

Poetry-Film & The Film Poem: Some Clarifications

Ever since experimental filmmakers and critics started theorising the concepts behind avant-garde visual explorations, the idea of poetry was seen as a fruitful model for the creative process of the more lyrical side of experimental film practices. The working mode of the narrative-liberated filmmaker seemed somehow analogous to this of the modernist poet. In some cases (like this of Stan Brakhage) even the very lifestyle of the filmmaker resembled that of the romantic poet, as did the modes of production in creating and distributing the work.

This appears as somewhat of a contradiction when we read some of the statements / manifestos of film artists, within which they often stress the importance of film as an independent art, suggesting that film could only be a respectable art form if it struggles to work within the specificities of its own language. [The notion of medium-specificity is a commonplace for modernism]. In the opening sequence of 'The Man With The Movie Camera', Dziga Vertov writes his manifesto:

"The film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events without the aid of intertitles (a film without intertitles), without the aid of a scenario (a film without a scenario), without the aid of theatre (a film without actors, without sets etc). This experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature"¹

In this statement Vertov asks audience and filmmakers alike to see filmmaking as an independent art form with its own language, a language that does not need to borrow from other arts to be meaningful.

The same could be suggested with reference to the 60s American avant-garde. In his influential essay 'Metaphors on Vision', Stan Brakhage claims that "there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word"².

The same stressing of importance of the particularities of the medium is shared according to Renata Jackson by Maya Deren: "Maya Deren's writings on the art of the motion picture... fall within the tradition of modernist medium-specificity: the two-pronged belief that art-forms are differentiated from one another by virtue of their distinctive formal or structural capabilities, and that there is a direct connection between these structural characteristics and each art form's proper expressive realm."³

Despite this polemic attitude supporting the separation of film from the other arts, all of the above writers felt that it is appropriate to make parallels between their modes of working and the art of poetry. They called themselves

¹ Vertov, Dziga, *The Man With A Movie Camera*, Soviet Union, 1929, (BFI edition)

² Metaphors on vision, *Film Culture*, No 30, Fall, 1963, no pages stated

³ Renata Jackson "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren" in *Maya Deren & The American Avant-Garde*, ed by Bill Nichols, London: University Of California Press, 2001, pg 47

'film poets' and their films 'film poems.' This apparent contradiction is mostly obvious in the writings of Maya Deren. Renata Jackson adds that "while (...) Deren warns the filmmaker against borrowing inappropriately from the methods of any other form, she clearly describes as comparable filmic and poetic creativity. (...) We can therefore more clearly understand her criticism (...) of Hollywood cinema (which borrows narrative from literature and theatre), abstract film (which imitates painting), or the documentary (which in Deren's view must not be considered an art form, since its task is to represent reality rather than to create new forms). True film art does not consist of linear narrative narratives, animated paintings, or documentary realism; for Deren it must be the result of more poetic approaches".⁴

Deren, Brakhage and Vertov were only some of the filmmakers and theorists interested in the parallel between film and poetry. Ever since the idea was first put forth in the mid-1920s by the French 'Impressionists' (Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc etc), Man Ray, Hans Richter and others, the debate has been continuous and the parallel was seen from a number of different viewpoints, arriving to the term 'film poem' being somewhat fuzzy. Despite the differences between those viewpoints, what connected most of them was the fact that their writers shared the belief that film should be a primarily visual language and that if there is any influence of poetry within it, then this must be on the actual picture. In other words, poetics should be incorporated into the very visual nature of the film. Especially early filmmakers like Vertov and Dulac neglected the use of intertitles as they believed that verbal languages should be redundant in modern film.

However, not everybody in the modernist avant-garde as it developed between the 20s and the 70s was opposed to the notion that words could be used to enhance the poetic qualities of a film. 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 a '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"⁵. 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"⁶.

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

⁴ Op Cit, pg 64

⁵ Deren, Maya speaking in Maas, Willard (chairman), "Poetry & The Film: A symposium" in Film Culture No 29, Summer 1963, pg 59

⁶ Gance, Abel quoted in Nin, Anais, "Poetics of the Film" in Film Culture, Vol. 30, pg 14

poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own"⁷. 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"⁸. 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 hybrid art form emerged, quoting poetry-film workshops organised in San Francisco by filmmaker and poet Herman Berlandt, which did not discard the old definition of the film poem, but which were 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"⁹. Thus, poetry-films expand the possibilities of visual / conceptual connections and offer different ways in researching the notion of visual metaphors, while at the same time using audio-visual temporal specificity make possible for more direct metaphorical connections. The ways literary poetry would be incorporated in a filmic structure are various: "sometimes the poets are shown reciting their poems... in 'Bells of Atlantis' we 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"¹⁰. 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 modernist literature and science.

The new hybrid art form resulted in a number of poetry-film festivals starting to appear in the 90s in the US. In the UK poetry-films became an almost popular genre (for art film standards) and 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,

⁷ 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

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Wees, William "The Poetry Film" in Wees, William & Dorland, Michael (eds) Words and Moving Images, Mediatexte Publications, 1984, pg 109

¹⁰ 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

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/mode to 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"¹¹.

Unfortunately, the use of the hyphen, which Speranza sees as significant, was often forgotten resulting in a further confusion about the concept of the film poem. Thus the NFT screenings of 'Film Poems' seem like a somehow loosely connected curation of films, some of which used spoken or written poetry, hence belonged to the new poetry-film tradition, some of which belonged to 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 or 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"¹². While in this definition we can hear slight echoes of Deren's ideas, 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 field, 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"¹³. The polemic language used showcases that Cottage's interest is not in creating a

¹¹ Speranza, Rob, *Verses in the Celluloid* (PhD), University of Sheffield, 2001, pg 119

¹² Todd, Peter in interview with Speranza, Rob in appendix of *ibid.*, no pages indicated

clear discussion of / debate on the problematic notion of the film poem, but to put a 'dogma' together (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 a very influential concept in the film history of the UK, something which seems slightly far-fetched if we compare British film practice to the American / French / Soviet avant-garde.

Although the notion of the poetry-film was a significant opposition to the way in which the film poem had been examined 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 'polemic-language' trap that Wees suggested the modernists have done some 30 years before. In a 'Film and Poetry' film festival that took place in Buxton in 1997, we can clearly see this approach by 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." The curator adds 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"¹⁴. 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 seen as an 'alternative viewpoint'. In Robert Speranza's recent research paper, which mainly focuses on poetry-films, the 60 years of research that predate poetry-films are somewhat reduced under the heading of 'The Avant-Garde Film Poem', which is only seen as a strand of the tradition of the film poem and not as the starting point – at least from a historical perspective.

This in a sense showcases how chaotic the notion of the film poem has been in the last 80 years and how difficult it is to talk about a specific definition of its characteristics. Even the historical analyses of the film poem are often written by individuals who have interests in promoting particular characteristics of it. Perhaps it is time to rethink the concepts of film and poetry taking into account all the different approaches that have been put forth by various filmmakers and critics without dismissing any possible perspective, but also with a critical and informed approach that would be useful to the research of the moving image.

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¹³ Cottage, Ian "Making Poem Films" in Peter Todd (ed) "Film Poem" programme notes, Arts Council of Britain and British Film Institute, 1999, pg 11

¹⁴ 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

filmmaker Nicky Hamlyn. For more information on Fil's own film work please visit his website at <http://www.fil-i.co.uk>