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Kinepoeia in Animated Poetry

Dene Grigar

In their Preface to *Literary Terms*, published in 1989, Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz argue that their Third Edition is needed because “new developments in literary criticism (with its inevitable efflorescence of fashionable terminology) have grown so alarmingly” (“Preface”). Sadly, there is no Fourth Edition of this useful text—but if there were, it would be precipitated by new developments in literary *forms* that have *grown so alarmingly* since introduction of the personal computer that occurred just five years before their Third Edition was released. One new literary form on which this chapter focuses is kinetic poetry—or poetry animated through the affordances of the computer environment, specifically programming languages like Applesoft BASIC, Visual Basic, and JavaScript and software programs like Flash, Shockwave, After Effects, and others. A particular feature of kinetic poetry is its ability to instantiate a thing, idea, or action expressed verbally through the movement of text and images, a term I identify as “kinepoeia.” This chapter provides examples of kinepoeia in three kinetic poems: Rob Kendall’s “Faith,” Thom Swiss’s “Shy Boy,” and Sasha West and Robert Lavandera’s “Zoology.”

Computers as Cite of Poetic Expression

The introduction of the personal computer in 1984 raised awareness that writing—and even literature—could be different from print. In his book *Writing Space*, published in 1991, Jay David Bolter argues that computers provide “visual expression to our acts of conceiving and manipulating

topics” (1991: 16). In fact, software programs like HyperCard and authoring systems like HyperGate, Storyspace, Intermedia, and Narrabase that emerged in the mid- to late 1980s made it possible for literary artists to experiment not only with what Bolter describes as “creat[ing] and track[ing] formal structures” (19) but also with conceiving and creating in a new medium of expression. This notion is discussed in Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer’s *The Aesthetics of Net Literature* published in 2007, where they acknowledge “the decisive difference to traditional literary texts that lies in the recursive processes between humans and machines” arising out of what they call “net literature” (2007: 9). Canadian poet Barrie Phillip Nichol (bpnichol), writing in 1984 on an Apple IIe and authoring in Apple BASIC, produced what many scholars cite as the first collection of poetry that saw words moving on the computer screen—a work entitled *First Screening*. It was distributed as a signed, special edition of 100 copies on a 5.25-inch floppy disk by his publishing company, Underwhich, and later also made accessible by scholars to the public via the web.

With a few exceptions, learning to program was not a practical approach for publishing poetry for most literary authors. Robert Kendall did produce his poem, *A Life Set for Two*, with Visual Basic and published it with Eastgate Systems, Inc. in 1996. Other examples can also be cited, but it was the mainstreaming of the web browser and the software program, Flash, that heralded an extraordinary period of experimentation when literary artists were making the leap from print to the electronic medium in order to produce and publish their work on computers for the purpose of poetic expression. Argentinian poet Ana María Uribe, for example, shifted her attention from writing concrete poetry, as seen in her collection *Tipoemas* (“Typoems,” or typed poems) to animated poetry, what she referred to as *Anipoemas* (“Anipoems,” or animated poetry), when she discovered that she could, using Flash animation software, make her words *move*. “Equilibrio” (“Balance”), published in *The Iowa Review Web* in 2000, exemplifies the impetus toward this type of experimentation. Many other writers found the ability to express themselves with movement, sound, music, and user interaction and participation—not to mention with an expanded color palette and spatial orientation—a draw for exploring Flash, particularly, since it was fairly easy to use and prepare for dissemination on the web as a platform for creating and publishing their work. So popular was Flash by 2005 as a platform for intellectual and creative expression that theorist Lev Manovich called this new era of cultural producers “Generation Flash” (Manovich, qtd. in Salter and Murray 2004: 3). Flash’s ubiquity as a platform of poetic expression contributed to kinetic poetry being referred to interchangeably as Flash poetry. If indeed there were a Fourth Edition of Beckson and Ganz’s *Literary Terms* published today, kinetic or Flash poetry could be a plausible new entry.

Imagery and Kineticism

Physical phenomena expressed with words in print poetry can be expressed with movement in kinetic poetry. What I mean by this is that the phrase found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"—that is, "[h]uge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail"—evoking a visual picture of a volcanic explosion with the use of words—could be expressed in a kinetic poem as words literally erupting as boulders on the computer screen. That said, kinetic poetry does not rely any less on "represent[ation]" when it renders "things, actions, or even abstract ideas" (Beckson and Ganz 1989: 119) through movement; rather, it overlays kinetic imagery with the visual in a way that expresses a multisensory experience with a text. As such, imagery, which has the potential to "clarify," "express," and "externalize ... mental activity," "dispose the reader ... toward various elements in the poetic situation," and "guid[e] the reader's expectations" (363–70) is broadened, as Alex Preminger suggests in *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, beyond the visual to harken other sensory modalities. Writing about born-digital literature in her book, *Writing Machines*, in 2002, N. Katherine Hayles complains—close to forty years after the publication of Preminger's book—that "print-centric view[s] fail to account for ... the ... signifying components of electronic texts, including sound, animation, motion, video, kinesthetic involvement, and software functionality, among others" (2002: 20). More recent, digital poet John Cayley claims in his recent book, *Grammalepsy*, that the "digitalization of typographic visuality tends to facilitate new ways of reading, especially less familiar temporalities of reading, and new relationships between reader action and what is read" (2018: 214).

Instantiating Movement: Kinepoeia

One example of a new way of reading texts stemming from born-digital literature is reading movement. Robert Kendall's "Faith," a philosophical poem published in *Cauldron & Net Volume 4* in 2002 about coming to grips with existential darkness, presents us with words that literally fall, spin, slide, expand, blink, appear, and disappear, representing kinetically the confusion and inner turmoil expressed verbally by the narrator. The word "edge," for example, sidles—or literally edges—itsself into the lines, "I/edge/ logic/out," thus visually representing the notion that we cling to deeply held beliefs even when they are sorely tested by logic. Later in the poem, the phrase "off the rocker" slants down out of alignment with the rest of the words next to it, reflecting the narrator's own deviation from convention

(see Figure 1). At the end of the poem, the word, “leap” grows in size as if the narrator has indeed jumped and is getting closer to the object of his quest: faith.¹

This injection of movement, a sensory modality not possible to produce in print medium, necessitates the need for an expansion of critical vocabulary. “Kinepoeia”—or movement suggested by the textual or pictorial representation of the word—is drawn from the term onomatopoeia, the rhetorical strategy that associates sound with textual representation (e.g., bam/bam) but unlike onomatopoeia, kinepoeia is indigenous to the digital medium.

Kinepoeia is frequently used in kinetic poetry. Thom Swiss’s “Shy Boy,” published in *Cauldon & Net* in 2002, recounts the abusive “batter[ing]” a child endures at school. Seeking to escape notice in the hallway, the boy “presses his back against the wall,” “melting.” The word, “melting,” evaporates as it collapses down toward the bottom of the screen, much like the boy wishes he could do when confronted by the bullies (see Figure 2). The inner struggle that pits his yearning for acceptance yet fear of abuse is expressed as a visual tug of war by the phrase “to be there” appearing on one side of the screen and then reappearing as the phrase “not to be there” in another. The appearance of the word, “ghost,” sees the block of gray on which the word rests disappear with the word itself. In short, the use of physical movement performs the activities suggested in the words.²

Sasha West and Robert Lavandera’s “Zoology,” published in *Born Magazine* in 2009, offers yet another example of kinepoeia. As the title suggests, animals figure largely in the poem and are used to concretize the conflict the narrator feels about the death of her husband. The pure love she feels for him, despite his fading looks and narcissism, is expressed in first four lines:

The rhino loves the camel as the camel is the color of the dying grass, the
muddy stream
and the camel loves the turtle because its shell reflects a dulled sun &
tarnished moon
and, O, how the turtle loves the bee
but the bee loves only the flower & its own making of honey.
(lines 1–4)

¹Robert Kendall, “Faith,” 2002. Cauldron & Net. Republished in 2006 and available at the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1. Electronic Literature Organization, http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/kendall_faith.html.

²Thom Swiss, “Shy Boy,” 2002. Cauldron & Net. Republished in 2002 in *Born Magazine*, <http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/shyboy/>.

FIGURE 1 Rob Kendall's "Faith."

FIGURE 2 *Thom Swiss's "Shy Boy."*

FIGURE 3 *Sasha West and Robert Lavandera's "Zoology."*

Segments of each line are delivered on its own screen, highlighted pictorially with a stylized image of the animal mentioned. The images themselves are formed out of small circles moving like molecules making the animals' shapes. To advance the screens and thus complete the poem, readers move the cursor over the one circle beating physically and sonically like a heart. In line 4—"but the bee loves only the flower & its own making of honey"—is emphasized by the instantiation of the movement of honey. This movement, the golden goo dripping languidly off the flower and through the receptacle offered as the letter "Y," underscores visually the sexual selfishness of this man who carelessly wastes his abundant nectar for his own enjoyment (see Figure 3).

Words and Images in Literary Performance

In the first two kinetic poems, the words carry into effect what they promise to fulfill. The enlarging size of the word "leap," in Kendall's "Faith," effects the experience of jumping, with the earth rising to meet the narrator as he hurdles toward it. The slow disappearance of the word, "melting," in Swiss's "Shy Boy," effects the boy's desire to vanish after a humiliating beating by bullies. In the third kinetic poem, it is the images that carry into effect the promise. The provocatively dripping image of "honey," in West and Lavandera's "Zoology,"³ effects the squandering of passion, with the honey misplaced on the flower and emptying nowhere in particular. In each example of kinépoeia we see the words and images doing as Gendolla and Schäfer suggest occurs in net literature: performing. Performance from this perspective is undertaken by objects, as Bolter observes, "danc[ing] across the screen before the reader's eyes" (1991: 145). Performance,

³[3] Sasha West and Robert Lavandera, "Zoology," 2009. Republished in 2002 in *Born Magazine*, <http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/zoology/>.

however, takes places at other locations with kinetic poetry. Talking about the “characteristics that digital media bring to specific artist statements,” Roberto Simanowski sees performance as the computer-based processes occurring at the “invisible textual level” and the level where the more accessible code functions in the background of a work (2011: 31). Later, in his discussion about concrete poetry, he claims that

[It] deals with the relation between the visible form and the intellectual substance of words. It is concrete in its vividness, in contrast to the abstraction of a term. It is visual not because it uses images, but because it adds the optical gesture of the word to its semantic meaning: as completion, expansion, or negation.

(Simanowski 2011: 62)

One can extrapolate from this claim that kinetic poetry, like Kendall’s, Swiss’s, and West and Landavera’s, that incorporates both the visual along with movement, adds a physical gesture to the “optical.” Finding a vocabulary, such as kinepoeia, to describe this experience is a necessary step in discussing and understanding them more fully.

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