

## State of the Art

presenting six British Poetry Films at  
ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival 5–8/ 12/19

‘Unseen Forces and the Protagonist’s Point of View’

Sarah Tremlett

Thomas Zandegiacomo of ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival generously invited Lucy English, Helen Dewbery and Chaucer Cameron (jointly) and myself to each select six British poetry films that we felt are significant today. The films I have chosen handle their particular ingredients with skill and mastery, and make three sets of comparative pairs. Each one centres on unseen forces acting on them, and plays with the position of the protagonist, or narrator, placing the viewer or camera in interesting and even culpable positions. The first two generate comic pathos; the second two focus on man’s inhumanity to man; and the final pair on the difficult dramatic technique of intimating freedom from negative forces beyond the screen (this world which is not that world).

*The Desktop Metaphor* <https://vimeo.com/217985141> by British poet Caleb Parkin, with filmic interpretation by Dutch filmmaker Helmie Stil, centres in content and form on the subtly humorous juxtaposition of the prosaic with the profound and mythical in relation to man’s position in a desktop universe. A photocopier light opera plays central stage in this film, accenting the poem where office products and a playful yet matter of fact delivery, also dramatically mirrored in Stil’s photocopied face, are interwoven with concepts of the infinite – ‘The Great Stapler which attaches the night to us’. The steady metrical repetition of the scanning motion of the photocopier (with both light and sound) creates its own hypnotic prosody, paralleling the anaphoric repetitions, enjambment and word mirroring of Parkin’s verbal images – ‘we were exoplanets with atmospheres of ink ink full of bright mating cries’.

*On Loop* <https://player.vimeo.com/video/104894544> one of the funniest films in recent years by British filmmaker and animator Christine Hooper, also focuses on the impotence of man’s condition to create humour. However, in this case the viewer is given the point of view of the invisible protagonist, who is in bed and tossing and turning with insomnia. In a short space of time we get to know exactly who the protagonist is, without ever seeing her, since an imagination in overdrive lets slip the jumbled contents of her thoughts. These are married with a visually fractured room, and a hyper alert voiceover (Susan Calman) that is so well chosen to dramatically accentuate, through the sharply rising and falling tones of the melodic accent, a disjointed, racing imagination. Placing the viewer in the physical and mental position of the protagonist is a clever device, the comic pathos doubled in affect.

The following two films deal with man’s inhumanity to man, with two contrasting filmic approaches. The first film *Numbers* <https://vimeo.com/187065202> with poem by British poet Lucy English and film by Polish filmmaker Maciej Piatek, begins with the filmmaker and the footage itself. Maciej asked Lucy to write a poem to the footage centering broadly on

someone 'trying to find their way in society'. Lucy arrived at the refugee survivor's narrative, which Maciej paired with a voiceover by a survivor herself.

The black and white footage is from a laboratory, and I quote Maciej: 'showing each stage of death of a human white blood cell, revealing the dying cells apparently trying to alert their immune system allies that they are dying'. He says he 'looped and delayed in time the same piece of found footage to make it look like a disease outbreak. At the end of the film one can see in the left top corner the cell is actually disappearing'.

This film rests on the visual absence of the survivor's themselves; the screen and the cells as human experiment are a surface to reflect upon, in the way that a tombstone in a graveyard focuses our thoughts. We are entirely tuned to the voice and its wholly credible narrative. However, the voice slowly disappears and the liquid vibrating aspect of the cells delicately suggests the negative role of water and the ocean in the stories. Although the survivor's voice lets us know she survived, the screen tells us a different story. Like the last two films I am going to show you, the film intimates what is *not shown*.

The next film *Hopscotch* <https://vimeo.com/209913743> also intimates an unseen but insidious negative force, highlighting targeted, everyday abuse, particularly against Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) women in Scotland, the UK. It is based on a poem by Nadine Aisha, and film by leading filmmaker Roxana Vilks, (executively produced by AMINA – Muslim Women's Resource Centre with support from Rape Crisis Edinburgh).

We are immediately drawn into the centre of the conflict. An invisible stalker hisses suggestive remarks to a girl who then retorts 'he says to me' placing us, the viewer, as her third-party confidante. At the same time the camera focuses on a girl strolling across the screen on a cold evening. Through this clever filmic device, we see from dual points of view – as both her friend and her assailant – creating dramatic tension.

We cut to daytime, on a bus, and she continues: 'Sat on the bus with a stranger's hot breath' and we are there again, but from the point of view of the abuser sitting right behind her, just as Christine Hooper placed us in the mind and physical position of the insomniac. 'I want you' he hisses. We follow our prey through the streets, and the abuse continues 'stuck up bitch' 'what's wrong, can't you take this, 'Slut, slag'.

Standing alone in a railway station as everyone else speeds passed, we recognize the victim's frozen isolation, and how such abuse robs us of an authentic, relaxed interaction in public places. She is left with the fallout of the words and an ensuing alienation: 'clenched them tight in fists that now mark the imprint of nameless men trying to name me'. The film continues for nearly five minutes, exposing us, the viewer, to a sense of an unending and unpredictable persecution. Ultimately the stalking camera reaches a climax where the victim turns, takes the camera, and starts filming herself. For a moment she, as in everywoman, triumphs; but through the majority of the narrative Vilks has expertly drawn us in, to inhabit the obsessive mind of the perpetrator. Since writing this Roxana told me (11 December 2019): 'one of the reasons I was drawn to the style I used was also about reflecting on the "male gaze" in cinema in the sense that it is often male directors behind the lens and I wanted to parallel that to also this harassment of women in public spaces.

Then to give the poet/ protagonist the chance at the end to grab the camera and turn the lens on herself ... so she could speak to the audience without the male gaze and take back the ownership of the story'. In the world of poetry film, where women are thriving as filmmakers, we forget that who held/holds the lens has always been a contentious issue, and often psychically parallels the hunter/hunted dichotomy underpinning stalking itself.

My final two films suggest spaces free from and yet intimating repression. In *Quarry* <https://vimeo.com/329081772> with poem by American poet Melissa Stein and animated line drawing by British artist animator Josh Saunders a dramatic narrative is placed squarely in front of us. With a delicate and charming line illustration, a girl and boy swim naked in a quarry. However, through the concise and well-placed choice of words which indicate brooding danger – for example 'a girl is swimming naked in dark water' – an undercurrent of impending loss of innocence emerges.

The narrative is told as if in the third person but as it reaches the denouement the narrator enters the first person. It is at this point that we sense that the earlier controlled use of language might indicate a personal psychological burial, now being exhumed. Within the developing drama, Saunders' figures swim with innocence and a fragile, vibratory naivety; dipping into and below the surface: at one with the water, the rocks and each other. As we realize this event actually happened to the author, so we adjust, and mentally include the invasive eye of an intruder. Achieving delicacy and innocence in a film is a difficult feat; however, with such restraint, both visual and verbal, the result is powerful and memorable, and shows how animation can add to narrative in dramatic ways beyond live footage.

*Storm Song* <https://vimeo.com/333132412> by British artist Rebecca Hilton is also set in water, but *underwater*, accompanied by two poems. On the surface, it appears to be a lyric, moving abstract painting where mermaid-like figures (some fully clothed and with long trailing fabric) unwind and intertwine, being both the ink and the brush. However, this film contains an underlying tension, and, rather than making a loud political statement, uses space, language and embodied gesture to subtly deny the constricts on the surface of enforced identities and ideologies from the powers that be – 'for all we understand is power'.

Alongside an enigmatic voiceover, the viewer's gaze finds itself broken by frequent black 'rests' – a technique I haven't seen except with intertitles. These black spaces, in a 'ma'-like way, inspire reflection on what has just been said. And just over halfway through the two poems interweave with each other. The themes in 'Ghost Ribbon' explore return from failure, whilst 'Cataclysmic Storm' investigates the weight of authoritarian power and control 'Suspended up up up until you breathe'. Whilst in *Quarry*, we are taken on a developing narrative that intimates in its dramatic unselfconscious innocence a dark denouement; in *Storm Song* the darkness gradually filters through, as a continuous invisible, quiescent force.

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