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Poetry and Film: Cinema As Publication

1. Background

Cinema has always been an unusually derivative art form. It evolved first as an extension of the still photograph, and soon after, as an extension of the magic show; and it was not until D. W. Griffith and others recognized that theater and prose fiction, and especially the novel, offered a model for extending narrative development that the feature film became a possibility. Of course, commercial film has never really left these influences behind. Most screenplays are based on novels or parts of novels, and the screenplay itself is, as the word suggests, a derivation of the theatrical drama. But this derivative quality of cinema is not confined to the commercial feature. Even those forms of the motion picture that are generally understood as "critical"—that is, as offering critiques of the commercial feature and the audience that has developed for it—are comparably derivative, though the sources of these critical forms are different from the sources of the narrative feature.

The most obviously critical of cinema's various histories is what is usually called "avant-garde" or "experimental" film.1 And from the outset, this history has been particularly dependent on two cultural sources: the fine arts, particularly music, and painting and collage; and the literary arts, particularly poetry. While much early cinema, including commercially oriented cinema, was experimental in rather obvious senses, it was not until the 1920s that something like an avant-garde film movement developed.2 What is usually considered the first film Avant-Garde—Hans Richter, Man Ray, Henri Chomette, Germaine Dulac, Viking Eggeling, Oskar Fischinger, Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, Fernand Léger, Dudley Murphy, Marcel Duchamp, Rene Clair et. al.—was a result of fine artists exploring cinema as a new artistic tool for creating Dadaist, abstract, and/or surrealist works. But the influence of poetry was also present from very early on. In *Manhatta* (1921), often considered the first American avant-garde film, photographer/painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand intercut between modernist cinematography of Manhattan and intertitles made up of excerpts from Walt Whitman's "A Broadway Pageant" (1860) "From Noon to Starry Night: Mannahatta" (1860), and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856).3

When an audience formed for critical forms of cinema, first during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and the United Kingdom as the ciné-club movement spread from nation to nation, and in the 1940s and 1950s in Canada and the United States, as film societies (often emulating Frank Stauffacher's Art in Cinema in San Francisco and Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 in New York) proliferated, poetry became as important for filmmakers as the visual arts.4 While there were relatively few instances where previously published poetry was incorporated into films or where films made visual use of poetically arranged words (exceptions include *L'Etoile de mer* ["Star of the Sea," 1928], adapted by Man Ray from a poem of the same name by Robert Desnos, and Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* [1926], which intercuts between spiral designs and spirally-arranged sentences full of puns and wordplay), there was an increasing sense that certain approaches to the visual image and to the organization of visual imagery within a film were "poetic." In the

program announcement for the first Art in Cinema film series, for example, Stauffacher and Richard Foster (his collaborator, early on) included as their ninth category, “Poetry in Cinema.”5 The single presentation announced for this show was Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un poet* (“Blood of a Poet,” 1930), which was widely seen and influential, in part because it represented to many what poet/filmmaker James Broughton would later describe as “an unforgettable example: a poet making a poetic film!”6

The meaning of “poetic” as used in this Art in Cinema program—the final program included *Le Sang d’un poet*, *Jammin’ the Blues* (1944) by Gjon Mili, *Lot in Sodom* (1933) by John S. Watson and Melville Webber, and *Vormittagspuk* (“Ghosts before Noon,” 1928) by Hans Richter--and of “poet” in the Cocteau film for that matter, is quite general, and typical of the 1940s and 1950s. It refers neither to the act of writing poetry nor to poetic texts, but to a human sensibility that can take a wide variety of forms. Judging from the program notes, what constitutes the “poetic” in *Jammin’ the Blues* is the film’s graphic qualities, particularly its use of close-ups and evocative chiaroscuro; in *Lot in Sodom* and *Vormittagspuk* it’s the handling of symbolic details within a mythic tale and within a fantasy, respectively. And in *Le Sang d’un poet* it’s a combination of factors. Basically, there is a sense in the program notes that filmmaker poets, like literary poets, are creators of suggestive, complex visual images.7 What all these films have in common may be suggested by Luis Buñuel in “Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry,” a talk delivered in Mexico in 1958: “it was agreed that the theme [of this event] would be ‘cinema as artistic expression,’ or more concretely, cinema as an instrument of poetry, with all that this latter word holds of a sense of liberation, subversion of reality, a passage into the marvelous world of the subconscious, and nonconformity to the restrictive society that surrounds us.”8

While “poetic” remained relatively amorphous when used in connection with cinema, by the 1940s there were films that revealed a more particular connection with poetry. Sometimes, these films combined the earlier, more general sense of the filmmaker as a poetic sensibility or as a maker of poetic images with auditory readings of poems. Willard Maas’s *Geography of the Body* (1943), for example, is accompanied by the reading of a poem by British poet George Barker, and Ian Hugo’s *The Bells of Atlantis* (1953) was based on a prose poem from *The House of Incest* by Anais Nin, who narrates the film. This combination of poetic texts and imagery continued to be an option for filmmakers. James Broughton was both a prolific poet and an accomplished filmmaker. From *Mother’s Day* (1949) on, his films reveal what was understood in the 1940s and 1950s as a poetic sensibility, and by the 1970s Broughton’s films regularly included poetic narrations, often using previously published poems he himself read.9 Examples include *This Is It* (1972), *High Kukus* (1973), *The Water Circle* (1975), and *Erogeny* (1975). *High Kukus* and *The Water Circle* are particularly effective; both use rather minimal visuals—a small pond reflecting sky and trees and birds, the surface of moving water, respectively—as an accompaniment to lovely, childlike, rather Blakeian verses recited by Broughton. Both films evoke haiku (indeed, “High Kukus” is a play on the word) in their attempt to create meaning from deceptively simple, unpretentious combinations of visual observation and poetic statement.10

By the 1950s the idea that poetry and avant-garde film were closely related had become so commonplace that Cinema 16, then the most successful film society in North America, felt the need to host a symposium on “Poetry and the Film” for its membership.11 On October 28, 1953, Amos Vogel was host to Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, Maya Deren, poet/filmmaker Willard Maas, and the critic Parker Tyler, who

discussed the relationship between poetry and film. That those coming to the discussion from the world of avant-garde film understood there to be a clear relationship between film and poetry is obvious in Parker Tyler's opening directive to the participants: "On the one hand, there's the *theory* of poetry, its possibilities as such in the film medium, and on the other hand the *practice* of poetry, as concentrated in the avant-garde film." Tyler, Maas, Deren, and Vogel seem to have been sure that there was such a thing as a "poetic film" or a "film poem." However, throughout the symposium discussions, Thomas and Miller--the two dignitaries brought in from outside the avant-garde film context--seem unclear as to how these two art forms are related—despite Deren's brilliant distinction between "horizontal" and "vertical" meaning in literature and in film: horizontal, being the forms of meaning made clear through the developing narrative of a work, and vertical, the multiple *layers* of meaning that accrue in forms of expression normally considered poetic.12

Not only was poetry pervasive in the thinking of the generation of avant-garde filmmakers who came to maturity in the 1940s and 1950s and in those programmers who built audiences for alternative work, it was central for those chronicling this history. When P. Adams Sitney came to write his breakthrough *Visionary Film* (1974), he read the work of the filmmakers who were his focus—Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage . . .—as a modern extension of British Romantic poetry:

The earliest American films discussed here were called 'film poems' or 'experimental films' when they were first seen. Both names, like all the subsequent ones, are inaccurate and limiting. Of the two, the term "film poem" has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of the type of film discussed in this book to the commercial narrative cinema is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times. The film-makers in question, like poets, produce their work without financial reward, often making great personal sacrifices to do so. The films themselves will always have a more limited audience than commercial features because they are so much more demanding. The analogy is also useful in that it does not put a value on the films in question. Poetry is not by essence better than prose.

. . .

Just as the chief works of French film theory must be seen in the light of Cubist and Surrealist thought, and Soviet theory in the context of formalism and constructivism, the preoccupations of the American avant-garde film-makers coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics.13

By the late 1960s and the early 1970s filmmakers were less likely to think of their work as film poems even though Broughton and some others--Jonas Mekas is a particularly noteworthy instance--continued to incorporate their poetry into their films.14 There are a number of reasons for this. One of the more obvious is that once "foreign film" (and to a lesser extent, avant-garde/experimental film) had demonstrated to a substantial portion of the educated film-going audience that film was an art form, rather than just a set of entertaining distractions, the designations "filmmaker" or "film artist" developed enough cultural caché so that most filmmakers, and most apologists for avant-garde film, no longer felt the need to argue cinema's artistic importance by attaching it to more established and more respected cultural forms.

Nevertheless, a good many filmmakers have continued to see poetry, and specific poets, as crucial influences on their work.15 Quite recently, for example, I learned during interviews with Nathaniel Dorsky, Abigail Child, and Phil Solomon that all three see the work of John Ashbery as inspirational and some of their own films as closely related to Ashbery's poetry.16 And there continue to be instances where filmmakers uses their own poetic texts as central visual dimensions of films. A particularly noteworthy example is *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), for which Su Friedrich scratched a series of texts—edited versions of dreams recorded in a dream diary—word by word, into the film emulsion so that the texts themselves become the visual foreground and the photographed imagery the background of a psychodrama that expresses the filmmaker's internal struggle coming to terms with the conflict between her Roman Catholic background and her lesbianism. Friedrich's texts are arranged within *Gently Down the Stream* with considerable attention to their visual spacing and temporal rhythm; it is difficult not to see the texts as a poem. And the experience of watching *Gently Down the Stream* has something of the impact of a public reading, though in this instance, we do the "listening" *and* the reading.17

My particular focus in this essay, however, is a number of under-appreciated, relatively recent films that have used filmmaking as a means of *publishing* poetry. *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* (1982) by the Canadian Rick Hancox and *nebel* (2000) by the German Matthias Müller make available to viewers, in inventive and ethical ways, poems by recognized poets: specifically, Wallace Stevens' "A Clear Day and No Memories" and Ernst Jandl's *Nebel: Gedichte an die Kindheit* ("Poems to Childhood"). And Canadian Clive Holden, unconsciously following the lead of James Broughton, has provided a useful test case whereby we can compare the effectiveness of different media in delivering poetic texts. Holden's *Trains of Winnipeg* was published first as a CD, then as a book, and finally as both a 35mm film and a DVD. The idea of using cinema as a means of providing poetry with a new form of public life seems novel enough, and these recent films engaging (and academically useful) enough, to deserve discussion.

2. Film as Re-Publication: *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* and *nebel*

Between 1969 and 1994 Hancox made fifteen films (or at least made fifteen films currently in distribution at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto); *Waterworx [A Clear Day and No Memories]* is the eleventh of these films, several of which explore the cinematic possibilities of poetry and other forms of visual text.18 The Wallace Stevens poem that is the focus of *Waterworx* is not well-known, and it is brief enough to reprint here:

> No soldiers in the scenery,
> No thoughts of people now dead,
> As they were fifty years ago,
> Young and living in a live air,
> Young and walking in the sunshine,
> Bending in blue dresses to touch something,
> Today the mind is not part of the weather.

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.

"A Clear Day and No Memories" is full of paradox and complexity. The narrator's list of the memories he is not having--soldiers in the scenery; people now dead, as they were fifty years ago; and young women in blue dresses bending to touch something—*is*, of course, a list of memories: he cannot name these people and moments without remembering them, and without in fact creating in us a memory of them. And yet, there is another sense in which his statement may be true, for even if he *is* having thoughts about these past moments, he seems not to be in pain about them, or at least not in a depth and immediacy of pain that we might assume has been an inevitable part of these (seemingly wartime) memories, at least until this "clear day." Whatever the narrator has lost and has felt the loss of, "Today the mind is not part of the weather": that is, he seems to be able to be conscious of the weather, of being alive in a particular moment, without the mind's projection of painful memories into the moment.

"Today the air is clear of everything. It has no knowledge except of nothingness" adds a further dimension to our sense of the narrator's experience. Stevens' use of "nothingness" recalls the pun on "nothing" in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place": in the air there is, on one hand, *nothing* of the narrator's projected awareness, or the narrator's previous pain; but the air *is* full of an existential nothingness, a realization that nothing any longer makes sense, or at least that nothing makes the kind of sense it may have seemed to make before the loss. It is as if the very idea of recovering from the losses implicit in the narrator's memories, his no longer openly feeling the pain of these losses, renders life meaningless and this clear day, a "shallow spectacle." The particular "invisible activity" of thinking about what is no longer or what is, for the moment, for this *unusual* moment—unusual enough to be the subject of this reverie--no longer causing pain is a "sense" of things that is on one hand *sensible* (it is usually sensible to move past the pain of loss) and at the same time, *senseless*, since forgetting what one has lost, and the concomitant surrender to meaninglessness and nothingness, seems to create a psychic state where nothing is as it seems and everything is empty.

Stevens' use of "us" suggests further complexities. The air "today" flows over "us" without meanings, "as if none of *us* had ever been here before," revealing that the narrator is not "here" alone (wherever he is). But whoever we assume is with him, the use of "us" also includes the reader: even if we have not been wherever the narrator is, we *are* here now, "today," *here* reading Stevens' poem (and this narrator's psyche) once again, and over and over again, remembering how we understood it before and coming to a new understanding now.

Obviously, Wallace Stevens does not need Rick Hancox to re-present his poem: "A Clear Day and No Memories" is engaging, complex (obviously I have only begun to unpack the poem), complete, and even powerful in its own right. And yet, Hancox's presentation of the Stevens poem not only brings a relatively obscure poem to a new audience, but also visualizes it in a manner that both confirms its complex implications, and includes it within a cinematic work that has its own integrity and power. Indeed,

Hancox's project did not begin with the poem, but with the imagery. The water filtration plant we see in the film, the Harris Water Filtration Plant on Queen Street East in Toronto overlooking Lake Ontario, was a landmark in the neighborhood where Hancox was born and where he continued to visit his grandmother once the family moved west: "As a child, I was always told, 'Don't go down there by yourself!' My mother had wheeled me around there in the pram when I was a baby; she was a war bride who had emigrated from England, and I guess she looked out over this vast lake and imagined she was looking back home. She was very lonely. So it's a place that goes back to my infancy."19 Hancox knew he wanted to balance the evocative images with a text, as a way of adding reason into the mix (He had read Stevens' essay, "The Noble Writer and the Sound of Words," which argues that poetry is the best medium for bringing reason and the imagination together), and in time was drawn to this particular Stevens poem.

The structure of *Waterworx [A Clear Day and No Memories]* creates a suspense that delivers us to the poem; the film is half over before we even know that Hancox's mission is to present "A Clear Day and No Memories." The film begins with the poem's title, in computer generated text (throughout the film, the text is all in capitals), which fades out; it is followed by eighteen shots of what appears to be a large waterworks near a river, accompanied by what seems to be the sound of machinery operating behind the waterworks walls. The first of these shots, of the corner of a building with the grounds visible to the right of the building, is a twenty-one-second still shot, the only one of the eighteen (during the eighteenth shot, the camera moves to a railing overlooking Lake Ontario, stops, and is still for several seconds); the other seventeen are filmed with a camera moving horizontally or forward in stable tracking shots, presenting various views of the waterworks installation, accompanied by the persistent whine of machinery behind the walls and the sound of wind.20 The pacing of the shots and the waterworks itself are quite serene. No one is visible, and nothing is moving except apparently the wind. We also hear, first, with the opening image of the waterworks, some children playing in the distance (an evocation perhaps of Hancox's childhood experiences), and then, during the remainder of the waterworks shots, a radio playing in the distance; we hear, through static, bits of a romantic song sung by a woman, a nostalgic song the words of which are for the most part inaudible: we can decipher the phrases, "it's only the moon again" and "I'll never forget" (in fact, we are hearing Vera Lynn, "England's sweetheart" during World War 2, singing "White Cliffs of Dover"; Lynn was host the BBC radio program, *Sincerely Yours*, immensely popular with British overseas servicemen.). The song becomes audible as the camera begins to move, and is audible until the camera moves toward a railing by a walk overlooking Lake Ontario and, in the final shot, stops.

Immediately after the conclusion of the two-minute ten-second waterworks sequence, it is repeated: we see the exact same series of shots, accompanied by the whine of machinery and the radio static and song, heard exactly as before (this time we do not hear the sound of the children playing during the first shot and the wind), as the poem is presented, one line at a time, in a computer text that, after the first line of the Stevens poem, scrolls across the screen from left to right. After each line is presented, it fades out. The visual arrangement of the lines of Stevens poem is altered—lines 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 are presented as two lines—though the overall timing of Hancox's presentation approximates the experience of reading the poem. At the conclusion of the repetition of the waterworks sequence, there is a dissolve (just after we read "THIS INVISIBLE ACTIVITY") to a computer terminal. There is a momentary refocusing of the camera, and we can see, in this final, still shot, the reflection of the camera and the

filmmaker in the monitor, along with “THIS SENSE.”

On the most obvious level, the film’s structure evokes dimensions of the poem. As we read “A Clear Day and No Memories,” line by line, we are re-seeing, *remembering*, the images of the waterworks and the song; and of course, there is again, nothing in this scenery—certainly no soldiers—and the day is, as in the poem, clear. There seems no obvious meaning in the waterworks imagery, beyond perhaps a metaphor for repressed energy. The “spectacle” of the film, in other words, is shallow—nothing happens and seeing the waterworks sequence the second time adds nothing except our awareness that we are remembering, and remembering nothing much, certainly nothing that causes us pain—though the combination of image and sound does evoke a feeling of emptiness. The intersection of the experiences of poem and film is particularly emphatic at the line, “As if none of us had ever been here before,” since the viewer can hardly fail to realize that “we” *have* been *here*—at the railing of the walk overlooking Lake Ontario—before, regardless of who the “us” in Stevens’ poem refers to.

The dissolve to the computer screen and the reflection of filmmaker and camera doubles the implications of *this* shallow spectacle, *this* invisible activity, *this* sense—since “this” now refers simultaneously to the narrator’s remembering/non-remembering, the poet’s representation of it, the filmmaker’s activity in communicating his sense of the Stevens poem to us, and our viewing of the finished film. It also significant that we are looking at a computer screen (and throughout the second half of the film a computer generated text, typed presumably on the computer we see), which in 1982 was not yet a conventional film image. “This sense” seems at first to refer specifically to the new technology as confirming the distance between the present and the past. Of course, the “sense” of the computer screen is no more an answer to the complexity of passion and of loss, of pain, of memory than does the narrator’s reverie or the poet’s representation of it.

I read the film’s use of still, then moving, then once again still (but refocusing) camera, specifically in conjunction with the nostalgic music, as a dramatization of the way in which memory moves—the way it can *move us*, the way it changes through time— and as a way of confirming the paradoxical dimensions of memory evident in Stevens’ poem. When we are powerfully moved by traumatic past events, they are still alive in us and we are still alive in them. As we move beyond the power of these memories, as we re-focus, we are simultaneously freed from a position of stasis, of “living in the past,” *and* faced with a new stasis, a new emptiness into which new passion, in time, may flow.

The revelation of the filmmaker’s name in the final credits—it ends in *x*, just as does the unusual spelling of “Waterworx” in the title (though the film’s full title is nowhere indicated in the film proper)--suggests Rick Hancox’s empathy with the particular emotion revealed in the poem as well as his detachment from it as creator/film poet, just as Stevens’s writing “A Clear Day and No Memories” suggests a control and a detachment from the narrator’s engagement with *his* thoughts.21

On one hand, the *nebel* project was unusual for Matthias Müller. Though many of his films have evocative narrations and sometimes include bits of text photographed from books, he had never made a film dedicated to presenting a poet’s work. But, in another sense, *nebel* is a typical Müller film; over the past twenty years Müller has made a name for himself as one of the cinema’s premiere “recyclers”: that is, many of his films

are made by recycling material from earlier works (his own films, films recorded off of television, old home movies…) and further, his films are unusually full of references to earlier films. Not only does *nebel* "recycle" Jandl's g*edichte an die kindheit*, but the visual imagery Müller uses to accompany the Jandl poems is, in many cases, borrowed from diverse filmic sources: there are at least two shots from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for example, and a number of passages from home movies made by Müller's father when Müller was a child.

Nebel came about when Müller agreed to contribute to what was planned as a cinematic homage, "an episodic film about Jandl's work, containing different filmmakers' contributions."22 While the larger homage fell through, Müller finished *nebel*, which premiered at the Vienna Film Festival in 2000 shortly after Jandl's death. Originally Jandl was to read his poems in *nebel*, but in the finished film, the reading is by Ernst-August Schepmann. According to Müller, while Jandl is a recognized figure in Europe, *gedichte an die kindheit* was not known even to most of those who were familiar with Jandl's work. Further, until *nebel*, *gedichte an die kindheit* had not been translated into English (Peter Waugh provided Müller with the translation he used in his subtitles).

The Jandl poems, at least in translation (I do not read German), are deceptively simple, easy to read but full of subtle humor, irony, and mystery. The title poem for the series, or really, the second of two poems called "der nebel" (these are the second and third poems in the series), gives a clear sense of Jandl's method:

nebel (mist) is leben (life),	der nebel ist das leben,
if you start from the end.	wenn man es von hinten beginnt.
everyone wants to do that at times,	das möchte manchmal jeder,
to become a child again,	zu werden noch ein kind.
I'd like to, more and more,	ich möchte es immer mehr,
the older I get,	je älter ich werde,
and the closer and closer I get	und komme doch immer näher
to my mother the earth,	meiner mutter der erde
which might also mean:	was auch heißen kann:
my mother under the earth.	meiner mutter in der erde.

What begins as a straightforward statement of our desire, from time to time, to move against the flow of time, to become children again, takes on a somewhat macabre tone, even a humorously macabre tone, from the final lines. While the adult might dream of returning to childhood and the security and protection of the mother, the reality is that we *are* relentlessly moving forward to our future in Mother Earth, and into the same earth as the mother we long for is buried in. We *will* be reunited, but not in the sense we dream about—though there is a kind of "security" in this reunification too. The reality of what happens after death—whether, as Jandl dearly hopes in "the soul shepherd," the first poem in *gedichte an die kindheit*, "we return at death to somewhere else/to this one great soul body, to this immortal joy"—is lost in the mist. We *will* be reunited *under* the earth with our mothers, but whether any further form of reunification will occur, we cannot know. Indeed, the closer to the end we come, and the hungrier we may grow for some transcendent reunification, the more "in the mist" we can feel: as Jandl suggests in the first "der nebel," "over the distant things . . . [mist] lays itself down thickly./I can't see them/and often don't know/if they're really there at all."

Müller's approach to presenting Jandl's poetry is reasonably consistent throughout

nebel and, since there is no space for a thorough exploration of his film, I'll use his version of the second "der nebel" to suggest the nature of this approach. Of course, since my experience of *nebel* is with the English version of the film, which translates the narrator's reading into visual text (there is also a version without the visual text for German-speaking audiences), the translated lines of Jandl's poem are the visual foreground of the film, and the imagery, the background—the cinematic *interpretation* of what is read. Of course, even in the German version, the audience's attention would be primarily devoted to hearing the reading of the poems, and the visual imagery would be seen in relation to that reading. In the English version, the narrator's tone *is* consistently a part of our understanding of what we read: Schepmann's reading is full of humor and wit—in a sense, the opposite of Hancox's presentation of the Stevens poem by means of the neutral, deadpan computer text. And the imagery Müller uses to accompany the Jandl poems is far more diverse and expressionistic than the imagery used in *Waterworx*: there are many shots and the camera is generally hand-held in an informal manner. The result is a very different film experience of a poetic text. Nevertheless, Müller's method is as fully appropriate for *gediche an die kindheit* as Hancox's imagery is for the Stevens poem.

The first visuals we see during "der nebel" are shots from an old regular-8mm color home movie of a young boy and his mother playing ball at a beach. This home-movie imagery is followed by an image of a ball flying through the air, across the film frame, back and forth, which we slowly realize we are seeing first forward, as the ball flies from left to right, then in reverse as it flies from right to left, then forward again, and reverse again. That we are seeing alternating forward and reverse motion is confirmed by the soundtrack: the music, composed for *nebel* by Claus van Bebber, is played forward and in reverse in time to the movement of the ball. When we get to the end of the poem, and to the line "which might also mean: my mother under the earth," the image darkens and we see a brown-tinted image of a ball lying on the muddy ground among puddles, then a fade to black. The music fades out just before the final line of the poem.

The visual imagery used for "der nebel" functions on several levels. Most obviously, the use of home movies of a child and his mother visualizes our periodic hunger "to become a child again," and the increasingly frequent desire to reverse the flow of time is imaged in the forward and reverse of the ball and the sound. That is, Müller provides a clearly appropriate visual accompaniment to the Jandl poem and a metaphor for the essential hunger it expresses. More subtly, the fact that we are seeing what are clearly *old* home movies—the color has faded and there are scratches in the emulsion; the surface of the old movies has decayed—of *early childhood* is a way of combining the new and the old, or more precisely, of creating a cinematic emblem of the hopelessness of our desire to return to a past that is itself in a state of decay. And the movement out of the nostalgia for a (decaying) past into the present—imaged by the change in location from beach to muddy road—implicitly confirms the fear of death that creates our nostalgia: as Jandl says in "ein grosser wunsch" ("a big wish"—the twelfth poem in *gedichte an die kindheit*), "I want to go back/till I'm three years old again. Then I was fit as a fiddle/and afraid/only of every big dog." *Now*, the implication is, there is more to fear, *and* (suggests the wry tone of the poem) in some sense *less*, since what we fear is nothing more than the inevitable destination of everyone.

A third level of suggestion--one not self-evident within Müller's version of "der nebel" from the words, imagery, and sound—is clear to those who know Müller's other films, in the same way that Jandl's rumination on childhood must be more fully evocative

for anyone who is familiar with the evolution of his career. The home movies we see in "der nebel," and throughout *nebel*, were made by Müller's father, who died when Müller was a child. In fact, Müller did not know that his father had made home-movies, or at least did not remember, until the 1980s, long after his father had passed on. And then, he began to use them in his own work, to render the old new and embed within the new, implications of what had already passed. The imagery of the filmmaker and his mother, filmed (from outside the frame) by Müller's father, can be read as a prescient metaphor for the mother's and son's subsequent lives together without the presence of the father. This relationship of mother and son is the subject of what may be Müller's best-known, and most accomplished, film: *Alpsee* (1994)—the title refers to another home-movie made in 1964 by his father, also called "Alpsee" (after a lake in the Alps the family was visiting). Müller's *Alpsee*, which ends with imagery of his mother wading in the lake—dramatizes moments in the life of mother and son in a manner that, in its visual design, evokes (consciously, says Müller) Douglas Sirk's American films. The theme of *Alpsee* is the evolution of the boy's creative sensibility within the repression and boredom of a middle-class life. For those of us familiar with Müller's ouvre, *nebel* suggests the evolution of a filmmaker from child to the person who can make the film we are seeing, and who, like Jandl, can now wax nostalgic about the lost past, and be fearful about what is to come.

But most of all, Müller—like Jandl—has learned not only to find, but to *create* consolation within his work. In the tenth (untitled) poem in *gedichte an die kindheit* Jandl remembers how "dazzling and marvelous" Christmas was when he was a child, and how, "for more then forty years" he no longer "believed in any of that." But now, he explains, "things are beginning to change":

everything can suddenly
dazzle me
namely each commonplace
thing
I hold
nothing in my hands
after such a long time.
but it's not
as far to get there
as it used to be.
it becomes the whole
room
in which I'm imprisoned,
big and white and
dazzlingly marvelous.

The imagery Müller uses to accompany this particular poem, reflects the older man's new awareness of everyday things (a *new*, albeit in some senses imprisoned, awareness that in a sense returns Jandl to his childhood): Müller's imagery of simple things--a box of Christmas tree ornaments, a light bulb…--is as visually gorgeous as Jandl's memories and new awareness seem to be. Unlike the poet, however, Müller can actually present this gorgeousness to us directly. Indeed, Müller's film is consistently exquisite and inventive, and like many of his other films, much involved with cinema's

ability to model a more intense, appreciative perception of what is normally overlooked (visual details of our everyday surround, poems not widely known…) in response to the inevitable pressures of mortality. The first film Müller lists on his filmography is *Aus derFerne—The Memo Book* (1989), which focuses on his process of recovery from losing a partner to AIDS; and *Pensão Globo* (1997) follows a young man, losing strength under the onslaught of AIDS, as he revisits Lisbon and remembers (imagines?) earlier days. In the wake of both earlier films, *nebel* suggests/demonstrates simultaneously the spiritual effulgence within the everyday *and* the evolution within the filmmaker of a recognition that even our transcendent moments are fragile and momentary—and do not truly, definitively, erase the macabre question of mortality and our desperation to weather it.

Earlier, I called the Hancox and Müller films "ethical." One of the admirable dimensions of both films is their obvious commitment to the original poetry they recycle into their films. They don't simply *use*, however honorifically, the work of Stevens and Jandl; they take considerable pains to deliver the poems to us so that we can discover and experience the poets' originality and skill. That is, the filmmakers' creativity is in service of the poets' original contributions, and the (considerable) effectiveness of their filmic manipulations of image and sound is a function of the degree to which these manipulations complement and clarify the poetry. On the other hand, both films are distinctive, effective works in their own right. Both makers accepted the challenge of trying to turn poetry into film, and both met this challenge while producing impressive cinema, *without* sacrificing the work of others to their own. I would hope that their success can serve as a model for other filmmakers.

3. *Trains of Winnipeg*

In 2001, Clive Holden released (through Cyclops Press/Endearing Records) an audio CD, *Trains of Winnipeg* (produced in collaboration with musicians Christine Fellows and The Weakerthans [Jason Tait and John K. Samson]). A book of thirty-eight poems, *Trains of Winnipeg* (Montreal: DC Books, 2002) followed. And in 2004, a 35mm film, *Trains of Winnipeg: 14 Film Poems*, was completed, and will be released as a DVD. Each is a separate project, and each is a part of the larger "Trains of Winnipeg Project," which has its own website: www.trainsofwinnipeg.com.23 Each part of "Trains of Winnipeg" includes a somewhat different set of poems. The book includes far more poems than either the CD (13) or the film, but does not include "Transcience," "Grain Train," and "Wind" from the CD, or "Hitler! (Revisited)" from the film.24 And in each medium the poems that are included are in an order that bears no particular relationship to the order of the poems in the other media. All in all, however, *Trains of Winnipeg* in its various forms provides a test case for exploring the differences in impact and meaning when a particular poetic sensibility, and specific poems, are presented in various media.

As a book of poetry, *Trains of Winnipeg* is not particularly unusual. Holden is a capable poet, though as in any collection some poems are more interesting than others. The CD records the poet reading his work, accompanied by music—less common than a book of poetry, but not unusual either. The *film*, however, *is* unusual. Indeed, I know no other instance in the history of film, including the multifarious world of avant-garde/experimental film, where a poet has used the feature film as an avenue for presenting a collection of poems, or to be a bit more particular, where a feature film has

been seen as a means for doing a new kind of poetry reading that includes motion picture imagery (sometimes as complex as the words) choreographed to the reading itself, as well as sound effects, environmental sounds, and music.25 When I saw *Trains of Winnipeg* at the 2004 Flaherty Film Seminar, it seemed almost unique; and if there is some unevenness from film poem to film poem, the overall accomplishment and impact of the larger work are considerable.

Like a good many books of poetry (and like Holden's CD), the film version of *Trains of Winnipeg* combines individual poems in an order that, on one hand, feels quirky, and on the other, more or less coherent--an autobiographical narrative (most of the poems are narrated by Holden) that has something in common with Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1992) and Alan Berliner's *Intimate Stranger* (1991).26 Each "film poem" (Hancox's term for the film versions of the poems) has its own visual structure, and the fourteen poems are arranged within the larger, formal structure of the film: each poem is succeeded by a fade out and a moment of looped imagery set within a tiny frame-within-a-frame in the lower-right-hand corner of the image; the looping image continues until we hear the sound of railroad cars coupling, and see the title of the next poem. The implicit parallel between moving pictures and railroad travel, a commonplace since the invention of cinema, is evoked and used not only to suggest a shared technological history, but an image of the geography of Canada created and held together in Winnipeg, at the center of the Canadian nation, by the railroad.27 The collection begins with ("Love in the White City"), ends with ("Trains of Winnipeg"), and is punctuated by ("Saigon Apartments" and "Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel") poems that relate to Holden's life in Winnipeg, which becomes the implicit here and now from which the poet flashes back to memories of his early life in the West, in and around Victoria, British Columbia, his student days back East (at Concordia University in Montreal), and more recent visits to and from his British Columbian parents.

There is no space here to discuss all the poems in *Trains of Winnipeg*, but some comment on what for me are three of the more impressive of the film poems—"18,000 Dead in Gordon Head (A Found Film)," "The Jew and the Irishman," and "Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel"—might provide a sense of Holden's approach, range, and style. In "18,000 dead in Gordon Head (A Found Film)" and "Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel," though this is not true for all the poems in the film, the soundtrack of the film version is identical to the audio version on the CD; that is, the audio version seems to have been used as a score against which to organize the visuals.

"18,000 Dead in Gordon Head" is the longest poem in the book (the 4_-page prose poem is followed by eight stills on four pages) and on the CD, and the second longest in the film.28 In all three cases "18,000 Dead" is positioned near the beginning: it is the third track on the CD, the second poem in the first section of the book, and the fifth film poem. The printed version of the poem is divided into four sections. The first explains how some film Holden had shot in 1985 was thrown into the garbage by an angry, pregnant roommate; the long second section and the brief fourth section focus on Holden's witnessing the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl (he heard the shot and saw the girl fall as he was arriving at a friend's house, and ran inside to call for an ambulance); and the third section briefly presents six violent events that Holden witnessed during the months after the murder: walking along the street, he stepped in a pool of blood; some time later he saw a woman being hit by a car; he witnessed a knife fight between two teenage boys; saw a man jumping in front of the subway; came upon the body of a man

who had jumped from the upper level of a mall, lying dead on the floor; and finally witnessed a motorcycle accident that killed a man. The first, second, and fourth sections of the text version of "18,000 Dead in Gordon Head" are made up of relatively brief, page-wide paragraphs; the fourth is organized so that the six brief stories are in two vertical columns.

In the CD and film versions this division into sections is less obvious, though the tonality of the reading of the opening section, where Holden explains how his film was thrown into the garbage, does distinguish it from subsequent sections. Holden indicates that during the period he is talking about he never got mad, even when his roommate, who was "a *tester*," tested him: his concluding comment on this situation ("then—she—threw my film in the garbage") is wryly amusing, despite the somewhat grim music on the sound track. And it reveals that, whatever the narrator's pretences of self-control, he was serious about his art. This opening provides background and emotional contrast for the body of the film poem, and it marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of Holden as an artist/filmmaker.

Holden explains that while he was never able to finish that original film, he had made a VHS record of the material for editing purposes, which he found nearly twenty years later: it is what we are seeing as we listen to him. Holden had attempted to create something like a memorial of the murder and of his witnessing of it: he filmed "the split-levels, service stations, and the air raid siren over the old Gordon Head store" (Gordon Head is a suburb just to the north of Victoria, British Columbia), as well as his friend Andrew doing oil pastels of the crime scene; "I even lay on my side on the road where she died." As Holden tells the story of the murder and its aftermath, and ruminates on his struggle during the days after the crime to know how to feel about the girl's death in a world where any young person is a "witness" to 18,000 television murders by age sixteen, we see the video imagery of the original footage, presented by means of continual looping: a second or two of imagery will be looped so that we see it several times, sometimes at one speed, then at an accelerated rate. The sound track (by Christine Fellows, Jason Tait, and Emily Goodden) is also looped, so that we hear much the same musical phrasing and sound effects over and over, though not in specific synchronization, or even at the same rate, as the looping of the imagery.

Holden's use of looping throughout much of *Trains of Winnipeg* has a variety of effects within different contexts, and several effects on the experience of this particular film poem. According to Holden, looping seemed a way of bringing something like rhythm and rhyme into the experience of film, and in general the various rhythms created by the looped imagery work in subtle syncopation with the rhythms of the poetic phrasing of the texts themselves and of his reading of them.29 Each passage of looped imagery is something like a line of poetry, a line defined by the observation of particular details and textures and other formal qualities within which we see these details, and by the specifics of the loop's intersections or lack of them with the music, sound, and narrated poetry. In most cases, what we see, over and over, relates directly to what we are hearing, though there are also instances where this isn't true, at least so far as I can tell. Overall, the narrated text on the sound track is the foreground, and the looping is, like the music, a form of accompaniment, though the nature of the looped material provides another dimension, since it is something like an index of the original experience, or at least of its emotional aftermath.

In "18,000 Dead in Gordon Head," the looping suggests both the intensity of the original experience of witnessing death (an intensity that commercial films have often

suggested by slow motion) combined with the narrator's obsession in returning to this moment in the following days and months, and, presumably years later, in the poem we are hearing/seeing. The looped imagery moves in and out of "synch" with particular moments in Holden's reading of the text of the poem. This is evident, for example, when Holden reads "then—she—threw my film in the garbage": at the sound of "then" the image changes to a pulsing reminiscent of a heartbeat, and changes again at "she," and still again—in this case to a looped image of the end leader on a Super-8mm filmstrip with its red stripe in the middle—at "threw my film in the garbage." The timing of the visual changes provides a confirmation of the emphasis in Holden's delivery, and the red stripe on the filmstrip not only suggests that the narrator "sees red," but leads into the story of the murder, which we begin to hear about as Holden cuts to a whited-out, scarlet-framed abstract image. When the poet describes his lying on his side in the street to film where the victim lay dying, we are seeing a side view of the same suburban street that we saw earlier in the film, but now this location has a more particular and complex meaning: it is where a death occurred and where the poet/filmmaker first tried to come to terms with this death in his art. The sound is also coordinated to the reading; during moments when the narrator is recalling moments of especially powerful stress, the sound—it evokes saws tearing through wood—becomes more abrasive.

This imagery is clearly several generations away from an original film record of the murder. What we are seeing is a reworked videotape of a Super-8mm film shot a year after the murder; the videotape was made crudely by projecting the Super-8mm film onto the wall of Holden's apartment and recording it with an early Camcorder. When Holden re-discovered the VHS and realized its potential, he refilmed the video, focusing especially on the glitches in the original Super-8mm material created when the camera was turned on and off, and digitally enhancing particular frames and moments. The resulting film poem materializes the distance between now and then in a way the textual version of the poem cannot. It provides evidence of the original crime scene in all its banality—throughout the looped material, people are walking into and out of the Gordon Head Store, and traffic is moving along the streets—and of Holden's return to this location to make the film at a later moment in his life, *and* of the decay of Holden's memory of the incident: the faded color—much of the imagery evokes watercolor painting—the glitches within the imagery, and the looping itself provide an analogy to the way memory modifies what it retains.

"18,000 Dead in Gordon Head" embodies the development of Holden's filmmaking over a period of years. This aesthetic evolution, which has resulted in a film that externalizes, or at least expresses, the pain of the original moment, also suggests a process of emotional maturation on Holden's part. The original feelings of shock that followed the murder seemed at the time unremarkable to the narrator; he felt "the same deadness I always felt," despite the fact that those around him can see that he has been traumatized. Even later, around the time when the original footage was thrown away, we know that the narrator was in the habit of suppressing his feelings: "I never got mad back then. I was proud of it. I used to say I could always see the other person's side of the story." But the slow, patient pace of the film poem, its success in returning us to that horrific moment, and to the several grisly events the narrator witnessed in subsequent months, reveals, once and for all, the depth of the trauma and confirms the filmmaker's early need to simultaneously recognize the power of this extended moment of his life and put it behind him, first, by taking the small positive action of putting a blanket over a dead motorcyclist—in the description of the film poem on his website, Holden calls this

the “small, positive action” that “broke the spell” of this period for him (in all the previous contacts with violence that occurred after the murder of the young girl, Holden was either powerless to do something or was dealing with his own shock)—and then, years later, *twenty* years later, by confining the incident of the murder and the violent incidents that followed it within the aesthetic structures of a poem and then a film poem.

Also implicit within the gap between the original crime and Holden’s transformation of his memories of it into poetry, is his engagement with the history of independent cinema, which seems to have, over time, revealed to Holden possibilities for working cinematically with the particular of his life. At various moments, *Trains of Winnipeg* evokes particular films and filmmakers. For example, the long montage of trains that concludes the film (it’s the title film poem of the collection) is a (conscious, according to Holden) allusion to Bruce Baillie’s *Castro Street* (1966). And the looping that is so fundamental to the visual structure of “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” and so much of *Trains of Winnipeg* is reminiscent of the work of Vancouver-born Canadian, David Rimmer, whose breakthrough films of the late sixties and early seventies often used looping as a fundamental figure of style.

“The Jew and the Irishman” is as autobiographical as “18,000 Dead,” but quite brief. In the film it is the second poem after “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” and its position is significant. The sixth film, “Saigon Apartments,” continues elements of “18,000 Dead”: it provides glimpses of human pain and struggle seen outside an apartment house by lovers together inside. After the following moment of auditory train coupling, seen with a looped image of a man inspecting a small plane, “The Jew and the Irishman” changes the trajectory of the film. In it Holden remembers his father becoming furious at guests of the family at a cocktail party when they enjoy a bigoted joke: “my father’s face turned from its usual descended black cloud to charcoal red, his mouth opening at last like a thin hidden vent in a volcano, and he actually said something, and they were burned by his words. . . .” Holden recalls that after the “White Anglo Saxon Protestants and their reasonable facsimiles” left, he stood looking at the moon with his father who was “smiling like I’d never seen.” The father’s refusal to stand for one more conventional Irish and Jewish joke, “after twenty years of those jokes,” is a triumph, both for him and for Holden (“and I loved him”)—and confirms the possibility of active response to the violence and pain the earlier poems review.

The visual focus of the film poem is a full moon. The moon is seen first through a series of superimposed diagrams (as Holden recalls the guests asking him about his plans for the future); then through panning shots of landscapes and shots from inside a car, as he remembers how he wrecked his first car on a utility pole (when he says the word “wreck,” the frame is divided into quadrants in each of which two hockey players collide). When his father responds to the joke, the moon is superimposed with red-tinted imagery of a pulp mill smokestack plume; and, as the guests “filtered away,” with a lighthouse, with a looped shot of sea birds flying, and finally, as Holden and his father “gazed together at the free moon,” with a shot of a single bird (the shot reveals spice marks and other glitches).

Given the overall trajectory of Holden’s reading of the poem on the sound track, the persistence of the moon, which “wasn’t owned by any of them,” suggests the possibility of freedom and creativity within any social situation and as the underlying reality of life. That the last two images of the film are of birds confirms the father’s implicit flight from social marginalization and the son’s admiration for his father (this is already clear when, just as Holden is about to remember the telling of the joke, he remembers his “tall,

beautiful father" listening to the party conversation, and we see the moon superimposed with two shots looking up through trees). The combination of the moon, the single bird, and the evidence of the surface of the filmstrip in the final shot (as the film ends, this same image is seen glowing in color negative) suggests that this moment, and this dimension of Holden's father, have helped to lead him into an artistic life, to a life of personal expression, and to the evocation of the memory we have just seen.

The eleventh poem in *Trains of Winnipeg: Fourteen Film Poems* is "Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel." Unlike those I've commented on, this brief (2_ minutes) piece is not an autobiographical flashback, but a brief portrait of an award-winning bus driver, Les Brandt (Brandt is also an artist, and Holden's website includes access to three of his cow paintings), filmed on a trip to Thompson, Manitoba, several hundred miles north of Winnipeg, at the end of the main road north.30 In this instance the filmed imagery and the music are directly related to the text Holden reads: when he says "Les," we see an image of Les, and the imagery in the film was recorded on the route described in the text. At times Holden wittily interweaves his text and his imagery—when the text describes how a "blood-drunk Manitoba mosquito" weaves across the road in front of Les's bus and is transformed by the windshield into a "circle of red, the size of a Canadian dime," we see a close-up of Les's uniform sleeve and a circular patch indicating his "Safety Years," just below another "Master Driver" patch that commemorates "one million miles"—and throughout the film Holden carefully matches the tone of the read text with the tone of the imagery and his cutting. In "Bus North to Thompson" Holden once again uses film to provide what a poem cannot: the poem can evoke the *kind* of man Les Brandt is, but the imagery introduces him to the viewer as a particular, recognizable person, and one of the people who make Winnipeg—as Holden describes it on his website, "entirely flat and the coldest city on earth"—livable, somehow quintessentially Canadian, and *home.*

Trains of Winnipeg: Fourteen Film Poems takes viewers on a journey into Canada and into Clive Holden's memory. Like a conventional feature film, it develops a story about an identifiable character and moves through a variety of emotional states, from his exhilaration as a happy child ("Nanaimo Station") to his respect for his parents' longevity and high spirits ("Condo" and "Unbreakable Bones"), though the experience is more various and less confined to narrative than a commercial melodrama is.31 The structuring of Holden's story and the particulars of its presentation reveal continual, often inventive intersections of poetic convention and avant-garde film history, but the experience of the film feels comparatively open. Like *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* and *nebel*, *Trains of Winnipeg: Fourteen Film Poems* demonstrates a new (or at least refreshes an older) option for both poets and filmmakers—as well as for audiences interested in exploring the full range of film experience.

Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories) is available in the United States from Canyon Cinema (www.canyoncinema.com; 415-626-2255) and in Canada from Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (www.cfmdc.com; 416-588-0725); *nebel*, from Matthias Müller (mueller.film@T-ONLINE.DE); and *Trains of Winnipeg* from Holden (www.trainsofwinnipeg.com).

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