Tom Gunning, “The Question of Poetic Cinema”

TG begins with a question (paraphrasing): “what makes a film poetic?”

TG’s candidates: Mallick, Jodorowsky, Tarkovsky, Fellini, Deren, Epstein

First Cut: what does ‘poetry’ in its usual sense refer to?

Answer:

Formally: rhyme, rhythm, layout on the page.

TG acknowledges that calling a film ‘poetic’ is at best analogical.

**What Is Poetry?**

Aristotle: ‘reliance on words’ rather than ‘colors…or bodily movements’ (JP: inadequate as then even a political speech is poetry)

Aristotle thinks poetry is mimetic, but fictional, and hence in his hands it is truly *poiesis* (an act of or product of creation)

Plato: *mimesis* (process of imitation: ‘poetry creates a representation of the world through words’ [JP: inadequate, as then novels and short stories are also poetry])

Plato is, thanks to his metaphysical commitments, *at war with all mimetic things* (sense perception being mimesis (‘reality once removed’), followed by poetry [‘reality twice removed’])

In the western tradition, poetry was ‘the act of fiction’ and its products, sorted by mode of expression (rhetoric) in the classical period. Neo-classical (Renaissance) period added a hierarchy of poetic fictions, with epic and tragic poetry at the top, and lyric poetry ranked lower with other ‘forms of lesser prestige’.[552]

Enter the Romantic era, where “poetry essentially expressed emotions” … of the poet (many felt this reduced the depth and importance of poetry as a source information about life of human beings [rather than just *this* human being, i.e., the poet]). Thus this rebellion put *lyric poetry* on top (mimesis of emotions rather than mimesis of the world). Coincides with the introduction of the Preeminent Self (in artistic terms, this is the introduction of the Poetic **Selfie**).

JP: since the Romantics also insisted on a fundamental ontological distinction between two kinds of language (where language is *always referential*): the poetic (referring to emotions of the poet) and the scientific/rational (referring to the world). For the 19th C Romantics, this was at least to make poetry different in virtue of *not serving a practical purpose* (Pure Art is the dream of this movement…Art Divorced from the Outer World so as to promote the existence of the Inner World).

Romantics + Early 20th C Formalists and Literary Critics “defined poetry specifically in opposition to the communicative tasks of language.” [553m] Poetry vs. Prose. Poetry as self-referential, and end-in-itself.

British example: *Jabberwocky* (Lewis Carroll)

This approach to poetry treats the *sounds* and *associations* and *rhythms* of words as **primary** and their meanings only of **secondary importance**.

Shlovsky’s idea that art *defamiliarizes* familiar things (much as some avant-garde cinema does), and in the case of poetry, the *defamiliarization* occurs to the words themselves.

**Filmed Poems: Adaptation, Illustration?**

Initially, film theorists working out what a ‘poetic film’ is went one of two ways:

a. They are films that *express emotions*.

b. They are films that “foreground formal qualities”

c. They are films that combine (a) and (b).

1. Films that Present a Poem through Film

Early filmmakers made films that *narrated narrative poems* (like the Rime of the Ancient Mariner [Coleridge] or The Ballad of Fisher’s Boarding House [Kipling])

2. Then there are avant-garde/surrealist films like *L’Etoile du mer* (Starfish) that Accompany A Poem that is *nonnarrative* and where the *film doesn’t have any obvious relationship to the poem* (isn’t representing what the words suggest in an obvious way). Here the film does not *narrate* and the relationship between images and words is more *like* the relationship between words in a poem and what the words could be taken to represent **literally**.

**Theories of Film Poetry: Deren, Piotrovskij, Pasolini and Epstein**

***Deren***

She puts poetry in opposition to narrative, and thus poetic film, unlike narrative film (which proceeds *horizontally* according to the logical of cause-followed-by-effect), proceeds *vertically* by breaking away from cause-effect logic and, instead, its images are “held together by either an emotion or a meaning they have in common”.

Some films could combine vertical and horizontal presentations, thus mixing narrative with poetic approaches to film.

Deren’s approach to poetic film essentially relies on a *lyrical* conception of poetry and privileges films that take that route of expression as **properly poetic**.

***Piotrovskij***

For him, poetic cinema avoids narrative devices in deference to formal features of cinematic expression like montage, those that rely more on *association* than on linear relations in time or causal relations in space, and adds Shklovky’s ‘defamiliarization’ objective to the tools of the poetic cinematic trade.

Piotrovskij recognizes that a *purely visual lyricism* can be realized (this is what I think is part of what makes *The New World* poetic and that film is also a good example of the way nonnarrative lyricism can be combined with narration without losing the poetic result that distinguishes that film from typical narrative fictions in film.)

***Pasolini***

Takes an approach to poetic cinema that embeds (or shows it was influenced by) *semiotics* (“the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation”).[559]

Pasolini uses semiotics to point out that the signs used in literature are fundamental different from those used in film. For him, linguistic signs are *bounded by a dictionary*, but images of cinema have “no such bounded set of existing signs” [JP: and hence can explore the world of undiscovered, unknown signs {e.g., *Stalker*). For Pasolini, cinema signs come not from a dictionary but from **chaos**.

For Pasolini, while cinema certainly *can be narrative* in its use of cinema signs, “the fundamental irrational nature of cinema cannot be eliminated.”[559]

Pasolini seems to have had *free verse* in mind as a model of what made the character of *cinema signs* distinctive, and what would follow from cinema expression using that type of signs. He associated this with *indirection* in expression through poetic cinema.

***Epstein***

He is an early 20th C reaction not unlike that of the Romantics of the 19th C to various aspects of modern life. He thought the latter had led to ‘a mental and physical fatigue’ that had led to a “‘new state of intelligence,’ one provoked by fatigue, which short-circuited traditional logic in favor of more immediate forms of communication.” [561]

The new state of intelligence had produced “a modern poetic revolution” understood mainly through “its psychological and sociological roots.” [562]

“Cinema for Epstein becomes the means of overcoming the deadening of modern human experience.” [562] (JP: \*sigh\*….human beings are least interesting when they are confused)

Epstein’s *photogénie* is so radical, he thought it “resists linguistic meaning” (JP: and, hence, probably resists the whole business of *making sense*…the seeds of totalitarianism and fascism in this kind of thinking are unmistakable and disturbing, especially given the present resurgence of the same set of human tendencies).

**Poets and the Cinema: Surrealism**

Here TG’s treatment of Poetic Cinema is less interesting since it now focuses on the way poetic cinema *affected poetry*. (JP: a good thing to think about, but wide of the purposes of our course….hence, I won’t be asking any questions on the exam about what he discusses here, interesting though it is)

TG finds the chief influence of cinema on modern poetry coming from surrealist cinema. In particular, Bunuel/Dali’s *Une Chien Andalou*, Man Ray’s *L’Etoile de Mer*, and especially Jean Cocteau’s *Blood of a Poet* (JP: I had a copy of this recorded from television, but it has no sound. I just found a copy and will make it available through Canvas if there is time before end-of-semester).

**American Avant-Garde Cinema**

Joseph Cornell’s *East of Borneo* (which is based on a Hollywood film from Universal Studios, but radically alters it by slowing it down from 24 fps to 16 fps, giving the actors the appearance of “moving underwater” and projected it through “a deep blue piece of glass which bathed it in nocturnal light similar to the tinting for night scenes in silent films”).

Maya Deren is the doyenne of the surrealist movement that grew out of the work of Joseph Cornell and people it influenced, like Ken Jacobs.

Brakhage was hired by Cornell to make a film *Wonder Ring*! [567]

Daniel Kane thinks “Perhaps no filmmaker was quite as infested in the conversation between film and poetry as Stan Brakhage”. [568]

TG makes note of Stan Brakhage’s view that language distorts our perception of, and hence distances us from, what the world *as captured on film* can reveal to us. [568b]