Poetry and Avant-Garde Film:
Three Recent Contributions

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Abstract This article begins with an overview of the relationship of poetry and independent film. It proceeds to focus on three independent films that use the cinematic apparatus as a means of publishing poetry. Waterworx, a film by Canadian Rick Hancock, recycles Wallace Stevens’s “A Clear Day and No Memories” in a manner that confirms the accomplishment of the original poem while embedding it, subtly as well as evocatively, within the filmmaker’s personal context. nebel (mist), by German filmmaker Matthias Müller, re-presents a cycle of poems by Ernst Jandl, Gedichte an die kindheit (Poems to Childhood). Müller’s film carefully weaves a recitation of the Jandl poems together with a variety of “found” visual images, including shots from The Wizard of Oz and home movies made during the 1960s by the filmmaker’s father, in a manner that provides evocative confirmations and counterpoints to Jandl’s text. Canadian Clive Holden’s Trains of Winnipeg republishes a set of the filmmaker’s own poems from a book by the same name; it is the first feature film I am aware of that is entirely devoted to the presentation of poetic texts.

I am indebted to Views from the Avant-Garde at the New York Film Festival (programmed by Mark McElhatten and Gavin Smith) for introducing me to Müller’s nebel; to the Flaherty Film Seminar (especially programmer Susan Oxtoby and director Margarita de la Vega Hurtado) for introducing me to Holden’s Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems; to Frank L. Bergmann at Utica College for his advice on the German translation of Jandl’s Nebel: Gedichte an die kindheit; to Canyon Cinema in San Francisco for making preview copies of several films available to me; to Sharon M. Britton, director of public services at the Burke Library at Hamilton College, for assistance with permissions; and to Marianita J. Amodio, Hamilton photographer, for help with imagery.

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1. Background: Poetry and the Poetic in Avant-Garde Film

In general, cinema has evolved by incorporating earlier art forms or aspects of earlier forms. It developed first as an extension of the still photograph and, soon after, of the magic show; and the feature film became a possibility only after D. W. Griffith and others recognized that theater and prose fiction, and especially the novel, offered a model for extending cinematic narrative.\(^1\) Most screenplays are based on short stories, novels, or parts of novels, and the screenplay itself is, as the word suggests, a derivation of the theatrical drama. But the tendency of cinema to incorporate other art forms is not confined to the commercial feature. Even those forms of the motion picture that are generally understood as “critical”—that is, as offering critiques of the commercial feature and the audience that has developed for it—have always incorporated the other arts, though the particular art forms incorporated tend to be different from the sources for commercial narrative features.\(^2\)

The most obviously critical of cinema’s various histories is what is usually called “avant-garde” or “experimental” film.\(^3\) And from the outset, this history has been particularly dependent on painting and collage, on music, and to a somewhat lesser extent, on the literary arts, particularly poetry. While much early cinema, including commercially oriented cinema, was experimental in the sense that filmmakers were often attempting things that had not been accomplished in film before, it was not until the 1920s that something like an avant-garde or experimental film movement developed.\(^4\) What is usually considered the first film avant-garde—crucial figures include Hans Richter, Man Ray, Henri Chomette, Germaine Dulac, Viking Eggeling, Oskar Fischinger, Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, Fer-

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2. A number of books have explored the ways in which early avant-garde cinema incorporates the visual arts and music. They include Curtis 1971; Le Grice 1977; and more recently, Rees 1999.
3. Terminology for this major strand in the weave of film history has always been confusing. *Avant-garde* and *experimental* are the most common terms, though each is problematic. Some filmmakers and critics do not like the military implications of *avant-garde*. In any case, “avant-garde” film cannot be said to be the avant-garde of cinema, since even the technology usually used to make it, 16mm cameras and film stock, would not exist if it were not for the commercial industry. Some filmmakers do think of themselves as experimental artists, but others bridle at the implication that their films are “experiments” rather than finished works of art. *Alternative cinema* is often useful too, as is *critical cinema* since nearly all the films in this general category provide alternatives, *critical alternatives*, to industrial cinema. I tend to use all these terms, depending on the particular context.
4. For a brief history of 1920s European avant-garde cinema, see Bordwell and Thompson 2003: 173–84.
nand Léger, Dudley Murphy, Marcel Duchamp, and René Clair—was a result primarily of visual artists exploring cinema as a new artistic tool for creating dadaist, abstract, and surrealist works. Richter, Ray, Léger, and others used the capacity of cinema to combine disparate imagery in a dadaist manner that confronted traditional assumptions about narrative and pictorial logic; Oskar Fischinger found ways of animating abstract shapes into what is often called “visual music” (James 2005: 252–53) and by 1930 was combining animated abstractions with music; and in Un chien andalou (1929) surrealist Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali used a series of shocking dream images and nonsensical intertitles to attack all forms of film that are meant to provide aesthetic pleasure or narrative resolution.  

While the visual arts tended to dominate the first film avant-garde, poetry was an important influence. For Manhatta (1921), often considered the first American avant-garde film, the two filmmakers, both of whom had established reputations as visual artists—photographer/painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand—intercut between modernist cinematography of Manhattan and intertitles made up of excerpts from several Walt Whitman poems, including “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856) and “Sparkles from the Wheel” (1871). Sheeler and Strand use individual lines or parts of lines from Whitman, dividing the lines so that they fit within the film frame and sometimes revising them slightly. Jan-Christopher Horak (1995) has argued that the particular combination of text and image in Manhatta makes it a historically pivotal film that looks simultaneously backward toward the romantic past represented by Whitman and forward into a modernist future (figure 1).

5. Many of the major films of the first avant-garde are available from the Museum of Modern Art and on the DVD Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and ’30s (Kino, 2005). Un chien andalou is available in 16mm from the Museum of Modern Art and on DVD from Kino.

For commentary on some of the various dada and surrealist strategies used by artists working in film during the 1920s, see Kuenzli 1987. Fischinger’s work with abstraction is detailed in Moritz 2004.

“Intertitles” are the visual texts that are interspersed with other forms of visual imagery in silent film, usually providing a kind of narration along with other forms of information.


7. For example, the opening line of “Sparkles from the Wheel”—“Where the city’s ceaseless crowd moves on the livelong day”—becomes “Where the city’s ceaseless crowd / moves on, the live long day”; and “Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me,” from section 9 of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” becomes “Gorgeous clouds of sunset / drench with your splendor / me or the men and women / generations after me.”
In Europe and the United Kingdom during the 1920s and 1930s, an audience formed for critical forms of cinema as a result of the ciné-club movement that spread from nation to nation. (A ciné-club was an informal organization dedicated to exhibiting the many forms of aesthetically and politically challenging film that commercial exhibitors were not interested in showing.) For this audience and for the filmmakers who produced the films shown in ciné-clubs, visual text, and poetic texts in particular, were important as source and inspiration. Some avant-garde films, widely seen on the ciné-club circuit, followed Manhatta’s lead in combining imagery with visual text. For example, L’étoile de mer (Starfish [1928]), a collaboration of Man Ray and surrealist poet Robert Desnos (who wrote film criticism during the 1920s; he appears in the film), uses phrases from Desnos’s

9. Depending on how one defines poetry, it could be argued that the incorporation of poetry into film is one instance of a somewhat larger field: the use of visual text as imagery in the history of cinema. A good many avant-garde films have used visual texts that would not normally be considered poetry, unless poetry is understood as any text that is arranged spatially. Michael Dorland and William C. Wees (1984) explore in their anthology this larger field, focusing in particular on Canadian avant-garde films, including several that are clearly combinations of poetry and cinema. My anthology (MacDonald 1995) includes the texts of a number of particularly remarkable films that make extensive use of visual text.
poetry as visual texts. And Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (1926) intercuts between spiral designs and spirally arranged sentences full of puns and wordplay. The arrival of sound in the late 1920s made possible the auditory inclusion of poetry, and during the 1930s several landmark contributions to the history of documentary included recitations of poetic texts: *Night Mail* (1936), by John Grierson and Basil Wright, ends with a poem by W. H. Auden, read by Auden; and Pare Lorentz’s *The River* (1937) is narrated by Thomas Chalmers, who reads a poetic text written by Lorentz (and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1938) but clearly inspired by Walt Whitman.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, as a result of the pioneering exhibition work of Frank Stauffacher at the Art in Cinema film society in San Francisco and of Amos and Marcia Vogel at the Cinema 16 film society in New York City, ciné-clubs, now called film societies, proliferated in the United States. Both Art in Cinema and Cinema 16 specialized in reviving films that had been important in the European ciné-clubs and in introducing audiences to new avant-garde and documentary work. In 1946, when Art in Cinema announced its first film series, the ninth show was entitled “Poetry in Cinema”: Jean Cocteau’s *Le sang d’un poète* (*Blood of a Poet* [1930]) was to be the feature presentation. During subsequent years, *Le sang d’un poète* was widely seen and influential, in part because it represented to some what poet/filmmaker James Broughton (1984: 29)

10. *L’Étoile de mer* and *Anemic Cinema* are available as 16mm prints from the Museum of Modern Art and on the Kino DVD *Avant-Garde* (see note 5). The verbal puns in *Anemic Cinema* are translated and discussed by Katrina Martin (1975). P. Adams Sitney (1979) discusses the use of visual texts in *Anemic Cinema* and *L’Étoile de mer.*

11. *Night Mail* and *The River* are available as 16mm prints from the Museum of Modern Art; *The River* is available on the DVD *Our Daily Bread and Other Films of the Great Depression.* Bill Nichols (2001: 33) defines the “poetic mode” of documentary as emphasizing “visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization. Examples: *The Bridge* (1928), *Song of Ceylon* (1934), *Listen to Britain* (1941), *Night and Fog* (1955), *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983). This mode bears close proximity to experimental, personal, or avant-garde filmmaking.” But “poetic documentary” is a slippery term that is often used more broadly to refer to other kinds of film: for example, to Robert Flaherty’s evocative depictions of exotic peoples, *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926). In *How the Myth Was Made* (1978), his documentary about the making of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* (1934), George Stoney concludes that Flaherty was America’s first (and still best) “film poet.”

12. For an overview of the histories of Art in Cinema and Cinema 16, see the introductions to MacDonald 2002 and MacDonald 2006b.

13. *Le sang d’un poète* is available on DVD from Criterion. The program notes for the first Art in Cinema series were published by the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1947 as *Art in Cinema,* edited by Richard Foster and Frank Stauffacher. The book is no longer in print, though a facsimile is available in MacDonald 2006b. The Art in Cinema Papers are housed at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California.
would later describe as an “unforgettable example: a poet making a poetic film!”

The meaning of “poetic” as used by Art in Cinema in its description of *Le sang d’un poet* (and, for that matter, of “poet” in the Cocteau title) as well as in its descriptions of a good many other films, is quite general, and typical of the 1940s and 1950s. It refers neither to the act of writing poetry nor to particular poetic texts, but to a human sensibility that can take a wide variety of forms. The men and women involved in presenting avant-garde cinema and the audiences that came to see the films seem to have shared a sense that filmmakers could create “poetic” film experiences. The actual “Poetry in Cinema” program presented by Art in Cinema (as opposed to the program announcement) included four films: *Le sang d’un poet*, *Jammin’ the Blues* (1944) by Gjon Mili, *Lot in Sodom* (1933) by John S. Watson and Melville Webber, and *Vormittagspuk* (*Ghosts before Breakfast* [1928]) by Hans Richter. Judging from the program notes, what constitutes the “poetic” in *Jammin’ the Blues* is the film’s graphic qualities, particularly its use of close-ups and evocative chiaroscuro; in *Lot in Sodom* and *Vormittagspuk*, it is the handling of symbolic details within a mythic tale and within a fantasy, respectively. And in *Le sang d’un poet*, it is a combination of several of these factors. Basically, what these and the many other films that were labeled “poetic” had in common, at least in the minds of those who wrote the program notes, is suggested by Luis Buñuel (2000: 136) in “Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry,” a talk delivered in Mexico in 1958: “It was agreed that the theme [of this event] would be ‘cinema as artistic expression,’ or more concretely, cinema as an instrument of poetry, with all that this latter word holds of a sense of liberation, subversion of reality, a passage into the marvelous world of the subconscious, and nonconformity to the restrictive society that surrounds us.”

During the 1940s and 1950s, there was a particular strategic value to the use of “poetic” in conjunction with avant-garde film. That filmmakers can be considered creative artists may seem obvious to us, and it was certainly clear to many avant-garde filmmakers, but for most moviegoers during the first five decades of film history, films were mindless distractions, engaging and skillfully made, perhaps, but certainly not “artistic” in any serious sense. Indeed, in the United States, film was not even considered a medium of communication protected by the First Amendment until 1952.

14. In this instance, Broughton was speaking specifically of Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1946).
15. *Vormittagspuk* and *Lot in Sodom* are available from the Museum of Modern Art in 16mm and on the Kino DVD *Avant-Garde* (see note 5).
16. The U.S. Supreme Court decided in * Burstyn v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495, that “expression by
By emphasizing the relationship of unusual cinematic forms to poetry (and also to painting, collage, and music), Art in Cinema, Cinema 16, and the network of film societies that imitated them were implicitly arguing for the kinds of attention and patience normally accorded to serious works of art.

While “poetic” remained relatively amorphous when used in connection with cinema, by the 1940s there were avant-garde films that revealed a more particular connection with poetry. Sometimes, these films combined the earlier, more general sense of the filmmaker as a maker of “poetic” images with soundtracks that included readings of particular poems. Willard Maas’s Geography of the Body (1943), for example, is accompanied by the reading of a poem by British poet George Barker, and Ian Hugo’s The Bells of Atlantis (1953) was based on The House of Incest, a prose poem by Anaïs Nin, who reads passages of it on the soundtrack. This combination of poetic texts and imagery continued to be an option for filmmakers. James Broughton was both a prolific poet and an accomplished filmmaker. From Mother’s Day (1949) on, his films reflect a poetic sensibility, and by the 1970s they regularly include poetic voice-overs, often of previously published Broughton poems which Broughton himself reads. Examples include This Is It (1972), High Kukus (1973), The Water Circle (1975), and Erogeny (1975). High Kukus and The Water Circle are particularly effective; both use rather minimal visuals—a small pond reflecting sky and trees and birds, the surface of moving water, respectively—as an accompaniment to lovely, childlike, rather Blakeian verses recited by Broughton. Each film evokes haiku (indeed, “High Kukus” is a play on the word) in its attempt to create meaning from deceptively simple, unpretentious combinations of visual observation and poetic statement.

means of motion pictures is included within the free speech and free press guaranty of the First and Fourteenth Amendments.” See Sova 2001: x–xiii for a brief review of the history of American film censorship.

7. Geography of the Body is available in 16mm from both the San Francisco–based Canyon Cinema (www.canyoncinema.com; 415–626–2255) and the New York Film-makers’ Cooperative (www.film-makerscoop.com). The Bells of Atlantis is available in 16mm from the Museum of Modern Art.

8. The early Broughton films were recognized as film poetry by other poets and filmmakers. In the Canyon Cinema (2000a: 89) catalog description for Four in the Afternoon (1951), Broughton includes comments by both Willard Maas (“The best film poetry ever made”) and Dylan Thomas (“Lovely and delicious, true cinematic poetry”). Broughton’s poetry, including the poems recited in This Is It and The Water Circle, is available in Broughton 1977: 229, 187; “High Kukus” is available in Broughton 1971: 176.

9. Broughton’s films also are available from Canyon Cinema (see note 17). Probably no poetic form has had more resonance for independent filmmakers than haiku. The mini-tradition of single-shot films that developed in the 1960s and 1970s—accomplished instances include Bruce Baillie’s All My Life (1966) and Still Life (1966), Robert Nelson’s The Awful Backlash (1967), Larry Gottheim’s Blues (1969), Corn (1970), and Fog Line (1970), Robert
By the 1950s, the idea that poetry and avant-garde film were closely related had become so commonplace that Cinema 16, then the most successful film society in North America, felt the need to offer a symposium called “Poetry and the Film” for its membership.⁲⁰ On October 28, 1953, Amos Vogel was host to Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, Maya Deren, Willard Maas, and the critic Parker Tyler, who discussed the relationship between poetry and film (figure 2). That those coming to the discussion from the world of avant-garde film saw a clear relationship between film and poetry is obvious in Parker Tyler’s (MacDonald 2002: 202) opening directive to the participants: “On the one hand, there’s the theory of poetry, its possibilities as such in the film medium, and on the other hand the practice of poetry, as concentrated in the avant-garde film.” Tyler, Maas, Deren, and Vogel seem to have been sure that there was such a thing as a “poetic film” or a “film poem.” However, throughout the symposium discussions, Thomas and Miller—dignitaries from the literary world who were not familiar with avant-garde film—seem unclear as to how these two art forms are related, despite Deren’s useful distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” meaning in literature and in film: horizontal being the forms of meaning made clear through the developing narrative of a work; vertical, the multiple layers of meaning that accrue in forms of expression normally considered poetic (MacDonald 2002: 208).²¹

Not only was poetry pervasive in the thinking of the generation of avant-garde filmmakers who came to maturity in the 1940s and 1950s and of those programmers who cultivated audiences for alternative work, it was

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Huot’s Snow (1971), and Sukumi Hagiwara’s Kiri [Mist] (1971)—seems to owe a good deal to an awareness of the haiku form. Chick Strand’s haiku-like Kristallnacht (1979) begins with a haiku. For more on these single-shot, haiku-like films, see MacDonald 1989.

20. The text of the first half of the “Poetry and the Film” symposium is reprinted in MacDonald 2002: 202–2.

21. “What I called a ‘horizontal’ development is more or less of a narrative development, such as occurs in drama from action to action, and . . . a ‘vertical’ development such as occurs in poetry, is a part of plunging down or a construction that is based on the intent of the moment.” “In what is called a ‘horizontal’ development, the logic is a logic of actions. In a ‘vertical’ development, it is a logic of a central emotion or idea that attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core, which they have in common. This, to me, is the structure of poetry” (MacDonald 2002: 211, 208). Deren’s distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” meanings made particular sense for avant-garde film during the 1940s and 1950s and especially for her own work. Her most famous film, Meshes of the Afternoon (1943), a collaboration with her husband Alexander Hammid, creates a dreamlike narrative in which the protagonist, played by Deren herself, functions within a world of seemingly symbolic objects that beg for interpretation. That is, the protagonist’s record player, phone, kitchen knives, mirror are, on one level, realistic details and, on another level, clues to the apparent psychic disturbance that is expressed in the film’s dream narrative. Without an interpretation of these details, the narrative itself seems indecipherable.
central for those chronicling this history. When P. Adams Sitney (1974: vii–viii, ix) came to write his breakthrough *Visionary Film* (1974), he read the work of the particular filmmakers who were his focus—Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage—as constituting a modern extension of British Romantic poetry by virtue of their creation of expansive, imaginative visions of the place of poetry and the poet—in this case, the filmmaker-poet—within modern society:

The earliest American films discussed here were called “film poems” or “experimental films” when they were first seen. Both names, like all the subsequent ones, are inaccurate and limiting. Of the two, the term “film poem” has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of the type of film discussed in this book to the commercial narrative cinema is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times. The film-makers in question, like poets, produce their work without financial reward, often making great personal sacrifices to do so. The films themselves will always have a more limited audience than commercial features because they are so much more demanding. The analogy is also useful in that it does not put a value on the films in question. Poetry is not by essence better than prose. . . .
Just as the chief works of French film theory must be seen in the light of Cubist and Surrealist thought, and Soviet theory in the context of formalism and constructivism, the preoccupations of the American avant-garde film-makers coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics.  

By the late 1960s and the early 1970s, filmmakers were less likely to think of themselves as film poets and their work as film poems, even though Broughton and some others—Jonas Mekas is a particularly noteworthy instance—continued to incorporate their poetry into their films. The designations “filmmaker” or “film artist” developed enough cultural cachet that most filmmakers, and most apologists for avant-garde film, no longer felt the need to argue cinema’s artistic importance by referencing more established and more respected cultural forms. 

In any case, regardless of whether they thought of themselves as “film poets,” a good many filmmakers continued to see poetry, and specific poets, as closely related to their work. Stan Brakhage (2005: 46), who yearned to be a poet and became the most prolific and influential of American avant-garde filmmakers, never ceased to see his work in relation to modern poetry or to be aesthetically fed by his reading of poetry and by its formative influence on him: “I had thought I was a poet, and I had continued to think so into my early twenties when I was living with Robert Duncan in the middle of the San Francisco Beat poetry movement. I met Michael McClure and  

22. In 2002 Sitney published a revised, expanded version of Visionary Film, which provides a more extensive survey of the field, though with a bit less emphasis on Romantic poetics.  
23. Mekas was an accomplished poet in his native Lithuania before immigrating to the United States after World War II, and he continued to write poetry in the United States. He also found ways to include poetry in his films. In the final sections of his Lost Lost Lost (1975), Mekas’s epic film about his arrival in the United States and his discovery of an aesthetic homeland in the world of independent cinema, he includes two sets of film haiku, “Rabbit Shit Haikus” and “Fools Haikus,” both of which combine words—as visual text and voice-over—with imagery and sound in brief, numbered film poems. Not only are these filmic haiku lovely and inventive in their own right as well as fitting additions to a film that is “poetic” in all the senses mentioned earlier; the two sets of haiku are also emblematic of Mekas’s rebirth into the new, creative life that, in the final third of the film, replaces the longing for Lithuania he experiences in the first two reels of Lost Lost Lost (the Soviet Union made Lithuania off-limits for Americans and for those who had left Lithuania during World War II soon after the surrender) and concludes the dark night of the soul he experiences as he works to find a place for himself in New York.
Kenneth Patchen and Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, Kenneth Rexroth and Louis Zukofsky and began having a sense of what a poet really is. All this powerfully confirmed my poetic aspirations.”

Hollis Frampton gave up his aspirations to be a poet, first to become a still photographer and subsequently a filmmaker, but continued to see Ezra Pound (whom he visited during the poet’s hospitalization in Baltimore) as a major influence on his life and work. Two of Frampton’s films—Poetic Justice (1972) and Gloria! (1979)—use visual text in ways closely related to poetry. Poetic Justice is a film of a 240-page screenplay, divided into four tableaux, filmed one page at a time for a few seconds per page; the third “tableau,” as well as Frampton’s propositions about his maternal grandmother in Gloria!, take a form closely related to catalog poems like Whitman’s Song of Myself, no. 6 (“What Is the Grass?”), and Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

Even the idea that the “film poem” constitutes a particular field continued to have adherents long after most avant-garde filmmakers no longer saw themselves as film poets. Herman Berlandt organized the first Poetry Film Festival in Bolinas, California, in 1975 for reasons he makes clear in a letter published in the January-February 1977 issue of Cinemanews:

I’ve been peculiarly obsessed with the concept of the poetry-film for a long time. I feel that its magic has hardly been made use of technically, aesthetically or conceptually. For more than twenty years I responded to my environment and inner troubles by reaching for a pencil to transform my vision into words. For a lazy, inept, borderline schizophrenic like myself, written poetry was the next best thing to dreaming. But, when I started attending readings and began listening to my colleagues, I became aware of the incredible isolation that printed and narrated poetry had suffered. Too many poets mumbled and bungled a good poem through a poor reading. Those who remained active poets tended to become self-centered, morose and bitter, not simply in reaction to the karma of human existence, but because of their failure to communicate their feelings and thoughts to their fellow mortals. . . .

I made a very personal decision to change that state of affairs. The medium itself must become better “show business,” more interesting “theatrically.” New

24. Brakhage’s films are available through Canyon Cinema (see note 17). The most efficient access to writing about Brakhage’s prolific career, both his own writing and that of critics and historians, is the Web site of Fred Camper, www.fredcamper.com/Brakhage. Marie Nesthus (1999) explores the many sequence films of Brakhage (that is, films organized into numbered sequences) in relation to the sequence poems of Ezra Pound and other poets Brakhage had read.

25. For information on Hollis Frampton, see Jenkins and Krane 1984 and a special issue of October (2004). Frampton’s films are available from the New York Film-makers’ Cooperative (see note 17).
forms of presentation must be found for talented poets. Why not publish in film form rather than in esoteric quarterlies?26

The Poetry Film Festival was a fixture in the Bay Area for seventeen years, though in general, the idea that cinema, at least the kinds of cinema that the Poetry Film Festival celebrated, can substantially expand the audience for poetry is, to say the least, problematic. In fact, the film poem may, at least so far, have attracted even smaller audiences than written poetry normally does!

Poetry continues to be a significant influence on avant-garde film. Quite recently, for example, I learned during interviews with Nathaniel Dorsky (MacDonald 2006a: 94–95), Abigail Child, and Phil Solomon (ibid.: 208, 210–11) that all three see the work of John Ashbery as inspirational and some of their own films as closely related to his poetry.27 Each of these filmmakers seems to take somewhat different things from Ashbery, though all of them have in common an approach to editing that often results in sequences during which successive shots are not related by any apparent narrative logic but accumulate impact through subtle, mysterious, surpris-

26. I never attended the Poetry Film Festival, but Berlandt is certainly a subject for further research. His commitment to using film as a means of publishing poetry and of developing a more public community around poetry now seems, on the one hand, a means of carrying on the oral tradition of poetry (a late manifestation of the Beats, perhaps) and, on the other hand, prescient of such recent developments as rap and poetry raves.

In a flyer designed for the Poetry Film Festival Workshop, held in conjunction with the twelfth annual Poetry Film Festival in December 1987, Berlandt lists the “Three Basic Elements in Poetry Films”: “I. POETRY: lettered or spoken”; “II: IMAGES: stills, moving or animated, abstract or recognizable”; and “III: SOUNDS: music, environmental sounds (nature, street, machinery), deliberate beats for special emphasis or rhythms.” This listing would seem to accommodate nearly all of what is called avant-garde film.

William C. Wees (1984: 110) quotes another Berlandt statement about the poetry film—a poetry film must incorporate “a verbal poetic statement in narrated or captioned form” (Berlandt 1980)—and defines several types of poetry film: the first is “the poem ‘as seen by’ the filmmaker. In other words, the poem already exists, and in addition to providing the words for the film’s soundtrack, was the originating idea for the film, a kind of ‘first treatment,’ that may also become the film’s scenario and even its ‘shooting script’.”; the second type “reverses that relationship: the film comes first—in conception and perhaps even in execution—and then the filmmaker finds a poem that suits the film’s images.” Wees considers Waterwors (A Clear Day and No Memories) an instance of this second type. The third type “is one in which the film—either completed or in preparation—leads to the writing of a poem which is then incorporated into the film” (Wees uses Hancox’s Beach Events as an instance along with The River, Le sang d’un poet, and Geography of the Body).

27. Dorsky’s, Child’s, and Solomon’s films are available from Canyon Cinema (see note 17). Child remarked on her admiration for Ashbery in conversation with me. Child has been a practicing poet for years and uses analogous strategies for organizing her poems and her films. And she thinks of poets as a primary audience for her work: “Poets—they’ve always been an enthusiastic and comprehending audience—people who are used to speed, density, complication, ambiguity” (Child 2003a: 221). See Child’s poetry collections (1989, 1994, 1996) and also Child 2005b.
ing changes in subject and tone, a quality common in Ashbery’s work. And there continue to be instances where filmmakers use their own poetic texts or the poetic texts of others as central dimensions of films. Noteworthy examples are *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) by Su Friedrich, *Tongues Untied* (1989) by Marlon Riggs, and David Gatten’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line* project.

For *Gently Down the Stream*, Friedrich scratched a series of texts—edited versions of dreams recorded in a dream diary—word by word into the film emulsion (figure 3). These texts become the visual foreground and the photographed imagery the background of a psychodrama that expresses the filmmaker’s internal conflict between her Roman Catholic background and her lesbianism.²⁸ I say Friedrich’s words are the “foreground” since words have particular power in film, especially words represented visually. If a particular shot in a film includes both photographic imagery and visual

²⁸. In film studies, “psychodrama” generally refers to a form of avant-garde film that emerged in the 1940s in the United States in which the filmmaker dramatizes the disturbed state of mind of the protagonist (often played by the filmmaker). Famous instances of psychodrama include *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid and *Fireworks* (1947) by Kenneth Anger.
text, the tendency is to read the text first; as Hollis Frampton (1988: 49) said, “Once we can read, and a word is put before us, we cannot not read it.” Friedrich’s texts are arranged within Gently Down the Stream with considerable attention to their visual spacing and temporal rhythm; it is difficult not to see the texts as a poem.\textsuperscript{29} In Tongues Untied, Marlon Riggs was determined to reveal, as a crucial component of his aggressive response to the history of the repression/suppression of African American homosexuality within American society, “all the poetry that was coming out by black gay men” (Kleinhans and Lesage 1991: 119). Riggs’s controversial video gives voice to a range of openly gay black men in a performance-oriented, confrontational form that is full of visual and auditory performances of poetic texts. One of the central motifs of the film is Essex Hemphill reciting his own poetry.\textsuperscript{30} Finally, in Secret History of the Dividing Line: A True Account in Nine Parts, David Gatten takes the final section of Susan Howe’s Frame Structures (1996), “Secret History of the Dividing Line” (1978), as a structural model for a cycle of films focusing on the life, writings, and personal life of William Byrd II of colonial Virginia. (Byrd’s History of the Dividing Line [1841], which chronicles his experiences drawing the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina, is considered one of the formative American nature writings.)\textsuperscript{31}

While the intersection of poetry and avant-garde cinema could (and should!) sustain a book-length exploration, the particular focus of this essay is three underappreciated, relatively recent films, which are distinct from nearly all the combinations of poetry and film I have described (except for several of the Broughton films) in two ways. First, each makes available to an audience a previously published poem or set of poems in a new, cinematic form, and second, each makes the presentation of the poems, which are included in their entirety, the foreground of the film experience. That is, these films do not \textit{adapt} the poems (revising them for use in a new

\textsuperscript{29} Gently Down the Stream is available from Canyon Cinema (see note 17). A small book that presents the texts, arranged as poetry and illustrated with stills from the film, was self-published by Friedrich in 1982.

\textsuperscript{30} When Tongues Untied was broadcast on network television in 1991, controversy ensued. Because the video had been partially financed by a $5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), its polemical defense of gay African America and homosexuality in general, combined with its explicit language and its sexual imagery, led to an attack on the NEA and on federal government sponsorship of the arts in general. See Ellis and McLane 2005: 283–87. Tongues Untied is available on VHS from Amazon.

\textsuperscript{31} As of summer 2006, Gatten had completed four sections of Secret History: the title film, Secret History of the Dividing Line (2002), plus The Great Art of Knowing (2004), Moxon’s Mechanick Exercises or the Doctrine of Handy-works Applied to the Art of Printing (1999), and The Enjoyment of Reading, Lost and Found (2001). All are available (in 16mm only) from Gatten: david.gatten@gmail.com.
context), they deliver the original words in their original senses, as precisely as possible, to new audiences through a different medium. They are, in other words, closer to new editions than to adaptations.\footnote{I do not mean to split hairs. Cinema has a long history of adapting literary texts to its own uses and, by doing so, creating endless debate about whether this or that film was true to the original story or novel adapted by the filmmaker. It is certainly true that the three films I discuss in subsequent sections of this piece provide new contexts for the poems they “re-publish,” and these new contexts create somewhat different readings of the poems for readers/viewers—any change in context tends to do this. But there seems a firm commitment on the part of all three filmmakers to the original poetic texts, which are used not as raw material but as finished works, each with its own integrity.} \textit{Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)} (1982, 6 minutes) by the Canadian Rick Hancox and \textit{nebel} (2000, 12 minutes) by the German Matthias Müller make available to viewers poems by recognized poets: specifically, Wallace Stevens’s “A Clear Day and No Memories” and Ernst Jandl’s \textit{Gedichte an die kindheit} (\textit{Poems to Childhood}). Canadian Clive Holden’s \textit{Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems} (2004, 88 minutes) recycles Holden’s own poems. The \textit{Trains of Winnipeg} project began as a Web site, then produced a CD of Holden reading his poetry, followed by a book of thirty-eight poems (Holden 2002), by the 35mm feature film \textit{Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems}, and finally, by a DVD of the film.

The idea of using cinema as a means of providing poetry with a new form of public life still seems unusual enough, and these recent films engaging enough, to deserve more detailed discussion. My goal here is not to provide anything like an exhaustive exploration of the films discussed or to deal with the many theoretical issues raised by the translation of a work of literature into a work of cinema.\footnote{For a discussion of the history of attempts to understand the practice of adapting literature to the screen and for a remarkable new approach to the issue of adaptation, see Elliott 2003.} Rather, I hope to alert readers to three accomplished contributions to the recent history of avant-garde film and to the ongoing relationship between cinema and poetry in the hope that at least some readers will be drawn toward the three films I discuss and to the remarkable history of which they are a part. Not only are these films interesting and unusual and quite relevant to the study of poetry, but my experience tells me that they can be of considerable use in college courses where the relationship of poetry and the other arts is a topic.

2. Film as Edition: \textit{Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)} and \textit{nebel}

Between 1969 and 1994, Rick Hancox made fifteen films (or at least made fifteen films currently in distribution through his primary distributor, the
Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto); several of these films explore the cinematic possibilities of poetry and other forms of visual text. *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)*, the eleventh of the films, is the most interesting of them. Like so many accomplished avant-garde films, *Waterworx* has not received much attention, either from programmers or from critics. This lack of attention is unfortunate considering not only the film’s quality but its value for those who teach poetry in general and Wallace Stevens in particular.

*Waterworx* includes the complete text of Stevens’s “A Clear Day and No Memories,” which is not particularly well-known and brief enough to reprint here:

No soldiers in the scenery,  
No thoughts of people now dead,  
As they were fifty years ago,  
Young and living in a live air,  
Young and walking in the sunshine,  
Bending in blue dresses to touch something,  
Today the mind is not part of the weather.

Today the air is clear of everything,  
It has no knowledge except of nothingness  
And it flows over us without meanings,  
As if none of us had ever been here before  
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,  
This invisible activity, this sense.

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Hancox sees *Waterworx*, along with *Landfall* (1983) and *Beach Events* (1984), as a trilogy “of landscape/poetry films,” each part of which has an autobiographical dimension: *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* was shot near his grandmother’s home and the other two films at a family home on Prince Edward Island (Canyon Cinema 2000b). *Landfall* combines the poetry of D. G. Jones, which we hear read and see phrases of on-screen (the on-screen words and phrases move in and out of the frame and around the screen like animated characters), superimposed over images of landscape. *Beach Events* combines a poem by Hancox himself with images recorded on a beach—feet making footprints, a crab, mussel beds. Poetic lines are presented, in a cursive typeface, at the bottom center of the frame.

While *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* is easily the most impressive of the three films, the other two are capably filmed and edited and with *Waterworx* do chart a range of the possibilities of visual text, particularly poetic text, within the film image. The particular success of *Waterworx*, in my view, is Hancox’s decision to use his filmmaking to deliver the Stevens poem to us as directly as possible rather than to use film as a way of interacting with the text of the poem, as he does in the other two instances.

35. “A Clear Day and No Memories” was originally published with three other poems in
Stevens’s poem is rich with subtle paradox. The speaker’s list of the memories he is not having—soldiers in the scenery; people, now dead, as they were fifty years ago; and young women in blue dresses bending to touch something—is, of course, a list of memories: he cannot name these people and moments without remembering them and without, in fact, creating in us a memory of them. And yet, there is another sense in which his statement may be true. For even if he is having thoughts about these past moments, he seems not to be in pain about them, or at least not in a depth and immediacy of pain that we might assume has been an inevitable part of these (seemingly wartime) memories, at least until this “clear day.” Whatever the speaker has lost and has felt the loss of, “Today the mind is not part of the weather”: that is, he seems to be able to be conscious of the weather, of being alive in a particular moment, without the mind’s projection of painful memories into this moment.

The lines “Today the air is clear of everything. / It has no knowledge except of nothingness” add a further dimension to our sense of the speaker’s experience. Stevens’s use of “nothingness” recalls the pun on “nothing” in Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”: in the atmosphere “today,” there is, at least at first glance, nothing of the speaker’s projected awareness of the past, or of the speaker’s previous pain. The air does seem full of an existential nothingness, a feeling that nothing any longer makes sense, or at least that nothing makes the kind of sense it may have seemed to make in the past. It is as if the very idea of recovering from the losses implicit in the speaker’s memories, his no longer openly feeling the pain of these losses, renders life meaningless and this clear day a “shallow spectacle.” The particular “invisible activity” of thinking about what is no longer—or what is, for this unusual moment (unusual enough to be the subject of the speaker’s reverie), no longer causing pain—is sensible (it is usually sensible to move past the pain of loss) yet, at the same time, senseless, since forgetting what one has lost, and the concomitant surrender to meaninglessness and nothingness, seem to create a psychic state where nothing is as it seems and everything feels empty.

Stevens’s use of “us” suggests further complexities. The air “today” flows

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Stevens 1955; subsequently, it was included in Stevens 1957, 1959, and 1971. This item is reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California (WAS 4122). 36. “A Clear Day and No Memories” has not attracted criticism. Harold Bloom (1977: 156) does mention the poem, though Bloom’s reading of the line “Today the mind is not part of the weather” suggests that he does not see it as ironic: “In the beautiful poem of the year before, A Clear Day and No Memories, he finally had said, ‘Today the mind is not part of the weather.’ But until then, he mixed mind and weather, not wanting to know how much of the weather came from the light of his own mind, the breath of his own spirit.”
over “us” without meanings, “as if none of us had ever been here before,” revealing that the speaker is not “here” alone (wherever he is). But whoever else we assume is with him, his use of “us” includes the reader. Even if we have not been wherever the speaker is, we are here now, “today.” We are here reading Stevens’s poem (and this speaker’s psyche) over and over as we attempt to come to a clearer sense of the poem by remembering how we understood it before and gaining fresh insights, or at least forming additional conjectures, now (and “now”).

Obviously, Wallace Stevens does not need Rick Hancox to re-present “A Clear Day and No Memories,” which is engaging, complex (I have only begun to unpack the poem), complete, and powerful in its own right. And yet, Hancox’s presentation of the Stevens poem not only brings a relatively obscure poem to a new audience, it also “foregrounds” the poem within a cinematic work that has its own integrity and power.37 Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories) begins with the poem’s title, in computer generated text (throughout the film, the text is all in capitals), which fades in, then fades out.38 Unless one already knows the Stevens poem, there is no way to know that this first text is the title of a poem as well as part of the title of this film, especially since it is not until the second half of the film that the poem itself is presented (the end credits mention “THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS,” though it is nowhere clarified that, in fact, “A Clear Day and No Memories” is the title of the poem we read in the film). This opening text is followed by eighteen shots of a large waterworks near a body of water, accompanied by what seems to be the sound of machinery operating behind the waterworks walls (figure 4). The first shot of the waterworks reveals the corner of a building with well-kept grounds visible to the right of the building. It is a twenty-one-second still shot, the only still shot of the eighteen shots in the waterworks sequence. The other seventeen are filmed with a camera moving through the waterworks in stable tracking shots, presenting various views of the waterworks buildings and grounds.39 The pacing of these shots is slow and steady (they evoke Alfred Hitchcock’s traveling shots), matching the lack of apparent activity at the waterworks. Nothing is moving except the camera and apparently the wind.

37. Incidentally, Waterworx took first prize at the eighth annual Poetry Film Festival, December 3–4, 1983.
38. Hancox (1984: 100) generated the text on a VAX 11/780 and filmed directly off the terminal that appears at the end of the film.
39. Hancox (2004) recorded his dolly shots in slight slow motion, thirty-two frames per second, from an automobile (he had let twenty pounds of air out of each tire to ensure smoothness).
The sequence of the waterworks is accompanied by what seems to be the persistent hum of machinery behind the walls and the sound of wind. We also hear, first, with the opening image of the waterworks, the sounds of children playing and, then, during the remainder of the sequence, a radio playing in the distance; through static, we can make out bits of a romantic song sung by a woman. It is a nostalgic song, the words of which are for the most part inaudible, though we can make out the phrases “It’s only the moon again” and “I’ll never forget.” In fact, we are hearing Vera Lynn, “England’s sweetheart” during World War II, singing “White Cliffs of Dover”; Lynn was the host of the BBC radio program *Sincerely Yours*, immensely popular with British overseas servicemen. The song becomes audible as the camera begins to move and remains audible until the final shot, when the camera moves toward a railing by a walk overlooking Lake Ontario and stops.

Following the conclusion of the waterworks sequence (which lasts 135 seconds), it is immediately repeated: we see the same eighteen shots in the same order accompanied by the hum of machinery and the radio static and song, heard exactly as before (we do not hear the sound of the children playing or the wind). This time, the poem is presented, one line at a time,
in a computer text that, after the first line of the Stevens poem, scrolls onto the screen from left to right, then stops so we can read it. The visual arrangement of the lines of Stevens’s poem is altered—lines 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 are presented as two lines of computer text each—though the overall timing of Hancox’s presentation approximates the experience of reading the poem (the lines unscroll at a consistent speed, but the time that elapses between particular lines varies). At the conclusion of the repeated waterworks sequence, there is a dissolve (just as we read “THIS INVISIBLE ACTIVITY”) to a computer terminal. There is a momentary refocusing of the camera, and we can see, in this final, still shot, the reflection of the camera and the filmmaker in the monitor along with, superimposed, “THIS SENSE.”

In fact, Hancox’s project did not begin with Stevens’s poem, but with the images of the water filtration plant we see in the film, footage that was shot and edited before Hancox decided to use “A Clear Day and No Memories” as part of the film (Hancox 1984: 99–100). The Harris Water Filtration Plant overlooking Lake Ontario on Queen Street East in Toronto was a landmark in the neighborhood where Hancox was born and where he continued to visit his grandmother after the family moved west: “As a child, I was always told, ‘Don’t go down there by yourself!’ My mother had wheeled me around there in the pram when I was a baby; she was a war bride who had emigrated from England, and I guess she looked out over this vast lake and imagined she was looking back home. She was very lonely. So it’s a place that goes back to my infancy” (Hancox 2004). Hancox had been moved by Stevens’s essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1951 [1942]), which argues that poetry is the best medium for protecting the concept of nobility from the pressure of reality, and he decided to use “A Clear Day and No Memories” within his film “since it conceptualized a particular relation between time and memory I had been wrestling with in the film” (Hancox 1984: 100–1).

Hancox (ibid.: 101) has described the structure of Waterworx as “modeled on human memory processing, with the first half, which has no text, permitting the viewer to record a strong, eidetic-like image directly, via the senses; the second half is actually a repeat of the first, emulating recollection, with the soundtrack attenuated and the image cluttered now by the superimposed poetic text, forcing its way through the intellect.” On the most obvious level, this organization evokes dimensions of Stevens’s poem. As we read “A Clear Day and No Memories” in the film, we are, as Hancox

40. After a moment, the computer texts either disappear or fade out. I can find no clear rule as to when Hancox uses the fade-out versus the simple disappearance of the text. I assume the choices had to do with his sense of how the poem should be read.
suggests, not only making sense of Stevens’s words and the speaker’s sense of things, we are also reseeing, remembering, the images of the waterworks and the song and the other sounds. Of course, once again there is nothing in this scenery—certainly no soldiers—and, as in the poem, the day remains clear. The “spectacle” of the film is “shallow”: nothing happens, and seeing the waterworks sequence the second time adds nothing except our awareness that we are remembering, and remembering nothing much, certainly nothing that causes us pain. The combination of the unpopulated spaces and distant sounds does evoke a feeling of emptiness, a feeling of distance from human interaction, and, in conjunction with the music on the sound track, a sense of nostalgia. The intersection of the experiences of poem and film is particularly emphatic at the line “As if none of us had ever been here before,” since the viewer can hardly fail to realize that “we” have been here—at the railing of the walk overlooking Lake Ontario—before, regardless of who the “us” in Stevens’s poem refers to.

The dissolve to the computer screen and the reflection of filmmaker and camera doubles the implications of this shallow spectacle, this invisible activity, this sense—since “this” now refers simultaneously to the speaker’s remembering/nonremembering, the poet’s representation of it, the filmmaker’s activity in communicating his sense of the Stevens poem to us, and the finished film (figure 5). It is also significant that we are looking at a computer screen and, throughout the film, at computer generated text (typed presumably, and actually, on the computer we see), which in 1982 was not yet ubiquitous in film. According to Hancox (ibid.: 100), “The idea of using the artificial memory of a computer to generate poetry about the absence of memory, is consistent with the kind of complex imagery central to Wallace Stevens’ poem.” The film’s concluding “This sense” seems at first to refer specifically to the new, computer technology as confirming the distance between the present and the past. But of course, the “sense” of the computer screen is no more an answer to the complexity of passion, and of loss, of pain, of memory, than is the speaker’s reverie or the poet’s representation of it.

Hancox (ibid.: 99–100) has said that his inclusion of Stevens’s “A Clear Day and No Memories” in Waterworx was in part a formal decision: “The film was stalled. The nostalgic imagery was simply available too readily to the senses; the viewer was lured into consuming the image, lured into an illusionary sense of possession. . . . Something was needed to block penetration into the image—something flat across the screen, to draw attention instead to a kind of transparent partition, made apparent through the use of superimposed text, preferably contrary in style to the background image.” Nevertheless, once he had decided to use a poetic text, and “A
Clear Day and No Memories” in particular, Hancox’s care in presenting Stevens’s work in such a way that the poem can be read, understood, and enjoyed for itself, even within a context that has powerful personal implications for Hancox, allows Waterworx to achieve something that seems quite unusual. By presenting Stevens’s original text to a new set of readers within a new, cinematic context, Hancox has done the work of a creative editor. Essentially, Waterworx provides the opportunity for a new kind of public “reading” of Stevens’s poem, within a new kind of public space (whether one imagines “reading” as an oral presentation for a live audience or as a readership of a new printing of the poem). Even the fact that the title Waterworx is not present at the beginning of the film (or, for that mat-

41. Hancox’s unusual spelling of waterworks creates a visual connection with his own name and, perhaps, emphasizes how personal these waterworks are for him. He has explained the unusual spelling this way: “In my own mind, while the film is in fact shot at a waterworks, the reason for the ‘X’ is to signify how its original purpose seems crossed out by its stronger metaphoric presence” (Hancox 2004).
42. Hancox had originally planned to use the Stevens title as the title of his film but thought better of it and in the end decided on Waterworx (Hancox 2004).
ter, at the end), and that Hancox privileges Stevens’s title as both the film’s opening text and the apparent title of the film confirms Hancox’s respect for the poem he delivers to us and, perhaps, suggests the way that what we read often comes to be as “personal” for us as our memories of our first-hand experiences.

Matthias Müller’s nebel was, in some ways, a quite different project from Waterworx. nebel came about when Müller (2006: 301) agreed to contribute to what was planned as a cinematic homage, “an episodic film about Ernst Jandl’s work, containing different filmmakers’ contributions.” While the larger homage to the well-known Austrian experimental poet fell through, Müller finished his homage, which premiered at the Vienna Film Festival in 2000, shortly after Jandl’s death. Originally, Jandl, who was famous both as a performer of poetry and for his innovations in the “sound poem,” was to read his Gedichte an die kindheit in nebel; but in the finished film, the reading is done by Ernst-August Schepmann. According to Müller (ibid.: 301–2), while Jandl is a recognized figure in Europe, the cycle of poems called Gedichte an die kindheit was not widely known, despite the considerable interest of the work; and since, “as I read these poems, my own images were immediately released” (ibid.: 301), he decided to work with these particular poems. Further, until nebel, Gedichte an die kindheit had not been translated into English: Peter Waugh provided Müller with the translation that he used in the subtitles of the English version of the film.

43. nebel is available from Matthias Müller: Mueller.film@t-online.de.
44. Ernst Jandl (1925–2000) is well known for a wide range of experimental poetic forms. According to Sharon Hall (1984: 194): “Although he is little known to the public, Austrian poet and dramatist Ernst Jandl is regarded by critics as one of the most prominent and influential figures in German avant-garde literature. His career, which has spanned over thirty years [Jandl died in 2000], is marked by tireless linguistic invention and experimentation. Jandl has been linked to the school of ‘concrete poetry,’ which emphasizes the acoustic and visual properties of words rather than their representational qualities. He has explored a variety of styles but is best known for his Lautgedichte, or sound poems, which he has performed in public, preserved on recordings, and published in numerous collections.”
45. In The Oxford Companion to German Literature, Mary and Henry Garland (1997: 423) mention Gedichte an die kindheit as an example of what in the collection Der gelbe Hund (1980) was an experiment with “‘infantile language’ (verkindlichte sprache)”: “The volume [Der gelbe Hund] expresses oppressive resignation, a preoccupation with ageing and death; writing has become a ‘duty’ (‘war ein gedichte ist’), a means of survival in an existential crisis in which the lyrical ‘I’ thinly disguises personal despair (‘von sinnen’).” Sharon Hall (1984: 194) confirms this estimate: “The poems in Die Bearbeitung der Mütze (1978) and Der gelbe Hund (1980) are dark and self-analytical, revealing Jandl’s profound depression and mounting fear of old age and creative decline. There are fewer of his characteristic sound and visual experiments, and a striking new stylistic device is his use of a reduced language similar to that spoken by children or foreign workers.”
Like Rick Hancox, Matthias Müller is considered an avant-garde filmmaker, though his means are rather different from Hancox’s. Müller’s early films, shot on Super-8mm film, are sensuous, diaristic evocations of complex, sometimes disturbed psychic states. More recently, Müller has made a name for himself as one of the cinema’s prominent “recyclers”: many of his films are made by imaginatively recycling material from earlier works (his own films, films recorded off of television, old home movies). In one sense, the *nebel* project was unusual for Müller. Though many of his films have evocative voice-overs and sometimes include bits of text photographed from books, he had never made a film dedicated to presenting a poet’s work. But in another sense, *nebel* is a typical Müller film. Not only does it “recycle” the entirety of Jandl’s *Gedichte an die kindheit*, but the visual imagery that Müller uses to accompany the Jandl poems is, in many cases, borrowed from diverse filmic sources: *nebel* includes at least two shots from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for example, and a number of passages from home movies made by Müller’s father when Müller was a child.

The Jandl poems, at least in translation (I do not read German), are deceptively simple, easy to read but full of subtle humor, irony, and mystery. The second of two poems in the collection, called “der nebel,” gives a particularly clear sense of Jandl’s method:

*nebel* (mist) is leben (life),
if you start from the end.
everyone wants to do that at times,
to become a child again,
I’d like to, more and more,
the older I get,
and the closer and closer I get
to my mother the earth,
which might also mean:
my mother under the earth.

der nebel ist das leben,
 wenn man es von hinten beginnt
das möchte manchmal jeder,
 zu werden noch ein kind
ich möchte es immer mehr,
 je älter ich werde,
 und komme doch immer näher
meiner mutter der erde
 was auch heißen kann;
 meiner mutter in der erde.47

What begins as a straightforward statement of our desire, from time to time, to move against the flow of time, to become children again (this reverse movement is subtly dramatized by the fact that “nebel” is “leben” in reverse), takes on a somewhat macabre tone, even a humorously macabre tone, from the final lines. While the adult might dream of returning to childhood and the security and protection of the mother, the reality is that we are relentlessly moving forward to our future in Mother Earth

46. For the most extensive discussions of Müller’s work, see Becker 2004 and Strathaus 2005.
47. *Gedichte an die kindheit* is included in Jandl 1985: 346–50.
and into the same earth that the mother we long for is buried in. We will be reunited, but not in the sense we dream about—though there is a kind of security in this reunification too: everyone, after all, must end there, “under the earth.” The reality of what happens after death—whether, as Jandl dearly hopes in “the soul shepherd,” the first poem in *Gedichte an die kindheit*, “we return at death to somewhere else / to this one great soul body, to this immortal joy”—is lost in the mist. We will be reunited under the earth with our mothers, but whether any further form of reunification will occur we cannot know. Indeed, the closer to the end we come and the hungrier we may grow for some transcendent reunification, the more “in the mist” we can feel: as Jandl suggests in the first “der nebel,” “over the distant things . . . [mist] lays itself down thickly. / I can’t see them / and often don’t know / if they’re really there at all.”

Müller’s approach to presenting the poems in *Gedichte an die kindheit* is reasonably consistent throughout *nebel*, and since there is no space for a thorough exploration of his film, I will use his version of the second “der nebel,” quoted above, to suggest the nature of this approach. Of course, since my experience of *nebel* is with the English version of the film, which translates the narrator’s reading into visual text (there is also a version without the visual text for German-speaking audiences), the translated lines of Jandl’s poem tend to function as the visual foreground of the film and the photographed images the background—the cinematic interpretation of what is read. Even in the German version, of course, the audience’s attention is primarily devoted to hearing the reading of the poems, and the visual imagery is seen in relation to that reading. The narrator’s tone is consistently a part of our understanding of what we read: Schepmann’s reading is full of humor and wit—in a sense, the opposite of Hancox’s presentation of the Stevens poem by means of the comparatively neutral, deadpan computer text. And the imagery Müller uses to accompany the Jandl poems is far more diverse and expressionistic than the imagery used in *Waterworx*: there are many shots, and the camera is generally handheld in an informal manner. The result is a very different film experience of a “re-published” poetic text. Nevertheless, Müller’s method is as fully appropriate for *Gedichte an die kindheit* as Hancox’s imagery is for the Stevens poem.

The first visuals we see during “der nebel” are shots from an old, regular-8mm color home movie of a young boy and his mother playing ball at a beach. This home movie material is followed by an image of a ball flying through the air, across the film frame, back and forth; after a moment, we realize that while we are seeing the ball fly from left to right in forward
motion, when the ball flies from right to left, we are actually seeing the original shot in reverse. That we are seeing alternating forward and reverse motion is confirmed by the soundtrack: the tape of the music, composed for *nebel* by Claus van Bebber, is played forward and in reverse in time to the movement of the ball. When we get to the end of the poem and to the line “which might also mean: my mother under the earth,” the image darkens, and we see a brown-tinted image of a ball lying on the muddy ground among puddles, then a fade to black (figure 6). The music fades out just before the final line of the poem.

The visual images used for “der nebel” function on several levels. Most obviously, within the context of Jandl’s poem, the use of home movies of a child and his mother visualizes our periodic yearning “to become a child again”; and the increasingly frequent desire to reverse the flow of time is imaged in the forward and reverse of the ball and the sound. That is, Müller provides a clearly appropriate visual accompaniment to the Jandl poem and a metaphor for the essential hunger it expresses. More subtly, the fact that we are seeing what are clearly *old* home movies of *early childhood*—the color has faded and there are scratches in the emulsion; the surface of the old movies has decayed—is a way of combining the new and the old or,
more precisely, of creating a cinematic emblem of the hopeless irony of our desire to return to a past that is itself in a state of decay.

A third level of suggestion—one not self-evident within Müller’s version of “der nebel” from the words, imagery, and sound—is available to those who know Müller’s other films, in the same way that Jandl’s rumination on childhood must be more fully evocative for anyone who has followed the evolution of his career. The home movies we see in “der nebel,” and throughout nebel, were made by Müller’s father, who died when Müller was a child. In fact, Müller did not know that his father had made home movies, or at least did not remember, until the 1980s, long after his father had passed on. He began to use them in his own work, to render the old new and the new old. The imagery of the filmmaker and his mother, filmed (from outside the frame) by Müller’s father, can be read as a prescient metaphor for the mother’s and son’s subsequent lives together without the presence of the father. This relationship of mother and son is the subject of what may be Müller’s best-known, and most accomplished, film: Alpsee (1994)—the title refers to another home movie made in 1964 by his father, also called “Alpsee” (after a lake in the Alps the family was visiting). Müller’s Alpsee, which ends with imagery of his mother wading in the lake, dramatizes moments in the life of mother and son in a manner that, in its visual design, evokes (consciously, says Müller [2006: 295]) Douglas Sirk’s American films. The theme of Alpsee is the evolution of the boy’s creative sensibility within the repression and boredom of a middle-class life. For those of us familiar with Müller’s ouvre, nebel evokes the evolution of the filmmaker from that child to the person who can make the film we are seeing, and who, like Jandl, can now feel the poignancy of the lost past and is becoming fearful about what is to come.

Müller—like Jandl—has learned not only to find also but to create consolation within his work. In the tenth (untitled) poem in Gedichte an die kindheit, Jandl remembers how “dazzling and marvelous” Christmas was when he was a child and how, “for more than forty years,” he no longer “believed in any of that.” But now, he explains, “things are beginning to change”:

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everything can suddenly
dazzle me
namely each commonplace
thing
I hold
nothing in my hands
after such a long time.
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48. See Müller’s (2006: 284, 292) comments on home movies.
but it’s not
as far to get there
as it used to be.
it becomes the whole
room
in which I’m imprisoned,
big and white and
- dazzlingly marvelous.

The imagery Müller uses to accompany this particular poem reflects an older man’s new awareness of everyday things in the face of mortality. Müller’s images of simple things—a box of Christmas tree ornaments, a light bulb—are as visually gorgeous as we imagine Jandl’s memories and new awareness to be. These images, and Müller’s frequent use of visually exquisite imagery, can also be seen as a confrontation of mortality. The first film Müller lists on his filmography is Aus der Färne—The Memo Book (1989), which focuses on his process of recovery from losing a partner to AIDS; Pensão Globo (1997) follows a young man, losing strength under the onslaught of AIDS, as he revisits Lisbon and remembers (imagines?) earlier days. In the wake of both earlier films and the experiences for which making the films was a kind of therapy, nebel suggests/demonstrates the spiritual effulgence within the everyday and the way in which loss and fear can seem to intensify perception of this spiritual effulgence—as distraction and sometimes compensation.

One of the admirable dimensions of both Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories) and nebel is the filmmakers’ obvious commitment to the original poetry they recycle into their films. They do not simply use, however honorifically, the work of Stevens and Jandl; they take considerable pains to deliver the poems to us, so that we can discover and experience the poets’ originality and skill. The filmmakers’ creativity is thus in service of the poets’ original contributions, and the (considerable) effectiveness of their filmic manipulations of image and sound is a function of the degree to which these manipulations complement and clarify the poetry. This seems to me an ethical use of the poets’ work. Both makers accepted the challenge of trying to turn poetry into film, and both met this challenge while producing impressive cinema, without sacrificing the work of others to their own.

3. Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems: Feature Film as Poetry Anthology

While Hancox and Müller use cinema to revive relatively obscure works by well-known poets and bring these works to a new audience, Clive Holden’s
approach to “republication” is rather different. Holden (2004a) is interested in enlarging the audience for his writing but also in seeing what the impact of new “publishing” contexts might be on particular poems. Each part of the Trains of Winnipeg project presents a somewhat different set of poems. The book includes far more poems (thirty-eight) than either the CD (thirteen) or the film (fourteen) but does not include “Transience,” “Grain Train,” and “Wind” from the CD or “Hitler! (Revisited)” from the film. And in each medium, the poems that are included are presented in an order that bears no particular relationship to the order of the poems in the other media. All in all, however, Trains of Winnipeg in its various forms provides a test case for exploring the differences in impact and implication (and/or the lack of differences) when a particular poetic sensibility, and specific poems, are presented in various media. The project is also an instance of the recent trend among media artists not simply to work in various media, but also to work across media in ways that blend media together into composite forms.

As a book of poetry, Trains of Winnipeg is not particularly unusual. Holden is a capable poet, though, as in any collection, some poems are more interesting than others. The CD records the poet reading his work, accompanied by music—less common than a book of poetry but not unusual either. The film, however, is unusual. Indeed, I know of no other instance in the history of cinema, including the multifarious world of avant-garde/experimental film, where a poet has used a feature film as an avenue for presenting a collection of poems; or to be more particular, where a feature film has been seen as a means for doing a new kind of poetry reading, which includes motion picture imagery (sometimes as complex as the words) choreographed to the reading, as well as sound effects, envi-

49. Holden’s work has been full of poetry/film crossover since before the Trains of Winnipeg project. For example, “Hitler!” which concludes Fury: Fictions and Films (Holden 1998: 153–71)—and is the basis for “Hitler! (Revisited)” in Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems—is subtitled a “filmpoem” and includes texts arranged into poetic lines and patterns as well as still images of successive phases of actions. In general, Fury: Fictions and Films, as the title suggests, is an earlier attempt to meld several media. The images—photographic stills—located consistently in the top right corner of successive pages of particular pieces can be animated like a flip book into a motion picture.

50. Holden himself is director of Cyclops Press, a micropress specializing in multimedia poetry. “Hitler! (Revisited)” is based on the earlier film Hitler! (1995; a version of this project is also included in Holden 1998). Hitler! is a somewhat awkward, slightly shorter anticipation of “Hitler! (Revisited).” It tells much the same story about Holden’s relationship with his older brother Niall, uses the same footage of Niall as the later piece, and attempts to meld Holden’s poetic narration with imagery and sound. In Hitler! however, the interference between the jazz track (a solo saxophone riff) and Holden’s voice-over about Niall is distracting; the two tracks tend to obfuscate each other.
When I saw *Trains of Winnipeg* at the 2004 Flaherty Film Seminar, it seemed virtually unique; and if there is some unevenness from one film poem to another, the overall accomplishment and impact of the larger work are considerable.

Like a good many books of poetry (and like Holden’s CD), *Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems* combines individual “film poems” in an order that forms a more or less coherent autobiographical narrative. This narrative takes viewers on a journey across Canada and into Clive Holden’s memory. Like a conventional feature film, it develops a story about an identifiable character and moves through a variety of emotional states, from his exhilaration as a happy child (“Nanaimo Station”) to his respect for his parents’ longevity and high spirits (“Condo” and “Unbreakable Bones”), though the experience is more various and less confined to narrative than commercial melodramas usually are. Each film poem has its own visual structure, and the fourteen poems are arranged within the larger structure of the film so that each poem is succeeded by a fade out and a moment of looped imagery set within a tiny frame-within-a-frame in the lower-right-hand corner of the image; the looping image continues until we hear the sound of railroad cars coupling and see the title of the next film poem. The implicit parallel between moving pictures and railroad travel, a commonplace since the invention of cinema, is used not only to suggest a shared technological history, but also to create an image of the geography of Canada as created, and held together in Winnipeg, at the very center of the Canadian nation, by the railroad.

*Trains of Winnipeg* begins with “Love in the White City,” ends with “Trains of Winnipeg,” and is punctuated by “Saigon Apartments” and “Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel”: all these poems relate to Holden’s life in Winnipeg, the implicit here and now from which the poet flashes back to memories of his early life in the West, in and around Victoria, British Columbia, and of his student days in the East (at Concordia University in Montreal) and to more recent visits to and by his British Columbian parents. The personal quality of this narrative is considerably enhanced by the fact that, in those instances where a poem is read on.

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51. In the film/DVD version of *Trains of Winnipeg*, “Hitler! (Revisited)” has no voice-over; as in *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)*, the words are presented entirely by means of visual text.

52. Cinema and the railroad are two versions of the same technology: both create movement along tracks (railroad tracks, sound tracks, image tracks) mechanically. This connection, and its considerable implications, was historicized and theorized by Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986) and explored in relation to early cinema in Kirby 1997.
the soundtrack, Holden is the reader.\(^{53}\) Of course, Holden (2004b) is well aware that the poems and the film transform him into a character:

I’d thought of the fourteen films’ connections as being mostly metaphorical, intuitive, emotional, formal and tonal, and didn’t see the connection that others would plainly see, that the “I” (or eye) of each piece is the same. Since the accumulation of memories, impressions, and concepts is one artist’s, and, for others, tells a story about that artist, regardless of the accuracy of the biographical facts as presented, it was inevitable that an audience would have this reaction.

For myself (seeing the work from within its process) it’s somewhat different. I certainly and consciously use autobiographical elements in these works, but I see these as raw materials, to be worked on, and with, almost as if they’re formal materials. I certainly wouldn’t hesitate to change so-called factual details, for example, in the service of making a better work.

I cannot discuss here all the film poems in *Trains of Winnipeg*. But some comment on three of the more impressive—“18,000 Dead in Gordon Head (A Found Film),” “The Jew and the Irishman,” and “Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel”—should provide a sense of Holden’s approach, range, and style.

“18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” is the longest poem in the book (the four-and-a-half-page prose poem is followed by eight stills on four pages) and on the CD and the second longest in the film.\(^{54}\) In all three cases, “18,000 Dead” is positioned near the beginning: it appears as the third track on the CD, as the second poem in the first section of the book, and as the fifth film poem. The printed version of the poem is divided into four sections. The first explains how some film Holden had shot in 1985 was thrown into the garbage by an angry, pregnant roommate; the long second section and the brief fourth section focus on Holden’s witnessing the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl (he heard the shot and saw the girl fall as he was arriving at a friend’s house and ran inside to call for an ambulance); and the third section briefly presents six violent events that Holden witnessed during the months after the murder. Walking along the street, he stepped into a pool of blood; some time later, he saw a woman being

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53. Of the fourteen film poems in *Trains of Winnipeg*, three do not have voice-over by Holden: “Hitler! (Revisited)” has a narration presented as visual text, and “F Movie” and “Trains of Winnipeg” include no voice-over at all.

54. “Hitler! (Revisited)” is nearly the same length; “Trains of Winnipeg,” the final section of the film, is just under seventeen minutes; the remaining eleven film poems range from just over one minute (“F Movie”) to seven minutes (“Love in the White City”). The CD version of “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” is listed as thirteen minutes seven seconds—that is, just slightly longer than the film version.
hit by a car; he witnessed a knife fight between two teenage boys; he was present when a man jumped in front of a subway train; he came upon the dead body of a man who had jumped from the upper level of a mall; and finally, he witnessed a motorcycle accident that killed a man. The first, second, and fourth sections of the text version of “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” are made up of relatively brief, page-wide paragraphs; the third is organized so that the six brief stories are in two vertical columns.

In the CD and film versions, this division into sections is less obvious, though the tonality of the reading of the opening section, where Holden explains how his film was thrown into the garbage, does distinguish it from subsequent sections. Holden indicates that during the period he is talking about, he never got mad, not even when his roommate, who was “a tester,” tested him: his concluding comment on this situation (“then—she—threw my film in the garbage”) is wryly amusing, despite the somewhat grim music on the soundtrack. And it reveals that, whatever the narrator’s pretenses of self-control, this incident infuriated him, since he saw it as an affront to his seriousness as an artist. This opening provides background and emotional contrast for the body of the film poem, and it marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of Holden as an artist/filmmaker.

Holden explains that, while he was never able to finish that original film, he had made a VHS record of the material for editing purposes (so he could plan the editing using the videotape, before doing a final edit of the fragile, single print of the film he had), which he found nearly twenty years later. The video, now recycled onto film for Trains of Winnipeg, is what we are seeing as we listen to him describe the history of its production. Originally, Holden had attempted to create something like a memorial of the murder and his witnessing of it: he filmed “the split-levels, service stations, and the air raid siren over the old Gordon Head store” (Gordon Head is a suburb just north of Victoria, British Columbia) as well as his friend Andrew doing oil pastels of the crime scene; “I even lay on my side on the road where she died” (figure 7). As Holden tells the story of the murder and its aftermath and ruminates on his struggle to know how to feel about the girl’s death in a world where any young person is a “witness” to eighteen thousand television murders by age sixteen, we see the video of the original

55. “The idea of the crude transfer to VHS was that I could log the material that I’d filmed, remembering the much better quality film images in my mind’s eye while using the low quality (1983 Camcorder) video footage to plan my edits. At the time I would write down a detailed account of every shot, and then do a ‘paper edit.’ . . . I would do a fair amount of this preparation before actually cutting the film, as of course with Super-8 film there was no negative, just the one copy. Of course, this is all changed now with Super-8 negative stock, but mostly with the capabilities made possible by the digital age” (Holden 2006).
Figure 7  The Gordon Head store, in front of which a thirteen-year-old girl was shot to death. Clive Holden used a video recording of his original Super-8mm film in “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head (A Found Film),” the fifth “film poem” in Clive Holden’s *Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems* (2004). Courtesy Clive Holden.

footage, presented by means of looping: images are looped so that we see them several times, sometimes at one speed, then at an accelerated rate. The sound track (by Christine Fellows, Jason Tait, and Emily Goodden) also is looped, so that we hear much the same musical phrasing and sound effects over and over.

Holden’s use of looping throughout much of *Trains of Winnipeg* has a variety of implications and several effects on the experience of this particular film poem. According to Holden (2004a), looping was a way of bringing something like rhythm and rhyme into the experience of film, and in general, the various rhythms created by the looped imagery do work in subtle syncopation with the rhythms of the poetic phrasing of the texts themselves and of Holden’s reading of them. Each passage of looped imagery is something like a line of poetry, a line defined by particular visual details and by the specifics of the loop’s intersections or lack of them with the music, sound, and spoken poetry. In most cases, what we see over and over relates directly to what we are hearing. Overall, the narrated text on the
sound track is the foreground, and the looped images are, like the music, a form of accompaniment (we would understand the narrative Holden is presenting even without any images at all, but without the reading of the poem, the imagery would have little meaning).

The looping of images in “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” suggests both the intensity of Holden’s original experience of witnessing death (an intensity that commercial films have often suggested by slow motion) and his obsession in returning to this moment in the following days and months, as well as years later, in the poem we are hearing. The looped images move in and out of “sync” with particular moments in Holden’s reading of the text of the poem. This is evident, for example, when Holden says, “then—she—threw my film in the garbage”: at the sound of “then” the image changes to white Super-8mm leader with its red stripe down the middle in a pulsing rhythm, particularly suggestive of a heartbeat, then it changes again at “she” (to a looped image of suburban homes) and still again at “threw my film in the garbage,” back to the looped image of Super-8mm leader. The timing of the visual changes provides a confirmation of the emphasis in Holden’s reading of the line, and the red stripe on the filmstrip not only suggests that the narrator “sees red” when he learns that his partner has thrown his film away but leads into the story of the murder, about which we begin to hear as Holden cuts to an overexposed, scarlet-framed abstract image. When the poet describes his lying on his side in the street to film where the victim lay dying, we are seeing a side view of the same suburban street that we saw earlier in the film, but now this location has a more particular and complex meaning: it is where a death occurred and where the poet/filmmaker first tried to come to terms with witnessing this death in his art. The sound is also coordinated to the reading; during moments when the narrator is recalling moments of especially powerful stress, the sound—it evokes saws tearing through wood—becomes more abrasive.

The film imagery is clearly several generations away from Holden’s original Super-8mm film record of the murder site. We are seeing a film (or

56. A print of any film is protected by the attaching of one or another kind of “leader” at the beginning and at the end. This leader is, like the print itself, made of celluloid but does not include imagery the audience needs to see. The function of leader is to keep various forms of damage movie projectors can do to films—e.g., scratching or puncturing a frame when the film is not properly threaded into the projector—away from the print itself. There are many kinds of leader, and they differ somewhat according to the gauge (width) of the film being used. Most viewers are familiar with “Academy leader,” the 10–9–8–7–6–5–4–3–2 countdown that sometimes becomes part of the exhibition of a film. In Super-8mm film, leader is generally white with a red stripe down the middle.
a DVD) image of a reworked videotape of a Super-8mm film shot a year after the murder; the videotape was made crudely by projecting the Super-8mm film onto the wall of Holden’s (2004a) apartment and recording it with an early Camcorder. When Holden rediscovered the VHS and realized its potential, he refilmed the video, focusing especially on the glitches in the original Super-8mm material created when the camera was turned on and off and digitally enhancing particular frames and moments. The resulting film poem materializes the distance between now and then in a way the textual version of the poem cannot. The film poem provides evidence of the original crime scene in all its banality—throughout the looped material, people are walking into and out of the Gordon Head Store, and traffic is moving along the streets—and of Holden’s return to this location to make the film at a later moment in his life. The glitches also suggest the decay of Holden’s memory of the incident.

“18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” reveals a process of emotional maturation on Holden’s part. The original feelings of shock that followed the murder seemed at the time unremarkable to Holden; in his voice-over, he explains that he felt “the same deadness I always felt,” despite the fact that those around him can see that he has been traumatized. Even later, around the time when the original footage was thrown away, we know that the narrator was in the habit of suppressing his feelings: “I never got mad back then. I was proud of it. I used to say I could always see the other person’s side of the story.” But the slow, patient pace of the film poem, its success in returning us to that horrific moment, and to the several grisly events the narrator witnessed in subsequent months, reveals, once and for all, the depth of the trauma. “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” confirms the film-maker’s early need to recognize the power of this extended moment of his life and then to put it behind him, first, by taking the small positive action of putting a blanket over a dead motorcyclist (in the description of the film poem on his Web site [Holden 2001], Holden calls this the “small, positive action” that “broke the spell” of this period for him) and then, years later, twenty years later, by confining the incident of the murder and the violent incidents that followed it within the aesthetic structures of a poem and later a film poem.

Also implicit in the gap between the original crime and Holden’s transformation of his memories of it into poetry is his engagement with the history of independent cinema, which seems to have, over time, revealed to Holden possibilities for working cinematically with the particulars of his life. At various moments, Trains of Winnipeg evokes particular films and filmmakers. For example, the long montage of trains that concludes the
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film (it is the title film poem of the collection) is a (conscious, according to Holden [2004a]) allusion to Bruce Baillie’s Castro Street (1966). And the looping that is so fundamental to the visual structure of “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” and to so much of Trains of Winnipeg is reminiscent of the work of the Vancouver-born Canadian David Rimmer, whose breakthrough film, Seashore (1971), uses looping as a fundamental figure of style.

“The Jew and the Irishman” is autobiographical but quite brief. It is the second film poem after “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” (and the seventh in the film), and its position is significant. The sixth film poem, “Saigon Apartments,” like “18,000 Dead,” provides glimpses of human pain and struggle—in this instance, seen over time outside an apartment house by a pair of lovers watching from inside. After the following auditory transition of train coupling, seen with a looped image of a man inspecting a small plane, “The Jew and the Irishman” changes the trajectory of the film. In it Holden remembers his father becoming furious at guests of the family at a cocktail party who enjoy a bigoted joke; in his voice-over, he explains: “My father’s face turned from its usual descended black cloud to charcoal red, his mouth opening at last like a thin hidden vent in a volcano, and he actually said something, and they were burned by his words.” Holden’s voice-over then recalls that after the “white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and their reasonable facsimiles” left, he stood looking at the moon with his father, who was “smiling like I’d never seen.” The father’s refusal to stand for one more conventional Irish and Jewish joke, “after twenty years of those jokes,” is a triumph, both for him and for Holden (“and I loved him”—and confirms the possibility of active response to the violence and pain that the two previous film poems review.

The visual focus of this film poem is a full moon (figure 8). The moon is seen first through a series of superimposed diagrams (as Holden recalls the guests asking him about his plans for the future), then through panning shots of landscapes and shots from inside a car, as he remembers how he wrecked his first car on a utility pole (when he utters the word “wreck,” the frame is divided into quadrants in each of which two hockey players collide). When his father responds to the joke, the moon is superimposed with red-tinted imagery of a pulp mill smokestack plume, and as the guests “filtered away,” with a lighthouse, with a looped shot of seabirds flying, and finally, as Holden and his father “gazed together at the free moon,” with a shot of a single bird flying (the shot reveals spice marks and other glitches).

57. A still from Castro Street is posted on the Trains of Winnipeg Web site (Holden 2001).
Given the overall trajectory of Holden’s reading of the poem on the sound track, the persistence of the moon, which “wasn’t owned by any of them,” suggests the possibility of freedom and creativity within any social situation and as the underlying reality of life. That the last two images of the film are of birds confirms the father’s implicit flight from obnoxious social convention and the son’s exhilaration at his father’s action (this attitude is already implicit when, just as Holden is about to remember the telling of the joke, he remembers his “tall, beautiful father” listening to the party conversation, and we see a lovely image of the moon superimposed with two shots of bare late-autumn trees). The combination of the moon, the single bird, and the evidence of the surface of the filmstrip in the final shot (as the film ends, this same image is seen glowing in color negative) suggests that this moment, and this dimension of Holden’s father, have helped lead him into an artistic life, to a life of personal expression, and to the evocation of the memory we have just seen.

The eleventh poem in *Trains of Winnipeg* is “Bus North to Thompson with Les at the Wheel.” Unlike “18,000 Dead in Gordon Head” and “The Jew and the Irishman,” this brief (2¾ minutes) piece is not an autobiographical flashback, but a mini-portrait of an award-winning bus driver, Les Brandt (Brandt is also an artist, and Holden’s Web site gives access to three of his
“cow paintings”), filmed on a trip to Thompson, Manitoba, several hundred miles north of Winnipeg, at the end of the main road north. In this instance, the filmed imagery is directly related to the text Holden reads: when he says “Les,” we see an image of Les, and the imagery in the film was recorded on the route described in the text. At times Holden wittily interweaves his text and his imagery. For example, when the poem describes how a “blood-drunk Manitoba mosquito” weaves across the road in front of Les’s bus and is transformed by the windshield into a “circle of red, the size of a Canadian dime,” we see a close-up of Les’s uniform sleeve and the circular patch indicating his “Safety Years” (just below another “Master Driver” patch that commemorates “one million miles”). Throughout the film, Holden carefully matches the tone and rhythm of the read text with the tone of the imagery and the rhythm of his cutting. In “Bus North to Thompson,” Holden once again uses a film poem to provide something that the text of a poem cannot: Holden’s poem evokes the kind of man Les Brandt is, but the imagery introduces Brandt to the viewer as a particular, recognizable person and one of the people who make Winnipeg—Holden (2001) describes it on his Web site as “entirely flat and the coldest city on earth”—livable, somehow quintessentially Canadian, and home.

All in all, Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems expands the scope of the “poetry film” or “film poem” and constitutes a breakthrough in the use of cinema as a means of publishing, or republishing, poetry. It demonstrates the potential of a new, cinematic form of public poetry reading, one that has the particular advantage of allowing the poet to “travel” more widely and address a more extended audience than might otherwise be possible. The combination of Holden’s readings of previously published poems, with a wide range of suggestive, dynamically arranged images and carefully chosen sounds and music, not only extends the expressivity of his words but adds new layers of rhythm, rhyme, and suggestiveness. Whether Trains of Winnipeg instigates further developments in the cinematic engagement with poetry or new kinds of publication/republication of poetry remains to be seen, but for those interested in how poets can come to grips with new media and with our increasingly mediated world, Holden’s feature may be of considerable use.

Of course, the fact that avant-garde film has, at least so far, been among the least recognized major contributions to film history, even within aca-

58. According to Holden (2006), “Bus North to Thompson” does have an autobiographical connection: “I used to be a greyhound bus driver. It was my seasonal ‘artist’s job,’ on and off, for many years. I spent one summer driving a route on the Alaska Highway and when I met Les, we spoke of driving north, and the poem and film sprang from that.”
deme, makes it unlikely that Holden’s, or Hancox’s or Müller’s, contributions will soon find the audience that I believe they deserve. But perhaps the reader can forgive the hope that a greater recognition of the decades-old, but often ignored, intersection between poetry and cinema might allow for a more considerable interpenetration of the somewhat distinct audiences for these two art forms and, in time, might help to create somewhat larger audiences for both.

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