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Finding a New Approach: The Use of Visual Images in Spoken Word Poetry Film

An Experience-Based Artist's Report with Reference to the Poetry Film Collection *The Book of Hours* and the Poetry Film *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air*

Introduction

Spoken word poetry is often perceived to be the public delivery of noisy crowd-pleasing material, which is certainly the case with poetry slams, but, for many, the lasting appeal of spoken word is its ability to create an emotional connection with an audience. Spoken word can be intimate and deeply personal. How can this intimacy and connection be translated into the medium of poetry film? This essay explores artistic approaches for using or adapting these to contain spoken word poetry. For many filmmakers the most obvious choice is to present the poet speaking or performing the poem. Organisations such as the UK based Apples and Snakes and current spoken word poets such as Hollie McNish use this method when creating their spoken word poetry films. However, there are a variety of other approaches.

Canadian theorist Tom Konyves identifies five major categories of what he describes as “video poems”: Kinetic text, where the text on the screen is animated; sound text, where the poetry is spoken, either by the poet or through a voice-over; visual text, where the text is featured on the film like a subtitle; performance, which includes the human body; and cine(e) poetry, which uses recognisable film sequences as well as animation (cf. Konyves 2012, 7). He claims a video poem must contain the following elements: text, either on screen or voiced; a narration to propel the viewer; poetic juxtaposition, which he defines as the placement of words and images which create different “meanings” or interpretations; and a “poetic experience,” which he further defines as “fragmented expressions of the artist’s imagination, suggestive of meaning, yet denying clarification of the purported meaning.” A video poem, he claims, should produce in the viewer “unprecedented and unlimited associations between image, text and sound” (Konyves 2012, 5). It must also include rhythm, illustration, collaboration and have a duration of “not longer than 300 seconds.” He claims that a true poetry film must express a blended nature: “In the measured blending of these three elements (visual, text and sound) it produces in the viewer the realisation of a ‘poetic experi-

ence” (Konyves 2012, 5). These parameters, although debateable, are a good starting point when creating a poetry film.

Sarah Tremlett in her comprehensive *Poetics of Poetry Film* (2021) acknowledges Konyves’ categories and also adds video haikus, dance, documentary, and ecopoetry. How useful are these definitions when creating a spoken word poetry film? I will argue that a variety of methods, as well as performance, can enhance the placement of a spoken word poem in a poetry film and that the physical presence of the poet, or even their voice, is not necessarily needed. I will refer to my own project *The Book of Hours* (English 2017) and to my recent spoken word project with US filmmakers Pamela Falkenberg and Jack Cochran, *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* (Cochran and Falkenberg 2020). Furthermore, I will discuss how spoken word poetry is translated into imagery in a spoken word poetry film.

A brief definition of poetry film and the origins of *The Book of Hours*

Firstly, what are poetry films? One thing they are not (although they can be) is films of people reading or reciting poetry. Even the name of the genre is disputed. Poetry films appear under different guises as “poetryfilms,” “filmpoems,” “video poems,” “multimedia poetry,” “e-poetry,” and “screen poetry.” Broadly speaking, they are a combining of poetry/words, displayed as text or spoken, with accompanying images and viewed on a screen. They can be created by the poet but they are usually a collaboration between poet and filmmaker. This is not a new subject; some of the earliest films, created by the Dadaists, were what we would now call poetry films and Susan McCabe has examined the use of film by the early Modernist poets, including Gertrude Stein, Hilda Doolittle or H.D, and Marianne Moore. “Rather than perceiving film as extraneous to their poetic styles [. . .] the poets engaged the modern crisis of embodiment with an awareness of the medium’s tangible synchronicity, multiplicity and evanescence.” (McCabe 2005, 17) In more recent years, with easier access to new media technology, more poetry films are being created and shown to audiences in festivals such as the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin, which is dedicated to this art form. Unlike the narrative led films of Hollywood, poetry films are tiny, exquisite and mesmerising and, if a filmmaker is involved, the relationship of the filmmaker to poet can be seen as a “creative editor” (MacDonald 2007, 22) who presents the text to new audiences.

For my own project, *The Book of Hours*,¹ I wanted to explore how spoken word poetry can be used in poetry film. Rather than present the films as a series of readings or performances I wanted to translate the immediacy and vibrancy of spoken word into the poetry film form and create a project which is experimental in its use of spoken word in poetry film, and also innovative in its approach to creating a themed collection of poetry films. This project, which contains 48 poetry films, was begun in 2014, made available online from 2015 during the process of construction and finally completed in 2018. *The Book of Hours* contains layers of experience for the reader, through sound, visual image, and text with the poetry delivered as spoken word. These poetry films present a constantly changing commentary on the passage of time. This is a loose replication of the original Books of Hours, highly decorative medieval illustrated manuscripts, which provided readers with religious texts in sections connected to the times of the day and religious festivals. The reader of the original books could choose which texts to read and when. In *The Book of Hours*, the first film displayed represents the current month and the time of day the viewer has accessed the website, such as “May, afternoon,” or “November, night,” but the viewer can also browse through the complete collection. *The Book of Hours* is therefore a calendar of poetry films which represent four times of day for each month of the year. Films from this project have been screened at over 40 international film festivals, won several awards, and the entire project was shortlisted for the New Media Writing Prize in 2019. *The Book of Hours* is now kept in the British Library archive as an example of a digital project. My role in this project was to write the poetry, record the poems in my voice, and act as artistic director (cf. English 2017).

As with all forms of art, there are factions, and allegiances. For my exploration of *The Book of Hours* I will use the term “poetry film,” with no hyphen, throughout. Tremlett mentions that the inclusion or not of a hyphen for the term “poetry film” is still a source of debate (cf. Tremlett 2021, 25). However, my decision not to use a hyphen emphasises that for this project I have understood a poetry film to be a blended entity, as described by Konyves, of both poetry and film, and in my case, these elements have been created separately but in collaboration between a poet and a filmmaker.

As mentioned earlier, the poetry in *The Book of Hours* is in the form of spoken word. I write poetry to be performed or heard. I want the sound of the language and the emotional response of the audience to be an important part of the experience. Claudia Benthien, Jordis Lau, and Maraike M. Marxsen explore how even in a recording of a poem the recorded voice “can have the power to create a

1 www.thebookofhours.org.

strong intimacy with listeners.” (Benthien et al. 2019, 50) My poetry can also be described as lyrical. “Lyric (or lyrical poetry) is subjective in its approach, expressing the feelings, thoughts and visions of the poet directly and often very personally” (Stillman 1966, xii). The lyrical nature of the poetry, I hoped, could be translated to the poetry films. Benthien, Lau, and Marxsen propose that when “works of media use poetic structures, they predominantly refer to lyric poetry” (Benthien et al. 2019, 114). Although I experimented with several forms in *The Book of Hours*, those which I were most drawn to were the ones where the lyrical poetry could be best appreciated: ‘sound text,’ as it uses the human voice and ‘visual text,’ which “displays the text on screen, superimposed over images captured or found” (Konyves 2012, 5). A few of the poetry films for *The Book of Hours* are also cine(e) poetry in that they have been created by a filmmaker using storyboards, actors, soundtracks and all the elements used in cinema films (cf. Konyves 2012, 5).

The development of *The Book of Hours*

One of the early filmmakers involved in the project was Helen Dewbery, a photographer, poetry filmmaker and organiser of the Poetry Film Live Online Magazine (see Dewbery 2019). In 2014 she was in the early stages of her poetry film making career and wanted plenty of discussion about the project and the films we could create. We discussed the concept of *The Book of Hours*, and its intention to create reflective experience in the viewer. Reflective moments in contemporary life were at the centre of our discussions, and strangely we both came up with the same location, a motorway service station. The result of this conversation was the realisation of artistic possibility in the anonymous quality of a service station and its existence as a place ‘out of time’; a place where time can get lost. Dewbery sent me a selection of short filmic sequences and images taken at the Gordano Service Station near Bristol. The aim was to find a new way of creating a poetry film other than me ‘giving’ her a poem to interpret. The visual images were a starting point that would drive the viewer’s interest in the poetry film as much as the poem itself. Dewbery would indeed be what McDonald calls “a creative editor” in that she would be adding to the audience’s interpretation of the poem by the use of visual language. P. Adams Sitney calls this “[t]he poetics of filmmaking” and his analysis of the work of Andrei Tarkovsky shows how “[t]he elements of dream and memory interpenetrate one another in a tight network of associations” (Sitney 2015, 87). These were certainly our aspirations for this poetry film.

One of Dewbery’s filmed sequences was a car journey at night. Mundane images that could be interpreted in a variety of ways. The following questions were

at the centre of a contemplation of these images and the motif of journeys: Where were all those cars going? What was the purpose of those journeys? How many journeys do we take in our lives? Dying is also referred to as ‘the last journey’ in our culture. To further explicate this, I want to include a specifically artistic and personal point of view in the production of the poem “Drive Through the Night” here. Death was very much on my mind at this time as my brother was in the final stages of cancer.

Based on this experience I wrote the poem and sent it to Helen Dewbery to work with. Her final film uses the repeating sequence of cars driving in the night. Against the placement of the words, this seemingly mundane image becomes ominous, even foreboding. She also included a fleeting image of a wolf, which was an important and discussed figure throughout the process of writing the poetry film. In our conversations during the production of this poetry film we decided to keep the image of the wolf as the animal seems to represent both the uneasiness about facing death but also a sort of spirit guide to the after-world. In the Native American pantheon of spirit guides, the wolf is connection to intuition and spiritual path finding. Collaboration is a shared space but it is also a space where individual talent can thrive and be celebrated. In a filmmaker’s hands, the poetry film becomes more than the poem; the images and sound used, expand the interpretation of the poem rather than merely ‘illustrate’ it; the poetry film explores those unconscious elements of dream and memory. “Drive Through the Night” reveals Helen Dewbery’s skill as a creative editor in placing images with the words, which give the poem a deeper meaning (Fig. 26). The images leave space for the audience’s interpretation (cf. MacDonald 2007, 22).



Fig. 26: Still from “Drive Through the Night.” Dir. Helen Dewbery. Poem: Lucy English. 2014.

A challenge in the writing of the poetry for *The Book of Hours* was to find a contemplative form of spoken word that could be translated to poetry film. My own personal experience is that in writing poetry the tasks are to choose a narrative structure, to develop a story within the poem/s, and to use lyrical language to enhance meaning. However, any narrative structure had to be more condensed in a poetry film, or even abandoned. Detailed descriptions, explanations and dialogue, the bedrock of much of previous spoken word poetry, proved to be too long and complicated. Claudia Kappenberg discusses this effect in her analysis of the work of Maya Deren, a filmmaker who wanted to move away from the “shorthand of narrative” in mainstream films, and to explore “[t]he real potential of cinema, which resides in the realm of the visual experience” (Kappenberg 2017, 108). A poetry film does not need so many words since the images, and indeed the sound, also carry meaning; much of the text has to be sacrificed to the image. A current approach, when combining spoken word poetry with film, is to create a film of the poet reading or performing the poem. Apples and Snakes, the leading UK promoter of spoken word poetry, for its Blackbox project, has filmed a series of spoken word poets which can be viewed online. These are quality films and were recorded in partnership with ESA Productions, the in-house production company of Elstree Screen Arts Academy (see Apples and Snakes 2022). These recreate the atmosphere of a live performance with a stage, background lighting, and in a venue, which looks like a theatre. These films and many other spoken word films, like music videos, tend to rely on the physical presence of the performer. For my project I felt that such an approach was limiting. *The Book of Hours* is not about ‘me’; it is designed to convey mood, or a reflection on place.

As a poet I am passionately concerned that *The Book of Hours* contains writing of a high literary standard, which can be critiqued as poetry. My spoken word poetry tends to be narrative, often improvised, and although it contains lyrical writing, the story predominates. The poetry I wrote for *The Book of Hours* conveys a mood, thought or emotion. Stories began to appear, as it seems that I cannot leave story behind, but they were more within the overarching narrative of the work rather than the individual poems. My ‘chatty’ spoken word voice still needed to be pared down even more to create more space for the visual experience. What I learned in these early collaborations was that I needed to take the poem to a place ‘outside’ of itself where it could blend more effectively with the sound and the images. I took these discoveries into the subsequent collaborations with the other filmmakers.

One of the filmmakers who developed the impact of the image in *The Book of Hours* was Eduardo Yagüe. He is Spanish and currently lives in Stockholm. Like many poetry filmmakers he had a complex route into filmmaking. He studied drama and has had a career as an actor, a teacher of drama, and a writer. He

started making poetry films in 2012. *The Book of Hours* was conceptualized to be a transnational project so I was keen to find filmmakers whose first language was not English. His approach to poetry film creation is very different to that of Helen Dewbery. Yagüe storyboards the films, creates narratives and uses actors and locations, much like a traditional concept of ‘film’ and what Konyves calls cine(e) poetry (cf. Konyves 2012, 5). In 2015 he described his working methods to me via email: “I am interested in exploring the limits of poetic and cinematographic languages. I love working with the actors in my videos, leaving them exposed and giving pure emotions, I love suggested stories with an open reading, all with the base of touching and intense poems.” I was familiar with his work through moving-poems.com and sent him “High Summer.” I was not sure what he would make of this poem written during a hot day in August and which conveys a particularly British summer:

Full bosomed and bellied, heavy and slow.
 A bus shelter covered in ivy
 by a crossroads where the road dips
 to a brown sludge of stream.
 The sticky smell of meadowsweet.
 Honeysuckle hair and eyes like brown moths.
 (English 2018, 44)

He said he would “deeply study it” before he responded with ideas. He decided to have it translated into Spanish so he could fully understand it. The idea he suggested to me was this: “I would like to make a contrast between the light of the words of the poem that go from the field to the tough city where we will find a woman (or a man, I am not already sure), who is imagining the poem.” He also suggested that he would approach it like a haiku and try to translate the structure of a haiku into a visual form. A month later he had made the film. The words were placed on the screen rather than spoken and it was intended to add a voice-over later, either in Spanish or in English. In “High Summer” Yagüe has used a story of a woman writing a poem about a British summer in a winter urban Spanish environment. He has, as Sitney suggested that the Italian filmmaker Pasolini does in his films, “[i]nvested his images with his subjectivity” (Sitney 2015, 22). There is tension between the placement of the words and the images. We read “honeysuckle hair” and we look at an image of dead plants in a drain pipe. We have to re-evaluate our attitude towards the urban environment, wet and dreary and filmed in black and white, whilst we read words about heat, meadows and ditches. There is a mystery about the film: Why is it a poem about summer in the middle of winter? When we first see the woman, we are not sure who she is and why she is so deep in thought. We only realise that she is the writer towards the

end of the film when we see her in her kitchen, looking for inspiration and finding it in the figure of a cow fridge magnet. It is a tender evocation of the act of creation and the power of imagination. This is why we decided collaboratively that this film did not need a voiceover.

For our second collaboration it seemed fitting to try a Spanish language film. A more narrative poem was chosen to accompany as Yagüe's films are excellent visual storytelling. The poem "What is Love" was selected because of its recognisable storyline; a snapshot of a relationship between a man and woman who meet in romantic circumstances but, as their lives progress, they have to navigate more ordinary challenges:

What is love? I think it is a new house.
 Piling up fast with stuff in every room.
 How can she have so many dresses, shoes, cooking pots?
 How can he have so many retro computer games?

(English 2018, 38)

By the time they are old "with icing sugar hair" they no longer remember the circumstances of when they first met but they are still together. It is a gentle poem and so there was plenty in the poem for Eduardo to storyboard. The poetry film Yagüe then created, "Qué es el Amor? (What is Love)" has become one of the most widely screened films in *The Book of Hours*. It was awarded video poem of the week on the online poetry film journal *Versogramas* (Montero 2016), second prize in the *Atticus Review* videopoem contest (2018) and has been screened at many other festivals. What Yagüe has done is to find a story within the story of the poem. Instead of focusing on the simple "boy meets girl" narrative he places his film in the future. As Belen Montero points out on the *Versogramas* webpage:

The contrast between the poem and the video is absolutely devastating, thus effective. A parallel history emerges in our minds: one of the protagonists of the poem, now an old man, alone in a big empty house, tries to spend time while remembering, in absolute solitude and sadness, when "they never felt alone." (Montero 2016)

Filmed in black in white and with a Spanish voiceover it has the power of a full-length drama and seems much longer than three and half minutes thanks to its emotional impact. It conveys all the emptiness and longing of grief. In the film an old man sits by a window, wanders through an empty apartment and picks up the gloves of his dead wife and inhales the scent. While none of this is mentioned in the poem, a visual 'story' with these images was created in the poetry film, which lends added depth and poignancy to the words. Dave Bonta comments further on movingpoems.com:

The geographic/linguistic distance and change in the expected sex of the narrator [most of the other poetry films are narrated by me, a woman. This is narrated by a man.] create additional resonances. And actor Steffan Carlson's silence is so eloquent as to supply almost a third voice to the mix. *Qué es el amor?* is a brilliant demonstration of how to use the narrative style of filmmaking to comment upon and transform a lyric poem. (Bonta 2016)

Marie Craven as the judge of the *Atticus Review* videopoem contest mentions why it was awarded a prize. "Masterfully directed and profoundly moving, the film is a meditation on a near-universal experience as we approach end of life." (*Atticus Review* 2019) Through a visualisation of the poem in the poetry film this specific example has become more than the poem through the adept use of images that has truly enhanced and expanded the words.

The next film I am going to discuss is "The Sundial" created with filmmaker and visual artist Lucia Sellars (2017). Previously working with Sellars for *The Book of Hours* the resulting discovery was that parts of the entire poem can suffice for a poetry film. In our previous collaboration Sellars edited my poem and even cut out several lines. I am a poet and like many artists I want artistic control but I had to learn not to feel precious about my words; I was willing to let the words go for the success of the collaboration. I realised that a poetry film did indeed not need all of the details in the text, even if they are spoken, because the visuals were 'carrying' this information. In "The Sundial" Sellars altered the sequence of the words and the phrase "Do not talk to me today" is repeated like a phrase of bird song. A wistful mood of a summer's day is suggested by using pastel colours and the effect of the sun through clouds, but the images in the poetry film also reveal the uneasiness about being a human in the natural world. A hummingbird flits restlessly across the screen and the outstretched hand could be interpreted as a lost attempt to connect.

These collaborations showed me how much time and effort all collaborators were putting into the poetry films, which in most cases, are not more than three minutes long. A poetry film is not merely a set of images to accompany words, it is a crafted visual and sound journey with the audiences' experience very much in mind; this specifically refers to what Tom Konyves called "a measured blending" (Konyves 2012, 2). In the film created with Sarah Tremlett, "Solstice Sol Invictus," the collaborative nature was explored further in the actual creation of the poem as well as in the construction of the film. In *The Book of Hours*, the two Solstice poetry films represent the sun at its lightest and darkest points of the year. Because of the status of these films in the series it was important for me to choose a filmmaker who could understand the significance; Sarah Tremlett prepared to take on this challenge.

Tremlett is the UK's foremost theorist on poetry film and her *The Poetics of Poetry Film* is a comprehensive overview of the theory and practice of poetry

film creation and an important attempt to define the genre. In her preface she states that “poetry films and videopoems are *not* vehicles for poets solely reciting to camera, [. . .]. Ultimately, all forms hinge on creating the *perception* of a relationship [. . .] between the elements, and it is this dialectic that creates such an imaginative leap [. . .]” (Tremlett 2021, xxi). She also states that poetry itself creates “*meaningful relations* between words and sounds” (Tremlett 2021, 49) and poetry films are furthering this poetic experience. Tremlett is an artist and writer and her poetry films combine her multifaceted skills. Her direct involvement in the writing of this poem took on a deeper significance as the 2016 Refugee Crisis unfolded across Europe. We wrote a verse each and recorded our voices: Sarah’s evokes the emergence of the light at Solstice, and my verse asks us to consider “even in the dark days there is hope.” The verse written by Tremlett is spoken by Helmi Stil, and she also co-speaks some of the words herself. Towards the end of the poetry film the three voices combine in a choral crescendo; a sonorous experience. The three female voices could represent the Celtic triple goddess and the rising soundtrack emphasises the gravitas of the message. The images are of a rising sun and the background colours move from darker tones towards the bright green and yellows of spring. It seems particularly relevant today when the ‘dark days’ appear even more extreme.

Before deciding to speak the poems in my own voice, I experimented with other methods, such as text on screen, and the use of other narrators. This decision was more complex than any concerns about the quality of delivery of the poems by other readers. My readers have added a multiplicity of voices with a range of ages, gender, and nationalities but I wanted to establish that I am a spoken word poet and my craft is in the writing and speaking of my work. I feel strongly that spoken word is not confined to the young, urban, and apparently artless. I am sixty-four years old and have over twenty years’ experience as a poet. I craft my work with care. I argue accordingly that the strengths of spoken word in poetry film are the choice of words and the way they are spoken. Unlike a live performance I did not have the use of my body to convey meaning and emotion. Julia Novak calls this “body communication” and has discussed in length the use of bodily actions and facial expressions in my and other spoken word poets’ live poetry (cf. Novak 2011, 151–153). For *The Book of Hours* my bodily actions were not part of the film, so I could only use my voice. Norrie Neumark examines how even a recorded voice still has the impact of a live voice and we respond to it as though it were physically present even though it is in the digital realm: “The performative voice is quintessentially paradoxical [. . .] it carried a trace of its ‘home,’ the body of the speaker, but leaves that home to perform speaking” (Neumark 2010, 97). John Durham Peters also explores the power of the spoken voice in modern media which “leaves the voice in curious limbo between

body and machine, text and performance, animal and angel,” (Peters 2004, 9) because we can keep returning to it to find further meaning.

For a poetry film the physical presence of the poet is unnecessary; spoken word poets do not always realise how good they are at the verbal delivery of their work. The purpose should be to connect to their audiences with their poet’s voice. Novak examines how spoken word poets “enact the irregular rhythms of ordinary speech” (Novak 2011, 95) to create this emotional bond. From an audience’s point of view the poet’s voice seems so natural their skill in doing this can be overlooked. It is this entire aspect of spoken word poetry that is often neglected. I am aware that my viewer will experience the poetry in *The Book of Hours* through images and sound rather than through gestures or body movements. I have been told that I am a good reader of my work. Pauses and emphasis of certain words are used in my delivery to bring out the meaning and emotions. For example, the sadness of the mother whose grown-up daughter has not stayed long enough in “River Girl” is an integral part of the poem. When I read the poem, my voice is almost a whisper and it sounds like I am on the verge of tears.

When she’s gone I wash the plates. Do the laundry.
Her dress is on the floor. Crumpled in a corner.
A thrush on the steps breaks open a snail
(English 2018, 33)

I wonder if filmmakers of spoken word poetry have felt too much the need to show the face of the poet, as if trying to replicate the live performance, rather than focusing on the quality of the delivery of the words and the quality of the images. For example, the 2018 ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival contained a separate screening of spoken word poetry films, “Fokus Spoken Word.” The programme notes describe a clear relationship between these films and music videos: “In the music industry video clips have been an established medium for the transfer onto the screen for more than 30 years. Spoken Word artists use this format as well in order to performatively present eloquent texts.” (Zandegiacomo Del Bel 2018, 50) In Germany there is a growing audience for these spoken word clips, and the ones I viewed at this screening did indeed have the energy and impact of a live performance, but most of the impact was through the sound of the words. There are many opportunities for exploring spoken word in poetry film and my hope is that festivals such as ZEBRA will keep creating separate spoken word screenings so that this sub-genre will develop further. For this purpose, I would propose a collaborative process where both filmmaker and poet are prepared to actively put aside their usual ways of working and find alternative ways of representing spoken word on screen. If a poet has to be placed in front of a camera, it should at least be made visually engaging, such as Salena Godden’s anarchic *RED*

(2016) where she gets red paint chucked at her as she performs a poem about menstruation or Kae Tempest's recent *Salt Coast* (2022) which has the moody quality of film noir.

Further explorations since the completion of *The Book of Hours*

All the *The Book of Hours* films were completed by 2018 and are available to view on the website. Since then my poetic work has been centred on creating poetry films with an environmental message in the form of ecopoetry films as mentioned by Sarah Tremlett (cf. Tremlett 2021, 310). Ecopoetry can be described as poetry which focuses on climate change and its effects on our daily lives such as soaring temperatures, flooding, and melting of polar ice. These poetry films draw attention to the destruction and changes in the natural world. With this aim I approached the US filmmakers Pamela Falkenberg and Jack Cochran who run Outlier Moving Pictures² and were collaborators for two poetry films for *The Book of Hours*, "The Shadow" and "The Names of Trees." The reason behind this choice was their use of experimental techniques in filming, and their compelling images of the American landscape. Between 2018 and 2019 they had been filming in the Permian Basin in Texas (the largest oil basin in the US) and around Dallas and Austin, documenting freeway construction and new suburban development. They had also filmed the prairie restorations and wetlands nature preserves near Rockford, Illinois in the US, the nuclear power plant and the wind turbine installations. In an email to me Falkenberg explained their methodological approach to filmmaking:

On a shooting road trip, we are usually searching for arresting images and beautiful light. On this trip, we scan the landscape, like advance scouts on expedition, but instead of water holes or the best trail, we are looking for visible signs of man's destructive impact on the environment (Falkenberg 2020).

The poetry film *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* was created during the global Covid-19 Pandemic and I wrote the poem during lockdown in the UK. Whilst in lockdown many people discovered or rediscovered their connection with the natural world and this poetry film starts with the desire to reconnect with nature. "Take me far away from here / to a grass meadow in The Basin." (Cochran and Falkenberg 2020) In our previous collaborations for *The Book of Hours*, we explored in-

2 <https://www.outliermovingpictures.com/>.

dividual emotional responses to landscapes: In “The Shadow” a woman cannot feel the wonder and beauty of the Oregon mountains until she understands that she is merely a “shadow” on the landscape; in “The Names of Trees” she realises that she does not know what the trees are called in her lover’s country, and feels that she does not belong there (cf. English 2017). *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* takes this uneasiness further. How do we feel when we see a meadow of prairie flowers growing outside a nuclear power plant? Are the flowers a compensation for the destruction of the natural world? I felt that such an enormous topic as climate change had to start with a personal narrative, which viewers could relate to. “The same flowers grow in the buffer zone / near the nuclear power plant / as the flowers in my great-grandmother’s farm. Gallardias and Gauras.” (Cochran and Falkenberg 2020) The words of the poem combined with the images create in the film a mystery and also awe, similar to what McCabe calls “an awareness of the medium’s tangible, synchronicity, multiplicity and evanescence” (McCabe 2005, 17). We are stunned by the beauty of the Permian Basin but also the vastness of the industrial activities (Fig. 27).



Fig. 27: Still from *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air*. Dir. Jack Cochran and Pamela Falkenberg. Poem: Lucy English. 2020.

In *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* the camera scans the landscape but instead of prairie meadows one sees the visible signs of man’s destructive impact. What appears to be a natural hillside is, in fact, a mound of landfill. The film reveals the buffer areas around nuclear power plants, and strip mines, where wild flowers bloom, birds sing, and insects buzz. Shots framed to exclude the excavations and

installations look like nature reserves. Viewers' assumptions about what constitutes beauty in landscape are unsettled. The poem appears as text on the screen and reveals a desire to escape "this concrete land" and find a place to "breathe cool sweet air." But the journey along the freeways in Texas only lead back to the city where the unhoused are living in tent villages. Human lives as well as landscapes are being disrupted by global industrialisation.

The film was originally created as a single reel but was later changed into a Triptych of images where the viewer watches three reels at once in order to have more impact. These three reels loop through the sequences of freeways, prairies and industrial landscape combined with a soundtrack of industrial noise, cars, and bird song. The effect is deliberately unsettling and disturbing. The poem ends with a determination to return to the river, the source of life, and a renewed sense of connection to nature and a desire to adopt a more robust stance to prevent further destruction. The aim was for our viewers to feel uncomfortable, learn more, and support/take action.

Take me far away from here.
 I want to breathe cool sweet air
 and listen to the black throated blue warbler's song
 and smell the dry wind from the rocky hill,
 and walk through prairie flowers to the lake
 and sink my fingers in the mud
 and wipe the mud across my face

(Cochran and Falkenberg 2020)

I did not use my voice in *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* and the poem appears in the film as text on screen. Although the poem is spoken word, in that it is written to sound like a person speaking, I did not feel that my own voice was suitable due to my very British accent. The placement of the words replicates the "irregular rhythms" of natural speech which Novak (2011, 95) mentioned that we respond to emotionally. The placement of the text on the screen lends a certain gravitas to the words.

My experiments with spoken word in poetry film have led me to explore further approaches other than placing me in front of a camera. I have found that the 'narrative' of images can give deeper meaning to the poem, whether by placement of words with images, as in "Drive Through the Night," images that further enhance the interpretation of the poem, as in "Solstice Sol Invictus," and the condensation of the words can enhance the experience of the poems, as in "The Sundial." The filmmaker can create a separate 'story' which runs alongside the poem, as in "Qué es el Amor? (What is Love)." Experiments in the way in which the poetry film is viewed, by creating a three-reel film where the viewer experiences a

sound and visual overload as in *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air*, reveal that there is much that can still be explored in the creation of the viewing experience (Fig. 28).



Fig. 28: Still from *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air*. Dir. Jack Cochran and Pamela Falkenberg. Poem: Lucy English. 2020.

My belief is that spoken poets must remember that their art is about craft, not appearance. They are not music stars, they do not need to sell their work by how they look on screen. The big players in spoken word, Shane Koyczen, Buddy Wakefield, and Kae Tempest, are not cute or manufactured. Their power is in their ability to connect with people through their words and voices. I would therefore suggest the development of a new definition, the *lyrical spoken word poetry film*. In a lyrical spoken word poetry film, the poet's other skills, such as the use of language, and delivery of the words, can be enhanced and the placement of the images by the filmmaker can be fully explored. For the placement of spoken word in poetry film I would propose the following: a lyrical spoken word poetry film need not contain the same poetry as a live performance since the type of poetry needs to be leaner, and more concise to give necessary space for the visual material; a lyrical spoken word poetry film can explore language as well as narrative content, but the quality of the language should be a high consideration; a lyrical spoken word poetry film can convey emotion as much as a live performance does but it may be conveyed in a more subtle way via the accompanying images; a lyrical spoken word poetry film should give opportunities for the viewer to revisit it to find further detail and nuance. There is much scope for spoken word poets to have more detailed and engaged conversations with collabora-

tors on how to create spoken word poetry films which best combine aspects of poetry, sound, and moving image.

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