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# Performing Language, Animating Poetry: Kinetic Text in Experimental Cinema

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KIM KNOWLES

LANGUAGE, BOTH WRITTEN AND SPOKEN, is so ubiquitous within the field of experimental film practice that singling out a particular thread or trajectory that would allow us to grasp, summarize, or theorize this interdisciplinary tendency at first seems like an insurmountable challenge. And this is even before we are led into the hazy definitions of either “language” or “experimental.” Our concern with language *in* the cinema must first of all be dissociated from the language *of* cinema (although the two frequently, and obviously, intersect, as my discussion of the work of Peter Rose later in this article will demonstrate). When speaking (of) the language *of* cinema, we are dealing first and foremost with a system of signification, a way of reading the screen by breaking down the image into a series of semantic units. Deriving from structuralist semiotics, this association of film with language has long dominated the field of film studies, perhaps overshadowing issues of language *within* the cinema.<sup>1</sup> In commercial cinema, language is, in most cases, subordinated to the image—the “of” and the “in” are thus one and the same. But in experimental, or avant-garde, practice, the dialogue between film and language mani-

fest itself as an interdisciplinary exchange that seeks to overturn this word-image hierarchy. What I am interested in here is the way experimental cinema makes language visible, inscribing it (sometimes literally) into the formal and conceptual fabric of the film.

“Visible language” is visible in the sense that words are physically, materially present on the screen; “screen writings” are, in Scott MacDonald’s words, a literary engagement with the screen as a surface as well as a window.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, “reading the screen” is not simply a process of understanding the visual language of the cinema; it can also be framed in terms of a complex oscillation between viewing (images) and reading (text). Sometimes, as in the films and videos of Peter Rose and Gary Hill, the spoken and the written word are brought together, emphasizing the concrete visual and acoustic properties of language. Often, as seen/read in the works of Michael Snow and the recent Internet artists Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, the text *is* the image, the only visual signifier on the screen. Frequently, and in most of these cases, language is used performatively—the filmmaker “speaks” through the text or inscribes him or herself in/onto the film through the gesture of writing. But the framework of performance also allows us to think about the role these texts play in acting out discourse, communication, and experience. Using the films of American artist Peter Rose as a case study, this article discusses the origin(al)ity of kinetic texts in experimental cinema, tracing a trajectory from the screen writings of early narrative cinema

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through avant-garde films and theory of the 1920s to visual and concrete poetry, ending with a discussion of contemporary examples of Internet poetry. In taking this approach, I hope to draw out the historical relevance of experimental cinema in the context of word-image discourse, but also to open up the discourse itself to considerations of new artistic encounters in the realms of the digital.

### Early Perspectives on Screen Texts

Fixed camera position on a dusty tree-lined lane receding into the background: from a distance, a horse-drawn cart appears and gradually moves into the foreground, disappearing past the camera and sending a cloud of dust across its field of vision. As the dust settles, another moving object emerges from the same spot in the background, only this time it turns out to be a motorcar, visibly out of control and veering dangerously toward the camera. When the car eventually consumes the frame, the physical collision is expressed in the sudden appearance of a black screen, onto which flashes, in quick succession, a series of words written directly onto the filmstrip: “?? / !!! / Oh! / Mother / will / be / pleased.” The film in question, Cecil B. Hepworth’s *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900), was perhaps the first to use the filmstrip as a surface on which to write, demonstrating the possibility of physical engagement with the material. The unexpected, and quite unfathomable, fragmented sentence that provides the climax to the action has less to do with the content of the film in a narrative sense (whose mother?) than with the ability of words on the screen to create a visceral impact comparable to that of the collision itself. Hepworth thus employs a process of text *as* image, which can be distinguished from the presentation of text *and* image. This distinction is predicated not exclusively on the literal separation of the words from the image, but on the specific role and character of the text itself, which, while tangentially commenting on the action, takes on a life of its own as a semiautonomous visual entity. The text, in other words, performs

the action presented in the images, surprising the viewer with the switch of cognitive register.

A few years later, in 1905, Edwin S. Porter made a series of films for Thomas Edison that used animated text as a way of visualizing speech. These works, *How Jones Lost His Roll*, *The Whole Dam Family and the Dam Dog*, and *Coney Island at Night*, experimented with ways of incorporating the text *into* the action, making it perform the thoughts and feelings of the characters. As Charles Musser describes it, “a hodgepodge of letters moved against their backgrounds until they formed intertitles for the succeeding scene,” with the effect of “making the intertitles more important than the pictures they illuminate, inverting the normal relationship between image and title” (317–18). In Porter’s slightly later work *College Chums* (1907), this is seen most effectively during a prickly telephone conversation between a man and a woman. The characters are positioned at opposite edges of the frame, hovering above the city rooftops, their words tumbling a jumbled airborne trajectory from interlocutor to receiver. When the discussion becomes gradually more heated, the words collide, like some poorly navigated linguistic disaster. As in the final moments of *How It Feels to Be Run Over*, in which the visual impact of the animated words both mirrors and accentuates the feeling of collision, the text of *College Chums* illustrates the emotional tension between the characters, giving it concrete visible form. This impulse to experiment with the “potential of printed intertitles and other forms of visual text to energize the experience of silent cinema” (MacDonald 2) extended into a number of other films of the period. Rick Altman has rightly observed that announcements and advertisements for such films tended to foreground this novelty element to the extent that the narrative itself receded into the background. The 1906 Biograph film *Looking for John Smith*, “the latest novelty in Biograph features,” was advertised in the company’s bulletin as follows:

In “LOOKING FOR JOHN SMITH,” the Biograph’s latest comedy feature, a decided

novelty has been introduced. In one of the scenes, the characters are made to speak their lines by means of words that appear to flow mysteriously from their mouths. This is the first time that “talking pictures” have been shown and they will prove bewildering and amusing to everyone. (qtd. in Altman 167)

It is not hard to see this fascination with, and marketing of, animated texts in the context of what Tom Gunning describes as the “cinema of attractions”—a defining characteristic of early pre-narrative cinema, which “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” (58). It is precisely through this integration of printed intertitles into the spectrum of cinematographic effects that filmmakers were able to transcend the purely descriptive function of words on the screen.

Interest in, and attention to, the presentation of intertitles continued into the next decades of silent cinema and emerged most forcefully during the 1910s and '20s as a key polemic in French avant-garde film theory and criticism. Not surprisingly, the proponents of *cinéma pur*, whose aspirations were to expunge the cinema of any residues of literary contamination in order that it might develop as an autonomous art form, were chiefly positioned in opposition to the use of intertitles in any context. Louis Delluc, the leading mouthpiece for the *cinéma pur* tendency, stated, “Let’s say it once again, the text should not be there when it can be replaced by an image. Subtitles are used too often. This unsettles the movement—and the spectator” (qtd. in Ghali 195).<sup>3</sup> Gustave Fréjaville, in a 1921 issue of *Ciné pour tous*, launched his own missile on the intertitle from within the wider battleground of word-image discourse: “The image disappears and gives way to a written description. To look at a painting we must read a text. Since looking and reading are two different processes, the eyes and the brain cope uneasily with such barbaric gymnastics” (Ghali 192).<sup>4</sup> The significance of this statement extends well beyond the purist

debates of the early avant-garde film theorists, entering into a more complex consideration of the cognitive effort required when one is faced with two ostensibly opposed systems of signification. Fréjaville, perhaps inadvertently, touches on issues that were by no means unique to the cinema and its reliance then on explanatory texts. In his discussion of René Magritte’s painting *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29), Michel Foucault makes a similar point, stating, “[T]he two systems [image and text] can neither merge nor intersect. In one way or another, subordination is required. Either the text is ruled by the image . . . or else the image is ruled by the text” (32). Roland Barthes also points in this direction when he describes the relationship of text (in advertising) to (the photographic) image as essentially “parasitic.” Barthes, like Foucault, sees this relationship as one of dominance, in which one mode of representation facilitates the other. The historical shift in cultural production, he argues, gives precedence to the text as the carrier of meaning, the process by which the connotative plurality of the image is harnessed and hinged to a specific message:

In the traditional modes of illustration the image functioned as an episodic return to denotation from a principle message (the text) which was experienced as connoted since, precisely, it needed an illustration; in the relationship that now holds, it is not the image which comes to elucidate or “realize” the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image. (Barthes 26)

How to overcome this apparent incompatibility of text and image? How might we see these debates around the competing channels of communication being played out, and resolved, in film? It would seem that filmmakers such as Edwin S. Porter found a way to strike a balance between the two modes of expression, embracing the idea that, as Robert Desnos later pointed out, “everything that can be projected on the screen belongs in the cinema, letters as well as faces” (98).<sup>5</sup> Yet although those early

experiments opened up new ways of conceiving text as image, as well as text *and* image (and I will return to these experiments later in my discussion of the work of Peter Rose), they do not directly address the tension, highlighted by both Fréjaville and Foucault, between modes of viewing and modes of reading. The film that most effectively dramatized this dialectic was, of course, Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926). Here, Duchamp's rotoreliefs alternate strings of homonymic puns spiraling in on themselves with actual spiral patterns that, when set in motion, create the illusion of depth. The punning title can be seen to function, among other things, as an ironic reference to the earlier avant-garde film theorists, with their romantic, high-modernist notions of a pure cinema, stripped of all "parasitic" (Barthes's term comes in handy here) elements (literature, theater) and reborn as a svelte, self-sufficient art form, free of the excess weight of literary history. Duchamp's film questions Foucault's conception of an inherent word-image hierarchy by interrogating the ways in which their combination, or rather alternation, effectuates a literal and conceptual dialogue (we are reminded here of the literalizing of conversations in silent cinema, discussed previously) between modes of representation *and* modes of reception. P. Adams Sitney's account of the film elucidates the terms of this delicate balance:

At first sight *Anémic Cinéma* would seem to underline the difference between optical and verbal images. Two modes of representation are held together by the figure of a spiral. And as we begin to perceive the puns as implicated in sexual play, that play determines the way in which the spiral images are seen . . . The sexuality is neither in the literal surface of the words nor in the optical illusion. It is an operation of the viewer's reading of one part of the film into the other. ("Image and Title" 104)

Clearly, *Anemic Cinema* does not suggest that the two sign systems can be successfully merged, nor does it express any desire to do so; rather, it develops a structure whereby the

traditionally distinct processes of viewing and reading are superimposed one onto the other in ways that challenge their supposed autonomy. Although the boundaries between the textual and the pictorial are largely maintained in relation to the typography itself, the circular *in*raveling of the text invites what we might call a kind of "pictorial" or "visual" reading (distinct from the process of "reading images" with which I began this article), where textual linearity is combined with graphic arrangement.

This was not, of course, a new phenomenon at the time of Duchamp's film. Published in 1897, Stéphane Mallarmé's revolutionary visual poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* had already instigated a tendency that would resonate throughout, and beyond, literary and artistic modernism, even, as we shall see, influencing much of contemporary digital poetry. Mallarmé's radical typographical layout, which sees words of different sizes and typefaces cascading down and across the page in seemingly random fashion, is shot through with pictorial concerns. Additionally, the poet instructed his readers to "read" the blank space, claiming its signifying importance to be equal to that of the black type to which it is all too often subordinated. Behind this initially perplexing concept (how can we "read" empty space?<sup>6</sup>) lies an attempt to emphasize the graphic qualities of the visual layout, thus encouraging a process of both reading and seeing.

If Mallarmé's poem set out to merge the literary with the pictorial, it was also an exercise in bringing text to life, notably through the combination of different fonts and styles. Mallarmé described *Un Coup de dés* as kinetic rather than static and asserted that it "must be animated, or mobilized by the work of a reader/spectator" (Shaw 171).<sup>7</sup> In her discussion of the poem in relation to contemporary dance, Deirdre Reynolds argues that "the overall visual layout of the text invites kinaesthetic empathy by appealing to our sense of spatial position, gravity and balance, producing movement sensations" (42). That the date of the poem's publication coincides roughly with the first cinema screenings in France is perhaps not incidental

in this context, and we might assume that film, along with other temporal, kinetic arts such as music and dance, were instrumental in shaping Mallarmé's literary approach. But whatever the poet's influences might have been, his interest in pursuing a form of kinetic text can clearly be perceived as a precursor to, as well as an influencing factor on, the development of animated text in the cinema.

A comparable desire to free words from the shackles of literary tradition later reemerged in the Futurist movement, where the revolutionary "leaps and bounds of style" also included the "swift sensations" of italics that Reynolds identifies in relation to *Un Coup de dés* (Marinetti, *Critical Writings* 128). F. T. Marinetti's notion of *parole in libertà*, or "words-in-freedom," pushes Mallarmé's innovations one step further: "We shall set in motion the words-in-freedom that smash the boundaries of literature as they march towards painting, music, noise-art, and throw a marvelous bridge between the word and the real object" (Marinetti et al., "The Futurist Cinema" 217).

This last comment resonates throughout the history of written texts in the cinema in a number of ways. But I would like to reinterpret its meaning somewhat to consider the "real object" of the word—or the word as a concrete material entity existing *in* the world, not simply describing it. The Futurists appear to have approached this idea when, in their 1916 "Manifesto of Futurist Cinema," they referred to "filmed words-in-freedom-in-movement" (Marinetti et al., "The Futurist Cinema" 218). In their discussion of the Futurists' conception of cinema, Mario Verdone and Günter Berghaus pass over the radical implications of this notion of filmed text, claiming that "despite these 'bookish' suggestions, the manifesto also contained many progressive, and indeed avant-garde thoughts" (409). This stance is derived from their belief that the authors of the manifesto "were still rooted in a culture of words rather than pure images" (409). The very notion of "pure images" in many ways seems like a regressive return to the arguments of the *cinéma pur* theorists of the 1920s and, moreover,

assumes a strict division between words and images that overlooks the potential of words *as* images. Is it not possible, one might ask, to be "bookish" while *at the same time* embracing the creative and pictorial possibilities—through their concrete properties—of words in movement? I would argue, contrary to Berghaus and Verdone, that it is precisely in their conception of a collision of word and image in the cinema that the Futurists were at their *most* progressive, conceiving of new systems of visual and verbal signification, notably through the idea of text *as* image, which would find expression in the decades that followed.

### Text as Image in the Films of Peter Rose

Although written texts continued to appear in experimental film post-1920s—Len Lye and Norman McLaren scratched and painted words onto the emulsion, as did the Lettrists of the 1950s—the 1970s and '80s saw a proliferation of "screen writings," films that shared the common goal of breaking through the traditional word-image dichotomy, incorporating, like those filmmakers at the beginning of the century, written texts into the visual fabric of the film. James Benning's *Grand Opera* (1978), Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1982), Morgan Fisher's *Projection Instructions* (1976) and *Standard Gauge* (1985), Hollis Frampton's *Poetic Justice* (1985), and the language-based videos and installations by Gary Hill are just a few examples of work in this area.<sup>8</sup> Bart Testa has very convincingly drawn out the correspondences between the early experiments in screen writings and the later explorations of American filmmakers such as Snow, Frampton, and more recently, David Gatten, arguing that "a bifurcation of seeing and reading that pertains to *mimesis* (*showing*) and *diegesis* (*telling*) opens the difference at the same time it explores the effects of their conjunction that we tend to take for granted" (n.p.). My argument, as is clear from the preceding pages, follows a similar trajectory to that of Testa, assessing the way in which approaches to written texts in the cinema

point, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to the discourse surrounding word and image. My analysis departs from Testa's in its emphasis on the ability of this word-image dialectic to reflect on wider issues of cinematic ontology, physicality, and performance. In the remainder of this article, I concentrate predominantly on the contemporary American artist Peter Rose, whose early films and videos directly and consistently engage with what he describes as the "surface of language." I draw on a series of interviews with the artist carried out during the summer of 2009 in order to elucidate the intricacies of his creative approach to kinetic text.

Although his work has received significantly less critical attention than that of filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow, Peter Rose is undoubtedly one of the most interesting artists to have explored the relationship between word and image. Like Frampton and Snow, whose films *Zorn's Lemma* (1970) and *So Is This* have been discussed at length, Rose's work in the 1980s and into the 1990s shifted toward an interest in cinema and language, both written and spoken. Unlike Frampton and Snow, however, his films have always sat awkwardly within the self-perpetuating categorization of American avant-garde cinema, instigated most powerfully by P. Adams Sitney in his seminal yet widely contested book *Visionary Film*.<sup>9</sup> Rose's film and video works, by his own admission, are positioned somewhere between structural and lyrical tendencies, engaging with both but never fully adhering to either.<sup>10</sup> The period I would like to refer to here clouds the issue of categorization even further, since it includes a transition from film to video and extends the still hazily defined terrain of kinetic text in the cinema. The two film works, *Secondary Currents* (1982) and *SpiritMatters* (1984), explore quite different approaches to the subject (though, as we will see, often through similar devices); whereas the former emphasizes the flat surface of the screen, the latter draws attention to the transparent surface of the filmstrip. Furthermore, if *SpiritMatters* is a philosophical meditation on the nature of cinema, *Secondary Currents* both questions

and attempts to escape language through language, and meaning through entropy. Finally, whereas *Secondary Currents* is described by Rose as a "film noir" (sound but no sight), *SpiritMatters* is a "silent film" (sight but no sound).

In *Secondary Currents* the visual content of the film is reduced to a black screen against which a series of white computer-generated texts appear, initially presented at the bottom of the screen in conventional subtitle format and then gradually breaking free of this constraint by taking up different formal arrangements within the frame. On the soundtrack a disembodied narrator speaks a strange, imaginary dialect (Rose's own invention composed of a mixture of languages and intonations, which reappears in a number of his subsequent films), accompanied by an eerie musical score that foretells a mysterious narrative. The narrator, played by Rose himself, speaks of being lost between thought and language and of his alienating inability to consolidate the two processes into a single state of being. On a deeper level, of course, this dichotomy—the tenuous relationship between two interrelated systems—subtly betrays a concern with the attempt to bring together the visual and the textual, word and image. Significantly, as Rose points out, the title *Secondary Currents* "can be taken to refer to a phenomenon in physics whereby an electrical current in one coil induces a current in the second, completely unattached wire" (message to the author). The idea of translation, or of exchange between one mode of communication and another, is therefore inscribed into the film on a number of different levels—both implicitly and explicitly. An example of the latter is, of course, Rose's reference to the more general experience of viewing foreign-language films, where discrepancies between the spoken and the written frequently arise, leading either to a sense of frustration or to comic dissociation. Indeed, the reliability of the subtitles is frequently undermined in *Secondary Currents*, as when an interminably long sentence is translated simply, and tellingly, as "Nonsense," a statement that also foreshadows the breakdown of communication

further on in the film. Thus, while exploring the cinematic potential of kinetic texts and the shifting registers of word and image, Rose also explores broader questions of cultural difference through language.

Just as we, the reader/viewer, adjust to this game of simultaneous translation, dutifully piecing together the (increasingly obscure) “story” from the subtitles, Rose has us jumping through intellectual hoops in a desperate attempt to keep up with the impossibly abstruse vocabulary and dense fabric of signification—until, that is, the subtitles reach an absurd level of linguistic complexity:

I began to fear a kind of contamination /  
 an invidious adumbration of thought, /  
 the effusion of an inchoate substrate of pre-  
 libidinal energy, / an unrepentant dilation of  
 constructed meaning / whose meandering  
 lucubrations / foretold the essential entropy  
 / of euphostolic processes and peregrina-  
 tions. . . .

As Scott MacDonald points out, “whilst the text itself continues to make sense, the viewer quickly loses the ability to apprehend it” (157), since the phrase-by-phrase presentation through the subtitles fragments and disrupts the reading process. Crucially, Rose pinpoints the shift from text to image and from reading to viewing at the very moment when verbal communication breaks down. The transitional sentence—“not subsinct or otherwise glottal or / schismatic can proct mismal gloating”—effectuates a passage from sense to nonsense, while the repetition of similar words and sounds (“glottal” becomes “gloating”) echoes the punning wordplay of

Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (which itself relates to the literary games of the Dada and Surrealists, including Robert Desnos). From this point onward, the text slides a slippery slope to abstraction, with each successive subtitle leading the viewer toward the foretold “essential entropy,” as seen here:

rt l px ex: s s at l  
 t-thel: kthe ls o  
 ke Inc i ! u a je t s le  
 ee tri-sit pn vo tep

These randomized strings of letters and punctuation marks lead gradually to clusters and then blocks of text that, in their visual formation, begin to resemble concrete poetry. The blocks themselves multiply and spread until the entire screen is filled with an unruly, indistinguishable mass of animated letters that swims in all directions. Again, to quote MacDonald, “[t]he entropy of the ‘narration’ is visualized in a culmination of Rose’s exploration of cinematic text as image” (157–58).

As the written communication explodes, so too does the narrator’s speech, signaled first in what seems to be an anguished attempt to express the overly complex sentences—what Rose refers to earlier in his narration as “the tangled administration of language”—and then developing into a comical series of gasps, guttural noises, and accompanying improvised percussion that builds toward a full-blown acoustic performance. It is from this performative perspective that *Secondary Currents* demonstrates correspondences with earlier literary movements, notably Dadaism (with its simultaneous poetry performances), but particularly Futurism.

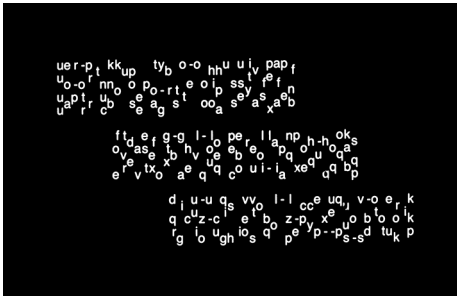


Figure 1: Film still from *Secondary Currents*. Courtesy of the artist.



Matteo D'Ambrosio's description of the Futurist performances is instructive here in underlining the "verbivocovisual"<sup>11</sup> emphasis of Marinetti's "words-in-freedom" (in movement):

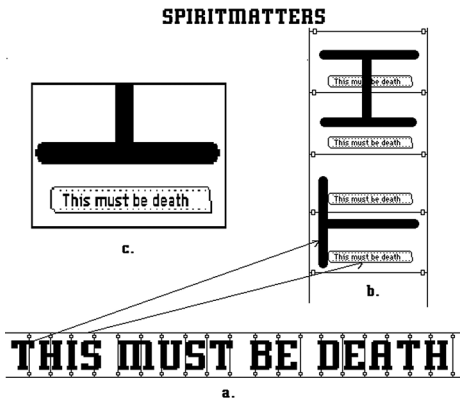
The Futurist poets recited their Words-in-Freedom with a particular musical and acoustic quality and combined them with sound accompaniment, thus deforming the materials of verbal language in order to express their ideas better. They invented new words and verbalized their deepest emotions in a highly abstract manner. (273)

In ways similar to the Futurists, then, Rose embraces and foregrounds the concrete material properties of both the visual and the spoken word, breaking them down to their constitutive components. In this sense, as indicated previously, the film also demonstrates strong affinities with concrete poetry, a literary tendency that began in the 1950s through the Brazilian group Noigandres. One could even say that Rose realizes the Futurists' dream of "words-in-freedom-in-movement," while at the same time creating a cinematic version of concrete poetry's fusion of the literary and the pictorial.

At the end of *Secondary Currents*, a final statement emerges out of the chaos in large block letters: "I FEAR / I DISSOLVE / MY VOICE / EXPLODING / MEANING." The element of humor that has characterized the film up to that point literally dissolves in the state of visual and aural confusion in which both narrator and spectator become lost, both giving themselves up to a state of meaninglessness that is as frightening as it is liberating. In the final moments of the film, Rose further problematizes the process of reading by writing directly onto the filmstrip, as did Man Ray in *Le Retour à la raison*, discussed earlier.<sup>12</sup> Here, however, this constitutes not a fleeting glimpse of a "text-image," but a secret message that "is only available should the viewer have access to the actual film, as opposed to the theatrical projection of it" (MacDonald 158). The text reads, "I sense a luminous transparency, a limitless linear aperture of an indecipherable articulate intelligence—I sense arising, a silent perpen-

dicular emissary unfolding from the invisible. It is becoming vast, provotic, spectral. All is clear now!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Luminous transparency, limitless linear aperture, silent perpendicular emissary—these are all references to the material properties of cinema and "the experience that led us to examine the intriguing marks on the strip of (clear) celluloid" (MacDonald 158). Thus, the film ends with the ultimate self-reflexive gesture through which identity (re) appears within the very fabric of cinematic communication. Our consideration of text-as-image is therefore transformed into a meditation on film-as-film and the relationship between the body of the film and the consciousness of the filmmaker. Indeed, questions of (dis)embodiment are interwoven through the film, particularly in the oscillation between bodily presence and absence within the narration. Furthermore, in its visceral appeal to the spectator through a mounting, multisensory stimulation, the final moments of the film, like the sudden impact at the end of *How It Feels to Be Run Over*, use text (as image) to elicit a physical response to the material of language and the material of film.

Many of the central concerns of *Secondary Currents* reappear in *SpiritMatters*, and a comparison of the two films allows us to understand Rose's approach to language and cinema, to text and image. Here we find, once again, a concentration on a textual form of communication, only this time it is, as Rose describes, "a silent monologue," with none of the invented speech that characterizes *Secondary Currents* as well as much of Rose's performance work. In fact, *SpiritMatters* seems to be a direct continuation of the final sequence of *Secondary Currents*, where the narrator's voice becomes lost in the material fabric of the film and can only "speak" through the celluloid itself. In *SpiritMatters*, the entire text of the film was written onto a strip of clear film, which was then refilmed on a light table over a series of static translations, themselves written onto thin strips of white paper. In a complex web of self-referentiality, the paper strips, with holes punched into the edges, are like miniature filmstrips, as Rose's drawing demonstrates.



THE FILM IS CONSTRUCTED BY WRITING (a) DIRECTLY ON CLEAR CELLULOID. THESE STRIPS ARE RE-FILMED ON A LIGHT TABLE AND SUPERED OVER THE ORIGINAL (b) TO SERVE AS "SUBTITLED TRANSLATION" FOR THE UNREADABLE INSCRIPTION. (c) SHOWS THE IMAGE VIEWED AS PROJECTED.

Figure 2: *Spirit Matters*: a diagrammatic explanation. Courtesy of the artist.

So if *Secondary Currents* involves the translation of an incomprehensible spoken language through the subtitles, *SpiritMatters* translates the words written onto the filmstrip, emphasizing two levels of cinematic reading—one in space and the other in time, one on a vertical plane and the other horizontal. This is the principle means by which Rose questions the very basis of cinematic representation, using the literal process of translation as a metaphor for film's material and mechanical foundations. The initially obscure text of this apparently "esoteric film" (as the title sequence announces) turns out to be, quite simply, a series of self-reflexive observations on this theme, emphasized by the foregrounding of the projector itself, whose presence—or performance—is signaled in the constant mechanical whirring that provides the film with its minimal soundtrack.

About a third of the way into the film, this process becomes, as it were, "clear," as Rose switches the register of legibility from the background to the foreground, encouraging the viewer to read (the) film. The obscure, but telling, statement "BUT YOU WHO EXIST IN REALITY ARE POWERLESS TO DISCERN ITS TRUE NATURE / AND CAN ONLY GLIMPSE IT IN FRAGMENTS" is followed by the not-so-obscure revelation that

"THIS IS A METAPHOR / DO YOU UNDERSTAND? / IS THIS LEGIBLE?????????????" The repetition of the question mark corresponds to the extended duration of the image on the filmstrip, which quivers uncertainly on the screen. The inherently fragmentary nature of (celluloid-based) cinema is literalized by the spelling out of the words, letter by letter, on the filmstrip, leading to an absurd and exaggerated stretching out of the accompanying translations. The text continues, "LISTEN! I'LL SLOW DOWN. SSSSSO00000 / YYYYYO0000UUUUUU / CCCCCAAAAANNNNNN," followed by the word "understand," now extending diagonally from one corner to another. As the text proceeds in this manner, the underlying translations, which can no longer be legibly read, are increasingly arranged into formally determined clusters, thus echoing the transition from text to image that characterizes the earlier *Secondary Currents*.

The process of translation, on which the film hinges, draws our attention specifically to notions of truth and reliability inherent to both linguistic and pictorial representation. Rose self-consciously draws attention to the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, or as the monologue of *Secondary Currents* narrates, that hazy, no-man's land be-

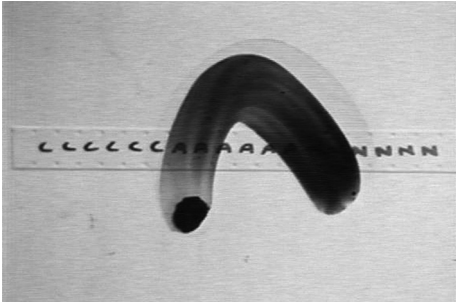


Figure 3: Frame capture from *Spirit Matters*.  
Courtesy of the artist.

tween thought and language that, in that film, threatens to destabilize identity. Of course, this in itself is not a new phenomenon, as Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, with its warning that "ceci n'est pas une pipe," makes clear. The originality of *SpiritMatters* in this sense, however, lies in the use of film's inherent material properties to stage the tension between word and image, and vice versa. As in *Secondary Currents*, Rose interrupts the correspondence, or translations, between two levels of meaning once the "rules" of the game have been established. Here the text states, "THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SIMULTANEOUS VERIFICATION / I MAY BE LYING / I MAY LEAVE CONCEALED SIGNALS FOR THE VERY FEW WHO PERCEIVE OBJECTIVELY."<sup>13</sup> What follows has been described by Rose as "cinematic graffiti," where brightly colored letters and words "painted" directly onto the film-strip pass by in a flurry of visual stimuli (perhaps a reference to the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage) that sees the text breaking into the realms of the pictorial. The viewer is plunged into a tactile sensory experience that privileges form, texture, and color over any kind of linguistic meaning. Again, the breakdown in communication—the unreliability of translation—leads us into a kind of visual entropy, but this is also, inevitably, a comment on the inherent unreliability of cinematic representation. What we can rely on, Rose seems to suggest, is a material, physical connection with the medium of film, which forces us to look for meaning not outward toward the world of representations, but inward toward our own bodily experience.

Related to this, the foregrounding of cinema's ontological basis (the sequential presentation of still images) functions, for Rose, as a way of thinking through, or spatializing, death. He explained in a May 2009 interview,

I was trying to make sense of [death] conceptually . . . I was thinking that the usual model for the afterlife is that people continue on in a parallel time zone to ours. That doesn't really make sense. It's much more like a perpendicular departure. If you think of us as going in a horizontal time direction, when someone dies they go vertical. I was trying to come up with some way of alluding to perpendicular time, and *SpiritMatters* is very much about the inaccessibility of the actual writing on the film from the perspective of what we see in the screening space. In other words, there's another dimension that is inaccessible to us unless we go to the projection box and read it while it's running.

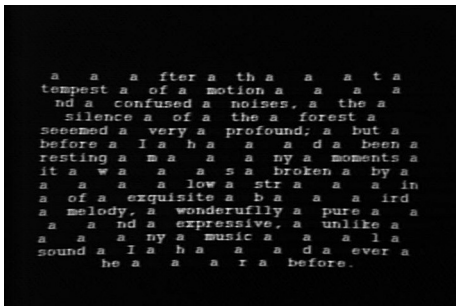
The film thus becomes, we could say, a "performance" of thought through the very act of writing, which itself stages the cinema's paradoxical conflation of stillness and motion, presence and absence. But Rose's association of the cinema with death also has exceptional contemporary relevance in relation to new digital technologies and the resulting "death of cinema" discourse, which in many ways foreshadows.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note, in this context, that *SpiritMatters* was the last film that Rose would shoot on celluloid, giving the metaphor itself a dual significance. His subsequent text-based works signal the transition from film

to video technology, with *Foit Yet Cleem Triavith* (1988), *Siren* (1990), and *Genesis* (1991) flaunting their computer-generated video aesthetic.

This transition, while demonstrating a clear aesthetic continuity from Rose's previous text films, particularly *Secondary Currents*, also shifts the work into more experiential terrain. Based on W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest* (1904), *Siren* intersperses subjective images of a forest with blocks of white text against a black background, reminiscent of the layout of *Secondary Currents*.

As the voice on the soundtrack recounts the story, individual letters are subtly animated through an alternation between one letter and another. This movement interrupts the reading process, shifting the eye from the words themselves to the (haptic) surface of the screen. Yet, as in Rose's earlier work, the focus is not simply the shift from word to image, from reading to viewing, but rather a process by which the words are given an organic performative quality. As Rose explained in a June 2009 interview,

the animation of the text is an attempt to visualise or embody the physical structure of sounds being heard from a jungle-like environment. The letters are changing in unpredictable ways and there's a homology or a correspondence between the kinetic articulation of that text and what it's talking about. It's not completely random. So in each case I'm trying to find a kind of choreographic translation of the text, so that one reads it on a textual level but then also experiences it in kinetic terms that are consonant with what you're reading.



Curiously, this description has echoes of the “kinaesthetic empathy” that Deirdre Reynolds identifies as one of the key elements of Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*—the ability to translate meaning through feeling and movement through reading. Furthermore, Rose’s emphasis on the experiential brings to mind Arthur Rimbaud’s “alchemy of the word” or Paul Eluard’s “*langage sensible*,” both of which represent attempts to bridge the gap between sensation and its expression through language. Rose extends these notions into the concrete properties of the text itself, which tie together image, word, and feeling. The emphasis on embodiment thus allows us to make some crucial historical leaps and associations, opening up new ways of understanding kinetic text in experimental film as a vital development in artistic and literary investigations into the creative potential of words in movement.

## From Experimental Film to Digital Poetry

The journey that takes us from the kinetic poetry of Mallarmé through the “primitive” films of the early twentieth century, the experiments of the French avant-garde, and the Futurists’ visions of *words-in-freedom-in-movement* does not terminate with the language explorations of Peter Rose and his contemporaries. Nor does it remain within the confines of either film or video. In fact, our consideration of kinetic text returns us to the literary, or rather propels us toward contemporary forms of writing through digital poetry and electronic literature. In an interview from 1992, Augusto de Campos, the Brazilian concrete poet and founder of the

Figure 4: Frame capture from *Siren*. Courtesy of the artist.

Noigandres group, points to the contemporary relevance of this historical trajectory. Making explicit the shift from static to kinetic text, de Campos states,

The virtual movement of the printed word, the typogram, is giving way to the real movement of the computerized word, the videogram, and to the typography of the electronic era. From static to cinematic poetry, which, combined with computerized sound resources, can raise the verbivocovisual structures preconceived by [concrete poetry] to their most complete materialization. (Greene n.p.)

That this observation on the historical lineage of kinetic text was made in the decade following the most important developments in word and image in the cinema (seen particularly in the works of Snow, Frampton, and Rose) is especially relevant when considering the overlapping concerns of digital poetry and experimental film, as suggested particularly by de Campos's use of the term "cinematic poetry."

The work of South Korean artists Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) is one such example of the increasingly blurred boundary between the cinema and Internet-based literature. The duo's film-poems are programmed in Flash software and draw heavily on both the aesthetics of the cinema and the creative possibilities opened up by new technologies and new viewing contexts. Rejecting the interactive basis of much Internet art, YHCHI plays precisely on the continuous projection of the cinema: the viewer cannot move forward or backward through the works, nor can they stop the continuous flow, except to restart the piece from the beginning. The loss of control is, in fact, an inherent part of the viewing experience, in which the process of reading is problematized. As Jessica Pressman observes of *Dakota*, the duo's most famous work to date, the text—"capitalized and unornamented"—"flashes against a stark white background in speeding synchronization to jazz music. Individual words and phrases pulse out from centre screen to take possession of the white space before they are replaced by more text" (302). These white spaces, of course, bring

us back to the "blancs" of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*, but the Flash aesthetic and the minimalist form of presentation are equally reminiscent of the flicker films of the 1960s. A useful point of comparison here would be *Word Movie* (1960), a text-based film by Paul Sharits, in which words flash onto the screen at a rate of one word per frame, and where reading (text) and viewing (image) collide in an intense perceptual overload. This process by which text becomes image is present also in *Dakota's* emphasis on the concrete properties of the words themselves, which strike out at the viewer, jitter, and recede into the seemingly three-dimensional space of the screen. The chaotic visual presentation of the words stands in for the adrenaline rush of the alcohol-fueled road trip they describe, in much the same way as the text of Peter Rose's *Siren* translates, or embodies, the sensory experience of the jungle-like environment. In both works, sound is used to further emphasize the visceral impact of the letters, particularly in *Dakota*, where the high-octane jazz music seems to jolt each word into action.

In a sense, then, the use of text in these works functions not only to describe but also to perform experience. Other digital works have pushed this performative element a step further to bestow on the words anthropomorphic characteristics, as in Brian Kim Stefans's *The Dream Life of Letters* (1999)<sup>15</sup> and Jim Andrews's *Seattle Life of Letters* (1997).<sup>16</sup> In the latter, a short text in the corner of the computer screen tells the reader/viewer: "I'm a bad text / I used to be a poem / but drifted from the scene. / Do me. / I just want you to do me." When the "reader" clicks on the instruction to "Do the text," the words break up, drifting and jittering riotously around the screen before disappearing out of the frame. The subtle transition from text to image through animated movement, in which words are given a life of their own, is reminiscent of the final moments of Rose's *Secondary Currents* and, of course, the intertitles of early cinema. Invoking similar connections to those early experiments, *The Dream Life of Letters*—based on a poem by Rachel Blau DuPlessis—involves an elaborately choreographed acrobatic performance of the alphabet,

where animated words come together in unexpected combinations and graphic arrangements. Like the narrative poems of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, the piece is significant in the way it combines the conventions of poetry with those of the cinema. Indeed, Stefans describes it as “much more like a short film than an interactive piece.”<sup>17</sup>

This fascinating historical circularity, which cuts across artistic boundaries and brings film and digital poetry into an intimate dialogue, offers a more comprehensive account of the development of kinetic text in art, film, and literature than has previously been attempted. Clearly, Internet art opens up new possibilities for the intersection of word and image and provides scope for more extensive investigations, particularly in relation to the form of performative writing and embodied reading that I have touched on here. This historical sketch allows us to track consistent concerns from one time period to another, from one art form to another, and from one medium to another. Advances in digital technologies have undoubtedly transformed the way we read, and written texts, particularly in the form of Web pages, are arguably now fully integrated into the pictorial. The early debates around word and image in the cinema thus take on renewed significance, just as the very idea of “cinema” as a singular concept is thrown into question by the works that have emerged in recent years. The sustained explorations into kinetic text by artists such as Peter Rose provide us with a compelling focal point from which to cast our eye both backward and forward in time. Coming in the aftermath of structuralist semiotics, these films represent a conscious attempt to overturn rigid structures of linguistic understanding by emphasizing the visual, sensual, and performative characteristics of words in movement and by creating ruptures in both visual and linguistic communication. In an era of intermediality, they provide a vital source of inspiration for contemporary film and digital media artists continually in search of new ways to, in an echo of the Futurists over a century ago, “smash the boundaries” between literature and the moving image.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Arijon; Barthes; Bellour; Metz; Mity; and Hedges.
2. Daniel Barnett explores these “two perspectives on the movie screen.” Interestingly, he asserts that “the cinema of the surface, as well as being nearly drama free, is nearly grammar free” (17–18). This further elucidates the shift from languages *of* the cinema to language *in* the cinema.
3. “Le texte, redisons-le, ne doit pas être là quand l’image peut le remplacer. On abuse du sous-titre. Cela gêne le mouvement—et le spectateur.”
4. “L’image disparaît et fait place à une légende écrite. Nous regardions un tableau, il nous faut lire un texte. Comme regarder et lire sont deux opérations différentes, les yeux et le cerveau supportent malaisément cette gymnastique barbare.”
5. “[T]out ce qui peut être projeté sur l’écran appartient au cinéma, les lettres comme les visages.”
6. For a cognitive account of reading space, see Knowles, Schaffner, Weger, and Roberts.
7. The kinetic element of the poem has also been discussed by Deirdre Reynolds in “Le mouvement pur et le silence déplacé par la voltige: Mallarmé and Dance, from Symbolism to Post-Modernism,” particularly in relation to dance.
8. See MacDonald for a fuller discussion of these works.
9. In the most compelling criticism of Sitney, Grahame Weinbren states that “[the book] defined the subject, the object of study, the relevant figures and the approach to the whole ball of wax. Not only were we younger generation of filmmakers shut out, but we remained shut out, as a lost generation of filmmakers whose work was ignored or reviled” (8–9).
10. See Knowles for a fuller discussion of the structural and lyrical tendencies in Rose’s work.
11. The term “verbivocovisual” derives from the Brazilian group Noigandres’s manifesto of concrete poetry.
12. Similar connections between screenwriting and the materiality of cinema are made by the French filmmaker Frédérique Devaux in her *Journalités / Journal non filmé* (1995), where the performative element of cinematic inscription takes center stage. Here, the filmstrip literally acts as a diary onto which the filmmaker recorded various events and reflections over a twelve-year period by scratching directly into the emulsion. Devaux’s references within the film to her visits to founder of the Lettrist movement Maurice Lemaître underscore the relationship between the film and the Lettrists’ own violations of the cinematic material.
13. Michael Snow’s *So Is This* involves a similar reference to the unreliability of the text in its statement, early on in the film, that “[t]his film will be about 2 hours long. Does that seem like a frightening

prospect? Well, look at it this way: how do you know this isn't lying?"

14. Paulo Cherchi Usai states, for example, that in the age of the digital, "moving image preservation will be redefined as the science of gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like a physician who has accepted the inevitability of death, even while he fights for the patient's life" (105). See also Mulvey.

15. Available at [http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans\\_the\\_dreamlife\\_of\\_letters/dreamlife\\_index.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/dreamlife_index.html) (accessed 20 June 2013).

16. <http://www.vispo.com/animisms/SeattleDriftEnglish.html> (accessed 20 June 2013).

17. [http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans\\_the\\_dreamlife\\_of\\_letters/dreamlife\\_index.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/dreamlife_index.html) (accessed 20 June 2013).

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