

VERSES IN THE CELLULOID:  
POETRY IN FILM FROM 1910-2002,  
WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF THE FILM-POEM

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## Summary

Poetry is not a new phenomenon in film and television. It is consistently treated as such because its presence is not common; poetry is repeatedly viewed as a 'special element' in a production. However, visual poetry is becoming less and less of an oddity in modern-day films. This thesis, which surveys multiple intersections of poetry and cinema, places particular emphasis on the most specific and direct use of poetry within film: 'film-poems'. Numerous poets and filmmakers today have made film-poems, particularly poet Tony Harrison. These works are important because they are revolutionary in their combination and application of the two media: a film-poem is a simultaneous collaboration of writing, shooting and cutting, which makes for extraordinary, sense-inundating viewing. Their qualities, not to mention their evolution, have escaped formal study for the most part, and fully deserve critical exploration.

The Harrisonian film-poem heavily involves both filmmaker and poet in most aspects of production. Yet there are discrepancies that emerge when using the term 'film poem'. Other classifications link the words to the arena of avant-garde cinema. Avant-garde films might contain some verse, but mainly they depict a theme or story through a cinematically metaphorical means, using images as those metaphors, using cinematic devices as poetic devices. A study of the avant-garde and a language of cinema that is called 'poetry' itself (by some) is another focus of this thesis.

I also concentrate on the cinematic placement of poetry in feature films. When films cite poetry, they immediately take on a new dimension, a significant deeper layer to their own story lines. Similarly, the poem also gains a significance that will link it with a scene and theme in the film, and the film's specific images. I begin this thesis with a study of this kind of citation, discussing the prospect of poetic presence in film, and proceed to discuss the development of film and poetry, which inevitably leads to its most significant intersection: the film-poem.

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## NOTE ON ACCOMPANYING VIDEOTAPE

Accompanying this thesis is a 63 minute-long series of clips on a three-hour videotape. These are clips from film productions I cover at length. Its order follows the order of the material in each chapter. Please note that excerpts from *Manhatta* (Sheeler and Strand, 1921) and 'Arctic Paradise' (Molyneux, 1981) were not available for extraction on this videotape. Scenes and stills from the following films are included:

### CHAPTER ONE

*Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955): 2 scenes, 1 still

*Bull Durham* (Shelton, 1988): 2 scenes

*The Innocents* (Clayton, 1961): 1 scene

*Once Upon a Honeymoon* (McCarey, 1942): 1 scene

*The Daytrippers* (Mottola, 1996): 1 scene

### CHAPTER TWO

*Night Mail* (Watt and Wright, 1936): 1 scene

'Metroland' (Mirzoeff, 1973): 1 scene

*Runner* (Molyneux, 1977): 1 scene (no introductory title available)

'A TV Dante: The Inferno Cantos I-VIII' (Greenaway, 1988): 1 scene

### CHAPTER THREE

'Xanadu' (Flitcroft, 1992): 1 scene

'Twice Through the Heart' (Lowthorpe, 1991): 2 scenes

*Birmingham is What I Think With* (Pickard, 1991): 2 scenes

'Killing Time' (Hill, 1999): 2 scenes

### CHAPTER FOUR

'The Big H' (Hays and Anson, 1984): 1 scene

'Loving Memory Part Two: Mimmo Perella non è piu' (Symes, 1987): 1 scene

'V.' (Eyre, 1985): 1 scene

'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' (Kidel and Harrison, 1994): 7 scenes

*Prometheus* (Harrison, 1998): 1 scene

'Crossings' (Thomas, 2002): 4 scenes



## INTRODUCTION

Poetry isn't normally a creative idea which gets directors going. Like most of us, film makers probably read poetry at school and go on to forget that it even exists.

- Film Critic Michael Thomson <sup>1</sup>

Poetry on film has a greater penetration or popularity than poetry on paper, in terms of the number of impressions.

- Film Producer Andrew Holmes <sup>2</sup>

### What is a Film-Poem?

Film-poems are a very specific breed of artistic creation, but film-poems are completely unspecific as well. Before a clear definition of the term can be reached, we must first ask what a film-poem has been in the past, explain how the term was forgotten and disused, and then rejuvenated to mean something new, so that it evolved into a controversial expression today. In a brochure for a programme at London's Royal Festival Hall, in 1996, a question was proposed:

There are poems and there are films and there are poems which are said to have shape and movement like a film and films which are said to have a poetic quality. But is there a new art form which combines qualities traditionally associated with poetry and/or film and manifests itself in the form of one or the other but which can be truly said to be a unique hybrid of the two? Does the film-poem really exist? (Maclennan, 3). <sup>3</sup>

No answers are provided in this pamphlet that directly answer the question, but the material that came out of the symposium, and subsequent work studied suggests that there is indeed a movement of film and a movement within poetry that, respectfully, embraces the other field and tries to absorb it. This thesis is concerned with exploring the intricate and important

combinations of the fields, with making clearer the associations that exist with the over-used but ensnaring term, film-poem.

The first step is to shed light on the term's usage. When using the term 'film-poem' there are immediately two definitions for it. One is the 'experimental', 'avant-garde' style of film, and this construction of the term had been used, albeit sparingly, for roughly thirty years, from the end of the 1920s until the late 1950s (Sitney, 1979, vii-viii). This sense of the film-poem has come to be recognised as a form of 'no-budget' cinema (Todd, 1997, 1), a member of the world of art-house cinema, or called a 'poetic cinema' by some.

The other definition of the term is one I will use more often throughout this thesis, in which poetry and cinematics are combined. I will call this the 'Harrisonian' explanation of the phrase, based on the film work of English poet Tony Harrison. This work has also been called, at various stages of its development, the 'film/poem' or earlier, 'poetry film'. During the course of this study I will seek to pinpoint the differences between the two interpretations, explore why the term is used to refer to such widely disparate forms of film. I will also observe the placement of poetry in feature films, where the literal presence of verse affects the development of a film. Most importantly, I will attempt to explain how one version of the film-poem has helped to define the other. My emphasis is not purely but more heavily based on the Harrisonian definition and its steady development, but it is clear that the two forms of film have influenced each other, whereas 'avant-garde' directors and producers have cited the impressions made by such works as Peter Symes' series of film-poems called *Words on Film* or any one of Harrison's pieces. The distinction between these two interpretations of the term is one that is obvious and reasonably easy to detect, but the critics of literature and cinema have not managed to make that identification a priority, preferring to establish a grey area when considering avant-garde film. I

hope to cast light on this elusive movement, which is on the verge of developing into a genre, but unfortunately has been treading on this threshold for some time.

New and comparatively undeveloped, film-poems sometimes abide by certain formulae that permit them to function as individual works. These processes have been continually changed and modified, and now a certain standard exists within the Harrisonian film-poem. The modern-day film-poem conforms to a number of rules, but there are unlimited variations. During the evolutionary process that has resulted in the creation of these guidelines, works known as film-poems have taken the form of everything from documentaries to animated shorts, all of which throughout the century involved syntheses of cinematic images and poetry at their heart. This thesis is concerned mainly with discovering the roots of the film-poem, and exploring the relationship between film and poetry over the last eighty to ninety years. Since nearly the dawn of cinema as an art form or as a medium of story telling, poetry has been present in film. From the early days of silent cinema (roughly from 1911), I will track the placement of poetry in film, and build up to its ultimate combination, the modern-day film-poem, culminating with an explication of a recent full-length example.

Film-poems do not simply use a poem to accompany a film, or an image to illustrate a poem, as researcher William Wees writes (1999, 1). Wees refers to everything from student and amateur film to the simple footage of a poet reading, and his essay seems to suggest that the poetry-film could include anything, as he states that,

the history of poetry in our century has taught us that any verbal expression can be turned into poetry, and 'poetry-films' vividly illustrate this modern concept... there is virtually no limit to what can be made cinematic (1997, 1).

Indeed it would be difficult to find an argument to counter Wees: in one form or another most material, whether tangible or intangible, literal or metaphorical, can be expressed visually. But that does not mean that any indirect or artistic visual photoplay becomes a 'poetry-film' or a film-poem. Wees' claim implies the exclusion of nothing and the acceptance of anything, which cannot be the case when considering a genre.

### The Harrisonian Model

Tony Harrison is an English poet from Leeds, whose theatre and film works are renowned and respected. Most of his television work has been documentary, including pieces like 'The Blasphemers' Banquet' (1989) and 'The Shadow of Hiroshima' (1995), and he is still the only poet to create a true feature-length film-poem (*Prometheus*, 1998).

The modern (Harrisonian) film-poem is the simultaneous collaboration of filmmaker and poet in practice; the product of this collaboration is a poem and a film which achieve a very specifically oriented type of match. Writing and filming often actually accompany each other; one means of expression does not, as is usually the norm in practical filmmaking, entirely come first. Typically, the screenplay precedes the film itself, sometimes by any number of years, and the film is realised when production staff finally decide what is possible to translate on celluloid. This still happens to an extent in the creation of a film-poem, but not necessarily with a precise screenplay. Budgets, schedules, time constraints, and personnel availability are persistent concerns of any film production, but the script is usually what binds them all together. Before an actor or director, for example, agrees to work on a particular piece, they almost infallibly ask to see the script. Alfred Hitchcock's famous remark about the three factors most important in the making of a film ('the script, the script and the script') very conspicuously does not usually apply

in the making of a film-poem. In the numerous Harrisonian film-poems studied in this thesis, there was often no pre-formed script; there was always an idea that can lend itself to poetry. But initially, the pure collaboration between poet and filmmaker, in this particular system, relies mainly on the reconnaissance mission both artists will undertake. Once an idea is established as a certain subject for the film-poem (and this can be a long and drawn-out procedure), locations are selected, the film-crews film while the poet writes, and the poet writes while the film-crews film (not necessarily or literally at the same moment in time). Both artists may continue to produce raw material until both are convinced that they have a malleable framework, and then both poet and filmmaker (often together) step into the editing suite. Writing is still done at this stage, to study and fine-tune the project and of course to synchronise verse and image correctly. Most of the time, more filming (within reason) will then be necessary when there is an inconsistent match, or when any other ideas occur. This process is a basic description of one method of constructing the film-poem, which will be more fully documented in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis. There are many other methods, and Harrison, the main proponent of this system, himself slightly diverges from it during the making of *Prometheus*, but this is probably one of the most interesting to study.

The above process is a simplification, based on various accounts of film-poem-making. It has elements of traditional styles of film production, both Hollywood-esque and European, but also involves a new approach to filmmaking: that which is done without a script and involves a technique of writing while filming and cutting. These projects are a true collaboration of artists. The creation of both aspects of the project are done at the same time and people are forced, though willingly, to work closely with one another. Soon, these aspects merge to become one

work-in-progress, and the fields of film and poetry seem less and less as separate entities as the project nears its completion.

'Writing while cutting': this phrase describes the close association the editor of the film-poem (and director, and possibly other members of a film crew) should have with the poet. Interestingly, the film-poem is not a collaboration of a poet with only a director, but with a team of filmmakers, since the product to be crafted will be affected by many people from the production staff. As Peter Symes, the producer of many film-poems, claims, 'the poet needs to understand the editing process the best of all the processes of filmmaking, since his job is almost the most similar to the editor's job' (interview, 1997). Symes is referring to, and supporting, the process of the film-poet supervising and perhaps co-editing his or her own material for the finished version of the film-poem. Film-poets must consider something in the craft of the film-poem that most writers of poetry do not have to consider; they must decide whether the subject of their verse is *likely* to be fit for film. Intensely far-fetched metaphors, abstract intangible imagery, or other fairly 'unfilmable' verses (for example, with very complicated and irregular rhythms and metres) may not be appropriate for a film-poem, no matter how much the poet loves them or how fine they might appear in print. But the other constraint a film-poet must contemplate is the limitation of a film's budget, the accessibility of a desired site for shooting and time/circumstantial constraints. A poet working with pen only would never need to consider these issues. Everything depends on the possibility of commitment to film, on the inspiration as a feasible, useful part of a visual medium. Therefore, 'cutting' is also done in the poetic sense, with entire sequences at risk if they present themselves as too difficult or impossible to shoot. An example of the drastic measures of poetic cutting for the sake of the film-poem will be studied in

this thesis as well, citing Harrison's television work and also the only feature-length mainstream release of a film poem to date, *Prometheus*.

Then again, the factor of the likelihood of 'filmability' is also one of the film-poem's strengths in addition to its function as a source of frustration and heartbreak for many a film-poem-maker. The challenge in matching an image to an eclectic verse, or verse to a correspondingly striking image, can be a valuable asset to the film-poem artisan, since it will force him or her to stretch the boundaries of a film-poem's previously accepted conventions. Yet this process of selection, of choosing an appropriate visual and verbal vehicle, is what many critics identify as a problem once a selection has been made. Some say this quality contributes to limiting the possibilities of the imagery of poetry, since one viewer's inferred image might differ radically from the one we are given to watch. Tony Cash, in his article 'Video Verses' (1995), explains:

Any attempt to depict verse is fraught with danger. At the very least it narrows the listener's range of imaginable pictures. At worst it may distract attention from the spoken word. The problems are particularly acute at any cut or transition from one image to another (17).

Many critics have agreed with, or preceded, Cash's estimation, including those that argue that the images in film-poems are only fragmentally related to the verses, forcing them to ask 'Why are the images never appropriate all the way through?' (Richards, 1986, 12). Yet, over the last ten years, film-poets have been making major adjustments to the way in which they film/write their material, which has resulted in some much more densely arranged, specifically tailored work. They have sought ways to make those images appropriate, or better yet, more thought provoking and imaginative. So, even in the most difficult of metaphorical or poetic situations, modern film-

poems can usually find a way to join words and images in an effort to make them seamless and simultaneous, although instances persist where the critics of the restrictive nature of film-poems would be justified in their critiques. In spite of their relative age, this is still a fledgling art form.

Sometimes a film-poem can be a vehicle for poetic confession. Provided the level of comfort and familiarity between filmmaker and poet, film-poems may expose more emotion or sensibility than can either a poem or a film on its own. Therefore, honesty and trust are essential on the set of a film-poem, as well as mutual dedication and willingness to compromise. There is less room for shyness, squeamishness, or private musing in a film-poem's environment. Most accounts of the making of a film-poem recount intense reaction and serendipitous occurrences, sometimes surprisingly coincidental.<sup>4</sup> This kind of open, communicative environment invites confession, although this is not to state that every film-poem's genesis was peaceful and poetic in itself, since many times confrontation and disappointment were at their root. For example, some accounts of working with uncompromising artists have led to quite a lot of strain on set, regardless of the levels of honesty and trust the filmmakers achieve.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, the film-poem will 'generate associations, connotations and metaphors', which function in each media individually but also manage to combine to achieve a unique effect. The poetic devices, which also become filmic devices, reach a level of maturity which 'neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own' (Wees, 1997, 1). This statement is accurate in its consideration of the dual nature of the film-poem, which should never be read as written text without having seen the film. The work should be absorbed via both media simultaneously.

Criticism on this subject is sparse, because of the newness of the material and the lack of attention film-poems have received. They are hybrid forms of art, still in their adolescence, but certainly deserved of analysis and appraisal. Yet the presence of poetry in film, while it has



gained some attention, has occasionally appeared similar to the modern-day film-poem in miniaturised form. Many filmmakers may not have recognised what they were beginning to create through the use of poetry in their work; they sometimes appear to have used poetry as if it were a throwaway cinematic device, a tool to add flair to their narrative. For example, many have used it once and then abandoned the method.<sup>6</sup> Some, however, have chosen to develop it, realising poetry's potential. In my studies dealing with 'the presence of poetry' and 'the evolution of the film-poem', I will analyse some of the best examples of films, which, over the years, have helped the inclusion of poetry in a screenplay retain a reputation as a sophisticated, inductive asset. Presumably, some of these examples have had an influence on the film-poem movement, a movement that has a chance at becoming a new genre, if it is allowed to develop, and is inspired by a wide range of filmic citations of poetry and 'poetic' film. Filmmakers as diverse as D.W. Griffith and Jean Cocteau have utilised the power of poetry, as have contemporary filmmakers such as Robert Aldrich, Ron Shelton and Woody Allen.

### The 'Avant-Garde' Film Poem

The other type of film that has been harnessed with this double-barreled title is the experimental, art-house film, which, most importantly, does not necessitate the presence of poetry itself. The name was probably not suited to the work, as P. Adams Sitney points out on his definitive work on American experimental cinema, *Visionary Film* (1979), stating that the term was both 'inaccurate and limiting' for the material it was attributed to. Yet he goes on to say that the term was slightly more applicable than the generalisation 'experimental film' because the phrase 'film-poem':

has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of [avant-garde film] to the commercial narrative cinema [which] is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times (vii).

This relates to the sharp observation that Tony Harrison makes in his description of the films made by so-called film-poets of the past (like Pasolini or Cocteau) in that the poetry of their films is an 'inner poetry', which might have a 'close affinity with poetry' but is a more unconventional approach to a defined style of art (1998, xxvii). The poetic film is not better than the straightforward, narrative film, much like 'poetry is not by essence better than prose' (Sitney, viii). Poetic films contain indefinable characteristics that simply make them un-mainstream. Any attempt to define this cinema would indeed be 'limiting', and 'very few filmmakers were ever satisfied' with attempts to label the movement. One can only describe the most relevant examples that relate to one's study, and deduce from there.

Filmmaker Peter Todd is the subject of an interview with myself where we discuss the term 'film poem', in Appendix A of this thesis. Todd is the curator of two recent touring programmes of films under the heading 'film poems'. When asked about the definition of a film-poem, he describes that which 'is somewhere between the poetry [a poet/filmmaker] is writing and visual material' (263). He states that film-poems do things that 'poetry might do, such as [employ] different rhythms, repetitions, you might be dealing more with trying to conjure up a mood rather than a narrative ' (264). Todd's observations are explicative and honest insights into the elusive world of avant-garde cinema, a cinema that seeks to facilitate a certain emotion. If that process of facilitation is considered poetic, then the evocation of viewer emotion is a quality of avant-garde film-poems. I will consider this question and many others about 'poetic film' and discuss to what extent the films invoke poetry, if at all, in Chapter Two. In that chapter I will look at specific

films as well as early philosophies on the fusion of poetry and film, and consider the former definition of the term 'film-poem' and weigh its worth alongside phrases like 'experimental films' or 'the avant-garde'.

### Other Intersections of Film and Poetry Covered in this Study

Before discussing the characteristics of film-poems, in either form, at any greater length, I would like to study, in Chapter One, the presence of poetry in film in a general capacity, without the rules of film-poems governing the case. Does the presence of poetry change the look or feel of a film? The literal citation of poems in films creates a special relationship between that poem and that film, whether it is narrative-related or simply incidental. There have been, as discussed above, many films that have been made with poetic sequences or even 'mini film-poems' within them, and some early examples may prove that there is a genre to be reckoned with today in the modern film-poem, and an identifiable 'formulae'. The most ironic aspect of this study is that the term 'film-poem' had been invented over seventy years ago, that it has undergone the equivalent of a complete overhaul, and still the term and the works themselves persist in being regarded as 'experimental' or, simply 'new'.

Film-poems are obviously not the only type of intersection between the worlds of film and poetry. Primarily in Chapters One and Two, I will explore some other relationships between poems and films. What place does a poem have in a film at all? What of previously published poetry within film? What can we make of films that adapt poetry or use poetry as their theme, or of poetry that is about film or film stars? These questions and others will be focussed on at certain intervals in this study.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FILM CITATIONS OF POETRY

Poetry opens a door for cinema. Cinema might open its door a bit wider.

- Filmmaker James Broughton, 1952, 126

#### 1.1 Films with 'Poetry Inside'

The use of poetry within film is a prevalent and even popular practice or technique, yet a comprehensive study of poetic citation in the history of cinema remains unaccomplished. Over roughly the last one hundred years, films from a wide variety of genres have contained poetry, published or unpublished, well known, unknown or written expressly for the film and screenplay. These genres include comedy, horror, drama, thriller, science fiction, mystery, fantasy, romance, and *film noir*, not to mention other, more obscure forms of film narrative. In this chapter I do not intend on providing a bibliographical resource for every instance of poetry in film, but to select a certain number of the most pertinent and characteristic examples of poetic incorporation in films, and to study the capacities by which the poem and the film work together within the same piece. The films that I have chosen to study closely are indicative of the wide range of formats that poetry can function within. Films which quote verse stand as examples of the evocative presence of poetry, at its most dynamic and pivotal. Since the development of sound in cinema, poetry has been present, reaching an apex in the late 1980s and 1990s and persisting into the present day.

It should also be noted that this chapter will chiefly deal with films that contain poetry as a verbal medium, where whole poems, or fragments of poems, are included in a film's story or environment. In terms of a study of 'poetry as a visual medium' (Vogel, 1972, 2), as in the case of a 'poetic film', that will be considered in the next chapter of this thesis, though not to the extent

of the subject at hand. The present study will refer to the film that is considered 'poetic' on many occasions, but will not dedicate a chapter to the subject as a separate entity, simply because it could not justifiably broach such a massive field in the time and space permitted.<sup>1</sup> I am also excluding songs in films, since this would involve a study on a musical level as opposed to such that deals with poetry alone. This chapter will also closely focus on the camera techniques used in a film at the moment that verse is being quoted, recited or composed. I will attempt to expose relationships between the camera movements of different films that cite poetry, and between the films as wholes, entities that deal with poetry in similar veins.

The placing of poetry within the script of a film is usually not incidental. In the films considered in this chapter, poetry functions in ways central to major developments in each film. Poetry becomes an acute contributor to the story within which it functions, a kind of 'hinge' for some aspect of the film to swing upon. Sometimes it is a crucial factor in the development of a character, as in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980) and Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1949). In other instances poetry is a central theme of a film, and character behaviour is based around that theme, as in *Dead Poet's Society* (Weir, 1989) and *Il Postino* (Radford, 1994). The most interesting uses of poetry in film are those which study the poetry themselves, evaluating specific lines to enhance or propel the story-line and the development of the film as a whole; films such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955) and *The Daytrippers* (Mottola, 1996) achieve such a balance with well-crafted scripts and the occasionally jarring plot twist. However, no matter what type of film in which poetry plays a part, and regardless to what extent, the presence of poetry accounts for a distinct oeuvre in the overall piece. There is an aesthetic undercurrent provided by poetry, one that most spectators will detect when the poem emerges within the film. Throughout the years it is apparent that there has been, and still is, an 'unconscious movement' in the world of film-

making, one which adopts poetry as a reliable asset. Poetic presence has quietly impacted the gradual development of cinema, providing depth, mystery and ambiguity, perfect qualities for suspense, crime or some dramatic films. The imagery of poetry used in films often supplies an audience with a series of conceptions impossible to relate without the poem in the film. The symbolic, indirect nature of much poetry is a fitting addition for films that seek an ethereal tone, or for films that want to undercut a frivolous plot line with something a degree more emotive or gravitational. If a film uses poetry skilfully, the effect that the poem can have upon an audience is often subtle but potent.

There is a shortage of material written about the citation of verse in film. Much has been written on the general relationships between film and poetry as separate fields and entities, but the study of the use of individual poems in individual films is virtually non-existent, despite the frequent presence of poetry in film scripts. The types of poetry used in films are wide-ranging as well. Some films will have original lines composed for the purposes of their specific plots: we will see this technique used in *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (McCarey, 1942) and *The Innocents* (Clayton, 1961), among many others. The majority of films that include poetry in their plots use existing work, such as that by Blake, Auden or Dylan Thomas. It is the rare film that specially commissions verse from poets, and sometimes the end result is impressive, but at other times embarrassing. If the whole of the film is not as fluid as the poetry (as in John Singleton's *Poetic Justice* (1993), in which Maya Angelou's beautiful verse outshines the film's overall qualities), the work will probably seem contrived, unevenly crossed between its storyline and poetic content. Furthermore, the myriad of different forms of poetry is a factor in the selection of poems for films, in that certain structural forms of poetry have been rarely adapted for the screen.

Regardless of outcome, all of these films add another layer of meaning to their plots, one that entails a cluster of significance. Some films place poetry very densely and strategically; in many cases, poems are themselves symbolic synopses of some of the most important themes in a film's story. For example, understanding the meaning of Christina Rossetti's 'Remember' in *Kiss Me Deadly* is a detective-style mystery in itself. Reading the poem more closely offers a chance to acquire a heightened sense of the devices at work within the poem. Considering its filmic significance, one can also gain a more sophisticated interpretation of the activities of the main characters in the film itself, obtaining clues and meanings that unravel the mysteries of the film as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 'It's Got to Be a Thing': Christina Rossetti and *Kiss Me Deadly*

One of the primary examples I will use in this study is the film *Kiss Me Deadly* which uses Rossetti's poetry to a well-developed degree, and provides a suitable framework with which we can consider the presence of poetry within all films. I think the wisest way to approach the functions of a poem within a film is to first study the poem on its own, without its filmic significance or connection. By studying one poem as it exists outside a film, or as it exists apart from any other medium, its specific qualities are more clearly understood, while it is stripped of all but its poetic meaning and artistic intent. My discussion of Rossetti and *Kiss Me Deadly* will be the only case in which I use this approach, and I will dispense with the study of the poem itself in subsequent examples. Each example studied will illustrate the ways through which a poem changes a film and how the poem's overall meaning is transformed or especially given a completely new significance once it appears and is manipulated within a film.

### 1.2.1 A Study of the Sonnet 'Remember'

In the introduction to her *Selected Poetry*, C.H. Sisson deemed Christina Rossetti as 'the most naked of poets' (1984, 21) which is an expression characteristic of intimacy and confessionalism. 'Confessional' poets, like Berryman or Plath, are pigeonholed into a weighty vein of poetry, a vein that deals with the study of the supposed truth of their lyrics, the close relations between their poetry and their lives. Yet, Rossetti is not classed as a confessional poet, and this may be because she reaches a level beyond the trappings of poetic 'confession' or even biographical information and/or circumstance through poetry. Instead, Rossetti candidly 'says what she wants to say as simply as she can say it' (Sisson, 19). By merely scanning Rossetti's poetry, one can appreciate the meaning of this sentiment. However, upon closer inspection, a certain taint sometimes adds itself to Rossetti's seemingly honest, uncomplicated meanings and painfully stated emotions; an undercurrent or 'wicked device' appears in many of her poems that undermines otherwise straightforward messages. Plainly, her speakers are not always as sweet and innocent as they may first appear. A fine example of this technique in Rossetti's work is in her famous sonnet 'Remember':

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.



Yet if you should forget me for a while  
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:  
For if the darkness and corruption leave  
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,  
Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.<sup>3</sup>

Among many of her other poems which center on the difficulties of coping with the frailties and limitations of memory ('Memory', 'Song', 'I Wish I Could Remember' and 'He and She' are some of the best examples), 'Remember' focuses on the intricacies involved with enduring a strong passion for somebody whose existence is, however futilely, temporary, whilst one's heart must seemingly endure all time. This embodies the certain degree of 'steely stoicism' (Philip Larkin's phrase) that Rossetti frequently and perhaps unwittingly inserts into her poems, and this stoicism is what readers can easily miss at first glance, lulled into a sense of innocence by her beautiful and natural metaphors or her musings on emotional depth or paradox. However, before we impose any unequivocal interpretations of this 'love sonnet', let us first seek its basic meaning.

First and foremost, 'Remember' is a poem that asks its subject, a romantic presence outside of the poem, to simply remember the speaker and her qualities. The poem has a strong preoccupation with death ('the silent land') and the stoppages of 'day by day' plans and thoughts. Rossetti expresses her pain at the thoughts of these 'stoppages'; she pleads with the subject to at least provide some trace, some 'vestige', to keep her own spirit alive once it has departed from her body. It is at once an alluring and beautiful poem which exposes a deep and true yearning for the pleasures of life and its emotions, but which also combines this yearning with a saddened realisation of the inevitability of death and a natural dependency on the living.

As a sonnet, 'Remember' has an *'abba'* rhyme scheme for the first eight lines (the octave) separated into two quatrains. Its rhyme alters in the last six lines, creating two tercets with *'cdd'* and *'ece'* rhyme schemes. This is slightly unconventional for what at first appeared to be an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, which normally has a final sestet of *'cde, cde'*. Instead, Rossetti places a link between the tercets through only two lines rather than through all six. The end rhyme in lines nine and thirteen is the only link between the final two tercets, separated over a greater amount of space in the poem, and therefore a 'longer' period of poetic 'time'. Aside from a further significance associated with the theme of the poem, which will be discussed shortly, the irregular rhyme pattern of the latter 'half' of the poem provides an indication of the unstable and slightly reckless nature of the speaker, whose motives are potentially as irregular as her rhyme scheme. Curiously, the sonnet's 'turn' is still in its conventional location for an Italian sonnet, in line nine (before the sestet), and it is also clearly marked with a capitalised 'Yet' to prepare us for a departure in meaning or action. This seems to hint that Rossetti (who was Italian in ethnic origin) blatantly rejects the Italian form at a late stage, after rigorously sticking to it for the first ten lines, at which point the poem's form could take on an irregular element with lasting effect. Manipulating this structure calls attention to the fact that Rossetti sought to break from convention and expectation, to impact not only her subject in the poem, but also her readers. The poem jars the reader almost subconsciously, by easing one into the serenity imparted by the opening lines and then concluding with an unconventional, odd-sounding ending. This ending simultaneously lifts the reader out of the 'aura' of death and depression while adding a minutia of possible sarcasm, though barely detectable at first glance.

The poem's rhythm is iambic for the most part, and in pentameter without exception. The iambic qualities to the sonnet make it sound as if it is rising steadily, as if to an occasion, which

is typical of an iambic piece (Lennard, 1996, 5). The only line that does not use an iamb in its first two syllables is line seven, where 'Only' is emphasised on the first syllable, thus becoming a dactyl. This minor detail is probably purposeful, since the line must emphasise that the speaker wants nothing more at this point but than to be remembered fondly; 'Only' stands out particularly because it is the operative word of the poem. However, the language used overall, combined with the constant alternations of stressed and unstressed syllables, creates a 'dirge' quality to the poem's sound, funereal and melodic but also fraught with bass-like tonality. The alliteration and repetition of the 'm' sound, in the very first line: '*remember me when I am...*' and the 'ee' sound in 'me' and 'remember' resonate with doom, with echo-like auditory effects. Line two repeats the word 'gone' also with a related similar 'n' sound and a harsher, more guttural 'g'. Alliteration is found in line three ('*hold me by the hand*') and four ('*turn to go, yet turning stay*'). With these repetitions and then the 'day by day' of line five, Rossetti crafts a lament, a hymn that can be half-sung as it is read, to achieve a haunting, creeping effect.

To match a rising rhythm, supported by the iambs in each line, with a 'dirgic' or funeral-  
esque sound is ironic, inappropriate for the poem's theme, which is basically one of sorrow and  
loss or decay. But this irony is purposeful, since Rossetti will be heading towards a lilt in her  
conclusive sestet, which contains proof that there is a hope in sight for these figures in the  
sonnet. Much in the same way as her lines express an approaching or imminent occurrence, the  
tone of the poem is ominous, as if it were warning us of a threatening presence without directly  
mentioning anything that could be equated with fear or trepidation. Yet, the alliterative qualities  
of the language may help us to understand the 'ominousness' here introduced, especially in line  
two: '*into the silent land*' and in line three, '*you can no more hold me by the hand*'. This couplet  
within the first stanza is at once upsetting and elegantly elegiac at the same time. The reader has

visions of ghost-like figures holding hands, traveling to a grave and quiet place (the 'silent land'), while one figure consistently attempts to break away from the other. This is expressed in line four, a sumptuously realistic line, 'Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay'. This moment, an exquisite moment which lovers can potentially endure at moments of separation, is delicately expressed with this one line, and the rhyme from line one is also satisfied with 'stay'. As a correlation to the theme of this opening quatrain, the speaker whom has 'gone away' at the end of line one 'stays away', in terms of the absence of rhyme for two lines, until in line four the reader is made aware of her temptation to 'stay'. The rhyme is restored much like the speaker of these lines is restored: the departure can only be temporary, provided the subject of the poem, the object of the speaker's affections, will adhere to her pleas and, indeed, 'remember'. To contribute to the urgency of her pleas, the lack of an unessential, but grammatically appropriate comma in line four (between 'go' and 'yet') instills the reader with a feeling of sincerity and movement. The omitting of a natural pause makes the speaker seem all the more desperate and honest, as she *must* say what she feels 'as simply as she can say it' (Sisson, 19) and as strongly.

Notably, though the word 'remember' appears five times within this fourteen-line poem, it only appears once within the first four lines. It is interesting that these four lines so heavily convey a plea without the repetition of this key word, which should demonstrate the gravity and real significance of Rossetti's choice of words and phrases. It is also ironic that Rossetti manages to change her mind in the later stages of the poem, claiming that it is not as important that she is remembered but that her lover is not unhappy (Bowra, 1998, 1). Yet the last line of the poem seems to add a measure of guilt and a demand for sorrow, closing with the words 'you should remember and be sad'. Indeed, in the last six lines of the poem, the word 'remember' appears twice.

To discuss another complication intricately written within this poem (and often easily missed), line eight's presence is strange in this sonnet: '...you understand / It will be late to counsel then or pray'. Obviously, the 'lateness' refers to the time when she will be dead and unable to speak, but 'counsel' and 'pray' are words that are linguistically uneven compared to the rest of the poem. 'Counseling' sounds like a communication on her part, a communication volunteered by her to her subject. Altogether upon the subject of vocal contact, all words seem to have been heretofore offered by the other figure, for example 'he tells me of our future', and it is he whom is repeatedly told to remember, and to hold her hand. His existence and function is a dominating one for most of the poem before this line, whereas she suddenly tells him, 'you understand / it will be late'. This sounds like a teacher talking to a student, a stronger and declarative stance of the speaker which is still in agreement with the previous movements of the poetry (in that she is still imparting advice and a plea), but she is now also speaking of actively conversing with him. Previously, the speaker was not this specifically admonishing, nor was she in the mode of conversation as much as she may have been merely musing or passively involved with this person, anticipating his reactions or behavior.

Beyond 'counsel', the word 'pray' also expresses a communion between the lovers, but adds a religious element to the couple's love, something absent from the poem until this point. For one consideration, following 'counsel' with 'pray' seems to be reminiscent of a confession, like the Catholic confession booth where sinners are relieved of their sins through a priest's advice and blessing (Rossetti was indeed Catholic). This feature in the poem could be an indication of some feelings of wrongdoing Rossetti's speaker and her lover may have felt while wooing. It is a bittersweet sense of the word used here, since the speaker seems to want to end any questionable behaviour and confess to it, a reason for her to 'pray'. Furthermore, a reason to 'remember' the

speaker could then be a confirmation of the resignation of their love, rather than a definite speech from the grave's depths. In this way, the 'silent land' becomes a place where one recedes to after the end of a passionate love affair, a place where the former lover is then untouchable or unreachable. This train of thought can be traced throughout the poem, whereas it is not necessarily the physical death of the speaker which calls for the need for remembrance, but a death of the love which formerly stood between the speaker and her lover. This reading, most strongly facilitated by the presence of the word 'pray', is not as clearly expressed as the former interpretation, but it is still quite viable, since there is no indication that proves a literal death is the only cause of their love's abstinence. It is particularly interesting that once an element of religion is injected into the poem, we are at once forced to consider that the moral or spiritual meanings behind this relationship are tainted. She could even be telling her lover that 'it will be late...to pray' for them to ever get back together again, which expresses a confidence on the speaker's part, in full control of the relationship. This is not a very romantic reading of a supposed love sonnet, but through exploring any underlying messages or tones Rossetti deliberately places within her poem, we can appreciate her 'wicked devices' at work. Beneath the wistful and dreamy talk of memories and past passion, there is an authoritative style and tone which transcends the romantic and provides the speaker of the poem with a feministic right to decide the outcome of every facet of their relationship, including any memories of its existence.

Considering the 'turn', or 'change in the direction of argument' (Stallworthy, 1983, 869) in a sonnet is often the key to understanding its most important messages. The turn in 'Remember' in line nine is an upward one, and can be read with a slight but fitting lilt in one's voice, a kind of brightening in a spoken reading of the poem. This 'brightening' is also ironic, since presumably this is not what the speaker would want her ex-lover to do, much less 'forget' about her for longer

than only a 'while'. There is impermanence attributed to both of these concepts, and firmness. Aside from the natural confidence that seems to dwell in this speaker, who is so self-assured that her mark on this lover was such a one that it would not allow forgetfulness, her plea is irrevocable, such that the lover will be unable to ignore it. She considers every option, and obstructs him from every passageway out of her memory. Still assuming a declarative air, the speaker exhibits strength and knowledge of her lover's feelings, their depth and/or her impression on him, and she genuinely provides him with a 'handbook' on how to deal with these feelings she thinks he is likely to have.

Presumptuously, the long expression which begins at line nine and ends the poem could be viewed as in keeping with the reading which does not require death as the reason for her going 'away', but that she is simply leaving him. The 'darkness and corruption', which has manifold connotations regarding death and distance, could be the world outside of the lovers slowly settling into his capacity for awareness, perhaps even acknowledging the possible presence of other lovers. In spite of her certainty (and paranoia) regarding any foreign women's invasion of his life, she is still confident to know that her memory will be his primary mental occupation. 'The thoughts that once I had' are her own thoughts, and they are seen, by her, as an infatuation in his memory. This is even more than slightly presumptuous, it is genuinely egotistical. The speaker immediately attributes 'darkness' and 'corruption' to the world beyond the spheres of the love this couple has experienced. She merely hopes that the world, vile as it may be, is not capable of erasing the memory of her in her lover's mind, or poisoning her image with worldly ideals. This reading complicates the funereal dirge-like rhythm of the poem, but it does not undermine it, in fact the dirge is transformed into somewhat of a frantic demand, an even stronger plea for her to have been 'the one' who made a fantastic and lasting impression. Once re-

read many times, the reading expresses more of a command for remembrance is more acutely articulated, and there is a sense of bitterness that pervades what is superficially a harmless love sonnet.

A more traditional or literal understanding of these lines (9-14) considers the death of the speaker. The 'grieve' that ends line ten is obviously a word associated with death and loss, but the words 'darkness and corruption', in line eleven, provide some complex images. Darkness, in terms of sinking into its depths, is usually associated with death, in spite of any 'bright light' stories told by people who have had near-death experiences. 'Corruption' not only refers to the uncertainties that exist after death, and the possible entrance of the soul into hell (punishment for the lovers' illicit coupling?), but it may also refer to the physical decay of the body in the grave. The word 'grieve', similar in sound and structure to 'grave', also introduces line eleven (and the remainder of the poem) with a colon, and hints at the 'grave' as an undertone, or a background motif. If the body is deteriorating in this poem, the speaker's body in particular, the preservation of her thoughts becomes a grotesque request. She, by using the word 'vestige' to summarize the traces of her thoughts left in her lover's brain, pleads with him to not allow her thoughts to corrode like her body, which is decidedly different than the simple request to 'only remember' them. Rossetti manufactures double meaning with the phrase, one that supports the speaker's death and one that supports her basic break-up with her lover, but both interpretations signify a presence of outer wickedness after the deed has been done; the evil, which was always surrounding their affair, may return and haunt them both, or haunt only the lover since he is left more strongly conscious.

Much like the structural significance of the placement of 'away' and 'stay', the latter parts of the poem structurally signify a possible forgetting of the speaker 'for a while'. From lines nine to



thirteen, the rhyme to match 'while' is unanswered for five lines, the lengthiest lapse without a complementing rhyme in the poem. The 'while' is this lapse in the sonnet before it is rhymed with (by 'smile'); it takes a 'while' to fulfill the rhyme and this pause in rhyming is purposeful and self-aware. Again, the previously 'abba' rhyme scheme in the octave changes to 'cdd, ece' for the two tercets that make up the final sestet of the poem. Four lines must be read before 'while' (rhyme c) is met by 'smile', which, thematically, expresses a hesitation in experiencing any pleasure, a delay in the release of any degree of happiness. This certainly is harmonious with the poem's purpose. Another point to identify, concerning rhyme, is that a couplet does not end the sonnet, as it would an English or Spenserian form, and the traditional ending of an Italian sonnet (*cde, cde*: the form this sonnet appeared to be in at first) is rejected. Rossetti was Italian, though she lived in England for most of her life, and was surrounded by Italian traditions and customs for the great majority of her upbringing and livelihood (Marsh, 1994). Yet she manipulates this 'Italian' sonnet's final structure. This suggests that there is a traditional idea being manipulated here, in that this sonnet is not as romantic as it first appears, but there are a few notions that need consideration, concerning the placement of satisfactory rhymes in these lines.

Placing a couplet within the first tercet of the final sestet creates a quickened pace to this part of the poem, yet also further delays the 'smile' from arriving. It is the only couplet in the poem, and it is an ironic reflection of the couple's love itself, since the rhyme is with 'grieve' and 'leave' instead of with positive or uplifting words. This fact supports the reality of her break with him, and preserves the air of sadness or melancholy. Rossetti refuses to gratify her subject with not only a sweet couplet, but also tortures with a delayed rhyme. Rossetti may also be upset that there is a possibility, however remote, that she may be forgotten, so she feels justified in torturing him, fruitless as the effort may be, by withholding the traditional rhyme. The delayed

rhyme also dictates that the author is tying up all the loose ends, and no rhymes are left unmatched. The rhymes are completed, and they are decidedly dreary ('grieve' and 'leave', 'had' and 'sad') and all express loss or unhappiness, but the fact that they are broken apart in an unconventional way expresses a certain quality to this relationship that Rossetti wants us to realise was also unconventional, sad and even sinful.

The poem ends with the word 'sad' even though the speaker seems to be telling her loved one that she wants him to try and be happy, independent of the complications explained. Additionally, it seems that the speaker cannot bear to think of herself as remembered negatively, therefore she speaks of nothing but positive memories of herself in his head. If this does not happen, she would rather not be remembered at all. This outcome would destroy the purpose of the poem, completely nullifying its meaning. After the speaker discusses the inner memories that her subject possesses, one particular aspect of the poem is glaring in its significance: that the 'thoughts' of line twelve are her own, and not his own. The lover is not given the free will to decide which memory of hers he would find appropriate, but is given a permission, like an ultimatum, to maintain a positive memory of her own thoughts. In addition to the mental connections and closeness between the two that is expressed through this kind of intuition, or at least that was experienced at one point, this line even more firmly determines her role as the one in control. It is fitting that the poem ends with the very word that could make its effect impossible; if he is 'sad', there will be no remembering.

Up until this point, 'Remember' has been described as a plea, which begs at or requests a memory, but perhaps the poem is more like a demand. The declarative tone of the speaker seems to magnify as the poem is studied and re-read, since the forceful and advisory voice of the author

and speaker emerges more and more authoritatively. The speaker's pleading voice grows louder, commanding, and after a time, we may not have any choice but to obey her.

Clearly, 'Remember' is a poem that has many layers of complicated meaning to it. It considers multiple possibilities of memory and makes the reader uncertain as to what Rossetti's subtexts precisely mean, but we can be sure these dualities are intentional. One thing is clear: the speaker and Rossetti want to be remembered for their thoughts and this poem serves as a proof of her lasting memory, through the permanence of literature and printed texts. Most interestingly, the poem's layers maintain some of these meanings once they are placed within another work, or within another medium of art (a film), but they also acquire a new and specifically oriented direction(s) which refers to the film's plot, characters, themes and intentions. Let us begin to study where 'Remember' and Rossetti appear in *Kiss Me Deadly*.

### 1.2.2 'Remember' in a Cinematic Context

Aldrich's 1955 film is one of the last and best examples of the genre of films known as *film noir*. These films usually focus on some aspect of a criminal underworld, their heroes being not unlike some of the criminal characters in the films themselves. To complement the shadiness of the characters in the film, *noir* films are often low-lit, and smoke, rain and particularly shadows often obscure shots. *Film noir* is usually bleak, pessimistic and sinister, providing an unsettling and threatening atmosphere. Their complicated narrative structures were adapted from 'pulp' fiction, by novelists like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The most recognisable figure in a film of this sort is the so-called *femme fatale*, the quintessential raven-haired beauty who is able to manipulate men and sometimes other women so as to achieve her goals. She is an enticing, intimidating, sexually active and predatory woman, capable of double-crossing, theft,

and possibly murder. The occasional *film noir* further complicates issues by casting an atypical blonde woman in the role of the *femme fatale*, and *Kiss Me Deadly* does exactly this. In fact, both unstable women in the film are blondes, including the sacrificial Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman, in her first film role), whom is named after Rossetti. Bailey announces, soon after her introduction, 'Christina Rossetti wrote love sonnets. I was named after her'. The hero, or indeed anti-hero of the film, is the popularised detective character invented by author Mickey Spillane, Mike Hammer (played by Ralph Meeker), and the film is based on Spillane's novel of the same name.<sup>4</sup>

*Kiss Me Deadly* uses 'Remember' in its plot and framework to further motivate its characters. In fact, it is so conspicuously and methodologically placed within the film that the film itself gains a completely new perspective, while aspects of the poem also change from their original meaning. Since the film is an example of the *noir* genre, most of the film's elements are connected to the central mystery that comprises the theme of the film, and the poem is 'central to Hammer's unraveling of the mystery, but its importance ... goes far beyond its value as a clue' (Hill, 1995, 146).

This film uses 'Remember' in such a way that the outcomes of the characters, the direction of the plot, and the very film itself, *depend* on the interpretation of the poem's lines. One might say that the film is 'inhabited' by poetry; this film entwines Rossetti's piece in its structure, and drastically manipulates itself and the (then) 105-year-old poem's meanings. By now studying the sonnet strictly in the context of the film, we may be able to determine a set of outcomes, a list of results that are identifiable when a film is intermeshed with a poem, or vice versa, and therefore seek the primary differences between a filmically-cited poem and a textual or printed poem.

The phrase 'Remember me' is used in Aldrich's film within the first ten minutes, is then unmentioned or presumably forgotten for a short while, then returns with strong significance and intricate purpose as the mystery of the film complicates. Notably, the placement of 'Remember' is entirely Aldrich's addition. Mickey Spillane's novel *Kiss Me Deadly* did not contain a reference to Rossetti or to her poetry; it is entirely absent from the novel. The *idea* of remembering is present in the novel but the use of poetry, conceived by Aldrich and screenwriter A. I. Bezzerides, to express this memory, makes the film more eloquent, multi-faceted, and altogether cerebral. The insertion of poetry is not the only change from that of the original novel either. From what Claude Chabrol called 'the worst material to be found, the most deplorable, the most nauseous product of a genre in a state of putrefaction' (Hoberman, 1994, 43) when referring to the novel, comes a film with a series of grandiose changes:

The novel's souped up heap became a Jaguar. Hammer's secretary, Velda, is transformed from a chaste and adoring fiancée to professional sex bait. The location shifts from New York to L.A. The villains mutate from gangsters to atom spies (Hoberman, 43).

Clearly the novel was overhauled by Aldrich and Bezzerides to make a film that crosses the genre of *noir* with science fiction, a film that Chabrol also termed 'the thriller of tomorrow' at the time (Hoberman, 43).

The first few minutes of the film very subtly prepares us for the 'Rossetti mechanism'. Christina, in her overcoat (apparently nude underneath), is picked up by Hammer in his car after the film's memorable opening scene. The first shot of the film is a tracking shot of her running legs, followed by various shots of the breathless Christina trying to pull over passing vehicles. Throughout her crying and wheezing (and the roll of the credits), Nat King Cole's 'Rather Have the Blues (Than What I Got)' is playing on the radio, and this is an indirect reference to the

loathsome secret she is carrying with her. The baseness and callousness of Hammer's character, icily underplayed by Meeker, also emerges from the very first angry words that spurt out of his mouth. Following the sombre scenes of the two in the car, which is full of typically *noirish* snappy but sarcastic conversation, we find out that Christina is an escapee from an asylum, she is carrying important information, and she is in trouble with someone to the point of being afraid for her life. Hammer takes steps to protect her, and when they pull off the road at a petrol station, she posts a letter, a letter that will later emerge as one of the only textual affirmations of the pivotal role 'Remember' will play.

The film's opening scene hardly wastes any time getting acquainted with the concept of poetry. Shortly after the 'perversely backward title crawl (outrageously accompanied by orgasmic heavy breathing)' (Hoberman, 43), Meeker's cold, hard detective character is faced with having to deal with something completely antithetical to what he is able to understand and relate to: poetry, which has an initially charming but eventually uncomfortable presence in the film. The poem never appears in its entirety in the film, and it does not fully appear in shot as printed lines on a page (as many other films have used poetry on-screen). But its lines are repeated many times over, its author is referred to as an inspiration for the naming of the 'insane' Christina and the mechanisms of the poetry are studied for deeper meaning or for clues to solve the mysteries of the film. These mysteries are Christina's murder, and the contents of a sinister-looking black box, the significance of which is deemed 'the great whatsit'.

There is much more important poetic significance in the film's first few minutes. After pulling away from the petrol station, the two are back on the dark road, in a wide-angle medium shot through the windscreen of the car. The shot is dimly lit from the dashboard of the car and from other cars' headlights (especially an ominous pair following distantly behind). It is here that

Christina specifically asks Hammer, 'You ever read poetry'? She tells him, 'Christina Rossetti wrote love sonnets. I'm named after her'. The conversation continues, and a threat is imposed upon this apparently harmless scene, when she repeats, 'If we don't make that bus stop...remember me'. At the conclusion of this statement, sudden, dramatic background music blaringly takes over and the shot finally cuts as another car angles itself in front of Hammer's. His car screeches off the road, where the two are waylaid by waiting men. Christina screams, and continues to scream throughout the dissolve to the next sequence, which is nauseating in its depiction of violence through shots of her dangling, quivering legs while she is tortured. Finally, her legs hang limply and we are cryptically told by voices that she is dead. Though this sequence of the film does not quote any poetry in a way that is clear to the first time viewer as of yet, 'Remember me' is introduced as a hinging statement, being Christina's last words and a clue for the detective, who survives a car crash, set up to look like an accident by the faceless villains. The murderers are only in frame from the waist down, so we mainly see their shoes and trousers; their apparent leader wears a pinstriped suit.

Notably, this important sequence naturally includes an introduction to Mike Hammer's character. Christina describes him as a true male chauvinist, who only has 'one true lasting love' and that is himself. She 'needles' Hammer and intones his inner thoughts by playfully mocking him, 'Ah...woman...the incomplete sex. And what does she need to complete her? Why, man of course. Wonderful man'. This dialogue, directed at Hammer and his personality, are similar to the bitterness Rossetti sometimes evokes in her poetry and the undercurrent of her indifference to the feelings of the male lover in 'Remember'. Christina's torn, mocking reflections on the dynamic between men and women are reminiscent of Rossetti's simultaneous coupling of desire and anger or acrimony regarding love. Christina says she was named after the poet, which

supports the idea of overlapping characteristics and relationships between the two. In 'Remember', called a love sonnet, this same bitterness and resentment at the lack of love or understanding from a male, which Christina observes, is discernible.

*Kiss Me Deadly* provides an appropriate setting for the mystery surrounding Christina, which is the film's initial priority. Even Hammer's scattered musings on the last words and acts of Christina are fraught with mutterings of 'Remember me'. This frequent, unconscious quoting of the first words of the poem create an atmosphere of suspense, one that makes us constantly wonder at the meaning of the words and of the contents of her letter. The use of the word 'remember' is also prevalent in scenes leading up to the discovery of her book of sonnets. For example, Pat, the police inspector with a typical contempt for the detective, asks him upon his awakening in the hospital, 'Can you remember, Mike?' Just after these words, Hammer blacks out again. Soon after his recovery, alone with his secretary (and part-time lover) Velda (Maxine Cooper), he discusses Christina's last words with her and concludes, 'She must be connected with something big'.

Once Hammer picks up on the link with Rossetti and finds a book of her sonnets at Christina's old apartment, we expect that perhaps he will immediately read 'Remember' and figure out something. But instead he is painstakingly slow at deciphering the poetry, and seems to find it incomprehensible or not worth his interest. This steers the plot into deeper mystery, and gives us an inkling into another one of Hammer's character traits: he is not intelligent, not a very adept detective, nor is he the type that could successfully analyze anything literary. Hammer's detective strength is in his instinct, which is not artistic, so the audience must wait for the words to be thoroughly explored and realised. The number of names and leads that Hammer follows up, apart from anything to do with the poetry, dangerously enmesh him in the case, but do not



provide any conclusive answers. An unveiling of sorts approaches when Hammer finds Christina's letter in the mail, but he finds it too late, as the killers have already been to his apartment, found the letter, and read its contents: 'Remember Me!' in cursive handwriting. Again, the words appear in the film, this time in a close-up, and this time we must accept that they will not only motivate the killers to try and eradicate Hammer if he does not tell them their meaning, but that they will also drive Hammer to every end in order to discover their meaning, if he can survive. Through his strong-arm tactics, and with the help of unspeakable and apparently 'unshowable' physical ability (he overpowers his foes with hardly any effort and uses an almost supernatural strength or power that is not shot or captured in the scenes where he betters his rivals), he will persist, delving into the poetic phrase.

After he finds the letter in his apartment, Hammer is captured and kidnapped a second time by the criminals, who are there waiting for him. They administer sodium-pentathol ('truth serum') to him as he is tied down on a bed, and their aim is to find out the meaning behind 'Remember me'. When the serum is supposed to have taken effect, one of the thugs sits near the bed, saying the phrase to him and asking him what it means. Of course, Hammer does not know, so he can only mumble gibberish to the criminal. The significance of this scene is quintessential to the role that poetry plays in this film; by the criminals' interest in the words and the lengths they will go to in order to discover their meaning, we are given a notion as to the extent of their importance. The film constructs its narrative to permit the lines' meaning as the foremost clue to the great mystery of the film. They are the 'piece of string' Mike often claims he searches for in his hunts.

Along the trail of the mystery, Hammer manages to find Christina's former roommate and friend, Lily Carver. In the scene immediately following his escape from his captors, he is alone with her, and this is when he finally decides to study a poem from the book of Rossetti's sonnets.

Mike asks Carver to read the poem 'Remember'. In this scene, we gain valuable insights into the mechanisms that the poem provides in this film, and how the poem changes itself as well. The reading begins with the two characters in a medium shot, and cuts to a medium close-up of the two as line seven is read, with Carver in the right foreground of the frame. The poem is presented in snippets and the lines that are indeed chosen and read are very significant. From the full sonnet, Carver reads only lines five to seven, and lines eleven and twelve. The rest of the poem is unread and treated as nonexistent, and some words are changed to fit the context of the story of the film, to aid the characters in their quest for 'the great whatsit'. For example, 'you' in line seven is changed to 'you'll' (read 'you'll understand' and omitting the completion of the enjambed sentence that continues and concludes in line eight). Carver also reads the words 'you'll understand' with much emphasis, and she glances at Hammer sporadically throughout her reading, clearly recognising that there is a clue that lies within the words. Additionally, 'For' in line eleven is changed to 'But' and the conspicuous and meaningful 'I' in line twelve is changed to 'we' (read 'But if the darkness and corruption leave / A vestige of the thoughts that once we had'). Hammer asks her to repeat these lines (eleven and twelve), the 'last part', as he puts it. His character needs a repetition, since he is not clever enough to decipher the meanings behind them at a single glance. During the poem's reading, his face is that of one lost in thought, and he suddenly rises from the couch, moving towards the door, not heeding Carver's protestations. Over-dramatic music also plays here in the background, and due to its timing and placement at the end of the reading, we are led to believe that something important has just happened. Ernest Laszlo's cinematography also provides some evidence of the importance of this scene, as the camera follows Carver's every move as she reads, cutting to a close-up of the two figures' faces. The movement of the camera signals that this scene is indispensable, as the slightest gestures and

expressions made within it are tracked and treated as pivotal and illuminating. The score by Frank de Vol also is a signifier in that the music itself is compositionally nondescript, but its positioning in the film is aligned with the positioning of the poetry, or with the links that lead directly to the poetry.

But ironically, it is Hammer's stupidity and misinterpretation of the lines that substantiate the sonnet's prime importance. In his mind, the 'vestige' of line twelve is equated with the 'small thing' that has been left behind by Christina, a clue that was given to him by one of his victims of his cross-examinations. This 'vestige', in the poem, is something entirely intangible, a thought or memory of the thoughts of the speaker. But Hammer is not this kind of analyst; he is not able to imagine a subject that is not concrete. He is headstrong, reliant on good luck and muscle to achieve his desires, a callous brute. This is why he impulsively leaves Carver and the apartment when the poem's reading is completed. The actual transformation from intangible 'vestige' to tangible vestige as small object is accordant with his character, an affirmation of Hammer's stone-like mental capacity and his inability to see beyond the obvious, momentary 'piece of string'. Again, ironically, and in spite of his misinterpretation, he manages to find what he imagines was left by Christina.

However unorthodox the grammatical changes in the poem may be, it is clear that Aldrich wanted to make the viewer believe that Christina was sending Hammer a coded message, therefore 'we' sounds more likely to involve the both of them. The use of 'but', rather than 'for', is like an introduction to a clue, a stronger inkling to the possibility that there might be something remaining or something left to discover. The alteration of 'you' to 'you'll' also sounds like an invitation for the detective to pick up the pieces of this puzzle and fit them together, further

supported by Carver's vocal emphasis, 'YOU'LL underSTAND'. In the next scene, Hammer comes closer to the mystery's solution with a sinister, greedy mortician.

While Hammer stands over Christina's dead body in the morgue, he repeats lines eleven and twelve (including the 'we' change), which is the third time they are repeated in the film. In this instance, something is realised. The lines are spoken over Christina's face, even though she is dead, and it is as if he is still having a conversation with her. This is a hearkening to one reading of the Rossetti sonnet, involving a communication with a spirit on the other side of life. Hammer is remembering her, after she has 'gone far away into the silent land'. Here Hammer dispels the mystery of the lines, unraveling their meaning for the specific purposes of this film. The missing 'vestige' or small thing will lead him to 'the great whatsit', which everyone is chasing. After repeating the lines he says, 'But if the thought it's dead because she's dead'. Aside from being ungrammatical and strange in its construction this sentence permits Hammer to conclude that the 'vestige' is indeed something that she concealed.<sup>5</sup> He states, 'It's got to be a thing. Something small, something she could hide', and through the detective's logic, prompted by the nodding, smirking ogre of a mortician, it is revealed that the object, the vestige, is a key that was found in Christina's dead body. This discovery is the most important of the film, and the deciphering of meaning in the poetry is at its source. It is the poem that has governed the direction of the plot, and is the direct cause of the most important onscreen activity, narrative development and character evolution.

Critic Rodney Hill, in an article that concentrates on the role of 'Remember' in *Kiss Me Deadly*, makes a number of proposals concerning the sonnet, including some that relate narrative consequence to the presence of the poetry. At one point he states:

Thus a reading of the poem might help to keep Christina's beneficial intentions (to prevent the box from falling into the wrong hands) alive; it might even be an edifying experience, similar to taking communion. I suggest that in invoking the Rossetti sonnet, Bailey hopes that its message will enable Hammer to fill her shoes, to carry on her gospel of communication, to prevent ultimate disaster in the inevitable event that she should die (147).

Furthermore, the idea of communion, of accepting the body of Christ into one's own body, is related to the key itself being hidden within Christina's corpse. The removal (and theft) of the key contains a strong irony, since the key does not lead to anything remotely similar to salvation. It leads instead to a box of horror, of what many critics refer to as an evil holocaust, spiritual in its escape. Within that mysterious box, we soon discover, is fissionable nuclear material or energy, which is exposed as a bright searing, burning light. When the box is opened, the energy hisses and snaps like a rasping demon unleashed upon the world.

But why is a poem the source of the mystery and the link to this secret? Dense and strangely incomplete in this film, the poem is like a veil, and Hammer's character is realistically not intelligent enough to clearly see through or lift that veil. He can only find the key, the tangible object, and he cannot understand the deeper meaning and significance of the poetic lines. To coincide with this view, perhaps this poetry is also there to expose Hammer's haplessness and his chauvinism to an even greater extent. As Hill writes, 'Hammer might consider poetry to be an unacceptably feminine (or effeminate) mode of communication... He never considers its imagery and possible symbolism' (148), and this contributes to the extent of his oversight. This is the main reason why he makes Carver read the poetry to him; this activity would not suit a male like him. Yet Aldrich manipulates the poetry; a poem that previously stood as a plea for a

continuance of memory, or an insistence on that same remembrance, is transformed into a catalyst for clues that will solve a mystery. The poem is never read in full, but this is permissible since the lines that are indeed read are treated pivotally, regardless of alteration. In this way, the poem is the perfect complement to this *film noir*, since it is an apparatus of elaborate complication, and suspenseful films benefit from a challenging narrative. The poem challenges the audience even further, in that they must concentrate on the lines of poetry and their possible meanings, as well as on the intrinsic mysteries of the film itself.

'Remember', forlorn and distressed at its most superficial level, has a sharp underbelly that ridicules its subject, selfish in its demands. Much like Gabrielle (Lily Carver's name and true identity) in *Kiss Me Deadly*, the forlorn, fearful figure is a masked *femme fatale*; from the box she unleashes a destructive energy, a force portrayed as if it were evil itself. Since Gabrielle possesses that sharp underside as well, perhaps she has understood the true meanings of 'Remember' all along, but like Hammer, is too self-involved to realise its total ramifications. Gabrielle is the antithesis of Christina, who dies because of her innocent knowledge, while she embodies and represents the sharp edge of the sonnet. One can view Christina's character as the author of the poem, a representation of Rossetti, who is innocently in love with love but who has 'the nicest way of needling a guy'. Gabrielle is like the ironic, self-centred speaker of the poem, whose ulterior motive eludes the reader's vision at first glance, and who deceives Mike Hammer throughout his blundering searches, until it is almost too late. Gabrielle, who has faked her name and passed herself off as someone else throughout most of the film, is a reflection of the poem's falsification as a love sonnet as well. The poem is anything but innocent within, akin to Gabrielle's eventual exposure; both innocently claim to be something that they are not at first. Hammer, who can himself further represent the ex-lover in the poem, never sees the edge in the

poem or in Carver/Gabrielle. His lack of foresight prevents him from seeing the death trap that he is accelerating towards, until the moment of his final confrontation with Gabrielle, when she shoots him. The bullet from Gabrielle is a final 'vestige', a proof of the 'darkness and corruption' that consumes Hammer. He can only stare blankly at the turn of events, as he strives to comprehend 'Remember me', much like Rossetti's idea that her ex-lover would try to remember her, or see the poem, misunderstand its irony, sometimes forget her, and all the while live in torment at her loss. This is why Hammer simply tells Pat that he 'didn't know', and the inspector harshly retorts that he probably wouldn't have done 'any different' if he *had* known.

The ending of the film pairs Hammer with his faithful secretary, Velda, but we are not led to believe that they have learned anything from the experience, will fall in love, or share any moral enlightenment whatsoever. Aldrich's abrupt style is a factor here, as is his understanding that this film is not meant to be a moral tale; in fact it is quite the opposite. It exposes multiple dark sides to human nature without reconciliation or soothing measures of balance, very much a film not in accordance with the tendencies of Classical Hollywood. Instead the film ends with destruction, unlike the end of Rossetti's sonnet, which ends sadly and in mock consideration of the lover's feelings and future.

The only possible link between the ending of the film and the end of the sonnet could be in Gabrielle's words, uttered just before she shoots Hammer, 'Kiss me Mike. Kiss me. I want you to kiss me. The liar's kiss that says I love you means something else'. This could be a tribute to that same sharp underside that the poem contains, summarising its lack of earnestness and truth. Rossetti's speaker does not exactly lie, but she is not steadfast either. The poem reveals her sarcasm and her interest in only ensuring that her name is well remembered. The above last

words of Gabrielle are a reflection of the greed of Gabrielle, opening the box like curious, fateful Pandora, responding to only what she wants regardless of consequence.

Alternatively, the lines that are not quoted from the sonnet are such that might expose the most detail about the mystery, and this is probably why the film does not quote the entire sonnet. Indeed, the only lines read by Carver in the scene described above are, with alterations:

Remember me when no more day by day

You tell me of a future that you'd planned.

Only remember me; you'll understand.

But if the darkness and corruption leave

A vestige of the thoughts that once we had.

Hill writes of the potential impact of the remaining lines of the sonnet, unread by Gabrielle.

However irrelevant they are for the purposes of the fixed film and script, their exclusion points to some specific ideas about the uncovering of the terrible secrets in the film. Referring to 'the incomplete clause' that is left at the conclusion of Carver's reading (stopping at line twelve) Hill writes,

Yet Gabrielle presents it as the poem's conclusion, a mysterious stopping point at best.

The complete ending of "Remember," if it were communicated to Hammer, could indeed provide him with some useful instructions... Even if we accept on its own terms

Hammer's inadequate interpretation that the "vestige" must be a thing (specifically a key - which leads to the whatzit - found in Christina's body), these final lines still signal a

warning. They suggest that if the dark, corrupt forces leave the key, if they do not find it,

then all will be well; then Hammer can "forget and smile." More significantly, the

thoughts that 'once Christina Bailey had' were thoughts of communication, of talk. Thus



the lines should warn Hammer that, if all talk that remains is a mere vestige... then communication can be undesirable; engaging in mysterious, evasive double-talk can only worsen the situation - better to forget entirely (150).

These warnings, though only obvious in part, could have prematurely exposed the ultimate mystery of the film, of which there are two parts: what is in the box, and why was Christina killed for having any knowledge of its contents? The rest of the poem seems to have been omitted to permit further speculation in the audience, and also to prevent Hammer from devising any way out. Even though he does not heed the warnings that he is provided with from the lines that are present in the film, the possibility for him to indeed 'forget and smile' would ruin the film's cataclysmic conclusion. This is not a film that wants to end safely and reassuringly; it is a tale of 'darkness and corruption'.

Aldrich and Bezzerides are brilliant in the way they link the poem and the film together, entwining its characters with the emotions introduced in the poem and creating a poetic atmosphere to the film as well. Perhaps the changes they make in the poem are objectionable to poetry purists, but this may be called, to coin a phrase, 'filmic license', with intent to preserve logical structure, grammar, and artistic integrity. When the sonnet is intermeshed with the plot of *Kiss Me Deadly* and its characters, its own meaning is subverted through the film's application of it within its own narrative. Looking at the poem's metaphors and ironic hidden meanings, there are echoes of most of the layers of the poem in the film as well, considering especially the sonnet's nasty narcissistic subtext.

### 1.3 Further Examples of Poetry in Film

By the means described in the above section of this study of film and poetry, one can see how a poem's original interpretation is manipulated by the insertion of that poem within a film, as opposed both to other mediums and to its existence on its own. Additionally, a film acquires a level of depth impossible before the poem's presence and the film is imbued with a framework, even an entire structure, with a poem in its screenplay. In some cases, the structure of a poem is imitated in the film's structure as well, and this creates another relationship between the two that is worth study. There are many other examples of poetry that exist within films, functioning and creating possibilities that may be beyond the filmmaker's original intention, and we will look at some of the most important of these. Throughout further discussion, the 'Rossetti protocol' can function as a firm reference, a confirmation of film and poetry's effect on one another.

#### 1.3.1 'I see great things in baseball': Poetry in a Sports Film

Ron Shelton's *Bull Durham* (1988), is different from *Kiss Me Deadly* on most levels, but the two films share the quality of allowing poetry to infiltrate their narratives. Shelton's film is a light-hearted affair, an example of an emerging sub-genre of 'sports comedy' films. Of course this film is not about poetry, and there is no mystery to solve where poetry can provide clues, but this film accomplishes something that appears as a mechanism in a number of films. It uses poetry so that it may inform character development, plot development, and the overall structure of the film itself. Baseball, sex, and playful frolicking on and off the baseball diamond are the principal themes of this film, with fine performances by Susan Sarandon and Kevin Costner and an early, 'young stud' role for Tim Robbins. Placed between the sexual antics and the education in baseball that we receive from this story are important 'injections' of poetry. Romantic and

fervent excerpts of pieces by William Blake and Walt Whitman subtly set up decisive moments for the characters in their developing perceptions of themselves and each other.

This poetry is read to Nuke Laloosh (Robbins) while he is tied to a bed ('a guy will listen to anything if he thinks it's foreplay'), hollered to Crash Davis (Costner) at moments of character realisation, and referred to and quoted at various times in the film by the poetic Annie Savoy (Sarandon). The lines are sometimes read or stated in a voice-over by Annie to better express her personal philosophies, and the poetry often affirms her own beliefs. It is an unusual counterbalance to baseball, or to any sport, but it combines elements of traditional romance and mystical eroticism (which accounts for the poetry's parallel to sexual themes) with pivotal moments in the lives of the main characters. Throughout, comments made in Annie's voice-over also remind us of the film's association with poetry, to the extent that poetry in general, as a subject, becomes a sub-theme of the primary narrative.

One interesting point to note is that, though *Bull Durham* could have easily incorporated poetry about baseball, of which there is a fair amount in print (e.g. 'Casey at the Bat' by Ernest L. Thayer, 1888), it primarily chooses to cite provocative poetry by Whitman, Blake and Gray. The poems Annie reads and/or recites in the film are as sexually or emotionally charged as she is, striving to make an impression as she searches for the ideal male in a baseball uniform. It is read and recited only at moments of vulnerability or assertiveness in the film and not at other more innocent or frivolous times. The poetry helps to further the development of emotional relations between Annie and Crash; in fact the poetry is almost played with, as if to reflect some of the aspects of the game itself.

Annie reads some poetry to 'Nuke' Laloosh when he is at her house for the first time, tied down in bed, almost naked. He is crass and eager while Annie is patient, artistic and creative

with her enticement. At the end of the scene the film cuts to the morning after that night, with Laloosh stumbling into the baseball clubhouse muttering about how poetry is much more tiresome than making love all night. Though he tries to relate to Annie's readings ('Limpid jets of love... Does that mean what I think it means?'), he never fully understands Annie's motives. Crash, on the other hand, is initially introduced as a cultured person (one character claims that they 'actually saw him read a book without pictures once'), and it is evident that he will eventually connect with Annie since he alone appreciates the poetry she bestows upon other characters. Until Crash enters the picture, her past efforts with others seemed to have been, ultimately, in vain. The difference between the personalities of the two lead male characters and their varying degrees of appreciation of an art form like poetry is the central issue in the story, and is what drives the action of the film towards a convincing climax. Nuke is a young and impressionable future star but he has 'a million dollar arm and a five cent head'. Crash is there to teach him the finer points of living up to the lifestyle of Major League Baseball. Crash's experience and maturity is the obvious root behind why he will successfully attract Annie, but it is Crash's belief in and appreciation for 'the soul' that binds him and Annie together. Meanwhile, Nuke is given his 'education' in baseball and poetry ('Hey Annie, what's this molecule stuff?') but soon receives the call to the upper echelons of the baseball world. He escapes the poetic and the minor leagues, while the older Crash belongs there, to teach (as a future manager) and flourish with Annie.

In the opening sequence of the film, Annie is introduced through a voiceover and we watch her preparing herself and walking over to the baseball field for one of the first games of the season. She discusses her disillusionment with various religions, preferring 'the church of

baseball'. While the camera tracks through her house and pauses on her while she applies her make-up, her voice-over states,

I prefer metaphysics to theology ... You see there's a certain amount of life wisdom I give these boys. I can expand their minds. Sometimes when I got a ball-player alone I'll just read Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman to them. And the guys are so sweet, they always stay and listen.

Therefore, poetry is introduced in the first two minutes of the film, and we are told what its precise function is in this story: something that will help 'expand the minds' of Annie's 'pupils'. It is no coincidence that while Annie is not at the ballpark or with a player, she teaches literature and creative writing at the local junior college. Not long after this scene, Annie will demonstrate how she attempts this with a player (Nuke, in the scene briefly referred to above) and the parallels between his personal and physical development and the presence of poetry will begin.

Annie is really the central figure of the film, primarily because it is her effect on the ball players that the film is most concerned about. Her advice and observations are almost always met with favour and respect. For example, in her first observation of Nuke's pitching Annie notices that he is not 'bending his back' enough, and after she sends a note to him to alert him of the problem, he begins striking out the players on the opposing team that he previously walked and hit with the ball. Clearly, Annie's advice is highly regarded on the Durham Bulls' team, and this quality pervades the film and naturally extends to her treatments of poetry. As a reviewer of the film wrote, 'in the end it is Annie's - and Susan Sarandon's - movie ... she knows exactly what she's doing and why' (Walters, 1989, 35).

In the scene where Annie first reads poetry to Nuke, she ties him to the bed first, making it impossible for him to escape her reading. She asks him if he has ever heard of Walt Whitman,

and Nuke responds, 'Who does he play for?' which helps to further solidify the stereotype of Nuke's role as a dumb jock. She reads him excerpts from different parts of Whitman's 'I Sing the Body Electric', a poem that focuses on the aesthetic beauty of the body, in harmony with itself:

I Sing the body electric,  
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth  
them,  
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to  
them,  
And discurrup them, and charge them full with the  
charge of the soul.

Annie then pauses, leans closer to Nuke, turns the page and reads:

But the expression of a well-made man appears not  
only in his face,  
But is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the  
joints of his hips and wrists,  
...  
love flesh swel-  
ling and deliciously aching,  
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous...<sup>6</sup>

The poem's sexual imagery is lost on Nuke, as he only finds it confusing. He even interrupts the poem's reading at one point (ironically at its most physically descriptive), asking Annie, 'Are we gonna fuck or what', to which she laughs mildly and continues to read until the scene cuts to a shot of the players' locker room the following day. Annie reinforces her role through Whitman's

verse in that she is meant to 'disrupt' Nuke and 'charge' his soul with an appreciation of beauty, of the human body, of life and love and poetry in general. When Annie pauses she skips a few lines and reads from the second part of the poem, and if Nuke had listened he would have detected Annie's praises of his body through the poetic lines. The camera uses shot/reverse shot techniques in this scene, with Nuke's long form often occupying the entire foreground of the shot. Annie sits on a chair next to the bed hunched over him, provocatively close to his groin, but all the while she merely reads. In the reverse shots over Annie's left shoulder, we see Nuke in an extremely prone position, lying supine with his wrists tied to the bedposts. He is completely at Annie's mercy, but she resists any temptation to touch him. Annie is, in all perceptions and interpretations, a teacher and trainer, who indeed attempts to 'expand the minds' of these young men.

Strangely, the last verses of the poem quoted above ('love flesh swelling... ') are from the fifth part of the poem, quoted from the middle of the fifty-ninth line to the middle of the sixtieth line. There is no relevant detail provided by the film to suggest that these lines do not naturally follow each other according to the original poem, since during their reading there is just a cut to a reverse shot over Annie's shoulder again, as before. This is similar to the way in which *Kiss Me Deadly* uses only portions of Rossetti's sonnet, lines chosen that are considered the most fitting for the film. In *Bull Durham*, Shelton (also the screenwriter) quotes some of the most erotic verses from the lengthy eight-part poem, but even these have no (immediate) effect on Nuke. There are some versions of the poem that are published without lines 56-66, which are focused on the female form. It is likely that some publishers (for example, the Oxford University Press, 1923) felt the lines too racy or provocative to print in a scholarly text. In 1989, however, they become important defining material in the cinematic character development of a baseball player,

and we will see how Laloosh gradually matures throughout the film, eventually refusing sex with Annie because he is afraid it will ruin his winning streak. His belief in the ethereal or is superstition, will gradually take shape. At least Shelton did not include the most strongly erotic words that complete line sixty of Whitman's poem, which are 'quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice'. They are too graphic for even the liberal Annie and the fervid Nuke.

It is also worth noting that Annie gives Nuke his nickname that same night, and he insists on people calling him that from then on (his real name is Ebby Calvin). This is significant because after a night of Annie's poetry reading, Nuke 'discovers' his stable identity, which will persist for the rest of the film and ascend with him into the Big Leagues. In fact, the young pitcher insists on being called 'Nuke' simply because 'Annie says' it is his new nickname. The confirmation of the importance of Annie's influence is reiterated in the wake of poetry's presence, taking effect after one night with the ball player. A further example of poetry's impact in defining the roles of the two suitors for Annie happens during the locker room scene as well. When Nuke is reflecting on Whitman's poem, he asks Crash if 'limpid jets of love' means what he suspects. Crash does not gratify him with an answer, ignoring his simple, sexual interpretation of the poem; Crash instead turns his attention to the state of his sandals: 'You'll never make it to the bigs with fungus on your shower shoes'. As practical as Annie is fanciful, Crash is able to balance his love of the game of baseball, and his purpose on this Single-A minor league team, with the appreciation of art that will more strongly emerge as the film progresses. This scene concludes the impact of 'I Sing the Body Electric' and further delegates the roles of Crash and Nuke into, respectively, that of the skilled, 'professional' analyst and that of the simple and headstrong 'boy'.

Smaller details within the film also contribute to the general potency of the poetry, like the baseball card Annie uses as a bookmark in her book of poetry, thereby fusing the two themes in



one image and one object. Similarly, when the Durham Bulls begin winning their games, Annie, in her familiar voice-over, declares that the Bulls are playing with, 'joy and verve and poetry'. This metaphorical reference to poetry is an allusion to a common expression that means, normally, with 'fluidity and grace'. This is certainly how the viewer is supposed to interpret the lines, but they can be obviously also taken literally since Annie preserves a poetic awareness at consistent intervals throughout the narrative. While she says these particular words, the montage of baseball action onscreen concludes with an impressive game of catch among a few of the players.

Another fine example is provided while Crash rounds the bases after hitting his career minor-league-record-breaking home run, as Annie says, 'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen / and waste its sweetness on the desert air'.<sup>7</sup> Annie's appreciation of Crash's feat is all the more heightened with this line, providing fitting praise of his milestone. The poetry instead does justice to a great injustice at work within the plot of the film, and says what perhaps nothing else could say. In spite of Crash claiming that his feat is something of a 'dubious honour', Gray's verses perfectly summarise his painful achievement, and therefore the 'sweetness' is not altogether 'wasted'.

Throughout the film poetry is associated with femininity, but not only through Annie's presence. The impressionable Nuke is given a garter belt to wear while he pitches, since, Annie claims, this will 'keep one side of [his] brain occupied while on the mound, thus keeping [his] brain slightly off centre, which is where it should be for artists and pitchers'. This is an excellent pairing of the sport and the poetry, linking Nuke's particular talent to the poetry he should be also appreciating. Juxtaposed with this idea of femininity is a distinct and predictable homosexual tension that occasionally surfaces in this film, but is also related to the poetry. Whitman's 'I Sing

the body electric' is saturated with homosexual imagery, about strong male camaraderie and the beauty of the male embrace. The locker room scenes of *Bull Durham*, of which there are many, involve a fair amount of contact, especially between Crash and Nuke. Both have explosive nicknames, both have volatile personalities, and one is meant to learn from the other. In the first scene where the three main characters meet in a bar and the two men first compete to dance with Annie, she claims,

I love a little macho male bonding. I think it's sweet - I do. Even if it probably is latent homosexuality being re-channeled...

Both men silently react to this statement, and it is immediately after this moment that Annie invites both men back to her place, where she will choose one of them to be the man she 'hooks up' with for the baseball season. The promise of sexual activity with Annie displaces any further talk of homo-eroticism, and the men both rise and follow Annie, even if Nuke is slightly taken aback by the impending competition. Crash reassures him with a slap on the back (flirtation?), and Nuke dutifully follows him out of the bar. The atmosphere, however, is light and playful, and the homosexual tension Annie refers to is forgotten and can be easily overlooked in this film at first glance. But the subsequent poetry matches this underlying theme of the film very well.

Later in the film, in a scene whose purpose is to consolidate bonds between Annie and Crash, Annie bursts into Crash's house while he is ironing his clothes. Among the accusations hurled at each other in this scene, Crash mockingly asks Annie why she dresses so excessively to which she replies with a line by William Blake, 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom'. Crash, in his agitated state, simply repeats Blake's name incredulously, while Annie repeats it insistently. Crash's rebuff causes Annie to say that she 'wants' him but Crash still asks her to leave. This is a classic example of the male character feigning disinterest, and it will

ultimately benefit Crash and Annie. As much as Crash rejects and even mocks her philosophies at times ('go on', he says at one point, 'dazzle me'), he is attracted to Annie's poetic side. Again, poetry is present when the onscreen action is at its most pivotal. In the next scene when they are together, at the end of the film, Annie and Crash admit their mutual affection for each other and the film soon ends with a shot of the two dancing.

A quote from Whitman (finally about baseball, but prosaic), closes this excellent film, linking poets and poetry with the sport. She states, again in voiceover,

Walt Whitman once said, "I see great things in baseball. It's our game. The American game. It will repair our losses and be a blessing to us".

And the last line of the film is particularly fitting, which is 'You could look it up'. This line not only crosses the boundary between film and literature, but it actually demonstrates a reality present in the film, increasing its degree of believability and cementing the concept of a natural intertextuality between film and literature. Whitman's words are treated like a tribute to the sport and the film treats baseball as an equal to the art of poetry, so this line is a perfect conclusion.

Films like *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Bull Durham* are by far not the only films that adopt previously published verse for their narratives. There are a large number of films that contain poetry within their narrative frames, some of which is incidental, some of which provides a 'hinge' that major aspects of the film will depend upon. For example, Woody Allen's films periodically contain small amounts of poetry, and one of the best examples is the Academy-Award winning comedy *Hannah and her Sisters*. In New York City, relationships intermingle between three sisters and the men in their lives. e.e. cummings' beautiful poem 'somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond' is used to entice one of the titular sisters, Lee, that Michael Caine's character, Elliot, is in love with. Unfortunately, Elliot is also married to Lee's sister

Hannah (Mia Farrow). The poem's presence is the impetus for the most dramatic turning point in the film, as it grants Elliot his hearts' desire: a direct opportunity to persuade the unhappy Lee (Barbara Hershey) to have an affair with him. Again, only fragments of the poem are read, but Allen chooses the most romantic lines of the poem for inclusion, and they are among the most important lines of the film. The poem's final line ('nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands') is used as one of the film's textual intertitles between scenes. The printed lines on the screen separate the film's scenes into cinematic 'acts' and the poem's last line introduces the act in which Elliot gets his wish. The entire scene is based around the placement of this poetry, since before its citation Lee is naïvely blind to the nature of Elliot's attention, whereas after its introduction she is clearly affected and interested in his motives. Throughout their relationship, Elliot has recommended music, novels and other books to Lee, and shown her attention and affection that he should be bestowing upon his wife, but it is the powerful poetry that finally gets through to her and makes her 'feel really close to [him]' soon afterwards. This poem is yet another example of the 'hinge' that poetry provides in films, where the placement of the poem in the narrative is a catalyst for major plot developments.

Other directors and screenwriters find it more reliable, or more appropriate, to forsake the limitations of poetry already in the public domain, in favour of creating original poems for their films. Let us now study a few cases in which this occurs.

### 1.3.2 Films that Contain Original Poetry

In some films that utilise poetry, a poem is written entirely for the film itself, not selected from any previously published material. Though this is not relevant in terms of the poetry's overall effect, there are some issues that arise in these cases that would have been impossible in

films that adopt existing poetry.<sup>8</sup> Let us look at an example in the 1961 British thriller, *The Innocents*, directed by Jack Clayton.

Based on a novella by Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw* [1897]), *The Innocents* focuses on a governess, Miss Giddens (Deborah Kerr) and two children, Miles (Martin Stephens) and Flora (Pamela Franklin), and on ghostly occurrences at a stately home (Bly) in the English countryside.<sup>9</sup> Kerr's character is hired as the children's governess at the beginning of the film. As the story unfolds, we are slowly supplied with clues and inklings to the children's problems, and the reasons behind them soon seem rooted in the supernatural. In the midst of the odd behaviour of the children, Miles provides the most substantial clue as to the unraveling of the film's mystery: he recites a poem about abandonment and loss, simply called, according to Miles, 'A Poem'.<sup>10</sup> Miles asks, in the poem, 'where shall I go, for my Lord is away'. At this point in the film, at the specific conclusion of the poem's recitation, we are truly made aware of the fuller possibility of Miles' corruption, which we will eventually suspect is a sort of possession. Miles' adoration of the old valet of the house, Peter Quint, persists even though the man is dead, and this poem is the most direct clue that we are given. It invites us to try and work out the nature of Miles' affliction, much like the poem itself invites the ghost of Quint into Miles' own soul and into the house. While reciting, Miles is dressed as a king, draped in a long robe, a crown upon his head. He carries a candle and paces back and forth in front of his audience, Miss Giddens and the housekeeper Mrs. Grose (Megs Jenkins). There is a slight echo effect on his voice, since this is happening in a large, high-ceilinged room, and the echo intensifies the boy's words and their sombre tone. The most important verses of the original piece are as follows:

Whom shall I love when the moon is arisen?

Gone is my Lord and a grave is his prison.

What shall I say when my Lord comes calling?

What shall I say when he knocks on my door?

What shall I say when his feet enter softly,

Leaving the marks of his grave on my floor?

These lines are pregnant with meaning. The theme of this poem has a strong connection to the story of Miles' closeness to Quint, which is explained in more precise detail to Miss Giddens (and to us) immediately preceding this scene. Close-up shots of Miles' face are used in this sequence, intercut with close-ups of Miss Giddens looking progressively more anxious as the poem continues. The camera tracks Miles as he wanders the room, his face softly lit by the flickering candle he consistently holds in front of his face. There is also a high key light focused on his face, intensifying its effect on the transfixed Miss Giddens (and on the viewer). His countenance looks pale and ghostly, and his gaze is not focused on any specific object, until the last three lines of the poem, which are,

Enter my Lord, come from your prison

Come from your grave for the moon is arisen

Welcome my Lord.

This is a classic moment, found often in horror tales, when the vampire/ghost/spirit is inadvertently 'welcomed' into a house, and then begins to wreak havoc on its inhabitants. With these words Miles approaches and stares through the glass doors on the rear wall of the room, behind and to the left of the sofa that Miss Giddens and Mrs. Grose are sitting on. The last line of the poem is whispered off-screen, as the accompanying shot is of Miss Giddens, looking worriedly at Miles. The next shot, after the poem's completion, is a close-up profile of his face, as he gazes out of the window and slowly turns his head towards the governess, then slowly back

towards the window. The camera then cuts back to Miss Giddens, who wonders aloud to Mrs. Grose, almost in the form of a protest, whether Miles knows about the ghost of Quint. It is clear that this scene, using poetry, contains the ultimate invitation for Quint's ghost; the lines serve as an introduction to and evidence of the possible spiritual possession of Miles. Since the film uses poetry to convey this possession makes the event even more elusive and indirect, and since this is a thriller, it seems spookier as well. As Miss Giddens states, the children are seemingly involved in 'something secretive, whispery and indecent'. Yet, the story also considers that the presence of the spirits is completely a fabrication by Miss Giddens, and its natural ambiguity is the basis for the fear it can inspire in the viewer. Though the novel is equally as spine chilling as the film, the poetry is absent from the novel altogether.

*The Innocents* relies on understatement and uncertainty. There are a number of 'unmentionable' pieces of information in the film; its slow unraveling is mostly due to Mrs. Grose's unwillingness to relate the histories of the house, involving Quint and the former governess, Miss Jessel. The story is surrounded by imprecise circumstances and ends with questionable conclusions. In a famous alternative reading of the film and novel's plot, there is enough evidence to suggest that the governess herself is responsible for the madness in the children, forcing them to face their nightmares and unfortunate pasts as a manifestation of her own personal insecurities and unrequited desires. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the steadfast Mrs. Grose is not affected by the supposedly supernatural occurrences in and around the house. In her initial interview, Miss Giddens is asked whether or not she has 'imagination', which supports the idea of her own mind creating the illusion of a possession. Even if this were the case, poetry still functions in a way beneficial to and perfectly in harmony with the primary aim of the story, which is centered on the exposure of the mansion's dark past. Much like

Rossetti's piece in *Kiss Me Deadly*, the poem used in Clayton's film operates like a piece of a puzzle. Miss Giddens must try and comprehend the true meaning behind Miles' words, as Mike Hammer must do the same to discover that a key was found inside the body of Christina. In *The Innocents*, each time a step is taken in the direction of shedding light on the mystery, something occurs to make the viewer doubt the validity of the 'ghost story'. At the conclusion of this scene, Miss Giddens asks Mrs. Grose, 'What if Miles knows', referring to the presence of Quint's ghost. The housekeeper never answers, as instead Flora, Miles' (equally disturbed?) younger sister, interjects with the words 'Knows what, Miss Giddens dear?' The camera lingers on her in a medium close-up as an all-too-innocent smile spreads across her face, and a very slow dissolve superimposes Flora's sickeningly sweet expression upon a shot of the two ladies discussing the event for an unnatural length of time. Flora's expression here is a materialization of the ironic meaning behind the title of the film; it is a microcosm of the lack of any innocence in the children whatsoever, in fact it seems the children know all too well what is really happening. Are they are playing a game with Miss Giddens, with the ghosts and with the viewer? If so, Miles' poem is part of the game's strategy. The slow dissolve on Flora's face is one of the most haunting (and memorable) images of the film, since it immediately follows the powerful poetry, and since it is unconventional in its shot duration.

This scene from *The Innocents* uses original poetry to further intensify a situation already mysterious and tense. The fact that we are permitted to assume Miles is the author of the piece, just because we are not told otherwise, creates an even more expressive scenario, in that Miles' own words give way or at least lead to the film's darkest secret. This is the primary difference between films that use previously published poetry and films that create verse specifically for the story of a film; part of appreciating and linking the poetry's purpose to the narrative of the film is



to assume authorship on the part of one of the characters. In Leo McCarey's *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (1942), original poetry functions again as an intensifier, a mechanism from the mind of a character within the framework of the story. This makes the poetry much more evocative and hastens the central development of the characters involved. This time it is not a mystery's solution at the film's core, but a love that must be proven or honestly admitted. Cary Grant's Pat O'Toole is a radio news broadcaster and analyst, an ex-reporter whom often lies in order to achieve an angle on a story or to get an interview. The target of his affection, Catherine Butte-Smith (Ginger Rogers) therefore has to be convinced that his advances are not an extension of his typical behaviour, but genuine. Poetry functions at this point, helping O'Toole prove the authenticity of his feelings (in spite of the complications involved with attempting to attract the fiancée of a suspected Nazi collaborator).

Catherine's naïveté regarding the truth about her husband is almost unbelievable in the film, but Cary Grant's typically manipulative but charming and righteous O'Toole is the man who opens her eyes. Not only is patriotism celebrated in their love affair (through their shared American roots and occasional bouts of nostalgia), but the fact that they both have Irish heritage is emphasised as well (Catherine's original surname is O'Hara), strengthening the sense that the two are destined to be together. The process of the unveiling for Catherine is an interesting one, and O'Toole is clever, slow moving and deliberate in exposing her husband's real motives. The film contains other examples of poetry as well, including quotation from Robert Browning and Shakespeare. Both of these quotations are by the dreamy Catherine, as the two get drunk together in a bar. The extent of Catherine's blindness to the acts of the Nazis is even further exemplified by her sappy rendition of Browning ('God's in his heaven / All's right with the world'), to which O'Toole sarcastically replies, 'That is a truly remarkable bit of philosophy, Baroness, coming at a

time when the whole world's gone behind a cloud'. Here we see O'Toole the realist matched against Catherine the idealist, and the patient O'Toole is wise in his subtle rebuttal of her silly claim. Fittingly, her next quotation is from Shakespeare; it is about self-honesty and in this case, the fear of committing an act of infidelity even when confronted with a sudden undermining truth:

This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man. (*Hamlet*: I, iii, 78-80)

At the conclusion of these lines, Catherine dramatically slows down, clearly at a moment of realisation. O'Toole says, 'Now we're getting somewhere', and uses this moment to quote an Irving Berlin song to her, presented as if poetry as well. O'Toole is aware that he is reaching Catherine, and this is one of the most crucial moments of her epiphany; it is significant that the scene calls for more poetry as a convincing medium as well. Unfortunately, Catherine still must undergo a sincere process of realisation before she finally will fully understand the political consequences of the acts of her fiancée, as O'Toole later laments, 'If a gnat dove into your pool of knowledge, he'd have broken his neck'.

In the most romantic scene of the film, which is also the couple's defining moment, O'Toole reveals that he has discovered 'ambition' ('I want to *do* things') and foretells the new man he is willing to become by offering her a poem that he 'found himself' writing one night. He mockingly insults his own ability ('it's not so good but the thought's not bad though'), and tells her to read it:

Let's make our love song one that will live,

Let's make it one and forget and forgive.

As life's shadows lengthen over the years,  
Our love will strengthen through laughter and tears  
I will know your thoughts, you will know mine,  
Without ever a word, without ever a sign.  
We will know what is deep in each other's heart,  
We will know for it must be, till death do us part.

She is obviously touched by the poem, and she accepts it as a symbol, a token of a genuine love for her that will last over time, and a willingness to sacrifice that which must be sacrificed in such dangerous times. The simple, greeting-card style poetry varies between dactylic and trochaic tetrameter. It uses clichés has a childish quality to it, using an 'aabb' rhyme scheme. Yet this poem, as it is read by Catherine, provides the most poignant moment in the film, accompanying the couple on their 'only night in Paris' and helping them imagine their love can be fulfilled ('Let's suppose everything, just for tonight'). This poem obviously communicates O'Toole's love for Catherine, and provides the impetus for the climactic honest expression of their love for each other. Even though it begins to rain, they keep on 'supposing' and the scene ends with a kiss. Much like 'A Poem' in *The Innocents*, the poem that supposedly penned by a main character in the film adds substance to his individuality. If there was any doubt as to the validity of O'Toole's feelings, this poem lays suspicion to rest. Poetry 'creates visible ... forms for something that is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement' (Deren, in Vogel, 1963, 4). Only original poetry would convey this strength of emotion best; poetry adapted for a specifically generated film character would not be as authentic if that character were to use it as if it were their own.

#### 1.4 Conclusion: It Does Not Have 'To Be a Thing'

This evidence of poetry as a catalyst for significant narrative development begs us to ask why poetry, in particular, should act as a hinging element? There is a simple answer to that question, since poetry is, of course, not the only device that films use to drive their plots. Most of the time, if there is an object, a single thing that a film's development depends on, it will be a tangible item or vital piece of information, like the famous 'Rosebud' sled in *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) or the search for Woody the toy cowboy in *Toy Story 2* (Lasseter, 1999). But poetry functions in a way that is different from all these other elements; poetry contains meaning within it that can be analysed and interpreted independent of the film it is cited in, but also its meanings can be *applied* to the film that cites it. It is true that a quotation of prose can operate in the same manner, but poetry contains rhythm, meter, metaphor and other poetic devices to diversify its meaning. About the only comparable mechanism to the usage of poetry in film would be the symbolic (possibly repetitive) use of a song. It is only the rare film, however, that uses that song to a symbolic extent, allowing its lyrics to relate to the film's plot and influence it.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the question we should ask about poetry in films is not why it is used, but why it should not be, as versatile a form of language as it is. Poetry opens up a minefield of possible interpretation, and for films that would benefit from any degree of ambiguity, poetry is a perfect hinge to move the story upon.

Poetry has enjoyed a new popularity in its placement in films, especially over the last decade. Poems are sometimes recited in full, as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994), sometimes alluded to as a comparative medium, as in *Bridget Jones' Diary* (S. Maguire, 2001), or sometimes provide a pivotal structural tool the film depends upon, as in the films described above in this chapter. An especially fine example of a modern film's use of a poem as a

motivational tool is Greg Mottola's *The Daytrippers* (1997). Poetry's function in this film is very similar to its function in *Kiss Me Deadly*, in that it provides clues and motivations for travel, investigation, suspicion and consideration on the part of protagonists and viewers alike. In *The Daytrippers*, the poem in question, part of a love letter, is found in a young couple's house; at some point the letter fell behind a chest of drawers. At the beginning of the film, the wife (Eliza, played by Hope Davis) finds it while cleaning up the bedroom, after the husband (Louis, played by Stanley Tucci) has left for work in the morning. Eliza unfolds the piece of paper, begins to read it with a concerned expression on her face, and then the camera cuts to a completely unrelated scene of characters we have, as of yet, not been introduced to in a setting that is also new and unfamiliar. Soon we will learn that the two older people in the house are Eliza's mother (Rita Malone, played by Anne Meara) and father (Jim Malone, played by Pat McNamara).

As soon as Eliza arrives at her parents' house, Jim greets her by asking 'What brings you here', which is a structurally significant piece of dialogue, giving the poem motivational purpose. Soon, the family is discussing the poem around the breakfast table, with various ranges of speculation occurring, from a coarsely analytical approach by Eliza's younger sister, Jo<sup>12</sup> (Parker Posey) to the hapless and uncertain remarks by Rita ('I don't understand poetry'). The lines in question are incorporated into a short letter from an obvious admirer (androgynously named 'Sandy'), and are the four lines of the last stanza of Andrew Marvell's 'The Definition of Love' (1681):

Therefore the love which us doth bind,

But Fate so enviously debars,

Is the conjunction of the mind,

And opposition of the stars.

The stanza concludes a poem about a love that cannot be fulfilled due to Fate's intervention, about a 'parallel' love that cannot be made fruitful due to some 'Impossibility'. If this letter was written to Louis, then he is obviously involved in an affair-like situation. The question as to how to confront Louis then emerges, and it is the garrulous Rita who suggests that they take Eliza into New York with them so she can talk to him face-to-face about the letter and the poem, since 'It's very easy to lie on the phone. See, you can't see the eyes. Eyes always give you away'. The next scene soon commences with a long tracking shot, with a snare drum beating in the background, of the family marching out of the house and into the car, the quest about to begin.

Throughout the rest of the film, the poem appears at various intervals, but it continues to govern the thoughts of the character that we most sympathise with, Eliza. Throughout the trip, her mind is wholly focussed on the contents of the letter, while the rest of the family makes infuriatingly insipid small talk. Even Jo's boyfriend Carl (Liev Schrieber), who seems to have creative ability since he has written a novel, can only spout generally vague literary or socio-political notions, some of them incorrect.<sup>13</sup> When Eliza meets author Edward Mazler (Campbell Scott) at Louis' office, he offers an explanation of the stanza (and of the entire poem) which is much to her dismay, since he tells her it is a 'love poem'. He discusses a double meaning in the last line of the poem, explaining how the line means both that they cannot see the same stars, the same heaven, because they are on 'opposite sides of the planet', and also that their love is in opposition to the stars, 'against fate'. His explanation and conveyance to her is made more significant due to his obvious attraction to her, but as soon as he meets her he discovers that she is married to one of his colleagues. It is quite fitting that he talks to her about a love that is impossible. In this way, the poem infiltrates almost every aspect of the film's themes, and helps to identify the subtle interrelations between the characters, exaggerating their qualities to the

extent that the film is at times in danger of whittling its protagonists down to stereotypes. Yet, the poem is able to guide the viewer through the conflicting personalities of the frantic figures, and the film ends with an unexpected twist on the suspected affair.

Films like *The Daytrippers* embrace poetry and manipulate it, adapting it to their scenarios. Marvell's poem is from the mid-1600s, yet it translates and performs extremely well in the film, infusing the modern story with a richness and art that is admirable and eventually shocking. No matter what form it takes, it is important to recognise that poetry is fast becoming a familiar dynamic in a wide variety of films, and filmmakers are no longer afraid that its presence will alienate an audience, but instead realise that the inclusion of poetry adds diversity, providing another layer to a film. Today, poetry is enjoying a popularity that it has never experienced before in the world of cinema, perhaps as a result of the growing acceptance of cinematic experimentation, and a willingness by the public not to switch off but to listen when poetry is recited.

Before concluding this chapter, one other film deserves mention, which has been advertised as being entirely 'in verse' on television talk shows and the internet.<sup>14</sup> *The Monkey's Mask* (S. Lang, 2001) is based on an Australian 264-page 'verse-novel' by Dorothy Porter. During the summer of 2001 it is travelling on a festival circuit, appearing in the United Kingdom as part of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. The film centres on a young girl named Mickey's (Abbie Cornish) murder, and private investigator Jill Fitzpatrick (Susan Porter), who also happens to be a lesbian. The murdered girl wrote and performed poetry and was a student in a college English class taught by Diana (Kelly McGillis), a bisexual. The film contains portions of poetic inner narration, like when Jill is alone, musing on the murder case and on her sexual longings for Diana, but all of the dialogue in the film appears to be in normal conversational

prose. Jill, who is desperate to find clues to her death, also studies Mickey's written poetry. There are also other characters in the film who play poets, and a major piece of evidence which is a videotape of Mickey reciting a poem to a café audience, but the film is not by any means obviously in verse. Much like Betjeman's colloquial sounding commentary in his film-poems, the dialogue to this film may be structured like verse on the page, in Porter's novel and/or in the film's script, but it is not unmistakably poetry as it is being performed by the actors.<sup>15</sup> Readers of the novel have written that the verse 'at first glance appears to be random thoughts shaped in the form of unstructured poetry' (Keller, 2001). New York's newspaper *The Village Voice* claims that 'large chunks of dialogue and narration are lifted from the original verse novel, which may or may not explain lines like "I never knew poetry could be as sticky as sex"' (Lim, 2001). The film is clearly not as poetic as the novel, which won the Age Poetry Book of the Year Award, 2000.

The most significant aspect of the film is its structural approach: each 'section' of the film is treated like a movement in a poem, since each is introduced by a textual intertitle on-screen (reminiscent of in Woody Allen's techniques) and by a few lines of poetry in the form of interior monologue by Jill. In her search for answers, Jill encounters more and more poetry by Mickey and other poets that contain clues that point to her murderer, but the end of the film has a bizarre twist that disappointingly negates a potentially interesting evolution, similar to the resolution in *Kiss Me Deadly*.<sup>16</sup> Unpolished and overtly sexual, the brashness of the lesbian lust-affair soon dominates the script (written by Anne Kennedy) and by the film's end the use of poetry is almost forgotten. In fact, an alternative title to *The Monkey's Mask*, according to the Internet Movie Database (<http://uk.imdb.com>), is *Poetry, Sex*.

The film-poem, in its application of poetry to simultaneously shot images, is part of the evolutionary process that has permitted a gradual progression to this state of mind throughout the



years and throughout the history of motion pictures. Likewise, the film containing poetry has continually proven how films and poems work together, in brief snippets and/or for the duration of a well-crafted film. The next chapter will help to further track this process through time, placing emphasis on the most important works of film and poetry, or the 'poetic', together.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EVOLUTION, OR 'PRE-HISTORY' OF THE FILM-POEM

[How can one] allegorise on one's own hook on the subject of a poem, without killing, for oneself and everyone, a distinct idea of the poet's?

- Christina Rossetti<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.1 Film as an Art: When did it Start?

The roots of film-poems, both Harrisonian and otherwise, are widespread, and also have recognisable versions of the modern-day formulae for film-poems at the core of their construction. Some of the qualities of even the earliest installations of poetry in the cinema still survive intact in today's most 'cutting-edge' film-poems.

Film and poetry have existed together, although not always peacefully, since near the beginning of cinematic history. As Peter Symes writes in his introduction to his collection of film-poems (*Words on Film*), 'The use of verse commentary on documentary film is not a new development. Experiments with the technique go back a long way' (1992, 1). The producer of film-poems has never referred to any specific text on film aesthetics as his source for such a claim, but the content of one particular text proves Symes' point.<sup>2</sup> Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922) is generally regarded as the first book which treated film artistically and not just another manual meant 'to teach office boys ways to make "quick money" in the "movies"' (18), as Lindsay himself claims. Previous to Lindsay's work, most cinema books were motivated by this 'get rich quick' scheme at the time. Lindsay's work will feature as a primary text in my 'journey' through the earlier instances of motion picture poetry.

Originally written in 1915, *The Art of the Moving Picture* was revised by Lindsay in 1922, presumably after he had seen more films. This book, although preachy at times, hopelessly dated and obviously limited in scope, does an excellent job of predicting the valuable artistic medium that film would someday become. It insists that art museums, universities and English departments all over the world (but mostly America) embrace the medium of film as a way by which the written literary word would become excitingly and artistically alive. Lindsay never uses the term 'film-poem', his work pre-dating the coinage of the term by about ten to fifteen years. His studies are more congruent with the idea of 'inner poetry' that Harrison detects in his preface to his 1998 film-poem, citing Pasolini (xxvii). Nevertheless, Lindsay's study is the first of its kind, and the first to attribute a poetic nature to film.

To introduce his purpose and convince his readership of his goal to 'spread the word' of the value of film as an art form, Lindsay includes many passages that support certain films and their deserved admittance to art museums and the like. For example:

I had converted one Art Institute director to the idea that [the film, in this case *The Wild Girl of the Sierras* (Powell, 1916), and referred to as "painting-in-motion"] could be shown in an Art Museum as promise of greater things in this world (3).

After this particular passage, the author then refers to Powell's film as 'one of the loveliest bits of poetry ever put into screen or fable' (4). Lindsay's campaigns were successful in many instances, and in fact the director of the Denver Art Association, George W. Eggers, prefaces the revised edition (1922), in which he supports Lindsay's then revolutionary observations. This film is only one of many that Lindsay evaluates and mentions in a casual yet awed style, and we are reminded as readers that these films were only available for viewing at limited times in the early days of silent cinema.<sup>3</sup>

Lindsay is the earliest writer to detect the possibilities inherent in filmic adaptation of poetry. In his chapter 'Patriotic Splendor', he illustrates the need for poetry in the movies:

We must have Whitmanesque scenarios, based on moods akin to that of the poem *By Blue Ontario's Shore* ... Whitman brought the idea of democracy itself to our sophisticated literati, but he did not persuade the democracy itself to read his democratic poems. Sooner or later the kinoscope will do what he could not (65-66).

Lindsay writes emphatically, but he is often vague, naïve and prone to generalisation. Though these traits (to be expected in the first book about art and the cinema) are present in the work, his points are clear and firmly made. In the next few chapters, the author attempts to describe what he feels are the strongest examples of poetic film. His primary aim was to convince his readership that films needed to be included in the art schools and museums of the country, but Lindsay also inadvertently identified some of the earliest poetic sequences ever filmed. These sequences begin 'the prehistory of the film-poem' and can be traced back, with Lindsay as principal watchdog, as far as 1911. In Chapter Seven, Lindsay discusses Lawrence Trimble's *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Trimble's film deals, as might be expected, with American patriotism, specifically the American Civil War (which occurred only fifty years earlier at this time). The film opens with President Lincoln in the White House, 'brooding over the lack of response to his last call for troops' (Lindsay, 73). Julia Ward Howe, the author of the famed 'Battle Hymn' observes the inactive enlistment headquarters with the President. Soon after cataloguing numerous examples of domestic apathy towards the American armed forces, Julia Ward Howe is 'shown in her room at midnight... rising in a trance and writing the Battle Hymn at a table by the bed' (74). This introduces the sequence that looks and sounds like an early film-poem, akin to the images

attached to other, later cinematic uses of verse. *Night Mail* (Watt and Wright, 1936, verse by W.H. Auden) is often referred to as the first film to employ film-poem tactics, but I must specify that it is not the first film to use poetry as its medium of verbal expression. *Night Mail* was probably the first film that specifically requested a poet's original verse, and therefore it has a 'commissioned' film-poem as part of its documentary-styled plot (this film will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Yet, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, released twenty-five years earlier, adopted this concept for an existing piece of poetry. Lindsay writes of the specified sequence:

The pictures that might possibly have passed before her mind during the trance are thrown upon the screen. The phrases they illustrate are not in the final order of the poem, but in the possible sequence in which they went on the paper in the first sketch.

(73)

Significantly, the author chooses to say that the images are 'thrown' on the screen. This sounds like a highly probable interpretation for a swiftly moving poetic sequence that attempts to merge image and verse. Today we might term this section of the film a montage, and view it as a device by which the filmmaker can achieve a passable translation of a voluminous or complex amount of material. Though the images in this sequence are conspicuously literal, the film achieves its end, which is to illustrate the possible visual interpretation of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'. Lindsay describes and evaluates parts of the sequence:

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”; a gracious picture of the nativity; “I have seen him in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps” and “They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps” – for these are given symbolic pageants of the Holy Sepulchre crusaders. Then there is a visible parable,

showing a marketplace in some wicked capital, neither Babylon, Tyre, nor Ninevah, but all of them in essential character. First come spectacles of rejoicing, cruelty, and waste. Then from Heaven descend flood and fire, brimstone and lightning... Just before the overthrow, the line is projected upon the screen: "He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword". Then the heavenly host becomes gradually visible upon the air, marching towards the audience, almost crossing the footlights, and blowing their solemn trumpets. With this picture the line is given us to read: "Our God is marching on". This host appears in the photoplay as often as the refrain sweeps into the poem (74-75).

The analysis is curiously similar to that of a modern-day film-poem, but two major factors are worth noting. The first is the nature of the verbal material, which was not written at the same time as the film was shot, so it is not purely a film-poem synthesis. The second is the process of repetition, a technique used to a greater degree in the modern-day music video. The repetition of an image to match a chorus or repeated verse is often seen in a film-poem, since repeating an image or verse has the effect of reinforcing the principle message of a work. This causes that specific image to be the one most precisely instilled in the minds of the audience. Since this film is covered in Lindsay's survey of 'religious' photoplay, the message of this film is meant to be religious, though it seems more a spirit of American nationalism or patriotism that pervades this film. Nevertheless, Lindsay identifies the power that a repeated image contains, especially when matched with an emphatic repeated verse, by commenting:

The celestial company, its imperceptible emergence, its spiritual power when in the ascendant, is a thing never to be forgotten, a tableau that proves the motion picture a great religious instrument (75).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the motion picture has become a great instrument and a medium of conveyance that Lindsay could not have possibly fathomed at the time, but he importantly observes the potential that motion pictures contained in their development, both poetically and non-poetically. He culminates his discussion of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* with the declaration, 'Every student of American Art should see this film', implying that the poetic sequence of the film (the only segment of the film discussed in detail) is worthy of artistic classification. To date, this film has not been cited by any film-poet as a major influence (in published form or through personal contact), but the works of D.W. Griffith indeed have, to which this film bears a striking resemblance.

## 2.2 D.W. Griffith: Innovation with Poetry

Griffith, the premier director of the silent era, was known to often use 'poetic' techniques to link ideas and themes in his films. 'The task I am trying to achieve is to make you see', he wrote, likening his work to that of a painter that transforms the site of an ugly, old, rundown barn to that of something beautiful, through the attention to detail his or her brushstrokes create (Stephenson and Debrix, 13). *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* is most similar to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) in terms of genre (political and historical dramatisation) and its forms of cinematography (the use of montage-like cutting). *Birth of a Nation* was America's first major full-length feature film, and it "took audiences by storm" (Knight, 1979, 26). Nearly three hours (twelve reels) in length, 'the passions it aroused, the tensions it created, lasted beyond the theater... [audiences] overflowed into the streets, and race riots and mob action followed in the wake of its presentation in many cities' (Knight, 27-28). From its intimate opening shot of crying children and women upon a hill, through its battle scenes and racially motivated clashes, to its 'painfully

poetic epilogue' (Knight, 29), there has arguably never been a film since then which 'swept along with such cumulative force' (Knight, 26). Though today it is sometimes regarded as 'a simple-minded, horrifyingly racist piece of garbage' it is uncertain as to whether this opinion undermines the film's 'value as the genesis of film as art' or not (Carlson, 1999). Griffith was the first to use close-ups of actors and other forms of framing for dramatic effect, and he did not limit his creative camera work to shooting people.<sup>5</sup> He initiated the use of close-ups of objects at times, rather than actors, displaying their prominence within the storyline and thereby making them 'act' as well. Griffith was the master of the subtle nuance, gesture or facial expression, popularising the lengthy close-up in which minor, barely perceptible changes occur on-screen. His stance as a 'poetic' filmmaker is justified as a result of his then unconventional, innovative methods of filming, which included the cinematic equivalent of some poetic tools or devices, like symbolism or metaphor. 'The characterization though vivid symbol' (Knight, 28) and his way of manipulating camera techniques to make them 'serve his purpose' (23) were what led to Griffith's title as the 'father of film technique' (22) and a reputation as a poetic filmmaker.

Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), a much less controversial film than *Birth of a Nation* and one which has garnered 'greatest film of all time' reviews in numerous forms of publication, also uses poetic methods in the construction of its complex four part narrative. In fact it uses a poem to link the four different lines of action that take place in the film: Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' (1859). 'A recurrent shot of a woman (Lillian Gish), rocking a cradle, a symbol of time, of eternity, of rebirth' (Stephenson and Debrix, 1974, 67) is used to metaphorically merge the four drastically different plot episodes. This inter-cutting was a film technique never before seen in the American cinema at the time.



In Lindsay's commentary on the film, he calls Griffith 'the ungrammatical Byron of the films and certainly as magnificent as Byron, and... he is the first of his kind... I for one, am willing to name him with Marlowe' (1922 ed., xxvi). Clearly, Griffith was and is seen as a pioneering filmmaker who used poetry or poetic sequencing to achieve his expressive goals. One of his writing credits includes a lesser film, at least in terms of fame and notoriety. *Enoch Arden* (Cabanne, 1915) is one of the only films from the early 1900s which takes its storyline from poetry, based on Tennyson's long poem.<sup>6</sup> Much like *Intolerance* uses the leitmotif of the woman rocking the cradle to reflect the theme of domesticity, peace and time, and additionally to link the film with the poem, *Enoch Arden* 'is a photographic rendering in many ways as fastidious as Tennyson's versification' (Lindsay, 24).<sup>7</sup> Lindsay's description of the film is perhaps as fine an example of the explanation of a 'poetic cinema' as there exists in better known works concerning the cinema as art, such as Jean Cocteau's classic book *The Art of Cinema* (1973) or Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969). He describes the film to his readership, whom he often seems to personally 'adopt' through the course of the book, by using a particularly vivid phrasing:

If you cannot get your local manager to bring *Enoch Arden*, reread that poem of Tennyson's and translate it in your own mind's eye into a gallery of six hundred delicately toned photographs hung in logical order, most of them cosy interior scenes, some of the faces five feet from chin to forehead in the more personal episodes, yet exquisitely fair. Fill in the out-of-door scenes and general gatherings with the appointments of an idyllic English fisher-village and you will get an approximate conception of what we mean by the Intimate-and-friendly Motion Picture, or the Intimate Picture, as I generally call it, for convenience (25).

By the 'intimate picture' Lindsay is referring to a film that deals with a domestic situation and a family-oriented theme. He links the idea of poetry with this 'intimacy' since most of his examples for this self-invented genre involve poetic sequences or poetry itself. But Lindsay also takes the idea of the filmic adaptation of a poem one step further with the likening of the film's impact on his memory to that of the poem's, by saying, 'seen several months ago it fills my eye-imagination and eye-memory more than that particular piece of Tennyson's fills word-imagination and word-memory' (25). With this statement, Lindsay automatically compares film as a medium of expression to poetry as a medium of expression, and it is clear which he favours. This may have been due to the newness or novelty of the techniques of film, and would explain some of the author's excited declarations regarding them. In any case, he is comparing one artistic form of the same work to another, and he chooses the visual form as more effective. Using statements like these as foundations on which to build ideas, and the filmic use of poetry to this degree, there were soon further developments in the adaptation of poetry for the cinema. The poetry of Walt Whitman was again used as an inspiration for a silent film now inducted by some into a rendition of the genre of 'film-poem'.

### 2.3 The Earliest Short Film-Poem?

In terms of a film based solely on the verses of a poem and without any other text or material included in its plot or storyline, *Manhatta* (1921) must be the first example. William Wees, a noted lecturer on the film-poem and supporter of the film-poem movement, writes about this film:

This practice of juxtaposing poetic texts and cinematic images goes back at least as far as 1921, when Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand released their short film *Manhatta*. By

combining shots of New York City with quotations and paraphrases from several poems by the great 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet Walt Whitman, Sheeler and Strand not only celebrated American urbanism and modern technology (including the technology of cinema itself), but also inaugurated a new film genre, the poetry-film (1999, 1).

*Manhatta* appears to be the first self-contained example of film and poetry's simultaneous presence, where the short film is inspired by the lyrics of the poem. It is described by filmmaker Peter Todd, in the notes for his touring 'programme of film poems' as 'a famous impressionistic representation of Walt Whitman's lyric hymn to the city' (1998). Yet, it is not a true film-poem since the modern definition suggests, and at times stresses, collaboration between poet and filmmaker at the same time, which was impossible for Whitman in 1921.<sup>8</sup> But *Manhatta* contains, albeit primitive, excellent examples of the types of mechanisms film-poems strive to achieve, and it harbours the same goals at its heart. I wish to analyse the dynamics of this early hybrid.

*Manhatta* sets images of New York City against the words of Walt Whitman's poetry, with verses chosen from his poems bearing relationships to the city, especially from 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' (1856). A fairly short experimental work of 9 minutes, this film happens to follow many of the techniques that film-poems of today have adopted as genre-specific rules. It contains, like *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, the attempted matching of probable lyrical implication with a visual interpretation of the chosen lyrics. For example, we can see this specifically at the point in the film where the words 'with iron rails' are printed onscreen and then the next shot displays trains at a station, with some distinct iron rails gleaming in the sunlight. Similarly, in the following sequence, the film displays steamships and other boats in the New York harbour after featuring lines about them as well. The visual content of the film opens with

shots of the city and its general bustle at peak travel times. Shots of the ferry, of people going to work, and of the skyline of Manhattan all are generated from the introductory lines.

Unfortunately, the film does not transcend the boundaries of static photography by much, except with the grainy camera pans of some of New York's skyscrapers. Here, Lindsay's comment about *Enoch Arden* comes to mind, regarding the 'gallery of six hundred photographs' (25), only these shots do not move as dramatically as those in Cabanne's film. In fact, the film has been labeled 'a pioneer, but little more' in the Internet Movie Database, and the film is described as unmemorable (Hartman, 1999). The same review of the film, however, claims it is one of the original 'city symphony' films. This statement, coupled with the claim that 'there is very little, if anything, memorable about *Manhatta*', clearly ignores the inclusion of poetry as an innovation within the film in favour of discussing the short as compared to other, longer, more impressive work. A 1999 article by Gareth Evans, describing Peter Todd's touring collection of film poems, evaluates each one of the included films individually. Beginning the programme, *Manhatta* is called the 'source of the American avant-garde' and a 'street poem that also gets the penthouse shot' (9). Labeled as a source simply because of its age and unpretentiousness, the film is also said to 'locate words in skyscrapers, river traffic, industry and crowds' (9). According to this opinion, the image can indeed then give the impression of informing the verse, as much as the verse seems to guide the imagery in terms of what to show the observer about the city. It is difficult to permanently affirm which one of the media, poetry or image, should take precedent in an estimation of the piece. This concern has also been briefly addressed in a review of the programme from *Sight and Sound*:

This is the perpetual problem of the film poem - as in all cross-form collaborative efforts: one element becomes subservient to the other. A balance or an uneasy truce must be maintained (Lambirth, 32).

An early work such as this should expect such doubts cast upon it, but at least the film introduces this problem, which is more notable than any film process that would attempt to solve it.

Therefore, this film does contain something memorable, and is much more than a pioneer. It is a veritable precursor to an entire movement and an engineer of larger, provocative questions about the relationship between film and poetry.

There is no music to accompany the film, unless it was played live (and this was probably the intention of the directors). Regardless, some of the shots of the Brooklyn Bridge, which are aligned with the line 'Shapes of the bridges', are well-timed, as are the shots of the hustling crowds of New York matched with Whitman's verse about them. These bits of verse that are intercut with the scenes of New York City become 'ushers' for the viewer through the projection of the film, while we grow accustomed to the printed text telling us what we will see next. The viewer is clearly waiting for the next set of text to appear onscreen as a kind of 'guide' to the context of the images projected.<sup>9</sup>

Film-poems today also often employ a 'guide' of some sort, whether it is an invented character, as English poet Tony Harrison is fond of implementing, or the simple usage of the printed poem as text onscreen. This process may seem fairly simplistic, but in reality it is not, given the fledgling status of film as an art form in 1921. The scenes chosen in *Manhatta* are logical accompaniments to straightforward lines, yet they still overstep the bounds of the poem (or in this case, a collection of selected verses) that exists on its own as a printed medium. The images direct the reader/viewer's imagination, and no longer does he/she simply assess the page

of the book as he reads/observes the poem. Among the film-poem's greatest source of power and among its greatest reasons for negative criticism, selecting an image is a defining characteristic of the film-poem.

Lindsay does not mention *Manhatta* in his evaluation of the applications of films and poetry, but he does ask an important question in Chapter Seventeen (XVII). After he lists a few poets under the heading, 'the Imagists' he claims: <sup>10</sup>

They are gathering followers and imitators...the Imagist impulse need not be confined to verse. Why would you be imitators of these leaders when you might be creators in a new medium? There is a clear parallelism between their point of view in verse and the Intimate-and-friendly Photoplay, especially when it is developed... An Imagist film would offer a noble challenge to the overstrained emotion, the overloaded splendor, the mere repetition of what are at present the finest photoplays (239-240).

*Manhatta* may have attempted to imitate the Imagists, however primitively or simply, and it was just too small a film to be noticed by Lindsay, or too recently made at the time of the revised edition's publication, or it was missed by the author. Lindsay refers to Imagist poetry's tone, and Strand and Sheeler's film, if it does not accomplish anything else, does achieve the tone or mood of the selected Whitman lines. 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' for example, is a lulling, rambling, quickly paced poem that rushes through its long lines and nine stanzas of variable length. It involves much repetition of certain 'city words' and phrases, like 'shore', 'ferry', 'ships', 'the hundreds and hundreds that cross' and the geographical names of places like 'Brooklyn' and 'Manhattan'. In much the same way, the film *Manhatta* is repetitive and abrupt, quickly paced with cuts and scenes of the city and its surroundings, yet is lulling by way of simplicity. Hartman claims that all the film 'really offers to modern audiences is a reason to fall asleep' (1), which is a

harsh and sophomoric opinion. I treat this film as an inspiration for the continued juxtaposition of poem and image, but it follows the same schema that many pure film-poems still do today. Lindsay knew the importance of the preservation of mood in a film adapted from a poem, when he wrote, again relating to the Imagists, 'Read some of the poems of the people listed above, then imagine the same moods in the films' (240).

The next level to which the film-poem may progress should now be obvious: what would happen if a film-poem attempted to represent lines that are not as plainly descriptive as 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', for example? Sheeler and Strand made an effort to approach the level to which poetic devices can be interpreted filmically by breaking apart the poem's inherently stratified lines, matching them with the film's choppy, strung-together series of images. But more complex poems began to slowly adopt the filmic medium as their method of visual expression, and the films which depicted their imagery became longer and more densely or thoroughly developed. With the coming of the 'talkie' (1927), sound added a new dimension to the content of the gradually evolving film-poem. Poetry began to appear in documentary films, which were searching for new ways to convey meaning. Documentary is the form of film that poetry would eventually flourish within, discovered to be a perfect asset in punctuating straightforward factual material.

#### 2.4 Sound and the Development of Film and Poetry

Repeatedly, almost incessantly cited as the strongest influence on the development of the film-poem, the General Post Office film-unit's *Night Mail* (Wright and Watt, 1936) contained a segment of roughly about three minutes in which W.H. Auden's poetry is spoken in rhythmical conjunction with a series of images relating to the travel of a British night mail-train. The

sequence concludes the film, for which Auden wrote prose, as well as poetry, and it is the principle model for the modern definition of the film-poem, though the poetry was written for existing footage instead of allowing it to inform the cinematography as well. It is probably also the most famous of examples of film-poem development (and this is actually a large factor to consider, when arguments surface against the film-poem's ability to accurately represent verse). *Night Mail* is particularly notable since it involved Auden, who is usually considered one of the forefathers of this genre. Auden worked on a series of other projects that came to be known later as film-poems, including *Runner* (1962) and *Us* (1967). Some of his projects flanking the period of *Night Mail*, except for his segment for *The Londoners* (1939), were sadly decommissioned or never made available to the public, but they remain Auden's creations, the film-poem literati are aware of them, and they are therefore an influence on the documentary film-poem movement<sup>11</sup>.

*Night Mail* was 'an already edited picture' (Harrison, 1998, xxiv) by the time Auden's verse (and Benjamin Britten's music) was added to the production. Since he was working in an age before the existence of videotape, as Harrison also observes, it was difficult for him to accurately time his verse so that it perfectly matched the speed of the visual material.<sup>12</sup> Auden expressed very lucid doubts about the successful addition of verse to film, as made obvious by some of his comments from an early lecture on poetry and film (1936). In his defense, Auden was imagining a scenario in which a poet would always add verse at a late stage in the development of the film, not writing while cutting or before principal photography. In 1936 sound in film was still a novel concept, so experimentation with that sound was also largely untried. Auden defends his determinations by explaining:

The visual image is a definite one, whereas verbal images are not sharp; they have auras of meaning. A visual image cannot be made to mean a number of things, nor can a word



image be confined to one thing. For this reason, highly developed metaphors cannot be included in the film medium (Mendelson, 512).

Auden feared the limiting nature of adding one particular image to a line of poetry, preventing or at least stifling the natural ambiguity inherent in the verse. Producer Tony Cash still found this a problem in 1990, when he declared that depicting verse 'narrows the listener's range of imaginable pictures' (17). Though his article insists on the illustration of every noun in a verse, this is not necessary. The literal visual representation of words is not the film-poem's main agenda. Cash worked on a series of 'illustrated lectures' about poets in the early 1990s called 'Poetry in Motion' with writer and monologist Alan Bennett, but these films, though entertaining, 'too often... did what so many other poetry programmes have done: rammed under the viewer's nose a literal visual interpretation of the lines, which kills the experience of poetry stone dead' (Dunkley, 1990, 12). There were two series of these: one six-part series in 1990 and one four-part series in 1992, exhibited on Channel Four.<sup>13</sup> As opposed to his own work, Cash praises the film version of Harrison's *V.* because of its tendency to depart from the stream of images that accompany parts of the poem, returning to shots of the poet reading to his audience when instances in the poem 'resolutely resist visual representation' (17). This is certainly an intelligent technique, as it provides an audience with respite, sparing them from a barrage of images that would 'change confusingly every second or so, preventing the viewer from concentrating on the words' (Cash, 17). Most film-poems are aware of this problem, which is why many of them include scenes without poetry, interludes consisting of a collection of images while music is made prominent. This gives the viewer a chance to absorb it all, giving the film a chance to reiterate its visual leitmotifs through repetition. In my study of the film-poem 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' in Chapter Four, I explain the importance of such a technique.

On the other hand, it is decidedly possible to create an image or series of images with many layers of meaning. Therefore, the key to successfully merging film and verse is to make the images as arbitrary, or at least as multi-faceted, as possible when the opportunity arrives.

Auden's problem is not with the limits of the image, but with the single connotation towards which an average image directs, instead of the myriad of possible imagery inspired by a metaphorical poetic line. Consider also that he was working within a limited form, the form of documentary.

Auden's statements are fairly one-dimensional; one merely has to watch silent films like *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel, 1928), Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1927) or other surrealist works to understand that the visual image can indeed be made to mean a number of things, to lack precise sharpness or clarity. It is surprising that in the 1930s, as the modernist movement was coming to a conclusion, and surrealism was in its heyday, that Auden would make such a finite declaration, but he was not a surrealist. In the process of constructing *Un Chien Andalou*, Dali and Buñuel would seek out the 'indecipherable', 'discarding' logical ideas or steps of the plot when they would occur to them, in favour of those ideas which 'had no possible explanation' (Sitney, 4). This claim indicates that the spaces in between the images in such films are indeed problematic, in that there is not an element present to link them together into a traceable narrative. Nevertheless, the viewer naturally struggles to find meaning, and the images themselves signify a wide range of interpretations in such films. Examples of the pioneers of avant-garde works and some of the most poetic examples of them will be discussed later in this chapter.

To his further discredit, Auden lacked the vision to conceive of the two conceptions of poetry and film working together in general, claiming that a 'strong sound image added to a

strong visual image tends to cancel out both'. He felt that sound in a film had the potential to make 'too many demands on [an audience's] attention' (Mendelson, 512). With these statements it is apparent that Auden did not assume an evolving sophistication in the audience. Yet, this is also forgivable as an oversight, since Auden was again speaking from an authoritative experience, one that no one else had previously tried, at least in the public vein. He admits that verse on film can be admissible if 'one necessity ... is observed - the spoken poetry must bear some relation, whether of similarity, indirect reference or contrast, to what is seen' (513). This is a basic concept and indeed a necessity, but without a doubt a bold step at the time. Graduating from an exceedingly structured task, it is logical to assume that Auden's opinions about it would have been themselves structured and shorn of room for possibility and expansion. It is not entirely Auden's fault either, since, from all accounts of the ordeal, Auden's collaborators at the GPO Film Unit did not allow the poet much independence. The Film Unit inhibited Auden, so his opinions of the entire process are also as restrained.

In spite of these drawbacks, Auden's verse 'combined his penchant for lists' with 'the desire that the people who compose and await the mail be brought into the film' (Weeks, 1995, 75). This was specifically a concern of the film unit's head producer, John Grierson. The commissioning of the poet gave rise to a certain 'human component', an element which British documentary film lacked, according to some opinions (Weeks, 77). The verse catalogues a few examples of the people who will receive letters from the night mail train ('letters for the rich, letters for the poor / The shop at the corner and the girl next door ... Letters of thanks, letters from banks, / Letters of joy from the girl and boy'). These verses provided characteristics unseen before in a documentary piece, and most film-poets and their collaborators recognise Auden's contributions as valuable.<sup>14</sup>

Auden's major innovation was to match the rhythm of his verse with the rhythm of the moving train, 'as the camera follows the train's progress along criss-crossing tracks through valleys and fields' (Hoare, 1997, 11). His was an experiment in working with a pre-determined cadence set by the images given to him, and 'the tempo of [his] poetry echoes the rhythm of the train's sound, quickening as the train builds up speed and the camera seems only just able to keep up with it' (Hoare, 11). Auden would work with setting his verse to match moving images again in 1962, on the short film *Runner*, made by the National Film Board of Canada. The film is a documentary that does not focus on any one athlete, but surreptitiously supports a Canadian runner, Bruce Kidd. Auden's contribution to the film is called the 'commentary' in the film's credits and is again just a handful of verses, but they are often matched with tracking shots of the runners' sprinting legs, travelling around a racetrack. For example, there is one memorable sequence where the film cuts to a slow-motion tracking shot of Kidd running, and the music also slows down to include only a moody bass-line. In this scene, there are three cuts during the following stanza's reading, and though Auden was not happy with the performance of the verse, in a nasal Canadian accent (Mendelson, 513), its matching with slow-motion footage of the runner's legs is impressive, carefully edited. Crisply shot in black-and-white, the first cut occurs before any verse is stated, to a long shot of Kidd. The first stanza of this segment is as follows:

All visible, visibly moving things  
Spin or swing, one of the two,  
Move as the limbs of a runner do  
To and fro, forward and back,  
Or as they swiftly carry him in orbit go  
Round an endless track.

The second cut comes on the word 'spin', to a shot of Kidd's legs running in a profiled medium close-up. The third cut, just before 'in orbit go', is also a medium close-up of the running legs, but shot from behind Kidd, so we see the muscles of his legs flexing and relaxing, the soles of his feet smacking the track and rising from it, all in slow-motion with the soothing poetry spoken in the background. This sequence continues in much the same way. Most of the rest of the film consists of trumpet-led jazz music set to the runners' rhythms, similar to the matching of the poetry. At eleven minutes in length, this is not a major work, but it is significant, in terms of rhythm and editing verse to image, and because of its similarities with *Night Mail*.

Until the 1970s and the film work of John Betjeman, other self-contained projects that involved the application of verse to image, whether previously edited material or not, were not well-known, and probably not influential. In addition to other ambitious film experiments by Auden, there were few endeavours to make what could be considered a film-poem by today's standards, even beyond the field of documentary. If rare tangential experimental films, made available only through arduous searching, are temporarily ignored, there is a great gap after the 1930s until the early 1970s, and then another gap until 1981, when the work of Tony Harrison first appears. Nevertheless, these rare films do exist and a few of them are worth mentioning in the briefest of contexts, purely because I have come across them while researching and they should be recognised. It is also important to do so since their existence deserves to be more widely known. I will consider a few of these rarities in the next pages of this chapter.

In 1973, English poet John Betjeman produced a documentary film with verse commentary called 'Metro-land', which he called 'a script for television' (215). It is referred to as a forerunner of the Harrisonian model by Peter Symes (1995, ix) and is regarded by most specialists as an early film-poem. Notably, this is the first work of its kind to be shot in colour. In this film,

Betjeman's free verse is difficult to pinpoint, since at times it is utterly prosaic and conversational and at other times indirect, alliterative and obviously sculpted verse. This raises a controversial question, asking what is poetry, in terms of what defines it as such, which is indeed too large a subject to broach within the scope of this paper, but Betjeman's commentary within this film is structured like poetry and shaped like verse on the page. The emergence of prosaic poetry is a movement within the world of poetry itself, and therefore we can safely determine that Betjeman's material is poetry, but some of the audible signifiers, as he recites parts of the script in the program, are not as obvious. Betjeman mingles his prose descriptions of London roads and suburbs with poetic lines, but the only noticeable differences between the two styles of delivery is his textual indentation of the parts we are meant to interpret as pure poetry. For example, in a scene focussed on Wembley Tower, it is not clear, if we judge the material based solely on performance, where Betjeman's poetry begins, ends, or where his prose descriptions take priority. The following lines are intended as poetry:

It was to be one hundred and

fifty feet higher

Than the Eiffel Tower.

But when at last it reached above

the trees,

And the first stage was opened to

the crowds,

The crowds weren't there. They

didn't want to come.

Money ran out,

The tower lingered on, resting  
and rusting

Until it was dismembered in 1907.

Immediately following these lines, the script indicates a change in setting and the layout of the text is not so meticulously indented, for a few lines:

This is where London's failed  
Eiffel Tower stood. Watkin's  
Folly as it was called. Here on  
this Middlesex turf, and since  
then the site has become quite  
well-known.

His reading style on camera is almost identical when he is citing either form of writing, so this is decidedly another hybrid piece, a true amalgamation of styles and forms. Highly influential, Betjeman's 'Metro-land' bred other experiments attaching film and poetry, both in documentary form and in other more risqué styles of photoplay. Betjeman himself made other films, some of which were discovered long after the poet had passed away. They all focussed on certain locations in England, all in the West Counties, that the former poet-laureate felt connected to for one reason or another, from the seaside resort Weston-super-mare to Marlborough College, where Betjeman spent some uncomfortable years (Lister, 2001).

Scottish poet Douglas Dunn, in what could be a homage to Auden's filmic efforts, also made a film-poem about the art of running. The film bears the same name as Auden's Canadian film, *Runner*, produced by the BBC in 1977. Of particular note is the film's director, Andrée Molyneaux, whose pioneering work with Tony Harrison in the early 1980s is studied in detail in

the fourth chapter of this thesis. It is almost a half-hour in length and contains a substantial amount of verse as its solitary form of dialogue (all in voice-over). The verse is an artistic and dramatic commentary on the images of athletes we see on the screen, most of them enduring intense physical exertion. Molyneaux's interest in poetry on film probably began here, in what is largely an unknown, rarely cited work. Her work with the BBC Music and Arts Department exposed her to a great deal of material, but she 'had seized every opportunity to make films containing verse, or on the subject of poetry and poets' (1991, 368). Dunn's film was an opportunity to work with verse and nothing else, a completely new innovation at the time, and fitting experience for future work with Harrison.

The film's poetry is much more metrical than Betjeman's and bears some resemblance to that of Auden's, in that its rhythm and meter is also often set to match the pace of the images of running legs. Most of it is in tetrameter but the poetry's form varies throughout the poem's duration, much like the poem's subjects. Impressively diverse, the film-poem alternates the pace and length of its verse, seemingly based on the footage of the runners that it exhibits. This film's poetry was written for the available film stock, but presumably it was written for footage selected as more suitable than other material. There are two readers performing the verse, another innovation that had never been attempted, and has seldom been since. There are some moments in the film which are specifically focussed on one item or person, for which it may be assumed the choice of footage was more limited. The segment that stands out from the rest of the poem is a section/stanza concentrating on Czech Olympic runner Emil Zatopek. It describes the athlete, praising him and his incredible endurance, but also eulogising his inevitable defeat. The poetry also uses repetition, which would come to be a great asset in future works of film and poetry.



The repeated words mesmerise, increasing the sense of awe inspired by the archive footage of this man's races. Part of the segment is as follows:

Zatopek showed how a runner should lead,

Running from the front in love with speed

Front runner, front runner.

Who is this man who always wants to lead

Running from the front, is it pride or greed?

Front runner, front runner.

The footage shown is of Zatopek competing in different races, keeping up a grueling pace and eclipsing his competitors, sometimes completely lapping them. The sixth line of this stanza is said as Zatopek crosses a finish line, snapping it just as he passes another competitor, one full lap behind. Called the 'Czech Express' or 'Emil the Indefatigable', his running style was almost unprofessional in its unconventionality, and his build strangely scrawny. While he ran 'his head bobbed from side to side, his arms flailed in the air and his face became contorted, as if he were suffering the severest pain'.<sup>15</sup> The famous American sports announcer Red Smith once said that while he ran 'his hatchet face [was] crimson and his tongue lolled out'. Dunn's film-poem captures the strange, near-dying efforts of Zatopek (and other track stars like him), as he unbelievably defeated runners whose form was more refined. This work manages to penetrate the viewer, poeticising the ability of these athletes, as well as artfully depicting the shame and sorrow many of them must bear in front of massive live crowds and television audiences. Indeed it contains footage of one anonymous sprinter desperately struggling towards the finish line, his legs wobbling and bending at excruciating angles, while the reader chants:

His feet, sick of the road  
Which had brought him there devotedly,  
The road which never fails to finish,  
And in his head was a voice, the voice of the road  
Which said over and over, contemptuously,  
'Finish, finish, finish, damn you'.

The runner finally crashes across the finish line. Dunn's verse fills this film-poem with accurate and emotional, galvanising scenes. It is an underestimated piece, one that should be better-known and respected, since its use of poetry is honed to a sharpness and appropriateness that some other works, even some of Harrison's earlier projects, can only approach.

Dunn would make one more film-poem to date, 'Dressed to Kill' (1992), one of the six film-poems Peter Symes produced for the *Words on Film* series, which is covered in Chapter Three of this thesis. Dunn also wrote verse pieces that were specifically dedicated to certain actors, like Anthony Quinn ('Valerio') and Jean-Paul Belmondo ('La Route'), a kind of visually based poetry that entwines scenes from a typical film with the actor's movie persona. The poems even incorporate fictional dialogue for the actors and those around him in the poetic 'scenes'. In fact Philip French, a noted anthologist of poetry about film termed the works 'so-called film poems that are like scenarios for certain actors'<sup>16</sup> (1993, 14). *Runner* producer Molyneaux would continue fostering her interest in the relationship of poetry and film with Harrison only two years after *Runner* was made, meeting with Harrison for the first time in London, 1979. The continuation of the story of the Harrisonian film-poem's evolution continues from that point in Chapter Four of this study. In this chapter, it is now appropriate to begin the study of the 'other' sort of film that bears the name of film-poem, that which Sitney now calls, out of convenience,

the 'avant-garde', because the term is 'not associated with a particular phase of the thirty-year span' he covers (1979, viii).

## 2.5 Film Poems without Verse?: The Influence of Avant-Garde

Significance in the development of a movement usually lies in a collection of projects, connected through a shared and accepted methodology that one artist or group of artists produces. In the development of the avant-garde film-poem, the selection of major artists is limited to only a handful of consistent producers of 'poetic' works. The amount of students, artists and professional filmmakers experimenting creatively with film is a number impossible to determine, because of the amount of work that is unavailable for the public eye. This is a field most directly affected by financial issues, where many films that would be released with the help of necessary funds are never brought to light. The plight of the experimental filmmaker is, and has been throughout the history of motion pictures, one of a severe lack of economic support. But some artists have succeeded in gaining the respect of the critical culture, regardless of whether their efforts have also raised enough capital for them to support themselves solely on the basis of their cinematic talents. Many of these have also blossomed into a hazily defined coterie of 'poetic' filmmakers, those auteurs whom have earned the title of 'film poet'. Unfortunately, this term has been overused by film critics, and now scarcely maintains individual meaning. I will now engage with the terms, 'film-poet', 'poetic film' and 'film-poem', in this light, considering these issues and what truly constitutes the poetic in film. This is a hotly debated issue, one that has undergone change and alteration at great length, and I do not plan to redefine or disallow the use of the terms toward what they now signify, since that would involve another study at this academic level. But it would be helpful to precisely identify the boundaries of the terms, and

suggest limitations of the intended scope of each. It would be sensible to discuss a few of the most important influences, or the beginnings of the area of film that is often referred to as the poetic cinema, or the 'cinema of poetry' (Pasolini, quoted in Harrison, 1998, xxv).

### 2.5.1 The 'Cinematic Construction' of Poetry and Montage Editing

In the 1920s, Russian filmmaking was pioneered and developed by a movement championed by a few filmmakers who shot films according to a distinguishable philosophy. 'Montage' cinema was a cinema of brevity and abruptness, and its origin was in a series of experiments performed on celluloid by Lev Kuleshov. Kuleshov taught at the State School on Cinema Art and because of the shortages of film stock induced by the government during the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), he tried to edit 'footage from different sources into a whole that creates an impression of continuity' (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997, 457). These and other experiments by filmmakers like Dziga Vertov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and eventually Sergei Eisenstein would spark a national movement of filmmaking and theorising. Eisenstein's film *Strike* (1925) is said to have initiated the movement to the furthest degree.

The differences between these films and the straightforward narratives typical of early Hollywood were based on editing. Montage style dictated that 'a film did not exist in its individual shots but only through their combination through editing into a whole' (Bordwell and Thompson, 458). Today Eisenstein's writings and films are probably treated as most influential from the period, but he did not completely agree with the movement in every case, stating that the juxtaposition of shots 'in order to create a concept' was most effective. He thought 'the maximum effect would be gained if the shots did not fit together perfectly, if they created a jolt for the spectator' (Bordwell and Thompson, 458). As usual, within a typical artistic movement,

its practitioners disagreed on specific principles within it, but agreed on fundamental issues. The creation of movement as a whole, however, must begin with separate images and individual objects. Many of Eisenstein's films emphasise one object and its implications, crafting a scene and editing it by splicing the individual images of that object together to create a whole. There are fine examples of this technique to be found in many of Eisenstein's films; for example, in *October* (1927), rapid alternating shots of two guns and the face of their gunner create the impression of active firing, mimicking the gun's violence and speed. The infatuation with the singular object, and the '*particular representation* of the general theme that...penetrates all the shot-pieces' (Eisenstein, 1938, 163), is the basis for a crucial Montage principle, providing 'the most complete image of the theme itself', which is the key to communicating a sound, lucid idea.

In *The Lessons of Modernism*, Gabriel Josipovici writes that 'Freud asked us to look at our dreams and sudden stabs of memory that take us back to past events...we all want pieces of things, when put together, to form a meaningful whole' (1977, 115). When we are given the 'separate pieces' in a Montage film, the gaps are often left for the viewer to fill in, and the viewer shapes a 'realistic significance when the separate pieces produce...the synthesis of one's theme' (Eisenstein, 167). Based on these philosophies, Montage cinema used the individual shot as the gateway to the 'most complete image', in varying capacities. The focus on the single object, of the combination of singular things to make one complete thing, was the introduction for comparisons to cinema as the most similar visual medium to poetry. It is like the Freudian sublimation of dream fragments to form cohesive, sensible and logical memories or manifestations of personal desires. The fragmentary nature of the solitary images, however, is likened to poetry in another way than merely by way of a dream-like quality.

In the pamphlet I refer to in the introduction to this thesis, Michael Donaghy, poet and jazz musician, writes of the links between poetry and film, citing Eisenstein and a Montage principle.<sup>17</sup> Eisenstein, Donaghy states, 'found the model for his montage technique in Haiku', the Japanese form of poetry that focuses on the singular action or image, and the specific elements related to that image, all in short bursts of three lines and seventeen syllables. He goes on:

A poem's focus is often achieved through a single object, held like Yorick's skull, in the poet's hand, a magician's prop toward which we direct our attention so that the magic can take place (1996, 4).

Through the single object, that which a poet will use to approach or illustrate an experience, the representation of that experience comes through its versification. The verse is 'concerned not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means' (Deren in Vogel, 1972, 4).

The single object of Donaghy's concern is a direct link with the single shot by the Montage filmmaker, and a score of theorists and critics have expounded on this issue. The Russian Formalists especially found 'the closest analogue to cinema in poetry' (Williams, 1995, 217) and have created, by way of a series of famous articles based on the relationships between poetry and film, a theoretical school founded on the 'poetics of cinema'.

Viktor Shklovsky, in his landmark essay 'Poetry and Prose in Cinema' (1927) claims that 'verse is closer to film than prose' (89), finding more than the simple qualities of rhythm to link between the two. Rhythm is not enough to defend the full relationship between a poem's text and a visual one, as rhythm can be found in prose as well as poetry. Prose, writes Shklovsky, often contains 'semantic features', and is 'based principally on a combination of everyday situations' (88), a straightforward style of storytelling. Verse, however, is the most suitable forum for ambiguity, and it is this captured, illustrated ambiguity that would make an image poetic.

Therefore, there is a specific image and a quality of ambiguity that an intentionally poetic film must seek to emulate. Yet there is another very important link between the two media, as Harrison, Vertov, Eisenstein and Formalist Yury Tynyanov also agree upon, spanning decades of film theory and criticism, as a predominantly shared characteristic. Tynyanov writes:

[Shots] replace each other just as a single verse line, a single metrical unit, replaces another one on a precise boundary. Film makes a *jump* from shot to shot, just as verse makes a jump from line to line (1927, 45).

The free flowing nature of verses of poetry and qualities of enjambment (which increase the pace of a poem) that are often employed from line to line are what Tynyanov here discusses. As opposed to the systems of tight and measured metricality that were used in classical poetry, Montage philosophy relates itself to free verse, an open form of poetry not adhering to the use of regulated rhyme or meter. The natural but unpredictable nature of free verse, in which long lines can be followed by short lines and in which 'the energy [of the language] advanced in bursts' (Tynyanov, 46) is likened to the long shot followed by the short shot. In a parallel vein, Tony Harrison's extensive work on film-poems in the 1980s and 1990s has provided him with the experience to make the following conclusion, from a point of view based on the structure of poetry:

I realised that my own rhythmic preoccupations had a parallel in what I now think of as the scansion of edited sequences. It is not merely the 24 frames per second, nor the metrical beats in a verse line, but how they succeed one another and build into gratifications or disappointments of expectation (1998, xxvii).

Montage cinema, in its study of the rhythm of its structure, is very much like the study of prosody in verse, the study of versification and metrical movement. Scansion, the art of 'scanning

a line to determine its division into metrical feet' (Stallworthy, 1983, 856), is a perfect metaphor used by Harrison, since the piecing together of a Montage film is very much like the composition of a line of poetry. The 'scansion of edited sequences' would involve breaking down a film's scenes, shot by shot, into the metrically patterned and organised instances that create not only the illusion of movement but the impression of action. Tynyanov and Harrison both speak of a characteristic of film editing that again refers to the all-important spaces between shots, in that they are as seamless and inconspicuous as the jump from poetic line to line (unless they are *intended* to be conspicuous). In fact, Tynyanov explains how the jump from one shot to another in a film is not as much about a connection between them as it is about a 'differential exchange' (46) of shots. An exchange of images on the screen, whereas one image replaces another through some logical or philosophical connection, is the basis for his comparison.<sup>18</sup> This idea is the 'foundation of montage' according to Tynyanov (45) and a further accurate likening between film and poetry.

Shklovsky and Tynyanov also point out the shared abilities of both cinema and poetry to semantically transform everyday objects, in terms of changing or altering their perceived meaning by way of their presentation to an audience. Shklovsky stresses repetition and 'recurring frames and images and the transformation of images into symbols' as the clearest method of conviction as to why film is 'poetic in nature' (89). The presence of repetition, and thereby the process of transforming an object into an icon, is a 'poetic touch', or the addition of a poetic element to a film (Williams, 217). For example, in *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), one of the most famous cinematic icons is an object, a sled with 'Rosebud' inscribed on it, and the film transforms the word and the sled into the psychological reasoning behind the motivations of its protagonist. This word becomes a metaphor for the thing that Charles Foster Kane (Orson



Welles) could never acquire; much like the statue of a falcon, a symbol and no longer a treasure by the film's conclusion, represents the 'stuff that dreams are made of' in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941). In this way the cinema becomes a forum for poetic devices, its mechanics of editing and cinematography like the mechanics that govern the form of a poem.

Once the realistic possibility of sound entered the motion picture industry, these concepts of pure image-based construction were further complicated. Montage cinema gave way to other forms of filmmaking, mostly due to the Soviet government's introduction of a new artistic policy in 1934, which stated that all films made had to 'depict revolutionary development while being firmly grounded in "realism"' (Bordwell and Thompson, 459). Many filmmakers across Europe and the United States learned poetic principles from the films of the Montage era, from other artistic movements, and from the theoretical material explaining the poetic nature of cinema. A new generation of film-poets was developing, and their reasoning explaining the poetic nature of film was diversified.

### 2.5.2 Film-Poets and the Art of Cinema

Poet Dylan Thomas, as part of a panel in a live symposium on 'Poetry and the Film' once was asked if he thought poetry could be 'welded' to the film in some way. His response was strikingly similar to the theories of Soviet Montage filmmakers. He said:

As in a poem one image breeds another, I think, in a film, it's really the visual image that breeds another - breeds and breathes it (Vogel, 6).

The breeding of images is comparable to the 'exchange' of shots discussed by Tynyanov and others. However, Tynyanov does not mean that these shots 'unfold' in a normal, sequential order, but that they reflect each other in their composition and incorporation in the scheme of a plot, in

that their meaning is compounded by the relationship of one shot to another, to the other shots in the film, and in both of their relationships to the narrative. This is the closest comparison to poetry, since the disparate images in a poem usually have some relationship to each other. As demonstrated in the study of Rossetti's sonnet in Chapter One, the theme of a poem and its interior images may also relate to the overall structure of the poem, in some way. A film works similarly. Eisenstein recognised this similarity, and in the making of *Alexander Nevsky*, he 'broke lines of Milton[*'s Paradise Lost*] down "to illustrate how *cinematic construction could be found in poetry*" (Harrison (his italics), 1998, xxv).

In the previous section of this chapter the differences between prose and poetry in cinema were discussed. Shklovsky distinguished between the two cinemas, and inspired others to elaborate on his ideas. Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian poet and film director, suggested the idea of a cinema of poetry, inherent in its language (1965). He claimed that there is an 'inner poetry' to some films, and the 'fascination lies more in the realm of rhythm and image than in diegetic content' (Williams, 1995, 216). Pasolini was concerned with form and with the awareness of the camera's presence, creating a system of language instead of signs and signifiers represented by images. He compared this system with a system codified by the language of words and their more direct signs and signifiers. Many critics were outraged at Pasolini for insisting that the language of cinema is not a symbolic one that represents reality, but that of reality itself (Greene, 1990, 98). He claimed that:

...cinema does not evoke reality as literary language does; it does not copy reality like painting; it does not mimic reality like theater. Cinema reproduces reality: image and sound! In reproducing reality, what does it do? Cinema expresses reality with reality (quoted in Greene, 98-99).

Pasolini is correct in that none of the other media he mentions succeed in capturing the genuine (though often pretended) acts and movements of individuals or characters through the less limited medium of celluloid as opposed to the acts of characters on a finite setting like a stage. Pasolini's reflections on the nature of cinema were inspired by some of the Formalist writings of the 1920s and 1930s, in fact he was 'in charge of a book series of formalist writings on cinema' (Greene, 110). But some critics objected to his generalisations, like 'to make films is to be a poet' (Stack, 154) stating that they ventured too far into unrealistic and unfounded insistence. There are many loopholes in his arguments; critics have found fault with his theories and others like them since they were introduced. Yet, he raised important questions about the nature of signs as language, in the cinema and out of it, in the midst of a period infatuated with the theories of semiotics (the 1960s). He thought that words, as opposed to language, are like films as opposed to cinema; the larger field is unknowable, since it is like a deeper reality, while the individual words or films are like small 'fictions' within that reality (Greene, 100). It is fair to assume, then, that Pasolini looked upon the reproductions of reality in cinema as poetry, the kind of poetry that is not verse, that is not related to a literary form, but is a quality of art, an essence naturally intrinsic within objects and people.

Pasolini's imagination detected poetry in everything, which is a fascinating but boundless, uncontrollable way to view reality. Poetry, especially the 'inner poetry' which visual art forms like film can contain, is language; Pasolini recognised that all forms of acting and performance were also forms of language. Soon Pasolini theorised that 'all of life is cinema', in that a camera's presence is not necessary for life to exist as cinema, it only 'needs ... a camera to be reproduced' (Greene, 99). Reality's natural flow and continuity is like 'a continuous and infinite long take' (Greene, 100) to Pasolini, whose theories began to resemble those of Soviet thinker Mikhail

Bakhtin by the time his famous essay 'Il cinema di poesia' emerged in the 1960s. They were similar in terms of their discussions of a 'free indirect discourse' (the natural layering or incorporation of one discourse within another) in the language of cinema (Greene, 111). In this natural embedding within language there is an oneiric quality, and a 'universal language' in which film directors 'create their own grammar, lexicon and syntax' by way of an identifiable style. Pasolini said that 'the cinema of poetry is the cinema which adopts a particular technique just as a poet adopts a particular technique when he writes verse' (Stack, 153). This adaptation is what lies at the centre of the philosophy considering a cinema of poetry, in the form of a 'technical language' (Greene, 115).

Eisenstein, Pasolini, Andrey Tarkovsky, and Jean Cocteau, among others, have all written well-known pieces describing cinema as poetry, some more scientifically and theoretically based than others. All of these works have contributed to a theology that dictates a poetic nature within film, one that elevates its relationship beyond a correlation with direct narrative and novels. Jean Cocteau's book, *The Art of Cinema* (1992, first published in France only, in 1973), defends his famous claim that he 'made use of film as a medium which allowed him to show what poetry ... could merely describe' (15). Also a poet turned filmmaker, Cocteau had his own private theories about poetic cinema. There are some significant similarities between the ideas of Cocteau and Pasolini, but Cocteau was clearly a man whose thinking was mostly independent of outside influence; his poetry 'functions better in the garage than in a castle' (9). He did not admire the high culture, the 'élitism of "art cinema"' (9), but, like Pasolini, saw that poetry could be present in all surroundings. Like Pasolini, he claimed that it was a 'mechanism ... inherent in things (including the most everyday objects) that, once released, would operate mysteriously on the mind' (9). He also, like Pasolini, agreed that the 'underlying mechanism of cinema is like that

of dreams' (9) because the absorption of a film is almost like the process of dreaming, because we want to "'believe" what we see, even when reason tells us it is impossible' (9). Dream scenarios are themselves featured in Cocteau's films, especially those concerned with the figure Orphée, who occasionally rises out of his slumber to perform dream-like tasks, like walking through mirrors. In *Orphée* (1949), death is constructed as if it happens while one sleeps, and characters that escape Death's clutches awake mystified with their nightmares.

Cocteau's films often incorporate some actual poetry into their framework as well. The characters of his films are sometimes poets, as in *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1931), *Orphée* and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960). In *Orphée*, the main character, played by Jean Marais, is based on the mythological figure Orpheus, who must descend into hell to retrieve his lost love. There are many scenes in the film that contain poetry, and indeed some of the verses are literally placed 'in the garage'. In the front seat of a car (which is parked within the garage), Orphée tunes his radio to a station, which at a particular time of day broadcasts individual lines of poetry. The poet takes note of these and uses them as his own. When his wife Eurydice hears some of the lines, she scoffs at them, and Orphée says, 'Who knows what poetry is?'. Cocteau skilfully masks his own philosophies in his films (he often calls poetry a 'mystery' himself [58]), in symbolic forms or through the circumstances of his film plots. In addition, the poetic lines from the radio are meaningful within the story of the film, in that they function as a trap set by Death to ensnare Orphée. When broken down, some of the lines can also symbolise parts of the film's story or style, as in the line 'silence is twice as fast backwards', which is linked to the film's scenes that are played in reverse. In fact, at the film's conclusion, when Death sends Orphée back to the world of the living, Orphée travels backwards and there is no dialogue, hence a 'silence'. In this

relatively short conclusive sequence, the events of the majority of the film are negated, as if they never occurred, hence the idea of them happening 'twice as fast'.

In a live symposium briefly referred to above, a group of filmmakers, writers and poets took part in a discussion outlining the relationship between poetry and film, which seemed to degenerate, after a time, into argument about the fundamental nature of film itself and poetry itself (10<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1953). The panel of participants included American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, playwright Arthur Miller, poet Dylan Thomas and critic Parker Tyler. Amos Vogel, the 'Executive Secretary of Cinema', organised the conference in 1953, but its transcription was not published in printed form until ten years later, in the journal *Film Culture* (Summer, 1963). At the conclusion of the discussion, which often grew quite heated, the chairman of the panel (Willard Maas) stated that anyone who wants to see a 'perfect welding' (14) of film and poetry needs only to see Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*. Surprisingly, there is no documented argument with his claim, which is strange after the nature of the discussion that took place beforehand. This silence could be due to the panel's respect for the film, and hopefully not because none of its other members had seen it.

Cocteau's collection of writing in *The Art of Cinema* spans his entire career; it is clear that he never tired of reiterating his affirmations about the differences between poetry and the poetic. He ventures to say that they might be 'opposites', because 'poetry is a product of the unconscious. The poetic is conscious' (38). It often seems that Cocteau allows the difference between these two words, these two peculiarities, to depend sheerly on perception. He often denounces the film that 'tries to be poetic', since then the viewer is aware of the attempt. The poet and filmmaker also states:

Moreover, the *poetic* is not *poetry* ... They stand back to back, and a great number of excursions into the poetic contain not the slightest poetry (38).

This claim may or may not contradict the Shklovskian idea that 'in poetic cinema elements of form prevail over elements of meaning' (Turovskaya, 1989, 10), but it considers that 'inner poetry', that 'relationship [that] is not something that could ever be expressed in words nor would it ever need to be' (Turovskaya, 98). This is why Cocteau the poet repeatedly used a particular analogy when he was approached about his style of filmmaking. He compared himself to 'someone making a table, whose concern is solely to ensure that the structure is solid' (Cocteau, 8). His concerns with form are his only worries; meaning will follow in the hands of the audience, the consumers that use his product. Tarkovsky's biographer, Maria Turovskaya, shares this philosophy with Cocteau, stating that the poetic image and symbolism in the cinema needs 'a spiritual effort on the part of the audience, an effort to emphasize and discriminate, and finally to perceive as a whole'. Cocteau concurs, using his table analogy, saying that once it is built:

...the mediums may come, if they wish: the audience, elbow to elbow in the dark, will put its hands on the table and make it turn and speak by secret means, since the words attributed to tables at séances are lifted out of our own pockets and come from the darkness within us (41).

This comment stresses meaning over form, in that it is not the job of the poetic filmmaker to provide that meaning. The film-poet needs only to be concerned about his construction, and the capturing of the poetry he/she observes in the inspiration for and the making of the film: those qualities of the objects, actors, and the entire mise-en-scene of the picture that bear that mark of poetry. As for the poetic, the audience determines its effectiveness, and only after it has been seen can a film be judged in any degree of poetic-ness it may or may not maintain. Film-poets,

evolving through the years over which cinema has become a 'Muse' (Cocteau, 56), seek the balance between the poetry ingrained in everyday objects and the cinematic construction that can be found in poetry.

Even though Cocteau insists that the literal presence of poetry is again not his concern, it persists as a compliment to the world of Cocteau's films, a world often concerned with the supernatural and magical. His theories are intriguingly never communicated as theories but almost as suppositions, since he consistently denounces his own academic merit. For example, in the journal *Filmkunst* in November of 1948, Cocteau wrote, 'My only intelligent perception has been to perceive that I am not intelligent, despite those who tell me that I am' (38). His uncertainties extend to his feelings about the nature of poetry as well, since he also wrote, in a Cannes bulletin (Number Five, in 1959), 'I know that poetry is indispensable, but I do not know for what' (58). This self-deprecating style of Cocteau is in direct contrast to the self-assuredness of Pasolini, though the two seem to agree on most points about poetry; one is certainly much more humble in his claims than the other, and one is obviously more theoretically and technically orientated.

Regardless of the form of the film poem that is being discussed in this chapter, the work of these film poets, among a score of others, has influenced any blending of film and poetry. Charlie Chaplin may have been praised by many critics as a poet, but Cocteau observed that he then 'tried to become one' (80), which was his downfall. The films of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Bergman, Mayakovsky, the 'Russian Dovzhenko', Humphrey Jennings and Tarkovsky are all listed by Tony Harrison, in addition to work by some directors discussed above, as excursions into the poetic cinema (1998, xxv-xxvi). In too many ways to mention comprehensively, work by these artists bears extensive similarities to the modern-day film poem (in either form, as outlined



in my introduction). Yet there is another form of film I have mentioned briefly in this chapter: that of the truly avant-garde work that is also referred to as a film poem. A study of these films now begs attention, using a few as examples.

### 2.5.3 The Avant-Garde and the 'Film Poem' (Without Hyphenation)

To be avant-garde is to be a pioneer, an innovator, a perpetuator of a movement. The term literally means 'before' a style or wave of popular, practiced technique. The maker of avant-garde films is therefore literally like a precursor to something that is expected to 'catch on', like a new trend. The fact that avant-garde films were at one point in history called 'film poems' is an indication of expectation. The term is usually meant to connote something simpler, devoid of a sense of 'fitting in', indeed exactly the opposite. The avant-garde, or 'experimental', 'underground', 'New American' or even 'non-mainstream' film is precisely that: that sort of film which is distinctly non-commercial, an alternative to a typical 'movie', created and possibly released with the expectation that it will only appeal to a select audience.

I will not be discussing the field of the avant-garde in detail to explore the qualities and influences that have promoted *its* evolution, but the characteristics of the field that have embodied any logic in the use of the word 'poem' to describe films within the field. The theories studied in Section 2.5.2 above, about film-poets, poetic film and 'the cinema of poetry', will figure into this discussion, but, for the most part, only in terms of the shared esoteric reputations that both divisions of film have. It is worth noting that running time is a key factor in dividing these film genres, not inasmuch as avant-garde films *must* be shorter, but the fact remains that some of the best known works of avant-garde cinema are shorts. In some circumstances, avant-

garde films are extraordinarily long, which is a factor that helps to define this type of cinema: the running time, extreme in one way or another, is not fitting for a mainstream release.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of content, avant-garde cinema seeks to undermine conventions of mainstream cinema, in that it confronts basic social systems of understanding. At the heart of any social system is the feeling that a cross-section of society generally agrees on or supports an idea. Avant-garde cinema often desires a break with a norm or shared philosophy, and challenges 'the idea that the individual personality and social and political relations among individuals are basically rational and understandable' (MacDonald, 1993, 3). This destroys the process of understanding character motivation in fiction; *Un Chien Andalou*, for example, accomplishes this 're-mystification' by shattering the linear connections between its images. Director Luis Buñuel was a poet before he began filmmaking, and the film is named after his first collection of poems. The phrase (translated 'An Andalusian Dog') refers to 'those modernist Andalusian poets whom [Buñuel and Dali] regarded as insensible to the revolutionary poetry of social content which Buñuel championed' (Drummond, 1994, ix). The film has also been said, by Dali, to be a 'series of irrational gags and dream residues' and by Buñuel to 'draw on the free associations of uninhibited compulsions' (Drummond, ix-x). Therefore, the film is the perfect prototype for the avant-garde formula: it rejects a social system of belief, confuses rational association, and also is inspired by the oneiric memories of two artists. This dreamlike quality is what most attracted poets like Cocteau to the medium of film, and Cocteau's first film *Le Sang d'un poète* [Blood of a Poet] (1930) is most clearly influenced by the surrealist movement, though Cocteau openly disassociated himself with their philosophies in the mid-1920s (Cocteau, 10).

Simultaneously, literally spiraling out of the abstract surrealist films of the 1920s and the 'Dada' movement was the graphic work of filmmakers like Man Ray and Germaine Dulac. One

film by French painter Marcel Duchamp, *Anemic Cinema* (1927), is often highlighted in many discussions of surrealist film and the emergence of avant-garde cinema. It is a short film that superimposes words, in the shape of French 'puns' onto a series of 'rotating discs' and 'slowly turning spirals' (Rees, 1999, 56). The film creates optical illusions of depth, which Duchamp experimented with in his painting as well (Sitney, 229). Abstract works like this film, which are usually without a straightforward story or plot but are a representation of artistic ideologies, utilised animation and camera experimentation to achieve unique results. Film writer Stuart Macdonald in *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (1993) lists Dulac's *Disque 957* (1928) and Henri Chomette's *Jeux de reflets et de la vitesse* [*Plays of Reflection and Speed*, 1925] as of primary importance in the filmic study of 'abstract imagery and rhythms' (3). Man Ray's *L'Etoile de Mer* [*Starfish*, 1928] was another experiment in motion, shape, and rhythm, 'loosely based on a poem by Robert Desnos' (Rees, 1999, 43). The starfish of the film engages in various tasks and endures many hardships, which stand as symbols for human affairs. Again, the film is not a narrative, but a series of snippets of representation, like most experimental pieces from this era. The techniques and ideas from this period would be influential in future films of the avant-garde class, many of them woven into future films that were termed film poems by certain members of the cinematic critical culture.

Sitney writes that the Surrealist cinema, and with it much of the avant-garde 'suddenly disappeared after Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* (1930) to re-emerge thirteen years later in America, essentially transformed' (229). The graphic experiments by the French and European artists of the previous decades were inspirational to American filmmakers of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, a time when the term 'film poem' was fashionably applied to avant-garde pieces that made statements of some kind about art and/or language. Len Lye, the New Zealand-born artist and

filmmaker, was a practitioner of painting and scratching shapes and designs directly onto the surface of the celluloid, so that the filmed images would also have Lye's artwork imposed over them. His works were often called 'poetry-films' and some have listed him alongside Auden as a forefather of the modern-day film-poem. Lye was interested in movement, and instigated alternative forms of movement in film, most notably the jump cut, 'an elliptical condensation of action achieved by elimination of middle shots so that the figure on the screen seems to jump forward along a prescribed course of action' (Sitney, 231). But Lye also managed to capture a poetry within objects in his films, the kind of poetry described above by Pasolini and Cocteau, and he highlighted the energy contained in his subjects with the use of animation. Sitney explains that Lye, 'was more interested in expanding a vocabulary of dynamic visual forms' (230) and his vocabulary was a poetic one. He was also concerned with the speed and beat of the movement in his films, and *Rhythm* (1953), one of his later films, completely explored only that aspect of moving photography, since there is little or no manipulation of the celluloid. This film 'shows the assembly of a Ford in one minute with hundreds of jump cuts' (Sitney, 231) and is concerned with a fluidity that is nevertheless achieved in spite of using unconnected shots. The viewer fills in the gaps between, as he or she may do when reading a poem. It is a type of cinematography modern day viewers now see in everyday adverts and documentaries on television, fit for a generation with a short attention span.

Films like these and others grew popular with a select audience, mostly an audience of poets and adventurous artists interested in the medium of film. Again, the extent of their number is impossible to judge, as is the capacity of their range and scope. However, some of these works have been singled out as recently as 1998, when filmmaker and BFI archivist Peter Todd curated a collection of what he termed film poems, meant to be seen as a collection of films that

'generate associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own' (Wees, 1999). When the programme toured, one of the places it was exhibited was in Manchester, at the Cornerhouse cinema on Oxford Street, in November 1998. The cinema's November brochure explained the motivation for such a collection even further:

How do poetry and film work together? What is a film poem? In an attempt to answer these questions, filmmaker Peter Todd has curated this programme of shorts for the National Film Theatre, London (17).

The first film in the programme is *Manhatta*, which is discussed in the first part of this chapter and the rest of the programme is an insightful, meticulously collected series of films that not only span the last eighty years of experimental film, but synthesises poetry and film in ways that are daring and original. They are all 'inspired by poetry or are indeed cinematic poems themselves'<sup>20</sup>

Among the films in Todd's showcase are those by poet and filmmaker Margaret Tait, a Scotswoman whose works are often centred around a very specific subject. Todd's programme runs her portrait (1964) of Hugh Macdiarmid, the Scottish poet. Most of Tait's films were self-made, in that they were financed by herself, and are described like a perfect demonstration of Pasolini's 'poetry of the everyday'. Ute Aurand, in a reprinted (and translated) obituary in Issue 7 of 'Poem Film Film Poem'<sup>21</sup> discusses her films as those which reach 'right to the essence of things' (2000, 7). He continues:

Her images... are of everyday experience and on this level are a representation of things as they are. But the manner in which they have been filmed, in their rhythmic patterns, their duration, these images offer a vision of the mystery and ambiguity inherent in so-called commonplace objects (7).

Tait stated that in her film portrait of MacDiarmid, she attempted to 'set' pictures to his poems, and often they were of the poet writing and reading, but some of the natural imagery we see that is meant to match MacDiarmid's poetry is well-exacted to correspond to the flavour of his heavily-accented verse.<sup>22</sup> Especially towards the end of the film, with a closing shot of churning water, the images attempt an approximation of the emotion of the poet's verse, and almost all critics have praised Tait's attempts to do such a thing. Tait said that she thought 'film is essentially a poetic medium' (1997, 4). Her 32 films, all scripted, photographed and edited by Tait herself, truly seem an indication of this.

In Todd's first programme (the second toured in late 2000 and early 2001) the other films included American poet Maya Deren's collaboration with the Czech surrealist director Alexander Hammid, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Deren's film is considered a staple of the surrealist movement, as its images are without any spoken or printed text, an 'evocation of dream, full of metaphor and simile' (Lambirth, 32). Interestingly, Lambirth's review of Todd's programme labels Deren's film 'the ultimate film-poem' which is of course an arguable point. The collection also includes a film by director Ian Hugo with spoken verse text by poet (and Hugo's wife) Anaïs Nin and 'colour effects' by Len Lye (*Bells of Atlantis*, 1952) and Todd's own work, a short (8 min) film called *Out* (1990). In the tradition of Samuel Beckett, *Out* inserts a monologue into the mouths of three different women, in three different surroundings, which causes the meaning of the piece to change dramatically each time it is said. Yet, the unknown gemstone of the programme, in terms of a successful merging of literal verse and image, is the one-minute *Mile End Purgatorio* (Sherwin, 1991), which was a collaboration between poet Martin Doyle and Guy Sherwin. It is a humorous look at a mid-life crisis, packed with quick wit and rapid images of 'shop fronts and other images [that] provoke and externalise the many themes of conflict'

(Cornerhouse Programme Notes and Credits, originally written by Sherwin, 1998). It takes its poetic cues from the Bible, Dante's *Inferno* and *Hamlet*, all in the space of exactly one minute of film.

Peter Todd may have grown aware of the loaded term he was dealing with in using 'film poem'. His pamphlets and mini-magazines that have been released announce new collections of films curated by Todd or new works by Todd himself, but they all introduce alternative arrangements or manipulations of the words. 'Poem film', 'cinematic poem' and 'poetry film' have all been used, but most often 'film poem' appears, and notably, without a hyphen between the words. Critics and commentators focussing on his work, especially on his collections of touring film poems, have freely adopted his terminology. This has been without hesitation, which is worrisome when the term has so many other connotations, even if distinguished by small, almost unnoticeable marks of punctuation. Yet, the term is used in the context of the avant-garde, in that the films are treated like members of an elite group. There are no hard and fast rules for the separation between a strictly 'avant-garde' or 'experimental' work and a 'film poem' or 'poetry film' according to Todd's selections. Wees writes that film poems are 'central to the avant-garde film tradition' yet have received little attention in their own right (1999, 2). The question that remains asks of the difference between these films and other avant-garde work: what makes these films 'film poems' and other avant-garde work not so poetic? Todd uses the terms semi-interchangeably, which is a surprising tactic for a specifically orientated purpose in mind. Todd writes that he sought to choose 'films which explore the nature of film and poetry' (1999, 9), but none of Harrison's work, or any other film-poem defined by the Harrisonian method appears in his programmes. But the unequivocal failure in defining what is and what is not is hardly Todd's fault. 'Film poem' is an overused term, with or without the hyphen.

One of the documents that has been included in the November 1997 edition of 'poem film film poem' is a startling 'manifesto' of fourteen rules that filmmaker Ian Cottage devised while working on *Blue Scars* (1994), a film about the decline of mining. Cottage worked on the film with poet Matthew Sweeney. Todd hints at the tension that emerged between the two in his interview with myself (Appendix A, 262); Sweeney was not satisfied with some of the techniques chosen in the making of the film.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the thirteenth point of the manifesto is,

The filmmaker is at liberty to erase the voice-over from the film if s/he does not like the poem (1).

While this is quite a selfish demand, the fourteenth point is,

The poet is at liberty to scratch the film's negative if s/he does not like the film (1).

This proves that not all collaborations between filmmaker and poet are harmonious, as it has generally seemed to me while conducting this study. In spite of these obvious tensions, there are some valuable criteria included on this list as well, such as the first point that states the poem film must be an 'original creation' and that 'both poet and filmmaker should push the boundaries of the poem film' (1). These seem like obvious points, barely worth mentioning, but more striking are the tenets included that are in total opposition to the philosophies of Harrison, which I will discuss in Chapter Four. Especially in violation of Harrison's thoughts on filmmaking is point ten: 'the filmmaker must edit the film on their own'. Point seven cites that the filmmaker cannot read the poem before the filming is complete, while point eight states that the filmmaker may not show any rushes to the poet, where 'sketches and storyboards are prohibited' (1).

Whereas this sounds like it might have been an adventurous way to shoot a film that is supposed to be a 'parallel' effort (Baumfield, 2), one can imagine that most of these criterion must be



hesitantly accepted, since it is apparent that the list was bitterly devised, if not with a wry sense of reflective humor.

In my interview with Todd I asked him of his definitions of a film poem. Todd's opinions are original, in that he thinks a film poem's definition most depends on an individual point of view, upon a person's specific background and experience. A film poem made by a poet, he says, could be 'somewhere between the poetry they are writing and visual material' (263). It is this kind of balance that he imagines came into effect for most of the films on his touring programme. His grandest distinction is another reiteration along a similar theme covered in this chapter, in that film poems should 'be dealing more with trying to conjure up a mood rather than a narrative' (264). This 'mood' is reminiscent of Pasolini's 'poetic' cinema, one that is already existent, rather than one contrived. It exists more in the minds of audiences, depending on their points of view, and indeed in the interview Todd recalls Pasolini stating something along these lines (265). However, he does distinguish between the Harrisonian film-poem, terming this style of work 'the literature side' (267). This literary emphasis is placed in direct opposition to the film-poem that is based on individual experience, which is a fictionally based work of expression, and this is a division which I feel I have helped prove as valid. The term 'film poem' is interchangeable, and in fact the popularity of the term could also be a prime reason behind why Tony Harrison began calling his works 'film/poems' since 1995.

But it stands to reason that the use of the term, especially if film-poems or film poems blossom into a degree of popularity, could generate confusion as to what sort of film is referred to. The author of one of the reviews of Todd's first programme, Gareth Evans writes that we should 'not get snared in definitions' (1999, 8), but states that these films grew out of and are the 'sensitive offspring of the experimental-avant-animation-underground crowd' and that the poetry

within them 'grows out of the seen' (8). The film poem in Todd's view is also a hybrid, a step beyond the experimental film, the avant-garde and any other classifiable movement. As Todd laughingly fails to chastise, film poems exist in a 'fascinatingly gray area' (269).

Todd's latest programme (2000-01) includes some films never before seen in the United Kingdom, at least not with any public fanfare. Maya Deren's work is featured again, this time in the form of a fifteen-minute film called *At Land* (1944). For the first time, films by Stan Brakhage, one of the most prolific filmmakers of the avant-garde cinema, are exhibited. *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) is a film classed by Sitney as 'lyrical' (150), and a true personal tribute to the art of Brakhage, with whom Todd has had some contact.<sup>24</sup> Humphrey Jennings, the British documentarist, poet, and painter, is represented with a lesser known short work, *Words for Battle* (1941), and the short blurb, by David Robinson, that advocates Jennings' inclusion in the programme claims that 'he compose[d] films exactly like a poet'. The film contains poetry by 'Blake, Browning, Kipling and Milton'.

In addition to another piece by Todd himself (*Diary*, 1998), he includes a film that has eluded this writer until this programme managed to screen it. Sandra Lahire's *Lady Lazarus* (1992) is a 'visually woven response' to Plath's poetry readings. The film illustrates scenarios of some of Plath's poems, many from *Ariel* (1965), over 23 minutes. The film also interweaves original footage of Plath reading her poetry and relates an intimate history of the poet, as much an interpretation of her poetic work as it is an exhibition of it. However, Lahire's film is an adaptation of poetry and unfortunately space has been limited in this thesis to covering mainly those films which either use or cite poetry, or films based on original works. These and other tragic omissions are the subject of the last brief section of this chapter.

## 2.6 Adaptations of poems on film

Where citations of poetry in film are concerned, I have sometimes chosen to look at those sequences in films that contain poetry, where appropriate, as miniature exercises in accordance with most of the stylistic habits of the Harrisonian film-poem. The first chapter of this study deals principally with such a subject, but I did not have the space to write a comprehensive study of those singular films that adapt their storylines from a previously existent poem. Mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, Tennyson's poem 'Enoch Arden' was adapted into a film, apparently the first film to do so with a previously published work of verse. Examples of undertakings of this sort abound, and the area includes Shakespearean films and films based on epics and mythologies written originally in verse. Shakespeare's verse plays have generated countless films, some of which treat the poetry pivotally, and some of which focus more on action than interpretation of poetic lines.<sup>25</sup> Both long feature films and short experiments are also members of this multifarious division of the links between poetry and film, ranging from the six-minute short *Waterworx* by Rick Hancox (1982), which bases its entire set of images around a poem by Wallace Stevens, to feature-length adaptations of Browning's 'The Pied Piper' (the best known is by Jacques Demy, 1971). In Appendix C of this thesis, my own developing film work with adaptations of poetry is briefly outlined.

There are many more shorts that base their storylines around a poem than feature-length films, but there are intersections between these adaptations, as should be expected after reading this study. Harrison's work has been primarily in television, as has the work of Peter Symes, so my only (abbreviated) case study for this breed of film and poetry also inhabits the television realm. The English film writer and director Peter Greenaway is known for his features, but one

of his earlier projects focussed on Dante's *Inferno*, called simply 'A TV Dante' (1988), is an amalgam of visual formats. It is probably the ultimate hybrid of a cross between verse and video.

This production is a complex work. There is an incredibly diverse mix of mechanisms within it, extending from the use of a radar screen that 'detects' sinners as 'blips' to the use of prosaic 'talking heads' that interrupt the poetic narrative, in small boxes in the corners of the screen, to comment on a relevant topic. There is a time graph that is utilised at different points in the film, tracking the age that sinners are punished from (following Dante's travels through the nine circles of Hell), and much archive footage used as well. As excerpts from the poetry are recited by John Gielgud as the voice of Virgil, the film cuts to a wide range of related images; for example, when an empress' lustful sins are described, the main part of the screen illustrates her sins by using blurred footage from an anonymous pornographic film. The film is intensely graphic, and indeed horrific in many parts, especially as the narration takes us deeper into hell. Swirling, screaming naked bodies are tortured miserably while bathed in red and green luminescence. The faces of people hurtling across the screen also often disturb these images, and the occasional case study is highlighted, by focussing on one particular sinner. This is very similar to Dante's own attention in the epic poem.

Greenaway's co-director, Tom Phillips, lectured about his work on animation for the film (for some scenes in Hell) in the Royal Festival Hall in London (October 2000), and stressed his desire to 'suppress the erotic', but Greenaway would have no artistic limitations placed on his work. Channel Four's support for the work was surprisingly strong, but Phillips says that 'those were different days for television back then, since Michael Kustow was head of Arts Programming' (Kustow would go on to become the executive producer of Harrison's *Prometheus*). Finances were the only constraint, and Phillips elaborately describes the crew's

resourcefulness in finding free video footage of a wide variety of material. Apparently, the Dutch have film archives that anyone can access for no charge, so the crew set about searching for appropriate images in their libraries. The entire production translates like a mixture between an illustrated news editorial and a surreal painting depicting supernatural events.

Yet there are those who criticise the work for its complexity. Christopher Dunkley's article 'Too many images spoil the picture' (1990) relishes the example that 'A TV Dante' sets for the purpose of its argument. It admits the film's brilliance and technical 'cleverness', but quickly condemns the multi-leveled work as an 'over-egged concoction' (11). The talking heads' interviews, for example, often appear to be speaking jerkily, and that is because the film's editors chopped apart the dialogue spoken by the interviewees and shaped it together again so that it offered almost no pause, no relief, no time for reflection. Dunkley writes:

Older viewers tend to look on with a wry smile and assume that, just as eight-year-olds are dab hands with computers and video recorders, so young people today are able to ingest all these layers of information at once. But that seems highly unlikely ... The difference, I suspect, is that young people are more willing to tolerate impressionistic chaos on television than their elders (11).

The age of the music video and the sound bite, in this case, will probably aid poetry's transmission to the masses, since, in all honesty, poetry is more suited to a shorter audience attention span. It is usually more compact than prose, and usually not as lengthy.

'A TV Dante' is confusing and hectic, and perhaps it tries to accomplish too much and can be viewed as over-ambitious. In Phillips' lecture, one audience member stated that she found it difficult to take the three elements (images, words and soundtrack) very 'difficult to take in at once'. Phillips, however, responded with an interesting point:

Is it all too much... Well, no, it's like a book. The whole idea was that you make television as good as a book. You take it down and you look at it again. What you caught on the first go round was fine, and then you kept something else on the second go, and so on. That's how we treated it... This was television that you should see twice or three times.

Even though repeated viewings were not always possible, Phillips defends the piece and makes its unconventionality seem commonplace. His claim is also an excuse for the multi-layered, Harrisonian film-poem as well, a genre that I will study in the next chapter. One thing is certain regarding 'A TV Dante': in 1988, it was a daring project to undertake in a time at which poetry was still unproven on television. The year before had only just experienced the scathing controversy that was Harrison's *V.*, and audiences were still reeling from the wave of profanity that it launched at them. Suddenly images of nude, tortured bodies stared at them from screens in their homes, while Gielgud read verse in the background. How was poetry to survive this blasphemous illustration? It did, it has, and it is still forcing people to look and listen.

Chapter Three will focus on the film-poem in the modern sense, considering the work in which the poetry is written as the film is shot. Using the material covered in the present chapter, telling of the events leading up to the present state of the genre, it is hoped that one will gain a sense of a specific evolution for this material.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE FILM-POEM**

**Is there a new art form which combines qualities traditionally associated with poetry and/or film and manifests itself in the form of one or the other but which could truly be said to be a unique hybrid of the two? Does the film-poem really exist?**

**- Shân MacLennan and Christina Patterson<sup>1</sup>**

#### **3.1 The Types of Film-Poems**

**What is a film-poem? There have been a number of cinematic works termed as such. Descriptively, the expression alone is probably, at best, vague. The terms 'film' and 'poem' refer to diverse material in the modern world of literature and artistic study, and contain countless offshoots and interpretations within. To place these words together might sound like a reference to experimental work; it is a term that could fit or classify a work that critics would be otherwise uncertain as to how to define. Is it one or the other (a film or a poem)? Is it a film with poetry in it, a 'poetic' film, or a film that uses poetry as its principle means of thematic expression? Could it be a poem that is cinematic in nature? These are all valid questions, and some are questions that the makers of film-poems themselves continue to ask today.**

**Various writers, filmmakers and poets have sought to define the 'film-poem' and make meaning out of the term, based on their observations of the works the words have been used to define, and sometimes based upon their own works. Perhaps the earliest use of the term was in the 1950s, by American avant-garde filmmakers like Maya Deren, and those referring to the cinematic avant-garde. P. Adams Sitney, in a book considered to be the 'exploratory benchmark' of avant-garde film (Evans, 2000, 8) claims that 'the term film-poem came, was useful, and gone**

by the late Fifties' (1979).<sup>2</sup> The phrase emerged again, albeit in a different capacity, in the early 1980s, but referring to something much more specific. This sense was not used to describe a 'hybrid' form of film (Lambirth, 2000, 32) or another manipulated phrase to specify beyond the words 'experimental' or 'avant-garde' (once those terms became trite). This referred to a phenomenon that was pioneered by a small group of poets and filmmakers who sought to marry verse and film simultaneously, with relatively little previous script material and/or location choices. They attempted spontaneous creation of film and verse (within reason), calling the results 'film/poems' or 'film-poems'. These films were predominantly documentary-like in nature and, at first, made for television.

But this does not mean that this definition was the correct definition of the term, or the most meaningful. Today the term 'film poem' is again being actively used to describe experimental or avant-garde films, and not only those from the 1950s. The term is being used to describe films produced since the early days of cinema, from the early 1920s, through the transition from silent films to 'talkies', until the present day. One writer claims that we should 'not get snared in definitions' (Evans, 8). Yet, it seems that if we are going to use the term, there is an inherent problem lurking within its interpretation, and that problem needs to be confronted. Considering the many different senses of the term that exist now, this is to be expected. We should not be 'snared' in seeking clarification but attempt to extricate ourselves from the ensnaring complications that may await us when in conversation about this elusive form of cinema/poetry.

### 3.2 Tony Harrison and the Film-Poem

The film-poems that I will concentrate most thoroughly upon in this chapter deal most specifically with the latter hyphenated interpretation of 'film-poem'. I will refer to it as the



'Harrisonian' definition of the term, after the poet Tony Harrison, whom has embraced the medium and reinvented it over the last twenty years with the aid of a varied but consistently talented host of directors, producers and editors. Some of the inspirations for Harrison and other contemporary poets in an unofficial 'film-poem school' were my concerns for study in Chapter Two, 'The Evolution of the Film-Poem'. In the present chapter, I will certainly refer to some of these first efforts. I should make it clear that this chapter is by no means a bibliographical account of every film-poem made over the last twenty to thirty years, but it instead intends to relate a distinguishable story, one that recounts the most significant events in the history of the development of the film-poem. I am attempting to describe these events with regard to an unofficial 'apex' of this era: the crafting of the genre's first feature-length production: *Prometheus* (1998). This is a temporary high point of the genre's development, but not its final submission.

The film-poems that began to emerge in the 1980s, clearly in many instances influenced by some early efforts, are primarily Harrison's. Growing out of Harrison's 1980s work are some of the more fully realised film-poems of the *Words on Film* series, produced by Peter Symes. The works of Tony Harrison, are so instrumental in the development of the film-poem that it has been my decision to dedicate the whole of Chapter Four to his work alone.

In the light of this distinction regarding the use of the term, there is still a pressing question: that of the nature of a film-poem in the Harrisonian sense. Let us try to put it simply. These film-poems seek to use little or no prose in their dialogue or voice-over; the text that accompanies the filmed images is entirely, or at least primarily, verse. However, the adaptation of a poem for a film is not what we are discussing here, since many films exist that have visually interpreted previously published or existing poems.<sup>3</sup> Harrison's film-poems are particularly original in terms of their conception. In many cases, the poet writes the poetry *as the film is being shot*. Likewise,

the filmmakers shoot the images *as* the poetry is being written. This makes for much confusion, a heap of stock celluloid on the cutting-room floor, and many notebooks. Nonetheless, no other form of filmmaking mirrors poetic inspiration in its own production process, or selects aspects of editing or mise-en-scene in parallel with poetic composition. In itself problematic and frustrating to successfully complete, film-poems attempt to join verse and film in a way that is both spontaneous but (eventually) carefully ordered. It is the initial effort that is the most exciting, and I have had the opportunity to ask certain film-poem artists about the steps in their evolutionary process. But before we discuss the specifics and intricacies of the modern film-poem, we should study the basics, and in that case we should first look at some of the material that emerges after the 'first attempts' are studied, now considered 'groundwork'.

The short film *Manhatta* (1921), in which Walt Whitman's verse is brought together with shots of the modern city, is an example of some of this groundwork. *Night Mail* (1936) in which W.H. Auden's verse is used to accompany the rhythmic mail train's journey, and John Betjeman's *Metroland* (1971) were also pioneers, 'limited to rare one-off commissions' (Symes, 1992, 2). These films were distinctly influential, but admittedly scarce. *Manhatta* is a very primitive film, simple in its structure and a landmark work. I discussed *Manhatta*, *Night Mail*, and other influential films in Chapter Two, since they all contribute to the evolution of the modern film-poem. Though these films and others like them were innovative and completely new in their time, they were technologically limited, small budgeted and therefore skeletal. The films did not abide by same sort of standards adhered to by modern film-poems, but helped in the setting of those standards. They provided excellent background for Harrison's work, which in turn provided a framework for the film-poems of roughly the last ten years.

Among the innumerable and obscure films being made with poetry throughout the world today, some more 'mainstream' film-poems have achieved fame among film and poetry enthusiasts and students. In 1992, six films were commissioned for BBC2, the *Words on Film* series of film-poems. In the Harrisonian, hyphenated sense of the term 'film-poem', these continue to be among the finest examples. Independent of Symes, but surely taking cues from his innovations in film and poetry, other film-poems began to spring up in the early 1990s, by many writers. Roy Fisher's *Birmingham's What I Think With* (1991) and Blake Morrison's 'Little Angels, Little Devils' (1994) for Channel Four's *Without Walls* series are examples of some of the 'spin-offs' inspired by Harrison's work. It is apparent that others understood Symes' opinions. In his commentary on filmmaking with Tony Harrison, Symes writes that there should be:

...no doubt of verse's great advantage over prose: its ability to draw people in, and then tell them uncomfortable things without having them turn away; its ability to be subjective; its ability to transform and illuminate (1991, 387).

Since these film-poems were made, many of the participating poets have continued making film-poems, some of the films have aired a few times, and future projects are often being planned, by a multitude of film companies and poets.

This leads us to a further point about the Harrisonian ideal of a film-poem. The subject matter of these types of film-poems is often a current issue in the news, in world culture, or of historical significance. Therefore most of these film-poems have a documentary flavour to them, and this is one of the essential differences between them and 'avant-garde' films. In an article about Morrison's film-poem, critic Jasper Rees labels it a 'documentary poem', a possible synonym for the Harrisonian film-poems, with exceptions. Rees calls the documentary poem a genre which 'lends itself to the tolling of Hell's bells...invented almost single-handedly by the

dread-toned Tony Harrison' (1994,18). It is true that many film-poems are dark and depressing; perhaps they are so because most of them are trying to convey a message, more of a specific message than an average film, mainstream or not. This quality is more reminiscent of the evening news than of the latest Hollywood blockbuster, since it seeks to open the public eye and provide a sharp opinion regarding each controversial subject. From defences of Salman Rushdie to an editorial on the treatment of children, film-poems are usually serious in nature. However, all of the films made about these issues, have one thing in common: they use poetry as a more effective intermediation, replacing prose with a more artistic, yet equally compelling and descriptive, medium.

Regarding an aspect of the development of a film-poem and a theoretical explanation of its roots, a particular excerpt of criticism is appropriate. In 'Narrative Sources of *Alien*', Robbie Robertson attempts to compare the difficult and complex tracing of the origins of a film with that of unearthing the sources for a poem. He describes how J. L. Lowe's *The Road to 'Xanadu'* (1927) is a 'meticulous unpicking of the sources for *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* ... in an attempt to reveal the forces which underlie the process of poetic creation' (1985, 172).<sup>4</sup> Robertson continues to say that unravelling the origins of a film is an entirely different matter. He writes:

Unlike even the most complex poem, a film is the product not of one person's experience and writing, but of the multiple experiences of a highly trained and talented team of professionals and the final text, as final cut, is achieved only by a variety of complex industrial processes (172).

In that case, the origins and roots of a film-poem must be manifold. The processes involved in creating a film-poem are therefore more complex than for a 'normal' film.<sup>5</sup> Ignoring genre-

specific requirements for a film like *Alien* (and the need for designers, artists, and an entire special effects crew), a film-poem involves two 'master-minds' at work (director and poet) and presupposes a need for a close working relationship between the two, as well as with the likes of an editor, producer, and cinematographer. Robertson anticipates the 'phenomenon of multiple authorship and thus a whole chain of multiple influences' (172), but this may be the case with any film. It is stressed, mostly by Symes, that a film-poem's effectiveness and ability to balance poetry and images depend on the original rapport that develops between the poet and the director (or producer/editor). Therefore, private and personal influences are to be considered in the study of the conceptual origins of a film-poem. Robertson concludes the discussion of this issue with a problematic statement: 'the multiple authorship of the image operat[es] as a source of multiple intertextualities in which authorship is everywhere and nowhere' (172). In the case of a film-poem, I think the author's presence is usually felt, especially when the author him/herself performs the voiceover, or when the author's poetry or filmmaker's direction is recognisable in its style, feel, and /or sound. It would be difficult to defend a statement that claims that the film-poem author is indeed 'nowhere'.

### 3.3 Problems with Poetry: Inappropriate Images?

Not everyone thought that the film-poem, or in fact poetry on television at all, was an interesting or promising concept. The film-poem is usually a densely ordered item of writing, and the images should attempt to be consistent throughout the work. Sadly, this is one of the most common criticisms of film and poetry's marriage: images and verses are sometimes not appropriately matched throughout the production (Richards, 1986, 12). The film-poem should connect images and words without uneven moments, and this requires close and patient crafting.

In an oft quoted article from 1986, 'Why are the images never appropriate all the way through?' by Bernard Richards, there is much disappointment expressed over how poetry had been presented on television in Britain. At the beginning of the article, he laments that:

...the images accompanying the text are invariably unsatisfactory in varying degrees, ranging from the misleading and distracting on the one hand, to the innocuous but inanely unhelpful on the other. And this complaint has often been voiced. In my own experience of over 30 years of viewing I have *never* heard a poem on television that has had appropriate and compelling images attached to it right the way through, though on some occasions a particular phrase in a poem has been illustrated by an image that struck me as right (1986, 12).

However, Richards elaborates on his opinion later in the article and it is quite clear, from the only ('broad') possibilities that he lists for the placement of poetry on television, that his scope is curtailed and his foresight limited. He claims that he can only see three ways of placing poetry on the screen, and that is either to have (a) the poet read the poem on film, (b) a 'vague and bland, almost neutral image, which operates as a sort of over-arching emblem', or (c) to try, as filmmakers, to imitate what they interpret the poet imagined him/herself (12). The idea of simultaneous writing and filming does not seem to fit into these categories, and in spite of the occasional presence of an 'emblem' in Harrison's work (and others'), it is clear even to the experienced viewer that film-poems were something new and unanticipated, at least in 1986.

Richards refers to the act of viewing poetry on television as 'listening to poems on TV' (12), and this is decidedly not what film-poets are aiming towards in their productions. It is interesting to note which examples of poetry on television Richards indicates as those

inappropriately accompanied by images, and how he sets about identifying what is wrong. He chooses two films that are explicitly documentaries, which is in general accordance with most film-poems, but they are only series documentaries about poets. One is a *Monitor* production about Philip Larkin, and the other a film on Gerard Manley Hopkins, called 'To Seem the Stranger', from the *Everyman* television series. Both programmes were made in 1986, and aired close to the article's publication. Now, if these programmes were filmed entirely in verse, using the traditional practices of film-poets, then perhaps Richards may have felt that the images were indeed 'appropriate all the way through'. This, however, is Richards' exact problem, since he states that, 'very often ... one has to unsee what it is on the screen in order to try and make sense of the lines' (12). This is the antithesis of a film-poem's purpose. In the Hopkins programme, he complains that while discussing 'Pied Beauty', a poem 'dense in images', that it would be nigh impossible to have met the standard for illustration that the poem naturally demands:

In the recent programme, we did not *see* on the screen 'rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim', we did not *see* 'brinded cows' ... and, more interestingly, we did not *see* 'fresh-firecoal chestnut falls'. And here there is a challenge to the film-maker, and the possibility of helping a viewer who cannot see anything for himself, or sees the wrong thing (12).

Although these verses might be unconventional in terms of their modifying adjectives, the nouns or objects themselves (the trout, cows, coal or chestnuts) are apparently missing from the images. Richards has a point in this case. But this is where the film-poem has its strengths. Literal interpretation as well as metaphorical matching are commonplace in film-poems, and the skill with which Harrison (who has also self-directed much of his later work) accomplishes the

matching is perhaps what Richards had been searching for. Later in the article, he writes, 'there are knottier problems, especially when it comes to the illustration of metaphors: is one to give prominence to tenor or vehicle?' (13). This is a good question in any case when considering the nature of the match of film and poetry. I think that the film-poems of the 1990s achieve a balance of both 'tenor' and 'vehicle', whereby one does not detect that there is one vehicle carrying the other medium at any one time, but that the two are interdependent. Obviously, one needs to pay close attention to the film-poem if it is going to function at the optimum level, but this is not an indication of one medium being supported by the other. In the film-poem, especially after one adjusts to the mood and style of the production, I think one loses most senses of disjoint and instead understands the copulation of the entire piece.<sup>6</sup>

The next goal (and the next step in satisfying critics like Richards) is to attempt the same stylised and literally appropriate matching of image and verse in a poem that is adapted for the screen, meaning a poem previously published independent of any filmic relation. Filmmakers should attempt this and avoid the mere 'talking head' or the fixed image, the drawing or the photographed work of art that is supposed to 'summarise' the poetic line. Harrison, by directing some of his films, should be an inspiration to other poets to try their hands at direction, since that is probably what the film dealing with poetry would need: more imaginative yet literally accurate and ordered cohabitation of shot and verse. Some minor attempts were made at this in the same year, in fact, though the results were not as well known or successful.

In late 1986, poet Alexis Lykiard wrote an argument to combat Richards' complaint.<sup>7</sup> He discusses Kevin Crooks' eight short films under the heading 'Video Poetry' which were commissioned that same year by Television South West and South West Arts. The films were meant to be a response to Richards' comments, attempting a new kind of artistic co-operation.



Lykiard was one of the poets involved with the project; his previously published poem was selected for placement on the screen. This team of filmmakers and poets adhered to some of the same kinds of criteria that film-poets now regularly practice. Obviously, the Richards article caused a stir in the minds of some poets and filmmakers. Lykiard himself writes:

As a poet, I'd rather agreed with Richards, having myself deplored most previous attempts at televised poetry. I recall exasperation or amusement when faced with yet more talking heads; ludicrously over-literal interpretations; 'actorish' voices; self-conscious artiness of all sorts; and perfunctory or pretentious snippets tucked away in non-peak slots (21).

Lykiard's film *The Attractions* was made in close collaboration with the director of the series (Crooks), as were the other seven pieces. This is an essential point, even if the poems were not written at the same time as the filming was being done. Lykiard's poem was written three years before the piece was filmed. Concerned with the memory's 'selective distortion', the 'glamour of power', and with sex, violence and death, the poem contains some rather violent imagery itself, and it was probably selected for the series by the filmmakers for its sensational value. Lykiard states that he could 'see the poem with new eyes' after association with this project (22). More importantly, the poet directly satisfies one of Richards' concerns with accuracy and appropriation, by claiming his own satisfaction with the poem's original subject matter:

...my fascination at seeing certain enduring preoccupations of mine resurface, taking on cinematic flesh, remains gratifying indeed... I felt, as did the director, that it should be perfectly possible for poetry to deliver a concentrated and hard-hitting message in these often loathsome, violent times (22).

At least Lykiard was aware of the pitfalls of poetry on television, and though he is strict in his criticism of past productions (see the passage above), his criticisms are genuinely valid, if they are not intended to prove Richards wrong. Ironically one of Richards' colleagues at Oxford, Peter Levi, had been involved in selecting and introducing some of the poems for the Television South West / South West Arts project. Lykiard seems assured that he had aided in providing some evidence to the contrary of Richards' argument, but in his article he humbly states that 'whether or not our particular marriage of image-to-word proves effective is of course for the viewers to decide' (22). They were fine attempts, but now it was time to move on to something more substantial, especially in terms of running time and a sense of 'completeness'. A few years later, Peter Symes' name returned to the world of film and poetry.

### *3.4 Words on Film*

The series of six film-poems for BBC2 picked up where some of the filmmakers' past experiences with Harrison left off. Symes, the series producer, writes of the series as follows:

*Words on Film* was designed specifically to show that what had been learnt on series like *Loving Memory* could be developed and expanded [<sup>8</sup>]. The previous films had allowed myself and Tony Harrison to experiment and learn while we built up a successful working rapport (1992, 3).

In this series, Symes worked closely with all six of the poets, and the accompanying booklet, which contains all of the poetry included in the finished versions of each film-poem, also contains some descriptions of what each poet was trying to accomplish or express, in the form of a short preface to each poem. Symes himself introduces the booklet with some reflection on the

experience. This introduction continues to be one of the best articulations of the process of making a film-poem. Only personal interviews with the participants are more illuminating.

In the initial stages of the proposed project, there was much opposition from within the BBC about the series, in fact 'about the idea of poetry on television at all' (Whitworth, 93, 40). The BBC representatives were confused about the motives of the project: 'Did you look at the pictures or listen to the words? It has been tried before and it doesn't work'. They even claimed that 'poets were prats and difficult to work with'. (Whitworth, 40). These criticisms were reminiscent of the famous scepticism met with the introduction of sound in cinema in the late 1920s, where critics believed less in the 'synchronisation of senses' (Eisenstein, in Bordwell and Thompson, 1997, 316) and more in the possibility of uncomfortable sensory overload.

But Symes was able to overturn these opinions about *Words on Film* by citing the reasons why it had been tried before and didn't work, at least in terms of Auden and *Night Mail*.<sup>9</sup> He said that Auden's career as a film-maker was indeed brief since he was required 'to provide verse for existing film material, rather in the manner of a composer writing music' and that 'Auden failed to mention the necessity of writer and film team being able to work closely together' (1991, 385). Symes repeatedly stressed the importance of the 'poet's own creativity' being allowed to 'inform the filmmaking', since otherwise one might just as well use prose. In a manner of speaking, the viewing was meant to be similar to the making of the film, in that one did not only listen to the words or look at the pictures. Viewing a film-poem is not only an auditory and visual experience, but the aim is to wholly engage both senses by making the qualities of the production parallel with each other. Though this might be the case for many films, the presence of poetry is the extraordinary difference between film-poems and other films, with its range of connotations, rhythms and unique forms that eclipse the limitations of most prose. The poem itself might have

worked on paper alone, and the film may have been an interesting panorama without its poetic backdrop, but the two were made to be together. Symes said he was lucky to choose Harrison as the poet in his first projects, since he was more than willing to work with the film crew to make sure the film was crafted in accordance with his vision. His film-poems, including 'Loving Memory' and 'The Blasphemers' Banquet', were highly successful and the television authorities were convinced. Thus the BBC gave Symes permission to proceed with his proposal for *Words on Film* and the project was soon under way.

The six poets were Damian Gorman, Jackie Kay, Adrian Mitchell, Simon Armitage, Fred D'Aguiar, and Douglas Dunn. Due to space confinements, I cannot discuss every one of these poets' films but will choose two of the best as models. I would like to look at Armitage's film-poem first, since it is probably the greatest influence upon the modern-day interpretation of the genre. His longer film-poem 'Killing Time' (2000), the most recent film-poem to date, uses many of the tools pioneered in 'Xanadu' as well.

### 3.4.1 'Xanadu' and Regional Accents

Armitage's 'Xanadu' was arguably one of the best of the six films in the series. 'Xanadu' concerns some of Armitage's past experiences as a probation officer and his dealings with a notorious housing development, the Ashfield Valley Estate in Rochdale. Thirty minutes in length (as are all of the series' films), it is an introspective and interpersonal story about some of the Estate's tenants and the type of environment that they live in. Presented in a 'deadpan', ironic style (Feay, 1992, 157), Armitage takes a witty stance in describing the precarious Estate's situation. What is particularly interesting about Armitage's verse is his individual opinion on the

Estate's condition, since it used to be one of his first responsibilities in his time as a probation officer. A passage in the accompanying booklet to the series explains further:

On returning to the Valley for *Words on Film* he finds the clichés of vandalism, crime and poverty that have built up over the years in association with the estate to be no longer relevant (Symes, 1992, 39).

This film-poem explores the image and reputation of the characteristically dilapidated housing estate, and how one should more closely inspect such places before immediately disdaining them.

The most memorable part of this film-poem is a certain dramatisation within it. The Ashfield Valley Estate's twenty-six streets or blocks of flats have names that all begin with a different letter of the alphabet, from A to Z. Symes described Armitage's realisation of this fact as 'a classic moment' (interview, 1997). Armitage fictitious city council members re-enact the selection of the names of these blocks, and all of the characters speak in couplets while they deduce that the twenty-six blocks correspond to the number of letters in the alphabet. They have a problem selecting a name beginning with 'X', and 'Xanadu' is glossed over once significance with Coleridge is mentioned, in favour of 'Exford'. Examples of the couplets are as follows:

2<sup>ND</sup> MAN

This isn't as easy as some o' t'others,  
there's twenty-six of these rotten buggers.

3<sup>RD</sup> MAN

26? Eh, flippin 'eck.

That's same as letters in alphabet.

Pass me that A to Z and a pin,  
I'll run through sections and stick it in,  
And wherever it lands, whatever it falls on,  
That'll be the name, that's what we'll call 'em.

In the same manner as Harrison's 'miner dialogue' in *Prometheus*, Armitage's characters speak colloquially, but are easily likeable in their rhythmic speech and rhyme.<sup>10</sup> The source of the film-poem's name is found a few lines after those above, while considering the problematic letter 'X':

1<sup>st</sup> MAN

Eh, Eureka! this will do,  
It's poetry or something: 'Xanadu,  
an idyllic estate or place' (and I'm quoting)  
from *Kubla Khan* by S T Coleridge.

2<sup>ND</sup> MAN

That's not a poem, that's a song  
By Olivia Bloody-Newton-John (44).

Armitage's couplets keep the atmosphere light and even cheery, but we know that underneath the flippant attitude of these speakers is a hint of foreboding negligence to come. Ashfield Valley is to fall into great disrepair, and it is the overall carelessness of the speakers which foreshadows this gradual event. The names of the housing blocks are given at random and without thought, and Armitage's film-poem suggests that the people living in the estate are treated thoughtlessly as well. There is much visual support for this statement. Armitage's poetry takes us back to the

time when the blocks were named, in 'nineteen-sixty something-or-other' (43), which already expresses a degree of vagueness.

As the segment is introduced we see a council chamber, while a table is polished and papers are neatly piled. We hear voices and general commotion, doors close slowly and drinking water is set on the table.<sup>11</sup> The cuts between shots are abrupt and quick, as are the movements of any figures within the frame. This creates a businesslike atmosphere, which is probably what is first desired. Once the doors close on the outside world, a hand picks up a gavel and order is called. It is interesting to note that the shot of the doors closing is at an angle, with the camera cocked about forty-five degrees to the left. This gives the viewer a stronger grasp of the hodgepodge way in which these council flats were developed. Akin to the hand seen grasping and banging the gavel, there is minimal physical presence onscreen until Armitage himself appears at the table at the scene's end, mouthing the words spoken by the first man. Plaster or ceramic busts, seemingly seated around or above the table represent the three council members. When one man is meant to be speaking (in verse) at the start of the discussion, there is a close-up of the bust's face. But the close-ups are only used to establish this technique, since soon the camera begins a smooth panning of the chamber and its surroundings: the table, coats of arms of past councilmen, the outside of the council building or town hall. A key shot in the midst of the discussion occurs at the same time as the lines quoted above are 'spoken'. As 'Eh, Eureka' is said, a medium close-up of one of the drinking glasses is shown. Too much water is then steadily poured into the glass, and the excess spills onto the table. The camera is panning while the shots are filmed. On the word 'Xanadu', cut to a shot of a stone arch, one of the doorways on the outside of the building, camera still panning at the same speed. The arch looks as if it is from a castle-like structure, or from an 'idyllic estate'. Then the camera cuts to the inside of the council building again, onto a

medium close-up of a man's hand, as the second man states, 'That's not a poem'. Still panning at the same speed, the camera photographs a man's hand tapping his fingers impatiently in front of a sign on the table that reads 'Please Use Table Mats' in cursive lettering. This shot is in direct correlation to the shot of the spilled water two shots beforehand. Clearly the poetic lines express a displeasure with the choice of 'Xanadu' and an ignorance on the part of the councilman, who is unaware of the poetic or historical significance of the word, and only aware of its status as a pop song. The sloppiness and generally unprofessional habits of the councilmen are reflected in this scene. The dialogue is also written colloquially, in a Northern Yorkshire accent, which unashamedly adds to the scene's air of laziness. Those viewers familiar with the Rochdale estate should be outraged as this scene follows others that expose the Estate's dereliction, showing the 'idyllic' housing development's abhorrent state. Through the fusion of poetry and image the councilmen are caricatured as oblivious to the troubles that they may cause through their casual attitude. The first council member, clearly the Head, even expresses his desire for quick and easy solutions with the lines, 'Great idea lad, right up my street, / I'm a great believer in keeping things neat' (43). At the end of the scene in the council room, while the camera continues to pan, they select 'Exford' to represent the letter 'X' in the housing estate, over 'Xanadu'. It is base thoughtlessness and stupidity that Armitage exaggerates in this scene, illustrating a disregard for attention to detail or circumstance. 'Xanadu' therefore becomes an ironic title for the entire piece, meaning both the majestic palace of Kubla Khan and the unused name for the housing block. The 'paradise' that is referred to in Coleridge's poem is of course metamorphosed into a parody when shots of the Estate are exhibited, but beyond that the fact remains that the name is never even used in its alphabetical arrangement. The name is glossed over as 'poetry or something' and as the segment draws to a close with the camera panning circularly around the messy table,



Armitage himself slouches in his seat, mouthing the words spoken by the first mythical councilman, 'Movin' on then. Any other business?' (44).<sup>12</sup> His disdain is palpable.

Some critics disliked the tone of the film, referring to its 'persistent whine' (Last, 1992, 28), and indicating the sequence described above as the only valuable material. Though the forty-minute film-poem does complain about the Estate's predicament, from its conception to its destruction, its stoic remaining inhabitants are the primary focal points of the work. In fact they are given a noble stance. The idiosyncrasies of these people are not condemned whatsoever, rather they are celebrated as interesting and provocative. They are treated the same way that a television documentary about war veterans might treat its participants, those whom had overcome a particular adversity. This film-poem is also a documentary in disguise, and its points should be taken as seriously as a production whose commentary was not almost entirely in verse. This is the sort of practice for which most viewers and many critics are not trained.

In Luke Spencer's book *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (1994) there is a study of Harrison's film-poems and their impact upon those who have seen them (114-136). One of Spencer's comments towards the end of this chapter is about whom else has experimented with the process of film-poem-making. Regarding Armitage, Spencer writes:

It is encouraging to see that at least one younger poet has taken up the challenge of working in this way. ['Xanadu'] ...is a bruising evocation and indictment of conditions on a Rochdale council estate. Original and versatile as this piece certainly is, it would have been less likely to be commissioned, written, produced, broadcast or published ...without Harrison's television work as an incitement and example (134).

Spencer does not comment on any of the other poets who worked on the *Words on Film* series, or on the presence of Peter Symes, but he recognises the impact Harrison had on the poetic community.

### 3.4.2 'Twice Through the Heart'

'Xanadu' was only one of six film-poems in *Words on Film*, each of which contain a similar message at their heart. The film-poems often choose, as their subject, something complicated and controversial that might be difficult to cover in the news over a long period. Some subjects that may be classed as local problems or minor issues are well covered by film-poems. One of the other works in the series that adopts a notable approach in its defense or explanation of such an issue is Jackie Kay's 'Twice Through the Heart'. It is a heartfelt exploration of one of the most disputed British murder cases in the early 1990s, concerned with Amelia Rossiter's conviction of the murder of her abusive husband. Kay is the only female poet included in this series, and her film-poem contains shocking yet peaceful poetry, but it surprisingly contains much prose as well. There are interviews, news reports and opinions, all in prose or normal speech, injected into this film-poem, and repetition is used to an effective extent as well. Kay's opinions about her own contributions to this work describe the writing process very well, stating:

I was always trying to think in visual pictures, to think of writing something that would not copy the picture but add to it or contradict it or work with it in some dynamic way (personal contact, 2001).

This comment suggests that the visuals existed before the poetry, but this was not the case. Kay describes the process of writing the verse as a symbiotic one, 'a real mixture' (personal contact,

2001). This film poem is saturated with unconventional devices on all levels, yet, critically speaking, it is the film-poem that has commanded the least attention in the series.

On a dark and chilling subject, the film-poem has a threatening and eerie feel to it from its outset. The first sequence of the film, called 'No Way Out', begins with a poetic summary of the events on the night of the murder; a kind of itinerary of the possible thoughts of Rossiter, thoughts that could have accumulated over years of abuse. The date appears at the bottom of the screen in the first shot, of a tabletop: (23<sup>rd</sup> July 1987). The scene is lit in a blue tint, evoking a dreamy atmosphere. Cut to a close-up of a tap with running water. Cut to a shot of bubbles in the washbasin that the water splashes into, followed by a close-up of some kitchen utensils on the tabletop: a rolling pin, a towel. Shadows lengthen on the rolling pin. The camera then begins to move, slowly panning up the dark blue-grey underside of the kitchen sink, followed by a pan of a kitchen shelf laden with teacups. In the midst of this pan, Kay's voiceover begins with, 'You tie the kitchen towel into a garrotte / There's no way out, no way out'. After lingering for a moment on a barometer, also upon the shelf, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of a twisted tea towel, the 'garrotte', upon which the camera quickly zooms in, an extreme close-up.<sup>12</sup> In this forty-second introduction to the film-poem, which includes both the wordless opening shots and the first six-line stanza, the camera remains fairly easy to follow: entirely static or moving slowly. The second stanza begins immediately after the sudden close-up of the tea towel, with a swirling camera, suddenly out of control. The ominous tone of the first stanza is replaced immediately as well, with an increase in volume and a note of panic in the reader's voice.

There are numerous devices at work in this first sequence, both in the poetry and the cinematography. For example, the first instances of repetition are used in the opening lines of this sequence: the line, 'There's no way out, no way out' alternates with other lines of tense

poetry over the first three stanzas, appearing nine times. This is similar to the use of repetition at the beginning of Armitage's 'Xanadu', in that there is a line present which intends to pervade the meaning of the piece, or disturb the viewer with its imagery. Armitage's verses alternately rhyme outside of the repeated line 'but the smell of the cabbage', creating a rhyme scheme of 'ababcbcbddb' and so on, where the 'b' is 'cabbage'. In contrast to Armitage's very ordered sequence, Kay's rhyme scheme in the opening stanzas is erratic, aside from the line 'there's no way out, no way out' appearing every other line. There are random half rhymes in the first stanza, and full rhymes or no rhymes altogether in the second and third stanza, creating a scheme that looks pattern-less over the three stanzas. Structurally, the opening sequence is not at all predictable. The first stanza has six lines, while the second and third have seven each. Another repetition also occurs in the seventh line in each of the second and third stanzas. Ultimately, the third stanza culminates with the two repeated lines appearing one after another. The irregularity of these stanzas adds to the frantic, panicky mood of the piece, provoking emotions that someone embroiled in a dangerous situation might feel. The lines are also fraught with tension since we are listening to a scenario in which we know a murder takes place. As the husband ('He' in the poem) approaches the speaking character in these opening lines, variations of 'he walks towards me' are also repeated. Like the action sequences in a suspenseful film, the moment of the worst tension is slowed down in verse. Visually, the scenes are withheld from us. This makes for a very disturbing sequence indeed.

The only sound we hear before the voiceover is the sound of water running out of a tap. This sound continues throughout the entire scene, making the tone of the film all the more unstable and sickening. It is worth pointing out that it is difficult to remember if the scene is only furnished with the sound of the water and the poetry, since the scene is reminiscent of one that

would normally include eerie or impressive background music of some sort. It is the musicality of the poetry and of Kay's voice that relinquishes the need for any such music. The sound of the running water only ceases with the final line of the three stanza scene, which is accompanied by three shots of the outside wall of a small house, one from the left, one from the right, and then centrally focussed. Shot from the ground and with a wide-angle lens, the wall is made to look imposing, dominating the screen. The last shot of the sequence, with the house in the centre of the frame, is unaccompanied by any sound, a static shot that expresses that the place we are looking at is the place in which the horrible event occurred. Its imposition on the viewer and the screen makes the crime as well as the issue itself seem overwhelming. In this way, simple shots in a film-poem that are unaccompanied by verse, but which follow a particularly moving stanza, can be just as effective without any voiceover, special effect or sound. We leave this opening scene with a firm sense of the subject of the piece, and all of this happens before we see the opening credits of the programme.

However, as the film-poem progresses, there is a departure from pure poetry, which is not usually the case in the other film-poems of the series. There are descriptions of the details of the crime placed into verse, but it sounds like prose and it is arguable as to whether or not the verses are really poetry. For example, the first 'poetic' sequence after the opening credits is this stanza:

Ethel Amelia Rossiter was 63 years old

When she was attacked by her husband

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1987.

During a fight he hit her and attempted strangulation.

She stabbed him twice.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1987

Leslie Rossiter, her second husband

Died in their house, number 3, the Saltings.<sup>14</sup>

This excerpt looks and sounds more like a straightforward newscast than poetry. However as the film-poem develops, we can guess that this insertion of prosaic text has a hidden purpose: it is to prepare the viewer for a number of other non-poetic interruptions. Quotations from certain individuals associated with the case are scattered throughout the piece, sometimes in interview form. In one case, some neighbours stand in front of the camera on their porch steps and explain how Mr. Rossiter was a private man. In another, a solicitor sits against a black backdrop, television-interview-style, and discusses the Rossiters' situation. There are a number of such examples of a departure from poetry as the solitary means of expression, as there occasionally are in 'Xanadu', Fred D'Aguiar's 'Sweet Thames' and other film-poems. This makes the film-poem more generically diverse, but also introduces odd impediments to the work's flow and effectiveness. Without the consistency of the presence of verse, it is not clear what Kay was trying to accomplish. In other examples, the inset of prose seems to be surrounded by poetry; in 'Twice Through the Heart' the poetry seems more of a colourful addition. Perhaps this film-poem, as opposed to others that have been made, is closest to the mainstream documentary. If so, then the poetry serves as an interesting tool, but it then takes on a few new tendencies. With the normal speech of many individuals alongside it, the spoken poetry in Kay's piece can sound insistent at times, and often the repetition that Kay employs as a poetic device comes across as intimidating and redundant. As opposed to the ways in which Tony Harrison has woven spoken dialogue into his verse, Kay's use of multiple segments of dialogue that interrupt the poetry is not as effective and make for inconsistent and difficult viewing. On the other hand, Kay's subject is perhaps one of the most controversial of the series and there are careful facts that must be

acknowledged when considering a murder case. Kay herself comments on the use of repetition in film-poems in an emailed response to my questions about her work:

I was thinking that people cannot read my words, so they have to be simple. They will hear them once. I was very aware that the medium was television so that dictated the style of the poetry ... I think using repetition works very well for the film. If people didn't catch it the first time, they can catch it the second! I think it works to increase the tension and the rhythm of the whole piece and to say something about violence itself, how relentless and repetitive it is.

Kay's answers also link the usage of the poetic devices in the specific verse to the overall themes of the film, in that she compares repetition to prison life, which is also 'full of repetitions, the same routine repeated again and again' (personal contact, 2001).

In *Time Out* critic Suzi Feay's review of the series, a few words are dedicated to Kay's work:

... Kay's mournful Scots tones barely rise above the hissing of the waves as she mooches about the seaside town where the Rossiters lived. The poetic element lifts the programme above an ordinary documentary, enabling a more discursive examination of the issues, but you're left with very little sense of Kay's poetic identity (1992, 157).

Perhaps the reason why an 'ordinary documentary' is mentioned at all in Feay's review is because there is a lack of poetic fluidity. Yet there are other elements within Kay's work that demonstrate distinct differences from conventional documentary form. In a further similar vein to Armitage's 'Xanadu', the idea of a human presence, without the use of an actor or character, is utilised. As Armitage used busts of human heads and empty chairs to express his councilmen, Kay uses clothes racks to represent the jury and a clothes horse with a blue woman's outfit wrapped around it to represent Amelia. For the judge's role, she uses another clothes horse with a robe and a wig

placed on top. These were Kay's favourite images in the piece, calling these adaptations the 'best thing of all' (personal contact, 2001). As we get accustomed to these sights, one easily imagines that there are people playing these parts, though we only *hear* their voices. With the use of these specific set pieces and timely camera movement, the coat racks and clothes-horses come to life. This brings us to another important aspect of the film-poem: what kinds of camera techniques are used within them to match the merging of verse and image?

In Kay's film, we see one of the most common camera movements that are present in film-poems. Sometimes, as discussed above, an inanimate object is transformed into a character that 'speaks' and requires some way of making communication obvious to viewers. That object, especially in this example, can also reflect upon the theme of the film-poem as well, since Kay herself thought that the jury, represented on suits on hangars, 'visually said so much about how powerless Amelia would have felt facing that faceless jury' (personal contact, 2001). Rather than use any kind of special effect, film-poems allow the poetry to feature centrally and all other aspects of the film revolve around it. Therefore, when one of these inanimate objects is meant to speak poetically, certain camera work should be employed to clearly indicate its voice or maximise its effect. A slow tracking pan, usually focussing on a stationary object, is a tool often used in documentaries; in film-poems the same is true. This kind of tracking shot is used in Kay's work to enhance the illusion of speech by the clothes racks. The slow, steady movement makes us concentrate harder on the audible verses. The movement also often appears to be circular, moving around a fixed central point. In this film-poem, the camera revolves around the clothes-horse that represents Amelia, while in Armitage's film-poem there is circular movement around the council table. A popular cinematographic effect is also the tendency to cut from the circular tracking shot to a close-up, either to some smaller aspect of an object in the room, or to another



figure. To clarify this idea, I will describe the sequence of shots that are used during the mock rendition of Amelia's trial, the scene with the coat racks in 'court'.

The representation of Amelia, while she is being circularly panned by the camera, 'says' the verses that are called 'What Amelia Thinks - part 2'. That shot is interrupted by a brief prosaic interlude, during which we find out that there is evidence of sexual abuse by her husband over many years. Cutting back to the courtroom scene, we emerge with the camera focussed on a close-up of buttons on Amelia's blouse while she says the words, 'Inside I say don't please / Grit my teeth. Bite the pillow'. The camera then tracks up Amelia's blouse up to her neck, and the scene ends with another cut, this one back to her buttons, a symbolic extreme close-up.

Regardless of or even with the inserted dialogue, this sequence is very typical within a film-poem. Establishing shots or slow pans often provide a cinematic sense of location and surrounding. Then the use of cuts is employed, jumping from one shot to the next rapidly. In other words, details are examined closely after we get an introduction to some larger issue. Film-poems tend to expose, and to relish the process of exposure. With that enjoyment, with that carefully planned out system of attack, comes some close attention to almost every element that makes up a shot, frame or object within the frame. In a film-poem the mise-en-scene swells with significance; there is often no stone left upturned and no detail left occupying space without some inspection. That is why the film-poem is pervasive, both on paper and in cinematic form. When the two are combined a dense work is certainly created.

'Twice Through the Heart' may attempt to cover too many aspects of the murder case in its rather short running time. Though it is a reflection of a court case that was fraught with many sources of conflict, ranging from sexism and age to justice and conspiracy, it itself may have been more effective if it simply focussed on one part of the case. The study might have benefited

from a singular analysis of the trial, or of Rossiter's imprisonment and its effects on her family. It is also very bleak, offering no hope for Rossiter, and it ends abruptly. It is only after the credits that we learn that one of Rossiter's appeals was met with a positive response, and that she was released in 1992.

Feay's review of the series states that it was 'odd that this project hadn't been attempted before: if poetry is about imagery, television is about images' (1992, 157).<sup>15</sup> She clearly did not think the images chosen were impressive, stating that the visuals were 'unimaginative' and the photography 'drab' (157). Yet, one of the recurring problems with critics who review film-poems is the inability to consider that the visuals are not meant to stand on their own, and neither should the poetry be read without its visual counterpart. If the visuals are described as 'boring', perhaps the poetry is not properly synchronised, or worse, misunderstood. Feay's article concludes, regarding Douglas Dunn's 'Dressed to Kill', that it 'tends to confirm one's worst fears about poetry' (157). Perhaps what is really happening is that poetry is confronting some of our worst fears. The material is gritty, the subjects often controversial. Some of the visuals are indeed basic; sometimes the poetry is complex, so a basic image would be needed so as not to overwhelm the viewer with interpretation. Yet, Feay does maintain some valid points: the visual content could have definitely been more creative, more imaginative in some of the works. These were still early stages however, and experimentation combined with a little hesitation on the part of the filmmakers could be forgiven. In this way, Feay seems to answer her own questions: this project had not been often tackled before because it is a difficult task to master. Poetry and television, if they are to work together, need to be finely tuned in to one another, made to match.

No matter how much 'Twice Through the Heart' skips through some complex issues, it is still a powerful piece. It also includes one aspect of the film-poem that has not been commented

upon at length as of yet in this study, and that is the idea of the 'common thread' or the use of one object as a 'guide' within the film-poem. Producers of this kind of material often employ an object to serve as a kind of narrator for the viewer, a familiar image to observe that holds the film together and makes it easier to comprehend. In Kay's work, the clothes rack rather simply serves this purpose for a portion of the film-poem. In Harrison's work we see guide after guide, and the later the work, the more eclectic the choice for the guide. But before some of the more substantially budgeted projects Harrison produced, there was the presence of less obvious guides in film-poems. Graduating from the *Words on Film* series for the moment, I would like to study a little known film-poem from the same period.

### 3.5 Roy Fisher and his Brummy Doors

Poet Roy Fisher's *Birmingham Is What I Think With* was also released in 1991. There was no separate transcript made privately available to accompany this film. To date, Fisher's film-poem has been primarily shown in festivals and has not been aired on television, which is an injustice since it is a fine film, well crafted and beautifully photographed. In Fisher's collection *Birmingham River* (1994), there is much of the poetry used in the film, under the heading 'Six Texts for a Film', but the film does not follow the poetry word for word, nor vice versa, or in any specific order. The film also borrows from some of his previously published material, including the poem 'Furnace'. In spite of this borrowing, the film has most of the qualities of a film-poem and stands as quite a maverick work. Straight from its outset, it intrigues the viewer; by its end, it cements itself as one of the more entertaining and interesting of the film-poems available today. Fisher and director (and poet) Tom Pickard simply desired an original forum for their ideas, and their collaboration on this film was 'a natural one' (Fisher, 1997, 5). Pickard's other documentary

films have often dealt with the working-class cities in the Northeast of England and the people of those cities. A native 'Brummy', Fisher has claimed that he has been familiar with Pickard's poetry and film since the 1960s, and that they have always worked upon 'similar themes' (5).

The title of the film is taken from the first line of the poem that was later published as 'Talking to Cameras' in Fisher's 1994 collection. 'Talking to Cameras' is a series of poems that Fisher wrote about his birthplace, and at first glance they appear nostalgic. However, Fisher ultimately describes Birmingham 'in terms of provisional metaphors' (Hooker, 29, 1996) and he becomes a poet associated with landscapes, with the desire to know what lies within them. Fisher's film mingles urban scenes and shots of broken-down factories with scenes of greenery and running water. Yet, everything, whether natural or synthetic, is spoken about as if it were a feat of engineering, whether in verse or straight prose. This is a portrait of not only Birmingham itself, but of its people, its mindset, its future or what is hoped for, and about Fisher, his poetry, and his styles of thinking that were shaped from his surroundings.

Fisher is introduced at the beginning of the film-poem as a 'poet and pianist', as he stands on the street next to a blue and white door, which he is holding upright. His reputation as a creative, literate person is set against a working class career, what he describes as the typical outcome for the average Brummy. Fisher spends the duration of the film-poem in exploration mode: searching for various aspects of the city that have influenced his personality, and taking stock of what he has seen around him. This search for meaning in the small universe of his childhood leads Fisher to the doors of his old home in Handsworth, and it is the actual door to his original birthplace. Fisher 'borrows' the door in the film-poem version of his soul-searching poetry.

This door begins to appear as an endearing reminder of the simplicity of Fisher's search: it is omnipresent, and whimsical in its appearances throughout the film. The door travels through the city as if it were Fisher himself. He writes of the interesting choice of prop:

Appearing on camera was less welcome; but I managed to persuade the battered front door of my birthplace to come out of retirement and stand in for me in many of the shots (1997, 5).

In this way, perhaps unwittingly, Fisher made use of a film-poem device that has since become somewhat of a standard issue in their making: the 'guide'. Like a reliable companion, Fisher's house door travels with him in a search through some of Birmingham's oldest historical locations, both universally notable and personally significant to Fisher himself. The door travels through canals, playgrounds, urban districts and other settings, to give the viewer an idea of the foundations his city was built upon. The door, with Fisher himself, becomes this 'guide', or a kind of leader to help us work our way through what is by nature a complex piece. In film-poems, the prop that becomes our visual 'guide' is often an important tool or factor in being able to fully understand the levels of the work. We will see the use of such guides in many film-poems, especially in Harrison's work, such as 'The Shadow of Hiroshima' (1995) and 'The Gaze of the Gorgon' (1992).

For a great part of Fisher's film, the door is travelling while poetic lines are being recited on the soundtrack, carried on the back of another actor that we are meant to imagine is the poet. As Fisher winds his way through the city, the door grows increasingly significant, and the poetry becomes increasingly synonymous with Birmingham and the significance of the areas we travel within. Fisher spends much time speaking in interview-style to the camera, giving his views on creativity, music (he plays the piano in a jazz quintet) and his origins. These prosaic interludes

are then made more intricate by the poetry that follows them. Fisher's film-poem is much more fluid than most of the material in the *Words on Film* series because his prose is also poetic. For example, when Fisher is describing his childhood neighbourhood of Handsworth, he describes a forge area, near to the street where he lived as a child. Of course, his parents always warned him about going near this area, and Fisher says it was like:

...living with your feet dangling over something that would burn them off if you left them dangling over it too long.

Though the 'something' was a forge and the analogy has quite literal connotations, the poetic qualities of Fisher's comments bind the film-poem more strongly together, linking prose and poetry through images.

Another interesting aspect of Fisher's film-poem is that all of the instances where he speaks in prose on camera are shot in colour, whether in 'interview format' or not. However, if he speaks poetry to the camera, he is always shot in black and white, and more brightly lit from the foreground, surrounded by a black background. It is almost as if he is in a spotlight and is performing the poetry to an audience, but as soon as we get comfortable with this picture, the scene cuts to another colour scene, which will have something to do with the forthcoming lines. When the screen reverts to black and white, it is highly noticeable, drawing more attention to the presence of poetry. Speaking of colours, the black and white film is also more similar to the image of a printed text, which is logically significant, but also ironic when one discovers that the majority of poetry Fisher uses in this film-poem had not been published in any book at the time.

When the poetry used in this film had finally been included in a published collection, it was very well received critically. Jeremy Hooker notes in his review of the poetry:

There is, I think, no urban poetry like this in English, not even in Williams' New Jersey or Charles Reznikoff's New York... It is with the help of a myth, then, that Fisher has overcome 'the demon of fixity and solidity', the myth that Nature, the source of creation, is also the power behind the imagination... True to his Romantic heritage, the idea takes Fisher back to his childhood and the source of the magical view of life (1996, 29).

What better way to illustrate that influence of background upon imagination than to isolate one tangible object from your past and physically carry it around with you? Fisher not only allows it to become a part of what is quite a surreal realisation but also places the door in positions it is not normally associated with, creating slightly surreal images in the process. In the film-poem, we see the door inside the local civic centre, bouncing through fields, underneath motorway overpasses and among the canals of Birmingham. Every scene where the door appears is another inkling toward Fisher's personal search for identity and it helps to slowly dispense with disillusionment about his past. This phenomenon is best illustrated in two simple but pertinent scenes; one with archive footage of children playing in the streets of the city, while the other consists solely of one shot: Fisher walking, with his door, down an urban street.

The first scene occurs only about ten minutes into the film and by this time Fisher has already demonstrated that his film and poem are about identity and its sources. We move as viewers from a collection of landscapes and buildings to an archive film within the film-poem, in sepia tinted photography, of children on the street or on suburban lawns in mid-twentieth century Birmingham. Fisher states these lines as the archive film continues:

But what is it

when you're first set loose in it, with only

your nostrils, fingertips, ears, eyes  
to teach you appetite and danger?

Is it the primal ocean, condemned  
and petrified? Is it a giant lagoon in Tartarus  
petrified, redeemed, made habitable?

There's one thing certain:  
this is the center of the universe.

Combining the stock footage of the children and these lines of poetry, Fisher makes us see that we are products of our surroundings, because no matter what our surroundings or what we become or fail to become, every child habitually thinks his own immediate environment is the hub of society. There is no place greater, more influential, more significant in individual development. And if home is the 'center of the universe' to the small child, and childhood is the time of our lives when our imaginations are at their most lively or uninhibited, then it is wise to carry some relic of that universe with us later in life. Fisher chooses the gateway to that universe with the door to his home, literally carrying it through his town, to humorous but powerful effect.

Fisher's door is with him through many verses of poetry in this film, but it perhaps best stands as an important memento while he and it are travelling down a simple urban street. While two children roll a tire across the street in the background, the door is carried in such a way that it looks like it is partially floating down the street, on the back of the supposed poet. Maintaining the sense of the door's symbolism, these verses are heard while the door bobs down the road,

Close by Apollo's abandoned



incinerator house at Delphi,  
its columns giving the air of  
a ruined iron works in the mountains.

I've held my hands to the displaced  
Omphalos-stone, the single-centre,

Not of the planet, but of the earth's shifting  
Surface, the live map.

While he has his hands around the door, we get the impression that the door is his 'Omphalos-stone', his oracle, with which he can unravel and comprehend the intricacies and roots of his life. It is also clear that Fisher, who occasionally huffs and puffs from the strain of carrying the door, wants to also invoke the hard labour involved with undertaking such a journey.

By making this film-poem, Fisher pieces his life together. He is on a mission to discover why he thinks as he does. The door serves as an aid for this mission, a provider of continuum. It is no accident that, when Fisher carries the door for the first time in Handsworth, a group of curious children, all Asian, follow him down the road. Like the fairy tale character the Pied Piper, the poet is leading them down the same symbolic road of discovery that he covets from his childhood. It is at this point that we begin to understand how 'Birmingham is what he thinks with'.

As indicated above, Birmingham is introduced as a city of industry. Shots of disused factories and warehouses abound, while scenes of labourers working at various tasks also pervade the film-poem.<sup>16</sup> One of the most indicative scenes, proving Fisher's points about his

background and its influence upon his ways of thinking, occurs immediately after the scene discussed above.

We are meant to remember that Fisher was initially introduced as not only a poet but also as a pianist. In the last scene, once the door is set upon the ground so the carrier can rest, piano based jazz music begins to play on the soundtrack. During the music, cut to a scene where multiple shots of the parts of a piano are shown, and a piano maker shaves wood and hammers wires in place. It is during this scene that Fisher describes the piano and his love for making music, but it is not a story that has creation at its root. Instead, Fisher describes his views of music in an industrial sense, in that when he plays he feels that he is *excavating* the music from within the 'machine' that is the piano. This does not provide us with a portrait of Fisher as a musician, it paints him as a labourer in music, and this is exactly the type of image he wants to portray. This segment of the film-poem shows the piano being put together piece by piece, systematically, while he anticipates its completion. A mathematical style of thinking is what Fisher means by 'Birmingham is what I think with', in that he considers reality in an industrial context, not necessarily in a creative vein. In this way, we also are treated to a somewhat schizophrenic portrayal of Fisher. From one perspective is the poet in black and white film, creating verses and his own 'magical view of life'. From the other perspective he exists as a prosaic builder, mining his music from the depths of the piano, assimilating his life from the series of images he and his door come across, all in colour footage. He proves to us that even in his creative mode, he cannot help but be a product of the working-class society that he grew up within. The door is there to guide us, but also it is there to guide and protect Fisher himself. Fittingly, the subjects for discussion following the piano sequence are the canals and forges of Birmingham, more products of past human labour.

In this film-poem, nature walks hand-in-hand with Birmingham's working class heritage. This piece focuses on building or discovering foundations, and those foundations are personal or communal. Hooker writes that Fisher's best poetry 'has a lot to do with his increasing awareness of Nature not only as a force but also as a spring of imaginative energy' (28). Adhering to this criticism, Fisher quite memorably demonstrates the importance of awareness only a few minutes into the film-poem. He takes an Asian child, who is also one of the new occupants of his old home, to a site where the bedrock of Birmingham is exposed. He then shows her the kind of rock that it actually is: sandstone, which crumbles to the touch of the hand. Thus, Fisher hints at the ironies held within the idea of using this stone as a foundation for the second largest city in England. In a way, Fisher symbolically undermines his personal quest, but he soon recovers. He gives some of the crumbled stone to the girl and says 'There's your bit'. This simple gesture symbolises the main point of the entire piece, making the search for firm ground all the more palpable for the viewers as well as for Fisher. It never seems to matter if the foundation is strong or weak, but it matters that one knows where it is and what it consists of.

In Hooker's review, he goes on to cite the importance and prominence of water in Fisher's poetry, as a perfect metaphor for a 'life giving source' (28) and for creativity. In the film-poem, we can see how much Fisher values the presence of water, as it features as an important element in many shots. Never seriously scrutinised but often at the forefront of his discussions, water takes the shape of an erosive agent, a historical tool, and a symbol of industrialisation. It gives us a sense of the real Birmingham while simultaneously helping to make the city strange. Fisher comments how his trips to other cities made him realise that Birmingham was different since it did not have a centrally located river, as other cities like London or Bristol had. With the knowledge that Birmingham's rivers are mostly canals, we realise that there is unnaturalness

about the poet's city. Pickard's film emphasises this odd factor in numerous shots. In one particularly eerie portion of the film, a series of tunnels and archways are shot in the distance. At first, a red light glares in the background while Fisher speaks of rivers. That light is zoomed in on and suddenly dissolved to blackness, and that blackness becomes the inside of one of the tunnels. The camera pans downward to the opening of the tunnel in the distance, white light streaming through it. The subsequent shots are of tunnel entrances as well, each steadily moving deeper into the tunnel, thus making the light in the middle of the shot smaller every time. The sound of running water is heard throughout the sequence. In this way, the film is made to look artistic and abnormal, in order to correlate with Fisher's feelings about Birmingham's irregularities.

'Birmingham is What I Think With' was screened in 1997's Buxton Fringe Film Festival, and in its programme notes, Fisher discusses the original idea for the film-poem's look. According to the poet, his work was meant to be a kind of 'Day-in-the-Life-of narrative framework' (1997, 5). Once the film began to take shape both poet and director realised this was impossible, since there was simply too much time to cover and too many elements under surveillance. But one resolve that survived throughout the making of the film was Fisher and Pickard's dislike of the use of 'talking heads' to recite the poetry. They wanted to make the poetry 'earn its keep by doing a job throughout the film' and even if the poetry was not always directly illustrated by the visuals it was indeed working hard. In fact, there are only a few scenes where the subject onscreen is straightforwardly associated with the subject covered in the accompanying verse. Much of the visual content of the film does require some work on the part of the viewer, but once the general concept behind the line 'Birmingham is what I think with' is understood, the rest falls into place.

### 3.6 Film and Poetry after 1991

Following the first years of the 1990s, the making of film-poems seems to have fallen to Tony Harrison and Peter Symes, except for the occasional emergence of one or two other poets or filmmakers attempting a film-poem. More often, there were adaptations of previously existing poetry springing up than new poetry for film-poems, but some of these deserve attention.

Sandra Lahire, whose short films have received much festival attention and a high degree of critical acclaim, made *Lady Lazarus* (1992), which was described in a press release for the film as 'a visually woven response to Sylvia Plath's own reading of her poetry'. Lahire describes her film as follows:

In this film, my Lady Lazarus is a woman drawn irresistibly towards Plath's voice. She becomes a medium for Sylvia, as in a séance, as the film travels between Massachusetts and Camden.

Less of a film-poem and more of an adaptation of Plath's work with a unique twist, this film cannot be truly considered a film-poem, but it does contain elements of the genre. The main reason why this film should not be included in the film-poem genre is that it adapts previously published material rather than demanding a process of simultaneous creation between poet and filmmaker. Since Plath's death had long preceded this film's making, Lahire, by involving a female character who is 'irresistibly drawn' to Plath, has done the next best thing short of writing new poetry herself. The film also contains footage of an interview with Plath, given just before her death. The footage provides 'an anchor' for the film, raw material for the Plath-obsessed character to react to. Lahire had made four other films before *Lady Lazarus* since 1984, when her first film *Arrows* was released. What also makes *Lady Lazarus* notable is that it may be the only film ever to attempt to treat Plath's verse cinematically. Currently, this film can still be seen

travelling on the festival circuit, and will emerge under the heading 'Film Poems 2' in a travelling programme of short films curated by London director Peter Todd. The discrepancy between Todd's definition of the term 'film-poem' and the sense of the term used in this chapter is covered throughout Chapter Two of this thesis.

As stated, besides Harrison and Symes, the film-poem efforts of the 1990s were minimal. Aside from the world of the experimental film or student projects, the film-poems released were either little known or uncommented upon. I would like to briefly cover the few that were notable from this period at this point.

Without Tony Harrison, Peter Symes continued to use poetry as his conceptual inspiration. In 1993, he was executive producer for a series of five collections of film-poems called *Poet's News*. These were only five minutes in length each and were stuffed between BBC2's 'Newsnight' and 'The Late Show'. The idea was that three or four poems could cover that day's top news stories. A poet would write the poem and assist in editing it with footage of them reciting the poem and with footage of the event. John Whitworth was one of the poets who took part in this series, and his article 'The Nine O'Clock Muse' is a report on poetry on television at the time, which was 1993 - 1994. His piece on the *Poet's News* series is like a day in the life of one's making. He writes:

What you heard was the poem, what you saw was inter-cut news footage. There were seventeen poems from ten poets during the week, some of them written in the weeks before, and some actually on the day of transmission (and why not?)... Such was Symes' encouragement and understanding that not one of the poetic team failed to produce broadcast material, nor was there at any time a shortage of ideas for poems even though

the week of broadcasting was the dullest for news I can remember for a long time (1993, 41).

These short collections of poetry received mixed reactions from critics and peers. Whitworth thinks they went very well, but claims since he was involved, he is naturally biased in his opinion (41). On the other hand, Tony Harrison apparently hated these (Symes, interview, 1997) and wished the idea had never come to fruition. Poetry on television was still not a popular or ratings-grabbing event, and these short programs did not further poetry's reputation in the world of television. Speculating whether these programs gave poetry a bad name is not entirely far-fetched, since Whitworth, in the same article, accounts for the opinions of various critics and reviewers. Particularly memorable is the anecdote about an anonymous television critic for *The Independent on Sunday*, who 'watched the programmes with her face buried in a cushion, [and] thought Tennyson would have turned in his grave' (41). In some instances, some of the episodes are quite original, with one poet mapping out the ailments of a human body as if he was giving the weather report, complete with a chart on the wall and a pointer in his hand. However, a few of the poems are too wordy to function successfully, and wind up clouding the issues in the news instead of providing an intriguing point of view about them. The most probable explanation for the failure of this idea is that poetry requires time to be digested; the average viewer might need to hear verse a few times in a row (or at least for a period of time lengthier than five minutes, or less) for it to effectively sink in. Short bursts of poetry might also work if they are accompanied by something visually stunning or even something whimsical, but having couplets accompany the unfortunately dull news footage is simply not a step forward for poetry and film.

In May 1994, *The Independent* ran a review of one of Channel Four's *Without Walls* episodes, a 'documentary poem' by Blake Morrison called 'Little Angels, Little Devils'. In a

series often concerned with sociological issues, this program followed the kinds of examples set by Tony Harrison, in terms of the 'tolling of Hell's bells' (J. Rees, 18). The poem is about the problems that adults have had in their relationships with children throughout history. Morrison attempts to brighten his voice to make it cheerier than Harrison's famous drone, but, as Rees also claims, 'you heard Hell's bells anyway' (18). Though generalisations about time periods in history abound in this film-poem and those time periods are summarised at a surprising pace, the piece does provoke some interesting thoughts about child rearing, especially when it considers the way mass media strives for the attention of the younger generation. Morrison attacks today's advertising strategies in loose and accessible language, while leaving hardly any institution untouched. Religions, education systems, literary movements: much comes under Morrison's critical eye. Even his own family's home movies are included in one segment, which he does not remember with fondness or nostalgia, but with a feel for distinct boredom. The subject, critical in nature, is perfect for a film-poem, and Morrison imitates Harrison's style admirably, but fails to develop it further. At least a different voice was heard on a true film-poem sometime in the 1990s, but it is lamentable that the project did not have more funding than what the Channel Four television series would allow.

Another adaptation should be mentioned here which did cause a slight ripple in the world of film and poetry, and that was theatrical director Deborah Warner's television version of 'The Waste Land', by T. S. Eliot. It starred director and actress Fiona Shaw and was released in the spring of 1996. Shaw steals the show with her 'impassioned oration', and according to *Variety* magazine, she 'squeezes every shred of contemporary relevance out of Eliot' (Nesselson, 1996, 53). The thirty five minutes it takes to film Eliot's 433-line poem 'goes by in a flash' and Nesselson claims that Shaw's performance makes the poem accessible because she 'revels in the



words and makes their meanings clear' (53). The camera work is controlled, the settings are simple, and the sections of the epic poem are separated in the film by title cards. This film premiered on the BBC in late December 1995, and would be useful as a teaching aid for literature classes studying Eliot, but it is simply too obscure to be considered as part of a movement. At any rate, this work was the last notable non-Harrisonian film to work closely with poetry until late 1999, when Simon Armitage returned to the conceptual film-poem, and wrote his song for the millennium, 'Killing Time'.

### 3.7 Simon Armitage at the Turn of the New Century

Armitage wrote 'Killing Time' without the guidance of Peter Symes and it is a longer, denser, variable work, based around the fear and excitement that came with the approach of a new century. It is exactly 1000 lines long and is separated into twelve sections. It considers the most pertinent news events of 1999 and their 'connections with the past one-thousand years of history' (Armitage, 2000, 1). Considering its running time (seventy minutes) and its broad scope, this is the most comprehensive and ambitious film-poem project for television to date. The influence of Harrison is still apparent, and there may be a homage to Harrison in the title of the work, which shares its namesake with the title of one of Harrison's poems from his collection *The School of Eloquence* (1978) and *Continuous* (1981). Harrison's 'Killing Time' is a poem also concerned with the pace of so-called progress and with the process of extinction.

The film begins with a shot of a man running, while poetry is being recited on the soundtrack. Immediately we are reminded of Armitage's couplets in 'Xanadu' since the rhythm of the poetry is sharp and choppy. The man jogs through countryside and city streets, and he is introduced to us with the first prosaic interlude of the film. A radio disc jockey announces that he

is the Millennium Man, travelling throughout the country collecting objects that people would prefer to do without. He will gather and ignite a bonfire with them to celebrate the passage of time. The jockey explains why the man wants to collect these items: 'simply because they're there'. Fisher's film poem is also coincidentally recalled here, as the Millennium Man is jokingly compared to the Pied Piper. The striking difference from Armitage's previous film work that is initially visible is his use of prose that is also mysterious or poetically related to his subject at hand. His poetry reading, which has been described before as dull and monotonous, is here livelier, but still with edgy bitterness. At the conclusion of the first scene, the man runs off camera, grasping various unwanted items he has been handed in the street, and the main title of the film-poem appears.

'Killing Time' also demonstrates a clear recognition of what has worked successfully in past film-poem experiments. There is again the very strong presence of a 'guide'; in fact, the whole premise of the film deals with a symbolic man 'guiding' us through the centuries and through the past events of recent history, as well as through the lives of people he meets. Refugees, a struggling farmer, and a young man diagnosed with cancer are among those whose lives are touched by the coming of the Millennium Man. More noticeable in this work is the presence of music, since imposing bass tones sometimes tend to govern action onscreen. Particularly admirable is a short sequence with scratch animation and music, which recalls work by the 1930s avant-garde New Zealand filmmaker Len Lye. Cartoons dance across the screen to frantic funk beats, animated stick figures hop across buildings, and a tiny ice cream van drives across a shot of ice cream being scooped from a dish. The poetry binds these diverse scenes together, making them relevant to each other and within the whole, in spite of their strangeness at first glance.

A number of progressive steps are taken in this film-poem. This was a project with much funding; one can guess that from the quality of the cinematography and editing. The frequent cuts are smooth and the transitions between scenes are unpredictable but flawless. This work casts professional actors for the first time in a film-poem on television, including Christopher Eccleston as the Millennium Man and Hermione Norris, from the series *Cold Feet*, as the Millennium Woman that joins him partway through the film. Characters are used in this work, and they function without complete names. Reminiscent of the characters in Harrison's feature length film-poem *Prometheus*, they are named according to their roles. For example, besides the Millennium Man and Woman, there is a male character called the 'Time Man' (Keith Allen), who appears at certain intervals throughout the film. He 'lectures about time' or describes its relentlessness, in such a way that he becomes akin to a god-like figure, one whose words are treated with gravity and reverence. In his final delivery he stands in front of a mock student group, lecturing them about their inevitable association with time. His best lines, however, are probably said when he and the Millennium Man meet in a café. Eccleston's character asks him the time, and among many confusing and complex verses, the Time Man answers:

The great geology of time

The gravity of loss

Memory lies here too

Memory, the glue

Of time, binding it close.

His poetic monologue stresses the way in which 'time builds up in layers', which is a realistic summary for the entire piece. 'Killing Time' is concerned with the shedding of these layers, so people can feel free to move on with their lives. The excess they have accumulated, the bad

habits they have acquired over time, is what Armitage's verse begs people to dismiss. Numerous individual episodes are summarised with the stanza quoted above, including a refugee woman's loss of her son to gunfire at their home. Some of these cases are explored in great depth in this film-poem. The verse asks people to release the memories of their unfortunate pasts, to break bad habits, and to recognise the importance of ridding oneself of objects infused with bad memories or karma.

Admittedly, most of the film-poem has a distinctly uncomfortable feel to it. It attempts to resolve this feeling at its end, with the final all-relic-consuming bonfire that is constructed in the shadow of the Millennium Dome. The Millennium Man and Woman, who have symbolically passed each other by throughout the first forty minutes of the piece, are united. She has joined the Man in his journey and by the end of the film they are a single entity, beginning and finishing each other's poetic verses. Yet, the resolve that is attempted never completely arrives by its end, since this work's striking, violent subject matter tends to linger in the viewer's minds. This film covers news items over the past year that broke the hearts of millions of people, packing them into poetic movements that are about ten minutes long apiece. Armitage refers to these sections above. But after seeing footage of the war in the Balkans, of the train crash at Signal 109 in Britain in 1999, and of the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, USA, in the span of twenty minutes of poetry, the viewer is severely challenged to keep his eyes onscreen. The amount of ground covered is staggering, the number of painful personal stories overwhelming. It is a good idea to take a break from this film-poem partway through, and it is difficult to achieve a sense of resolution from the conclusive bonfire.

On the other hand, a great and idealistic thing is accomplished in the work by helping numerous troubled people rid themselves of the symbols of their troubles. Everything is

incinerated, from rings, clothes, marriage licenses, chequebooks and mobile phones to cigarettes, beer can holders, an exercise bike and a Sony Playstation: 'It keeps me from doing my homework', says one young boy. In this way, just as some of the donation sequences are meant to impress, the re-enactment of some of the events from 1999 are also particularly moving. To illustrate the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, Armitage devises a scene that contains unconventional imagery indeed. Instead of guns, there are flowers in the marauding boys' hands. There is a reconstruction of the duo's actions, as they march through a school's hallways, recreational grounds and library, relentlessly showering flowers and petals on innocent students and staff that pass them by or try and avoid their attention. The extended metaphor contains detail after detail, which mirror the horrifying events at the school. The most ironic quality of the scene is the poetic commentary given by the Millennium Man and Woman, who are supposedly watching this event on a small screen in their home. They speak of the crime in peaceful and honourable terms, painting the flowery deluge in the school with a sense of wartime heraldry. The idea is so far-fetched, the poetry and onscreen action seem almost uneven:

Upstairs in the school library,  
Individuals are singled out for special attention.  
Some were showered with blossom,  
Others wore their blooms like broaches or medals.  
Even those who turned their backs,  
Or refused point blank to accept such honours,  
Were decorated with buds.  
Unseasonable fruits and rosettes,  
Same as the others,

By which time a crowd had gathered  
Outside the school, drawn through suburbia  
By the rumours  
Of flowers in full bloom.

During the delivery of the above lines, we first see the Man and Woman talking to each other as if they are discussing aspects of the event they have both heard about. Cut to shots of teenagers, mostly girls, in a school library, being hit with flowers from all directions, though some 'turn their backs' just at the moment that the line is spoken. This makes the film difficult to watch, but Armitage is perhaps recalling some of Symes' most resonant advice about film and poetry, which was that poetry can show us uncomfortable things without making us feel the need to turn away. It '*allows us to watch*' (1995, xii).

There is much to say about this film-poem and it deserves closer attention than space allows here, but it derives its roots from the *Words on Film* series and the work of Harrison, and there will be closer readings of some of these works in later sections of this thesis.

We began this chapter asking about the nature and definition of film-poems. At this point, the answer should be quite clear: though many will argue and vie for the terminology, a film-poem is usually a documentary styled film which is shot at virtually the same time as the poetry for it is being written. The two formats feed off one another and inspire their respective processes of creation. Their formulation is a difficult task to undertake, and quite a lot of proposals involving many poets have never taken shape due to the problems that film-poems impose upon their makers. However, they are far from being completely evolved, and many filmmakers, poets and academics are now devising further developments within the field. The individual who has developed the film-poem to the highest standard, Tony Harrison, is the focus

of the next chapter. His interpretations of the film-poem have led to his own particular terminology and the invention of a sub-genre. I will explore much of his work, often in the light of the material studied in this chapter as well.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE FILM-POEMS OF TONY HARRISON

Cinematic signs are rooted not in logical, rational discourse, but in memory and dreams... In my view the cinema is substantially and naturally poetic... because it is dreamlike, because it is close to dreams.

- Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>1</sup>

As you may have heard, if you've met him, Tony says he never dreams, because all his life is dreaming.

(Film Producer Andrew Holmes)<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.1 'Verse's Great Advantages Over Prose'

As discussed in the previous chapter, film-poems have developed primarily over the last ten years, after 1990. The artist who has had the greatest influence on this development is Yorkshire-born Tony Harrison (1937-). Harrison was one of the first poets to understand the viscosity of verse and its natural inclination towards cinematography, its 'filmability'. He feels, as he states in a televised commentary for his 2002 film-poem ('Crossings') that his film-poems 'give the documentary style an organisation, a structure that it doesn't have naturally'. As a poet he has harnessed a technique intended to provide a medium for ideas that perhaps cannot be properly or effectively expressed with prose or dialogue, even for ideas which are impossible to express. His finished product is an example of art within art: a poem that is a film. The poem can be recognised as independent work without special filmic significance, but it should not be: the two forms of expression are designed to be seen together.

Harrison's verse is suited for film; it is rhythmically dynamic, metaphorically rich, powerfully rhymed, and honest. His mode of poetry is a natural link with the film image, since it is often enriched with strong imagery itself. Harrison's style lends itself to the honesty and



truthfulness that is needed when dealing with issues that film-poems tend to tackle, issues like incurable diseases, religious dissension and death. His is a plain speaking voice, borne out of an English region renowned for its frank and open people, with a reputation for straight, direct talk. Harrison would make eleven film-poems for television (and one for the cinema) to reflect his strong opinions on these and other subjects throughout his career.

A number of years before the *Words on Film* project came into being in 1992, Peter Symes worked with Harrison on a few film-poem ventures. In his introduction to Harrison's 1995 textual collection of film/poems, Symes writes:

Film is a magical medium... What better vehicle for a poet to use? Are not the still words, combined into lines, undergoing a similar process [referring to the process of filming, which combines 24-25 stills per second to create the illusion of movement], not for the eyes but for the ears? What more exciting process... but to combine the two (vii).

The relationships between poetry and film are such that Symes has written at length in two instances about them, clearly excited about his work and impressed with its outcome.<sup>3</sup> Symes' work with Harrison has covered many subjects and geographically spanned most of continental Europe. His collaborations have been very successful, and have included a four-part series on death and commemoration called 'Loving Memory' (1986), with four sub-headings, and 'The Blasphemers' Banquet' (1989), a defence of Salman Rushdie, one of the most influential film-poems for the entire genre. After 1990, Symes continued to work with Harrison, producing 'The Gaze of the Gorgon' (1992), which deals with fascism, and 'Black Daisies for the Bride' (1993), which is a study of Alzheimer's Disease. In 1994, Harrison first attempted direction, as co-director with Mark Kidel for 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' and in 1995 assumed total directorial responsibility with 'The Shadow of Hiroshima'. The producer for these two films was Andrew Holmes, an independent television producer for Channel Four, who also joined Harrison on the

most impressive film-poem project to date, *Prometheus* (1998). It stands as the only major-release feature-length film-poem ever made.<sup>4</sup>

The combination of verse and film appeals to not only those directly associated with television. In an essay akin to Symes' above comments on the similarities between the structures of films and poems, William Wees writes:

Through a synergy of expressive words and images, successful poetry-films...produce associations, connotations, metaphors and symbols that cannot be found in either their verbal or their visual texts taken alone (1997, 1).

Wees refers to a myriad of works when he refers to 'poetry-films', including experimental short films, but his opinions can clearly apply to the Harrisonian film-poem. Symes' writings reflect upon the 'inherent metricality' (1995, vii) of the process of filming, and the natural tendencies for poets to 'gravitate to television' (viii). Similar to Wees' optimistic views on poetry and film, Symes also asks if verse on television can 'help us to look at the future' or even 'allow us to look at our past and our present with unblinking eyes' (viii). At the core of both writers' reflection is the admittance of poetry and film's great resemblance to one another, and their immediate and surprising compatibility.

#### 4.2 Early Experiments with Poetry and Film: 'Stick to the Rhythm'

Long before Peter Symes was associated with Tony Harrison, the poet had already made a few excursions into the world of television and film. In a premature venture, Harrison was commissioned to write the lyrics to the songs in George Cukor's *The Blue Bird* in 1975. Similar to W. H. Auden's early (and mostly unreleased) song writing for the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s, Harrison was involved with a large film production, perhaps in slightly over his head as a young poet.

A remake of the 1940 Walter Lang film of the same name, the film failed miserably at the box office, but was highly touted as the first major co-production between the United States and Russia. Both films are based on the fairy-play by Maurice Maeterlinck, where two children seek 'the blue bird of happiness' (Milne, 1997, 89) and search through the past and future, but find happiness in their own time. Cukor's remake boasted a cast featuring Elizabeth Taylor in multiple roles, Ava Gardner, Jane Fonda and Cicely Tyson, but the songs failed to rescue the film from mediocrity. The film did serve one major purpose if not any other: it allowed Harrison to take his first Auden-like steps in the film world. Cukor himself provided Harrison with the introductory stepping stones towards the art of film writing, by sending Harrison 'contact strips with scribbled notes' on the back of them (Harrison, 1992, 260). The poet would read the notes and then write lyrics to match the spirit of the character's face on the strip, like he did for one strip labelled 'the brooding poet'. This process was very much unlike writing pure film-poems but it gave the poet a taste for film writing as opposed to writing poetry or dramatic verse. Presumably, Harrison was given the job based on the success of his previous dramatic work, since *The Blue Bird* is itself based on a play. Later in his career, Harrison would write a poem immortalising this process, paying respect to Cukor in his poem 'Losing Touch' (1992).<sup>5</sup>

Before Harrison turned to television, he enjoyed considerable theatrical success. His affinity for Greek drama is well documented, since it is prominent in many of the verses of his film-poems and Symes himself has occasionally written of its influence upon their collaborations. Harrison's dramatic projects were widespread, but he often worked in theatres like the West Yorkshire Playhouse (Leeds) and in others in Bradford, Blackpool and London. According to Symes, Harrison's first great love was actually pantomime, which Symes believes has informed some of the styles of Harrison's film-poems (1995, viii).

The influence of pantomime is probably best seen in Harrison's work without Symes, especially in his live-action musical drama, the film 'The Big H' (1984). This film was the second

of Harrison's film projects, the first being 'Arctic Paradise' (1981). Andrée Molyneux, a BBC producer and director who made 'The Big H' for the BBC's Drama Film Department, produced both films. Her experience was primarily in the field of documentaries, and her first encounters with Harrison and verse were met with a degree of worry and anxiety (1991, 367).<sup>6</sup> In keeping with the sense of chronology heretofore practised in this study, I will begin with a discussion of Harrison's first experience with verse onscreen, in a production that is a film-poem in an evolutionary phase.

'Arctic Paradise' was a documentary project, based on the life of a trapper and his family in the far Canadian north. Harrison and Molyneux first met in 1979, and a discussion about Molyneux's work on another film about poet Robert Service piqued Harrison's interest.<sup>7</sup> Though other poets had previously implied to Molyneux that 'Service's poetry wasn't worth a film' (Molyneux, 367), Harrison was 'full of enthusiasm' (367) when the producer first mentioned Service's name and her work with his poetry. Harrison apparently thought that work with 'great popular verse' was very positive, and supported its initial treatment. Molyneux writes:

I was having difficulty convincing some of the actors, even Fulton Mackay who played Robert Service, how important it was to emphasise the bold, obvious rhythm. They were trying to break up the rhythm and read in a more naturalistic way. I blurted out my worries about the delivery of the verse and was instantly reassured [by Harrison], 'You're right, right, go for the rhythm. Stop them acting, stop them emoting, stick to the rhythm and you can't go wrong' (367).

This proved influential on Molyneux, regarding both her independent projects and work with Harrison. That same day as their meeting, Harrison took Molyneux to a production of his play *The Passion*, where the poetry was spoken by the actors in the way that Harrison had directed. Molyneux was convinced that 'such strongly rhythmic reading sense seem[ed] obviously right' (368), and cites that night as the greatest influence upon the rest of her film on Service.

Obviously, it also was the beginning of her collaboration with the poet and the beginning of a career of poetry and film for Harrison himself.

The first few steps taken within this field were with much trepidation. Poetry's reputation on television was not positive, in spite of Harrison's (and others') efforts; popular opinion claimed that 'verse never works' (Symes, 1991, 385). Molyneux was well aware of this apprehension about poetry, from both the perspectives of the poet and from her peers in television:

The purists have often attacked filmmakers for spoiling poetry by trying to accompany it with pictures, and often justifiably so, because the film-maker's vision of a poem can sometimes obscure the poet's vision (368).

Nevertheless, she approached Harrison to write specially commissioned verse for her next film, since she believed 'there is no reason... why verse should not be naturally allied to film... if both are created in unison' (368). This is precisely the essential difference in the craft of a film-poem versus a 'normal' TV program: how the two fields are matched and in what contexts or circumstances. By conceiving the process for the combination of verse and image, Molyneux sensed how poetry on television could indeed 'work'.

First inclinations, however, were fruitless in terms of true film-poems. Harrison's initial ideas about making a film based on the American bird painter and enthusiast, John James Audubon, were met with interest and much research by Molyneux. Unfortunately the plans to actually make the film fell through, since 'the idea proved too rich; ...there were too many elements to fit harmoniously together into one film' (Molyneux, 368).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the ideas introduced at these meetings served as an inspiration for Harrison's use of fine art and sculpture in some of his later film-poems like 'The Blasphemers' Banquet' and 'The Gaze of the Gorgon'. Certainly, the claim of 'too many elements' makes sense here, since the two artists were already trying to link two distinctly separate art forms together, and the presence of a third would

probably complicate matters beyond their readiness at the time. However, Molyneux's previous experience with Service's poetry led to ideas about Harrison imitating his style.

While Molyneux shot footage of the Yukon in the summer of 1980, she was 'mindful' of the talks between herself and Harrison, and 'took more long developing shots than usual, and some long continuous shots of the gold-fields from a helicopter' (369). Yet, something else was constantly an issue to bear in mind as well: the constraints of the film's commissioning program. The BBC's *World About Us* was shown to a 'family audience early on Sunday evening' (371) and since the time slot was so accessible, Molyneux knew that she would not be able to make the unusual program that 'Arctic Paradise' would have been had Harrison been given more independence with the project. Thus the presence of much prose, acting, and a fairly straightforward storyline in place of something the average viewer might find difficult to follow. The parts of the film that Harrison's verse is used for are therefore slow moving and direct, since both the producer and the poet were 'aware of the need for the pictures to give the verse room to breathe... giving the audience a chance to attend to the words' (369). In these early stages of film-poem construction, Harrison's penchant for poetic bombardment and harrowing visual imagery had not yet developed, so it is interesting to view these moderately tame initial efforts. Absent also was Harrison's notorious tendency to demand the proper settings and shots in line with his poetic vision. Instead, Molyneux relates his willingness to rewrite lines or change a rhythm instead of requests to recut the film to fit the poetry (370).

Part of the narrative of this film focuses on an actual man (Roger Mendelsohn) who was a trapper in the winter and a fisherman in the summer, living in a log cabin with his wife and two children in the wilderness of the Yukon. His stories served as inspirational raw material for Harrison, especially his tales of being 'drawn to the North by reading the poems of Robert Service' (369). His character is enhanced by a man's voice that speaks Harrison's verses on the soundtrack. Harrison had 'painstakingly read all the transcripts of interviews with the trapper and

his wife and the gold-miners' (370) before writing, and their concerns and opinions are interwoven within the poetry. A woman's voice was selected to read Harrison's verses as well, since Harrison envisioned a double commentary about the young trapper's life. The voices on the soundtrack sound old and worn, and seem to watch over the trapper, advising him and his family. Harrison chose actors for these roles, whom were guided by the poet throughout rehearsals and the shoot.

In the process of creating this film came also the discovery of the importance of the role of the editor in film-poems. The editor for this particular production, Jess Palmer, had worked with Molyneux before, and notably on documentary films about poetry. The role of the film-poem editor is repeatedly stressed as paramount, equal to that of the poet and director themselves. Effective editing leads to effective timing, and when verse is paired with image, timing can be most noticeable and important to an audience. It is this sense of timing that remains Harrison's greatest asset; producers and directors compliment it in many reviews or retrospectives of working with the poet. Molyneux recalls:

Being told the number of seconds he could have, he would write something exactly the right length, tailored to the individual shots (370).

According to her account, it is also clear that the poet had a sharp sense of speed and continuity, never afraid to vary the tempo of his cutting or even cut against the rhythm of the piece. Together with Palmer, who 'enjoyed juggling the film against the rhymes and rhythms of the verse' (370), Harrison began his first real work with synthesising verse and image. In keeping with the fairly mainstream look of the piece, Harrison had to abide by the same rules as the rest of the production crew, yet there are elements present in this first filmic outing that are still visible in the poet's less restrained visual offerings of today.

The rhyme scheme of the opening lines is *abab*, typical of Service's poetry, and of Harrison's as well. Molyneux states that Harrison wrote the verse 'in the style of Robert Service, but to [her]

mind, much better' (369). In 'Arctic Paradise', most of Harrison's verse is *aabb*, in rhyming couplets typical of the poet's later work, so in that respect it differs from Service. It is interesting to note that this marks a departure from much of Harrison's other poetry from the same period, which was mostly *abab*, with only the occasional couplet present.<sup>9</sup> The most striking similarity between Harrison's poetry and Service's is their rhythm. Service habitually wrote in iambic heptameter, a highly popular form of verse that often contains internal rhyme. The poetry has the same feel as a limerick, with humour or adventure at its core. The internal rhyme is on the second and fourth feet of each line, and usually the rhyme is of an elongated vocal sound, which slows the intonation of the lines and makes them sound more dramatic. For example, the fourth stanza into the film-poem begins with the woman's voice:

Come June, July, a clear blue sky and the sun up there all day

For this paradise, that winter ice was a paltry price to pay.<sup>10</sup>

The male trapper's voice follows with:

No greens, no fruit, just what I shoot and ice-hole fish-lines bring

And one moose can make a year of steak to see us through till Spring.

The words 'July', 'sky', 'paradise', and 'ice' are soft sounding and they complement the harsh landscapes we are visually treated to in this film with a degree of irony and calm. Interestingly, these exact couplets are repeated at different intervals in the film-poem, reiterating the struggle that everyday existence can be in the Yukon. When repeated, however, the voices are reversed.

The film was very successful, achieving a viewership of 'four and a half million people, the highest figure that year for the series' (Molyneux, 371). Its greatest achievement though, was paving the road for Harrison in the field of television. His next film, the strange music drama 'The Big H' (1984) was inspired by 'Arctic Paradise', and would again unite Harrison and Molyneux. It would also ignite collaboration with musical composer Dominic Muldowney, who would work with Harrison on a number of projects in the years to come.



'The Big H' focuses on a group of children from the Leeds area, linking local linguistic dialect that often omits the 'H' sound at the beginning of words with the Biblical story about King Herod and his insane desires. The director of the film was Bill Hayes, an experienced director of TV drama and opera, who was not positive about the project when snippets of the verse were first shown to him. Harrison's subsequent suggestions encouraged Hayes, since now the poet had ideas on lighting, costumes, design and other aspects of the production, all the while editing and rewriting the verse in the initial script. The one major visible difference in this film is that it was recorded on videotape instead of film, and its crudity is obvious. Making the transition from the expansive Yukon to the small, cramped classroom could have been jarring, but Harrison was prepared to deal with the transition, using the smaller scope to broaden his ideas and hone his television experience.

On the set of this film Molyneux again claims that Harrison was 'receptive to alternatives and very understanding of limitations imposed by the practical nature of television', while at the same time very certain about his own ideas (375). Unlike Harrison's future involvement with the process of making his film-poems, he actually left the film site and the editing suites before the film was completed (but was present for all four days of the shoot). The poet continued to suggest changes on 'neatly typed postcards from various parts of the world' (Molyneux, 375) throughout the film's post-production and editing, until the final stages. This kind of arrangement was only possible since the process of videotape editing, as opposed to working with celluloid, 'is shorter, more intense and offers less opportunity for re-arranging and re-cutting the material' (Molyneux, 375). This factor allowed Harrison to make decisions with Hayes and then pursue other poetic work to suit his interests and responsibilities at the time.

Writing verse in imitation of Robert Service's style must have influenced Harrison poetically, since much of the verse from 'The Big H' is again in iambic heptameter. More importantly, the same jaunty, energetic rhythm is inherent in the lines written for the characters in

this film. Service himself, in his only television interview, said that he never considered his poetic lines to be 'poetry', but was satisfied calling them 'verse', since he didn't think they were serious enough to be 'poetry'.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the subjects covered here are more 'serious' than the adventures of characters like 'Dangerous Dan McGrew' in Service's verse. The poetry in 'The Big H' praises the acts of King Herod, and his orders for the Slaughter of the Innocents. More than occasional references to Adolph Hitler and his Herod-like behaviour are made in the film's verse dialogue, but in spite of this, 'The Big H' is fairly light-hearted. It may be because much of the acting and singing is done by schoolchildren, and because the viewer can sense, as one can with most Christmas television specials, that everything will turn out all right in the end.

Harrison wanted to make poetry 'accessible to everyone'; he wanted to 'move poetry out of the ghetto of late-night programmes for the initiated, and put it in front of a mainstream audience' (Molyneux, 371). This may have been achieved with 'Arctic Paradise', but 'The Big H' does not conform to expectations of prime-time visual content. The images in this film are sometimes difficult to watch, such as the animated pictures of babies' throats being slit. At times the action onscreen is humourous in places where it shouldn't be, as in a female History teacher's (June Watson) transformation into a Herod in her own right, pleading for feminine equality, 'In these days of freedom the flogger and flesh-render / Can also be a Herod of the feminine gender'. Her questions are put to the camera in this sequence, and what she asks should make most audience members shift uncomfortably. Yet the playful rhythm of most of the verses, coupled with rapid cuts of the camera, provide an atmosphere of knowing fellowship. The camera cuts in synchronisation with the rhythm of the lines as well, adding to the fluidity of the entire piece.

One other factor that allows for the film's lighter ambience is the music, which is just as jaunty as the rhythm of the poetry. The music is reminiscent of the kind played by a marching band, or from a soundtrack to a Hollywood Biblical epic film like *The Robe* (1953). Dominic Muldowney's score was played live in the studio during the film's recording, to be matched with

the children's much-rehearsed singing. As one might easily imagine with the Biblical epic in mind, the music is drum-based, akin to that of a military drill. Although it often sounds tinny and chaotic, the music is a fitting forum for a chaotic and crude piece.

Originally conceived as a nativity play, 'The Big H' evolves into something much more complex than that, something that is probably not average holiday viewing.<sup>12</sup> Some of the themes of the film are violent, since Herod's characters (there are three teachers that 'transform' into Herod during the film) repeatedly order bloody deeds. Through Harrison's verse and Muldowney's music, the film stresses how violent tendencies are transmitted from adults to children and a mob mentality is quickly formed. Ranting teachers in the classroom are changed into King Herod three times, 'exhorting his or her squad to kill all the boy babies' (Molyneux, 376). Within each group of boys is one shorter member who is singled out and reprimanded, in rhythmically potent tones, for not pronouncing the 'H' sound when he speaks. This character is the one who is symbolically supposed to represent hope for humanity, since his problems with direction and elocution lead directly to his 'lack of enthusiasm in the task of killing' (Molyneux, 376). His role is a blockade against a selfish and unjust order, a defiant act against a supreme but blinded power. The film-poem ends with a feeling of hope, with the classic belief that goodness will always triumph over evil, in the manner of fairy-tales.

There are some problems with this production, to be expected with the first attempts of an emerging genre. As mentioned, this film-poem contains some elements of crudity that can be overlooked if the program was simply advertised as a school project, but it was not; it looks too much like a high school student's film assignment. There are sequences in the film which are effective, containing provocative lyrics, but they are underscored by the presence of scenes which look too amateurish to be taken seriously, and these distract from the main point of the film. For instance, once the squadrons of boys are physically sent to carry out Herod's orders, they travel through an animated background of a town. Possibly, the scenes could be viewed as surreal, since

the sizes of the pupils are disproportionate to the size of the drawings, but the effect falls short of surrealism, and simply looks ridiculous. At the same time, the childishly drawn pictures of babies being brutally murdered are disturbing, while the schoolgirls who play the distraught 'mothers' of the story hold bloodied bundles and lament the day's passing.

Another problem is the poor articulation of some of the schoolchildren. In direct contrast to the adults playing the teacher/Herod characters, who were chosen for their excellent vocal clarity, the children often muffle their lines or do not project their voices enough for the listener to adjust to the change in volume or pace before their lines are finished. Verses are spoken quickly in this musical, and the attempt to create a thumping, staccato sound to the poetry is thwarted by some of the students' vocal capabilities. This is an ironic problem, since some of the subject matter of the film-poem itself deals with pronunciation issues, as discussed above. In addition, sometimes lines are spoken unnaturally, with striking pauses, to fit the deliberate rhythm of the piece, broken in mid-thought or idea to match the near-incessant drumming in the background. The verse then feels too measured, and the meaning of the interrupted lines is clouded and uncertain.

Harrison usually writes about his experiences and of what he knows, and historically has poeticised his worldly concerns. Some of the poet's personal issues are easily identifiable due to their presence in several of his poems, providing a slight degree of confessionalism in his work. In 'The Big H', the first teacher we are introduced to is a maths teacher, (Barrie Rutter). Some of the lines he speaks complain about the state of the youth of the day, angrily predicting their fates:

Before they grow up squirting aerosols, graffiti-ing our garages,  
Rip open the upholstery on coup excursion carriages,  
And end up with some lass like these in monstrous fertile marriages.  
Before they grow up to squirt aerosols they start to spray  
The few words they can spell right or 'United Rules O.K'.

Vandalism will prove a popular subject in Harrison's poetry. 'The Big H' was written before *V.* (1985), Harrison's famous profane poem, predating it by over a year, but spray painting and other forms of vandalism are covered to a great extent in *V.* In 'The Big H' we can see Harrison's obsession with the issue more clearly than in his controversial long poem from the following year. The similarities between the two poems is even more obvious with the lines:

Let's batter 'em while they're still brats, yes, batter 'em before  
They come and squirt four-letter words all over your front door.

In *V.* the poet chose to incorporate four letter words into his poetry, and once it was placed on TV in a semi-styled film-poem (1987), the public outrage was well documented.<sup>13</sup> Obviously the sources of *V.* are manifold, but we better understand its inspirations by watching this earlier work.

Other clues as to the themes of some of Harrison's later film-poems can be found within 'The Big H'. One of the 'mothers' uses the following lines to justify the slaying of her child:

A mum's 'eart's as soon as broke:  
what mother wants to dream,  
her little boy'll be the bloke  
who A-bombs Hiroshima.

In 1995, Harrison made 'The Shadow of Hiroshima', a film-poem concerned with the effect the bombing of the Japanese city has had on future generations. Apparently, this subject was present in the mind of the poet even ten years before it was written about at length. It is interesting to note the seeds for Harrison's future work in his more obscure film projects, especially because we are seeing them visually as well as in print. *V.* and some of these other projects will be discussed later in this chapter.

### 4.3 Development with Peter Symes: 'Of course it works with death'

After 1985 and Harrison's film-poem 'juvenilia', there was a lapse of television work by the poet; in fact his only visual output was the play *The Mysteries*, which was filmed and televised in 1985 and 1986. Harrison's popularity was growing, his theatre contributions were becoming regular, and several anthologies of his works, both poetic and dramatic, were published between the years 1985-1987. It was not until 1987 that Harrison began to challenge television producers again, with clear, detailed ambitions.

Considering Harrison's fairly successful experiences with Andrée Molyneux, television seemed to be a field worth conquering with poetry, again a place to make poetry 'accessible to everyone' (Molyneux, 371). The four part series 'Loving Memory' (1987) was already well under way by the time Harrison became involved with it, but it seemed a perfect forum to fit poetry back into the 'mainstream' time slots to reach a massive audience. Peter Symes was producing the series, and he wanted to diverge from ordinary documentary; in fact he felt that it was 'in deep trouble and needed something to save it' (interview, 1997). Thus, five years before the emergence of the *Words on Film* series and Symes' experiments with six poets, the producer had his first experience working with verse onscreen with Harrison. Some of the films, however, seem disconnected or disorganised. In the first and third parts of the series ('Letters in the Rock' and 'The Muffled Bells') there is much non-poetic content, in that there are blocks of ordinary speech mixed between the poetry, much like the scenes discussed in Chapter Three about Symes' work with Jackie Kay and Simon Armitage. The lack of pure poetry, which Harrison would later insist on, is indicative of the fact that the poet was not involved from the outset of filming.

Interestingly, the second and fourth films ('Mimmo Perella Non È Piu' and 'Cheating the Void') are those that Symes discusses most in the two articles he has written about 'Loving Memory', which also supports the assumption that these were the most unfinished films at the advent of the

poet's involvement. These two films are almost devoid of prose or speech interludes while the other two parts contain long segments with virtually no poetry.

In spite of the poet's experience with Molyneux and poetry on television, Harrison did not venture forth into this significantly larger budgeted project without guidance. Harrison 'skilfully adopts and adapts Gray's *Elegy*' (Sail, 382) for the four-part series, going so far as to pay homage to the poem by quoting directly from it in the series' second and third parts. Gray's poem ('Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' [1742-50]), is a popular source for gravestone epitaphs and itself focuses on the way we remember our dead. Harrison felt that this poem's metre and theme fit the mood that he meant to convey in the television series, and Symes agreed that it 'provid[ed] the poet with a verse form that he could use throughout' (1995, x). In fact, Harrison's verses mimic the metre used in Gray's poem, which allows for the direct quotation from the poem in part three of the series ('The Muffled Bells'). The transitions from Harrison's own verse to Gray's is smooth as a result, and moreover they are a perfect companion to the slow-moving camera pans of churchyards and tombs. Harrison would continue to use this structure for most of his future film-poems, as he claims in the preface to his 1998 film-poem *Prometheus*.<sup>14</sup>

At first, Symes was not eager to work entirely with poetry, as evident from his descriptions of his first meetings with Harrison:

I had assumed some poetic content, but he made it clear that it would have to be all or nothing - he only wrote verse, and that would be all we would get. I gulped and agreed (1991, 385).

In his introduction to *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* (1995), Symes describes his initial misgivings in greater detail:

[Harrison] was no longer interested in producing a few verses to be tacked onto pictures.

...I took a very healthy swig from the wine glass before nervously assenting. Since no one I knew had ever attempted to drive a full-length documentary with a verse

commentary, I contented myself with the blissful comfort of ignorance, a comfort that lasted until I returned to the office to be greeted with the sort of looks and comments normally associated with a bereavement. Only I think I was probably the corpse (ix).

Credit should be given to Symes for taking such a risk, especially since the project was subject to approval by his superiors at the time. Poetry on television was occasional, never announced with much fanfare. Soon after 'hiring' Harrison and providing him with a room 'next door to the film-cutting room' (Symes, 1995, x), poetry was suddenly present in the studio. Symes had the vision to allow Harrison's verse to inform not only the subject matter of his films, but to also let it affect the structure of the series itself as well.

The film-poems were to provide an overview of cemeteries throughout Europe, focusing on death rituals in specific places, and including interviews with undertakers, gravediggers and others who work with or are surrounded by the dead. Soon after Harrison's role became prominent, the interviews gave way to more original styles of expression; the second part of the documentary series, 'Mimmo Pirella non È Piu', or 'Mimmo Pirella is No More' is the best example of progress, since poetry is virtually the sole method of expression within the film. This programme contains some harrowing footage of grave exhumations, and shots of the treatment of year-old corpses make for some startling viewing, but perhaps the scenes are not as difficult to watch as they should be. After 'The Big H' and the scenes of mock bloodshed within, the poet seemed to grow comfortable with poetry as a suitable link with horrific images.

Both Harrison and Symes understood the effectiveness behind linking poetry with 'strange and rather gruesome' images (Symes, 1991, 387). At many points in the four-part series, the poetry compels us to look at unpleasant visuals, from the rows of skulls inside a massive tomb to Neapolitan exhumations. It is during these scenes that the poetry seems the most effective in terms of interaction with the image. Over the exhumation, Harrison speaks the following lines:



Under a blanket with a yellow cross  
He clutches a crucifix in leather claw  
And leaves a wife and sister with the wounds of loss  
That won't heal till they too are "no more".

Symes writes about this moment in particular, describing how the first line about the yellow cross is simply descriptive, 'supporting what we can see' (1991, 387). But Harrison does not allow the verse to stop there, states Symes, but injects a more meaningful element after the obvious is put forth, one that is not visible (we never see the supposed crucifix) and one which further develops the humanitarian trend that Harrison uses in this scene with the family of Vincenzo Cicatiello. The poetry allows us to feel some of the emotions that the Cicatiello family must be feeling as the exhumation takes place. It is both enlightening and personal as well as full of uneasiness. Symes writes on this scene and of the more jarring material in the series:

This sequence should leave the viewer in no doubt of verse's great advantage over prose: its ability to draw people in, and then tell them uncomfortable things without having them turn away; its ability to be subjective; its ability to transform and illuminate (1991, 387).

This establishes the film-poem as the kind of medium that is sometimes suited to incorporating disturbing material into its subject, often to make stronger points or provide it with a more stimulating life of its own. Harrison would continue to recognise verse's 'great advantage over prose' in his subsequent works, especially when dealing with difficult visual material.

The series climaxed with 'Cheating the Void', which was the most travel-orientated episode of the four. Innovations occurring throughout the making of the films also culminated in an artistic high point for the filmmakers involved during the editing of this part of the series.

Working for the first time with a larger budget, more freedom and flexibility, and with an entire team of film personnel versus just one producer or director, the poet again realised his own

similarities, in terms of his work's pace and style, to that of the editor. Symes comments on this factor, one that is visible in the films themselves, by discussing the similarities between the editor's and poet's concerns about constructing their respective pieces:

In both, the creator manipulates image and rhythm; in both he is concerned with momentum, structure and repetition; and in both there is the same tinkering and fine-tuning, the same running and re-running of sequence and of whole until the process appears to be working (385-6).

By realising the above aspects of film-making that were similar to his own writing, Harrison grew more and more aware of film and poetry's natural inclination towards each other. He also grew more aware of the kinds of techniques that were available to him as a poet, suddenly given the magic-box of film stylistics that could be plundered in order to best express an idea in verse. For example, in 'Cheating the Void', fades are used a few times; in one instance to accompany the word 'oblivion' the film fades to black. These techniques and others provide the film with a true sense of the fine-tuning both the editor and the poet value. They also make the film look modern, professional and creatively constructed. More stylistic elements were to follow, as Harrison and the filmmakers learned which poetic devices best corresponded to fades, dissolves, jump cuts and various focal techniques. I will study some of these innovations gradually in this thesis, selecting some of the best examples of each from the many film-poems Harrison has written.

In a review of the 'Loving Memory' series, critic Lawrence Sail provides one of the only professional academic opinions that exist from someone uninvolved with the project itself (1991).<sup>15</sup> Sail discusses 'Loving Memory', but also comments on the entire relationship between film and poetry. His is an excellent early observation about the dynamics between the two forms of art, one that explores many of the film-poem's individual characteristics, like its brand of cinematography, soundtrack and content. Sail, unlike other early critics of the synthesis of film and poetry, does not dismiss the two media together as 'mutually distracting' (383), but instead

recognises the 'parallel' between the two and 'the way in which pictures and words fulfil one another' (383). Sail's critique also includes the first notation of a specific film-poem technique by a critic uninvolved with the production itself: he writes of the use of the close-up in the series, which 'invit[es] us to consider surface and texture in a way (and, again, at a slow pace) unusual for television' (383). Indeed the close-up is used largely in the series. As Harrison introduces a subject, the camera often cuts to a close-up of that object with a satisfying accuracy, much like a close-up would feature in a 'normal' documentary. However, the rhythm of the poetry and the precision of the cuts to close-ups make for an altogether different effect upon the viewer. The viewer feels as if he were 'gliding' (383) through the film, and through the numerous places the film itself covers. Cuts become effortless, and are only distinctly noticeable when the poetry breaks to allow a new stanza to begin. When lines are read across a cut between shots, even between physical locations, the viewer does not always detect the transition. On the other hand this is somewhat of a problem in film-poems, since it is very easy to lose track of the movement of a film-poem that covers much geographical ground (as in 'Cheating the Void', which travels through Paris, Genoa, Menton, Venice, Milan and Hamburg in forty minutes). The transitions are often not specifically announced, sometimes only mentioned once, and if a line or shot is missed, one can easily be oblivious to where that part of the film-poem is based. Sail calls the film-poem 'adventurous' and 'sprightly', and to a great degree he is right, but his comments lead the viewer to suspect that if a film-poem is not carefully followed, it is possible to fail to gain an understanding of or misinterpret its sensibilities and statements, even the subject matter of the film itself. Therefore, the close-up does provide artistic value, but if one was to evaluate the practical sense of a film-poem and its typical spatial or cinematographic structure, close-ups between shots would be a critical drawback.

Harrison was to embark on many more projects with Symes, but decided to first place his experiences in the world of film alongside what was and probably still is his most famous, most controversial poem, *V.* (1987).

#### 4.4 Cursing in Prime Time: *V.* on TV

If Tony Harrison's previous television material escaped the general public eye, *V.* was the project that not only gained him more of a reputation as a poet, but as a poet that was suddenly much more visible than many of his contemporaries. The televised version of his long poem generated a great deal of controversy, much of which is included in the second edition of the individual poem by Bloodaxe Books (1989). The televised poem was not purely a film-poem, meaning that it did not contain a consistent stream of visual interpretation of the lines from beginning to end. Of course, the film was made well after the poem had been written, so the main criterion for the film-poem-making process was not relevant in any case. Nevertheless, this film is worth discussing since it draws on many of the techniques learned in the poet's first endeavours.

For the first few minutes, the film appears to be a standard documentary, with Harrison discussing his background and inspiration for the poem. His commentary is first delivered in voiceover, and then directly to the camera, as he walks in the Leeds cemetery where his parents and family are buried. There is nothing exceptionally artistic or unusual about the way these opening scenes are shot. Following his personal introduction there is a departure from the cemetery and the surroundings of Leeds, with the words:

There's room for one more body in this grave and it could be mine. When I think about returning here to be buried, to be united with the people who are buried here already: the butcher, the publican and the baker, I have to ask myself how what I do, poetry, relates to what they provided, the basic essentials of life: bread, meat and beer.

In this way, Harrison provides the viewer with a blunt, brief explanation of the subject of his personal poem, inviting us to consider his angst about his familial roots versus his own legacy as a poet. This concludes the justification of *V.*, as the poem's presentation is prefaced by a speech by Winston Churchill, and scenes of Adolf Hitler and marching Nazis. Especially destructive moments in warfare are shown, incorporating real footage from World War II, and the segment concludes with various expressions of 'V for Victory'. These 'V's' are what lead us into the somewhat abrupt commencement of the reading of Harrison's poem. In a series of three shots, a still of a hand making the V-sign is brought into close up. The quote that precedes the poem appears here, by Arthur Scargill.<sup>16</sup> They quickly fade to reveal the graves of the Leeds cemetery in a sinking tracking shot, moving amidst the spoken opening lines of the poem:

Next millennium you'll have to search quite hard  
to find my slab behind the family dead,  
butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard  
adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.

It is clear that Harrison wanted to ease his audience into this long, often shocking poem, since these lines literally repeat what Harrison himself discusses in his introductory comments about his family and origin. It is likely that his lack of subtlety about this poem's theme and subject is present because he wants his point to be explicit, and poetry is not always the most easily understood motif on television. He may also want people to understand the justification for the swearwords within the poem, so he immediately introduces the audience to his coarse family background, an act of familiarisation.

This film-poem intersperses shots that relate to the poetry spoken by Harrison with simple scenes of the poet reading to a small group of people, in a small room with a black background. The people in the audience are usually in the foreground of each shot, and the camera moves around the room, circling the poet, creating an active, unsettled atmosphere suitable for this

disturbing poem. The filmed version of 'V.' does not stop at creating an interesting surrounding for the reading of the poem; it is much more than a collection of suitable images highlighting a conventional reading. It is another hybrid form within a hybrid genre, an experimental piece that innovates as it narrates.

Richard Eyre, the film's director, calls the poem and film 'a celebration of the ambiguities of what it wouldn't be too grand to call the human condition' (1989, 38). These ambiguities make the film-poem indeed difficult to pinpoint, since the visual content of the film is as unpredictable as the emanation of the next curse. Eyre remembers the outrage about the poem, and recounts the 'free publicity' (37) the film received before it was aired, since the censors were striving to prevent it from being shown. Yet he also tells an interesting story about one of the 'disinterested' viewers of the poem: the film's editor (Ray Weedon), who simply claimed that poetry was 'not for [him]' (37). As discussed above, film-poets are acutely aware of the problems that poetry presents in the public eye, and the reputation that precedes it. One of the goals many film-poems set is to make poetry more palatable for the average viewer, as discussed by Molyneux, Symes and others. Eyre relates how it was a pleasure to study Weedon, the archetypal poetry-hater:

become drawn into the poem so that he felt each nuance, each rhyme, each rhythm, each shift of thought with an ever increasing vividness (37).

The editor was quite taken with the poem, to the extent that Weedon eventually stated that the work was 'fucking amazing' (38). This kind of comment is probably the greatest compliment for a poet, based on its source, and could be more highly regarded as a recommendation than the opinions of astute critics.<sup>17</sup> In fact, one editorial about the poem claims that the 'programme proved most conclusively that most poetry is rendered prosaic by visual illustration' (Tookey, 1987, 74). In argument with this point, it would be more appropriate to state that the poetry begins to lose its conspicuous nature as specific, measured verse, and takes on a lively and more easily consumable air. To say that it becomes prosaic seems to be slightly off the mark, since at

all times it is clear that we are hearing distinct poetry with an *abab* rhyme scheme. However, this opinion is positive, since it advocates that the poetry does indeed succeed when illustrated, no matter how that illustration is interpreted.

V. is a film that uses a variety of camera and editing techniques to illustrate a complicated, dialogical poem. Some of them appear strange at first, unconnected to the verse. Rather, the accompanying verse needs close attention so that the techniques make sense. For instance, at one point in the film, a series of words appear onscreen through a number of media. The graffiti we by now are familiar with is situated with neon lights and advertisements from a city square. With the spoken words 'where kids use aerosols, use giant signs' there is a shot of some graffiti that reads 'I love you mad girl', and with the line 'Arms are hoisted for the British ruling class' there is a close up on the word 'ROYAL' from a building's facade. But because the word is only onscreen for about three seconds, and it is nestled in between an amalgam of similar word-image combinations, it is difficult to grasp the immediate significance behind the juxtaposition at first glance. Rather a simple concept, in that the 'ruling class' is indeed the 'royal' one, it can be lost in the frantic array of images that are presented in such segments.<sup>18</sup>

When reading the poem 'V' on its own, the frequent swearwords appear to stand out dramatically; therefore a proposal to cinematically adopt this poem was understandably met with controversy. Yet, interestingly, the images attached to the poem (and the vulgar verses in particular) seem to dull the impact of some individual words, making us anticipate what will come next instead of dwelling on the profanity. Harrison's reading is potent, with his familiar 'dread tones', and it is very possible that his style adds a professionalism to the reading, which make the swearwords less offensive and more meaningful. We soon forget (after a few of the initial curses) that these words are being used in prime time at all, but we begin to pay attention to why they are being used and in what context. The images distract us from the very presence of

the words, and force us to ask why they are there. In spite of '47 expletives in 448 lines' (Hislop, 1987, 62), there is less of a concern about 'filth' (Hislop, 62) on television than there are questions probing the purpose of the alleged trash-talk. More importantly, since the words are in themselves dramatic and evoke a response in the viewer/listener when faced with an image that accompanies words like 'fuck' and 'shit', viewers are compelled to make a judgement based on observation. While one of the most obscenity-filled lines is read by Harrison, we cut from a shot of him reading to his audience to shots of a gang of youths running through the Leeds cemetery, with occasional close-ups of their spray-cans in use. This is a segment in which Harrison employs a technique he would finely tune in future projects: the use of another voice, this one a skinhead that he invents for the purpose of argumentation about social class in this poem. There are eight expletives in sixteen lines in this scene of the film-poem, and Harrison emphatically enunciates the swearwords, sinking to the skinhead's level but also displaying his hard-edged understanding of his character's point of view. This scene is not only polyphonic, but introduces the most important conflict of the film, in that the central crisis of Harrison's life is itself being debated: is his own heritage itself too much a crippling detriment to his aspirations of poetic ability? Through a twisted justification of the skinhead's 'scrawl', giving it 'higher meaning' (V., line 211), Harrison seems to win the argument. By line 282, Harrison enables himself to reveal the identity of the vandalising voice: it is his own. In a brilliant biographical, introspective study, Harrison extends the 'V', the 'versus', to signify inner conflict between two warring personalities inside himself, constructing the skinhead immediately as an alter ego. The V-sign contains much meaning in this film-poem, from a simple abbreviation (as in Sheffield Wednesday v. Sheffield United) to a 'V for Victory' symbol, to the 'v' Harrison uses to stand between classic clashing notions in British history, symbolising 'divisions of class, gender, religion, [and] language' (Morrison, 1987, 57).<sup>19</sup> A further study of the issues covered in this film-poem is far too complicated to explore at this point in this thesis, since I have chosen a later piece, Harrison's 'A



Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' (1994) as the example of his work upon which I most duly concentrate. Yet, *V.* stands as the exploratory benchmark that paved the way for Harrison's best material.

#### 4.5 Further Development of the Film-Poem

After the controversy and success of *V.*, Harrison worked on a number of dramatic projects, some of which have never been performed, but others stand as important examples of his own development as a writer. In 1989, he wrote and filmed one of his most influential and well-known film-poems, 'The Blasphemers' Banquet'. A defence of Salman Rushdie, this film-poem was written as an expression of the frustration Harrison felt at the public acceptance of Rushdie's prohibition. Harrison indeed felt it 'a monstrous threat to freedom of speech' (Symes, 1991, 388-9), and luckily received an opportunity to write about the issue when a slot became available on BBC1's *Byline* series, which often 'allows strong opinions to be aired' (Symes, 1991, 389). As previously noted, I have discussed this film-poem in further detail in my MA thesis, which documents Symes' personal feelings about the project. It was at this point that Symes felt Harrison and he were beginning to cooperate most successfully, reaching an unprecedented understanding of the 'symbiotic' nature of the material, where they began to allow the poetry 'work' for them (interview, 1997). It remains Symes' favourite of Harrison's television work (1995), surviving through much metamorphosis, including a complete overhaul of the film's original title and key motif, a series of 'Heads in the Sand', 'based on the religious stonings that had started to take place in Iran' (Symes, 1995, xv).

For a piece that was rushed (in fact the filmmakers spent about forty days on it, and by its completion were 'exhausted' [Symes, 1991, 394]), it managed to most strongly influence the

process of making film-poems. According to Symes, the construction of 'The Blasphemers' Banquet' inspired powerful realisation regarding the fusion of poetry and film:

It was made with a passion born of intense anger in the ridiculously short space of about eight weeks, on a tight budget (1995, xiv).

Although risky, this flexible approach to film-making offers enormous benefits: images, words, music and sounds all contribute to the whole on their own terms, and not as some weaker accompaniment, so while the verse remains the lynchpin of the whole operation the other elements are never downgraded (1991, 393).

The setting of a meal in a restaurant replaced the original idea for the film's centre-piece as a dominant conceit, where the banquet would be attended by various poets or writers accused of blasphemy in their own time. One of the work's primary strengths is that it created a forum for other elements of the production, in that the poetry is balanced amongst them. In some cases, the poet's voice is not heard, preferring 'the image [to] do the work', 'enhanced here and there by an occasional trick like slow-motion or enlargement, or by a dazzling score' (Symes, 1995, xvi).

Symes admits that this film achieved something elusive for all artistry: that special level where the piece begins to govern itself. In fact, Symes attests that sometimes the rhythm was automatically selected, even before specific poetry for a scene was written:

One particular shot starts on an obscene scrawl painted on a boarded up door, and travels from it across a wall, over an Urdu notice, along a fence, ending finally on the dome of an unfinished mosque.<sup>20</sup> In the finished film it covers four quatrains, and allows an unstoppable momentum to build up in the verse that then continues into the wonderful meditation on transience that lies at the heart of the piece. None of the quatrains that later accompany this shot had been written when we filmed it, but nevertheless the ghost of the metre determined the way in which it was filmed. We had begun to trust each other (1995, xvii).

It is this 'ghost' that filmmakers probably find most valuable, the sense of timing and level of understanding that is an intangible asset in any visual medium of art, especially film. Once this determination had been achieved, Harrison and his collaborators were ready to take their film-poem-making skills further, creating these productions more regularly over subsequent years.

Harrison's next works for television became subjectively bolder over the following years. Focussing mainly on some of the crises that personally interested Harrison, their subject matter ranged from the excavation of a Gorgon's head ('The Gaze of the Gorgon', 1992) to the political and social problems plaguing the newly formed country of Kazakhstan ('A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan', 1994), to the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima ('The Shadow of Hiroshima', 1995). These pieces adopted a particularly Harrisonian technique that more fully evolved in 'The Gaze of the Gorgon': the use of a 'guide' that acts as a companion throughout the poetry, a visual and poetic escort.<sup>21</sup> A statue of the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine is the guide in this film, much like the 'burnt outline of a man' (Symes, 1995, xxii), frozen in stone in Hiroshima, provides such a service in 1995's piece. As the film-poems grew increasingly intense and complicated, the use of a character to assist the viewer graduated into a trademark of the poet's precision, and Harrison would continue its usage throughout the rest of his work, especially in 1998's *Prometheus*.

1993 brought a piece about individuals that suffer from Alzheimer's disease, called 'Black Daisies for the Bride', which was slightly different from the other works since the verse written for the film's performers was meant to be sung. This film is primarily notable because it is a more precisely honed attempt to 'interweave performance with documentary' (Symes, 1995, xxi), something that was somewhat attempted in 'Arctic Paradise', and because it was the winner of the 'Prix Italia' in 1993 for best documentary (Symes, 1995, xxi). The film employs actresses and actual patients, and is 'moving evidence that the rescuing from oblivion of individual histories is

still inseparable ... from Harrison's larger historical and political concerns' (Spencer, 135).

Harrison's gift for welding the personal with the public would continue to develop onscreen.

Incidentally, both 'Black Daisies for the Bride' and 'The Shadow of Hiroshima' acquired a degree of critical acclaim that allowed Harrison's work to garner the level of respect that invited financial backing, and indeed Channel Four Productions to grant him over a million pounds to spend on a production. In his review of the film and volume, critic Mick Imlah describes 'The Shadow of Hiroshima' as a piece in which 'verse and image are inventively contrasted, taking turns to apply the greater pressure' (1995, 18). Harrison's work was now the subject of much attention, and his material was beginning to eclipse the marginal or experimental.

I have selected 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' as a film-poem fit for closer study. One reason for this is because it has been virtually ignored academically, and another reason is because the piece contains many examples of the strides the poet was making in developing his film-poems, before 1998's *Prometheus*, his first and only feature-length project of verse and film. A discussion of the feature will follow this next section, which I intend to function as an isolated model for the analysis of a Harrisonian film-poem.

#### 4.6 A Film-Poem Protocol

The most direct manner of studying this style of the combination of film and poetry is by choosing one specific film-poem as a prime example, and treating it like a complete synthesis. An excellent model is Harrison's 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' (1994), a film-poem which is a study and a 'montage' of the modern day former Soviet state and its prospects for the future. It is directed by both Harrison and Mark Kidel, and edited by Julian Sabbath. Harrison focuses on the modern issues and/or problems concerning the country today and creatively expresses the confusing nature of the Kazakh peoples' identity, both in terms of the past and in terms of their musings about the future of the nation. Harrison and the filmmakers accomplish this by merging

powerful and especially symbolic images with rhythmic (though occasionally predictable) rhyming poetry in iambic tetrameter. The intertextual nature of this material, considering the historical and socio-political context to the work, makes the piece a prime example of the manifold issues that may be confronted when analysing a film-poem. For viewers who know virtually nothing about Kazakhstan, versus viewers with professional expertise, this film-poem can both illuminate and provoke. Presented in a familiar documentary style, this film-poem is both a news editorial and a stylistic drama about a foreign culture. It is at once an interesting and absorbing study, and the intercommunication that the piece manages to maintain with the people of the troubled nation is further demonstrated by its inclusion of their dialogue, their actual voices, in its script of poetry.

Today Kazakhstan is described as a place where many races and nationalities of people come together and form a society, similar in theory to past descriptions, as idealistic as they may have been, of America. In Kazakhstan these proverbial adages are less pronounced or even absent, but it is likely that they are replaced by expressions of uncertainty and fear, expressions that are intrinsically uncomfortable or themselves wary of deeper meaning. The truth is that the people of Kazakhstan are unsure of themselves as an independent nation or culture, and they are also unsure about what is noble or sacred about their past. This is not to say that the Kazakh people are permanently in a state of aimlessness, like certain Kazakhs' nomadic forefathers, but to say that a theoretical battle is being waged within Kazakhstan between ethnic and nationalistic notions of identity and or definition (Akiner, 1995, 2). Harrison has been able, even as a foreigner, to ask two questions that some economists and sociologists may be thinking about as well: will Kazakhstan fully and successfully move towards a capitalist economy and rid itself of all traces of Communism and Soviet rule, and, perhaps more importantly:

Will Kazakhstan contribute to regional tensions by fostering ethnic confrontation, or will it succeed in developing a model of ethnic harmony? (Akiner, 3).

In 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan', Harrison poses these questions, among others, in a less technical fashion, but by way of poetic understatement. Therefore, there is less of a comparison with a classic American 'melting-pot' but more so with the problematic vision of the superpower as a disjointed land, racially and culturally divided. Perhaps too much of the nomadic character remains infused into Kazakhstan's social mind-set. In any case, it seems that many issues remain somewhat 'under surveillance' though not by the KGB, in Kazakhstan. I will now analyse Harrison's film-poem, sometimes shot-by-shot.

#### 4.6.1 The Opening Shot

Kazakhstan has officially been an independent nation since December of 1991. Since the Soviet Union abruptly disassembled, Kazakhstan was forced to deal with the destruction of 'the entire context...within which the modern Kazakh identity had been formed' (Akiner, 62). Harrison poetically and filmically deals with this study of the development of 'Kazakh-ness' by beginning his film-poem with an establishing shot of a city wall, a grey and ordinary backdrop devoid of meaning, like a blank canvas waiting for the addition of colour. Yet, as the camera vertically scans the wall towards its base, we see that it is old and crumbling. At its bottom, we come across a collection of mementoes from the Kazakhstani past which have also, it appears, fallen into disuse: a picture of a Soviet leader, a Russian book, some fishing nets, and various Russian toy dolls and *babushkas*. This shot and its elements are a statement of the breakdown of the country's traditions from the years before, while also being an appropriate setting for Harrison's melancholic vocals when reading his poetry:

A city wall not quite sure where,  
no May Day posters plastered there.  
Although its May Day no parade  
disturbs the new free world of trade,

only the memory of a choir  
and from it one voice rising higher  
out of a red doll standing near a  
man who bows a Black Sea *lyra*.

There is much to be said about these opening lines and about their accompanying images and soundtrack. The wall is symbolic (the first symbol in a film-poem laden with meaningful objects) of disintegration, much like the Communist government that the now defunct Soviet Union had championed. The wall is also in a place 'not quite sure where', giving it a sense of randomness, a universality. Yet, at the base of the wall we are shown elements (the toys and Russian items) indicative of specific national identity. This plain grey wall is now the relic of a much older presence and/or past evil, a symbol of loss and estrangement. A strange scene indeed begins this film-poem, unsettling and ironic, since freedom's gain is by definition liberating and inspiring. But no colours of patriotism are present ('no May Day posters plastered there'), just the memories of a hazardous past (hence the netting), and a few children's toys, possibly representing the nation's innocence in past politics. To make the scenario even more relevant, this film-poem was first broadcast on May 1, 1994, 'May Day', the former traditional annual celebration of the Communist government. This extended pun in the title of the work expresses an uncertainty in the minds of Kazakhstan's people, specifically directed at notions of the primary culture in the country.

May Day, a day of festival, organised traditional celebrations and military parades is here depicted as grey, uneventful and un-sensational; the people in Kazakhstan go about their everyday business on this day throughout the film, as if it were any other. So there is 'no parade', just a market day and a reflection on past celebration, the 'memory of a choir'. As the film-poem progresses, we see how Harrison's 'characters' attempt to resuscitate their roots and/or revive the celebratory nature of May Day by playing musical instruments or dancing, but every attempt

seems thwarted by some other force or occurrence. This prevention is due to an underlying problem, a private Kazakhstani plague about which we will soon be made aware. Through the ironical usage of the word 'Maybe' for 'May' and the synthesis of the poetry with the image, the extended metaphor for this uncertain nation and its present or former inhabitants becomes a type of conceit, used as a tool throughout. This desire for music or celebration expresses torn emotions as well: the people still want to experience the festivities of May Day, but reject the former regime as its source. The 'Maybe' Day is the possibility of that revival, in that someday maybe there shall be a holiday the Kazakhs will celebrate to commemorate their own nationality, culture and independence.

In terms of music, the background tune we hear as the title of this work appears on-screen (in deep red) is the Socialist anthem 'The Red Flag', but also known as 'O Tannenbaum', the German Christmas song. The melody maintains its political significance in this production, and in this first instance, like many others, it is abruptly cut off, as Harrison's gravity-laden voice takes over as the primary soundtrack. However, it is important to note that the anthem sounds crackly and tinny, clearly a vinyl record being played. This detail provides insight into the general purpose of the film collaborators; the point is to give the viewer a doubled sense of past or historical background: the song is on one hand a presumably infamous, hated Socialist anthem, and on the other a beloved Christmas song. Neither lyrics are sung in the film-poem, but at a later point the song's tune will be used in a reworked operatic manner, with lyrics sung that reflect one of this work's primary messages.

This technique points directly at a manifold meaning in the use of this particular melody. Though 'O Tannenbaum' is German, reason suggests that this carol, which plays at various times throughout the production, is also used to commemorate the questionable and complicated 'December riots' and periods of aggression that occurred in 1986 in Moscow. During these times, Kazakhstani youths expressed public anger and frustration in Red Square at the removal of the



one Kazakh representative member in the Soviet government. Replacing the Kazakh First Party Secretary, Dinmukhamed Kunayev, with a Russian, Gunnady Kolbin, was a step that incensed the Kazakhstan people, and incited a group of students to march into the Russian capital and demand to know the motive behind the move. When three senior officials tried to deal with the protesters, the riots began with cries of 'We don't want to talk to you traitors' and barrages of snowballs. Eventually some of the young people were 'taken to meet Kolbin', but many of them were not heard from again. After this, fights broke out, 'the tanks were brought in and several people were fatally injured' (Akiner, 55). Thus, the seeds were sown for the period of 'violent occurrences' throughout the Soviet Union from 1988-1991, many of them happening close to the Christmas holidays. Today Kazakhs:

feel that those December days had marked a watershed in Russian-Kazakh relations; for all their protestations of amity and fraternal assistance, the Russian community remained silent when the Kazakh demonstrators were being subjected to excessively rough treatment, as though their liberal, pro-democracy views did not extend to Kazakhstan' (Akiner, 56).

Hence the ironic, but perfectly bi-dimensional usage of a Christmas song and a Socialist anthem that is suddenly interrupted, much as the Kazakh (and Russian) holidays were most likely interrupted during the winter of 1986 (and in succeeding years as well). From a wider perspective, this could also further reflect the sudden disintegration of the Communist regime, aborted in its struggle to stay intact with a metaphorical 'switching off'.

This meaningful opening scene also provides a first look at some objects that will appear repeatedly throughout the film-poem. Most notable are the props at the wall's base, including the red dolls and *babushkas*. The trinkets help to assimilate a sense of place and ethnicity after the introduction upon a plain grey wall. Images of these diverse items, combined with the words of Harrison and some historical or contextual knowledge, signify the torn spirit of the modern

Kazakh: a person once taught to obey and follow the strictest of laws who simultaneously yearns for the ability to establish a personal identity and for a stable, powerful national government. At once, we are treated to the first confrontation between the ethnic and nationalistic concerns of the people of Kazakhstan. As the camera cuts away from these objects, one doll is left to escort us to the next segment of the film. Gradually, almost ominously, we are introduced to shots of people and scenes of the market, presumably in Kazakhstan (although we are uninformed as to a particular city or location within the nation). The first representative of the people, 'the *lyra* man' now makes an entrance.

#### 4.6.2 The *Lyra* Man and his 'Countrymen'

The first true figure to appear in the film-poem, the '*lyra* man', is just that: a man who plays a *lyra*, a Greek/African stringed instrument that appears a cross between a violin and a guitar. The *lyra*'s relationship to Kazakh culture is unclear, but the instrument is used as a symbol of culture and antiquity, and as a result, of cultural pride. The *lyra* musician is an ageing, jovial veteran who has the problems of a nation etched into his wrinkled skin. He is a mark of experience, an element that is much needed in the film, though he says only one word and plays only one tune. The word is the name of the nation, and the tune sounds Middle Eastern but is presumably Kazakh in origin. He appears as if he were a street performer, providing the diegetic musical background for the city's people as they mill about the marketplace, browsing and playing chess. It is the *lyra* man who serves as speaker and as audience guide since Harrison 'seek[s] directions from the man'. This hints at a certain anonymity to the area, since the man's national identity is unconfirmed. Perhaps he is Greek, like the instrument he plays, and just one of the members of the many nationalities commonly represented in most Kazakh cities.

By way of a series of cuts in the market scene, the area appears extremely crowded yet happy and bustling; the camera is momentarily forced out of focus again and again by passing walkers

and shoppers. Random shots of a laughing, active people are shown while the *lyra* man's tune pervades the entire scene. However, a few moments after the intrusion of a few tuba notes into the *lyra* melody (from a tuba, briefly pictured, obviously located nearby) a shot of a heavy-looking hammer interjects into the scene. A loud 'clank' causes all of the music to cease. Immediately following the sudden silence, an old woman stares straight into the camera at us with fearful eyes.

This scene could symbolise the same 'failure to unite' that Kazakhstan is itself now experiencing. Since the music crashes to a halt as another instrument (the tuba) enters the tune of the *lyra*, perhaps Harrison is comparing this chaotic music to the plight of Kazakhstan as a nation. 'Voices', like people, seem unable to really integrate with each other. Yet some try, like the potentially Greek *lyra* musician, by playing an un-Greek tune. The attempt to merge his melody with some other tune, however, fails. The hammer, one half of the hammer-and-sickle emblem of the Soviet flag, also is a symbol of the repression of Soviet rule. This type of government did not encourage ethnic mixing; it thrust everyone together, ignoring negative or positive results. Greeks, Germans, Turks, Middle-Easterners and others, seized from Soviet territories and from the much-travelled Silk Way, were regarded as prisoners of war. By Stalin's orders they were shipped off to be collectivised in Kazakhstan and other then-Russian places. Consequently, many people stoically preserved their traditions from before forced integration, and a Kazakh identity or individual tradition would not emerge. No nation can build its own culture when its citizens do not have any ties to or relations with each other. Of course, and to make matters worse, the addition of age-old clan (or 'khan') competition among native Kazakhs did not help matters of integration, but inhibited cultural development still more. This problem still exists today as Kazakhstan struggles to harness its potential for power and influence in world politics, being territorially rich in natural resources, and often termed 'the Saudi Arabia of Central

Asia' (Sadeghi, 1998). Unfortunately, differences in origin, either through khan or nationality, consistently impede progress.

As a curious but appropriate ingredient, after the hammer's clank and the *lyra*'s silencing, a new, sad dirge emerges to accompany the following scenes. Shots of citizens looking solemn and grave replace the laughing, lively facial expressions we had previously been treated to. In terms of compositional similarity, it is interesting to note that, preceding and succeeding the shots of the hammer, all frames contain only individuals. We move, however, from generally happy facial expressions to those expressions connoting despair or depression, yet still on the same people. None of these shots catch another entire person's face in its frame. This suggests that Kazakhstan, as cinematically symbolised, is a nation of individuals who think they stand on their own, avoiding or loathing contact and unification with others. Mehrdad Sadeghi, an Iranian businessman and frequent visitor to Kazakhstan, observes:

It seems that Kazakh tribes are still vying for power among each other, and since they have not learned to successfully co-exist with each other, they certainly have not learned to cohabitate well with those from completely foreign cultures (interview, 1998).

All evidence seems to support an underlying message regarding the problems that unity and mixing are causing in Kazakhstan, a message that is both metaphorically and directly stated in this film-poem. Shots of people during the sadder, slower melody persist as shots of lone figures, never groups of people, and both sequences of these shots are connected to different forms of music. Music will turn out to be a useful transmitter of messages in this film-poem, as one example has already proven, but the problems of attempts at harmony will be even more precisely demonstrated later in the program.

### 4.6.3 Inserted Dialogue

Before any of the above scenes, however, the *lyra* man is functional only in that he plays his tune and states the name of his country. Though he is the only one to play the particular piece of music we hear at this point (but not the only musician to appear in this film-poem), he is *not* the only one to say the country's name. Numerous faces randomly mutter 'Kazakhstan' during this film, but it is worthwhile noting that place names are the only inserts of spoken dialogue within this film-poem, the only 'synchronous contributions from bystanders that are woven into the verse' (Symes, 1995, xxi). This is a feature differing from much of Harrison's other work, until 2002, and from most other film-poems as well. Harrison must have been more resolute about poetry as the sole voice in this piece, since his deliberate insertion of the name of the country insists on his rhyming with it as well, 'I seek directions from the man / who welcomes me to Kazakhstan!' The spoken place names, of which most are 'Kazakhstan', stand out a little too sorely at times, but maybe this is deliberate. In some later lines, especially those that mention 'Georgia' and 'Sukhum', the occasionally successive words interrupt the poetic rhythm of the lines that Harrison is usually cautious to maintain in his voice-overs. Similar examples will be examined shortly, but it is important to note that these scenes are indeed the only moments in which Harrison's non-diegetic narration absorbs the diegetic, mingling with the only examples of 'character' speech.

Numerous other film-poems by poets such as Fred D'Aguiar, Jackie Kay, Roy Fisher, and Harrison himself have all used lengthier spoken dialogue and extended moments of prose to enhance their poetry, sometimes using these prosaic segments as metaphors within their works. At times, the prose may extend its meaning to become a symbolic commentary on the rest of the film-poem. D'Aguiar demonstrates this especially well in his 'Sweet Thames' (1991), one of the film-poems in the *Words on Film* series, when a sugar refining process (removing impurities) is described by a factory worker in normal speech, but the poet verbally and visually then compares

this to the British consulate's exclusion of unwanted immigrants. It is a fascinating technique, but we are bereft of anything similar in 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan', in favour of the principal medium of poetry. No interviews of Kazakh citizens, no readings of newspaper articles about the process of independence, and no opinions are given of the present situation in Kazakhstan in prose. Harrison manufactures this almost prose-less piece deliberately, making sure to allow spoken dialogue only as a noticeable intrusion and only if it may be 'woven' into the poetic lines. The integration sometimes works, but at other times sounds awkward, as if Harrison is waiting too long for the Kazakh to speak. This may be the fault of Sabbath's editing, but in some instances the filmmakers could have probably chosen better examples, since the speech sometimes sounds muddled.

For example, one of the best insertions of interwoven dialogue occurs when a Kazakh man, wearing a Siberian fur hat, concludes one of Harrison's most melancholy couplets ('May Day comes and haunts a man / with memories of...') with a groaning 'Kazakhstannnn'. He also preludes his melodramatic intonation of the word with a searching, lost look directed off-screen, and as he is about to speak, he looks directly into the camera and, of course, directly at the viewer. His face dissolves into a smear of red that soon shapes itself into a few of the many Soviet ('Red') flags on sale at one of many street market stands. This momentary superimposition of the red flags with the man's face recalls many famous film scenes in which this technique is used to show the character's association with the other object, often used to chilling effect, as in Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1993). Numerous superimpositions during particularly gruesome scenes are used to exhibit the main characters' blood-drenched exploits throughout Stone's film, and this scene in 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' does not use this style as explicitly, but it transmits a similar message in this film-poem.

Ironically, one of the worst examples of the prosaic occurs just after one of the best. As the camera slowly pans the red flags and banners, dismissed like unwanted clothing, the lines 'Red

flags he flogs for what he can / once flew high in Kazakhstan' are read by Harrison, and 'Kazakhstan' is again said on-screen, but this time by a somewhat dubious 'actor'. A flag salesman, significantly younger than the former speaker, finishes these lines, but unfortunately the speaker smirks subtly as he says the word, and nods his head afterwards. This conveys a negative and unconvincing impression of the gravity of this subject; these civilians are not actors. Though his gestures may be nearly imperceptible, the average viewer's eye is surprisingly aware of detail, especially in terms of facial expression and movement. Therefore, we can say that the usage of inserted dialogue is indeed effective at times, but at others may appear forced, inappropriate, or in this case, slightly rehearsed and almost worthless and ineffectual. Harrison will thankfully perfect this technique in his later work; the incorporation of spoken dialogue, whether by actors or not, is a distinct asset in his 2002 film-poem, 'Crossings'.

The entire work as a whole, however, achieves a fluid momentum in its documentation of the Kazakh identity crisis, without any specific pieces of quoted material or fact. Interviews or personal anecdotes of citizens and their pasts are summarised by these utterances of 'Kazakhstan'. Shots of people's faces tell enough of a story in their own right, accompanied by poetic lines like 'Cold dark deportation trains / still jolt and judder through their brains' or 'What sometimes haunts these traders' looks / are dark nights and days in cattle trucks'. It seems that politically minded verse together with a flair for dramatisation is a sufficiently expressive in this film-poem, and the use of a prose interview or factual piece would only obstruct poetic messages. Incidentally, as the words 'traders' looks' are spoken by Harrison, we immediately see a few quick shots of some of the merchants at the market, one of the many examples of the superb timing and editing that is accomplished in this piece.

Sometimes no poetry is used to express a thought or an issue in this work. Harrison, in his 2002 'South Bank Show' appearance, claims that sometimes when writing with film, one 'must leave space for the power of the imagery onscreen'. At this point in the Kazakhstan study,

Harrison segues to a montage of the marketplace by inserting a wordless series of shots and camera pans into the film after the flag seller mutters his innocuous line. A shot of a miniature, tambourine-like instrument introduces a scene that is made cohesive by the emergence of background vocals, a 'choir effect', humming 'Red Flag'. A hand shakes the instrument to a marching tempo; it is uniquely reminiscent of a 'clap-board', which introduces takes and scenes when filming is to begin. This scene is appropriate following the red flags we have just seen. The 'o-lipped' Russian *babushkas*, of all shapes and sizes, are panned while the choir's singing grows louder, developing into a peaceful segment of the film-poem. Eventually, the music dramatically gives way to more unnerving sound effects and general discord, as a gas mask is found among the expanse of dolls. As 'Kazakhstan' is whispered or (more appropriately) wheezed quietly in the background, we see numerous masks and then, of all things, a smoking accordion player.

The musician 'greet' us, then plays his version of 'Red Flag', reworked for his instrument. To complicate this sequence, two individuals' faces appear in the midst of it that tell us their own places of origin. This scene might seem unnecessary at first, but it could be read to contain much significance. Immediately before this scene, there is a peace insinuated during the choir's singing, but the mask and the accordion tune yet again undermine the quiet. We then are again forced to consider people one by one, in the shape of the two muttering faces, and not as a collective population, like the choir/rows of dolls we have previously seen and heard. To conclude this scene, the accordion player's shaded eyes are in close-up, but the shot soon fades into another pair of sunglasses, these for sale on a rack somewhere in the market. The 'peaceful' poetry-less segment concludes, and we now return to the analysis of current affairs in Kazakh culture.

#### 4.6.4 The Market Montage and the Importance of Editing

It is in the market that the 'new free world of trade' is being tested, and again ironically, the goods that are being sold here are most indicative of past Soviet mastery of the region. In this



long sequence, we are shown a montage of shots of people milling about, looking at the truckloads of junk for sale. It is obvious that no one is buying anything. Badges, uniforms, the red flags: 'anything and everything' (Sadeghi, interview) is on display, but one of the points this film-poem is trying to make, though not explicitly stated, is that not many of these articles will be purchased by citizens of Kazakhstan, since these are the objects they are trying to forget. In much the same manner as a poem often does on its own, the film understates one of its primary points, leaving it up to the viewer to decide the meaning behind the images. These meanings are much less than obvious to the average viewer, but Harrison still does not explicitly say, 'People will not buy these goods since they are indicative of the former regime'. Instead, his poetry is critical and symbolic, such as:

And uniforms have been sloughed off,  
redundant after Gorbachev,  
mere novelties a trader peddles,  
not in Red Square impaled with medals  
bouncing on breasts as brass bands play  
marchers and missiles through May Day

With these alliterative lines Harrison informs viewers of a current philosophy of the Kazakh market. In addition to a further homage to the past parades of Communist May Day, the tokens of Soviet rule are shown to remain strictly tokens on the tables of the merchants, 'mere novelties' for tourists or collector's interests. His meaning reaches beyond a symbolic level, to refer to the object itself in everyday use. In this way, Harrison demystifies the past and exhibits its implications in the present day without prose, news footage, or interview.

The uniforms are not the only objects acknowledged in this part of the film, as the camera eye and the poetic voice survey many objects, only some of which are filmed or commented upon. Marks of communism and former regulation would not be welcome sights in the average

household of a newly independent nation. The goods remain on the shelves and tables at the markets, but retain a purpose. With no intention of selling them to locals, these items are placed in the middle of the city, for all Kazakhs to see, so that the people might revel in the glory of their freedom, strengthening their pride in their own nation. Consider the lines:

The free market, seller/buyer  
of tablecloths and *Stolichnaya*,  
hats made of Siberian furs,  
and surplus Soviet secateurs  
we see flea-market browsers feel  
to test the sharpness of the steel.

By merely observing and 'browsing' among the objects on sale, the people can instil within themselves a feeling of thankfulness, a realisation that oppression is over. No longer will the flea market be under 'surveillance by the KGB' or 'police', as Harrison intones just before the above lines. Instead the items are placed about as novelties and relics, to be toyed with, scoffed at and possibly left out to rust and eventually disintegrate. This interpretation of these scenes (and of this entire montage) is like a self-reflective study of the attempt made at an emerging Kazakh identity. Harrison is saying that the Kazakh people will be aided in their search if they are able to freely touch items from their past. Through transitive means, the aspect of touch may give way to a more substantial understanding of patriotism. A realisation of this need for integration is exactly what the Kazakh people need as a nation, and this would help to establish communal gratification and serve as a unifying factor for all. Even so, among the market table items, a radio blares out 'Red Flag' again, and a hand reaches out to quickly switch it off, again indicating that the items themselves are enough of a reminder.

Alternatively, and to accompany Harrison's probable intention, this scene is meant to expose a pathetic side to these people, who are selling whatever they can to afford a living. The words

'free market', quoted in the above stanza, are said sarcastically by Harrison, hinting that there really is no freedom here at all, but a struggle to survive. The poet proceeds to spit out a few more phrases like 'surplus Soviet seateurs', in mockery of Kazakhstan's situation. It is clear that the poet does not approve of the manner by which Kazakhs are currently trying to make their way, by structuring a national identity out of relics from the past. Harrison wants to alert the people to modern possibilities, demanding the stoppage of ethnic-mixing paranoia, favouring realisation and development of their potential environmental gold mine.

Like one of Harrison's previous film-poems, 'The Blasphemers' Banquet' (1989), this sequence uses similar symbolic shots which are strung together in a way that is akin to Soviet Montage cinema techniques. The Montage style, defined and founded by Russian filmmakers like Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, expressed ideas and action by using quick cuts, metaphorically related subject matter, two or more plot lines, and a crowded mise-en-scene. It is no accident that a montage is used in this film-poem, especially since Soviet Montage cinema was born near the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (and 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' considers a modern revolution, however uncertain, but which is full of possibility). As the market browsers look at various items in this lengthy sequence/series of stanzas, the poetry perfectly matches the images of the people. For example, as the lines 'though things to aid the human eye / take aim, survey, or even spy' are stated, numerous brief shots of people looking through binoculars and telescopes are shown. It is also relevant to note that this scene began with steady pans of rows of sunglasses, focussing on the reflections in one particular pair. Reflections are used often in this film-poem, whether they are distorted images in the brass bell of a tuba or shapes in the lenses of sunglasses, as in this example. People move in strange directions in the reflection of the lenses, and all the while Harrison speaks about the freedom from 'surveillance' by the KGB. A theme of voyeurism is well symbolised during these scenes, where sometimes there is so much to look at and listen to that there is a need for a pause, slow-motion effect or shot repetition. Recalling Tom

Phillips' words about his 'A TV Dante', film-poems may not be as effective the first time through, and as one critic writes, 'one would welcome a repeat' (Saunders, 1996, 60).

As mentioned earlier, one of the most prominent objects that repeatedly appears throughout this film-poem is a little red doll with a weight and bell in its rounded base, making it impossible to be knocked down. It must return to an upright position, though it totters haphazardly. We first see this doll in the first scene of the film, at the base of the wall. At the market, the dolls appear again, wobbling and straightening. In a slow motion shot, on a ghostly close-up of a doll's face, these lines are spoken:

They seem to sell these everywhere  
as talismans against despair,  
these little dolls on every stall  
no force seems able to make fall.  
The doll, no matter what the drop, 'll  
come up trilling from her topple,  
cling to her song and go on clinging  
though Kazakhstan could crush her singing,  
collectivised and forced by rote  
to still the *lyra* in her throat.

The brightly coloured red dolls represent the struggle of the Kazakh people to maintain their livelihood and to fight feelings of absolute loss and dissension ('talismans against despair'). The line 'though Kazakhstan could crush her singing' contains a strong message; the refusal to bond and overlook ethnic differences could be the country's undoing. Most of the dolls are identical, and they stand peacefully everywhere but if there are different kinds of dolls, in terms of colour or size, they stand together with the red ones. Here again, we see an item used as a symbol to unite and solidify a people as a culture. Seizing the idea of common awareness, knowledge or

familiarity with something, Harrison indicates the relative ease with which one can surpass problems of collectivisation and being 'forced by rote'.

These are some of the particular lines in this film-poem which are a classic example of how poetic lines written for film that are left to stand on their own truly seem to have something missing. Peter Symes writes that we should 'never forget that this is work that is designed to be *seen and heard*' (1995, xxiv). If we read the above stanza without the image, or without even a description of the intended accompanying images, we would probably be unconvinced or confused about the meaning behind them. The stanza begins with 'They seem to sell these everywhere' and we are not told, in the film-poem's script, what 'these' refers to, until a vague 'identification' two lines later. Even with that confirmation, the poetry does not stand as powerfully on its own. This creates a small problem when the poetic material is published alone in a book. In order to aid the video-less reader, Harrison places descriptions of the filmic images in the margins of his printed texts, but this technique pales in comparison with seeing the entire collaboration as it was meant to be seen. The images are essential to fully appreciate the work as an evolved synthesis of poetry and film.

In addition to the toy dolls' unifying qualities, there are other ways they figure prominently in this film-poem. The dolls capture much camera attention for numerous scenes. At the base of the wall in the introductory sequence, the dolls are shot while a choir with 'one voice rising higher' is described. This 'choir effect' is an important motif in this work, until its culmination, when the toy's presence and the choir in the background give way to a human female voice singing words. The toy dolls are also wide-eyed, and are often used as eyeline-matchers. For example, they watch 'shoppers' 'march past' at the markets, and mirror our own gaze as viewers. They are indeed like little guides, since the camera frequently matches their stare. Their 'attention' directs the camera as to what to photograph next.

Symbolic similarities and parallels between objects and real-life situations are not by any means the only mechanisms at work within this film-poem. Maintaining that this work is an exploration into the history of Kazakhstan and its people as much as it is an expression of concern for them, we are soon transported and privy to the possible thoughts of an old woman knitting booties. Some *babushkas* watch the shoppers' 'march past' and the knitting woman as we do. Another one of Harrison's improvised 'characters', she is referred to simply as 'she' (a further example of the problem of the missing image in the text alone), and Harrison gives her a voice:

She sees their feet from where she's sitting

on the pavement, peddling, knitting

And maybe all her bright bootees

will walk to better times than these,

not crash their heels to May Day brass

as medalled smilers watch them pass,

not keep in step, or form in ranks

and march as boots in front of tanks.

And maybe the head that wears this bonnet

won't ever need a gas mask on it...

Sounds of marching feet interrupt the poetry after 'knitting', a reasonable semblance of the knitter's thoughts. We can imagine the echo of the marching feet also occurring in her head, reminiscent of the May Day military parades. These were threatening spectacles of power that were also marks of a holiday, though the holiday is one the culture seems content to forget. The camera then pulls back from a close-up of her blue booties to reveal masses of them. With the final two lines of this stanza, as she holds a bonnet in her hands (like a little head), we realise more strongly that her thoughts have not been given in the first person (in the voice-over) by shifting voices from Harrison's to a woman's. Perspective curiously remains in the third person.

This is done to improve the speculative feel that is markedly present in Harrison's projected musings for the old knitter. The old woman's full face is not seen until the last two lines of the stanza are read; she remains anonymous until her identity is 'revealed' with the words 'the head that wears'. In spite of these two anomalies within this passage, these verses, especially the final couplet of this stanza, are meant to be straightforward examples of modern day worries or concerns of typical Kazakhs, and it is no accident that there are two more 'maybes' in this stanza as well. The strength of multiple meanings and levels to the 'Maybe Day' grow stronger by this point, and we may add the everyday doubts and concerns of the people into our formula for 'maybe'. A film-poem's close analysis breeds additional levels of meaning like that of any work, but moreover because the work is both a poem and a film, and we must consider both media's multiple dynamics.

Matching the spoken word to the image, Harrison reads 'gas mask' in the above stanza and we see shots of some of these masks and gas canisters, strewn among other tools and workshop items on the encyclopaedic market tables. Displaying these masks and other symbols of hard work, struggle and labour offers the viewer a horrific vision of past life for these people, and soon it gets worse. After the harmless old knitter seems to look in the direction of the masks (off-screen), we are told that, 'The Kazakhstan these masks came from / was the test site for the Soviet bomb'. Harrison then informs the viewer about the Kazakh past reality of radiation scares, and quickly (within the same stanza) closes in on what he terms 'metronomes', which are really radiation meters. The focus on these items is both a verbal one and a filmic one:

The metronome these masks employ  
gets sold here as a gruesome toy.

These meters dumped in great amounts  
measure radiation counts.

With these words comes a shot of many of these counters, followed by a close-up of one. These items are the most effective at describing past horror yet used, since their ticking and beeping sounds resonate with the rhythm of the poetry and the frequency of cuts. Harrison terms the meters 'metronomes' for this reason, aiding his own well-timed voice-over with a haunting guide.

More objects, representing the terrifying past of Kazakhstan, can be found in the market. While panning and scanning some old musical instruments apparently for sale, the camera never manages to fit one entirely into its frame, but we hear some strange disharmonious sounds emanating from them separately on the soundtrack. We are delivered from this choppy mess of notes by portions of 'Red Flag' played on toy instruments. Yet again, this song returns as a reminder, this time played whimsically. Here Harrison alludes to the song in his voice-over while a toy xylophone player taps out the song's notes, this time clearly stating the significance of the tune, 'The tune we hear three browsers play / still haunts them though its had its day'. The musician stops playing in mid-verse, interrupting the song yet another time. No one can bear to hear the song played in its entirety. Now Harrison's poetry pauses again, like an elongated caesura, during which we are shown hordes of Soviet medallions. Here lies a hidden metaphor, in that the inability to play the song symbolises an inability to seriously face these objects and hence a tumultuous past; one of the only ways 'Red Flag' can be played at any length is on toy instruments. These small toys are also 'talismans against despair'.

Harrison next begins the longest stanza of the film-poem, and therefore the longest collection of related scenes, with the alliterative couplet, 'Pavement peddlers trading trash / From Communism's fatal crash'. These lines begin a bitter poetic rant. Harrison is clearly critical of the goods that are sold in this market; one is reminded of the Biblical story of Jesus Christ destroying the goods on sale in the temple on an otherwise holy day (Matthew 21:12-13). In the shape of the camera lens, Harrison's observant eye travels around from table to table and mocks many objects through powerful comparisons. From an electronic Mickey Mouse game to statues of Lenin



(‘mummified/in philosophical formaldehyde’) and movable toy figures of Dr. Trotsky (who ‘goes on making toasts/ to *glasnost* and the gulag ghosts’), Harrison discovers manifold relevance in harmless items. An extended metaphor of the mythical Greek ship the *Argo* is also introduced in this stanza, a foreshadowing of an important event soon to come. This segment of the film-poem focuses on equating the traders at this market with the lost and doomed Argonauts from the Greek myth. Timing is essential in this long stanza as Harrison moves from object to object with much speed, forcing the camera to capture all of the images he himself captures poetically. He ends this pervasive mockery with the words:

The foundered *Argo’s* former crew  
now peddling here on pavements new,  
marooned in free flea-market forces  
with no sights fixed on future courses,  
what new horizons do they scan,  
these castaways from Kazakhstan?

At the conclusion of this question begins a veritable ‘Part Two’ to this film-poem, since then the film shifts from terming these merchants as actual Kazakhs to terming them as ex-Kazakhs, people who have fled from the country in former days. After certain individuals say names of places near and around Kazakhstan, we are taken to Athens, Greece, where ‘democracy began / two millenia and a half ago’. A reflection in a tuba shows the ruins of the Acropolis, and we hear the *lyra* playing again. This change in setting does not cause any major shifts in viewer perception, mainly because some of the characters and props are identical. The point is, Harrison confesses, that the market we had been studying for so long was not in Kazakhstan at all, but Greece. Though we may have been misled, it is clear that Harrison has deliberately compared the two places, playing on the fact that not only would the viewer not have been able to tell the difference, but neither would Kazakhs themselves. No specific location was ever identified.

Recalling the first line of the piece, 'A city wall, not quite sure where', we can directly perceive that there *is* a problem with identity in Kazakhstan. We might have been surveying any market in Eastern Europe, within reason. The absence of indicative architecture, foods, and even buildings or streets with Kazakh names on them is now made apparent, since the Grecian market we are in now looks the same as the former. We also now realise that the only potentially Kazakh items we saw were Russian; items that were imposed upon them for sixty years, and the items could have been placed on market tables anywhere, even in a studio. This film-poem is manipulative, but it manipulates with a serious specific purpose.

#### 4.6.5 The Turn, or the Moments of Truth

The next scenes in this film-poem mark a turning point in its narrative, much like the moment of further affirmation or of reversal that takes place in a sonnet, known as a 'turn'. The film-poem here re-adjusts its principal messages, and quickly concludes to inform its audience of its true purposes. A change of setting from an undefined one to an exact location (Athens) attempts to merge the people of both places together. By selecting a city of Greeks and calling them 'once deportees to Kazakhstan', Harrison refers to the population migrations that took place in the history of Kazakhstan itself. At first, there were high migrations of people to the country, but once the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, many of those who once sought entry into Kazakhstan then made haste to leave. People were literally caught within the borders of the expanding Russian empire, and could not escape the Soviet regime. These people were from many places, but the Greeks in this film, once Russian, are descendants of those people or experienced this hardship authentically; they are at least representations of the people who survived the ordeal. Now it seems that these people had to learn 'to feel like Greeks again, / though Greeks still call them Soviet men'. Russians sent any previously emigrated Greeks in other areas of the Soviet Union (like Georgia), to Kazakhstan in efforts to collectivise them and

instigate unity. As we have seen, these efforts supremely backfired, caused much distress, and presented the problems this film-poem investigates.

Democracy, presented at first as a solution to Kazakhstan's identity crisis, becomes a last resort in Greece. It is clear that these people have not found peace or fellowship in their true homes, since the 'Greeks still call them Soviet men'. Harrison's reference to the *Argo* now also makes more sense, as the Greek tale is one that ends with the crew marooned and/or exiled. As all of the nightmarish memories of the past are eulogised by Harrison's words ('forced out of Georgia and displaced / from fertile farms to barren waste'), some of the 'characters' that serve as examples of Soviet Greeks are revisited. Again, the miniature tambourine-like instrument shakes on-screen, and introduces us to the next segment of the film-poem. This segment contains a montage of people's faces, which dissolve or fade into black and white still photographs, or vice versa. Even the 'lyra man' is exposed as a member of one large photograph's entourage, one of a group of people holding up a Soviet banner. Throughout the black and white photo montage, a new approach is used to synthesise word and image: lines are sung rather than spoken, not by Harrison, but by a female vocalist. This technique, reminiscent of a conceptual music video, complements the film-poem well, regardless of the imperfections in the singer's voice. The tune sung is another alternative version of 'Red Flag', the lyrics changed to fit the content of the photographs and their inhabitants.

At this point, Harrison finally shifts the tone of his poetry from depressing and mournful to bright and hopeful, on as much of a positive note as can be expected. Hope for the future of Kazakhstan amplifies the musicality of the piece. The dreams of democracy and for a sense of belonging are 'not quite dimmed'. To tell the story of the people's determination to work towards a 'Maybe day and that maybe / 's the future of democracy', the tubas return, this time with twice the force, 'Two Soviet tubas, silver, brass / Struggle through the May Day mass'. We are also reminded that it is still May Day, and normally parades would be occurring. While the tubas are

seen in the crowd from a distance, they look like bizarre guns protruding over the heads of the populace, a symbolic restoration of the 'bazookas' and 'missiles' that may have once been visible during a Soviet May Day parade. The tuba-carriers soon join other marching musicians, who carry a variety of instruments. They make their way to the Parthenon and Acropolis, a former forum for democracy. In the background, the *lyra* tune returns as background music to 'march' to.

A new figure is introduced at this point in the production: a young blonde girl, dressed mostly in red, leads the procession, a live version of the red dolls used in this piece. Carrying one of the miniature tambourines in her small hands, she establishes the beat for the marchers and for the *lyra*'s tune. This tune is further manipulated while the procession travels to the Parthenon, led most of the way by this prophetic child.<sup>22</sup> The camera intermittently follows these Greeks, barely managing to keep them in its line of sight. Once they reach the building, which is conspicuously under construction, they play a fanfare together, to symbolise some great accomplishment.

Finally, musicians are indeed playing together, a feat not accomplished since the beginning of this feature. Their music symbolises their hopes for rebuilding, a spontaneous collaboration.

This band, still led by the youth, is happily playing together, when they are suddenly interrupted by sounds of pulleys and cables being stretched. The scene cuts to a large stone being hoisted by a crane, simultaneous with these lines, 'Not marble, but millenia weigh / on cables that'll maybe fray'. Echoing Shakespeare (Sonnet 55, which also considers themes of impermanence), Harrison depicts the problems of the insertion of democracy into these people's lives. Since the block is hoisted 'off the ground', this expresses the readiness to build, but since it remains aloft, swaying slightly, this expresses an uncertainty of placement: 'it goes into which structure? Where?'. With this idea still hovering, our little guide in red suddenly disappears from the group of transfixed musicians, to magically reappear in the Theatre of Dionysus with the *lyra* player, whose tune is restored to its original form. On the floor of the Theatre are a series of 'the people's flags of deepest red / spread for tender feet to tread'. The girl, now barefoot, cautiously makes her way

towards the *lyra* man, who sits at the opposite end of the theatre, directly across the scar of red that stains its floor. The line 'the people's flags of deepest red' also is the first lyric of 'Red Flag', which refuses dismissal even in the presence of this young hope for the future.

#### 4.6.6 The Concluding Scene

The last scene expresses the questionable future for the people of this film. Greeks, one of Kazakhstan's many ethnic groups, are as uncertain as the rest of the population, but at least they are back on their home soil where the experience of democracy is familiar. The young independent nation is taking its first steps, like the young girl, attempting to define itself. The old *lyra* man smiles as he looks on, and the girl dances to his tune when she reaches him.

Yet there may be too many memories remaining. Kazakhstan is a place where people are still haunted by the spectre of Russian rule, and where 'tribes are versus Russians, as well as other tribes' (Sadeghi, interview). These people, once Stalinist prisoners of war, are now 'back in Greece' and are attempting, 'piece by piece', to re-shape their lives. As the young girl picks up one of these memories (a solitary red doll), holding it in her palm as she sits on the steps of the Theatre, she gazes at the construction machines that are still holding fragments of a future government building aloft. These lines are sung during the closing scene of this film-poem:

From Kazakhstan now back in Greece

I dream the maybe, piece by piece.

I dream with open eyes and see

the marble of maybe . . . maybe.

The struggle to return to normalcy is reiterated by the concluding verses, claiming that the instruments played previously in unison will be returned 'back into flea-market trade'. A stunning crane shot of the city of Athens is pulled back from the girl in the Theatre. It holds the Theatre in the forefront of its frame, without its red scar, fading to black as 'May Day evening falls'.

#### 4.6.7 Conclusions Regarding 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan'

This film-poem accomplishes two things through its trickery. At first, we are made to believe that its markets are Kazakh, and that we are exploring the national identity crisis that is currently being experienced in Kazakhstan. Though we are not told of any city in which to base ourselves as viewers and readers during (roughly) the first twenty minutes of the film, the purpose of the mysterious setting is made known to us at the 'turn' in the poem, and the corresponding pivotal scene in the film. Through a synthesis of setting that actually does not essentially change, another concern emerges as the film-poems' primary topic: the rebuilding of the shattered lives of the displaced Greeks, in Greece, Kazakhstan, or wherever they now reside. Whether or not many viewers will understand this dual message is uncertain, but after study these themes clearly come forth. This misty quality of the message within seems to hint at a need for simplicity in an average film-poem, if they are to be effective pieces at all. I will seek further clarity in a study of Harrison's feature length project, *Prometheus*.

#### 4.7 A Summary of the Styles of the Film-Poem

Many cinematic techniques are used in 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' that brilliantly correspond to conventional poetic devices. It is through these techniques that we are able to understand the importance of time in film-poems. Well-timed matching of words and moving images is essential to 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' since often characters and objects are introduced simply as 'he', 'she', or 'it'; as they are spoken about in verse their identity would be altogether veiled. The clarifying, meaningful image is required to shed light when the poetic image is not obvious, and in a film-poem the reverse is valid as well. Some say that this limits the ability of the poem to illustrate the minds of those who read it on its own. Philip Larkin, in a 'gentle rejection slip' to television arts producer Tony Cash regarding a proposition to film one of Larkin's poems, wrote 'that his verse already contained all the images and music it could need'

(Cash, 1990, 16). A similar request was made by Ted Hughes when reading his poems for an 'Off the Page' television episode in 1986, stating, 'I don't want any other photographs to come between my words and your memories'. This is not to say that films must always contain a specific single image to accompany a line of verse. When film-poems are concerned, the process of writing and filming occurs at virtually the same time, and therefore the image that accompanies the poem is also the image that probably inspired the verse, or is naturally and hermetically linked to it in some indigenous way. Therefore, film-poems are not limiting the potential to conceive images for poetry, but they are displaying the result of a true homogeneity of the image and the word, including the source of inspiration on both sides.

The close-up, the cut, the dissolve and fade, focussing, tracking shots and other film devices are all used to illustrate poetry's verbal impact and purpose. A Harrisonian favourite is the pan, through which it is possible to study a large group of objects, like in the markets of 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan'. Without panning, we would be as spectators in a gallery of stills, especially in a shot that catches many objects in frame. Motion often matches the rhythm of the verse, allowing the viewer to become an active participant in an art that is always changing and fostering multiple meanings. Panning is an effective way of setting a pace for poetry or to communicate poetic rhythm to the audience. It is surprising how well 'cinematic techniques correspond to poetic devices' (Symes, interview, 1997). Varieties of cuts, for example, often accompany similes or metaphors in the poetry; slow-motion photography or close-ups that follow the cut often place greater emphasis on the comparison. Dissolves or fades often signify the end of a stanza and the beginning of a new one, or occur between specific sections of the poem. This relationship is the deeper intertext in the film-poem: levels of otherwise hidden meaning are exposed once film devices are related to poetic devices. Intertextuality is achieved by not only the presence of both film and poetry in one work, but also by the interactions between the two mechanisms. They are 'always already' (Abrams, 1993, 281) in place and are the site of

interaction between the worlds of film and poetry as separate wholes. Peter Symes probably best describes the natural similarities between film and poetry in his introduction to *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* when he compares the twenty-five 'flickering images that go to make up one single second' of film to the 'still words, combined into lines' of poetry (vii).

Movement and meaning are achieved in both media once each item is made part of a system. This relationship helps to create the mutual dependence poetry and film maintain, since each device used by one medium is a mirror for a device of the other. In film-poems, the relationship is no longer merely theoretical, but is made palpable and visible by the application of the devices with each other. By far the most ambitious of this process of application would be a feature length production, crafted not for television but for the cinema screen.

#### 4.8 The Cinematic Film-Poem

Poets as diverse as Harrison, Auden, Blake Morrison, and Jackie Kay have all made forms of film-poems for television, shorter than feature-length. However, to attest to the contemporary nature of this material, Harrison completed two works of film-poetry during the writing of this degree. One of these is the feature-length *Prometheus*. It was released in mostly avant-garde or non-mainstream cinemas and was made for Channel Four Films. It sets a precedent virtually unseen before in the history of the film-poem (and, more importantly, film in general) with its length, release and unique style. Before available (1997-98) it was only known that its plot would involve the ancient mythical figure Prometheus emerging out of isolation and seeing, in today's world, what humanity had done with the fire for which he sacrificed his own freedom. Upon study, the film considers much more than that.

*Prometheus* involves a journey, as many of Harrison's works do, through parts of Europe where there is again strife stemming from the failure of a 'free-market' economy. The god Hermes (Michael Feast) searches for a working class that will curse the original giver of fire, and



he finally finds them in Romania, who pelt and stain the statue of Prometheus with carbon, in exchange for cash. Hermes (or Mercury in Roman myth) is a perfect presence in this film. He is the god of roads (much of the film is spent transporting a statue through European highways on a flatbed truck), commerce (pertaining to the film's concern with trade) and eloquence (Feast's lines are often concerned with the beauty of expression in poetry versus prose), and ironically, theft (an inverted interpretation of the first Promethean pilfering). Hermes challenges the efforts of the working class, and is the herald for Zeus and his hatred, explaining to the audience how Zeus detests humanity for abusing fire. *Prometheus* is a political statement as well as a layered autobiography for Harrison (Holmes, 289). It is a study of the working class' habits throughout Europe, and is not afraid to praise or condemn nationalities, based on their reactions to the massive golden representation of the thieving Titan. Harrison himself, in the preface to the published screenplay of the film, writes of the literary evidence of Prometheus as the hero of the proletariat, 'the patron of technology and the smokestacks of the ... North of England where I grew up, inhaling the sulphurous fumes of the Promethean gift' (1998, xvi).

In a bizarre but interesting twist in the history of the film-poem genre, *Prometheus* invokes a subject that was also addressed in the one of the first explorations in joining verse with image. Auden's involvement with the GPO Film Unit documentary *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti, 1935, and produced by John Grierson) centred on coal mining and industry, and its verse was intended for a female chorus. Auden wrote only one stanza for this piece; its opening lines are:

O lurcher loving collier black as night,

Follow your love across the smokeless hill.

Your lamp is out and all your cages still.

The song appears near the end of the film, like Auden's verse for *Night Mail*, and this film appeared one year earlier than the famous mail train documentary. *Coal Face* is an artful eulogy for the plight of some lost miners. It is worth noting that much verse written for film has centred

on industrial subjects, and this ironic link between an early work and a contemporary one creates one relevant full circle. In another hearkening to the past works of film and poetry, Harrison himself has returned to the original roots of film and poetry, writing a *Night Mail* for today': 'Crossings' (2002), a film-poem that again focuses on the Royal Mail delivery train but in a modern sense.<sup>23</sup> The short film encompasses much of Harrison's maturity as a film-maker, and I will briefly discuss it following my commentary on *Prometheus*.

A major difference between the feature film and Harrison's television pieces is that this film is presented without the aura of a news item or a documentary. The subject is similar to that of an editorial, since it is deconstructed by a series of opinions, clear stances on specific issues. But *Prometheus* is a fictional film, a drama presented in verse, where there are actors playing characters, not filmed civilians, and much of the verse is in dialogue, not in voice-over commentary. *Prometheus* is also a film-poem without the poet's actual voice within it ('All of his words are in the mouths of actors. He's written in character' [Holmes, 287]). This is a sharp difference from Harrison's other work, where his voice was the mainstay of the piece, varied as the material might have been. Harrison would merge the vocal stylistics of his older film-poems with the techniques learned in *Prometheus* in 'Crossings'. Much of my discussion of *Prometheus* will quote from a personal interview with the film's producer, Andrew Holmes. This entire interview is Appendix B of this thesis.

*Prometheus* still invokes the presence of a 'guide', but Harrison has developed a new interpretation of that quality of film-poems. This time the guide is the character Hermes, who directly affects other character lives. The film is extraordinary, and very different from anything that has ever been done before (Holmes, 281). Also producer for 'The Shadow of Hiroshima' and 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan', Holmes calls the film 'an incredible feat of writing' (281) which is quite an accurate description. Earlier scripts (some of which looked 'like a telephone book' [Holmes, 281]) would have produced a film that ran for at least four hours, which might provide

some idea of the amount of verse that was scrapped, so Harrison was hard at work creating voluminous amounts of couplets. Harrison has apparently learned to be quite callous with his own material, cutting his couplets without hesitation in many cases. This time writing for characters that represent his concerns, the film's verse focuses on the decay of 'modern, Eastern-European and Western-European industry, and socialism' (Holmes, 283), ideas that Harrison relates to because of his interest in the plight of miners in Britain over the last twenty or thirty years. Indeed, many of the characters in *Prometheus* are miners or ex-miners, and the first image we see in the film is of a cluster of smouldering cooling towers for a coal-fired power station, and of a newspaper headline that reads 'Last Yorkshire pit to close tomorrow: 3,000 job losses'. Clearly, the poet's concerns are still not straying from the working class, whether his forum is television or cinema. This recalls material covered in *V.* and its coverage of the miner's strike, during which *V.* was composed (Dyer, 1987, 63). We soon are given proof of Harrison's stance, as the next character we are introduced to is the Old Man (Walter Sparrow) who curses Michael Heseltine (a Tory MP that supported the closing of the pits) in the second scene of the film. Prometheus, with his likeness' right arm outstretched in the film, 'has come to embody the tyrannically restrained champion of the downtrodden and oppressed' (Harrison, 1998, viii).

But mostly, *Prometheus* hearkens to another theme covered in Harrison's controversial 'four letter TV poem' (Deans and Jenkins, 1987, 40), in that it involves a child's relationship with his working class parents, who he feels he is intellectually eclipsing through his education. This is very similar to a major theme of *V.* (and much of Harrison's other poetry), described by Hugh Hebert in *The Guardian* (17<sup>th</sup> October, 1987) as 'a long, meditative, sometimes quite moving piece about the poet's relationship to his dead parents, about the way his work with words relates to his father's work as a baker' (49). In *Prometheus*, a young Boy named Jack (Jonathan Waistnidge) protests against his Dad's (Steve Huison) angry resentment towards his assigned homework, which is to read the Greek myth about the Titan who stole fire from the gods for the

good of mankind. Jack's father, upset about losing his job as a miner, ends up throwing pages of the book on the fire, and 'clouts' his son on the head. Jack flees his home and his father, and his Mam (Fern Smith) chases after him. Holmes confirms the personal involvement Harrison has with these characters by stating that the character of the Boy is 'really Tony as a child' and the Boy does 'what Tony himself did as a young boy, when he studied classics' (287).

In these introductory sequences, conversations between Jack and his miner Dad and the Old Man (also known as Grandad) and his wife (Grandma) are the only examples of prosaic dialogue that take place in the film. The only poetry present before the scene of the familial squabble, twelve minutes into the film, is the opening quatrain by Hermes and the Boy's reading of his homework, excerpts from *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus. After Hermes' silver statue appears near the colliery, where the boy has fled and in which his father works (this day being his last), the rest of the major dialogue in the film is in verse couplets, rhymed *aabb*. It is as if Hermes, as he points his caduceus (a rod with an emblem at the end) enchants the characters of the film with the ability (or curse) to speak consistently in rhyming poetic lines. Hermes' role is a manifold one, since not only does he observe and comment on the other figures in the film, but he also speaks to the camera, explaining his motives and 'narrating'. He also plays the 'Tallyman' of the colliery, whom the miners all detest and slander as they walk past him in an early scene, and he plays other brief roles in working environments. At times his complicated and erudite narration serves to indeed clarify, but at others Hermes simply does not have enough time to express what are complex ideas, borne from a wide range of inspiration. One must study Hermes' lines a few times to absorb all aspects of their meaning.

Those familiar with Harrison's work are at a great advantage over those who are not when watching this film. Within the first twenty minutes, *Prometheus* contains certain images and subjects that are familiar in the poet's work. There is a brass band, marching down the street to commemorate the pit's last day as a serviceable industrial site; this recalls the makeshift band

marching near the conclusion of 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan', which also had an industrial inspiration at its heart. *Prometheus* also uses the exact same motif of a reflection in the bell of a brass tuba. Another example of a familiar subject is touched upon when Hermes refers to pronunciation in his fourth speech:

And why, you might ask, should gods come  
into this world of 'Ee-by-gum'?  
Those dropped aitches help disguise  
the fact I've flown down from the skies.

Hermes' speech is appropriate since it explains how he, as a god, has falsified his true nature in front of the humans ('and, Zeus help me, speaking *prose!* / I mean an immortal, Hermes, me, / not spouting proper poetry!'). Yet it also recalls Harrison's concerns with proper enunciation, covered in 'The Big H', V., and many of his poems, like 'Them & [uz]' and 'The Queen's English'.<sup>24</sup>

Harrison studied classics and is a notable translator, producer and scholar of Greek drama and myth, so this aspect of his work and life is inherent in the very choice for the subject matter.

These themes become particularly recognisable after studying Harrison's poetic and filmic work in any amount of detail, and with them are delivered a series of the poet's principle messages, many of which I have attempted to discuss in this thesis.

Beautifully shot by Alistair Cameron, this film contains stunning landscape cinematography, as well as exquisitely detailed shots of some of the most impressive sculpture in Europe. Close-ups and tracking shots of statues of Zeus, his eagle (that came every day to gouge out Prometheus' liver while he was chained to a rock) and of various locations in Eastern Europe are consistently visually arresting.<sup>25</sup> Much like some of the examples studied in the 'film-poem protocol' above, the images are steadily tracked in many cases to match the iambic tetrameter of Harrison's unfailing couplets. However, *Prometheus* also contains scenes that are surprisingly static, and may seem boring in a prosaic film. There are frequent shots of characters speaking to

the camera in still medium or long shots, and in these instances the shot duration is uncommonly long by modern films' standards. Yet, because the figures are speaking poetry, the length of the shots only becomes noticeable after an especially long lingering of the camera. The rhythm of the lyrics distracts us from the more practical side of observation, and the poetry enables us to understand and accept another uncommon element present in this film: the amount of shots, especially close-ups, that lack dialogue. There are some sequences in this film that are unaccompanied by any form of speech, whether poetry or prose, and they are filled with diverse images. For example, in the scene mentioned above, where Hermes' statue appears at the colliery, there are only three lines of incidental speech during five minutes of a rather important scene, which the poetry that follows will attempt to 'justify'. This happens occasionally in this film; the verse explains the purpose of the previous image instead of appearing at the same time. This differs from the previous film-poems of Harrison, in which the poetry most always comments on the images as they appear. In explanation, Holmes claims that some of the poem 'was written before it was filmed', so 'an enormous amount [of the screenplay] is predetermined because it is speech, either to camera or to other characters' (289). We see elongated scenes without any dialogue throughout the film, such as when the thirty-foot tall statue of Prometheus travels through Germany after being formed from the miners' bodies or during the strangely placed 'pilgrim scene' involving a Jewish man lighting a candle at Auschwitz.<sup>26</sup> Most often, the verse still comments on activity onscreen as it happens, especially in the shape of poetic dialogue that the characters speak.

In a revolutionary interpretation of verse's presence in film, some of the characters speak poetry about the process of rhyming, as they find themselves performing and matching speech with rhyme. Roughly forty minutes into the film, the miners discover that they cannot speak normal sentences unless they rhyme and contain similar rhythm:

MINER 1

Have you noticed summat?

MINER 2

What?

MINER 1

Every time

we make a sentence it ends up wi' a rhyme!

MINER 3

I'm not joining in, I'm not, old son.

MINER 5

Except someone'll complete what you've begun!

...

MINER 1

An t'barmiest thing of all's like when

we talk in bloody rhyme like I did then.

I don't like it. It's more than bloody queer

spouting bloody poetry like King Lear.

The Yorkshire dialect that is included in the poetic speech of the characters, especially the miners and the Old Man, makes for a very convincing and genuine enchantment. It proves that these people, who are clearly working-class and stereotypically not interested in such art, are obviously not in control of their own speech, or lives. Then again, Holmes claims that:

There is not much character interaction in *Prometheus*, mostly it is a collection of monologues, with different characters musing on their own lives, or discussing the state of the world, either with the camera, addressing the camera, or almost to themselves (289).

Even though this is probably true for the most part, the film still greatly differs from the poet's previous efforts, since it is performed instead of narrated, a work of virtual fiction rather than a documentary or docu-drama.

Another sophisticated device Harrison weaves into his film in the use of a film-within-a-film. As the Old Man defiantly smokes a cigarette in a disused movie house, Hermes appears to him on the grimy screen in front of him, regarding him condescendingly and reacting to his protests. Hermes speaks to both him and us, and whenever he is shown on the second screen, in a shot over the shoulder of the Old Man, he is portrayed in black and white. The use of the derelict cinema provides yet another level to an already complicated film, and allows the poetry to be directed at both the Old Man and the viewer.

*Prometheus* is visually shocking and powerful, which relates to one more tool that is harboured by the genre. Recall Symes' claim that film-poems have the ability to show people 'uncomfortable things without having them turn away' (1991, 387). *Prometheus* contains some disturbing images of a woman, Mam/Io, treated like a cow in an abattoir (and therefore killed). Most unsettling is that the film ends without any clear hope for future peace, liberation or acceptance of a conquest over fire or overrule. In the last five minutes of the film, all of its principal characters die, except Jack. Hermes, who has taken on the role of the 'enemy of the people' throughout the film, fakes his death, causing the Old Man to inadvertently burn down the picture house he sits in. The fire he 'sets' on the screen in front of him spreads to destroy the statue of Prometheus and the Daughters of Ocean, who have also travelled throughout Europe on Hermes' quest. The sudden, sadistic but ambiguous ending of the film should stun audiences, represented by the old man in the cinema seat. 'Grandad' represents Harrison as an old man himself (Holmes, 293), who laments the demise of socialism as he passes away with a final puff of cigarette smoke. Hermes and Zeus seem to triumph, because, even though Hermes does not steal fire back for the good of only Olympus:



Zeus particularly glorifies in fiery destruction and smoky pollution, and Mankind's slower death by poisoning the earth with factories fuelled by Promethean power (Harrison, 1998, xvii).

Harrison invokes this ironic twist to the benefits afforded to man by Prometheus' gift, and the smoky landscapes we have been watching throughout the film seem all the more terrible.

Some critics have interpreted *Prometheus* as a defence of smoking, which is by far not the case. In an article from the 8<sup>th</sup> November, 1998 issue of *The Sunday Times*, John Harlow describes the film unilaterally, considering only the scene where the Old Man asks the public to light up with him, and not the negative aspects of smoking that his character portrays. His smoking is only a metaphor for the initial thieving of the flame from the gods, which Prometheus, according to the myth, hid in a 'fennel stalk' (Paddington, 1998, 25). Though there is some praise of the allure and taste of cigarettes and tobacco in the film-poem ('I'd love to rerun every bit / of bloody film where fags get lit'), there is much more condemnation of the act of smoking. The Old Man, for one, dies after an onscreen existence of obviously painful hacking and wheezing, and his grimy, unhealthy appearance, sitting alone in a derelict cinema amidst a sea of burnt out stubs, is not romantic or appealing. Critics such as Harlow have clearly 'missed the point' (Paddington, 23). The ancient Grandad yet manages a few pro-smoking statements, though they are clouded with sorrow and guilt ('though I know I'm bloody croaking, / the lifelong joy I've had from smoking'). The point of his carcinogenic habit, however, is more about the art of defiance, or the very tradition of defiance (smoking in a cinema), than it is about defending smoking itself. His tiny rebellion is clearly related to the initial theft of fire; it is a microcosm of the myth and an inspiration for the poetic argument that takes place between himself and Hermes for most of the film. Fittingly, the Old Man's face is superimposed with the face of the statue of Prometheus, and, as the screenplay notes, he has become an 'aspect of Prometheus' (Harrison, 1997, 123) by the end of his character's life.

Harrison's introduction to the screenplay ('Fire and Poetry', 1998) discusses his inspirations for the film, which first outline his initial poetic musings as a child in front of the fire (vii). In true Harrisonian style, the poet tracks his interest in fire, in the aesthetic beauty of light raging in a dark place, to the light of the cinema screen in a darkened theatre.<sup>27</sup> His project is a fusion of two of his great 'obsessions' (fire and poetry), his messages conveyed through a highly symbolic, multifarious medium. A good summary to Harrison's lifelong research is a couplet spoken by the Old Man, just before he expires, 'Fire and poetry, two great powers / That mek the so-called gods' world OURS!'. Though *Prometheus* ends on a bleak note, with Jack running home past the collapsing cooling towers of the colliery, Harrison tells us, at the conclusion of his preface to the screenplay, that 'poetry rises out of its own ashes and continues its ancient dream in front of fire' (xxix). Fire, thought by many to be the inspiration behind man's capability for inner thought, the source of all pondering and the ultimate muse, is thwarted with the closing of the mine, but retains a degree of hope in the shape of a fire-engine obsessed boy.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.9 Conclusions about the Harrisonian Film Poem

Though there is not a great amount of disturbing material in 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' or *Prometheus*, many film-poems can justifiably contain gruesome or shocking imagery, since viewers are drawn to the rhythm of the verse, expecting rhyme and matching image. With film-poems, people are consistently compelled to watch still more. If a way to spark the interest of the public masses can be discovered, in order to allow this division of film and poetry to reach its full potential, we could be studying the ancestors of a future visual and lyrical phenomenon. Harrison's contribution to the genre has been definitive and according to Holmes, complete, since Harrison 'keeps on saying he's never going to make another one' (302). After working with Harrison on a number of productions, and when asked what his definition of a film-poem is, Holmes responded by saying that it is:

Complete integration of the verse with the film process. Either can come first, or they can both spring spontaneously to life at the same time (290).

Harrison's poetic ability to inspire those filmmakers around him with the realisation of the similarities between poetry's craft and the production of a film is a benchmark in the world of art today. He is 'in complete command of the medium' (Holmes, 290) and has reached a pinnacle with his feature-length work. His discoveries extend from the understanding that 'poetry could enter the world of people in documentary situations' to the realisation that poetry can also be utilised to convey character motivation and thought (Harrison, 1998, xxiii). Other filmmakers will presumably learn from his substantial material and further develop poetry and film's relationship in the Harrisonian ideal, and/or beyond it.

Yet, Harrison obviously reconsidered *Prometheus* as his final film-poem project. In March of 2002, Harrison's latest film-poem, 'Crossings', was broadcast. It is shorter than any of his past projects, with a running time close to twenty minutes. A collaboration with *South Bank Show* director David Thomas, it is a modern commentary on the journey of the overnight mail train and a fitting conclusion to this chapter and entire study, linking Harrison's groundbreaking film career with arguably the most influential work of film and poetry. Regarding the impact of *Night Mail* (1936), Harrison states:

I saw *Night Mail* when I was in my late teens, I think, and for me it was important because it was the first time I'd ever heard poetry and film together. That for me was unique and it stayed in my mind since I saw it, always thinking I would like to do that... Verse and film seemed to be uniquely related.<sup>29</sup>

In the prelude to 'Crossings', Harrison describes his technique in making film-poems and its differences from Auden's work, which was set to a film that was already cut. 'Part Two' of the programme, almost entirely consisting of Harrison's discussion, outlines the process of Harrison's construction, and highlights the ease with which the poet can now speak into a microphone in the

editing suite while editor Tony Webb runs images. Harrison is pictured sitting alongside Webb, watching the monitor and deciding 'if shots need extending, some other image needs to come in, [or] a cut needs to come on the rhyme' and so forth. Harrison 'plays around endlessly' with the combinations of his words and images, and sometimes writes more verse in the suite.

When Harrison describes how he approaches researching his subject, he talks of a 'hunt for images' that is undertaken with each new film. He 'never has a script' and waits until he 'sees something and [his] hair stands on end'. In the discussions within this chapter, Harrison must have seen many objects and items that made such an impression, like the items on the market tables in Greece or Kazakhstan, or the cooling towers in Sheffield that were used to illustrate the destruction of the Promethean collieries. Harrison speaks of the process as follows, in the most illuminating discussion of his work habits to date:

I will go to the places. I will think about the subject. I will think about the visual imageries. Then we'll shoot but I don't write a poem and then send it out to a crew to illustrate it. I never have a script. The whole process is organic from the beginning. I actually like the sense of creative serendipity, this ability to find link between things suddenly. It's a kind of creative chaos. But I'm collecting images that I like ... I'm collecting a ragbag of things I feel might be useful, guided by the sound, guided by the rhythm, guided by the visual world we're exposed to ... It's like Zen somehow; you just commit yourself to being open to find things.

In Harrison's reconnaissance for the 'Crossings' project, he experienced many moments of 'serendipity' and the sudden awareness of links. For one, in the post office, Harrison particularly notes his coming across the button marked 'Culler', which rejects inferior material from better quality post and separates it from the masses. He immediately linked this with the farm animals culled from the countryside during 2001's foot-and-mouth crisis in Britain, since the mail train travels through much of the land the animals inhabit. Another example is his discovery of the

Royal Mail's nickname for the night train, the 'Lady in Red', and Harrison terms the train and its weighty cargo 'an instrument of fate'. He links the red culling button with the red train with, 'the button's the shade of the shiny new livery / of the lady in red, who awaits their delivery'.

'Crossings' seeks to make the mail train's delivery process intensely personal, by inventing individual situations and systematically commenting on them. Harrison's couplets cover many people's plights, from a homeless boy (Angus) living in a cardboard box under a train trestle (there is a letter slot cut in the box's side) to a woman waiting at a railroad crossing who discusses her anxiety about receiving the results of her HIV test on her mobile phone. The verse is narrated by Harrison at times, in his familiar voice-over, and at other times recited by actors, similar to those in *Prometheus* or Armitage's 'Killing Time'. The poetry is skilfully balanced in this work, which contains no prose, but incorporates almost all of the dynamics Harrison has previously used. There are examples of verses being finished from his voice-over by actors onscreen. There are specific representative characters for Harrison's themes, and there are other voices that sometimes interrupt Harrison's, like the heavily accented voice that is meant to be that of one of the late-night postal workers, who comments on her job sorting the mail. Harrison's verse rapidly comments on various lifestyles for Britons, from clubbing women to dog-betting old age pensioners, as the train rumbles through the country from London to Scotland. *Guardian* reporter Peter Lennon writes:

Harrison does not miss the pain and panic a letter can create: "...in one of those sacks/ is a thin little letter with the weight of an axe." This refers to an HIV diagnosis. In fact, he has a more intimate relationship with the material throughout (2002, 4).

Harrison's train touches people's lives in the ways Auden's might have if he was given the free will to write verse for longer portions of the original film. In his introduction to the piece, Harrison describes his motivation for writing the new verse, which often cites Auden's within his own:

That wonderful image where a 'jug in a bedroom gently shakes': we don't see that, that's only in the words. You don't have to see it, because the word says everything. But I wanted to see some of that life, of the jug gently shaking, and the people ... I hope I can find people, faces, expecting their mail, worrying about their mail, longing to hear from a lover, fearful to hear from a creditor.

'Crossings' is a film about the train's crossings, but also about the lives it crosses every time it makes its journey; 'you cross in time', says Harrison, 'you cross bridges and you cross between individuals' (Lennon, 4).

While the original *Night Mail* ends with a musical flourish and a glorification of the postal service's indispensability ('for who can bear to feel himself forgotten'), Harrison's ends with a sense of foreboding. Over an edited montage of shots of letters and envelopes sliding through slots, Harrison slowly states, 'Millions of letters through Great Britain's doors, / Panic, pain, pleasure: which will be yours?' The cacophonous music by Richard Blackford that accompanies Harrison's lines, and entire piece, is reminiscent of that used in 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' in that it intervenes often suddenly and is almost industrial. The final lines, however, are stated over silence, as a letter falls over the lens of the camera. Cut to black.

The poet's latest piece is certainly a step taken forward, using new recording techniques to match verse and image, but it is also a testament to Harrison's work as well as Auden's, merging so many of the qualities of his previous film-poems from the last twenty years. Lawrence Sail called *Night Mail* Harrison's 'ghost train' in his early review of his film-poems (1991); Harrison has revisited those ghosts with a learned style. Symes called Harrison Auden's 'successor' in 1995 (xxiii), and now there is a direct link with Auden to prove such a claim. To conclude this discussion of Harrison's material, I again quote Harrison at length, on the subject of the selection of his language, from the prelude to 'Crossings':

My feeling about the kind of language that I've developed for film poetry is that you're always aware that you have to keep interest. Therefore, you can't bunch your imagery because you have a lot of imagery on the screen. You've got to be fairly clear; accessible, but you have to make your verse work in a different way than it would if it were simply designed for the page, where *it* does all the work. Here, you're writing with film in order to create ... a *film-poem*. So you've got to always leave space for the power of the imagery; just as you have to allow room for music to take words and allow it to make them into this third creation, which is neither music nor poetry.

Film-poems cannot be made using language or poetry that can appear on the page as easily. They are a specific breed of artistic creation. Harrison's contributions to the welding of film and poetry are highly influential and world-famous. His are a large portion of the existent 'verses in the celluloid'.

## CONCLUSION

Modern poetry has been deeply influenced by film. Modern film has not sufficiently returned the compliment.

- James Broughton, 1952, 126

Perhaps the new digital editing has made it possible to experiment much more with the relations between poetry and film.

- Tony Harrison, 1998, xxiv

### The Present State of the 'Evolution': Notes for the Future of Film and Poetry

Poetic film and the film-poets, as well as the avant-garde world of film, were contributors to the modern-day interpretation of the film-poem in all of its forms. Tony Harrison's preface to his *Prometheus* script lists some of the poetic and cinematic movements that have played an integral part in the formation and development of his work. In the 1990s Harrison's work continued to flourish, while producer/director Peter Symes devised the series *Words on Film*, a collection of six film-poems that are the most closely adherent, in terms of the Harrisonian definition of the film-poem, to a true collaboration of poet and film-maker. Various other projects have been significant in this phase (roughly from 1986-1993), the closest thing to a heyday the film-poem movement can claim, until Harrison's epic feature-length *Prometheus* (1998) came into the spotlight. This film is the bridge to future feature-length film-poems, and with the advent of 2002's 'Crossings', is apparently an influence on poetry's appearance on television as well.

I wish to state that I will not draw any major conclusions regarding a definitive and permanent theory about the nature of film and poetry. The firmest conclusion I can make about their relationship is that it is an uncertain one, full of corollaries and extenuating circumstances



and misused or manipulated examples. But there is a distinction that I sought to have clearly outlined in the second chapter of this work, in that there is a difference between 'poetry' and the 'poetic' in cinema. To restate, there is a language of cinema that is called 'poetry' by some and that involves the capturing of an essence, a quality, a degree of artfulness with the camera, even if it is shooting, or especially if it is shooting, a random everyday item. The filmmaker himself determines this area of poetry; it depends on his/her skill, perception and appreciation for such characteristics. The observations of that poetry, in fact the nature of a poetic quality to the overall finished film, is not a mechanism that a filmmaker or poet can track or insert into his work. That is the work of the audience, who must be receptive enough to feel that essence, to detect its split from a mainstream expressiveness. That is the nature of the 'poetic': to infect the viewer with a sense of something quite different from what they are used to, to defamiliarise the common. Viktor Shklovsky's work is here relevant, whereas he discusses the mutual abilities of both cinema and poetry to transform the meaning of everyday objects by way of their presentation to an audience. It is the captured, illustrated ambiguity within an object or subject that makes its image poetic (1927, 88).

There is a further discrepancy in the use of the term 'film poem' or 'film-poem' as I have also demonstrated. The film-poem or film/poem of Tony Harrison and Peter Symes is one that heavily involves both filmmaker and poet in most aspects of film production; it is a simultaneous collaboration of writing, shooting and cutting. The film poems of Peter Todd's touring programmes are those that are linked to the avant-garde arena of cinema, indefinable themselves but very much identifiable to some. They are films that might contain some verse, but which mainly depict a theme or story through a cinematically metaphorical means, using images as

those metaphors, using cinematic devices as poetic devices, using symbolism itself in whatever capacity it needs to do so.

In 1952, poet and filmmaker James Broughton, himself a director of the 'Todd-ian' film poem, devised an interesting and playful manifesto called 'Odd Birds in the Aviary: Some Notes on Poetry and Film'. The list is dense, sweeping, and covers many aspects of poetry and film, but there are some points that Broughton makes which are accurate and poetic in their own right. His work seeks to clarify but in reality it probably mystifies and makes the idea of poetry in film seem grandiose. His ideas of poetry in cinema are likened to 'the essence of experience... for how we really feel and dream' (126). He states:

A poem is a film.

A poem is intended to be looked at, and to be heard

It is both image and language, vision and music.

It has movement and form, a progression and a meaning.

And it is to be remembered, and looked at again (126).

Though Broughton's demands are intense and overwhelming, they are also in alignment with many of the opinions of Pasolini and Cocteau, with the 'Montage' writers and with film-poets today, especially in terms of film-poems or film poems needing repeated attention. Published in *Sight and Sound*, this piece is a popular reference for those concerned with film and poetry.

Not everyone agrees that poetry and film are indeed notably synonymous. In an explanation of Shklovsky's work, critic F.W. Galan (who specialises in Formalist theory) states that:

There is nothing in the filmic chain that corresponds to stresses, syllables or word boundaries - or indeed to words themselves. Consequently, cinematic rhythm, the film's metrical course, is bound to remain broad, indistinct, unmeasurable (1984, 101).

Galan's claim seems to ignore the steps taken by Auden in his matching verse with image, timed with a stopwatch in those early days. I would argue that certain kinds of film cuts or editing techniques, like the fade or 'whitewash', can correspond to stresses, that cinematic rhythm can be measured and matched by a measurable poetic rhythm, as Harrison has demonstrated with his film-poems, and that words themselves can find their visual equivalent in appropriate, corresponding individual shots. Galan's points are valid if one chooses to look at the cinema in terms of a whole medium, an entity that is purely visual and technical, but this is probably not an open-minded approach.

In spite of certain misgivings, poetry is becoming a widely used medium in today's media. It was easier to keep up with the developments in film and poetry, with the events surrounding their intersection and with the films reputed to contain a poetic element, for example, when I began this study in 1997. But in the last three to four years poetry has flourished in ways that are difficult to keep abreast of. Movements of film and poetry are emerging, especially in America, where a 'Cine-Poetry' Festival happens every year in San Francisco, initialised by poet and filmmaker Herman Berlandt. The Festival is dedicated to showing the most poetic of new avant-garde films, and any material that clearly links the fields together. The Festival has also recently begun a tour, and seeks institutionalising in other cities as well, according to periodic emails from one of the movement's organisers, George Aguilar.

Yet again, poetry is not a new development in cinema. It is consistently treated as such because its inclusion is not regularity, but is repeatedly viewed as a special element to a production. While it *is* indeed a special element, poetry's attempt to gain the favour of the mass public might lie in the endeavour to get the common person to accept its presence and acknowledge its obvious popularity. The number one box office hit in the spring of 2001, and

indeed for all time for British films, was *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Maguire), based on the personal-journal-structured novel by Helen Fielding. Even in this comedy, starring Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant and Colin Firth, there is poetry, with Grant quoting lines by Keats just before he falls headfirst into a lake. It is not as noticeable or perpetual as Harrison's original verse, but it is present, and directors seem no longer 'frightened of poetry', as Spanish director Victor Erice said in an interview with *The Guardian* (1<sup>st</sup> April, 1993, quoted in Harrison, 1998, xxv). Modern films now include poetry without hesitation, from comedies like *Maybe Baby* (Elton, 2000) and *Patch Adams* (Shadyac, 1998) to romantic dramas like *Il Postino* (Radford, 1994) to war films like *Hamburger Hill* (Irvin, 1987).

Poetry is also appearing more often in special programmes to celebrate national affairs. In 2000, the Royal Mail, to commemorate the advent of the next millenium, commissioned twelve poets, one for each month, to write verse that celebrated the particular qualities associated with each month of the year. In tandem with the project are twelve poetry films made with school children across the UK. The one-minute films, simply constructed, are based on original verse by the children and the poets and on the locations selected for the Millenium Stamps by the Royal Mail. I was able to attend London's Royal Festival Hall's Poetry International Festival, 6-14 Oct 2000, where the films were exhibited. The programme was called 'Shooting the Messenger: Poetry on Film' and some of the films were reminiscent of Len Lye's work, while others were unfortunately incomprehensible. It was an ambitious project, and probably a valuable, fun experience for the children involved. Among the poets working with the children were Matthew Fitt and Anton Hecht, and Hecht has contributed to some of the film poems in Todd's last touring programme (2000) as well. The Festival also included Tom Phillips' lecture on 'Animating Dante'

and a lecture by film director Anthony Minghella ('Poetry and Film'), which I discuss below.

Poetry, it seems safe to say, is happening in films all around us.

But poetry on television is still not as widespread. Harrison does not have a regular programme dedicated to showing film-poems and poetry still only rarely appears in prime time. Harrison's 'Crossings' was broadcast at 10:45 on ITV on a Sunday evening, albeit versus 'The X-Files' on BBC1, but still was surely not a top ratings-grabber. Daisy Goodwin, a BBC editor and the 'organiser of the Nation's Favourite Poem Poll' observes that poetry is still lacking in its presentation on TV:

Television is a brash medium and if it's going to work it can't do poetry in hushed tones...If poetry is to appear on television at all, and I passionately believe that it should, it needs to show that it has a popular following (1996, 39).

This is a valid point, and Goodwin explains that poetry should move beyond the conventional 'poetry performances' that most people think about when they consider poetry on television, which is admittedly unresourceful. Film-poems are a hopeful segue into an area of accessibility, with promises of further development after works like 'Killing Time', Armitage's 'Millenium poem', reached many viewers. Prior to Goodwin, Robert Hanks, quoting publicist Max Clifford, pointed out some of the problems with poetry's image as well, on National Poetry Day in 1994:

Most men, if you're talking about the masses, think you'd have to be either gay or extremely effeminate to write poetry. So you've got to get over these mis-conceptions and give people a popular hero they can associate with (23).

This 'hero' still waits an unveiling, but Armitage could be a likely candidate, if there needs to be one. If his poems preserve their brash, bold tone, if they continue to face pressing and popular

issues (and if his police work, in a rougher area of England, is popularised) perhaps the masses might tune in.

Yet, Armitage himself has expressed misgivings about certain poetic intersections with film:

But far and away the worst flicks are those that dabble in poetry, with poetry 'cast' in the same way an actor is, usually in a serious or sensitive role. Recent culprits, among many, are the wretched *Dead Poets' Society* and the truly crummy *Tom and Viv*. Add to this most actors' apparent mission in life is to murder poetry by performing it when it only need be said, and the picture is a bleak one. Even the rendition of Auden's 'Funeral Blues', recited during *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, was, to be honest, ordinary, but presumably revived such unstoppable praise because of the lack of decent competition.

Film of the book - ho hum. Film of a book about poets - shudder (1998, 83-4).

Armitage makes some valid points (and a 'film of a book about poets' is a strange proposition) but poetry needs to 'break out of the ghetto' (Hanks, 23), and move into the mainframe of media broadcasting. Everyone usually likes music in some form, and the film-poem's construction is not unlike some conceptual music videos, which are very popular with the masses indeed. Poetry should imitate the success of that medium, where words and music often come together to a powerful effect, and weave itself into the popular realm of television with more regularity.

More and more directors in film are becoming interested in poetry, like Oscar-winning director and 'poetry fan' Anthony Minghella [*The English Patient* (1996), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999)]. Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1991) employs Pablo Neruda's poetry (as did *Il Postino* in 1994) and the director feels that poetry and cinema 'are almost the same thing' (2000). In Minghella's 2000 lecture on 'Poetry and Film', he states that poems describe images, which are clearly styles of cinematography, like 'location shots, close-ups, developing shots,

tracking shots and overhead shots'. He discusses their similarities, again recalling Pasolini, to dreams, 'in the realm of mysteries and secrets'. Minghella feels that poetry and film are obvious comparisons, and that the links between them have only begun to be discovered. Yet he still admits that 'the worst thing one can say to get funding for a film in the USA are the words "art film"'. In that case, poetry has not entirely escaped the 'ghetto' yet.

Indeed poems describe images similar to cinematic signs. The subject matter of poetry is completely reliant on imagery. However, what of poetry that is inspired by the world of cinema? This is another link between film and poetry not fully covered in this thesis: the poetry that exists about films and film stars. French and Wlaschin's *The Faber Book of Movie Verse* (1993), *The Picture Dancing on a Screen* (ed. Anthony Slide, 1988), and *Lights, Camera, Poetry!: American Movie Poems, the First Hundred Years* (ed. Jason Shinder, 1996) are all books specifically containing verse inspired by hundreds of films and movie icons. From Robert Frost to e. e. cummings, from Carol Ann Duffy to Allen Ginsberg, poets have composed poems based on their experiences with the big screen. I shall close this thesis with the final stanza from a poem, included in French and Wlaschin's anthology, by Douglas Dunn: 'I Am a Cameraman' (386-7). It is a humble admittance to the struggling reputation poetry still maintains on the screen. Poetry in film may be progressing, blossoming like it has never blossomed before, but it still has a long way to go.

Life flickers on the frame like beautiful hummingbirds.

That is the film that always comes out blank.

The painting the artist can't get shapes to fit.

The poem that shrugs off every word you try.

The music no one has ever heard.

ENDNOTES: INTRODUCTION (pp. 1-11)

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from an online review of *The Monkey's Mask*, 4 Aug 2001.

<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/monkeys\\_mask\\_2001\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/monkeys_mask_2001_review.shtml)>

<sup>2</sup> From my interview with Holmes (1998), Appendix B of this thesis, pg. 295.

<sup>3</sup> The brochure is called 'Cross-Cuts' and was released in conjunction with the 'Literature Education Programme' at the South Bank Centre in London. The Poetry International Festival for that year was devoted to a study of the film-poem, and Peter Symes contributed to that issue, incorporating his essay from the introduction to his collection of *Words on Film* scripts, with new critical material. The pamphlet's articles, by a host of authors, ask many questions about the existence and definition of the film-poem.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Richard Eyre's short piece in Tony Harrison's *V.* (the 'New Edition: with Press Articles', 1989, pp. 37-38) and almost all of Peter Symes' accounts, which are listed in my bibliography, as well as Harrison's preface to the screenplay of his *Prometheus* (1998), pp. xxviii-xxix.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B, 'An Interview with Andrew Holmes' for a hint at difficulties of working with Harrison, as well as Andrée Molyneux's piece in Bloodaxe's anthology on Harrison (1991), 'Cutting His Teeth: working with Tony Harrison on *Arctic Paradise* and *The Big H* (pp. 367-376).

<sup>6</sup> Ron Shelton, for example, uses poetry to a very successful extent in *Bull Durham* (1988) but never again approached its incorporation in future work to date.



## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER ONE (pp. 12-65)

<sup>1</sup> 'Poetic film' has had much more written about it as a phenomenon. For the most thorough consideration of poetic film in this thesis, see Chapter Two, "The Evolution, or 'Pre-history' of the Film-Poem", throughout Section 2.5.

<sup>2</sup> I do not suggest that each example of a poem in a film requires a viewer to research and read that poem on its own each time. My subsequent study of Rossetti's poem is an exercise meant to shed light on the possibilities intrinsic in the filmic technique of citing poetry. Repeated readings are certainly not the norm, nor expected from an average viewer.

<sup>3</sup> This version of the poem is taken from Rossetti's *Selected Poems*. Ed. and introduction by C. H. Sisson. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pg. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Spillane's novel *Kiss Me Deadly* was published in paperback format in 1952.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Meeker said his lines incorrectly and he should have said 'But if *it's* the thought it's dead because she's dead', but the filmmakers obviously preserved this take.

<sup>6</sup> These lines are taken from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass: The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*. Reader's Edition. Ed. by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (London: University of London Press, 1965). It contains the poem in its original complete form. In some editions, especially *Everyman* editions of Whitman's verse, some of the lines from 'I Sing the Body Electric', among other poems, are omitted, presumably because of their sexually graphic nature.

<sup>7</sup> These lines are the 55<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', and Annie is uncharacteristically unsure of the author of the lines. She says she gets Gray mixed up with another poet, her first uncertain quotation in the film. It is perhaps interesting, but not particularly relevant, that this confusion happens after she gets together with Crash, the man she really wanted throughout the film.

<sup>8</sup> This is only the case if a poem used in a film is not one that is particularly well known, since when a film uses a famous piece, it would generally be inviting much more criticism upon itself. This is obviously because people have their own sets of images attached to poems, and a romantic or specific image of certain poets, and poems that are selected for use in a film will have specific images chosen to accompany them, robbing the viewer of his or her previously self-invented mental visualisation of the poem and its verses. This continues to be one of the most popular criticisms of the adaptation of poetry to works of film.

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, the character of Miss Giddens remains famously anonymous in James' novel. She is simply known as 'the governess'.

<sup>10</sup> This scene occurs approximately 43 minutes into the film. The author of the poem is William Archibald, who co-wrote the screenplay with Truman Capote. Archibald also wrote a play of the same name (performed on Broadway in 1950), from which the screenplay for this film is 'partly culled'. The poem is lifted from that play, adapted for the screen (Chase, 1998, 5).

<sup>11</sup> In terms of music that is present in films, where the lyrics are important or at least significant to plot or character development, we can usually assume that the same kind of rationale can be applied to films of this type as I have used in this thesis. Song lyrics on their own, read or reiterated in a film, can presumably be treated in the same way as poetry in film, with a few exceptions. However, when music is involved as well, as in *Say Anything...* (Crowe, 1989) and its pivotal use of Peter Gabriel's 'In Your Eyes', a completely different, and much more obvious dynamic is at work. Music has an audible advantage in stirring emotions and communicating feelings; poetry seeks to accomplish this with a natural musicality to it, and through careful combinations of words.

<sup>12</sup> Jo offers a clarification of the lines, and her explanation provides some insight to her character, which up to this point had been frivolous and silly. She says, 'Basically the poem says that love binds us together and we're like, totally in sync, but it's a drag because circumstances keep us apart'. While she says these words, the camera cuts to Eliza sitting across the table from her, looking increasingly more uncomfortable and nervous as the possible realities of this letter, if it was indeed addressed to Louis, hit home.

<sup>13</sup> Carl inaccurately states that Marvell (1621-1678) is a predecessor of Shakespeare, who died in 1616.

<sup>14</sup> In early June, 2001, the actress Kelly McGillis appeared on *This Morning* with Richard Madely and Judy Finnegan, on which she claimed that the film was all in verse. On the Internet, at <[http://www.asauthors.org/web\\_of\\_poets/Porter/poems/mask100.html](http://www.asauthors.org/web_of_poets/Porter/poems/mask100.html)>, there is a website about the film and its genesis.

<sup>15</sup> Betjeman's film-poems are studied in Chapter Two, Section 2.4 of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> In another segment of the film, Aldrich's work is particularly remembered, since Mickey's poems are closely analysed in a desperate search for more clues.

## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER TWO (pp. 66-118)

<sup>1</sup> This quote is from a letter to William Allingham, dated January, 1855, and appears in Bernard Richards' article 'Why are the images never appropriate all the way through?' *Listener* 115 (1986): 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the inclusion of poetry in film studied in this chapter does not only consider documentary film.

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps difficult to imagine in the modern-day world of video, but once films had played in theatres in the first days of cinema, they were almost impossible to view again. Many films ran for no more than a week, and once that period was over, the film was retired and stored away. Many historians of film have written on the change in the mindset of the present generations of cinemagoers, who now know that they will not have missed the film forever if they do not go to see it while it is on general cinema release. Richard Maltby quotes an early film poster for *Chang* (1927): 'See it today, tomorrow and Thursday. Then *Chang* will be gone forever!!' (1996, 147).

<sup>4</sup> I will study some important Harrisonian 'tableaus' throughout Chapter Four of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Stephenson and Debrix cite a story of the effects of the first close-ups used in a film (a comedy by Griffith which is unspecified) on a well-educated Siberian girl visiting Moscow. She said that she thought the first film she had ever seen in her life was horrifying, because 'human beings were torn to pieces, the heads thrown one way and the bodies the other'. They go on to say that 'when Griffith showed the first close-ups, and a huge severed head smiled at the audience, there was panic in the auditorium' (65).

<sup>6</sup> Griffith is also listed as a 'supervisor' on *Enoch Arden's* credits (<<http://www.imdb.com>>). It is 40 minutes, or four reels, in length.

<sup>7</sup> I do not consider this film as a self-contained film-poem because it is more loosely based on the poem by Tennyson. The seaman Arden returns home after a long absence to find his wife married to another man, but cannot bear to destroy her happiness in spite of his love for her. The verse does not literally appear in the film.

<sup>8</sup> The film-poem and its modern tenets will be studied throughout Chapter Three.

<sup>9</sup> 'Guides' are particularly useful in film-poems and we will be referring to their activities, whether they are literal ushers or metaphorical accompaniments, in various film-poems throughout this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay lists Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, John Gould Fletcher, Amy Lowell, F.S. Flint, and D. H. Lawrence by name, and says there are 'others'. It would have made sense to include Whitman on this list, but Lindsay was speaking in terms of a recent movement at the time.

<sup>11</sup> The texts written for the decommissioned films are published in Mendelson's two volumes of *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden* (1988, 1993). They would have been available for consultation for those interested in seeing what the 'forefather' of film-poetry did not succeed in completing, so they can still be regarded as an influence. Harrison, Symes, and others list the pieces as significant models in their explanations of inspiration.

<sup>12</sup> Auden went so far as to resort to the use of a stopwatch to 'fit it to the shot on which it commented' (Mendelson, 1988, 513). Harrison also uses this impediment to explain Auden's doubts about how poetry and film work together (1998, xxiv).

<sup>13</sup> The second series of programmes was organised according to theme, rather than around one poet as in the first series. Among the poets illustrated were many of whom are associated with film projects, including Auden, Betjeman and Philip Larkin in the first series and Rossetti and Harrison in the second series.

<sup>14</sup> I have written more on Auden's work on *Night Mail*, as well as on other projects for television, in my MA dissertation, 'The Art of the Film-Poem: Linking Poetry's 'Engine' and the Image' (1997).

<sup>15</sup> No author is cited for this observation, but it is found on a website devoted to top athletes, at <<http://www.sportspublishinginc.com/Titles/The-Sports-100-Online/html/Emil-Zatopek.html>>. Red Smith's quote is also found on this page.

<sup>16</sup> French is the co-editor of *The Faber Book of Movie Verse* (1993), an anthology of poetry based on films, actors, film institutions, cinemas, film-making and television. It is a valuable and impressive, sobering collection. These two poems by Dunn, among others, are included in this collection.

<sup>17</sup> 'Cross Cuts', an issue dated Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> November, which contains material dedicated to the study of poetry and film. Donaghy was one of the poets invited to the discussion between a collection of poets and filmmakers in June of 1996.

<sup>18</sup> As mentioned earlier, surrealism sought to break with this standard, in that the surrealist filmmakers asked why images should be connected in any way. The randomness of the surreal film's ordering is usually only connected through psychological evaluation, examining the inspired roots behind seemingly unconnected images. See Salvador Dali's 'dream sequence' in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) to observe the actual practice of this evaluation, used in the film to solve a murder mystery and also explain an irrational 'fear of stripes'.

<sup>19</sup> For example, I am thinking of Andy Warhol's film of his friend John Giorno sleeping for hours on end (*Sleep*, 1963, 5 hrs 21 min), or Warhol's *Empire* (8 hrs, 5 min) with footage of the Empire State Building in New York shot from early evening until late at

night. Also particularly notable is an eight-hour so-called film poem by Canadian filmmaker Bruce Elder, *Lamentation* (1985).

<sup>20</sup> This quote is from a flyer advertising Todd's collection. The programme toured around the world, but one screening in Bristol appeared as the early evening event at the "'Projections' Weekend of Poetry and Film", May 2000. "Projections" included Harrison's work, and films by Jean Vigo, and Iain Sinclair, as well as material by local Bristol artists. It is important to note that work by Harrison and the avant-garde films in Todd's programme, among the other material, were exhibited in the same event, under a singular heading. The weekend was presented by "Poetry Can", a 'Poetry Development Agency' and a group called "Poetry Works 2000".

<sup>21</sup> This is a photocopied magazine that is released sporadically by the South London Poetry and Film Society and by Peter Todd, this specific issue from June 2000. Todd has occasionally sent me these issues, as well as articles and material relating to many of the subjects and films we have discussed in numerous e-mails, and in the interview that is a part of this thesis. I am deeply grateful to him for this.

<sup>22</sup> Tait's piece appeared in *Poem Film Film Poem*, Issue 1, November 1997. It was reprinted in an issue (Number Four, 2000) that accompanied the touring programme of Todd's 'Film Poems'. Tait's article is called, confusingly, 'Film - Poem or Poem - Film: A few notes about film and poetry' (4-5).

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Baumfield, in the same issue of Todd's magazine, reports that the poet wanted to use a local student's voice to read the verbal text, but Cottage staunchly desired an actress' voice, 'knowing that clarity, pace, and production quality would result' (2).

<sup>24</sup> An amusing copy of a postcard Brakhage wrote to Todd is included (on page six) in his latest programme notes for Film Poems 2 (October, 2000). In it he states that the films Todd chose exemplify his own standard of topics for his films: birth, sex and death. The Programme Notes double as *Poem Film Film Poem* Issue 8.

<sup>25</sup> Shakespearean films are important in a study of poetry and film, but prove too diverse for this thesis and deserve much attention in a specifically tailored critical study, like *Shakespeare on Film* by Jack J. Jorgens (1991).

## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER THREE (pp. 119-167)

<sup>1</sup> This quote is from the Sunday, 3 November 1996 of *Cross Cuts*, a pamphlet issued as part of the Literature Education Programme at the South Bank Centre in London.

<sup>2</sup> Sitney's book, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-78*, is known as an 'insider directory' (Evans, 8) for those studying avant-garde film.

<sup>3</sup> Films that adapt a previously existing poem for the screen by filming it, as one would do a novel, are partly discussed in Chapters One and Two, but are not the primary focus of this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> By John Livingstone Lowes, a study of S. T. Coleridge's inspirations for his best-known work.

<sup>5</sup> The processes that Robertson refers to as important to consider in a study of the origins of a film are the inspirations of different members of the film crew, including the scriptwriters, original authors (both of which are identical to the poet in a film-poem's case), visual designers, set designers, production designers, and the director. I would also not hesitate, as I often state, to stress the importance and contributions of the editor and cinematographer.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter Four, Section 4.6, for the breakdown of a film-poem I explore in detail, 'A Maybe Day in Kazakhstan' which gives one an idea of this successful pairing by blending the filmic images and the spoken poetry particularly well.

<sup>7</sup> 'Marrying image to word', found in the August/September issue of the *Arts Express*, p. 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> 'Loving Memory' (1986) was a film-poem divided into four parts, all focusing on cemeteries in Europe. These programmes were some of the most intense film-poems ever filmed, since footage of grave exhumations, set to poetry, was particularly effective. I have written about 'Loving Memory' in my MA thesis, *The Art of the Film-Poem: Linking Poetry's 'Engine' and the Image*.

<sup>9</sup> Most critics, apparently those outside the BBC, think that *Night Mail* was a landmark film event and that it indeed was not a failure. It at least keeps surfacing as an influential piece for many different types of British films, not all of them film-poems or documentaries.

<sup>10</sup> See discussion of *Prometheus* in Chapter Four, Section 4.8.

<sup>11</sup> This is listed as Scene Five in the text for the film-poem in the *Words on Film* collection.

<sup>12</sup> This technique of circular panning around an empty table with busts replacing real-life characters or historical figures is used to much the same effect in Harrison's *The Blasphemers' Banquet* (1989), with Harrison himself seated at the table. It is an effective device for the film-poem.

<sup>13</sup> A 'garrote' is used for strangulation; originally the word referred to a particular sort of iron collar used in executions or robberies. Robbery is often associated with this word, which deepens the meaning of Rossiter's own abuse at the hands of her husband.

<sup>14</sup> The original document prints these lines in italics.

<sup>15</sup> Clearly, though, this project *had* indeed been attempted before, as Harrison's film-poems of the 1980s prove, as well as earlier projects like Auden's *Night Mail* and such work. Feay was simply unaware of the material.

<sup>16</sup> Apparently it was difficult for Fisher to find 'surviving industrial scenes as foul and imposing as those I'd grown up with, and [I] wished we had a budget to shoot in Eastern Europe'. At least this is a positive statement about the appearance of Birmingham today.

## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER FOUR (pp. 168-239)

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted from Pasolini's *Heretical Empiricism*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett. (1988, 169) and *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (1969, 153).
- <sup>2</sup> From my interview with Holmes, Appendix B of this thesis, page 302.
- <sup>3</sup> Symes has written about his early collaborations with Harrison in 1991 in Bloodaxe's *Critical Anthology of Tony Harrison*, edited by Neil Astley: an essay called 'Blasphemy and Death: on film making with Tony Harrison' (pp. 384-94). His second published work about their cumulative creative output serves as the introduction to Harrison's published collection of film-poem scripts, *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. vii-xxiv.
- <sup>4</sup> For original information from Holmes about these projects see my interview with him, Appendix B, pgs 281-305.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Losing Touch' is published in the first issue of *Projections*, 1992. It appears as Chapter 10 and is subtitled 'In Memoriam George Cukor, died 24 January 1983'. The poem is preceded by a brief description of Cukor and Harrison's relationship, and is accompanied by two photos: contact strips of the poet and the director on set.
- <sup>6</sup> Molyneux's misgivings are very similar to Symes' initial uncertainties about verse, experienced in his opening meetings with Harrison regarding the appearance of 'Loving Memory' (1991, 385).
- <sup>7</sup> Molyneux produced a documentary about Service called 'Songs of a Sourdough: Verses from the Yukon' (1980) that incorporated facts about Robert Service's life with photographs, narration and one or two dramatisations of a few of the episodes in Service's poetry. The story of Sam McGhee, one of Service's famous characters, is a five or six minute segment of the film that is very similar to the content of a film-poem, but of course the verse had been written beforehand and it is only a small part of the documentary.
- <sup>8</sup> Harrison's poems from this period can be found in *The School of Eloquence*, Part Three (1978).
- <sup>9</sup> The majority of the poems in Harrison's *Selected Poems* (1987) have an *abab* rhyme scheme, including his famous 'V', but by 1995 his film-poems began to use the *aabb* rhyme scheme more often (with the exception of the early 'Loving Memory' series). See *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other film/poems* (1995) for the printed versions of these works.
- <sup>10</sup> These lines are italicised in Harrison's original script, which follows Molyneux's article in the 1991 Bloodaxe anthology (377-381).
- <sup>11</sup> This portion of the interview appears at the end of Molyneux's 'Songs of a Sourdough'.
- <sup>12</sup> 'The Big H' was first aired on Boxing Day, 1984.
- <sup>13</sup> For example, some lines from *V*. are:
- This graveyard stands above a worked-out pit.  
Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.



One leaning left's marked FUCK, one right's marked SHIT  
sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed (9).

<sup>14</sup> Harrison uses and mimics both 'the quatrain of Gray's *Elegy* and the quatrain of Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, as well as octosyllabic couplets' (1998, xxiv).

<sup>15</sup> Sail's article is titled 'Harrison's Interno: *Loving Memory*' and is reprinted in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I: Tony Harrison*. (pgs. 382-383). Originally, the review was published in the journal *Poetry Review*, 77: 3 (Autumn 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Miners' leader Scargill was a hero of the working class, and his words appeared in the *Sunday Times*, 10 January 1982: 'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words'.

<sup>17</sup> A good source for the range of opinions that the broadcasting of the poem was able to inspire is the 'Duty Officer's Report' for Channel Four Television that is included in the Second Edition of *V.* (1989), pgs. 70-72. Reactions extend from the entirely 'disgusted' to the most 'moved' and appreciative.

<sup>18</sup> This sequence occurs 22 minutes into the film.

<sup>19</sup> Poet and editor Blake Morrison, the author of the piece on *V.* entitled 'Harrison's elegy in a city graveyard' (24 Oct, 1987, *The Independent*), is indeed the author of his own television film-poem, 'Little Angels, Little Devils' (1994), which I cover briefly in Chapter Three, Section 3.6 of this study.

<sup>20</sup> Graffiti and dereliction often compliments Harrison's verse, as poetry about it is a perfect union between his own 'cultured' personal vision and his more colloquial, 'common' background and upbringing.

<sup>21</sup> I discuss the mechanics of the use of a guide in works by Harrison, Armitage and Kay throughout Chapter Three.

<sup>22</sup> This scene might be related to the Biblical verse 'And the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid... And a little child shall lead them' *Isaiah* 11:6, which is about future world harmony especially among naturally diverse or enemy cultures.

<sup>23</sup> The description of Harrison's 'Crossings' is given by Melvyn Bragg, presented of *The South Bank Show*. This was first broadcast on Sunday 10 March, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Poems from *The School of Eloquence and Other Poems* (1978), which are best collectivised in the second edition of Harrison's *Selected Poems* (1987).

<sup>25</sup> According to myth, Prometheus was eventually freed from his chains by Hercules, who also shot the eagle down with arrows. The statue of the eagle in this film is in Tatabanya, Hungary, and is known as the 'Tural' monument (from the screenplay *Prometheus*, 1998, 66).

<sup>26</sup> Again, Harrison usually directs his subjects at the 'horrors of the twentieth century'. None of his film-poems ever addressed one of the most glaring: the Holocaust, so it seems like he places this scene in the film as a homage to the incident.

<sup>27</sup> This is a concept Harrison introduces us to by way of a German historian, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, who wrote that 'in the dark, light is life' and that one 'can lose himself [in the

cinema screen] in the same way that he can submerge himself in contemplating the campfire or a candle' (xxii).

<sup>28</sup> Harrison quotes a proposition by Gaston Bachelard that suggests 'it is from brooding before flames that early man developed his interior life' in part (i) of his preface to the 1998 screenplay, 'Fire and Poetry' (vii).

<sup>29</sup> All quotes come from Harrison's comments on *The South Bank Show*, as documented in Endnote 23, unless otherwise indicated.