

The Poetics of ‘Videopoetry’ and Video blogs

Emelia Noronha^{1,2+}

¹HSS Department, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India.

²Prahladrai Dalmia Lions College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai, India.

Abstract. The present paper aims to identify the elements of ‘videopoetry’ and classify it into types. It further explores the elements that ‘videopoetry’ shares with video blogs. A brief analysis of a ‘videopoem’ and a video blog is the methodology used to come to the conclusion that images, sound, motion, special effects of sound and light, materiality and positioning of the text and other cinematographic techniques are the elements that ‘videopoetry’ shares with video blogs. In short this paper is an attempt to define the poetics of ‘videopoetry’, the digital avatar of multimedia poetry and video blogs.

Keywords: video poem, video blogs, poetics, videopoetry.

1. Introduction

Italo Calvino [1] proposed two types of imaginative process: “the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression”. Video poetry, the digital avatar of multimedia poetry, is an example of the second type of imagination. In 1978 Tom Knowes of Montreal’s Vehicule Poets coined the term ‘videopoetry’ to describe his multimedia work. The basic problem with the so called ‘videopoetry’ is that its proponents have not been successful in defining themselves and their work in precise terms so as to make themselves independent in a way that would indicate a clear evolution of new genre. Their attempt at defining ‘videopoetry’ is like the automobile being described as the ‘horseless carriage’ which indeed is an inadequate way of describing the phenomenon. The present paper attempts to define the poetics of ‘videopoetry’ and draw the lines of similarities that it shares with video blogs.

2. Analysing ‘Videopoetry’

A ‘videopoem’ like that of Talal Khoury’s dramatization of Mahmoud Darwish’s poem ‘Personal Duty’[2] that won a Special Jury Prize at the 2009 Dubai International Film Festival can be taken as an example to study the poetics of ‘videopoetry’.

The poem as an artistic piece can be critically analysed from the point of view of narrativity, poetic juxtaposition and rhythm, elements that it shares with the more traditional, non-multimedia form of poetry. But these features alone do not make Talal Khoury’s ‘videopoem’ a masterpiece. The striking feature of this piece is the visual effect that the cinematic techniques create through the black and white film adding to the sombre effect of the theme of the poem. The sound effect that it starts with – the shrapnel being removed from the body of the martyred ‘hero’ – is an important poetic element that eventually gives the piece a proper sense of closure and finality. The traditional stringed instrumental piece synchronised perfectly with the thunder and rain providing the background score for the funeral gives the piece not only a local flavour but also heightens the thematic patriotic fervour that is resonant in the first half of the poem. Sound is pitted against absolute silence at pertinent junctures. The blackout technique is used effectively for the narrative to go back and forth in time.

The cinematic techniques of different shot sizes, such as the long shot to give the panoramic sense of the local tragedy and the close-ups to elucidate the finer emotions of the characters add to the meaning-making

⁺ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: emelia.n@rediffmail.com.

process. The ‘fade-in’ and ‘fade out’ techniques, the various camera angles, the light effects creating shadows and silhouettes, the flashback technique, all add to the aesthetic effect of the poem. Thus a ‘videopoem’ like this is hardly dependent on the voiced text alone. In fact, the various ways in which the visuals and sounds are arranged and rearranged defines the poetics of the poem.

‘Walking in Plastic’ [3] by Bandile Gumbe is a unique ‘videopoem’ produced by the South African artist, poet and filmmaker Kai Lossgott, who highlights the materiality of the theme with sound and choreographed movements that are highly stylized and performed by Mduduzi Nyembe. The performance artist Mduduzi Nyembe very skilfully gives a glimpse into the miseries of slum life – substance abuse, violence, gender inequalities, chronic unemployment and families’ incapacity to provide for and protect their children – all in just 7 minutes and 39 seconds. The poem makes use of stylized choreography, light and sound, close-ups and colour combinations of black and white interspersed with some red and green colour in the background, that cumulatively wring out the pathos in the poem.

Tom Knowes’ ‘Sign Language’ [4] is constructed from images of graffiti captured around the city of Vancouver. The rhythm of the poem is created by the careful juxtaposition of synchronized images – created through careful and slick editing – and the soundtrack, which accentuates the effect. The music entitled “You Haunt Me” is the soundtrack against which the poetic work is set thereby adding to the poetic effect of the work.

3. Elements of ‘Videopoetry’

The following are the defining features of ‘videopoetry’ based on the above analysis: Sound effect, Silence, techniques of fade-in and fade out, blackout - Music, Imagery through atmosphere and characters, Long and short cuts, Juxtaposition of scenes, Assonance between the written traditional text and the visual images, Stylized choreography, Synchronization of images and sound using sophisticated editing technology and skill.

In an attempt to chart the blueprint of ‘videopoetry’ and free it from being tagged as poetry films, poetry videos, film poetry, cyber-poetry, cine-poetry, kinetic poetry, digital poetry, poetronic, filming of poetry, etc. Tom Knowes in his *Manifesto on Videopoetry* [5] defines it as a ‘genre poetry that is displayed on screen, that is time based and has poetic juxtapositions of sound and images’. Knowes limits the idea of a videopoem to three elements - the text, images and sound. The text displayed on screen or voiced is an essential element. But ‘videopoetry’ cannot be constrained to just these three elements; it needs to take into account the cinematographic elements that make it a distinct genre of poetry. It is in the perfect blending of these cinematographic elements with the text, images and sound that it produces in the viewer the realization of a poetic experience – something akin to what in Indian aesthetics could be termed as ‘*rasa*’.

The text displayed on screen – words – is not the lone criteria that make a piece of art ‘poetic’. If poetry cannot be thought of without words, what about a poem that has a narrative without explicit text aren’t the sounds and images themselves enough to bring about the ‘poetic experience’? As ambiguity, symbolism, irony and other stylistic devices are elements of poetic diction; assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm are used to create a musical effect; metaphor, simile, metonymy create a resonance between disparate images; the ‘videopoem’ too needs to be analysed in terms of the various cinematographic stylistic devices that one would find in it. The elements enumerated by Tom Knowes in the *Manifesto on Videopoetry* – narrativity, poetic juxtaposition and rhythm – are based on our understanding of poetry in the verbal, written form. With video being the prime element of this emerging genre one needs to define it from a fresh perspective rather than define the new phenomenon from an older perspective.

If one has to chart the history of poetry, the declaimed poetry with its rhyme, rhythm and metrics accompanied by musical instruments were the norm in the case of medieval troubadour poetry. With the emergence of the writing system and then the print technology the process of writing poetry shorn of sound and music, rhyme and rhythm consolidated the importance of the written text. The emphasis shifted to diction, stylistic and spatial devices that the poetic text offered.

The technological revolution ushered in by computers followed by the Internet has changed the dynamics of understanding and creating art and poetry. The creative audio-visual content that the present

technological devices generate demands a new set of criteria that will help to create a theoretical construct by which we understand the forms that the new media is bringing forth. Thus the emphasis would be not on the traditional text alone but much more on the visual images, sound, motion, special effects of sound and images, materiality and positioning of the text - verbal, written and visual and the cinematographic techniques that it employs.

4. Types of 'Videopoetry'

'Videopoetry' can be categorized as follows:

- Kinetic poems: The poems in this category imply text animated over a neutral background. The poems by the Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries such as the poem – 'Dakota', 'Traveling To Utopia: With A Brief History Of The Technology' or 'What now' are video poems that can be categorized as Kinetic text.[6]
- Sound poems: Here the text is on the sound track. This poetry, a great development during the historic Futurist, Dadaist and Cubist vanguards is 'created by means of sounds which are separated, in a certain way, from the meaning (the phonemes don't form a word) and it represents a kind of digital poetry, usually named sound poetry'.[7] In some cases, it is separated from sound and digital, because the sound poetry is to be heard. Caterina Davinio's 'Zinskij, The last Letter' [8] is a text, voiced, digital unpublished sound poem from the cycle Terminal Video-Poems.
- Visual poems: This form of poetry displays text on screen superimposed over images that are captured or found. The juxtaposition of the on-screen text with the images that they are accompanied with produce a myriad of complex relationships and multiplicity of meanings. Tom Knowes' 'All this Day is Good For' is, in the words of Knowes, an ode to the 'simultaneous, true and false perceptions that collide in a 360 degree panoramic sweep of a moment in time, rendering life and art in equal measure'. The 'videopoem' is an assemblage of hundreds of spam emails that represent the lies that one confronts in everyday life. The poetic element lies in the unintentional truth of life that emerges out of these 'passion-laden letters'. As Knowes asserts 'In between mundane and altered reality lies that precious essence of life I see as poetry'.[9]
- Performance poems: Here the poet as a performer directly addresses the audience and performs his/her piece of poetic art. This form is not just a rendering of the poem by the artist but also a visual expression of art that uses the background, the setting of the 'videopoem', effectively to make the piece artistic. This form dates back to the oral tradition, but with the advent of sophisticated technology this art form is being revived in an avatar that is avant-garde. This poetry is in continuation with the foundation laid down by the beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.
- Cine (poetry): The text is animated or superimposed over graphics with the help of computer software in cine (poems). Caterina Davinio's 'The First Poetry Space Shuttle Landing on Second Life' [10] is a poem that can be categorized under this type of 'videopoetry'.
- Concept videopoems: These focus on the materiality of the language. Meaning is attributed to the process of presentation. The idea is most important and is executed meticulously in a methodical manner. The installations of David Small at the Mary Baker Eddy Library [11] for the Betterment of Humanity in Boston are an ideal example of such poetry. The animated sets of words of a quotation spill out from the fountain that is the centerpiece, migrate onto the floor, and swim up to the two arches in the Hall to resolve into their final form.

The types enumerated above are just categories that help to define the characteristics of a piece of art. One usually finds the types overlapping and flowing into one another, thus labelling an artistic piece would do gross injustice to the aesthetic experience the work entails to exhibit.

5. Similarities with Video blogs

A video blog or a 'vlog' as it is popularly known is a form of blogging through the medium of video. Instead of using the written mode as the medium of expression and communication, videos are posted by bloggers to get their ideas across to audiences. Video blog enthusiasts have exploded the blogging scene in

unique ways of self expression and commentary on issues that they feel strongly about. An analysis of few posts on one such video blog can serve to elucidate the characteristics these video blogs share with 'videopoetry'.

Video blogs by Dave Huth [12] are ideal specimens for analysis. Dave Huth's video blog entitled 'Humans' can be compared to the 'videopoem' – 'Blinking', a poem about heightened awareness produced by Rachel Burnham, Media Mike Hazard and David Bengtson. [13]

'Humans' with its juxtaposition of images of a variety of pupils glaring onto the camera, the faces of different colour and race that form a collage on the backdrop of jubilant music score underline the statement 'Who is our neighbor?'. The concept of the other 'the asian guy' the 'Muslim' is neatly woven into the poetic warp and weft of the artistic piece. The reference to 'E pluribus' meaning 'out of many, one' brings with itself several inter-textual references – Heraclitus's 10th fragment "The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one." St. Augustine in his Confessions (IV, 8), reminiscing of the friend of his childhood and youth whom he lost, describing the seething cauldron of his emotions, from which it was still possible to create unity, he says: "flagrare animos et ex pluribus unum facere." [14]

The elements of narrativity and juxtaposition in this video blog are similar to those found in the 'videopoem' – 'Blinking'. The black and white film blinking against the voiced text that also appears on the screen, the pupils glaring at the bare truth of life give the "Blinking" an immediacy that is similar to the sensibility that emerges in the video blog entitled 'Humans'. All these elements definitely assert that the video blog 'Humans' is also a 'videopoem', just because Huth does not call it one does not matter.

Another video blog entitled 'Meaning' by Dave Huth is a superb piece that neatly fits into the 'concept poetry' form and has almost all the elements that can be found in Tom Knowes' 'Sign Language'. The video blog- 'Meaning' is about the quintessential quest for finding the 'meaning' in life. The quest is in the similar mode of the modernist trying to find answers to existentialist problems and metaphysical questions as to 'why' we exist. The variety of reasons each of the protagonist in the video blog comes up with, eventually results in the annihilation of the entire race. This is what the video blog brings to the fore front. The blog makes strong statements and alludes to the crisis created by the 'meanings' that have emerged out of 'words' such as – oil, religion, consumerism, beauty – and the fetish created by these words. The poetic core of the video blog emerges through the juxtaposition of simple images of toys placed strategically with text pieces in the form of call-outs that are voiced by the viewer. The viewer like the traditional reader partakes in the meaning-making process which is ironical because the poetic video piece is an indictment upon 'meaning'.

Other pieces on the same blog such as 'Who will Tell me what to feel?' hints at the emptiness that is seething into the modern homes, with the television and its myriads of 'White Noise' all around, isolating the individual furthermore into a shell of one's own isolation. Another blog entitled 'Revolution' is a humorous satirical piece that takes a tongue in cheek jibe at the revolutionary speeches made by the self appointed revolutionary 'gurus'. The baby voicing out the revolutionary programme that it has for the 'babies', inciting the 'babies of the world' to unite, to fight against the universal challenge, giving a clarion call to "rise and cast off the shackles of the adult oppressor . . . cast off your diapers . . . refuse their coochy coos, ... take your life into your own hands". Though the video piece is technically construed and the idea far-fetched, the oration by the 'tiny-tot' grandiosely calling upon all 'the drooling teethers', with the background score of echoing applause at prominent junctures of the oration, is a biting sarcasm on the shallowness of the idea of 'revolution' in our times.

6. Conclusion

Each of the video blogs discussed above may not exhibit the same intensity that we find in Talal Khoury's 'videopoem', a dramatization of Mahmoud Darwish's poem 'Personal Duty', but they cannot be ignored as just another video that is blogged by a video enthusiast. These video blogs are definitely artistic and can easily compete for the title of a 'videopoem', for they start with a visual image only to arrive at its verbal expression. One cannot deny the presence of narrativity, poetic juxtaposition and rhythm, the elements enumerated as elements of 'videopoetry', in the blogs that we have discussed. Other than these techniques

these video blogs also play with cinematographic techniques of sound, light and images that are edited skilfully, creating a visual collage of great intensity.

7. Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Prof. Milind Malshe of IIT Bombay, my Supervisor, for his critical review and insight that helped me in revising my paper and to Prof. Sharmila Sreekumar of IIT Bombay for initiating me into digital literature.

8. References

- [1] I. Calvino. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Harvard University Press. 1998. pp. 83.
- [2] T. Khoury. Personal Duty by Mahmoud Darwish. Available at <http://movingpoems.com/filmmaker/talal-khoury/>. Accessed on 12 November 2011.
- [3] B. Gumbi. Walking in Plastic . Available at <http://movingpoems.com/?s=walking+in+plastic>. Accessed on 21 October 2011.
- [4] T. Knowes. Sign Language. 1984. Available at <http://movingpoems.com/?s=Sign+Language> . Accessed on 21 October 2011.
- [5] T. Knowes. *About Video Poetry*. 2009. Available at <<http://movingpoems.com/about/>>. Accessed on 25 October 2011
- [6] Young- Hae chang Heavy Industries . Available at <<http://www.yhchang.com/DAKOTA.html>>. Accessed on 24 November 2011.
- [7] J. Antonio. *The Digital Poetry Genre* . 2011. Available at <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/eazines/elp/issue-1/digital-poetry-genre.php>>. Accessed on 3 December 2011.
- [8] C. Davinio. Zinskij, The last Letter. Artwaver Radio.net . Available at www.artwaveradio.net/en/Playlists/2007/w0018_aug20-26.htm . Accessed on 12 November 2011.
- [9] T. Knowes. All this Day is Good For. 2010. Vimeo. Available at <http://vimeo.com/17713416>. Accessed on 18 October 2011.
- [10] C. Davinio. ‘The First Poetry Space Shuttle Landing on Second Life’. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3zMgGMiUuw>. Accessed on 18 November 2011.
- [11] The Mary Baker Library. The Hall of Ideas. 2002. Small Design Firm Inc. Available at <http://www.davidsmall.com/portfolio/client/mary-baker-eddy-library/>. Accessed on 24 November 2011.
- [12] D. Huth. *My Only Idea So Far*. Available at <<http://davehuth.com/main/>>. Accessed on 14 November 2011.
- [13] R. Burnham, M. Hazard and D. Bengtson. Blinking. Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/blinking>. Accessed on 26 November 2011.
- [14] M. Deutsch. E Pluribus Unum. In *The Classical Journal* .1923.: pp. 387 - 407.