"The implicit problem that these tendencies (vispo and videopoetry) have thus far failed to solve in any consistent manner has been the formal definition of their own territory, as such, as distinct from the various other art forms that often influence & inform them."

VIDEOPOETRY: A MANIFESTO

by TOM KONYVES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"If I knew what the picture was going to be like I wouldn't make it. It was almost like it was made already... the challenge is more about trying to make what you can't think of." – Cindy Sherman

"The writer is entitled to his boomboom." – Tristan Tzara

VIDEOPOETRY: A MANIFESTO
 by TOM KONYVES

What follows is intended to distinguish videopoetry from *poetry films, film poetry, poemvideos, poetry videos, cyber-poetry, cine-poetry, kinetic poetry, digital poetry, poetronica, filming of poetry* and other unwieldy neologisms, which have been applied, at one time or another, to describe the treatment of poetry in film and video but which have also developed different and divergent meanings.

The democratization of the medium realized by the introduction of video technology has, in the last 25 years, only sharpened the initial *art vs entertainment* debate; in particular, the movement of poetry to the "big screen" has exposed two conflicting positions – one demystifying the poem by complementary "visuals", the other augmenting the suggestive power of poetry by unexpected juxtapositions.

The underlying dichotomy opposes videopoetry – I envision the measured integration of narrative, non-narrative and anti-narrative juxtapositions of image, text and sound as resulting in a poetic experience – to works which publish poems (voiced or displayed on-screen) in video format. While the latter are to be commended for bringing a new audience to poetry, their use of imagery as embellishments to (if not direct illustrations of) the text, their preference to employ narrative over self-reflexive sequences, their rejection of contrast, fragmentation, the incongruous and the dissonant, prevent these works from being considered as models for a *new* genre of technology-assisted poetry.

> *"Transformations in expression and in modes of communication cannot exist without influencing the transformation of poetry itself."* – Jean-Marie Gleize

Of its definition.

Videopoetry is a genre of poetry displayed on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, *poetic* juxtaposition of images with text and sound. In the measured blending of these three elements, it produces in the viewer the realization of a *poetic experience*.

Presented as a multimedia object of a fixed duration, the principal function of a videopoem is to demonstrate *the process of thought* and *the simultaneity of experience*, expressed in words – visible and/or audible – whose *meaning* is blended with, but not illustrated by, the images and the soundtrack.

> *"Progress in any aspect is a movement through changes of terminology."* – Wallace Stevens

Of the term.

Videopoetry is one word; it is not separated or hyphenated. As one word, it indicates that a fusion of the visual, the verbal and the audible has occurred, resulting in a new, different form of poetic experience. As one word, it recognizes that a century of *experiments* with poetry in film and video – poems introduced to motion pictures as intertitles, then as kinetic texts, as images illustrating voiced texts (some excluding visual or voiced text entirely), poems performed in front of a camera, poems as text superimposed over images – is the narrative of a gradual movement from the tenuous, anxious relationship of image and text to their rare but perceptible synthesis, i.e., from poetry films to film poems to poetry videos to *videopoetry*.

As an amalgam of Latin (*video*) and Greek (*poetry*) origins, "*videopoetry*" combines the best of two classical traditions: *making* poetry with *technological innovation.*

As a closed compound noun, "video" not only functions to *modify* "poetry", it alters its meaning. Therefore, videopoetry is more than a term of convenience; it asserts that a poem is being created without the linear story-telling style of many "poetry videos" (which are made primarily to promote poems in print, using images directly representing the descriptions and actions in the text and are assembled in the conventional narrative form of movie-making). While a videopoem is, in fact, a "movie", its intention is to provide an alternative that is non-narrative, sometimes anti-narrative, even *ante-*narrative.

Of its constraints.

Text, displayed on-screen or voiced, is an essential element of the videopoem. A work which does not contain visible or audible text could be described as *poetic,* as an art film or video art, but not as a *videopoem*.

Imagery in a videopoem – including on-screen text – does not illustrate the voiced text.

> *"I tried constantly to find something which would not recall what had happened before."* – Marcel Duchamp

Of narrativity.

Videopoetry recognizes that narrative moments – whether presented as individual elements or a combination of text, image or sound – encourage the viewer's engagement; to sustain the *poetic experience*, *some* narrativity is necessary as a structural device. (A non-narrative element juxtaposed with another non-narrative element for an *extended* period of time may result in distancing the viewer from the work.) From scene to scene, narrativity propels the work forward, providing *context* for the viewer during the process of the poetic experience. The distance traveled, the time elapsed, the voices heard, the images seen, are measured out with what best suits the *poetic* direction of a particular moment – the awareness that when the narrative moment has reached its usefulness, a deliberate disruption must occur, must appear, must sever the forward movement toward which the narrative will always conspire. The viewer's expectations of eventfulness are, by turns, satisfied and subverted; *meaning* is eventually derived from the effect of the repeated movement from the narrative to the non-narrative elements of the work.

"Bringing together two things into a previously untried juxtaposition is the surest way of developing new vision."
– Andre Breton

Of poetic juxtaposition.

In the assembly (editing or "montage") phase, syntactical decisions are made to render image-text-sound juxtapositions as a metaphor for simultaneous "meanings" which the viewer interprets as a *poetic experience*. These decisions are based on presenting the 3 elements as *distant realities* (often arrived at through *chance* operations) whose relationship strikes the viewer as surprising, as always new. It is imperative that the juxtapositions be consistently perceived as suggestive of *indirect* relationships – mysterious, oneiric.

The success of each syntactical decision is achieved when the *distant realities* – the ambiguous or enigmatic relationship of a particular image to a portion of text, for example – are not *so* distant as to cause disengagement with the work. The key to a successfully executed poetic juxtaposition is *balance*, the weighing of image-text relationships for their suggestive, rather than illustrative qualities, the determining of durations, the positioning and appearance of text, the treatment of colour, the layering of the soundtrack, the acceleration or deceleration of elements, etc. Balance, in this scheme, is the demonstration of control over the narrative impulse.

"In film, poetry is opposed to reality." – Luis Bunuel

Of the poetic experience.

Videopoetry recognizes the power of video for producing and communicating unprecedented and unlimited associations between image, text and sound.

The viewer is presented with non-illustrative juxtapositions of image, text and sound. As the work gradually unfolds, it is perceived that the visual (image and/or displayed text) and audible (sound and/or voiced text) elements are fragmented expressions of the artist's imagination, suggestive of meaning, yet denying clarification of the purported meaning – a teasing, vertiginous exploration of *desire*.

When the introduction of these fragmented expressions causes an impediment to the narrative flow, the viewer will either surrender to the *symmetry* of the disruptions – and participate in the adventure – or disengage and "tune out". Provided that the image-text-sound juxtapositions exhibit a pleasing *balance* between narrative and non-narrative moments – achieved through strategic, self-referential disruptions, a demonstration of awareness of the spatial and temporal relationships between elements, intentional repetitions, etc. – a viewer will experience their sense of time suspended or blurred.

Tension and repose, the "ebb and flow" of narrative and non-narrative moments, may also be interpreted by the viewer as *simultaneity made manifest*, while the complexity and significance of relationships between the presented elements – as in dreams, for instance – may have to wait to be resolved.

"Always the precious repetition for the joy of recognition."
– Oyvind Fahlström

Of rhythm.

The *poetry* in a videopoem is characterized by a discernible rhythm, but it is different from the traditional written or oral form of poetry: it's not limited to an *attribute* of the text element.

Rhythm is the *effect* produced by the introduction and the subsequent duration of a new portion of image, text or sound in the process of assembling the work.

Videopoetry also exhibits *internal* rhythms; enveloped in each appearance of a series of images, on-screen text or sounds, the viewer discerns patterns specific to the element presented.

Repetition – as a visual or audible device – produces the most effective signalling of the presence of poetry. Its many functions include emphasis, self-reflection, division, regulation or suspension of time, even a *hypnotic* quality (especially when prolonged); it is most useful in sustaining the rhythmic structure and the poetic experience of a work.

"The purpose of art is to ask questions."
– Lawrence Weiner

Of illustration.
To see an image as a representation of the audible text or to hear the words as they are displayed on the screen violates the premise that *poetic* juxtaposition is the presentation of *distant* realities; inevitably, the viewer is prevented from forming their own imaginative associations between the elements presented, resulting in the demystification of these associations, diminishing the poetic quality and experience of the work.

Of collaboration.
The *videopoet* is a poet, filmmaker and sound artist combined.
Videopoetry recognizes that production logistics sometimes require a team of individuals to cooperate during the creation of a work; the genre accommodates both individual and collaborative work, provided that the work exhibits a *unified vision*.

Of duration.
Whether composed of multiple scenes or one continuous shot, a videopoem longer than 300 seconds faces the challenge of *sustaining the poetic experience* of the viewer. The *videohaiku* (approx. 30 seconds) uses a few words of text attached to the shortest duration of images.

"Plotless film is poetic film." – Victor Shklovsky

Of categories.
Differentiated by their use of text, there are 5 major categories of videopoems:

KINETIC TEXT
SOUND TEXT
VISUAL TEXT
PERFORMANCE
CIN(E)POETRY

KINETIC TEXT is the animation of text over a neutral background.
Continuing the ongoing experimentation with text as an aesthetic object, these works owe much to *concrete* and *patterned* poetry in their style – the use of different fonts, sizes and colours, strategic spatial positioning, self-referentiality – simultaneously presenting text *as* image.
By virtue of its equal acceptance of the semantic and non-semantic, as well as its ability to demonstrate the destruction, reconstruction and transformation of static words or letters into "characters" which *move* (in both senses of the word), the category represents the "prototype" of a videopoem.

SOUND TEXT presents the text on the soundtrack.
Juxtaposed with the video images on the screen, it is expressed through the human voice.
Of the five categories of videopoetry, this form (with or without music) – is the most popular, due to the facility of working within the traditional form of video/film, i.e., using the voice as the chief mode of text presentation and juxtaposition with images and other sounds (e.g., music, chant, sound effects, etc.) – without the additional difficulty presented by visual text.

VISUAL TEXT displays the text on-screen, superimposed over images captured or found.
Charged with *leading* the genre, this category presents the most significant challenge to videopoetry.
For the *engaged* viewer, the complex relationships and multiplicity of meanings suggested by juxtapositions of on-screen text with curious, non-illustrative images make extraordinary imaginative leaps not only possible, but automatic.

PERFORMANCE is the on-screen appearance of the poet, or designated poet (actor), speaking directly or indirectly into the camera. Of the five categories, it is the most problematic: the poet/performer is perceived as the intermediary between the viewer and the poem, possibly demystifying the process of presentation. (Excluding the form of *sound poetry*, there are many excellent, emotionally moving representations of "verbal art", but they are only that – re-presentations of poems, not *the poems*.) In a videopoem, on-screen appearances only succeed by virtue of their *visual* expression (i.e., eccentric body language)and their juxtaposition – within the image frame – with a *background* suggesting a unique, unusual "setting" for the performance.

CIN(E)POETRY is the videopoem wherein the text is animated and/or superimposed over graphics, still or moving images that are "painted" or modified with the assistance of computer software, e.g., *Photoshop, Flash* or the 3D modelling and animation features in *Second Life,* the online virtual *world*. It closely resembles VISUAL TEXT, except the imagery has a computer-generated or modified appearance. The parenthesized "e" (*electronic*) was introduced by George Aguilar, who works most often in this form.

Individual works may overlap and exhibit combinations of categories.

Of image and the displayed (on-screen) text.
Videopoetry does not differentiate between camera-captured and *found* images (appropriated from another source or format); the genre accommodates both.
Videopoetry does not differentiate between concrete (representational) and abstract (non-representational) content in images; the genre accommodates both.
Abstract images – extreme close-ups of objects, details of hand-made or computer-generated paintings, out of focus or *gel*-covered lens shots – enable text elements to be placed almost anywhere on the screen; the more the text *stands out* in contrast to the image, the more it receives the viewer's immediate attention, takes precedence over and assigns to the abstract image a supportive role, that of the *background*, moving or not. The more the text is *blended* with an abstract image, the more the viewer is required to consider a more subtle relationship between the two.
Concrete images require a different approach to displayed text: a still object in a motionless frame provides surfaces and edges, horizontal, vertical, oblique and curved lines as potential *text-spaces*; a moving object in a motionless frame restricts text-space to empty areas.

Of image and special effects.
Advancements in graphic design have refined image-text relationships to the degree that videopoetry, in terms of innovative juxtapositions, has followed the latest "cutting-edge" commercial/advertising methods with interest; while some effects, such as *floating text* or *text crawl* are still useful, other "high-end" flip-swoop-wrap-zoom-spin-shake dynamics so clearly refer to product promotion that they have acquired a secondary symbolic value: the commodification of society.
As alluded to above, videopoetry accommodates both modified and unmodified images; whether an image is to be modified or not will always depend on the *effectiveness* of its juxtaposition with text and sound.
Of the countless effects in post-production (the editing and assembling of the work), two transitions have proven invaluable: the *dissolve* and the *fade.* Both affect the viewer's perception of time.
The (cross) dissolve – the superimposition of one image *over* another – presents two scenes (one ending, one beginning) simultaneously; as one of the most common transition effects, it is used primarily to indicate that a period of time has elapsed between the two scenes.
In videopoetry, when the superimposition is prolonged, it produces a *sustained* experience of *time suspended* while simultaneously signalling the uncontrolled state of dreaming. (Related to these, a *freeze-frame* can also be seen as a device that "stops" time, while the *split-screen* effect enables the viewer to follow two scenes on the screen simultaneously; yet both are of lesser *poetic* value than the *dissolve* or the *fade.*)
The fade (or fade-to-black) is used to indicate an end to a scene, usually followed by a *fade-in* to introduce the next scene; in videopoetry, we can interpret this effect as the *blink of an eye* or – when it's prolonged – the shutting of the eyes, followed by "re-awakening" to a new "world" (or at least a new context/scene in the videopoem).

Of image and motion.
In the process of filming, the camera is either locked in position (the *still* shot), moving with a fluid, tracking motion or is hand-held. Of these three, the still and fluid-motion shot will not cause a *disengagement* with the work; the hand-held camera shot is more problematic.

The *unstable* image of the hand-held shot becomes a constant reminder of the operation (and operator) behind the camera; every possible accident of the moment becomes magnified, leaving the viewer unsure whether drawing attention to camera movement is an oversight or an intentional 'self-referential disruption'. Of these accidents, it can be argued that an element of *chance* should be always brought into play, as it may produce the most unexpected trophies of "found" imagery. The final decision to include or exclude hand-held shots is determined by their function in the balance act of poetic juxtaposition.

Accelerated motion is often associated with a comic scene; in a videopoem, depending on whether the action recorded is for *atmospheric* or *illustrative* use, the *time-lapse* effect can be more forgiving.

Slow motion appeals to videopoetry for a number of reasons: the effect suggests a *gradual* suspension of time; a dream-like state is evoked; action unfolds like a painting; a perception of reality is emphasized. In the *structure* of the videopoem, it functions as punctuation.

"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, but as another dimension relating to it, then it is the two things together that make a poem." – Maya Deren

Of text.
Videopoetry recognizes that text has the unique capacity to deliver the signs of abstract objects (ideas) as well as concrete objects to the viewer; as such, it performs the most essential function in a videopoem – to provide the ideal *counterpoint* to the elements of image and sound.

Videopoetry recognizes that text – due to its capacity to be displayed on the screen (i.e. freed from its fixity on the page), *found* in a captured image or voiced on the soundtrack – is in the propitious position of enabling the viewer to experience poetry in a *time-based* visual form*;* it is the essential catalyst in the transformation of a work from "poetic" to poetry.

Typically, text is written *for* the videopoem; in some cases it is "found" and repurposed for the videopoem.

Used in a videopoem, a previously composed/published poem represents only one element of the videopoem, the text element. The "poetry" in videopoetry is the *result* of the judicious juxtaposition of text with image and sound.

When the text is borrowed from a previously composed/published poem, it must be that the artist has discovered a new function for the pre-existing text, based on its juxtaposition with certain imagery, or a certain soundtrack.

In its visual/displayed form, text is "looked at" before read.

The *looked-at* text applies the strategies derived from concrete poetry, typography, graphic design and motion graphics. Fonts, the *characters* of type, are selected for their clarity *and* suggestiveness, always in relation to the image presented on the screen. Positioning, motion, duration and method of appearance (positing by *dissolve, pop or typewriter* effect, for example) are similarly considered in relation to the image presented on the screen.

While the demonstration of the variety and versatility of text treatment is proof that new ways of seeing words performs a poetic function, effects are *not* prerequisites of videopoetry.

In the relentless manipulations of the *appearance* of text – from the textured to the malleable, from the casually handwritten to the finely-chiseled 3-D reflective surfaces – there is a tendency to be preoccupied with the *materiality* of the written word, sometimes at the expense of "meaning".

Read or *meaning*-driven text, wherein the appearance of words is of lesser importance, narrows the context of the moment, favouring interior effects over superficial effects. It is the strategic balance of appearance *and* meaning – in addition to the 'judicious juxtaposition' with images and sound – that produces the "poetry" in a videopoem.

"Where you have music that doesn't imitate what's on the screen, but goes against it… is far more interesting than anything imitative." – Alfred Hitchcock

Of sound.

Videopoetry recognizes that the use of a "soundtrack" significantly augments the sensory perception of the work; as such, it provides the ideal counterpoint to the elements of image and text in assisting the viewer to process the effect or meaning of juxtapositions.

The soundtrack is not a prerequisite of videopoetry (silence *is* an effect and a syntactical decision), but its presence contributes to a richness of effects and meanings.

The three "branches" of the auditory capacity of the soundtrack are: voiced text, music and sound effects. Videopoetry does not differentiate between *voiced* and *displayed* text; the genre accommodates both.

Voiced text intensifies the videopoem with its range of expression: the "real" voice of the poet provides an authentic connection to the creator of the work; affected or natural, loud or soft, slurred or modulated, metallic or cloyingly sweet, passionate or dull, nasal or throaty, the voice of a nightingale or the filtered voice on the phone, the human voice colours the text with *nuance*.

On the sound track, the bridge between *voiced text* and *music* is occupied by what is commonly termed *sound poetry*. Of all the various "imports" or repurposed forms of poetry, these vocalizations emphasize more aural than semantic qualities and have proved most compatible with the non-narrative objectives of videopoetry: the declamations, the chants, the recitations of "nonsense words" provide a *natural* counterpoint when juxtaposed with abstract images.

Music is a considered, measured "device" in videopoetry; it can be used minimally or sporadically, overlapping or *underlying* selected segments. In certain cases, it can be assigned the more demanding task of delivering the entire soundtrack of the work, from beginning to end, in the form of a *score.*

Prior to, at the point of, or immediately after a juxtaposition (the introduction of a new element – image, text or voice), music*'s* primary function is to intensify, diminish or eliminate the emotional content of a particular "scene", thereby altering the viewer's interpretation of the meaning of the content.

Music which happens to be present during the shooting (*diagetic* music) serves to identify the content of a scene as *narrative* content.

Use of music segments exemplifying specific *cultural* associations provides cues for the viewer to identify supplemental meanings in the work.

While music tends to emphasize, accent and generally support narrative scenes, *sound effects* in videopoetry are more often than not isolated, disruptive gestures used to highlight incongruous image-text juxtapositions while contributing dissonance to the *internal* rhythm of the soundtrack.

Concept videopoems.

Concept or *conceptual videopoems* focus on the materiality of language, exclude narrative and tend to hold little of *intentional* semantic value; "meaning" is attributed to the *process* of presentation*,* which follows a pre-conceived formula (the idea), often executed in a methodical *technical* manner.

The dominating element is text; its content is gathered from sourced *information: found* phrases, statements, lists, etc.

The text element in these works is strong on context but stripped of emotive value.

The viewer may not perceive development or change of perspective throughout the work, as heightening or diminishing effects are superseded by the intention to present an object of examination – the process of presentation – in a *pure* self-referential state.

Of translation.

Texts in videopoems should be provided in multiple languages; in DVD format, the viewer should be able to select the preferred language. SOUND TEXT videopoems should provide translation as subtitles, optimized for legibility: white, sans-serif font on a separate display *below* the screen or yellow with black outline at the bottom of the screen.

In the subtitling process, the accurate synchronization of audio and subtitle is essential.

VISUAL TEXT videopoems should provide translation on a separate display below the screen; if the visual text is one or two words, the subtitle should be positioned close to the side of the on-screen text. The subtitles should be synchronized to appear with the on-screen text.

In cases where the foreign language uses both SOUND TEXT and VISUAL TEXT, the subtitles of the VISUAL TEXT should be synchronized to appear with the on-screen text, using a colour *different* from the SOUND TEXT subtitles.