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Re-defining poetry through motion: A book review

Fátima Chinita

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Sarah Tremlett, *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*, Bristol (UK) and Chicago (USA): Intellect, 2021, 385 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78938-268-6 (paperback).

- 1 Sarah Tremlett's book *The Poetics of Poetry Film* (Intellect, 2021) is a much-needed incursion into the artistic world of the poetry film, a hybrid practice that has gained ground in the last decades, from the late 1970s onwards, especially with the adoption of video soon followed by digital cinema and the appearance of growingly affordable technical equipment. This form of self-expression is burgeoning in nowadays audiovisual artistic landscape, although academia has yet to recognize its full extension.
- 2 The concept of poetry film is used by Tremlett as an umbrella term that encompasses "film poems" and "videopoetry" (the latter for example in the sense of Tom Konyves who created the term in 2011, alluding to a combination of image, [oral, visual, or animated], text and sound used in a non-linear fashion, with the poet performing him- or herself in the film, and making use of superimposed graphics and 3D models). It also covers other terms created by different filmmakers and/or commentators in the field, such as "polypoetry" (Enzo Minarelli, 1987), sound poetry electronically delivered in a live performance possibly with images (154); "live cinema" (Mia Makela, 2008), a real-time live performance for an *in situ* audience involving other media and a mix of several genres (234); "visible verse" (Heather Haley), a hybrid type of videopoems

which prioritizes voice yet fusing it with images; “flicker film” (e.g., Jane Glennie), very short films lasting from 30 seconds to a minute and comprising about 1,500 images (214); among others.

- 3 The multiple terminology featured in Tremlett’s book is detrimental to the immediate full realization of what is at stake in this area of knowledge, especially since the book contents, although divided in three neat parts, constantly tends to mix practice and theory. However, Tremlett positions herself here more as author (filmmaker and poet) and curator than academic, which ultimately explains the form of the book. Although the blend of theory and practice can be confusing at times it is also an opportunity to get access to these visual artists’ own point of view, provided mostly through short interviews and first-hand opinions on their own work. As the cover of the book advertises, the volume counts “over 40 contributors”, all major figures in the field such as Alastair Cook, Dave Bonta, Gabrielè Labanauskatè, George Aguilar, Javier Robledo, Marc Neys, Peter Todd, Thomas Zandegiacomo del Bel, the duo Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas, Zata Banks, the Portuguese directors Alexandre Borges and Manuel Vilarinho, and the Spanish poet-filmmakers Alejandro Céspedes and Agustin Fernández Mallo. This practical contribution by other voices is undoubtedly one of the main assets of Tremlett’s *The Poetics of Poetry Film*.
- 4 But what is Poetry Film in general? According to Tremlett, it is a form of short films, usually under five minutes long (although some longer ones exist), which however, should not be confused with fictional shorts (41); it must contain some text, delivered orally or through writing-on-screen, but not necessarily a poem (any kind of information or story lyrically delivered suffices) (41); it has to contain a metaphorical dimension, resulting from the interpretation of the lyrical material by the filmmakers rather than presenting a mere illustration of it (53). Lastly, although it is imbued with an experimental character which accrues from its expressive and subjective nature, a film poem is not the equivalent of an experimental film, which is usually more abstract and lyrical in a broader and not necessarily subjective sense. Simple as they may seem to be, these guidelines can be confusing and less precise than they ought to be. For one, Tremlett starts the book with a historical review of the concept in which the reader is informed that the first few forays into this subject were made by poets and filmmakers who did not consider poetry as part of the equation.
- 5 The Futurist Marinetti, who coined the term “cinematic poem” (1916), envisaged a free and expressive combination of verbal language with images on screen (12); in the 1920s the Surrealist Man Ray termed his work of pure cinema *Emak Bakia* a “*cinépoème*” (literally, a film poem), while the Russian Formalist Viktor Shlovski commented that “plotless film is poetic film” (qdt. Tremlett 14). Later P. Adams Sitney, an expert on experimental cinema, described the “lyrical film’ as possessing the intense vision of the film-maker as first person protagonist” (*Visionary Film*, 1974, qtd. Tremlett 19). Sarah Tremlett herself considers films such as *Le Sang d’un poète* (Jean Cocteau, 1930) and *At Land* (Maya Deren, 1944) to be part of this lineage, although they lack a poem, revealing just how much the lyrical aspect is a key factor in this field.
- 6 Yet, on top of her own guidelines, Tremlett confesses to following Herman Berlandt’s stipulation that in the “film poem”, a term he coined in the mid-1970s, what matters is the inclusion of poetry *inside* the film and not the simple conception of a poetic film in general (9). Let it be noted that for Berlandt any poetic text is acceptable, including tone poems (which are simply composed of orally emitted sounds) and poems created

purposely to be featured in the films. In his essay “What Is a Poetry Film?” (2008), Berlandt states that “The poetry-film seeks a symbiotic relationship of image, music, and [textual] work; uses rhythms as well as the tempo of music and meter to maintain mood and continuity” (qtd. Tremlett 27). Yet, as Tremlett observes, these films tend to be non-linear and the majority is more lyrical than dramatic, focusing on state of mind (94) and mood (50). Even when a story is told, “it offers no resolution” (94) and “doesn’t seek to resolve issues, more to illuminate a subject” (94).

- 7 Also, film poem and videopoem may or may not be synonymous terms, as Tremlett admits: “[...] choosing between the terms videopoem or poetry film becomes problematic in the many films that overlap definition” (38). Although, as she claims, a film poem is usually more subjective and intimate, and the videopoems more prone to use technology graphically as a way to trigger strangeness (i.e., to create distancing effects), both things can happen in both circumstances (38) and there is no characteristic mode of production either.
- 8 As a result, an attentive reading of Tremlett’s *The Poetics of Poetry Film* is required, notably to extract crucial information which is scattered throughout the book, despite its division in three parts. Part One, dedicated to form and structure, outlines the chronological development of this artistic practice and its main elements; Part Two, more oriented towards the artists themselves and the modalities of their collaboration, if any, also includes two articles signed by Charles Olsen and Marisol Bellusci, writing on Spanish/Portuguese and Argentinian videopoets, respectively. Part Three focuses on some poetry film genres. The contents of these parts overlap at times and thus some films are mentioned and/or insightfully analysed in more than one section.
- 9 It is in Part One that Tremlett lists what, according to her, are the eight main components of a film poem: (1) theme; (2) subject (though which the metaphorical associations are conveyed); (3) voice (pertaining to the physical vocal or phonological properties as well as the authorial point of view); (4) genres and filmic approach (e.g., allegorical, visual); (5) resources employed by the medium (moving or static images, found footage, collages, photographs, film, CGI effects, graphs, paintings, sketches, animation, etc. (6) overall design (e.g., collection of films or single film); (7) editing and sound design (choices and techniques employed); (8) aesthetic effect (having to do with the visual tone and the soundscape, both related to the nature of the materials and their texture). One senses this has been apprehended empirically by Tremlett – justifiably so, given that she is a prolific artist in the field and co-creator of the poetry film Liberated Words Festival, whose website is very illuminating and merits a visit by all those interested in the subject: <https://liberatedwords.com/about/>.
- 10 Other key aspects follow the theoretical perspective of some artists whose influence Tremlett acknowledges: Herman Berlandt and William C. Wees, followed by Tom Konyves, George Aguilar, and Peter Todd (35). In their opinion the elements of voice, time, space, sound, and author are the most important ones to consider.
- 11 The “voice” in the film poem is first and foremost the point of view/ideas of the author (either the poet, the filmmaker, or both – working in collaboration or conjoined in the same person) followed by the filmic enunciation, which may contain – among other devices – oral text (human voice), written text (intertitles), and song. The human voice can be worked over and manipulated according to several different goals and meaningful artistic results. Time, which for some commentators such as William C. Wees is the most important element of the film poem and the very subject of this

cinematic category, is manifest in the films' lyrical non-linearity. Time may be conveyed in manifold ways, but Tremlett is most attracted by the coexistence of different temporalities, a phenomenon she calls "pervious time" and that she deems prevalent in the film poems. These different temporalities may eventually blur into one non-temporal image (88). Space is also very prominent, inasmuch as nowadays everything can be created directly in the image itself, making the screen the most important element to consider: "Where once a shot was assembled, now a screen is assembled" (Tremlett 96). All non-diegetic sounds form the soundscape, which for Marc Neys and Tom Konyves is the key element in a film poem. Music is generally present in film poems, although sound can also be used meaningfully in a lyrical way; more importantly, some films are sung, others have musical voice(s) or a beat that musicalizes the whole film (131-133).

- 12 On page 110, Tremlett comments that the visibility of film poems is "the most memorable aspect" of this filmic experience, an observation she does not attribute to any other commentator or artist, and which one feels is truly personal. Indeed, her own films are charged with texture, color and light, strongly emphasizing atmosphere — judging from the many examples she provides in the book. Although Tremlett does not highlight this phenomenon, some films she mentions may even be explicitly intermedial, such as *La danza de los pinceles* (2010, directed by Charles Olsen) and *4º Segundo Plieque: El Dentro/Fuera* (2016, written and directed by Alejandro Céspedes), as well as those that feature dance (e.g., *October 4th*, by Francesca Gironi, 2015). Music contributes in no small measure to the intrinsic intermediality of this cinematic variety which is necessarily made up of image and lyrical text. In truth, poets may figure prominently inside their own films, either as "themselves", as a fictional persona, or as a narrator. In many ways, this equals a performance, especially when they look straight at the camera. As Martina Pfeiler states: "One can never be sure behind which persona the poem may be 'hiding' or, if any" (*Sounds of Poetry*: 48, qtd. Tremlett 138).
- 13 In short, despite its hybrid design, in between a thematic monograph and a compilation work, Sarah Tremlett's *The Poetics of Poetry Film* is a fundamental reading on this subject and the author/artist/curator has much to be commended for, beginning with an exemplary and quite extensive list of poetry films that she watched attentively, and which form her main material of research for this book. All of them are mentioned in the text and compiled in the References section, forming an invaluable resource for any researcher or apprentice filmmaker. Also, the book ends on a section containing Examples of Leading Poetry Film Festivals (324-328) and the volume is amply illustrated. Although the book is notoriously lacking in more developed theory, it is highly recommended to all those interested in personal audiovisual expression, whether they are (already) poetry aficionados or not.

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AUTHORS

FÁTIMA CHINITA

Fátima Chinita is an Associate Professor at the Theatre and Film School of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute, in Portugal. She has a PhD in Artistic Studies (concluded in 2013) and did her post-doctoral research at the IMS – Intermediality and Multimodality Research Center at Linnaeus University, in Sweden, under the supervision of the late Professor Lars Elleström. She lectures on Intermediality and Inter-arts, Film Studies, and Audiovisual Narratives, and publishes regularly in English on said subjects. She is preparing a monograph on Intermediality.