dr Jeff Boehm and Jon Riley for translating my musical descriptions into musical terminology; and my deepest thanks to Professor Gwendolyn Audrey Foster and Dr Meriel Lland for their rich wisdom and advice. Finally, none of this would have been possible without the patient support of leading academic publisher – Intellect Books – and my dedicated and irreplaceable editors Emma Berrill and Sophia Munyengeterwa. Thank you.

Disclaimer

Although historical references are made to poetic cinema and film poetry in its various incarnations, the emphasis is on *contemporary* practitioners, rather than say American experimental film-makers between the 1940s and 1980s. This publication does not include an in-depth examination of semiotics in relation to poetry film, nor detailed analyses of video editing and animation techniques, and related software programmes. The works selected are from established practitioners, and are available online with English translations. Many poetry films I value have not been possible to include. Historical category definitions by other theorists (experimental film and film poem) have been adhered to where relevant. Priority has been given to the audio-visual form, rather than full, printed poems, except where specified. Poets writing ekphrastic poems inspired by films or TV are not included. Longer essays, poems and interviews can be found at the Liberated Words website <http://www.liberatedwords.com> and <http://www.sarahtremlett.com>. This

publication is not a comprehensive source of poetry film sites, festivals, magazines, etc. For an overview of these, see <http://www.movingpoems.com>, <http://www.poetryfilmkanal.de>, <http://atticusreview.org> or <http://www.poetryfilmlive.com> and www.cinematicpoems.com. Where possible, all links for historical films have been to reputable and long-term sites such as <http://www.UbuWeb.com>.

Throughout this book, I have tried to keep in mind the more recent statement of American non-narrative experimental film-maker or film poet Stan Brakhage (1933–2003), who reminds me that defining can remove us from the very purpose of art itself: ‘these left-brain hierarchies of symbols, signs, numbers and words which tend to delimit one’s ability to be aware of what a lit candle human beings just normally are, all the time, going along being’ ([1996] 2015). I feel that poetry films today are generated by ‘lit candles’ as lit candles, and I hope not to extinguish their direct access to our equally unique imaginations.

NOTES

- 1 Accessed through Chelsea College of Arts Library.
- 2 See <https://www.sarahtremlett.com>. Accessed 27 November 2012.
- 3 In 1978, Tom defined his multimedia work as videopoems and in print in 1982 in *The Insecurity of Art: Essays on Poetics* published by Véhicule Press (Konyves 1982). See <https://www.ufv.ca/english/faculty-and-staff/konyves-tom.htm>.