

Film Poetry: A Historical Analysis

The concepts of 'film poetry' and the 'film poem' have been used on a number of occasions throughout the history of film by different filmmakers and theoreticians. Each of these writers applied their own understanding of what the film poem might be and rarely took different perspectives into consideration. Some use the term 'film poem', others prefer 'cinemoem', whereas some later writers seem to place importance in the existence of the hyphen between the words film and poem and hence talk about the 'film-poem'. Some writers refer to the notion of 'film poetry', while others talk about 'poetry film'. This essay will be an attempt to present some of the most important writings on the notion of film poetry and the film poem and more generally on the connection between film and poetry. Although the essay will incorporate different perspectives, it will mainly focus on what is widely known as avant-garde (or experimental) practitioners and theoreticians, as opposed to texts on the poetics of narrative cinema.

There is a number of problems inherent in the notion of drawing parallels between film and poetry, which explain how the concepts have been used by different writers in such different (at times contradictory) ways. First of all, before even attempting a definition of the notion of 'film poetry' one is faced with the problem of the definition of poetry itself. In the earliest ever attempt to define poetry, Aristotle compares poetry and history suggesting that "Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood. (...) Next, there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm."¹ Those notions have been influential for hundreds of years, yet 'imitation' seems to have given its place to 'personal expression' already by the years of romantic poetry. In his attempt to describe what a poet is Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggests that "the poet (...) brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity."² Hence for the romantic poets, poetry was primarily an inwards (towards the soul) rather than outwards (towards the world) movement. With the coming of the modernist era, most attempts to define poetry become unimportant if not impossible. The notion of 'harmony' was questioned by 'free verse', which in Ezra Pound's words is to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome."³ People like T.S. Eliot composed 'prose poems', redefining completely the notion of poetic form.

Secondarily, the whole notion of drawing direct parallels between different art forms is a problematic notion in itself. Literary poetry has been developing for thousands of years, whereas film is comparably still in its adolescence (if not infancy). It is arguable even whether we could be talking about visual

¹ Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, (Trans by Ingram Bywater), Oxford University Press, 1920, pg 28

² (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, pg. ??????????????)

³ Kennedy, X.J. & Gioia, Dana, *An Introduction to Poetry*, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994, pg. 194

languages and whether the cinema is a language system in itself. Yet, this is not the first time that the notion of poetry has been applied to a non-literary space. Almost fifty years before the creation of the first cinematographic machines, romantic composer Franz Liszt had used the notion of the 'symphonic poem' to describe his work. The reason romantic composers would decide to use the word 'poem' seems to be almost opposite to those of film-makers: a symphonic poem is a symphonic piece which narrates a story. On some occasions, symphonic poems were based on already written poems. In this case 'poetry' is not used in the transcendental, expressionist, abstract way, but more in the Aristotlean 'imitation of the world' way. This is possibly understandable considering the de-facto abstract nature of tonal music.

Considering all these problematics, what was it then that attracted filmmakers and critics in the notion of poetry to make parallels in the filmic world? In a way, the very confusion of the definition of poetry could be useful to describe modern unclassifiable film works. But more than that – despite the differences in poetry definitions, there is one thing that always remains the same: the importance of the individual, the poet, the author as the driving source of creation. Whereas literary poetry – as mentioned above – has a long history as an 'art', filmmaking became part of an industry almost immediately after its conception. Within this environment, avant-garde filmmakers have to reclaim their status as artists. In this respect, they became 'film-poets' in the original Greek sense of the word – poet as maker. In his review of the American avant-garde, James Peterson claims: "in practice, the film poem label was primarily an emblem of the avant-garde's difference from the commercial narrative film"⁴ giving a very general understanding of the notion of the film poem, as an avant-garde practice. Yet, even within the experimental tradition there were a number of different ways writers referred to the notion of 'film poetry' and these writers did not adopt the same positions.

1. Germaine Dulac & The French 'Impressionists'

The earliest mentioning of the notion of 'poetry' within a discussion of film can be found in the writings of the pre-surrealist French avant-garde of the 20s, otherwise known as cinema's 'Impressionists' (the reason for this name will not be discussed here). Germaine Dulac, Henri Chomette and Luis Delluc tried to establish the notion of pure cinema (cinema-pur) and found the poetic analogy useful to strengthen their position. When referring to mainstream cinema, Dulac is the first to establish the notion of narrative cinema as a 'novelistic', prosaic one: "it [cinema] became a new means of expression for novelistic or dramatic literature, and since cinema was movement, it was confused with the interrelating of actions, of situations, it was put in the service of a 'story to tell'⁵. For Dulac, narrative cinema's only purpose is to tell a story, whereas the avant-garde film tries to go deeper in the realm of what could be 'poetic'. As Eugene Mc Creary argues "When Delluc referred to film as (...) 'visual poetry' he was not simply employing elegant metaphors to

⁴ Peterson, James, Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1957, pg. 29

⁵ Dulac, Germaine "The Essence of the Cinema: The Visual Idea" in Sitney, Adams, P. (ed), The Avant-Garde Film, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987, pg. 38

establish film's pedigree among the muses. He was invoking something quite specific – the creative act of isolating and stylizing the significant detail”⁶. Poetry for the impressionists is the action of ‘isolating’ and ‘stylizing’ a detail. In poetry, detail is more or as important as the whole and the way a detail is presented (stylized) affects the content itself.

Interestingly enough, although the Impressionists drew from the notion of poetry, they believed in film's total separation from the other arts in order to find what is essential to itself. Dulac's stance is polemical in this respect: “every cinematic drama (...) must be visual and not literary”⁷, “a real film can't be able to be told, since it must draw its active and emotive principle from images formed of unique visual tones”⁸. It is important to understand that although the impressionists used the poetic analogy, they certainly did not believe in a literary inclusion of poetic text in the form of intertitles, that they were generally against. What was it then in the ‘poetic’ that attracted the impressionists?

When referring to Henri Chomette's ‘Cinq Minutes Du Cinema Pur’, Al Rees argues that “What really makes it a poem (...) is its stress on rhythm as an aspect of form, expressed both in variable shooting speeds and in the pace of cutting”⁹. Hence for the impressionists the notion of the ‘poetic’ was primarily useful as a stress on rhythm as an aspect of form. Rhythm has always been connected to poetry – even the modernists that neglected the notion of specific syllables per line and rhyming did so because they believed that free verse expressed a different rhythmic pattern. Dulac went even further in her writings in attempting to define a series of rules or ‘proofs’ on / of how pure cinema works. She states:

- “1. That the expression of a movement depends on its rhythm;
1. That the rhythm in itself and the development of a movement constitute the two perceptual and emotional elements which are the bases of the dramaturgy of the screen;
2. That the cinematic work must reject every esthetic principle which does not properly belong to it and seek out its own esthetic in the contributions of the visual
3. That the cinematic action must be life
4. That the cinematic action must not be limited to the human person, but must extend beyond it into the realm of nature and dream.”¹⁰

In its celebratory nature, this statement poses a number of problems considering the way ‘cinema pur’ works. When Dulac refers to ‘life’ in number 4, it seems that she is asking for a primarily documentarist esthetic, something which she goes to contradict in number 5. Perhaps it is exactly this contradiction in ‘cinema pur’ for which the poetic analogy is useful: it is a

⁶ McCreary, Eugene, C. “Louis Delluc, Film Theorist, Critic, and Prophet” in Cinema Journal Vol 16, Issue 1, Autumn 1976, pg 20

⁷ Dulac, Germaine, “From Visual and Anti-visual Films” in in Sitney, Adams, P. (ed), The Avant-Garde Film, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987, pg. 31

⁸ Ibid, pg 33

⁹ Rees, Al, A History of Experimental Film & Video, London: BFI, 1999, pg 35

¹⁰ Dulac, Germaine, “The Avant-Garde Cinema” in in Sitney, Adams, P. (ed), The Avant-Garde Film, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987, pg. 47

cinema at once impressionistic and expressionistic, which both observes and creates anew.

One of the major problems with the theories of Dulac and the impressionists for our purposes is the notion of rhythm in relation to music. If rhythm is suggested to be the basis of expression than music seems to provide a more appropriate analogy than poetry. Not surprisingly, Dulac refers to the symphonic poem when referring to the up-and-coming avant garde film scene: "The conception of the art of movement, and of the systematically paced images came into its own, as well as the expression of things magnificently accomplishing the visual poem made up of human life-instincts, playing with matter and the imponderable. A symphonic poem, where emotion bursts forth not in facts, not in actions, but in visual sonorities".¹¹ The impressionists did not distinguish between the use of 'poetic' and 'musical' languages. Their urge to create a non-narrative and more form-based art was such that any model that stresses form over content would be applied, whether poetic or musical, with no differencing between the two. Delluc claims "Just as in a symphony each note contributes its own vitality to the general line, each shot, each shadow moves, disintegrates or is reconstituted according to the requirements of a powerful orchestration"¹².

Overall, the use of the 'poetic' in the writings of the French film impressionists is generally loose and the attempts to exemplify how it illustrates itself in the films themselves are unconvincing. Dulac seems to use the notion of the poetic as an extension of the musical, the rhythmical, which is problematic in itself. Ian Christie suggests that the writings of the impressionists were "rooted in a romantic aesthetic which invokes the nineteenth-century notion of synaesthesia in its call for a cinema based on the supposed common 'essence' of poetry and music, the two traditional time-base arts"¹³. Yet, the writings of the impressionists are very important, as they are a basic discussion of the notion of the difference between a prose and poetry cinema, a difference that the formalists will deal with and Maya Deren will expand in much more detail.

2. Man Ray – The Fragment, Adaptations, Light Writing

Of all the filmmakers mentioned in the essay, Man Ray's involvement with film was the shortest and one that was characterized by continuous disillusionment with the medium. Man Ray made four films in the space of seven years and made then a conscious decision to drop filmmaking in order to dedicate himself fully to the art of photography, for which he is primarily known. Yet his short involvement with the cinema is of great importance for the discussion of the relationship between film poetry for a number of reasons. First of all, Man Ray was the first filmmaker that actually spoke of a

¹¹ Ibid, pg 46

¹² McCreary, Eugene, C. "Louis Delluc, Film Theorist, Critic, and Prophet" in Cinema Journal Vol 16, Issue 1, Autumn 1976, pg 23

¹³ Christie, Ian, "French Avant-Garde in the Twenties" in Curtis, David & Francis, Richard (eds), Film As Film: Formal Experiment In Film, London: Arts Council of Britain, 1979, pg 39

film poem (cinemoem) as a generic construction. Describing his second film 'Emak Bakia' he suggested that "a series of fragments, a cinemoem with a certain optical sequence make up a whole that still remains a fragment. Just as one can much better appreciate the abstract beauty in a fragment of a classic work than in its entirety so this film tries to indicate the essentials in contemporary cinematography. It is not an 'abstract' film nor a story-teller; its reasons for being are its inventions of light-forms and movements, while the more objective parts interrupt the monotony of abstract inventions or serve as punctuation"¹⁴.

Not only did Man Ray talk about a 'cinemoem' but he even discussed some of the principles behind its notion. For someone generally disinterested in the art of film – as it proved from his later career, his discussion was certainly prophetic – he refused the notion of storytelling and stressed form by even using modernist literary concepts as 'punctuation'. More than anything what is important in what Man Ray argues is the notion of the fragment versus the whole. As in modernist poetry, in the work of Man Ray – and particularly Emak Bakia – the fragment becomes the most important segment of creative construction. Susan McCabe has compared the work of Man Ray with that of American poet Gertrude Stein: "The kinship between modern poetry and film (...) hinges upon the subordination of plot to rhythm, but also upon a montage aesthetics that privileges the fragment and its abrasion of other fragments"¹⁵. This notion of the importance of the fragment seems to be close both to Dulac's notion that a film has to be primarily visual and Deren's notion of 'verticality' in poetry (discussed later).

Another similarity McCabe points out between the work of the filmmaker and the poet is that they both refuse to follow a single character. "Like Stein's writing, Man Ray's film denies a stable subjectivity"¹⁶, McCabe argues. This places Man Ray's film language closer to that of the modernist poets than the romantics who believed that the language of poetry was the expression of the poet's internal visions. At the same time, Man Ray refuses to use the shot-countershot tradition to show us what his 'characters' might be seeing. The shot-countershot technique is the convention of a 120 or 180 degree camera angle change to signify the perspective of different people appearing in a scene, e.g. talking to each other. As Adams P. Sitney argues in his discussion of Man Ray's 'L' Etoile De Mer', "this is the earliest 'narrative' film I know that deliberately avoids shot-countershot after the institutionalization of that figure"¹⁷. Thus, Man Ray's vision is neither clearly a romantic expression of a personal vision nor a narrative-based characterized vision as in classic prose. It can be any and both, shifting between the two, as a modernist poem could shift between 'I', 'he' and 'she'.

Another important factor that Man Ray stressed which is important for our purposes is the notion of automatism. For Man Ray notions of 'play' and

¹⁴ Man Ray, "Emak Bakia", *Close-Up*, Vol 1, No 2, August 1927, pg. 43-4

¹⁵ McCabe, Susan, "Delight In Dislocation: The Cinematic Modernism of Stein, Chaplin, and Man Ray" in *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol 8, No 3, pg 431

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg 434

¹⁷ Sitney, Adams P., *Modernist Montage*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pg 33

'improvisation' were so important that it can be argued that his films were simply almost automatic improvisations. As he claims "all the films I have made are improvisations. I did not write scenarios. It was automatic cinema"¹⁸. The notion of automatism was something that interested modernist poets as a mode of expressing some kind of more pure sensibility. Yet the possibility for automatism in the cinema has been problematised by the whole notion that generally a film happens in various stages: the writing of a script, shooting, editing, possibly more. By neglecting the need for a script, Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* becomes primarily an automatic shooting 'exercise'. The notion of the camera being used a 'pen' – in the sense of capturing reality as directly and automatically as possible has later been expanded by documentarist filmmaker Alexandre Astruc. "I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of the camera-stylo, he claims. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language"¹⁹. Although Astruc takes a much more anti-formalist perspective than Man Ray, the notion of the 'camera-stylo' as a metaphor for the direct 'capturing' of reality is very useful for Man Ray's work. The metaphor of 'writing' in film could even be expanded in Man Ray's case to include his Rayograms, which could be seen as an example of automatic 'light writing'.

Man Ray was also a pioneer in attempting to create the adaptation of a poem, a tendency which will later occur often in the film poem. His third film 'L' Etoile De Mer' was based on a poem written by surrealist poet Robert Desnos. When Man Ray first heard the poem, he visualized various images and decided that the poem could be used as a sort of scenario to a poetic film. According to Man Ray "Desnos's poem was like a scenario for a film, consisting of fifteen or twenty lines, each line presenting a clear, detached image of a place or of a man and a woman"²⁰. Similarly to Man Ray's previous work, Desnos's poem seemed to be focusing more on the disconnected fragment and as such it was a perfect script for Man Ray. The notion of adapting an already written poem in an attempt to create a poetic vision in film would become popular significantly later. Yet what is very important was that even at that stage, Man Ray realized the peculiarities and problematics of adaptation. As Adams P. Sitney suggests "the very subtitle of the film 'poeme de Robert Desnos tel que l' a vu Man Ray", draws our attention to the difference between text and sight and bids us look for the particulars of Man Ray's vision.

Hence the film was not a simple 'photographing' Desnos' poem, but attempted to somehow translate literary into visual poetics. As Schwartz argues "parts of it [the film] were shot through partially obscuring gelatine film the better to convey the poem's atmosphere"²¹. The applying of gelatine film as a means of obscuring the picture giving it a more poetic atmosphere is a very simple

¹⁸ Schwarz, Arturo, *Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1977, pg 287

¹⁹ Astruc, Alexandre, "The birth of a new avant-garde: Le camera-stylo", in Graham, P. (ed) *The New Wave*, London: BFI, 1968, pg 18

²⁰ Man Ray, ("Manuscript for L' Etoile de Mer", trans Kuenzli, Rudolf) in Kuenzli, Rudolf, *Dada & Surrealist Film*, New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1987, pg. 208

manifestation of what would later be a discussion on the notion of modernist poetics of the image itself (for example in the work of Stan Brakhage) and discussions of the relationship between image and sound, as presented by cultural critics like Christian Metz. Man Ray was aware that in order to achieve a poetic adaptation of a literary work, it is essential to consider the language of the medium he worked on. At the same time, not taking a fundamentalist approach, he did not neglect the possibility of poetry's appearance in the film in a literary form as intertitles. Modernist filmmakers of the time neglected the use of intertitles claiming that it was a concession of filmic language to literature. Dziga Vertov in his famous manifesto in the introductory sequence of the 'Man with a movie Camera' suggests that it is a 'film without the need for intertitles'²², which works on a purely visual language. Although Man Ray generally shared this idea, in 'L' Etoile De mer' he "was the first to make free use of poetic captions that are not meant to comment on or explain the images they accompany, but rather to add a new dimension to them" as Schwartz argues. By doing so, Man Ray's film is the first poetry-film hybrid, which will be discussed later.

Despite Man Ray's short involvement with film, his influence was enormous in the discussion of the relationship between film and poetry and the project of a modernist film practice. As narrative cinema took over and film became more and more realistic, Man Ray decided to abandon filmmaking, as for him filmmaking was something intrinsically poetic. In fact ever since he abandoned filmmaking in 1929 his only re-involvement with film was in collaboration with poets, like Jacques Prevert, Andre Breton and Paul Eluard in attempts that materialized in scripts which were however never realized as films.

3. Vertov, Shklovsky & the Russian Formalists

The Russian school of formalist writers and artists was the first one to attempt an analysis of film poetics and more generally the language of film. In the 1927 book 'Poetics of Cinema' (Poetica Kino) formalist writers Boris Eikhenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky and others analysed the relationship between visual and literary languages and tried to apply theories of formalist poetry on film. This visual / literary parallel the formalists attempted has been often criticized. Paul Schmidt suggests that "the major assumption with which they began, that film was like literature" led them to propose a 'language' of film, analogous to natural language"²³. Although indeed the notion of drawing parallels between new and pre-existing arts is problematic (and Tynyanov realizes this: "to name the cinema in relation to the neighbouring arts is just as unproductive as naming those arts according to the cinema"²⁴, the formalists'

²¹ Schwarz, Arturo, Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination, London: Thames & Hudson, 1977, pg 296

²² Vertov, Dziga, Man With A Movie Camera (Introductory Manifesto Sequence), 1929

²³ Schmidt, Paul, "First Speculations: Russian Formalist Film Theory" in Texas Studies in Literature and Language, vol 17, 1975, pg. 327

²⁴ Tynyanov, Yuri, "The Fundamentals Of Cinema" in Eikhenbaum, B. M. (ed, 1927) / Taylor, Richard (trans, 1982) Russian Poetics in Translation, Vol 9: "The Poetics of Cinema", 1982, pg 36

Poetica Kino was the first major contribution to both the study of the relationship between film and poetry but more generally the notion of film semiotics. What must be clarified is that the title of the book is slightly deceiving, as in reality only a small part of the book analyses poetics and for the largest part notions of the more general notions of film language and structure are defined. For the purposes of this essay, the focus will be poetics and not an overview of Russian formalist film theory.

In his article 'Problems of Cine-Stylistics', Boris Eikhenbaum attempts the earliest written direct applications of literary language on film. He talks about the 'cine-phrase': "If by the word 'phrase' we generally understand a certain basic type of articulation, which is actually perceived as a segment (verbal, musical etc) of moving material, then it can be defined as a group of elements clustered around an accentual nucleus"²⁵. Thus a cine-phrase for Eikhenbaum is a shot whose montage "can be lengthened and shortened. In some cases the long shot can have considerable significance – lengthening it gives the impression of a long, slowly developing phrase"²⁶. If we accept the notion of the shot as a 'phrase' then the next question that naturally arises is the connection between the shots / phrases. Eikhenbaum takes the analogy even further and talks about the construction of the 'cine period', stating that a cine-period in filmic terms is a spatio-temporal linking of shots/phrases. In his words "The movement of frames, once started, requires a meaningful linking according to the principal of spatio-temporal continuity. It is a question, naturally, of the illusion of continuity"²⁷. This definition of the cine-period is extremely useful for the film poem, as it is by neglecting this exact notion of the period (as continuity) that film poets function. Dziga Vertov, for example, can be argued to use shots/phrases but not construct them in cine-periods.

Another important issue Eikhenbaum mentions (but does not analyse deeply) in his article is the notion of internal speech in the film, especially in relation to symbolic and metaphoric language. The notion of a metaphor, "a statement that one thing is something else, which, in a literary sense, it is not"²⁸, is very important for most poetry and the possibility of visual metaphors is something that always interested filmmakers of the poetic oeuvre. Eikhenbaum suggests that "the cine-metaphor is feasible only on the condition that it is supported by a verbal metaphor. The spectator can understand it only in circumstances where there is a corresponding metaphorical expression in his stock of language"²⁹. In this respect, he suggests that film viewing is always accompanied by a process of internal speech, of verbalizing what is seen in order to understand it and therefore problematises the possibility for Dulac's purely cinematic languages. His theory will later be questioned by the American avant-garde and primarily Stan Brakhage, who believed in the notion of the 'untutored eye' and the 'visual mind'.

²⁵ Eikhenbaum, Boris «Problems of Cine-stylistics" in Eikhenbaum, B. M. (ed, 1927) / Taylor, Richard (trans, 1982) Russian Poetics in Translation, Vol 9: "The Poetics of Cinema", 1982, pg 22

²⁶ Ibid, pg 23

²⁷ Ibid, pg 24

²⁸ Kennedy, X.J. & Gioia, Dana, An Introduction to Poetry, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994, pg. 98

²⁹ Op. Cit., pg. 30

For the purposes of the essay, the most influential text in *Poetica Kino* was Viktor Shklovsky's short essay 'Poetry & Prose in the Cinema'. Almost simplistically, but in a clear way, Shklovsky attempts to give a definition between what is poetic and what is prosaic in the cinema: "The fundamental distinction between poetry and prose lies possibly in a greater geometricity of devices, in the fact that a whole series of arbitrary semantic resolutions is replaced by a formal geometric resolution"³⁰. He further explains that poetry and prose in the cinema "are distinguished from one another not by rhythm, or not by rhythm alone, but by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition"³¹. Shklovsky realizes the problematics of separating poetry and prose purely based on rhythm from his analyses of literary works, where poetic language could be used in an overall prosaic work. It is important to notice the choice of words – Shklovsky talks about 'prevalence' of one over the other and not a choice between the two. In this respect the notion of a 'poetic prose' is possible in the cinema and it is the work which overall adheres to narrative semantics but includes poetic illuminations. Such work could for example be the work of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, whose biographer suggests "I have no hesitation of describing Tarkovsky's cinema as poetic"³². Similar analogies could be applied to filmmakers like Antonioni, Bergman and others.

Yet in a 'purely' poetic film work (a film poem), it is according to Shklovsky the geometrics of structure that prevail. Hence semantics are replaced by a geometry of form, which should be used as the only means of achieving some kind of resolution in a composition. It is not surprising therefore that Shklovsky quotes Vertov's kinesthetic work as poetic: "there is no doubt that Dziga Vertov's 'A Sixth Part of the World' is constructed on the principle of poetic formal resolution: it has a pronounced parallelism and a recurrence of images at the end of the film where they convey a different meaning and thus vaguely recall the form of a triolet"³³. Although Vertov used representational images from the world around him, his primary interest was the reconstruction of these images, adhering thus to formalist principles. Shklovsky's definition of filmic poetry further helps establish the role of an audience and the ideas of reception of a film-poem. Instead of attempting to establish a semantics of continuity, the audience of a film-poem should search within the geometry of formal structures for resolutions and 'answers'.

Dziga Vertov was the most important formalist filmmaker of the time and arguably one of the most important figures in the history of the avant-garde. Although Vertov's work has been frequently analysed in terms of the notions of socialist realism and formalism, the connection between Vertov's work and poetry/poetics has rarely been presented (exceptions quoted here). Vertov's interest in poetry was possibly the greatest of all the filmmakers discussed in

³⁰ Shklovsky, Viktor, "Poetry and Prose In Cinema" in Eikhenbaum, B. M. (ed, 1927) / Taylor, Richard (trans, 1982) *Russian Poetics in Translation*, Vol 9: "The Poetics of Cinema", 1982, pg 88

³¹ Ibid., pg 89

³² Turovskaya, Maya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, pg. 101

³³ Op Cit, pg. 88

this essay with the exception of Stan Brakhage. Vertov wrote poetry himself and even his scripts were realized in a poetic language. He often collaborated articles on poetry in publications of his time, focusing primarily on poets of the modernist era. Vertov also described himself as a film-poet: "I am a writer of the cinema. I am a film poet. But instead of writing on paper, I write on the film strip"³⁴. The parallel between characteristics of Vertov's work and poetry can be divided in three parts, each one based on a particular tradition of poetry and each one analysed by a different writer.

Vlada Petric, who has analysed the work of Vertov thoroughly, presents Mayakovsky as the most important writer for Vertov, as belonging in the tradition of formalist poetry that emerged in the Soviet Union of the 20s. Although Mayakovsky's writings on the cinema varied from very enthusiastic to dismissing it completely as an art form, it is his poetry that provided an important basis for the construction of Vertov's cinematic language. As Vlada Petric suggests "rather than restrict himself to traditional poetic forms, Mayakovsky expanded the stylistic features of his poetry, much as Vertov was preoccupied with experimenting with image and sound to form his unique cinematic style"³⁵. Petric takes the parallel even further and suggests that in Mayakovsky's poem 'Morning' "the structuring of the lines, some of which consist of only one or one-and-a-half words (!), is reminiscent of Vertov's use of a single frame as a shot or montage unit"³⁶. Whether Vertov was aware of this specific poem and tried a visual analogy to this extent in his films is arguable, but what remains is that Vertov influenced by Mayakovsky was certainly interested in the notion of a unity of form and content. A late script of Vertov's of a film - which was never realized - exemplifies these poetic tendencies:

'A girl is playing the piano
she is watched
through the open windows of a
terrace
by a starry night.
The moon illuminates her hands.
The moon illuminates the keyboard.
And to her it seems not sounds
but rays of distant, invisible worlds,
rays of glimmering stars
that sing from under the fingers'

Clearly influenced by Mayakovsky, Vertov's script uses the vertical placement of words in lines as a means of establishing his personal stylistics. The question that remains is of course how a script like this would materialize as a shot film. At this point it is important to notice "a surprising correspondence" – as Petric suggests³⁷ – between Vertov and the American filmmaker Maya

³⁴ Vertov, Dziga "More on Mayakovsky" in Michelson, Annette (ed), Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, London: University of California Press, 1984, pg 182

³⁵ Petric, Vlada, Constructivism In Film: The Man With A Movie Camera, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pg 27

³⁶ Ibid, pg 26

³⁷ Ibid, pg 155

Deren in her theory of film's 'vertical possibilities'. Deren's theory will be analysed in a further chapter.

Similar to the theories of the formalists, but slightly more aggressive – and slightly predating them – are those of the futurists. The futurists believed in the destruction of early twentieth century notions of aesthetics and beauty. In futurist poetry this manifested in an increasing interest in the word – as opposed to the phrase – as the basis of expression and even a further deconstruction of the word into letters and sounds. In her description of A. Kruchenkh's futurist poem 'Pomada' (and further comparison to Vertov's work), Anna Lawton suggests that: "the images in this poem are liberated from any kind of causal relationship and arranged in rhythmic segments... endowing the text with a new and fresh meaning based on analogical relationships"³⁸. This statement could be applied to Vertov's work, in which there is a tendency to fragmentise – from the sequence to the shot, from the shot to the frame. As in futurist poetry, even the smallest particles are important and useful for Vertov, which explains his frequent use of short-length, almost subliminally visible shots.

B. Singer examines Vertov's work in relation to the poetry of Walt Whitman. Although it is probably more difficult to draw parallels between Vertov and Whitman, as they are chronologically significantly far apart, there is a number of instances in Vertov's work that showcase not only an interest in, but a direct influence from Whitman's poems. Singer notes a number of similarities in the stylistics of the filmmaker and the poet (realist, fast-paced etc), but most importantly mentions the imagistic characteristics they share. He argues: "both exhibit a style of imagistic effusiveness, richness, and intensity of presentation" and "in both, the creating eye is omnivorous, seizing the diverse physical environment with a voracious eclecticism"³⁹ (Singer, pg. 250). The notion of eclectic representation is very important, as it could be argued that it is this eclecticism that separates the poetic and the prosaic text. At the same time, both Whitman and Vertov have a celebratory stance towards the world – they both seek to 'sing' the world around them constructing ethnographic poetics.

4. Hans Richter

One of the most important writers and practitioners on the 'film poem' is German experimental filmmaker and artist Hans Richter. He started writing on the poetic nature of film already in the 20s, but it was not until significantly later that his writings were framed as writings on film poetry. A significant amount of his early published material was revised and republished in the 50s when the notion of the film poem regained importance in the American avant-garde film movement. For this reason, it is very difficult to examine how prophetic and revolutionary his writings were; yet, they remain extremely important for the study of the film poem today.

³⁸ ??????, maybe Lawton, Anna, Cinema & The Russian Avant-Garde, Purdue University Paper, 1985, pg ???

³⁹ Singer, B., "Connoisseurs of Chaos: Whitman, Vertov and the 'Poetic Survey'" in Literature Film Quarterly, Vol, 15, 4, 1987, pg 250

Hans Richter was interested in the lyrical potential of film. He states “I have always been especially fascinated by the possibilities of the film to make the invisible visible: the functioning of the invisible subconscious, which no other art can express as completely and as drastically as the film. It is the lyric quality of this film form that is probably its distinguishing mark. With this lyrical form goes a greater freedom in its use of the raw material as there is not necessarily a story to tell”⁴⁰. Here Richter uses the notion of the ‘lyrical’ which although he seems to do almost instinctively, it is important to point out. In the discussion of film poetry until that time, it was rare that filmmakers or theoreticians distinguished between the different strands of poetry. Richter explains that it is the ‘lyrical’ aspect of poetry that he is interested in. Lyric poetry originally as the name suggests was to be accompanied by music (lyre). Yet in the post-romantic period the definition of a lyric poem changed roughly to “a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker”⁴¹. What Richter is interested in therefore is not the formalist, rhythmical aspects of film, but the freedom of personal expression, which a lyric poem – free of having to tell a story – has. As in lyric poetry, words can be manipulated freely to stress emotional qualities, in the film poem shots (what Richter calls ‘raw material’) can be used in any order or way.

Furthermore, Richter draws a parallel between the way poetry is written and a film poem is composed. He quotes: “One of the main characteristics of film poetry, I would say, is the way the film poem is made. (...) Whereas the commercial film has to be laid out ironclad from the beginning to the end, has to follow the script to the point, (...) the film poem follows a different process. There is a general direction, there is an aim, a meaning, a mood in the process of production. But all that grows is not foreseen. It is a result of the creative process itself. It is not so much planning as it is feeling along the path which the theme takes. In other words, the material you accumulate during the shooting is more or less raw material: though it has been planned to contribute to a specific scene or aim, it might, in the end assume a different meaning altogether. This I would call sensitive improvisation”⁴². There is a number of points to notice in Richter’s statement. First of all he suggests that in the film poem there is an aim, a target, but not a clear script. This is important as it is reminiscent of the way in which poetry usually ‘deals’ with a subject, has a concept, but does not clearly tell a story. Also, Richter seems to be placing importance in the notion of improvisation, again stressing poetry’s more intuitive nature.

Shots for Richter are simply ‘words’ or ‘phrases’ which could be used in a number of ways to create meanings. As filmmaker and theoretician Pier Paolo Pasolini argues “A dictionary of images does not exist. There are no images classified and ready for use. (...) While the writer’s work is esthetic invention, that of the filmmaker is first linguistic invention, then esthetic”⁴³. When

⁴⁰ Richter, Hans, Hans Richter, London: Thames & Hudson, 1971, pg 144

⁴¹ Kennedy, X.J. & Gioia, Dana, An Introduction to Poetry, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994, pg. 6

⁴² Op Cit, pg 144

⁴³ Pasolini, Pier Paolo, “The Cinema of Poetry” in Nichols, Bill (ed), Movies & Methods, Vol. 1, London: University of California Press, 1976, pg 545

collecting footage, then, Richter practically compiles his visual dictionary, a dictionary which is only a starting point for creativity, what Pasolini calls 'linguistic invention'. In this respect, the essential poetic element of cinema is for Richter montage. As David Finch suggests "Film montage and language metaphor use some of the same mental processes. (...) Metaphor in both film and language can produce a third thing from the combination of two elements, an image not producible in any other way"⁴⁴. Thus, film montage is the equivalent of putting together two phrases for metaphorical effect, as it happens often in poetry.

Richter also foresaw what would later be named poetry-film, the genre in which literary poetry and film art are combined in a new form (analysed later). His film 'Dadascope' which is a semi-abstract documentary on dadaist poetry consists of the combination of dadaist poetry read on top of visuals (or vice-versa). "When you use poems as a background instead of music, and you let your hand, or scissors in the case of editing, wander together with the poem, that could give you a new form of film"⁴⁵ he claims. Indeed the notion of using actual poetry read on top of or together with filmed material was to later form a new genre. Yet this is not one of the primary interests of Richter.

Richter's view on the role of the audience also uses the notion of the poetic, against as opposed to the straightforward narrative: "The direct action-form of the entertainment film (...) has been replaced in film poetry by the rather free use of the symbol. (...) The accent, therefore, has been shifted from asking the audience to understand clearly, to asking the audience to swing with the symbols freely, and to respond to their meaning, whether universal or personal, in an intuitive way, by opening up, by giving itself freely to the special work of art"⁴⁶. What Richter suggests is that the symbolic language of the film poem is more open to interpretation than that of the novelistic entertainment film. Furthermore, he calls the audience to 'swing with the symbols freely' and become an active interpreter of what is presented. He stresses the notion of intuition and in a way suggests that the film poem should primarily be felt or experienced as opposed to understood.

Despite the fact that Richter's writings are extremely important for a research towards the notion of 'film poetry', there is a significant problem that emerges from most of his writing. Richter seems to be confusing the notion of 'modernist film', or what has been called the avant-garde with the notion of the film poem. In fact he states that: "The reason I use the word 'poetry' is to set it off against the 'film novel', which is represented by the entertainment film, or the reportage which is represented by the documentary. Where I would consider the entertainment film as 'novel', I would describe the exploration into the realm of mood, the lyrical sensation as 'poetry'. I would call all experimental films 'film poetry'⁴⁷. Although this quote is useful in establishing a notion of poetry vs prose in the cinema, it is very problematic to include all

⁴⁴ Finch, David, "A Third Something: Montage, Film & Poetry" in Danino, Nina & Maziere, Michael (eds), *The Undercut Reader*, London: Wallflower Press, 2003, pg 63

⁴⁵ Richter, Hans, *Hans Richter*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1971, pg 155

⁴⁶ Mekas, Jonas (ed), "Hans Richter on the Nature of Film Poetry" (excerpts from interviews) in *Film Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1957, pg 7

⁴⁷ Ibid, pg 6

experimental films in the category of 'film poetry'. Such a statement seems to be taking for granted that all experimental films are the lyrical exploration of a mood, something which certainly is not a primary interest in the more essayistic nature of the structural film. At the same time, it is not clear why what he calls the 'entertainment' film or the documentary could not possess the same mood exploration, lyric qualities he suggests. Documentarist film poets such as Margaret Tait would certainly disagree with him.

5. Maya Deren & the Cinema 16 Symposium

Maya Deren was the first major theorist to write extensively about the relationship between film and poetry and actually make the notion of 'poetics of film' the basis of her theory and practice. Being one of the first filmmakers in a long tradition that would later be known as the new American avant-garde, her writings were extremely influential and had a certain polemic tone. Arguing for a new, modern cinema, Deren adopted the modernist model inherited by people like Dziga Vertov, of cinema based on its total separation from the other arts. Sounding significantly like Dulac, Deren believed that the 'real' essence of film lies on the visual elements of camera and montage, elements that are particular in the art of film. Renata Jackson quotes: "Deren was quite adamant about the avoidance of literary or theatrical adaptation, abstract animation, or the imitation of objective reality for the creation of film-art. It is very telling then that, of all the art-forms referred to 'Anagram' [a text about art, film and poetics] other than film, poetry is not only the most sympathetically portrayed, but also is the only one from which Deren condones the borrowing of analogous creative methods, without her familiar warnings to the film-artist against misappropriating the expressive means of the other arts"⁴⁸.

Although Deren believes that film should not be influenced by or reduced to a presentation of the other arts, she does not find contradictory to refer to the art of poetry as an art that works in similar ways as film. Within the same text, the 'Anagram', a text on the nature of film, art and the ways in which she herself works, she incorporated a fundamentalist medium-specific notion of what film is: "the capacity of the camera to represent a given reality in its own terms, to the extent that it is accepted as a substitute proper for that reality"⁴⁹ as well as made parallel to literary poetics: "just as the verbal logics of a poem are composed of the relationships established through syntax, assonance, rhyme, and other such verbal methods, so in film there are processes of filmic relationships which derive from the instrument and the elements of its manipulations"⁵⁰. Although Deren believed in medium-specificity, she did not find it problematic to refer to draw a model of her film from a literary art. It is interesting at this point to note that this contradiction is also evident in Dziga Vertov's writing, as Vertov also believed in medium-specificity [the introductory

⁴⁸ Jackson, Renata, *The Modernist Poetics & Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, pg 111

⁴⁹ Deren, Maya, "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film" in Nichols, Bill (ed) *Maya Deren & The Avant Garde*, London: University of California Press, 2001, appendix, pg 30

⁵⁰ Ibid, pg 48

sequence of 'The Man With A Movie Camera' is a 'proud announcement that it is an art of cinema based on its separation from the other arts], but at the same time found poetic models useful. To stress the similarities even more, it is worth noticing that both filmmakers shared an interest in documentary cinema, but both believed that reality is only a starting point for expression.

Deren's concepts on the relationship between film and poetry were best expressed in a symposium held in 1953 by pioneering film society Cinema 16, in which a number of writers, filmmakers and poets discussed the possibilities of drawing parallels between the two media. In this symposium Deren described her notion of verticality in relation to the structure of film, a theory which would later have a strong influence on the whole of the American avant-garde: "The distinction of poetry is its construction and the poetic construct arises from the fact that it is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means"⁵¹. The notion of trying to pinpoint what poetry was generally not well-received by other members of the panel and the reactions were numerous, from poet Dylan Thomas crudely parodying the theory, to writer Arthur Miller suggesting that what Deren calls the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' can not actually be separated. Deren used a number of examples to illustrate what each of the two movements meant, for example she referred to the notion of the establishing shot in a narrative film as a poetic moment, a moment where the narrative does not evolve but there is an illumination of a place, a person or some form of theme. She suggested the same for dreaming sequences, as well as the poetic monologues in Shakespeare.

Although Deren's arguments were not well received at the time, in retrospect it seems that Deren's notions of the horizontal and the vertical are simply a more visual rephrasing of notions of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic that the structuralists had already mentioned and that were widely accepted by that time. Structuralist theorist Roman Jakobson made a distinction between language's substitutable elements (the paradigmatic axis) and non-substitutable, linear elements (the syntagmatic axis). In his analysis of Jakobson's work, Richard Bradford suggests that "the syntagmatic, combinative pole is that which anchors language to the prelinguistic world events and impressions, while its paradigmatic, selective counterpart is that which effects a more subjective and perhaps bizarre relationship between the mind of the addresser and the code of linguistic signs"⁵². According to Annette Michelson, Deren's writing argued for "a recognition for the cinema, in cinema, of the duality of linguistic structure, that very duality that Jakobson was to propose... as the metonymic and metaphoric modes on which contemporary film theory eventually builds"⁵³. Whereas the syntagmatic / metonymic modes called for unity and linearity, the paradigmatic / metaphoric modes called for

⁵¹ Deren, Maya speaking in Maas, Willard (chairman), "Poetry & The Film: A symposium" in *Film Culture* No 29, Summer 1963, pg 56

⁵² Bradford, Richard, *Roman Jakobson: Life, Language, Art*, London: Routledge, 1994, pg 13

⁵³ Michelson, Annette, "Poetics and Savage Thought: About Anagram" in Nichols, Bill (ed) *Maya Deren & The Avant Garde*, London: University of California Press, 2001, pg 26

fragmentation and since film was primarily an entertainment industry, it was the syntagmatic mode that developed significantly more and in expense of the paradigmatic. Michelson continues: "it was against this hegemony and in validation of a commitment to the substitutive metaphor as an essential constructive element that Deren spoke, and the set of formal strategies entailed by this position and deeply grounded in montage was to generate an entire rethinking, not only of composition and production, but eventually, of distribution, exhibition, and reception as well"⁵⁴.

It almost seems that Deren's writings of the poetic possibilities of film were not simply an artist's statement on their work, but a foundation for the polemics of a new era for film and a questioning of all the aspects of film. What is even more important in the case of Deren – and specifically important for the purposes of this essay – is that Deren's theories were always connected to her practice. Michelson points that one of the similarities between Deren and film theorist and practitioner Sergei Eisenstein is 'the sense of a constant and intimate articulation of theory with practice, a relentless concern with systematization, the determination to ground innovative practice in theory. And, of course, the manner in which both practice and theory stand in relation of fruitful, unresolved tension, at variance with those of industrial production in her time"⁵⁵. All of the theoreticians mentioned in this essay were practitioners themselves, but in the case of Deren the relationships between theory and practice were almost 'scientific'. Whereas Dulac, Ray, Richter and Vertov all talked about the poetic possibilities of film, they seemed to work relatively intuitively in their own practice. Deren's application of theory into practice (and back and forth) would go all the way to attempting to create 'film-haikus' or analyse in a very detailed formalist manner her personal work.

In her attempts to define the film poem, Deren has mentioned a number of characteristics, which she believes film poems share. She mentions that these films are usually short, because as she argues "it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time"⁵⁶ and as such parallelises them with lyric poems. The notion of the possibility of longer lyrical works would later be criticized by the feature length works of people like Stan Brakhage and Gregory Markopoulos. Also Deren suggests that in the metaphoric language of film, the element of montage is essential, but then arrives to the problematic conclusion: "film, I believe, lends itself particularly to the poetic statement, because it is essentially a montage and therefore, seems by its very nature to be a poetic medium"⁵⁷. The notion that film is an inherently poetic medium is not useful for the purposes of this essay. At the same time, it is a statement that contradicts Deren's whole attempt to separate between poetic and non-poetic filmic expression.

When Deren places such importance on montage, it is because she believes in structures. In a lecture she gave about her films in 1951, she states that

⁵⁴ Ibid, pg 26

⁵⁵ Ibid, pg 27

⁵⁶ Deren, Maya speaking in Maas, Willard (chairman), "Poetry & The Film: A symposium" in Film Culture No 29, Summer 1963, pg 56

⁵⁷ Ibid, pg 59

“the meaning of a work of art rests not in elements which appear in it, but in the relationship of those elements”, taking a much more structuralist approach than someone like Man Ray or Richter who believed primarily in the power of the fragment. Deren refuses the use of specific symbols and suggested that if she uses a shot of a bird, she does so not because this action has a particular symbolic significance for her, but simply because of the action itself - with the knowledge of all the possible concepts that can be derived from such an image. “Natural phenomena”, she states “...don’t intend anything, as the setting of the sun might be the beginning of an ominous night for one, the end of a perfect day for another. Sun has no intention emotionally, so one may attach any emotions”⁵⁸. Thus, it is the placement of the image of the sun within the context of someone’s life that can explain the importance of the sunset for a person. This notion that elements make sense within a context could be argued to be contradicting Deren’s vertical vs horizontal theory (especially if seen as an extension of the paradigmatic / syntagmatic axis).

In order to examine this apparent contradiction it is important to point out that Deren’s notion of the vertical does not neglect the possibility or even more so the importance of the linking between the different elements that make up a cinematic experience. The difference really lies on the mode in which the relationship between parts is overall seen. To make this clearer we can examine Deren’s attitude towards narrative editing devices. Renata Jackson quotes: “for Deren, flashbacks and parallel editing sequences, while breaking a narrative out of strict uni-directional or chronological development, both simply re-present actions in space, whereas true innovation in the realm of temporal manipulation would consist in reversed, accelerated, or slow motion, which not only can make perceptible movements that the naked eye would otherwise fail to register, but which also can create alternative space-time relationships”⁵⁹. Therefore, the montage in someone like for example Eisenstein still remains largely linear, as despite the modernist touches of perplexing the narrative, it is still to be understood as a fixed spatio-temporal continuum and not as a re-constructed time and space which can only be poetically experienced. Slow motion especially has a particular power for Deren which is strongly connected to her notion of poetic illumination: “when you see slow motion you are affected not by the rate of movement of the object, but you are affected by the fact that it is the wrong rate, which you recognize by your own pulse”⁶⁰.

In order to finish the discussion of Deren’s contribution to the ideas of the relationship of poetry and film, it is useful to mention Deren’s unfinished project of creating film-haikus and her subsequent writings in 1961. “Just as the haiku consists not of the butterfly but of the way the poet thinks and speaks of the butterfly, so my filmic haiku could not consist of movements of reality but had to create a reality, most carefully, out of the vocabulary and syntax of film image and editing”⁶¹, Deren states. Yet despite this basic

⁵⁸ Deren, Maya, from a lecture given at the Cleveland Museum on April 6th, 1951 in Film Culture, No. 29, Summer 1963, pg 65

⁵⁹ Jackson, Renatta, The Modernist Poetics & Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, pg 89

⁶⁰ Op Cit, pg 67

⁶¹ Deren, Maya, “On A Film In Progress” in Film Culture, No 22-23, Summer 1961, pg 161

principal Deren finds a number of problems in the parallel, primarily to do with the notion of structuring her film haikus together: “one has random access to a book of haiku... but a film made up of haiku would necessarily be in an imposed sequence”⁶², arriving to the unquestionable “what is the principal, the form which would determine such a sequence? (...) Common locales? (...) Increasing intensity? Contrast? Perhaps like the movements of a musical composition?”⁶³. After years of dealing with the parallel between film and poetry, Deren still arrives to basic questions of form, which showcases the fact that she was such an ever-questioning spirit, but also probably highlights the difficulty if not impossibility to apply rules in the attempt of literary / cinematic form parallels.

6. Stan Brakhage as a Modernist/Romantic Poet

Stan Brakhage is arguable the single most discussed filmmaker in terms of the relationship between film and poetry. The formal complexity of his work has been often paralleled with this of the modernist poets, whereas his reclusive life seems to resemble the romantic poets' stance towards society. Brakhage also lived in a place and time where the ground for such research was opened up by filmmakers and theoreticians. Brakhage himself was a poet and had personal relationships with poets. Already in 1966 he stated that “poetry and painting have alternately proved more growth-engendering sources of inspiration than either the trappings of the stage or the specific continuity limitations of any ‘making up a story’, novelistic tendencies etc”⁶⁴ [the influence of Abstract Expressionist painting on Brakhage is very important although it will not be discussed here]. Poets themselves appreciated the work of Brakhage and felt that he realized in visual terms what they worked on verbally and establishing connections between their work and Brakhage's. American poet Robert Kelly writes that “we loved him [Brakhage] when he moved against the narrative, and counterposed against old narrative a deeper new sense of telling. Telling the eyes, not telling the story... We loved him for erasing any pre-existent story, and allowing to come forward only the story that the film/ing editing/ could tell, could tell by making us see... Anybody can write. A writer is someone with an eraser. So that the writing of the film might properly be spoken of, and I do speak it, Brakhage wrote (erased) his films. We saw (were denied the sight)”⁶⁵.

One of the most important writers on Brakhage and the American avant-garde of the 60s is Adams P. Sitney. In his analysis of the work of Brakhage, Sitney refers to the ‘Lyrical Film’, a definition which is not exactly a film genre with specific characteristics, but rather an approach to filmmaking. Sitney states: “The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we now how he is

⁶² Ibid, pg 161

⁶³ Ibid, pg 161

⁶⁴ Brakhage, Stan “On Music, Sound, Color, And Film” in *Film Culture*, No. 67-8, 1979, pg 130

⁶⁵ Kelly, Robert “Notes on Brakhage” in Steinhoff (ed), *Stan Brakhage: Correspondences* (Chicago Review), 47:4 Winter, 48:1 2001 Spring 2002, pg 164-7

reacting to his vision”⁶⁶. Sitney does not explain exactly what the relationship is – if any – between the type of film he describes and lyric poetry. Yet if we think of the definition of poetry his choice of a the term ‘lyrical’ seems appropriate. According to Kennedy and Gioia “a rough definition of a lyric as it is written today [is]: a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker”⁶⁷. Brakhage’s films seem to have all of those characteristics – they are made by a single person, they express this person’s thoughts and feelings and they tend to be short in terms of length. Furthermore, lyric poetry seems an appropriate parallel as it tends to be a structurally free form of expression. As James Peterson suggests “lyric poetry is not distinguished by a particular structure, but by an approach to structure that leaves open the possibility of almost any global structure whatsoever or even none at all”⁶⁸. Equally Brakhage’s films take various forms and structures and sometimes even feel so open-ended that they are almost structure-less.

In an earlier analysis of Brakhage’s ‘Dog Star Man’, one of his most important works, Sitney claims that the objective and subjective point of view are never quite clear. In Sitney’s words “it is difficult to be precise always in dividing the objective from the subjective. Perhaps this is best for the sake of a poetic ambiguity in film”⁶⁹. This difficulty in distinguishing between the subjective and the objective is increased by Brakhage’s use of what is known in linguistics as ‘radical metaphors’. A radical metaphor is the metaphor in which the metaphorical replacement is seen but not the original term, which the metaphor refers to. In his comparison between the work of Eisenstein and Brakhage, James Peterson explains: “Near the end of Eisenstein’s ‘Strike’ (1925), we see both the Cossacks’ attack on the workers *and* [his emphasis] the slaughter of the bull. The metaphor emphasizes the innocence of the workers and the brutality of the attack, but the narrative sequence would be comprehensible even if we were to miss the metaphor, because all the key events are explicitly shown. But because a radical metaphor shows only the vehicle and not the tenor, missing the metaphor poses a more serious threat to comprehension. In ‘Reflections in Black’ [by Brakhage], a blind man ‘sees’ several couples’ abortive attempts to interact. The last episode ends with a shot of coffee pot boiling over, but there is no explicit resolution of the personal relationship”⁷⁰. Brakhage’s images could be subjective or objective, literal or metaphorical, internal or external without any diegetic pass between the different consciousness worlds.

A difference between a number of experimental film-makers and Brakhage is the question of whether the creation of images is a process from the inside out or vice versa. Bruce Elder suggests that “Brakhage’s adherence to the Romantic tradition involves a commitment to the idea that what happens on the ‘inside’ is all of a piece with what occurs on the ‘outside’; furthermore,

⁶⁶ Sitney, Adams P., *Visionary Film*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, pg 142

⁶⁷ Kennedy, X.J. & Gioia, Dana, *An Introduction to Poetry*, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994, pg 6

⁶⁸ Peterson, James, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order.*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1957, pg 47

⁶⁹ Sitney, Adams P., “Imagism In Four Avant-Garde Films” in *Film Culture*, No. 30, Fall 1963, pg 19

⁷⁰ Op Cit, pg 44

Brakhage's transformations of the image have the end of revealing the operations of the imagination... Deren believed to the contrary that cinematography, as a photographically based medium, has a strong commitment to unmanipulated reality"⁷¹. For Deren, as for Dziga Vertov before her, the essence of film is capturing what is in front of the camera out in the world and therefore creation is a process from the outside towards the inside. Brakhage's imagination plays such an important role to his work that towards the end of his career he even developed a theory of 'closed eye vision' which resulted in creating some of his most abstract works.

In this respect, Brakhage's work is less of a documentary / diary nature and closer to abstract expressionism. This kind of expression is for Ken Kelman the central aspect of the film-poem: "Film-poem must be primarily developed in terms of personal, 'abstract' expression; and only secondarily to that may narrative, or any other formal effect, be introduced"⁷² and adds that "when the film-poem utilizes 'real' characters and situations, it must transform them to symbols of the filmmaker's thoughts and feelings"⁷³. A definition of the film-poem like this would define a work as the 'Man with a Move Camera' as impressionistic, since images do not symbolized an internal state and therefore inappropriate to be called a film poem. On the contrary in Brakhage "the external world is transfigured by the internal; the internal world is objectified by the outer. Physical 'reality' is not shown for its own sake, so much as for that of the subjective emotion associated with it"⁷⁴. Although, this is a useful way of approaching Brakhage's films, this statement is slightly problematic as it could be argued that the interplay between the internal and the external is found in any filmmaker's work. At the same time, stressing Brakhage's imagination as a driving force might mean disregarding his absolute commitment to immediate perception, a characteristic he shared with poet Charles Olson. According to David James "Olson's stress on immediate perception and on the poem's continuous self-generation out of its present are nodes around which Brakhage's own theories and the details of the style he created during the sixties fall into place: his total and physical involvement in the shooting process"⁷⁵.

One of the most polemical supporters of the work of lyrical filmmakers was Jonas Mekas, the most consistent member of the New York Filmmakers Coop from the sixties until today. Ironically, Mekas was initially one of the harshest critics of the new American film-poem. In his 1955 essay 'The experimental film in America' (which caused an uproar between others for its homophobic stance) Mekas states that "The film poets, not unlike most of our contemporary writers, are so fascinated by their personal worlds that they do not feel a need to communicate nor give to their characters or stories a larger, more human scope"⁷⁶. Only seven years later, Mekas sees this personal stance of the film poet not as a self-indulgent practice, but as a means of

⁷¹ Elder, Bruce R. The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein & Charles Olson, Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Univ Pr, 1998, pg 502

⁷² Kelman, Ken "Film as Poetry" in Film Culture, No. ???, pg 23

⁷³ Ibid, pg 24

⁷⁴ Ibid, pg 26

⁷⁵ James, David "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson" in Film Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 3, pg 39

arriving to a personal truth. On his article 'Notes on the New American Cinema' he states "Like the new poet, the new film-maker is not interested in public acceptance. The new artist knows that most of what's publicly said today is corrupt and distorted"⁷⁷ and calls Brakhage, Menken and Breer the 'pure poets of cinema'.

David James adds another, more political and biographical dimension to the notion of Brakhage as a personal poet. He claims that "the ideal of an anti-technological, organically human cinema (...) was lived by Brakhage in his retreat from the city to a nineteenth-century log cabin in the Colorado wilderness, where with his family he could be most free (...) to re-create the Romantic problematique"⁷⁸. In this respect, Brakhage comes across as a romantic poet not only because of the quality of his work, but also of the choices that inform the context in which this work was created. This strategy of removing one's self from the 'distractions' of the social world in order to create was a typical romantic strategy from Thoreau to Wordsworth and Coleridge. This choice "necessitated a working organization, a mode of production and distribution, alternative to the technology, labor practices, and institutional insertion of Hollywood"⁷⁹. As the romantic poet was displaced from a social environment, the film-poet (and for our purposes Brakhage) created outside the industrial capitalist system, whose strict 'professional' mode of production is not open enough for personal expression. Brakhage considered himself an amateur in the original sense of the word, someone who loves what they do as opposed to a professional who works for commercial gain.

Leaving the personal element aside, Brakhage's work has often been thought of as poetic for its formal qualities. This time it is not the romantic but modernist poet model that is applied – mainly modernist free verse. Both Sitney and Mekas when referring to 'Dog Star Man' use a parallel between visual and linguistic elements. Mekas suggests that in the 'prelude' of the film "the images

7. 'Poetry-film': a cross-discipline genre

This essay has so far approached the notion of film poetry from a somewhat modernist, purist perspective: poetry in film not in a direct literal inclusion of poetic text, but as an application of poetic concerns on film. This approach, which was prevalent until the 80s, was a result of the writings of the early modernist film critics, who wanted to establish an independent filmic language. Both for Vertov and Dulac as we have seen in the chapters above film a purely visual medium and therefore any 'poetics' incorporated within film should arrive from the image itself. Hence, both of these filmmakers opposed strongly to the use of intertitles, as they believed that intertitles somehow

⁷⁶ Mekas, Jonas "The Experimental Film in America" in Sitney, Adams P. (ed) Film Culture Reader, New York: Praeger Film Books, 1970, pg 22-3

⁷⁷ Mekas, Jonas "Notes on the New American Cinema" in Sitney, Adams P. (ed) Film Culture Reader, New York: Praeger Film Books, 1970, pg 103

⁷⁸ James, David "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson" in Film Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 3, pg 38

⁷⁹ James, David E., Allegories Of Cinema, Princeton University Press, 1989, pg 32

undermined the visual continuity of film in the name of establishing clear concepts and a linear narrative. The coming of sound in the cinema permitted for intertitles to be abandoned, however – to the regret of early experimental filmmakers – a significantly more strictly narrative tradition was established. As William Wees suggests: “the union of words and images strengthened cinema’s ties to realism and narrative. By closing the spatial-temporal gap between characters speaking and the words they spoke, it eliminated a nagging reminder of cinema’s artifice, its technological mediation between the spectator and the ‘world’ of film”⁸⁰.

Not everybody in the modernist avant-garde as it developed between the 20s and the 70s was opposed to the notion of words not only being used in a film, but actually enhancing the poetic qualities of a film. As already mentioned Man Ray used text in his ‘Etoile de Mer’ cine-poem. Even someone who believed very strongly on the visual qualities of film like Maya Deren did not consider the possibility of using spoken language as a contradiction to film’s visual value. In the ‘Poetry and Film’ symposium and in answer to Arthur Miller’s claim that words should not be used in films, Deren suggests that words “would be redundant in film if they were used as a further projection from the image. However, if they were brought in on a different level, not issuing from the image which should be complete in itself, but as another dimension relating to it, then it is the two things together that make a poem”⁸¹. American filmmaker Ian Hugo worked in this way in his 1952 work ‘Bells of Atlantis’. As Abel Gance argues “the marriage of image, text, and sound is so magical that it is impossible to dissociate them in order to explain the favorable reactions of one’s unconscious”⁸².

This combination of image and text (at once independent and interdependent) forms what William Wees has called the ‘Poetry-film’ genre. As he suggests “a number of avant-garde film and video makers have created a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own”⁸³. It is important at this point to notice that Wees uses a new term, instead of sticking to the over-used ‘film poem’. Wees continues, explaining the reasons why poetry-films have been generally discarded: “while film poems have long been recognized as central to the avant-garde film tradition, poetry-films have received little special attention (...) because poetry-films are a kind of hybrid art form and, therefore, seem less ‘pure’, less essentially cinematic, in the high modernist sense”⁸⁴. This approach was first proposed in Wees’ influential essay ‘the poetry film’ published in 1984. In this essay, Wees claims that it was possibly because of poets increasingly being interested in film that the

⁸⁰ Wees, William “Introduction” in Wees, William & Dorland, Michael (eds) Words and Moving Images, Mediatexte Publications, 1984, pg 10

⁸¹ Deren, Maya speaking in Maas, Willard (chairman), “Poetry & The Film: A symposium” in Film Culture No 29, Summer 1963, pg 59

⁸² Gance, Abel quoted in Nin, Anais, “Poetics of the Film” in Film Culture, Vol. 30, ???????, pg 14

⁸³ Wees, William C., “Poetry-Films and Film Poems” in The Lux website, <http://www.lux.org.uk>, retrieved in 5th March 2005 also originally published in ‘Film Poems’ programme notes, April 1999

⁸⁴ Ibid

hybrid art form emerged, quoting poetry-film workshops organized in San Francisco by filmmaker and poet Herman Berlandt, which did not neglect the old definition of the film poem, but was also interested in the new combinative form.

Illustrating this combination process, Wees argues that poetry-film “expands upon the specific denotations of words and the limited iconic references of images to produce a much broader range of connotations, associations, metaphors. At the same time, it puts limits on the potentially limitless possibilities of meaning in words and images, and directs our responses toward some concretely communicable experience”⁸⁵. Thus, poetry-films expand the possibilities of visual / conceptual connections and offer different way in researching the notion of a visual metaphor, while at the same time using audio-visual temporal specificity make possible for more direct metaphorical connections. The ways literary poetry will be incorporated in a whole are various: “sometimes the poets are shown reciting their poems... in ‘bells of atlantis’ he hear Anais Nin’s voice, but see her only as a mysterious figure in a dream world; whereas in a number of instances we hear the poets but do not see them at all. Sometimes, the words themselves become images and appear as visual text on the screen”⁸⁶. The poetry-film is interested in the fine line between text as word or image, spoken voice as words or sounds and the question of whether image or concept come first in a human mind, discussions that were prevalent in 20th century literature and analysed by people like Italo Calvino and others.

The new hybrid art form resulted in a number of poetry-film festivals starting to appear in the 90s in the US. It was, however, in the UK that poetry-films became such a popular genre that even television channels started commissioning poets and filmmakers to create poetry-films. Literary poetry societies soon got interested and the 90s saw the publication of ‘Film Poem Poem Film’, a periodical brochure of the South London Poem Film Society. The National Film Theatre presented a number of ‘Film Poem’ programmes, curated by Peter Todd, who was involved with the publication of ‘FPPF’. The more literary and mainstream the concept of film poetry became, the more definitions started to blur. William Wees’ notion of the ‘poetry-film’, which was fundamental for the new hybrid genre was used less frequently and soon the new poetry-films were classified under the more general and less useful notion of the film poem, which Wees clearly saw as a distinctly different genre than that of the poetry-film. Filmmaker Ian Cottage refers to the ‘poem film’, while filmmaker and poet Tony Harrison prefers the notion of the ‘film-poem’ with a hyphen. Robert Speranza, who has studied the work of Harrison and the British film-poem suggests that the new poets and filmmakers that came together “attempted a spontaneous creation of film and verse calling the results film/poems or film-poems. (...) I use the hyphen to easily distinguish between these and other film poems”⁸⁷.

⁸⁵ Wees, William “The Poetry Film” in Wees, William & Dorland, Michael (eds) Words and Moving Images, Mediatexte Publications, 1984, pg 109

⁸⁶ Wees, William “Poetry Film” in Todd, Peter (ed) Poem Film Film Poem, Newsletter 4 of the South London Poetry Film Society, March 1998, pg 5

⁸⁷ Speranza, Rob, Verses in the Celluloid (PhD), University of Sheffield, 2001, pg 119

Unfortunately, the use of hyphen which Speranza sees as significant was often forgotten resulting in a further confusion about the concept of the film poem (which was confusing before the poetry-film anyway). Thus the NFT screenings of 'Film Poems' seem like a very loosely connected curation of films, some of which used spoken or written poetry, hence belonged in the new poetry-film tradition, some of which belonged in the more general tradition of the film poem as it was established in the American and European avant-garde and some that fell in between, that were simply considered poetic attempts by their makers. In an interview with Speranza, Todd gives very general – if not contradicting – definitions, suggesting that film poems “are driven by poets themselves, wishing to explore new areas and ideas, or alternatively, they might be looking for an area which is somewhere between the poetry they are writing and visual material”, hence using the poetry-film model. Later in an attempt to include the less straight-forward, non-literary film poems, he argues that “the film poem does not have the structure that a traditional Hollywood script or traditional play would have. It does things that sometimes you could say poetry might do, such as different rhythms, repetitions, you might be dealing more with trying to conjure up a mood rather than a narrative”⁸⁸. While this definition sounds slightly like Deren’s notion of the vertical, the notion of the film poem simply being a non-Hollywood structure is not very useful, as it could encompass not only all kinds of experimental filmmaking, but even the more artistic European traditions of film and basically suggest that all non-clearly-narrative film is a film poem.

In an attempt to clear the area, the new British film poets who were working primarily on poetry-film set up a number of 'rules' for making these films. Ian Cottage lists 14 characteristics / rules of the film poem, some of which were reflecting on the romantic notion of poetry (as seen in Brakhage): (No. 6): “A minimal crew must be used for the shoot. Preferably the filmmaker and a camera”, others seem almost random: (No. 5) “The poem film must be shot on film”, (No. 3) “The film and poem should be created in no more than three days”, while others were so general that were simply not useful: (No. 4) “Both poet and filmmaker should push the boundaries of the poem film”⁸⁹. The polemic language used showcases that Cottage’s interest is not in creating a clear discussion of the possible interests behind the notion of the film poem, but to create a 'dogma' (similar to the Danish Dogme 95 filmmakers), which can create some hype and therefore a support for the new hybrid art form. It is not surprising in that respect that a large number of the films Todd selected for his NFT nights are British, equally showcasing a support for local production and pushing the establishment of the idea that film poetry has been an influential concept in the film history of a country that historically has not shown a great interest in it, at least in the notion of film as lyricism / modernism as it appeared in the American / French / Russian avant-garde.

Despite the fact the notion of the poetry-film was a significant opposition to the way in which the relationship between film and poetry had been examined

⁸⁸ Todd, Peter in interview with Speranza, Rob in appendix of *ibid.*, no pages indicated

⁸⁹ Cottage, Ian “Making Poem Films” in Peter Todd (ed) “Film Poem” programme notes, Arts Council of Britain and British Film Institute, 1999, pg 11

until the 80s, its supporters soon were so involved that they started considering the hybrid art form as a somewhat natural result of the investigation of the relationship between film and poetry, falling in a sense in the same fundamentalist trap that Wees accused the modernists of. In a 'Film and Poetry' film festival that took place in Buxton in 1997, this approach was clear if we examine the criteria under which films were chosen: "the films should in some way be overtly linked to poetry, either containing spoken or written poetry or taking a poet as subject." Stating that if the event was to be repeated "I would like the programme to be more influenced by the filmmaker's perspective, and to investigate more directly the formal similarities between film and poetry"⁹⁰. Thus, the poetry-film tradition has arrived to the point where the notion of the filmmaker as the main person behind a filmic creation has to be reclaimed and the modernist appropriation of poetics on film are an 'alternative viewpoint'. This in a sense showcases how chaotic the notion of the film-poem has been in the last 80 years and how an attempt for a specific definition is almost impossible, since even the historical analyses of the film-poem are often written by individuals who have interests in promoting particular characteristics of it.

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⁹⁰ Buxton Fringe Film Festival, "Film & Poetry in Buxton" in in Todd, Peter (ed) Poem Film Film Poem, Newsletter 2 of the South London Poetry Film Society, November 1997, no pages indicated

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