THE FILM POEM

The Film Poem

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(Instead of) Dedication

The great news of the completion of this PhD coincided with the devastating news of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Although it seems absurd to dedicate a PhD to those affected by a natural disaster, I considered it appropriate to at least mention this inevitable happy / sad inner contradiction I experienced at the time of being awarded the PhD title.

Abstract

The thesis traces the history of the film poem as a concern and formal strategy within artists' film traditions over the last one hundred years. Via a theoretical framework (that includes Russian Formalist literary poetics, experimental film studies, critical theory and linguistics) the investigation reveals and explicates what connects the ways different practitioners have synthesised the two terms "film" and "poem" and discusses the relevance of the "film poem" as a combinative term within a contemporary art context.

It begins by presenting and evaluating a series of different critical and creative stances taken by theoreticians and especially practitioners (including Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage) and showing how they relate and have developed over a historical continuum. In this attempt to map the territory on which the film poem has been developed, the thesis also tries to clarify some positions that have caused confusion and are theoretically problematic or irrelevant for a contemporary analysis of the concept of the film poem.

The results of the historical / literary review coalesce into some of the concerns on which the practice for this PhD was based. As the practice developed on a parallel to the writing of the thesis, the results of the practice are then self-reflexively discussed in the thesis itself and the concerns of the overall research project eventually become more specific, led by the practical work. The analysis of my own practice, its contextualisation within the work of

other practitioners and the discussion of how they relate to the theories of the film poem form the most significant part of the thesis.

Finally, the thesis brings the term "film poem" to a contemporary context in order to analyse more recent work and question its relevance for 21st century art practices, particularly seeing how ideas around the film poem could be related to multiple screen / installation work.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

This thesis will deal with the relationship between film and poetry in methodological terms and will discuss the notion of the film poem as a strategic concern in artists' film. It will argue that what one can term a 'film poem' is an open form, based on an aesthetic strategy of *parallelism*: a way of combining images without attempting to produce a specific meaning for the audience. I shall trace this process through the work of Vertov, Brakhage and other practitioners and show how it differs from the montage project of Eisenstein, which was based on what I call 'closed metaphor'. I shall argue that traditional metaphor creates a generally closed interpretive form, while parallelism and synecdochical abstraction create open forms. In this way, audience reception is not held captive to the author's meaning, but is able to freely interpret the work in multiple ways. I then pursue various methods of parallelism and the synecdoche in the works of other filmmakers and in my own work.

Chapter 2 begins by placing the film poem in a historical context from which some of the early 20th century writing could be better understood and clarifies a number of positions that are culturally specific and therefore irrelevant for my purposes. The main aim of this thesis, however, will not be to present all the different ways in which the terms film and poetry can be combined, but to focus particularly on the film poem as an approach towards the making and reception of a work. Therefore, a definition of what area of poetry is of interest here is essential, as well as understanding the idea of medium-specificity and

its importance within artists' film. The historically important theorists and practitioners of the film poem believed strongly in film's separation from the other arts, yet still considered the poetic analogy useful in methodological terms.

After setting the basic theoretical foundations upon which the thesis builds its argument, chapter 3 continues with a presentation of some fairly direct approaches of combining film and poetry, primarily to do with attempting a parallel between literary and visual phrasing (applying rules of the former to the latter). The thesis will argue that although this attempt could be seen as interesting in terms of comparing visual and literary languages, it is intrinsically problematic, as it takes poetry as being a priori a more fundamental language than film. Clarifying this problem is useful for my purposes, as from that point onwards, the thesis will consider film and poetry as two equal fields, neither of which pre-supposes the other and is more fundamental in their parallel. Similarly, this chapter explains how the use of words within a film (creating a film+poem hybrid) can result in a weakening of the visual syntax as such.

Chapter 4 discusses two very important ideas, structure and abstraction. The thesis suggests that within the film poem structure is very important and that it is through the structure that a work of art arrives at a resolution. But at the same time, the film poem is different from Structural film whose primary raison d' être is the filmic structure as such. This chapter makes it clear that definitions can by no means be hard-edged and that it is important to notice

the shades of grey between terms. However, it is still useful to point out that there are areas of interest that are different. Abstraction is important for the film poem as the space of tension between an object for what it is and an object as a quality of light. The thesis discusses the term of synecdoche that P. Adams Sitney uses to describe a type of abstraction that has to do with selective framing (Sitney 1977: 5) as it is a term that exactly works on this tension. The work of Stan Brakhage is analysed in relation to synecdoche.

In chapter 5 a crucial topic is presented, that of the poetic metaphor in relation to cinematic montage. This chapter compares the work of two Soviet masters, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, in order to show that the former's montage project, which worked on the more open principle of parallelism rather than the pre-defined literary symbol or specific metaphor, is more relevant for my purposes. The chapter argues that Eisenstein's closed and mono-directional montage sequences are too fixed to be seen as an example of what a visual metaphor could achieve, but are rather a case in which the viewer simply has to put together two phrases into a pre-existing verbal metaphor, i.e. simply to decode a closed symbolic system. Instead, the chapter focuses on the notion of parallelism, which is suggested to be a more preferable method of montage for this thesis' purposes. A detailed analysis of Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929) in terms of the strategy of parallelism follows.

Following on the work of other practitioners, the thesis then focuses on my own films. Chapter 6, the first of two chapters that analyse my own practice,

deals with work I created in the pre-MPhil upgrade period, works that are all made for a single screen. This chapter describes the making of five films (*The Garden* (2005), *Daffodil : Secret* (2005), *Light Particles* (2005), *Self-Portrait: Pulse* (2006), *Reaction Cannon* (2008)) and discusses how my practice changed as my theoretical research developed. The main question that arises is whether my films manage to tackle the balance between the symbolic and the formal, a question which was in some ways always present in my own work, but never clearly addressed. The general path in these films is from the more formal (*The Garden*) to the more symbolic (*Reaction Cannon*), yet none of the films satisfied me totally and at that point I decided to move onto a multi-screen space.

Chapter 7 introduces a new area of theory and practice into the PhD, that of the multi-screen installation which is not traditionally associated with the film poem. Through an investigation of the work of a number of practitioners including Sigrid Hackenberg, Chris Marker, Wolfgang Tillmans and Bill Viola, the chapter suggests that multi-screen installations can bring a contemporary dimension to the way the film poem can be analysed. By dispersing meaning across different planes, a multi-screen work has the potential of creating the open form, multi-directional metaphors that the thesis argues are at the essence of the film poem project. The chapter explains the spatial and synecdochical rigour with which installations need to be addressed to be analogous to the ideas of the film poem. The installation work of Wolfgang Tillmans is of particular interest, as, despite the fact that he is the only non moving image artist discussed here, he is the one that best tackles the idea of

parallelism, a type of parallelism that could result in many different metaphors being produced in the mind of the audience, but which does not impose itself towards specific readings.

Chapter 8, the second self-reflexive chapter analyzing my own work, closes the main body of the thesis. The chapter describes the results of my multi-screen experiments and my first commissioned multiple screen installation, which was to become the penultimate piece of work for the purposes of this research. It discusses how my work organically moved from the single to the multi screen and how elements of multi-screen concerns were to be found in various parts within my work as a practicing artist before and during my PhD. It also relates the results of the installation to the theory presented in chapters 4 and 5 (structure, abstraction, montage), summarizing how the theoretical issues presented in relation to the film poem can be applied to a multi-screen space. Finally, there is a description and analysis of how the material of each of the screens of the installation was put together and how they work and relate to each other.

Finally, the conclusion sums up all the issues that have been discussed in relation to historical writing on the film poem, the presentation of important works and the analysis of my own films. It also highlights the importance of the term for contemporary artists' film theory, particularly vis-à-vis the ideas of parallelism and how multi-screen installations can be seen as an expansion of the Vertovian / Jakobsonian parallelism project. In conclusion, the film poem

is presented as a useful mode considering the role of the audience, as it is an artwork that has to be synthesised by artist and audience together.

Chapter 2

Setting the foundations: poetic concepts, medium-specificity and exceptions

a. Defining poetry and poetic tropes

The first thing that needs to be made clear in this thesis is the definition of poetry itself and of what area within poetry interests the writers on the film poem and this thesis. As poetry pre-dates film by thousands of years, the definitions of poetry as a mode of expression and of poetic tropes vary significantly, which suggests that poetry cannot be used as a de facto term. Many early writers on the film poem, e.g. Hans Richter or the French impressionists, avoid defining poetry and isolate the type of poetry that interests them ignoring the rest or even use ideas of Modernist/freeform and Romantic/Lyrical poetry inter-changeably. This is not surprising as the definition of poetry itself is a debatable area. In the earliest ever attempt to define poetry, around 335 BCE, Aristotle compares poetry and history as two different modes of writing suggesting that "poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood. [...] Next, there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm" (Aristotle 1920: 28). Those notions have been influential in Western civilisation for hundreds of years, yet 'imitation' seems to have given way to 'personal expression' already by late 18th and early 19th C. Romantic poetry. In his attempt to describe what a poet is Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggests

that "the poet [...] brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity" (Coleridge 1817: 11). Hence for the Romantic poets, poetry was primarily an inwards (towards the soul) rather than outwards (towards the world) movement. With the coming of the Modernist era in the late 19th C., most attempts to define poetry became unimportant if not impossible. The notion of 'harmony' was questioned by 'free verse', which in Ezra Pound's words is to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (Pound cited in Kennedy and Gioia 1994: 194).

Although Aristotle's idea that poetry is a mixture of the instincts for imitation and rhythm is interesting and can be argued to be close to some of the tensions that the film poem deals with, it is useful to make it clear that as the film poem developed around the same time as Modernist poetry, the writing around it usually deals with poetry in the Modernist sense in terms of its structure and language. This is important in order to understand how writers on the film poem have dealt with various poetic concepts that they apply in their analyses and also the sort of writers they usually choose to parallel in their practices. Dziga Vertov and Stan Brakhage prefer to refer to the work of Modernist poets like Vladimir Mayakovski and Gertrude Stein (respectively) rather than the classic Greek Lyrical or English Romantic poets like Sappho and Coleridge.

The definition of metaphor is an area that highlights this preference towards the Modernist in the writings on the film poem. The new Princeton

Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics offers a rather open definition: "metaphor is a trope, or figurative expression, in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings" (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 760). This definition, which is much more encompassing and less definitive than traditional definitions of metaphor, is useful for my purposes as it offers a scheme whose openness is more suitable for the application to another medium. Going back to Aristotle, metaphor is about transferring meaning from one term to another ("the lion sprang at them" refers to Achilles fighting). Yet 20th century critics have questioned the idea that the purpose of metaphor is this closed transfer of meaning. According to the Princeton Encyclopaedia:

> rather than simply substituting one word for another, or comparing two things, metaphor invokes a transaction between words and things, after which the words, things and thoughts are not quite the same (ibid: 761) [and] the tendency to think that metaphors always equate or fuse entities [...] reduces the varied effects of metaphor in poetry to a single register (ibid: 762).

In his seminal study *The Rule of Metaphor,* Paul Ricoeur connects the idea of metaphor with the phenomenon of polysemy: "the identity of a word in relation to other words at the same time allows an internal heterogeneity, a plurality" (Ricoeur 1978: 115), suggesting that metaphor can be defined as "association by resemblance" (ibid: 117) within the interplay of possible meanings. This discussion of metaphor will be crucial in determining some of the differences between the working methods of Eisenstein and Vertov analysed later.

Another term that needs clarification is that of 'poetics.' The term of poetics is quite over-encompassing and for this reason, this thesis prefers not to use it. Taking the word back to its etymological meaning, it stems from the Greek "ποιώ," which means "to make." In that respect, poetics can be argued to be the study of the way things are made. This is the sort of definition of poetry that David Bordwell in his recent study *Poetics of Cinema* takes, a book that deals with the way (primarily narrative) films are made, from their conceptualization to their distribution. This definition of poetics is extremely broad, since it could cover every type of filmmaking and be used to discuss it from any different perspective, as all films have myriad facets in terms of the way they are made. For my purposes poetry needs to be seen as a more specific (yet still in some ways open) epistemological concern.

b. Medium-specificity

The application itself of poetic concepts to film is an activity that can take different approaches and could even be argued to be impossible. Despite the fact that the film poem was by default a mode of film practice that refers to another art and in that respect it is a priori conceptually combinative, a large number of writers and practitioners in the field believed strongly in medium-specificity and the separation of film from the rest of the arts. This may seem contradictory in a methodological sense, but a closer inspection of what exactly interested these writers in medium-specificity and how it differs to the idea of formalism could clear the area and actually provide one of the foundations for this thesis' discussion of the film poem.

The earliest text that sets the basis for the term of medium-specificity to develop is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* written in 1766. In a partly theoretical and partly poetic text, Lessing compares the work of a painter and a poet and sets out crucial differences between those two models of expression. He states poets "must not consider the necessities of painting as a part of their own wealth" (Lessing 1896: 68) and goes on to argue that painting that imitates literature is not worthwhile: "how is it that our admiration for the artist is nowise diminished, where he has really done nothing more than give expression in form and colour to the words of the poet?" (ibid: 71). Not only did Lessing suggest that each art form should be separate from the other, but he also attempted establishing the idea of a separate language (methodology) for painting and poetry. He argues "Painting employs in its imitations entirely different means of symbols from those adopted in poetry – i.e., the former using forms and colours in space, the latter, on the other hand, articulate sounds in time" (ibid: 90), suggesting a major space / time difference between the two modes of expression. According to Lessing, this difference is crucial not only in terms of how subject matters are approached, but as it should indicate the sort of subject matters and themes that are appropriate to each art form in the first place. An example of this is his reference to the notion of 'charm' and the possibility of its portrayal within the arts: "Charm is beauty in motion, and is, for this very reason, less suited to the painter than to the poet. The painter can only leave motion to conjecture; his

figures themselves are, in fact, motionless. With him, therefore, charm becomes grimace" (ibid: 127).

Lessing's essay was to be enormously influential, as the notion of medium-specificity and the difference in the language and methods of different art forms was a key issue at the beginnings of the Modernist era and influenced a number of avant-garde movements. A key theoretician of 20th century modern art who was influenced by Lessing's project is Clement Greenberg, who believed strongly in the methodological independence of various art forms. He suggests "Painting and sculpture in the hands of the lesser talents... become nothing more than ghosts and 'stooges' of literature. All emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred to subject matter" (Greenberg 1986b: 25). This is one of the earliest clear statements concerning the importance of form as the language system of an art medium and a definition of the notions of form and content. According to Greenberg "content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself" (Greenberg 1986a: 8). Therefore, when approaching any subject matter ('content'), the artist must never lose contact with form itself and the particularities of their own medium. It is only when form is investigated that a painting becomes something other than an illustrated version of literature (story-telling).

Although the idea of content being dissolved into form is close to Lessing's concepts, Greenberg pushed it a little further and arrived at the formalist point of dismissing figurative painting altogether, as he believed that it is only within

abstract art that form can really be investigated. In this respect the only thing that interested Greenberg were the form's self-defined rules: "the nonrepresentational or 'abstract,' if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint" (ibid: 9). This suggestion could be seen as an invitation for the development of a self-defined abstract visual language, which will pose its own limitations and rules. Useful as it may have been at the time, as a support for abstract art, the difference between Lessing and Greenberg is important for the purposes of the film poem. Whereas Greenberg's formalist project talks about a self-defined / self-referential language, Lessing's medium-specificity suggests that an interest in form does not necessarily need to be the sole driving force of a work.

Most of the major writers on experimental film – and the film poem to be more specific – believed very strongly in medium-specificity. In his introduction to *The Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929) Dziga Vertov's manifesto states:

> This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events without the aid of intertitles (a film without intertitles), without the aid of a scenario (a film without a scenario). This experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature (Vertov 1929).

American experimental filmmaker Maya Deren who was also interested in the film poem was equally interested in film's medium-specificity. As Renata Jackson argues:

> Maya Deren's writings on the art of the motion picture [...] fall within the tradition of Modernist medium-specificity: the two-pronged belief that art-forms are differentiated from one another by virtue of their distinctive formal or structural capabilities, and that there is a direct connection between these structural characteristics and each art form's proper expressive realm (Jackson 2001: 47).

Stan Brakhage similarly believed that visual languages could exist independent of verbal languages: "there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word" (Brakhage 1963, no pagination).

Yet none of the above writers found it contradictory to refer to poetry as a parallel to their interests in filmmaking. Dziga Vertov described himself as a film poet: "I am a writer of the cinema. I am a film poet. But instead of writing on paper, I write on the film strip" (Vertov 1984b: 182). Maya Deren saw poetry as a practice analogous to her filmic methods, as Renata Jackson suggests:

> Deren was quite adamant about the avoidance of literary or theatrical adaptation, abstract animation, or the imitation of objective reality for the creation of film-art. It is very telling then that,

> of all the art-forms referred to in 'Anagram'[1] other than film, poetry is not only the most sympathetically portrayed, but also is the only one from which Deren condones the borrowing of analogous creative methods, without her familiar warnings to the film-artist against misappropriating the expressive means of the other arts (Jackson 2002: 111).

The same applies to Stan Brakhage, who, although he created strictly visual and in a sense very 'filmic' works (which are usually silent so the audience can really focus on the image), still finds the poetic analogy useful. He suggests that "poetry and painting have alternately proved more growth-engendering sources of inspiration than either the trappings of the stage or the specific continuity limitations of any 'making up a story', novelistic tendencies etc" (Brakhage 1979: 130).

This contradiction between the medium-specificity Modernist film artists stressed and the parallel between film and poetry that they found interesting nevertheless is a starting point for the investigation of the film poem. At the same time the tension between the terms medium-specific and formalist would be useful in separating the more structural / materialist tendencies within artists' film from the concerns of the film poem. However, before I analyse the various ways in which the combination between the concepts of film and poetry has been attempted in epistemological terms, it is important to mention two culturally specific approaches to film poetry, which this essay will not deal with, as they are far too general and in some ways no longer

1 a text about art, film and poetics written in 1946

relevant. These are based on historically important writings on the film poem and although they are not strictly related to my project, it is important they are mentioned, as they use the same terms that this thesis is dealing with and may thus cause confusion.

c. The film poem as polemic

As experimental film often operated in the margins, sometimes Modernist film artists used the 'film poem' as a polemical emblem to define themselves in separation to what was happening in mainstream film. 1920s French abstract filmmakers – often referred to as 'impressionists' – Germaine Dulac, Henri Chomette and Louis Delluc drew heavily on the notion of poetry in their attempt to establish ideas about pure cinema ('cinema-pur'). When referring to mainstream cinema, Dulac was one of the first to establish the notion of narrative cinema as a 'novelistic,' prosaic one: "it [cinema] became a new means of expression for novelistic or dramatic literature, and since cinema was movement, it was confused with the interrelating of actions, of situations, it was put in the service of a 'story to tell' (Dulac 1987b: 38). Poetry was seen instead as something personal and of a high artistic importance and it is understandable that the modern filmmakers used the poetic analogy in their defense. However, although Dulac's separation between poetry and prose is close to Greenberg's separation between form and content and anticipates Deren's arguments on the 'horizontal vs. the vertical' (analysed further on in the thesis), the texts of the impressionists are unspecific in identifying what exactly interests them in the notion of the 'poetic' and they often fuse it with

that of the 'musical.' Dulac mentions the notion of the symphonic poem (a musical term for the description of a particular structure of a musical piece) when referring to the up-and-coming avant-garde film scene:

> The conception of the art of movement, and of the systematically paced images came into its own, as well as the expression of things magnificently accomplishing the visual poem made up of human life-instincts, playing with matter and the imponderable. A symphonic poem, where emotion bursts forth not in facts, not in actions, but in visual sonorities (ibid: 42).

The impressionists did not distinguish between the use of 'poetic' and 'musical' languages. Their urge to create a non-narrative and more form-based film art was such that any model that stresses form over content could be applied, whether poetic or musical, with no differentiation between the two.

German Dadaist filmmaker Hans Richter used the term in a similar polemical way in an interview with Jonas Mekas:

> The reason I use the word 'poetry' is to set it off against the 'film novel', which is represented by the entertainment film, or the reportage which is represented by the documentary. Where I would consider the entertainment film as 'novel', I would describe the exploration into the realm of mood, the lyrical sensation as 'poetry'. I would call all experimental films 'film poetry' (Richter, cited in Mekas 1957: 6).

Although this statement could be useful in establishing a notion of poetry versus prose in the cinema, it is rather problematic to include all experimental

films in the category of 'film poetry' and for the purposes of this essay this definition will be considered extremely broad. Richter seems to pre-suppose here that all experimental films deal with the exploration of mood and what he calls "lyrical sensation" (a term that is rather unclear). While most experimental films can be argued to include some poetic moments and qualities, there are strands of the experimental film whose primary raison d'être is not to explore poetry-related concerns, for example the structural or minimal film of the 1970s.[2]

It is understandable, however, that early Modernist filmmakers who often found themselves in the margins of film production would latch onto defensive positions despite the slight theoretical problems, as at that stage there was no developed body of theory to back up the importance of experimental film explorations. Even thirty or so years later, something similar can be noticed in texts on the American avant-garde. James Peterson, in his analysis of the work of the Late Modern American film-artists of the 1960s states that: "in practice, the film poem label was primarily an emblem of the avant-garde's difference from the commercial narrative film" (Peterson 1994: 29) giving a very general understanding of the notion of the film poem as an avant-garde practice, rather than a series of concerns / strategies. It is worth noting that even long after the establishment of experimental film, film artists still found the need to present themselves in opposition to the prevailing model of narrative film.[3]

2 A more detailed analysis of the relationship between Structural film and poetry follows.

3 Stan Brakhage spoke of experimental film as standing in opposition to narrative film until late in his career, while materialist British filmmakers of the 70s like Peter Gidal also used fairly polemical anti-narrative film language.

This idea of using the film poem as a polemical term is certainly historically specific, as it refers to a time when experimental filmmakers would have to use parallels with other arts to defend their work. But in a sense it can be argued that using the idea of the 'poetic' to suggest a loose, anti-narrative position still can be found in theoretical texts. At times, a film is described as 'poetic' when the viewer cannot establish a very clear coherent structure and semantic strategies are unclear. This could be argued to be the way some of the more abstract narrative filmmakers are seen. For example, Andrei Tarkovsky, whose biographer Maya Turovskaya suggests "I have no hesitation of describing Tarkovsky's cinema as poetic" (Turovskaya 1989: 101). Turovskaya does not refer to specific methodological strategies in order to arrive to such conclusion, but sees Tarkovsky's cinema as poetic due to its general non-clear narrative structure.

d. Biographical approaches and 'Lyrical film'

Another more culturally positioned approach that is important to clarify at this point is a number of parallels between the life of the Modern 20th C. experimental filmmaker and that of the Romantic poet. When analyzing the work of American filmmaker Stan Brakhage, David James follows this biographical mode of analysis and suggests that:

> The appropriateness of the analogy between the Romantic poet and the 60s independent filmmaker is not simply a matter of parallels in epistemological concerns so much as a continuity in the

> situation of the artist in industrial capitalism, a situation which, while it conditions all cultural production in this period, is more thoroughly fulfilled in the case of the poet and in the case of some independent film-maker in the fifties and 60s" (James 1982: 36).

What is important to mention here is that James not only uses a Romantic notion of poetry, which is generally not the case in most writings of the film poem, but he also places more importance on the poet himself rather than the work.

He claims that "the ideal of an anti-technological, organically human cinema [...] was lived by Brakhage in his retreat from the city to a nineteenth-century log cabin in the Colorado wilderness, where with his family he could be most free [...] to re-create the Romantic problematique" (ibid: 38). In this respect, Brakhage comes across as a Romantic poet not because of the quality of his work, but because of the choices that inform the context in which the work was created. This strategy of removing one's self from the 'distractions' of the social world in order to create was a typical Romantic strategy from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Thoreau. In the case of film, this choice "necessitated a working organization, a mode of production and distribution, alternative to the technology, labor practices, and institutional insertion of Hollywood" (James 1989: 32). Analogous to the 18th and 19th century Romantic poets' displacement from a social environment, the film poem was created outside the industrial capitalist system, where strict, professional modes of production are not open enough for personal expression. This definition of the film artist as the 'Romantic poet' is irrelevant to my

methodological purposes, but was quite important as a political point of difference for the American independent filmmakers of the 1960s.[4]

A similar, though slightly less biographical, approach is taken by P. Adams Sitney in his development of the idea of the 'Lyrical film'. Lyrical film is not exactly a film genre with specific characteristics, but rather an approach to filmmaking. Sitney states: "The Lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision" (Sitney 1979: 142). Sitney does not explain exactly what the relationship is – if any – between the type of film he describes and Lyric poetry. Yet, taking into consideration the definitions of different types of poetry, his choice of the term 'lyrical' seems appropriate. According to Kennedy and Gioia "a rough definition of a lyric as it is written today [is]: a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker" (Kennedy and Gioia 1994: 6). Using the idea of the first person narration as a characteristic of the film poem is problematic, as it can be argued that most artists' films are a first-person narrative in some way. However, what is worth-noting is that the discussion of the 'Lyrical film' brought up the question of the different definitions of poetry itself and how those different definitions would influence the way the film poem could be approached.

4 Brakhage will be discussed from a formal rather than auto-biographical perspective at a later chapter

Leaving aside those two approaches, let us now examine some other ways in which the terms film and poetry have been connected within the history of artists' film theory, which take a more clear methodological approach and are thus relevant to this project.

Chapter 3

Direct applications: phrasing, translation and hybrid

In the previous chapter, I have defined some of the ideas of poetry that are of interest for my project and placed the development of the film poem within a particular milieu. I have also cleared out some definitions of the film poem project that might cause confusion, as they do not clearly relate to methodological concerns. In this chapter, I will begin my investigation of the relationship between film and poetry in terms of the strategies of making creative work.

a. The Formalists' project of visual phrasing

One of the first attempts to approach film and poetry was to try to create a direct parallel between visual and literary languages in the form of 'phrasing.' This was a potentially fruitful project, but because its application was quite formulaic, it results in a problematic rigidity. The Russian school of Formalist writers and artists was the first to attempt an analysis of film poetics and more generally the language of film. In the 1927 book *Poetics of Cinema (Poetica Kino),* Formalist writers Boris Eikhenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov and others analysed the relationship between visual and literary languages and tried to apply theories of Formalist poetry to film. In his article 'Problems of Cine-Stylistics', Boris Eikhenbaum attempts the earliest written direct applications of literary language to film. He talks about the 'cine-phrase':

> If by the word 'phrase' we generally understand a certain basic type of articulation, which is actually perceived as a segment (verbal, musical etc) of moving material, then it can be defined as a group of elements clustered around an accentual nucleus (Eikhenbaum 1982: 22).

Thus, a cine-phrase for Eikhenbaum is a shot whose montage "can be lengthened and shortened. In some cases the long shot can have considerable significance – lengthening it gives the impression of a long, slowly developing phrase" (ibid: 24). If I accept the notion of the shot as a 'phrase' then the next question that naturally arises is the connection between the shots / phrases. Eikhenbaum takes the analogy even further and talks about the construction of the 'cine period', stating that a cine-period in filmic terms is a spatiotemporal linking of shots/phrases. In his words "the movement of frames, once started, requires a meaningful linking according to the principal of spatiotemporal continuity. It is a question, naturally, of the illusion of continuity" (ibid).

However, Eikhenbaum does not explain how a shot is exactly a cine-phrase. It is true that a long shot could have a considerable significance, but the same could be argued for a series of extremely short shots that flicker between each other producing strong stroboscopic effects. If a shot is a cine-phrase, then what would constitute the cine-word? Would it be a film frame (an instance of a shot) or would it be a spatial element of a framed shot? Couldn't a cine-phrase be made up of a number of shots instead? The possibilities of making parallels between specific cinematic and literary terms are so many,

that the project of a 'direct' translation between verbal and visual discourse seems impossible or pointless.

The visual / literary parallel the Russian Formalists attempted has been widely criticized. Paul Schmidt suggests that "the major assumption with which they began, that film was like literature, led them to propose a 'language' of film, analogous to natural language" (Schmidt 1975: 327). Interestingly, the Formalists themselves were aware that it was problematic to draw direct parallels and in *Poetica Kino* Tynyanov suggests that "to name the cinema in relation to the neighbouring arts is just as unproductive as naming those arts according to the cinema" (Tynyanov 1982: 36). Yet, despite being aware of the problems in making those direct parallels, they still considered it important in the development of film theory. In a 1932 article on cine-language, Alexander Brailovsky shows exactly this by being rather contradictory within the same one-page article:

> Suppose you read the word 'horse'. As a means of literary expression it is only an abstract and very general symbol. It is left to your imagination to decide upon a whole series of qualifications of a 'horse'. It might be a big horse, small, harness, race, young, old [...]. Now when you see the horse on the screen, all these qualifications are given to you at once and immediately in a visual image (Brailovsky 1932: 24).

This quote could easily lead to the conclusion that because of its specificity, a cinematic image cannot be paralleled to a word and that the language of film is different to the language of words. Yet further down in the same article,

Brailovsky continues: "suppose I see an image of a 'bottle.' Only in connection with other images do I perceive whether it is a bottle of whiskey, confiscated by prohibition agents, or a bottle thrown into the ocean by people from a drowning boat, containing important information" (ibid). Brailovsky contradicts himself by suggesting that an image is a non-specific entity that makes sense only in relation to its context.

In an early 1970s review of the Formalists' visual / verbal parallel method, Gianfranco Bettetini suggested that:

> Cinema and verbal discourse are entirely incommensurable. Not even the unmoving image of a single object could be translated by the word corresponding to the photographed object, because in its definition one would have to take into account the lighting, the figurative relations between the object and the outline of the image, the angulation, the deformation of the results from the use of a certain lens, and all the other technical elements that are open to the director (Bettetini 1973: 32).

Whether cinema and verbal discourse are incommensurable as Bettetini argues is open to speculation, but certainly, the project of direct translation could take too many different approaches to be methodologically useful.

Even clearer in his more recent analysis is Gregory Currie, who differentiated the two to such a point that "the language of cinema, if there is one, is in various ways startlingly different from any natural language. It is what we might call medium specific: it has its existence in cinematic images and their

modifications, so it is conveyed to us through sight alone" (Currie 1995: 117). He continues:

> Cinema language is not just medium specific: you could not even 'translate' cinematic images into distinct visual images by say, stretching, distortion or colour modulation and still have what advocates of cinema language would call 'the same language', for those transformations would impose a change of meaning; [...] But with natural languages there is nothing special or privileged about any visually specific way of representing letters and words, as font and handwriting differences attest (ibid: 117-8).

This point is of course arguable and the graphic design / typography field would certainly be positioned against it, but it is interesting to pinpoint this general difference between visual and literary languages.

b. Hybrid: Man Ray and 'poetry-film'

The idea of the direct translation between literary and cinematic modes that Gregory Currie finds impossible can be argued to be the basis of Man Ray's *L' Etoile De Mer* (France, 1928), a film based on a poem written by Surrealist poet Robert Desnos. When Man Ray first heard the poem, he visualized various images and decided that the poem could be used as a sort of script to a poetic film. According to Man Ray himself, "Desnos's poem was like a scenario for a film, consisting of fifteen or twenty lines, each line presenting a clear, detached image of a place or of a man and a woman" (Man Ray 1987:

208). Desnos's poem seemed to share some of the characteristics of Man Ray's previous film work on the disconnected fragment and as such, Man Ray saw it as a perfect script. Man Ray did realise the peculiarities and problematics of adaptation. As P. Adams Sitney suggests, "the very subtitle of the film 'poeme de Robert Desnos tel que l' a vu Man Ray', draws our attention to the difference between text and sight and asks the audience to look for the particulars of Man Ray's vision" (Sitney 1990: 29). Yet, *L' Etoile De Mer* still leaves many questions unanswered as to how this particular poem was adapted and more so how directorial choices were taken and how the overall structure and visual syntax are composed.

Despite its problems, Man Ray's film could be argued to be one of the milestones of what was to become the 'poetry-film' movement. Within this, poetry is not only an important starting point structurally, but actually, the film-poem (the hyphen is important) is a hybrid artwork that consists of a film and a poem (appearing in text or read in a voice-over). American filmmaker Ian Hugo worked in this combinative way in his work *Bells of Atlantis* (USA, 1952). As Abel Gance argued, "the marriage of image, text, and sound is so magical that it is impossible to dissociate them in order to explain the favorable reactions of one's unconscious" (Gance cited in Nin 1963-4: 14).

The first writer who mentioned this combination of image and text as the 'poetry-film' genre was William Wees. He suggests "a number of avant-garde film and video makers have created a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor

the visual text would produce on its own" (Wees 1999: no pagination). It is important at this point to notice that Wees uses a new term, instead of sticking to the over-used 'film poem'. Wees continues, explaining the reasons why poetry-films have been generally discarded in film theory:

> while film poems have long been recognized as central to the avant-garde film tradition, poetry-films have received little special attention [...] because poetry-films are a kind of hybrid art form and, therefore, seem less 'pure,' less essentially cinematic, in the high Modernist sense (ibid).

This approach was first proposed in Wees' influential essay "The Poetry Film" published in 1984. In this essay, Wees claims that the hybrid art form emerged due to the increasing interest of literary poets in film quoting poetry-film workshops organized in San Francisco by filmmaker and poet Herman Berlandt, which did not totally neglect the old definitions of the film poem, but were primarily interested in the new combinative form (Wees, cited in Todd 1997: 5).[5]

Although the poetry-film movement offered an new perspective on the film poem when it first appeared, it soon ended up in confusion, as a number of texts mixed the new hybrid genre with the older, more pure Modernist texts on film poetry that Wees refers to. William Wees' notion of the 'poetry-film,' which was fundamental for the new hybrid genre, was used less frequently and soon the new poetry-films were classified under the more general and less useful notion of the film poem, which Wees had clearly seen as a distinctly different

5 In 1980 Herman Berlandt organized the first of a series of poetry-film workshops, calling poets and filmmakers to make films that incorporated poetic texts and were interested in the poem as a verbal form.

genre than that of the poetry-film. Filmmaker Ian Cottage refers to the 'poem film,' while filmmaker and poet Tony Harrison prefers the notion of the 'film-poem' with a hyphen. Robert Speranza, who has studied the work of Harrison and the British 'film-poem', suggests that the new poets and filmmakers that came together around the late 90's in the 'Film Poem Poem Film' society "attempted a spontaneous creation of film and verse calling the results film/poems or film-poems. [...] I use the hyphen to easily distinguish between these and other film poems" (Speranza 2001: 119).

Even leaving these confusions aside, though, Wees' suggestion that the poetry-film movement could open up the possibility for metaphors seems problematic. Indeed bringing in an extra element like words could ideally create a meaningful tension between these words and the images. However, I would suggest that in practice due to its urgency in terms of daily use verbal language actually concretizes meaning and thus narrows the potential for the visual to be multi-referential. Bringing words into a film would enhance the importance of inner-speech processes when a film is viewed (a topic that is analysed later) and would therefore reduce the audience's attention towards following the visual syntax. The hybrid film and poem idea that the poetry-film movement suggested will thus not be dealt with any further in this research project.

Summing up, I would argue that attempting to bridge the literary and the visual in strict (or hybrid) terms is a task that seems to have a number of problems. Each medium has its own history and developed language and to

try to make specific parallels between a phrase and an image is so open to speculation and possibilities that is ultimately an almost impossible task. If the film poem is defined as simply a 'film plus poem,' it becomes less useful a term for the formal analysis of contemporary work. Using words as an element of translation or as an element of a hybrid form could be seen as formally and conceptually limiting, as words concretize meanings and therefore produce a hierarchy in which image is subordinate, which results in a lack of rigour of the visual syntax as such. Instead, what this thesis would argue is that the relationship between film and poetry has to be seen as one to do with strategic concerns of the more general structure and form of a work.

Chapter 4

Structure and Abstraction

The ideas of phrasing, translation and hybridity that I have explored in chapter 3 form the more literary streak within the theoretical tradition of analysis of the relationship between film and poetry, which not only takes poetry as a starting point for discussion, but does it in such a way that there is little room left for what is particular in cinematic languages, for the medium-specific. It also problematically places poetry as an a priori mode of operation and presupposes that in the relationship between the two poetry is more fundamental. In this chapter I will deal with those writers who believed that an investigation of the film poem has to start from the medium itself and that drawing parallels with poetry has to be done in a freer, more schematic way, addressing more general questions of form, rather than attempting direct parallels.

a. Structure, geometry

Even within the Russian Formalists, it was at times understood that the direct parallel scheme is problematic and some of the younger critics suggested different approaches. Viktor Shklovsky, in his 1927 short essay "Poetry & Prose in the Cinema" attempts to give a more open definition of what is poetic and what is prosaic in film: "the fundamental distinction between poetry and prose lies possibly in a greater geometricality of devices, in the fact that a whole series of arbitrary semantic resolutions is replaced by a formal

geometric resolution" (Shklovsky 1982: 88). He further explains that poetry and prose in the cinema "are distinguished from one another [...] by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition" (ibid: 89). It is important to notice the choice of words – Shklovsky talks about 'prevalence' of one over the other and not a choice between the two. This is once more a case in which an investigation of form does not result in formalism, but similarly to Lessing's medium-specificity the form arises from the subject matter itself being important in completing its investigation.

It is not surprising therefore that Shklovsky quotes Vertov's work as an example of what he considers poetry in the cinema:

> There is no doubt that Dziga Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World*[6] is constructed on the principle of poetic formal resolution: it has a pronounced parallelism and a recurrence of images at the end of the film where they convey a different meaning and thus vaguely recall the form of a triolet (ibid).

Contrary to the other writers of *Poetica Kino*, who focused more on applying specific poetic tropes to film, Shklovsky clearly points out the question of form within film, taking in a sense a more medium-specific approach. Shklovsky's definition of filmic poetry further helps establish the role of an audience and the ideas of reception of a film poem. Instead of attempting to establish narrative continuity, the audience of a film poem should search within the geometry of formal structures for resolutions and an understanding of the

6 USSR, 1926

work. In addition, Shklovsky is one of the first writers to talk about parallelism. He does not explain exactly what he means in terms of visual strategies, but nevertheless mentions a term central for the purposes of this research.

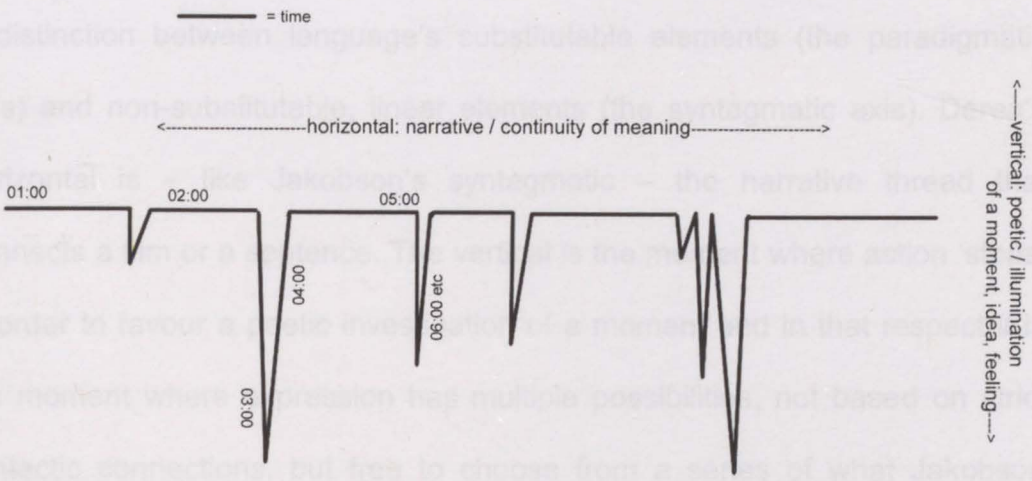
b. Maya Deren and the vertical

This notion of the prevalence of 'geometry' within film poetry paved the way for Maya Deren's influential ideas on 'verticality,' which used a similar method of talking about the importance of form when the relationship between film and poetry is discussed. Deren's concepts were clearly expressed at a symposium held in 1953 by the pioneering film society Cinema 16, in which a number of writers, filmmakers and poets discussed the possibilities of drawing parallels between the two media. In this symposium, Deren described her notion of verticality in relation to the structure of film, a theory that would later have a strong influence on the American avant-garde:

> The distinction of poetry is its construction and the poetic construct arises from the fact that it is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means (Deren cited in Maas 1963: 56).

The following graph I have devised provides a visual reconstruction of Deren's understanding of the parallel horizontal and vertical axes:

MAYA DEREN: HORIZONTAL / VERTICAL



The notion of trying to pinpoint what poetry is, was generally not well-received by other members of the panel and the reactions as Renata Jackson sees were generally negative, particularly from poet Dylan Thomas and writer Arthur Miller (Jackson, 2001: 66) . Deren used a number of examples to illustrate what each of the two movements meant, for example she referred to the notion of the establishing shot in a narrative film as something that would belong to the vertical poetic axis: a moment where the narrative does not evolve but there is an illumination of a place, a person or some form of theme. She suggested the same for dreaming sequences, as well as the poetic monologues in Shakespeare (Deren, cited in Maas 1963: 57).

Annette Michelson has paralleled Deren's ideas with those of structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson suggesting that what Deren was referring to was in a way "a recognition for the cinema, in cinema, of the duality of linguistic structure, that very duality that Jakobson was to propose... as the metonymic and metaphoric modes" (Michelson 2001: 26). Whereas the syntagmatic /

metonymic modes called for unity and linearity, the paradigmatic / metaphoric modes called for fragmentation and multiplicity of possibility. Jakobson made a distinction between language's substitutable elements (the paradigmatic axis) and non-substitutable, linear elements (the syntagmatic axis). Deren's horizontal is – like Jakobson's syntagmatic – the narrative thread that connects a film or a sentence. The vertical is the moment where action 'stops' in order to favour a poetic investigation of a moment and in that respect it is the moment where expression has multiple possibilities, not based on strict syntactic connections, but free to choose from a series of what Jakobson would see as the substitutable or subjective elements.

The parallel between Jakobson's duality and Deren's horizontal and vertical modes is very useful, but a little unclear. The way Michelson uses Jakobson seems to pre-suppose that by the syntagmatic axis he means a narrative / linear axis, whereas the syntagmatic axis can be argued to be simply the contextual / syntactical axis of a sentence, which in a poetic text could also be non-narrative. In Jakobson's writing it is a little undefined whether the syntagmatic and the narrative are aligned. Renata Jackson analyses Michelson's parallel between Deren and Jakobson and argues that the answer lies in the fact that Jakobson considers metonymy a trope connected to prose (even if it is a poetic figure) and metaphor a trope connected to poetry. Jakobson then suggests that they refer to "relations made by similarity and substitution (metaphor)[7] and... relations made by combination and context (metonymy)" (Jackson 2001: 65). In metonymy, as in a narrative

7 This is also close to Ricoeur's view of metaphor that I have mentioned in chapter 2.

structure, elements of a structure are used to fulfill specific semantic purposes (what Deren sees as the advancement of a narrative), whereas in metaphor there is a sense of ambiguity (what Deren sees as the illumination of a moment).

Although this was arguably the most influential instance in which Deren brought up poetry as a term on which analogies can be built, it was in other texts that she explained how this investigation into the vertical can actually happen within film practices. Deren refers to two different but interrelated issues: the form of a shot as it is captured by the camera and the overall structure of a film as it is put together in the editing process. A key text in which Deren first talked about both is "Anagram," written in 1946. In relation to the form a shot can take, Deren states that what is the essence of the film poem and film art in general is "a dynamic manipulation of the relationships between film-time and film-space" (Deren 2001: 51). This tension between space and time is not explained in "Anagram," but in a later text "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" (1960), where Deren talks about techniques such as slow, accelerated and reverse motion as strategies which can function as commentary on the content of the shots themselves. With reference to the overall structure of film she suggests that:

> Just as the verbal logics of a poem are composed of the relationships established through syntax, assonance, rhyme, and other such verbal methods, so in film there are processes of filmic relationships which derive from the instrument and the elements of its manipulations (Deren 1987: 48).

Deren does not go on to analyse the importance of those filmic relationships, but focuses rather on the instrument's manipulations. Yet it is important that Deren discusses syntax, as she is suggesting that the analysis of the relationship between the elements within a film, i.e. its structure is important for the understanding of a piece.

Trying to pinpoint how exactly filmic and poetic structure coincide is a complex task that can take multiple forms and Deren fails to arrive to specific conclusions when dealing with the project of creating a 'film haiku'. She states:

> Just as the haiku consists not of the butterfly but of the way the poet thinks and speaks of the butterfly, so my filmic haiku could not consist of movements of reality but had to create a reality, most carefully, out of the vocabulary and syntax of film image and editing (Deren 1961: 161).

Yet despite this basic principal Deren finds a number of problems in the parallel between a literary and a visual haiku, primarily to do with the notion of structuring her film haiku together:

> one has random access to a book of haiku… but a film made up of haiku would necessarily be in an imposed sequence. […] What is the principal, the form which would determine such a sequence? […] Common locales? […] Increasing intensity? Contrast? Perhaps like the movements of a musical composition?[8] (ibid).

8 The issue of a random access to a number of film haiku that are not in an imposed sequence is dealt with in some ways in my final installation piece in which the audience is allowed to walk in a room surrounded by projected film

In a sense, those questions here suggest that her analysis of the parallel between cinematic and poetic structures should be seen more as an area for discussion rather than a methodologically specific / finished argument.

c. The case of Structural film

At the same time, the idea of the importance of the overall structure brings up the question of whether every cinematic work that is interested in structure is poetry-related. A claim like this would take the definition of poetry back to the idea of poetics as the way things are made (from the Greek ποιώ meaning to make) which as I have already mentioned would be extremely broad for present purposes. A good example of a type of film that deals with structure but is not necessarily film poetry-related is "Structural film" (Sitney, 1974). Although a problematic term, the idea of 'Structural film' that American theoretician P. Adams Sitney devised seems to have persisted as a reference for those artists' films that focus on the medium itself in a self-reflexive and self-referential way.[9] These are films that comment on the very nature of cinema, both as a time-based medium and as a projection / technology medium.[10] Structural films may end up including poetic illuminations but this seems to be a by-product rather than their primary raison d'être. Birgit Hein suggests that

haiku. Whether a multi-screen installation would answer Deren's questions is arguable, but it would certainly offer an alternative. A detailed analysis of multi-screen works follows in chapter 7.

9 P. Adams Sitney discusses 'Structural Film' in quite some detail in his seminal book Visionary Film, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974

10 Structural film should not be confused with the semiotic theory of structuralism.

> roughly speaking, these films have no narrative or poetic content. The content of structural films refers to the operations of the medium itself. Formal devices are not used symbolically as in poetic film but on their own account, as theme (Hein 1979: 93).

It is very difficult to draw the line where the structural ends and the poetic begins and Hein continues, referring to Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (USA, 1963), a film created by sticking materials on the surface of celluloid, which therefore could be grouped under the field of Structural films, but it is also a film that can be argued to have a series of poetic qualities in terms of the rhythms with which colours are sequenced, creating semi-abstract synecdoches etc. This tension between the structural and the poetic is a fruitful point for the research on the film poem – it is a film that at once engages with its own self-defined language (hence shares some characteristics with Structural film), but also works in a rather open scheme and is not defined by a formal pattern, neither has medium self-referentiality at its core. The case of Brakhage is actually particularly interesting as despite the fact that he was a big supporter of experimental film in general, he was never keen on the systematic nature of the strict Structural film[11] and always left many structure-related questions almost deliberately unresolved in his films. Fred Camper, who studied Brakhage's work extensively, points out this non-systematic approach that Brakhage took. In describing a sequence of a film where Brakhage cuts between images of film scratches, birds and black, he suggests that: "Brakhage undercuts every possible specificity. [...]

11 Stan Brakhage questioned ideas of the Structural film aesthetic in a live debate he had with Malcolm LeGrice in December 1977, called 'Structural versus Personal Film-making'

Interjecting such irregularities denies singular, reductive interpretations, which feeds into the film's ever-changing, almost self-consuming essence" (Camper 2002: 93). For Brakhage's work, the notion of an open schema is an important factor that stresses the work's poetic quality.

Summing up, I would say that structure and geometry are important concepts for the film poem and that film poems are by default engaged with these issues. However, it is important to emphasise that a focus on form or structure is not enough to group something under the interests of the film poem. While there might be overlapping in the case of some filmmakers (like Stan Brakhage, as I have previously discussed), the area engaged with the film poem is different to that of the Structural film.

d. Abstraction and the synecdoche

When the idea of form is analysed in relation to the film poem, it is important also to give some space to the discussion of abstraction. Most of the practitioners and theoreticians of the film poem – and of artists' film in general – have dealt with abstraction in some way. Modernist poets and literary historians have also seen abstraction as extremely important. For the purposes of this chapter, I will not analyse the extent to which modern poetry deals with ideas of abstraction, nor the definition of abstraction as a philosophical question. I will rather focus on how abstraction relates to the investigation of the relationship between film and poetry.

Artists' strategies for filmic abstraction in the sense of altering perspective and moving away from the predictable viewpoint of a shot have been various. Brakhage often used distortion filters when shooting objects and situations, while Deren wrote extensively on slow motion as a poetic tool. One of the methods of abstraction that is of particular interest in this thesis is the idea of presenting a specific detail of an object rather than the whole. This technique is commonplace in experimental film. Discussing the work of Louis Delluc and the French impressionists, Eugene Mc Creary argues that:

> when Delluc referred to film as [...] 'visual poetry' he was not simply employing elegant metaphors to establish film's pedigree among the muses. He was invoking something quite specific – the creative act of isolating and stylizing the significant detail (McCreary 1976: 20).

Poetry in this respect is the action of 'isolating' and 'stylising' a detail. In poetry, detail is as important as the whole and the way a detail is presented (stylized) affects the content itself.

Describing his second film *Emak Bakia* (France, 1926) Man Ray suggested that:

> A series of fragments, a cinepoem with a certain optical sequence make up a whole that still remains a fragment. Just as one can much better appreciate the abstract beauty in a fragment of a classic work than in its entirety so this film tries to indicate the essentials in contemporary cinematography (Man Ray 1927: 43-4).

As in Modernist poetry, in the work of Man Ray – and particularly *Emak Bakia* – the fragment becomes the most important segment of creative construction. Susan McCabe has compared the work of Man Ray with that of American poet Gertrude Stein: "The kinship between modern poetry and film [...] hinges upon [...] upon a montage aesthetics that privileges the fragment and its abrasion of other fragments" (McCabe 2001: 431). Thus McCabe considers *Emak Bakia*'s fragmental nature to be related to the investigation between film and poetry and offers a different understanding of the (non-)importance of overall structure in the film poem.

Going back to seminal texts on abstraction, one of the most useful quotes for my purposes comes from Rudolf Arnheim's *Visual Thinking* (1970): "In no way can the terms "concrete" and "abstract" serve to sort the items of experience in two containers. Neither are they antonyms nor do they refer to mutually exclusive populations" (Arnheim 1970: 156). This concept is quite useful, as it suggests that abstraction is not at odds with representational reality, but actually distinctions overlap. The space between the abstract and the concrete is exactly what Fred Camper sees as important in the work of Stan Brakhage. He claims that:

> a Brakhage image of a house is most often stripped from its context: not only do we not see the yard, but the porch might be a bit out-of-focus, and there's no build-up of its volume through the intercutting of diverse camera angles. Instead, the viewer is offered a fragment that presents itself both as an image of the object it contains and as a fragile mental construct, a composition that feels

> like it's been dreamed into being more than it feels like a photograph of a thing. Brakhage removes his images from the familiar to charge them with a more visionary life – to 'make it new', in the phrase of Ezra Pound, one of Brakhage's major influences" (Camper 2002: 71).

Thus, abstraction for Brakhage is not simply a question of aestheticising the visual material, but opens up the possibilities of the viewers' perception of the image and hence poses a questioning behind the notion of understanding and interpretation. Camper continues: "the dualism between language and vision that Brakhage poses, [...] is most often present in his films as a split between (1) objects seen and used according to their names and (2) objects presented as varieties of pure light" (ibid: 73). By abstracting his images, Brakhage gives them further layers of existence beyond their actual names and thus opens up the possibilities for a multiplicity of meaning.

The space between an image of an object as close to its concept / name and as pure form / light is exactly the space in which Brakhage operates and which is the most important for my purposes. At this point, it is useful to introduce an idea that P. Adams Sitney brings up in a lecture he gave in 1971 titled "The Idea of Abstraction":

> I'd like to speak of a basic cinematic form which is also a literary trope and that is synecdoche; which in literature means part of the whole. It is one of the most elementary of all cinematic forms in that it depends upon the framing of the image (Sitney 1977: 5).

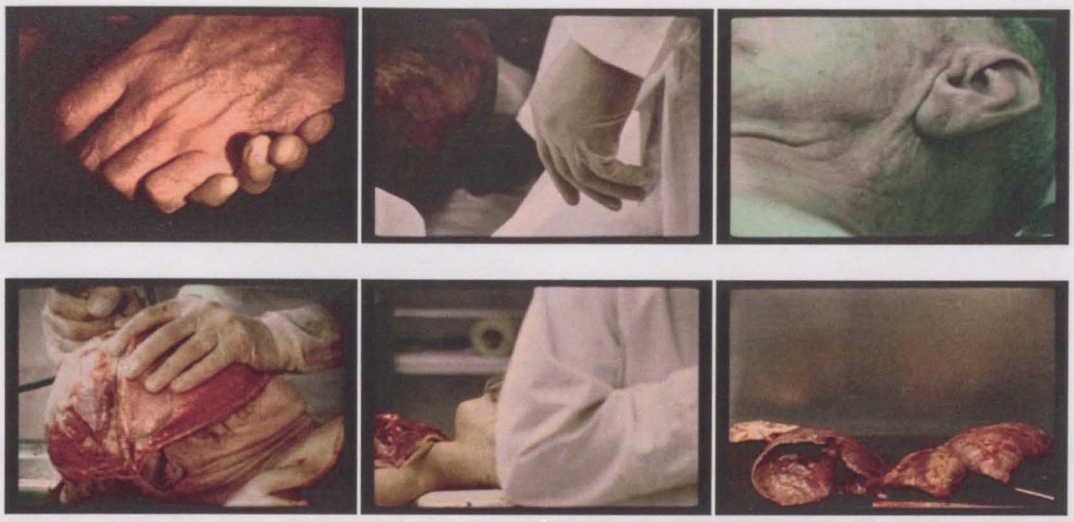
This idea of the synecdoche is closely related to my definition of the film poem as being something that is neither a fully abstract, self-referential mode of expression nor a fully contextual, symbolic method, but actually something in between. It is noticeable that Sitney prefers the more rarely used term of synecdoche rather than metonymy, which is a poetic trope that also works with substitution of one element for another. Their difference is crucial for my purposes, as metonymy works with substitution on a conceptual level, whereas synecdoche is in a sense fundamentally visual, replacing a whole with a separated (cut-out, framed) part of it.

e. Case Study: 'The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes'

Let us have a look at how the idea of 'synecdoche' can be applied to the work of Stan Brakhage. Although many of Brakhage's films use abstraction, the one that perhaps mostly deals with the abstraction of framing (in the sense of the visual synecdoche) is *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (USA, 1971). In this silent film, which lasts nearly 32 minutes, Brakhage observes an actual autopsy through his hand-held camera and – contrary to other films of his – does not over-edit the shots or intercut a wide variety of material. The film does not shy away from showing the process as it is, yet equally the manipulation of framing creates a number of conceptual suggestions, which do not impose a specific metaphorical meaning, but leave a number of possibilities open for the viewer. In an interview with Colin Still in 1996, Brakhage himself suggests that he wanted to present the material "without more metaphor than just exactly arose within the exigencies of the shooting".

He continues: "there was a tremendous need, a drive in my thinking to superimpose with all this material more metaphorical things," but suggests that in the end "all metaphor that arises, arises just exactly and very clearly as it does in their every day daily life" (Brakhage 2003, The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes interview with Collin Still).

As Brakhage decided that he did not want to intercut other material through the film nor to over-edit the shots to create flickery and superimposition effects, the main strategy with which the film works is that of abstraction through framing or what Sitney calls the 'synecdoche'. In *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* framing is essential, not for abstracting the image in terms of making it less obvious, but rather for 'making it anew' (to use Ezra Pound's phrase), opening the material to metaphorical possibilities.



In *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes,* Brakhage displays the possibilities of an open metaphorical scheme simply by selecting and isolating a detail from the rest. The images are not abstracted using filters or paralleled with other visually similar images creating formalist collages, but simply work metaphorically due to the exact tension between abstract and concrete created by tight framing. When Brakhage frames the image of an open eye of a dead person looking up placing it at the very bottom of the screen, this is not simply an aesthetical choice but invites a number of cosmic questions to arise (: man looking at the universe). Similarly, Brakhage chooses to focus on an image of two hands (of a doctor and a dead person) holding together, an image that has such strong connotations of 'togetherness' and 'support' that it is almost impossible not to think about such ideas, even if the audience is aware of watching an autopsy where these ideas in reality are absurd. The two holding hands also look very similar, which is uncanny and invites further suggestions on ideas of the passage between life and death and how close in a way humans always are to death. I could go on and analyse many of the shots from the film (which are always polysemic), in relation to the concept of

'synecdoche', but I will stop at this point and finish with a quote from the Brakhage interview in which he suggested that this film changed the way he produced work from then onwards: "in my working processes it taught me to stick with that and trust that[12] from then on... not to try to thicken the plot" (ibid)

The place of abstraction within poetics seems somehow important to most writers, yet as the definition of abstraction is problematic in itself, not all theoreticians would agree with the notions of isolating a detail / stylizing a shot etc. Compared to someone like Brakhage, Maya Deren's films for example would seem hardly abstract. Pointing out this difference, Bruce Elder suggests that:

> Brakhage's adherence to the Romantic tradition involves a commitment to the idea that what happens on the 'inside' is all of a piece with what occurs on the 'outside'; furthermore, Brakhage's transformations of the image have the end of revealing the operations of the imagination [...] Deren believed to the contrary that cinematography, as a photographically based medium, has a strong commitment to unmanipulated reality (Elder 1998: 502).

Although Elder does not exactly explain how those two filmmakers differ in terms of creativity as an 'inwards or outwards movement,' it is important to stress at this point that abstraction can take multiple forms and it is not always clearly related to a somehow distorted view of the representational image. Structural filmmaker and theorist Malcolm Le Grice makes a similar point in an

12 He is referring to trusting the image as it is and not trying to counter-pose lots of other material with it.

interview for a Channel Four documentary *Abstract Cinema*: "I think the issues of abstraction [in film] are much more to do with the question of how you deal with time" (Le Grice cited in Griffiths, 1993 documentary) as opposed to the abstract-painting influence on film of composing non-representational images.

Whatever the definition of abstraction, it is important to conclude by stressing its importance for my project, as abstraction can create a tension between the conceptual and the formal that operates very much in the area that the film poem focuses on. Thus in terms of both abstraction and structure, the film poem, as I have seen, works in the area where they are both important in the realization of a work, but they do not become the centre of focus, i.e. the film poem is neither fully abstract nor structural.

Chapter 5

Metaphor & Parallelism

In the previous chapter, I have dealt with two very important issues, structure and abstraction, both having to do with methodological concerns in the relationship between film and poetry. In terms of structure, the film poem deals with the space where structure is important in the making of a work, but is not its raison d'être (i.e. structural). In terms of abstraction, it deals with the space between an object for what it is and as a pure quality of light. In this chapter I will investigate another area within which the film poem also seems to occupy a space-in-between, that of the relationship between montage and literary metaphor.

Montage in relation to verbal metaphor has been one of the key issues not only in writings on film and poetry, but also on modern film in general. From the days of Early Cinema, practitioners and theoreticians were aware of the power of montage, of putting two different shots together and the parallel / counteracting effect this could produce. For the purposes of this thesis, montage seems to be particularly relevant as a means of achieving visual metaphors – and metaphors are traditionally connected to poetry. As David Finch suggests

> Film montage and language metaphor use some of the same mental processes. [...] Metaphor in both film and language can produce a third thing from the combination of two elements, an image not producible in any other way (Finch 2003: 63).

Thus, film montage is the equivalent of putting together two 'things' (words, phrases, sentences, images etc) for metaphorical effect, as it happens often in poetry.

a. Eisenstein and inner-speech

One of the main practitioners connected with montage and the notion of cinematic metaphor was Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein was very much aligned with the Formalists' ideas of almost translating from literary to visual languages and he was thus one of the Formalist critics' most widely discussed filmmakers as it appears in *Poetica Kino* and other writings of the time. Eisenstein studied ideograms and was very interested in how ideograms put together created third meanings. He claims:

> a dog + a mouth = 'to bark'
>
> a mouth + a child = 'to scream'
>
> a mouth + a bird = 'to sing'
>
> a knife + a heart = 'sorrow' and so on.
>
> But this is montage!... Combining shots that are depictive, single in meaning, neutral in content – into intellectual contexts and series (Eisenstein 1977: 30).

For Eisenstein, montage is primarily a conceptual process[13]; combining two concepts to create a third one, using a language that is in many ways similar to verbal metaphor.

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13 Eisenstein separates his analysis of montage into different sub-terms, but there will not be a detailed analysis of all of them in this thesis. I will rather discuss what he saw as montage's general principles.

Boris Eikhenbaum seems to be aligned with this position arguing that "the cine-metaphor is feasible only on the condition that it is supported by a verbal metaphor. The spectator can understand it only in circumstances where there is a corresponding metaphorical expression in his stock of language" (Eikhenbaum 1982: 30). In this respect, he suggests that film viewing is always accompanied by a process of internal speech:

> Directors already often use symbols and metaphors whose meaning rests directly on current verbal metaphors. Film-viewing is accompanied by a continuous process of internal speech. We are already used to a whole series of typical clichés of cine-language; even the very slightest innovation in this sphere strikes us with no less force than the appearance of a new word in language itself. It is impossible to treat cinema, as an art, as a totally non-verbal art (ibid).

Staying firmly with the position that filmmaking should be treated as a system analogous to verbal language, Eikhenbaum assumes that the visual metaphor should/would correspond directly to a language metaphor. Supporters of the theory of internal speech usually take this position as a starting point. In an essay on internal speech, Paul Willemen suggests that

> this paper starts from the recognition firstly that language is the symbolic expression par excellence and all other systems of communication are derived from it and presume its existence and secondly that any human communication of nonverbal images presupposes a circuit of verbal messages without a reverse implication. This recognition is founded on previous research which

> demonstrated that verbal signifiers are present in and have a structuring effect on the very formation of images (Willemen 1983: 141-2).

Yet the position that Willemen starts from is one that many experimental filmmakers and visual artists would argue against. Paul Schmidt also criticizes the idea of the inevitable connection between film viewing and inner-speech suggesting that:

> In describing the task of the director in 1926, Eikhenbaum simply foretold what Hollywood was soon to accomplish – all the possible ways of relating shots were rejected in favour of a conventionalized *single* way – and that way was heavily dependent on the conventions of literary narrative (Schmidt 1975: 334).

This traditionalist approach towards image understanding / interpretation comes across within Eisenstein's writing as well. Despite being a modernist filmmaker in the sense of being interested in the medium itself, he was also interested in the notion of film having very specific readings and was not particularly keen on the idea that film should be open to interpretation. In his very influential essay "The Montage of Attractions", Eisenstein suggests that "an attraction [which he poses as his main building block] [...] possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience's emotions and direction dictated by the production's purpose" (Eisenstein 1988: 40-1) and that:

> A script [...] is a prescription [...] of montage sequences and combinations by means of which the author intends to subject the audience to a definite series of shocks, a 'prescription' that

> summarises the general projected emotional effect on the audience and the pressure that will inevitably be exerted on the audience's psyche (ibid: 46).

From those two observations I would suggest that Eisenstein was not particularly interested in the openness of meaning that two pieces of film could produce, but rather strove for a specific language where the relationship between A and B would always result to C for everyone, exactly as people who read Chinese will all translate an ideogram in the same way. David Finch also sees Eisenstein's writing as rather fixed in this respect:

> Eisenstein is very much concerned, in *The Film Sense*, that the viewer's experience should correspond to the author's intention, and he elaborates a defensive model of (respectable and acceptable) montage as a technique for the efficient transmission of a theme. This model weakens the full force of his concept of montage as the production of a mental event in the viewer, of the image as arising from the viewer's imagination (Finch 2003: 63).

In these cases, the montage impact has more to do with putting together two elements within a pre-learnt coding system, rather than allowing oneself to make a number of parallel connections.

Eisenstein criticized those who used montage as a less conceptually pre-prescribed method and in various writings played down the importance of the work of Dziga Vertov whose methods comprise some of the most visually-driven and abstract examples of a use of montage. Eisenstein suggests that:

> The 'leftists' of montage [...] when playing with pieces of film [...] discovered a certain property in the toy which kept them astonished for a number of years. This property consisted in the fact that two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of this juxtaposition (Eisenstein 1986: 14).

Here Eisenstein grasps for a second the vast potential of montage as a tool for the creation of open-ended metaphors or what I would further down in this chapter call parallelisms, but dismisses this openness in the name of developing a specific coding system, within which he can lead the audience's emotion one way or another. "The absence of [such] a scheme would not lead to organization of the material but to hopeless Impressionism around a possibly attractional theme" (Eisenstein 1988: 46). Despite his films having many ambiguous moments, where the meaning of his juxtapositions is actually much more open than he probably intended himself, Eisenstein's theories were primarily geared towards achieving a way of getting a clear message across and on how to establish montage 'rules' for the transmission and specific decoding of visual concepts.

b. Vertov and parallelism

Working at the same time as Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov – who as mentioned earlier considered himself a film poet – posed a different view on the relationship between montage and metaphor: he was not interested in the types of metaphor that already existed within language and inner speech, but

strove for a more visual and fundamentally cinematic model. Anna Lawton has pointed some of the differences between the two Soviet masters:

> Vertov did not use montage in the Eisensteinian way [...], but wove in each of his films a subtle net of semantic relationships by means of rhythmic patterning. The result of this kind of 'rhythmic montage' is a meaningful whole, based on the same principles that sustain the creation of modern poetry (Lawton 1978: 49).

Vertov's approach was not based on any theory of language, which he would then apply on to film. Instead, he developed an instinct for working within the medium itself and then his theories would be strongly influenced by what he had found in practice, either filming or editing his material.

P. Adams Sitney has also pointed out the difference in the way Eisenstein and Vertov saw montage in relation to metaphor. Sitney compares the way the two filmmakers have used similar images of the slaughtering of a bull:

> At the climax of Strike[14], Eisenstein had metaphorically intercut shots of the butchering of a bull with images of the slaughter of striking workers who had resisted factory owners and their agents, the police. He demonstrated the power of his theory of 'the montage of attractions' in which the conflict of images induces a physical response in the viewer by skillfully intercutting scenes from the dramatic reconstruction of a mounted police assault [...] with the shots of the abbatoir [...] [He] intercuts the single title 'Brutalised' to underline the culminating violence (Sitney 1990: 42).

14 USSR, 1925

In that respect, Eisenstein's use of the bull metaphor becomes semantically superfluous and is simply a means of emotional manipulation of the audience. Working rather differently, Sitney suggests Vertov

> showed the slaughter of a bull, but to opposite effects: by reversing the order of the shots from the marketable meat back to the execution of the animal, he emphasized the labor history of food production. Furthermore, he presented the most violent scenes in reverse motion so that the butcher's knife seems to reunite magically the separated halves of the carcass and the killing blow restores the collapsed animal to life (ibid)

Both filmmakers realized that the slaughterhouse image was powerful, but while Eisenstein used the image as a symbol for 'brutalised' which exists within verbal language, Vertov left the image more open and not as symbolic by using a cinematic strategy that is simply visually experienced (with the multiple connections a visual experience can produce) rather than understood from a pre-defined 'vocabulary.'

This openness of practice and technique is pointed out by Vertov in his own texts. Although he agreed with Eisenstein on the urgency to develop new cinematic languages, Vertov was not interested in establishing a systematic/ formulaic method which could be read by (or could manipulate) the audience in a specific way / towards a specific direction. In fact, Vertov was not interested in passing a particular message to his audience, but believed in a cinema of multiplicity of levels, as he claimed about his film *Three Songs about Lenin* (USSR, 1934):

> the contents of *Three Songs* develop in spiral-fashion, now in the sound, now in the image, now in a voice, now in an intertitle, now through facial expression alone – with no music or words – now through movement within the shot, now in the collision of one group shot with another, now smoothly, now by jolts from dark to light, from slow to fast, from the tired to the vigorous, now through noise, now through silent song, a song without words, through thoughts that fly from screen to viewer without the viewer-listener having to translate thought into words (Vertov 1984e: 118)

Striving for such an open schema, it is not surprising that Vertov's films were perceived as far too difficult for their time and as such he was not lucky to be considered successful or influential during his lifetime, but his work was re-discovered and appreciated significantly later. The openness of his films also led to his eventual ostracizing by the Communist regime.[15]

A key-concept when examining Vertov's work is the idea of parallelism versus the fixed metaphor. Parallelism is the idea that two things are placed next to each other for no symbolic reason, yet they interact in a number of ways. Parallelism had already existed as a model within the work of Modernist poets. Gianfranco Bettetini suggests that:

> the works of T.S. Eliot, C. Peguy, Yeats (etc)... often use unexpected images, skillfully inserted into the poetic narration and completely detached from its potential logical core. They do not

15 Vlada Petric analyses Vertov's alienation from the rest of the Soviet artistic milieu in the chapter 'Vertov's difficult years' in his book 'Constructivism in Film', suggesting that "those who opposed the dogma of socialist realism were pronounced unsuitable and denied full participation in the artistic community" (pp. 60)

> even make an effective comparison or a valid metaphor because they are far removed from any relationship or similarity to the object of the content. Their sign function has its origin in that mysterious source of junctions and disjunctions that is the subject's unconscious (Bettetini 1974: 104).

For the purposes of this thesis, there will not be an examination of the relationship between (dis)junctions and the subconscious. What is rather the important point is the understanding that two images placed together do not necessarily combine into a pre-existing verbal metaphor, but still nevertheless could produce a number of 'third spaces' as Finch has suggested. Anna Lawton sees parallelism (and the writings of Roman Jakobson) as an important point when examining Vertov's *The Man With A Movie Camera*. She argues that:

> Parallelism is a feature inextricably connected with the concept of rhythm; it is according to Jakobson, the fundamental principle of poetry.... Jakobson sustains that "in poetry... any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation". This equation is perceived by the reader in terms of similarity and opposition or better, of opposition within similarity. The rhythmic segmentation fosters an expectation of a subsequent similar segment; when the expectation is partly frustrated the variation stands out by opposition and is invested with a strong semantic stress. [...] the parallelism can be perceived in terms of the rhythm of a phrase – i.e. the alternation of shots of different duration in a sequence – and

> the visual rhyme – i.e. the analogy of images, frame composition, and action (Lawton 1972: 111).

Therefore, Vertov does not cut between images using conceptual metaphors, but creates rhythms and frame relations that could be read in a multiplicity of ways.

The idea of the openness of symbols and the non-fixed metaphor was something a number of experimental filmmakers embraced, as it led to a more freely-interpreted cinema, but also as it permitted a cinema that was most of all visual (not based on the pre-production writing stage). German Dadaist filmmaker Hans Richter, whose films do not aim at delivering a particular message, would entertain the idea that the audience interprets symbols freely. He states:

> the direct action-form of the entertainment film [...] has been replaced in film poetry by the rather free use of the symbol. [...] The accent, therefore, has been shifted from asking the audience to understand clearly, to asking the audience to swing with the symbols freely, and to respond to their meaning, whether universal or personal, in an intuitive way, by opening up, by giving itself freely to the special work of art (Richter cited in Mekas 1957: 7).

What Richter suggests is that the symbolic language of the film poem[16] is more open to interpretation than that of the narrative feature film. Furthermore, he calls the audience to 'swing with the symbols freely' and to

16 In this essay 'metaphor' is considered a more relevant term than 'symbol', as symbol tends to refer to a relatively closed system of signification. However, it seems that symbol is used to suggest a fairly open schema by Richter here.

become an active interpreter of what is presented. He stresses the notion of intuition and in a way suggests that the film poem should be visually experienced as opposed to literally understood.

A similar approach is to be found within the American avant-garde movement. Maya Deren suggests that she does not use an image for one particular symbolic purpose and claims that if she shows a shot of a bird flying, she does so simply because of the action itself – with the knowledge of all the possible meanings that can be derived from such an image. "Natural phenomena", she states, "don't intend anything, as the setting of the sun might be the beginning of an ominous night for one, the end of a perfect day for another. Sun has no intention emotionally, so one may attach any emotions" (Deren 1963: 65). Thus, it is the placement of the image of the sun within the context of someone's life that can explain its importance for a person. In this respect, the placing together of images in Deren might be interpreted in a variety of ways, possibly as many as its viewers. This openness of symbols is what interested Deren in Jean Cocteau's work:

> Since it consists of 'immediately visual images', *Le sang d' un poete*[17] is a work of film-art that therefore communicates directly without recourse to symbols; its 'meaning' is thus contained in the shots themselves; but receptivity is ke

17 France, 1930

> y here, since obviously the critics who haven't appreciated the film have either found symbolism (and therefore see the film images as merely referential, not experiential), and/or have applied erroneous frames of reference to it (such as psychoanalysis) and therefore have misinterpreted it (Deren cited in Jackson 2002: 118).

c. Symbolism

The ideas of parallelism and the freer, multi-referential use of images were not particularly embraced by the traditional film studies area, especially as it developed from the 1960s onwards, favouring psycho-analysis and any interpretative model that used pre-defined language and treated images as specific symbols. However, a number of theoreticians have pointed out the problem of seeing cinematic images as symbols. Gianfranco Bettetini suggests that "the cinematographic spectator interprets the film as a communicative totality, and is not faced with a series of signs that are more or less monosignificant in the various situations in which they are used" (Bettetini 1973: 47). More specifically on metaphor, Christian Metz points out that "in filmic metaphors the two things are aligned side to side [...] and the phenomenon of transfer of meaning is much less clear-cut" (Metz 1973: 382). Nevertheless, the permeating trend within film studies is to treat images as a text of symbols.

Noel Carroll, who has worked on film and metaphor, seems to belong in the symbol-leaning film studies tradition. Carroll misses what I have described as

a key difference between Eisenstein and Vertov when he analyses metaphor within Soviet film:

> Famous examples of [this] structure in film include Vertov's superimposition in *Man With A Movie Camera* of the eye over the camera lens – thereby propounding the metaphor that the eye is a camera... and Eisenstein's suggestion in *Strike*, through gradual dissolves, wipes and superimposition, that one of the spies is a monkey and that another is a fox (Carroll 1996: 212-3).

Despite the fact that Carroll earlier recognizes that "film images have no resources for fixing directionality" (ibid: 220), he does not seem to take this idea into consideration. I would argue that if his thesis on directionality is to be considered, then in Vertov's case the eye and the camera are simply paralleled (both are a comment on each other) and neither pre-supposes the other. This is significantly different to Eisenstein's case in which the attributes of one image are passed on to the previous one (which, belonging to a narrative thread, is more fundamental in the film's structure) and the directionality is fixed. For my purposes, this lack of directionality is a key-difference between a pre-defined metaphor and a rather freer and more visual method of placing images next to each other, a parallelism.

Another filmmaker whose strategies Carroll somehow limits by using pre-defined, literary symbolism is Stan Brakhage. Brakhage believed in a world beyond language: "imagine a world before the beginning was the word" (Brakhage 1963, no pagination) and created films that attempted to be as

purely visual experiences as possible. Carroll applies a specific psycho-analytical reading to Brakhage's work:

> The cut in Brakhage's celebratory birth film *Window Water Baby Moving*[18], from Jane's vagina to a shot of a window from the inside of his home not only provokes the simile "her vagina is like a window" but also has original metaphoric impact, inviting us to grasp the selective affinities between the two terms of the cut which are both apertures and, significantly, passageways that lead out into the hard, cruel world (Carroll 1996: 190).

Here Carroll inserts verbal metaphors in approaching Brakhage's editing patterns. Although every reading of the film is obviously valid, I would argue that Carroll's reading limits the interpretational possibilities of Brakhage's work in order to establish a particular coherence of semantics. Offering a different perspective, Fred Camper suggests that:

> particularly striking are those images throughout Brakhage's work that have a privileged status within the structure of a film: the movements of a tiny bug, a sand mound's sudden collapse, a particularly stunning cloud formation. Such moments seem to leap beyond the film's existing structure, obliterating whatever interpretations (usually multiple) the previous images had been suggesting.[19] Having begun his film-making career by reading whatever writings of Eisenstein's he could find, late in life he is producing a cinema which argues with its every flicker against the

18 USA, 1962

19 This reminds of Bettetini's suggestion about the unexpected images in Modernist poets like T.S. Eliot.

synthesizing imperatives of Eisensteinian montage" (Camper 2002: 85).

James Peterson, who has also studied Brakhage's work extensively, calls the way Brakhage cuts between shots a 'radical metaphor'. A radical metaphor is the metaphor in which the metaphorical replacement is seen but the original term which the metaphor refers to isn't. In his comparison between the work of Eisenstein and Brakhage, James Peterson explains:

> Near the end of Eisenstein's 'Strike' (1925), we see both the Cossacks' attack on the workers *and* the slaughter of the bull. The metaphor emphasises the innocence of the workers and the brutality of the attack, but the narrative sequence would be comprehensible even if we were to miss the metaphor, because all the key events are explicitly shown. But because a radical metaphor shows only the vehicle and not the tenor, missing the metaphor poses a more serious threat to comprehension. In 'Reflections on Black'[20] [by Brakhage], a blind man 'sees' several couples' abortive attempts to interact. The last episode ends with a shot of coffee pot boiling over, but there is no explicit resolution of the personal relationship (Peterson 1994: 44).

Whether Brakhage's images are indeed the vehicles without the tenors or simply a series of visual parallels is not of significant interest here – what is important is that Brakhage, similar to Vertov and Deren, has worked on

20 USA, 1955

methods for putting images together without using already existing inner speech metaphors.

d. Bruce Conner's collage

One more filmmaker should be mentioned who uses the notion of the visual metaphor and has pushed it to quite an extreme. Bruce Conner is not often discussed in the context of film and poetry, but some of his methods as relevant to my concerns. Conner's work consists of collages of found visual material – material that ranges widely from nature or science documentaries to military propaganda films, advertising and generally areas that are not commonly seen as spaces of artistic expression and control. Yet it is the putting together of this material that is of particular importance, a putting together which attempts to establish some surface coherence, but at the same time it is open to interpretation. David Curtis sees the use of Conner's montage as similar to that of Hans Richter and states that they "both make use of a completely traditional technique – montage – but divorce it from its traditional role of qualifying clause into a narrative form" (Curtis 1971: 168).

The film that exemplifies this method the best is *Take The 5.10 To Dreamland* (USA, 1976); one of Conner's least known and most enigmatic works. This film is one of the most extreme examples of establishing cinematic coherence between material that has (or at least originally had) no conceptual connection. By using a similar aesthetic quality throughout shots and a continuous soundtrack, Conner puts together images that do not belong

together in any linear, narrative or symbolic content.[21] At times, he uses a logic of action and reaction, e.g. when there is a shot of rocks falling which quickly cuts to a shot of a horse looking up, almost as if reacting to the sound of the rocks. Other times he uses similarities of shapes to cut between different objects, like a feather and a rocket. At times, music keeps the images together, while other times, it is plain rhythm (equally long fades from one picture to the next) that establishes a general cohesion. Whatever Conner uses as his building block for establishing coherence, it is very interesting to see that it is possible to combine images from very different sources and context into something that is not conceptually specific, but synaesthetically 'feels' connected and self-sufficient.

All of the above approaches, whether they refer to the non-fixed metaphor, the radical metaphor or the idea of parallelism are attempting a mode of shot connection which is not interested in using inner-speech or predefined verbal metaphors in order to work. I will now look at a case study in which these ideas are clearly developed. The film is Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929) and for the purposes of this research, I will primarily use the term parallelism.

e. Case Study: 'The Man with a Movie Camera'

Vertov himself would use various terms to describe this function of putting clips together for non-symbolic effect, e.g. he spoke of rhyming visual

21 Establishing a priority of an aesthetic over conceptual cohesion could result to a metaphorical method that Trevor Whittock calls 'chiming', which will be discussed later.

phrases. Yet, a close inspection of his film work and theoretical texts would show that the most applicable term to describe his practice would be that of parallelism. In his writings Vertov was keen to point out that he was not interested in direct symbolism:

> We do not emphasize symbolism. If it turns out that several shots or montage phrases, when brought to perfection,[22] develop the significance of symbols, we do not panic or feel we must exclude them from the film. We believe that a symbolist film and a series of shots constructed on the principle of expediency but developed to the significance of symbols are two completely different concepts (Vertov 1984d: 80).

This is what separates Vertov's project from Eisenstein's, as mentioned earlier – while Eisenstein's main purpose was to use symbolism in order to emotionally / intellectually manipulate his audience, Vertov was aware of the possibilities of symbolism, but did not want to direct his audience towards a singular understanding of montage's combinative function. Vlada Petric also sees this difference while describing *Strike*:

> Eisenstein used symbolic details in depicting (unmasking) negative characters by superimposing the emblematic close-ups (the owl, the fox) over the faces of his typages (nonprofessional actors chosen according to their facial features). In contrast, Vertov did not adhere to such a direct – and quite histrionic – visual symbolism (Petric 1987: 36).

22 The idea of shots 'being brought to perfection' is reminiscent of Viktor Shklovsky's notion of a geometrical resolution of a composition.

If then Vertov was not interested in symbolism, the process of insinuating a specific metaphorical meaning behind an actual word or image, then his montage methods are not exactly metaphorical in the closed sense of transferring meaning from one linguistic unit to another.

Before I analyse specific visual extracts from *The Man with a Movie Camera* in order to pinpoint a series of Vertov's editing strategies, it is useful to look at some relevant theory on poetics. F. W. Galan, who writes on film as poetry and prose, sees German philologist Hermann Paul's writing as key, suggesting that Paul defines poetry as "an equal-valued multiplicity of expressions" (Paul cited in Galan 1984, 102). In Paul's words:

> the language of poetry avails itself of the groups of synonyms, which have gradually grown up, using them indiscriminately, where the language of conversation attaches the use of each to special conditions, and maintaining them where the language of conversation gradually restricts itself to a single use (Paul 1888: 273).

Here Paul sets the foundation for Jakobson's structuralist project. The notion of multiplicity vs. singularity is extremely useful in understanding Vertov's methods and in general useful for the purposes of this research.[23] Furthermore, Jakobson suggests that "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson 1987: 71). Both terms of 'equivalence' and 'combination' are also very important terms for my purposes. Anna Lawton who has studied the work

23 I will return to 'multiplicity' when analyzing some of my own working methods.

of Vertov extensively has applied a Jakobsonian analysis and picks the term of parallelism to describe his methods. In a parallel between Russian futurist poetry and Vertov's working strategies, she suggests that in futurist poetry:

> the destruction of the conventional semantic, syntactic, and prosodic elements liberates the words from every kind of causal relationships; they become unmotivated and are therefore perceived as autonomous values. The arrangement of the words in rhythmical segments and by phonetic analogies endows the texts with a new and fresh meaning, based on parallelism. Similarly, Vertov in his films destroys both the conventional semantics of the shots (by means of unusual frame compositions and camera angles), and the conventional syntagmatic relationships that would advance a narrative (by means of a striking use of montage). The result is a palpable texture of visual analogies and rhythmic segments, homologous with the texture of a Futurist poem (Lawton 1978: 44).

It is important to note that Lawton does not use the term 'metaphorical,' but prefers the idea of 'visual analogies,' as a metaphor can be a quite semantically closed scheme (if defined in the traditional, pre-Modernist sense) that Vertov was certainly not interested in imposing onto his visual material. F. W. Galan also uses the term of 'analogies' describing *The Man with a Movie Camera* as "a veritable orgy of analogies between aspects of life and features of the cinematic apparatus" (Galan 1984: 102).

What is fairly obvious is that most writers who have closely investigated Vertov's work are uncomfortable in using fixed terminology in relation to his methods and prefer phraseology that is more open – words such as analogies, parallelism, palpable, orgy – suggesting a multiplicity of possibilities (to go back to Paul's term). Indeed Vertov was interested in showing us a world of multiple possibilities and simultaneous action, a world full of contradictions and different perspectives. Let us have a look now at some segments from *The Man with a Movie Camera*; arguably, Vertov's most important realized work vis-à-vis notions of poetic structure.

The first sequence that is important for my purposes is the "sleeping / awakening" sequence, which comes early in the film, following the introductory "cinema / projectionist" sequence. The visual structure of this sequence shot-by-shot is as follows:

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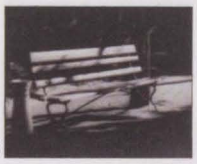
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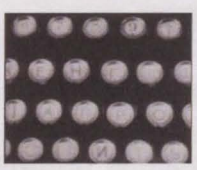
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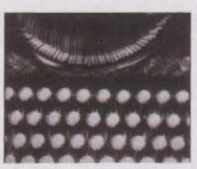
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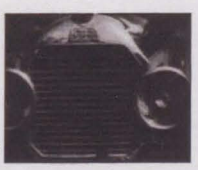
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These 62 shots, each of which lasts around 3 seconds (with some exceptions) are used as an introduction to the film (many of the elements shown here will be developed later), but at the same time work as a mini-poem on the sleeping city. Very little movement appears and there is little to no action in those shots. The order of the cutting of this sequence is a superb example of the way in which Vertov wanted to synthesize shots into general thematic clusters, but refused to attach particular meaning to his montage connections. Early on in the sequence there is the establishment of a central figure (a woman sleeping), between shots of whom footage of the city is cut. At the same time, Vertov inter-cuts two shots of posters (04 and 06) portraying people looking to the left and in one of them the character seems to say "quiet" by putting his pointer over his mouth. These shots are a clear example of the kinesthetic / 'imaginary spatial' energy Vertov was interested in when cutting his sequences together. The shots seem to communicate, it is almost as if the posters are gazing at the sleeping woman (and in fact asking others around them or even members of the audience to keep quiet), whereas quite

probably the posters are to be found in a completely different part of the city. This playful visual pun is not imposed by Vertov and for this reason he does not intersect the face of an actual person going "quiet" (something Eisenstein might have done), but uses the image of a poster, therefore making it at once clear that connections are created in the mind of the viewer. These are the moments that Vertov, as mentioned earlier, considers moments in which some sort of symbolism appears, but the symbolism is not imposed by the filmmaker and this is a crucial difference between him and Eisenstein.[24]

Later, following a quick intersection of tree images (Vertov often cuts back and forth when he wants to introduce a new 'theme'), there is a number of shots of sleeping people and smoothly the audience is introduced to the theme of buildings and communal areas. Shots 17-20 are another typical example of Vertovian montage, adhering to constructivist principles. Those four shots are cut completely on the premise of their visual resemblance and more specifically the fact that they all seem to graphically develop in a diagonal from bottom left to top right fashion. By using their graphic similarity, Vertov connects two shots (19 & 20) that may have otherwise seemed incongruous: a low-angle shot of a building and a shot of a row of newborns in a hospital. Yet the smooth visual cutting between the two makes the next image of babies sleeping (21) appear expected and understandable. At the same time, the theme of 'sleeping' is continued while metaphors about 'new

24 Vlada Petric pinpoints a further cultural reference – that the poster shown is advertising the German popular film "The Awakening of a Woman", a film of the type of narrative structure that Vertov was adamantly against. This could have implications both of a symbolic nature for those in the audience who would be familiar with the storyline of the film, but also is an interesting meta-reference by itself. This is another example of how multi-valent Vertov's approach is, as he is using formal, meta-narrative and semantic codes simultaneously.

beginning', 'new life' easily spring to mind, but without ever having been forced. In his analysis of different types of cinematic metaphor, Trevor Whittock calls this "chiming (parallelism)": "a quite arbitrary similarity or parallelism becomes the opportunity for a juxtaposition of two ideas" (Whittock 1990: 66). This concept seems applicable to the way Vertovian montage works: due to its complexity and yet openness it develops in a plaid-like-fashion with themes developing on different layers, ideas revisited, and multiple suggestions made. The result is an organic whole that is at once non-specific and multi-suggestible / multi-linear.

From then onwards, Vertov continues building up the sequence focusing mainly on the stillness of the sleeping city. In this careful threading of shots, Vertov repeats some images (or elements of them), as if almost to keep reminding the audience of what was already shown, so that it does not lose touch with 'the full picture.' Shot 01 is repeated as shot 22, shot 30 comes back as shot 33; shot 44 develops into shot 59, while shot 36 is a reminder of the constructivist (17-20) section. Between shots 27 and 37 a series of human-like figures appear (mainly in the form of mannequins), none of which is however human. At the same time and especially from shots 39 onwards Vertov cuts a series of machines of communication and production, which are however untouched and unused due to the absence of human interaction. This complex intercutting of humans sleeping, human-like mannequins with wide-open eyes and unused machinery can evoke all sorts of metaphors about the at once dependant and antagonistic relationship between humans and machines (a very typical constructivist concern) or could simply be seen

as a bird's eye view over the beauty of stillness in the city. Anna Lawton finds the rhythm of the scene equally important: "the association people / machines is [...] generated not only by a visual analogy – stillness – but also by the rhythm of the sequence" (Lawton 1978: 47). Either way, what is important is that Vertov's cutting is not systematically fixed and therefore invites the viewer to make a multiplicity of simultaneous connections.

Another example in which Vertov uses a type of kinesthetic montage that is not specific in terms of passing across a particular message is the 'awakening sequence':

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In this sequence, a cameraman's dangerous action of filming a train from a quite close angle is inter-cut with shots of a woman (the one introduced in the

previous sequence) waking up. The idea of the cutting between the two situations seems conceptually curious and any metaphorical conclusions that may be drawn between such disconnected actions are somewhat far-fetched. Nonetheless, the method in which the shots are cut strengthens the case for putting them together. By quickly inter-cutting between the two and with the use of handheld camera, Vertov manages to achieve a kinesthetic pulsation that seems to be relevant to both those two states of being. Whether Vertov wanted to impose the kinetic sense of danger of the train sequence onto the sleeping character's awakening state (shot B as a comment on shot A) is open to interpretation. After all, Vertov's parallels lack directionality and it is therefore impossible to safely talk about which image is the metaphorical commentary on the other. Vlada Petric sees the scene as having a strong oneiric impact: "it is through the interaction of these [...] conflicting patterns [frames 70-74] and corresponding movements that optical tension ultimately affects the viewer on a subliminal way. [...] The young woman gets out of bed as 'awakened' by this kinesthetic shock!" (Petric 1987: 175). Although this is an interesting reading, it is important to make it clear that Vertov does not use the train sequence as a dreamt (diegetic) sequence, i.e. he does not enter a consciousness-within-consciousness narrative mode to explain the disconnection of the two events. To make sure that this is clear, he uses shot 79, which shows the cameraman still in the same location after the woman wakes up. Either way, whether the oneiric impact of the scene is stressed or if it is seen on a purely kinetic basis, the inter-cutting of those two actions creates an unnerving and urgent feel, which works well as the catalyst for the

beginning of the sequence in which the first significant amounts of movement in the film appear.

f. Hands: Vertov, Steiner and others

Another montage sequence, which seems to operate around a general theme, but without imposing specific metaphors is the 'working hands' sequence. Some of the 73 shots composing this sequence are:

In a display of virtuosic rhythmical cutting, Vertov presents in a few minutes a whole array of human action, all based on hand movement and use, that develops into an 'ode to hands', one of the most useful and at the same time aesthetically complex parts of the human body. At the beginning of the sequence, Vertov intercuts shots in a washing and beauty salon with shots of manual jobs. Anna Lawton suggests that:

> It may be tinged with irony, as in the beauty salon sequence, where shots of a seemingly bourgeois lady, having her hair washed and trimmed and her hands manicured, are intercut with shots of women working at jobs requiring manual dexterity (Lawton 1978: 48).

However, it seems unlikely that Vertov imposed such judgment, despite his definite anti-bourgeois background. The way the sequence is cut together does not suggest a significant divide between the hands as a beautiful / beautifying object or as a manual tool. Hence the placement of the cutting room (shots 91, 107) and the cameraman's hand (88, 96) in the middle of this sequence, two jobs that are both aesthetical, as much as they are manual. In fact if anything, Vertov seems to stress the graphic similarity of hand-related actions above their differences and even very briefly / subliminally (for a few frames) uses a shot of someone holding a gun, a destructive but nevertheless hand-based human activity.

At the same time, the rhythm of this scene increasingly becomes more intense in order to create what Petric sees as a

> fascinating choreography of physical activities, juxtaposing various forms and shapes characteristic of the nature of each respective activity. As a result, the kinesthetic orchestration produces a perceptual impact simultaneously disturbing and pleasing to the viewer, while never obscuring the thematic meaning of the sequence – the human hand at work (Petric 1987: 151).

This rhythmical orchestration of movement is not formalistic, but rather a detailed engagement with a specific theme in a deep (or as Deren would say 'vertical') investigation of the language of the medium itself. Through a series of quick cuts, contrasting movements, repeated actions, accelerated footage and other strategies, Vertov shows in the most visually engaging way the multiplicity of possibility and simultaneity of human action, focusing on one central theme, that of the human hands. Vertov himself when analyzing his working methods points out that this is not a formalist practice, as the form stems directly from the theme itself:

> we had to resort to a superior way of organizing the documentary footage, one of organic interactions between shots, one in which shots enrich each other, combining their efforts to form a collective body [...] This is by no means formalism. It's something entirely different. It's a legitimate development that must not be, ought not to be avoided (Vertov 1984c: 256).

At this point, it would be interesting to mention that hands as a theme have frequently interested experimental filmmakers, possibly as they seem to effortlessly combine a multiplicity of referential connotation and a strong,

abstract, expressive image. Around the same time that Vertov made *The Man With a Movie Camera*, a few other filmmakers made short films focusing on the theme of hands. Vertov would probably not have seen these rather obscure (in the sense of rarity) American films. Slightly pre-dating Vertov's film, Stella Simon & Miklós Bándy's *Hände: Das Leben und die Liebe eines Zärtlichen Geschlechts* (USA, 1927-28) is the first film showing entirely hands as the characters of its narrative.

stills from Hände

Using solely hands during its whole duration, the film is an early ode to the expressive beauty of hands. However, despite the film's visual interest, hands are used primarily as caricatures of 'male' and 'female' and therefore what might at first appear as a structural choice ends up a simple aesthetical gimmick of an otherwise fairly straight-forward narrative film.

Another similar production, which again uses hands as its central theme is Norman Bel Geddes' *Tilly Losch in Her Dance of the Hands* (USA, c. 1930-33) in which the focus is on the hands of a dancer.

stills from Tilly Losch in Her Dance of the Hands

This is not a narrative film, but possibly one of the first examples of a structural cine-dance film, a concern/method that was to become fairly common in artists film. Following the hands of the dancer, this film presents a

series of finger and wrist movements that culminate into a wide vocabulary of the body language of hands.

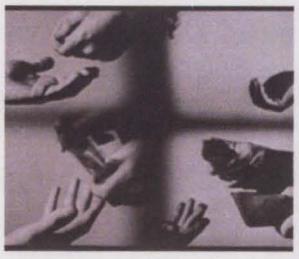
Yet, the film that mostly resembles Vertov's project is Willard Van Dyke & Ralph Steiner's *Hands* (USA, 1934), a short film about the possibility of action by the use of hands. Ralph Steiner has made a number of short films that are always simple investigations of a specific theme (*Mechanical Principles* (1930), *H_2O* (1929) etc). At first, it seems that Van Dyke and Steiner's film uses similar hand-related actions to Vertov, but actually it lacks the structural complexity of *The Man with a Movie Camera* and its ultimate purpose seems to be to create something very specific in its meaning. As such, it stands as a good example of how the same topic ('hands at work') could be approached from a much less open-ended perspective (than Vertov's) and while using the same cinematic tool: the power of montage. The structure of the film is simple – it starts with a few shots of empty / waiting / idle hands panning from one another:



What follows this sort of introduction is a series of shots displaying all different types of handwork that can be done:



After a few shots of manual work, shots of money exchange appear that develop as the film progresses more and more into multi-screen complex images.

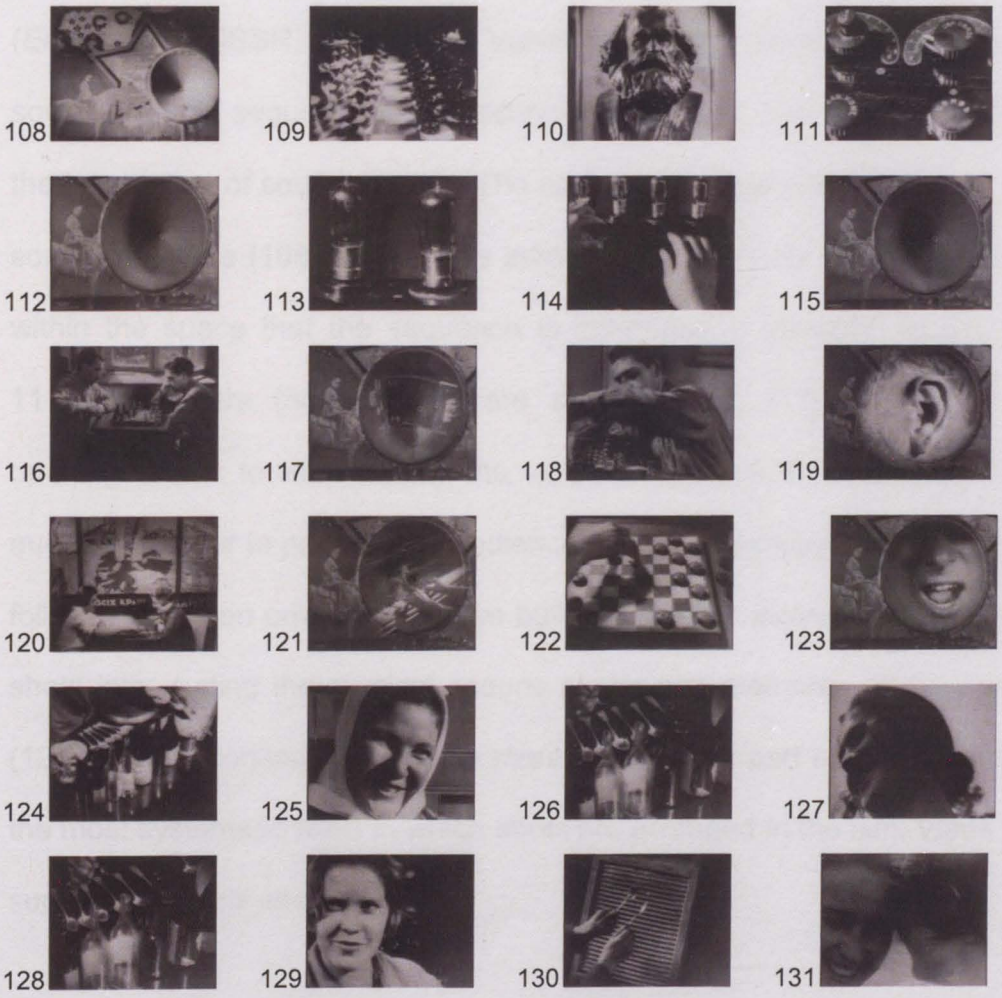




Using this simple structure, the filmmakers – without the recourse to symbolism or the need for spoken text or intertitles – give out the clear message that "working pays off" and that "if you are not working / unemployed / but having ideas, you should go out there and turn your ideas into jobs and then you will be financially rewarded." The film finishes with a shot of a United States cheque growing bigger and bigger on the screen. It is interesting to see that propagandistic editing techniques similar to Eisenstein's were also used in the other side of the Atlantic, this time to promote liberal capitalism. Comparing this film with Vertov's 'hands' sequence, it becomes apparent how Vertov purposefully stayed clear of such particular messages and how through his montage techniques he was primarily interested in showing a multiplicity of perspectives rather than a particular one.[25]

25 It is important to note that the fact that Vertov was not interested in passing a particular message does not make him any less political than Eisenstein, but arguably brings his project closer to theories of libertarianism than communism. The politics of Vertov, however, will not be analysed in detail in this thesis.

g. Space in 'The Man with a Movie Camera'

Going back to *The Man with a Movie Camera*, let us examine a sequence that presents yet another complex shot arrangement, the 'spoons performance (in the workers club)' sequence. In this sequence, Vertov seems to want to achieve an almost silent optical music experience. In order to do that, he does not simply present a series of shots taken from a musical performance, but more closely related to my purposes develops the sequence in a form of a musical piece by structuring the shots along parallel 'contrapuntal' lines.



Pre-dating by just one year his first experiment in which sound was integrated (*Enthusiasm*, USSR, 1930), here Vertov has clearly developed an interest in sound and this sequence is an accurate example of how he tried to achieve the impression of sound visually. The sequence begins with an introduction of sound elements (108-123). In this introduction, elements of sound that exist within the space that the sequence is investigating (diegetic) appear (111-114) and others (non-diegetic) are superimposed (119, 121, 123). This opening seems to want to shift the viewer's attention from the visual to the auditory in order to prepare the audience for the rhythmical sequence that will follow. From then onwards, the film builds a steadily increasing crescendo of shots inter-cutting the musical spoons player and members of the audience (124-147 and continuing for many more shots). This part seems to be one of the most systematic ways in which shots are arranged in the film. Vlada Petric suggests that this sequence

> perfectly demonstrates Vertov's concept of organizing film-pieces into a film-thing, where the duration of a shot progressively decreases in established increments. While the decimal alternation of shots and the repetition of specific scales or lengths contribute to auditory sensation, the divergent, often totally opposed, movements within individual shots and their literal superimposition through multiple exposure produce an optical glissando associated with the music performance (Petric 1987: 182).

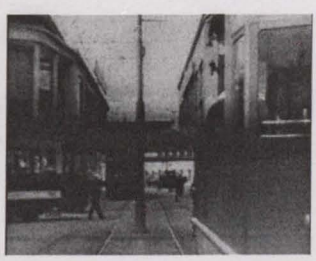
In this sequence, Vertov does not simply cut a series of rhythmical / musical patterns, but actually captures one of the important key-differences between the ways visual and auditory stimuli work and could be presented in a cinematic experience: while vision works in a fairly mono-dimensional way, hearing can have multiple simultaneous layers. To achieve a visual analogy to this multiplicity of simultaneous layers (that e.g. a symphony would consist of) Vertov uses quick rhythmical cuts, but also literal superimpositions of the various auditory stimuli onto one another:

Here Vertov is dealing with an issue that is very important for the purposes of this essay – that of multiplicity of space and the question of what strategies would be most appropriate to use in order to present simultaneously what goes on in different locations (spatial and metaphorical) at the same time in the screen. His use of superimposition in the musical spoons sequence

seems therefore to apply his montage ideas (which primarily deal with time) into space – the multiplicity of perspective is occurring simultaneously in the eyes of the viewer. Vertov was one of the pioneers of the use of superimposed images and the technique was to become incredibly influential in experimental cinema because it produces both conceptual tension, but also visionary abstractions. When images are superimposed, their edges are fused and they result in shapes that are reminiscent of objects, but equally are brand new entities of light that can look like new, different objects. This is not far from the synecdochical frame abstraction that was analysed in the previous chapter.

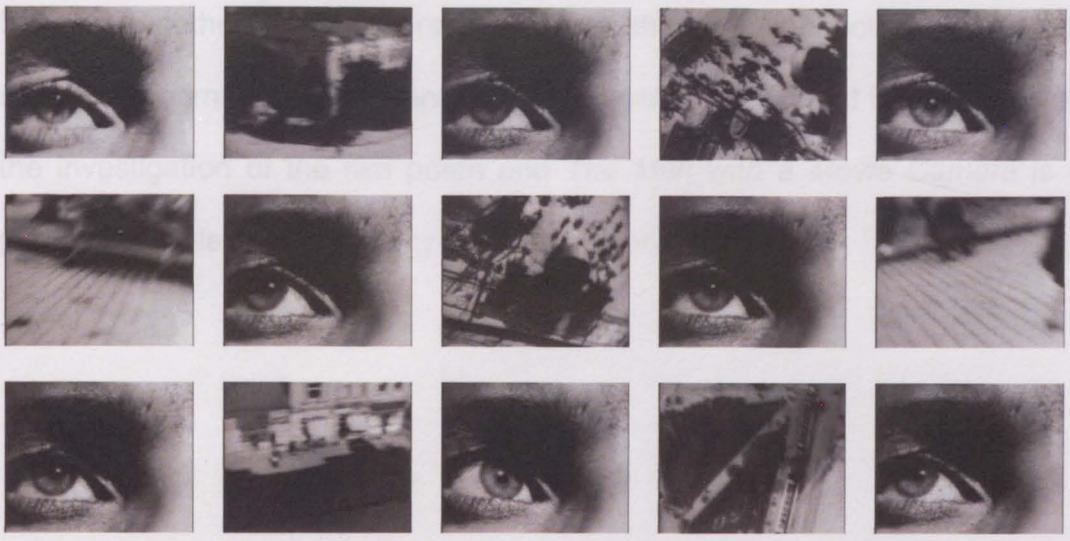
As Vertov was interested in presenting a world of multiplicity and various points of view, dealing with multiple spaces / locations or elements of location at the same time becomes extremely important. Particularly worth-noting for this research is the way in which he uses split screens, as could be seen in his representation of city traffic. Vertov was fascinated by cars and the simultaneous events that happen in a busy street and he wanted to present this multiplicity of stimuli in an as-overwhelming-as-possible way. By using split screens, Vertov stresses the kinesthetic impact of the disorientating effect of standing in the middle of a busy street.





By splitting the screen in two – while often using contradictory movements in the two halves of the screen – Vertov plays with the spectator's means of perception. As the eyes are watching contradictory movements, an uncomfortable feeling of being unable to visually follow what is going on (and therefore of being overwhelmed by it all) is created, similar to that of standing in the middle of a very busy train station, unable to focus on a particular movement or action.

Vertov was interested in tampering with the audience's means of perception, being once more prophetic in terms of what was to come in the history of experimental cinema (as seen in structural/materialist cinema forty years later). Another method that Vertov used in order to try to achieve this sense of disorientation and 'impossibility' of the perception of multiple stimuli is in a sense 'abusing' the idea of 'persistence of vision' by cutting frame-by-frame back and forth two sets of images. As Vlada Petric suggests, "due to the fact that our eyes retain a perceived image on the retina for one one-hundredth of a second after an actual perception is completed [...], the viewer experiences an illusion of double exposure (through a coalescence of two or more images on the same screen)" (Petric 1987: 139). The clearest example is the 'street and eye' sequence. The frames that are presented here only partly reveal the importance of those shots, as each frame actually includes a very quick movement and the contrast between those movements increases significantly the stroboscopic effect.



By inter-cutting in very rapid fashion extreme close-ups of an eye moving to different directions and quick, frantic camera pans across the city, the two images are superimposed in a hypnotic mixture, creating impossible spatial landscapes, while sticking firmly with his subject-matter: representing as accurately as possible the multiplicity of visual experience that is standing in front of a busy street in a big city. The stroboscopic cutting that Vertov chooses for this scene is another method for dealing with the issue of presenting an as-much-as-possible 3-dimensional image of a situation in the 2-dimensional constrains of the cinematic experience.[26]

Summing up, the concept of metaphor could be seen as a useful term for my purposes only as an open, modernist scheme, as I had discussed in chapter 2. The more closed metaphor which aims at delivering a particular message and has a fixed directionality and which formed the basis of Eisenstein's project is less relevant to my methods. The idea of parallelism, instead,

26 Vertov's investigation of space is influential for my own practice's move towards the territory of installation, which relates parallelism with issues of the multi-spatial field.

bringing together many different elements that are connected but do not specifically comment on one another is the poetic method that is the closest to the investigation of the film poem and *The Man with a Movie Camera* is a perfect example of this strategy in terms of montage.

Chapter 6

My work for single screen

The film poem, as it has been discussed in this thesis, can be seen as an arena in which tendencies towards theoretical 'opposites' in artists' film are questioned. It is a type of film where structure is at play, but it is not a 'Structural film'; where abstraction is at play but it is not an 'abstract film'. It may produce metaphors, but not of the pre-defined, specific, literary type that I term 'closed'. Seeing the film poem as a fairly open project, as this thesis has attempted, can help question specific definitions and categorizing.

This is what first attracted me to the idea of the film poem in terms of understanding my own creative practice, as I always found myself oscillating between a tendency to produce symbolic and metaphorical work and an interest in an engagement with the medium itself, an almost formalist 'instinct'. At times, I have felt that the two tendencies were unbridgeable and in the largest part of my work, one would overwhelm the other. Yet the work I was always mostly happy with was the one that juggles the balance between the two and in which the two seem almost inseparable. Most of the films I produced in the first few years of this research project were leaning towards the structural / formalist tendency rather than the symbolic / literary tendency. This is possibly due to the fact that I wanted to create very theoretically 'concrete' work and it seemed to me that the more formalist my work, the more it would be based on pre-determined systems and patterns and

therefore the easier it would be to theorise it afterwards and 'defend' it at a PhD level[27].

a. Pre-MPhil upgrade work

The first film I created for the purposes of this research was a very structure-based formalist piece called *The Garden* (2005). The idea behind this film was to recreate the multi-sensory experience of being in a garden. I decided to use fast flickery[28] editing to create the illusion of 3D space. Repeating multiple images, I was hoping to recreate the experience of being in the centre of a garden where multiple visual stimuli would occur simultaneously, reminiscent of Vertov's inner-city flickery edits.

Various images from 'The Garden'

27 When I embarked on this practice-based PhD project I was unaware of the complexities in the relationship between theory and practice that it brings up and how tight this relationship has to be.

28 The cinematic flicker is created by rapidly cutting one or two frame sections of material with black leader or other material. The effect is often difficult for the human eye.

A frame-by-frame analysis of the opening sequence of the film, highlighting the flickery editing methods

Yet this strategy proved somewhat 'harsh' against the images themselves and the final product was too overtly medium-focused to allow the film to exist on any level other than as an investigation of the flicker phenomenon itself. While in Vertov the rapid cutting made sense as it was a result of what the image was showing (the hectic city), in my film, this cutting seems imposed onto the material. Still, there are some moments when the concept works, especially when I juxtapose images that are very different physically / conceptually like the ground/soil pictures against the plane flying in the sky.

In these moments, due to the difference between the flickered material, the images that are juxtaposed seem to retain a conceptual clarity (in the sense of

being able to see distinctly what they are made of), which results in a conceptual tension, not far from the project of parallelism or the open metaphor. However, at this stage I was certainly not combining images on such a conscious level.

The rhythm of *The Garden* is quite adventurous and the overall structure is complex, but equally non-specific (sub-sections roughly based on different flowers/colours), both of which are elements that I was happy to investigate and take on board for subsequent experiments. Still the film fails to tackle the balance between the symbolic and the structural and the result seems like a simple light / colour / rhythm and repetition experiment. Most shots are cut so quickly that their initial importance and reference points are almost redundant or unperceivable (i.e. the synecdochical does not work). Some of the most successful moments are these where I leave a shot to develop for a slightly longer period, like the shot of clothes hanging from a washing line or the shot of a small bug moving its antennas sitting at the edge of a big leaf. While these shots are as carefully composed as the rest in terms of framing, the key-difference is that they can also be seen as useful for potential (open) metaphorical readings as they are more specific and less abstracted, less brought to a pure abstract state, where they simply become form, colour and shape.

Looking back at this experiment, I think that – despite its problems – it was an appropriate starting point for my research. The very topic I chose and my approach towards it revealed immediately some of the tensions I wanted to

investigate and which would run through my whole research: I wanted to deal with a typically lyrical theme, a garden, but to try and formally restructure it into something else, something of a formal interest. In addition, although I was not happy with the overall editing of the film, it was very interesting for me to create a film almost entirely in the post-production process (a strategy that I would largely follow throughout the PhD project). When I initially went out on location, I had no idea how the material would be used later (e.g. that I would use a flickering effect). I was quite pleased to see that it was possible to improvise in the shooting process and then use the material only as a starting point for constructing something more specific in the editing phase. At the same time, however, this lack of pre-production might be the reason why the overall structure of the film seems somehow 'forced' and not in significant contact with / arising from the visual material itself.

Partly frustrated with this over-edited film, I decided to embark on a very different project, in which post-production would play a smaller role so that images would not be so significantly stripped of their context. Another difference was that in this film – called *Daffodil : Secret* (2005) – I also decided to use sound. Although I do not frequently work with sound, it was a useful venture, as the connection between image and sound could create imaginary audiovisual-scapes by combining elements that are not part of a narrative spatiotemporal scheme, hence bring the project close to Vertov's parallelism. However, the sound and image connections in this film are not that well composed to arrive at such a space and often the sound seems to overwhelm or almost 'guide' the picture. Furthermore, although I was happy to

place a larger importance on production as opposed to post-production, I did not plan my shots well-enough but instead decided to improvise fully and the final material I had to work with in the editing phase was not varied, making the task of creating parallelisms and open-metaphors almost impossible.

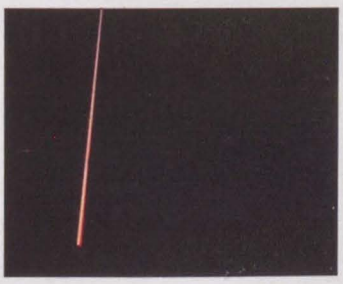
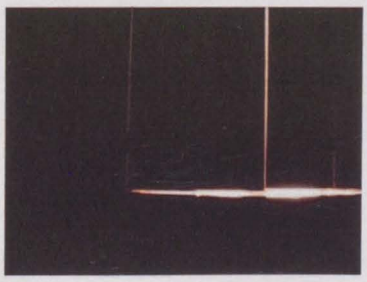
A further possible mistake I made at this stage was my decision to shoot in super-8, a technology which is old and no longer mass-produced and therefore carries a particular contextual reference of being the main technology used for 'home-movies' in the 70s (a reference that became even more pronounced by the decision to shoot handheld). This added a self-referential context to the film, in which the main focus becomes the person behind the camera, not far from the strategy that Sitney describes as the 'Lyrical film' that I discussed early in this thesis.

Overall, this was not a successful experiment for the purposes of this research, as it does not hold strongly in a formal analysis, nor does it have a particular metaphorical quality arising from the pictures themselves. Still, I decided to use sound again in my next film, as I believed that I had not managed to work yet on audio-visual connections as a strategy for the formation of conceptual parallels/metaphors.

The third film, *Light Particles* (2005), was the most successful to date in my research process, juggling the balance between the conceptual / symbolic and the formal / structural rather adeptly. The film focuses on a simple subject matter, that of dust particles flying in the light rays that come from a window, but uses a number of strategies to simultaneously give the material a metaphorical quality. In the first part, brightness is pushed to a minimum and contrast to a maximum, removing any contextual spatial information and leaving the particles to float in an unknown space.


The result is an investigation that is designed to be visually / formally intriguing, but also creates a meditative space, as it looks like outer space images of the universe.

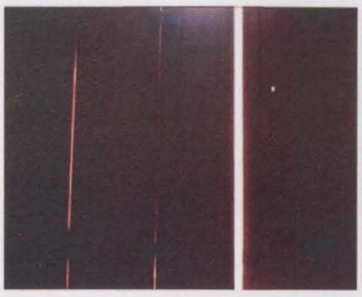
The second part uses slightly more specific images – yet still unclear in relation to the objects they belong to – combined with electronic sounds.

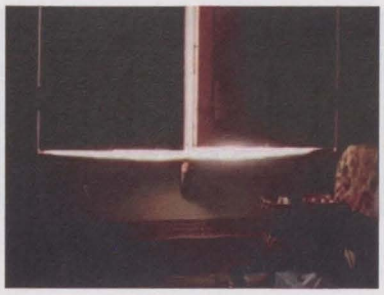



The semi-abstraction of this part coupled with an audiovisual tightness presents a logic of synaesthetic correspondences as opposed to narrative spatiotemporal continuity. When a sound is heard, an image is seen. Their simultaneity makes them 'match'. This is reminiscent of Vertov's graphic parallelism between shots, as it is for example featured in the woman waking up / train arriving segment of *The Man with a Movie Camera* or as an audiovisual version of what Trevor Whittock calls 'chiming', a concept I discussed earlier in the thesis.

In the third part, images become clearer, brighter and wider and with the use of more representational sound the viewer starts compiling a series of mindscapes about the actuality of the space investigated.

But it is not until the fourth part that the images and sounds become very representational, having brought the initial cosmic quality of the particles back into something very trivial, the space of a house's living room and kitchen.





The last part, although comprising of representational images and sounds, is intended to open up a space for possibilities in the mind of the viewer: this is an example of Sitney's synecdoche. The images and sounds are representational, they refer to actual places and actions, yet as there are only parts of them presented and in a random order, the viewer tries to piece together a landscape which is semi-representational, carrying a series of connotations (to do with domestic life) but is equally not straight-forward in terms of presenting spatiotemporal unity. At the same time, the fact that the initial universe-like images are now paralleled with trivial domestic moments invites a series of metaphors to occur.

Finally, the fourth film I created for the purposes of this research, *Self-Portrait: Pulse* (2006), deals primarily with abstraction and macro imagery. In this film, I brought the camera very near the subject matter, my body, and used very strong specifically directed lighting to reveal micro-structures of the body that bring to mind nature landscapes and push it away from the subject matter itself. Stills from the film follow.

In that respect, the film has the potential to be both heavily formal and somehow openly metaphorical. Yet the effect of the abstract landscapes fails to interest after a few shots and the film seems to be little else than an abstract interpretation of skin. Once more the most conceptually complex moments occur when images become more specific and the body's pulse appears, which brings with it a whole series of connotations (without however any of them being too specific). Although I was happy with this film visually, as it seems that it is the film in which I best developed my use of abstract imagery, the film moves towards the more structural again and is so abstract that any conceptual importance falls through. The tension between objects abstracted into qualities of light / shape and objects for what they are that interested Brakhage is not as successfully dealt with here, as the amount of abstraction ends up fully 'aestheticising' the material. In this sense, the final images lose contact with their original source or the original source becomes unimportant and the synecdoche does not work. The viewer is thus discouraged to work metaphorically and ends up simply observing some visually impressive abstractions.

None of the films I had created up until that point had satisfied me completely in tackling the important balance that the film poem is investigating between the conceptual/literary/symbolic and the structural/formal/materialist (with the

exception of elements of *Light Particles*). In the examples given above, it seems that in most cases one of the two tends to overwhelm the other. There were certainly important lessons I learnt from all of the films, which I would then take on board in my next experiments. In *The Garden* I have learnt how to structure shots in rhythmical discipline in order to try to achieve a multi-sensory experience. In *Daffodil : Secret*, I learnt the opposite, to trust improvisation and to try to achieve a less controlled vision. In *Light Particles*, I understood how to deal with abstraction in time, while still maintaining both the improvisation element and the structural post-production discipline. In *Self-Portrait: Pulse*, I learnt how to use abstraction of space, taking into consideration all of the above. My practice was certainly developing, but what seemed to me to be lacking was a variety of visual material used in each film separately. Trying to achieve Deren's 'vertical' investigation of a moment, I had significantly narrowed down the types of images (while increasing their abstract representation). Understandably, the result tends more towards the structural / investigative, rather than the metaphorical. Not surprisingly, it was moments in these films where the visual material opened-up and was less systematically arranged in formal terms that were the most successful for my purposes.

What was therefore lacking was a combination of more diverse shots that would be less photographically abstracted and presented simultaneously or temporally close to each other. In other words, montage. But as I believed that Eisenstein's conceptual montage methods narrow down the potential of the filmic metaphor, I turned to Vertov's parallelisms. As I have argued the idea of

parallelism is one of the key issues (if not *the* key issue) in my investigation of the film poem. In the last years of my research towards the completion of my final practical work, I focused significantly on trying to achieve this idea of parallelism, as I believed that it could offer the balance between the metaphorical and the formal that I was interested in achieving.

b. Post-MPhil upgrade work

The first major piece in which I attempted to create a multi-layered montage world similar to Vertov's was my piece *Reaction Cannon* (2008). The idea came to me while listening to a piece (with the same name) by W.A. Mozart in which musical themes that are structured in a canon-like form appear to be reacting to each other, while still remaining independent. My idea was to capture a day in the life of the countryside, where things co-exist in parallel, whether plants, animals or human beings and to give a sense that there is an unspoken communication between all those elements. I decided to collect all the footage initially without knowing exactly which section each bit would be used for (if at all) and then process the material and assemble it into what Vertov calls the method of 'higher mathematics of facts,' as I have mentioned in previous parts of this thesis. Some of the very varied imagery used for the film:




The resulting film, the longest I had created for the purposes of this research, was useful for me as a work in progress that helped me define my question more firmly and later decide on a radical shift within my practice. The film is indeed a presentation of a day in the countryside using some elements of a formal approach to vision, similar to Vertov. The overall structure is multi-layered and seems to develop in sections of visual themes (again close to Vertov's vision) that are at once smoothly exchanged and clearly juxtaposed. A series of ideas spring to mind about the relationships between the different elements presented and metaphorical concepts are insinuated without being imposed. The sound creates yet another dimension in this collage, being at times on a parallel and in other moments completely juxtaposed with the visual stimuli. Overall, I seem to have developed some of the ideas on montage that I wanted to explore in the second part of my research, moving slightly away from the more structural ground I was working on before my upgrade. This was the first occasion in which I consciously attempted to bridge the symbolic / literary and formal / medium specific.

However, there were some crucial differences between the strategies that my film employs and those pioneered by Vertov. Contrary to Vertov, in my film

there is not a sense of a visual resolution of a composition, in the way for example Vertov cuts together stills 17-20 in *The Man with a Movie Camera*. The way I cut between images seems so intuitive that it is almost impossible to establish any sort of cohesion on a formal level (with the exception of some moments). This lack of obvious formal strategies results in a visual experience, in which the audience, struggling to find coherence, gives up altogether the attempt to work with metaphor or to conceptually or graphically combine elements. Instead of creating a world in which multiple spatial elements interact in dance-like rhythms encouraging an active spectator to impose simultaneously multiple readings, I had put together a film that converts the spectator into a fairly passive receiver of a series of audiovisual connections.

Another misjudgement I realized I had made was the choice of subject matter as such and how it could be related to the montage strategies I tried to apply. Although portraying the multiplicity of action in nature could potentially be a relevant topic for my purposes, the lack of tension between the different elements presented in this film meant that the montage connections do not result from the visual material itself, but are rather imposed on it. In a way, I had made the same mistake as in my earlier piece *The Garden*. My portrayal of nature is different to Vertov's project, which presents a city of simultaneous contradictions and therefore lends itself better to a montage-based project. His strategies created more meaningful tensions, as he used images that were full of social significance and could therefore operate on the space between the metaphorical and the formal, whereas the images I used are

more neutral in the sense of producing conceptual connotations and could only work towards graphically dynamic tensions.

A more general issue that struck me at that stage as a new area to investigate within my practice was the relationship between time and space. As already analysed, Vertov himself was aware of the problem of the relationship between cinematic time and space and has employed a number of strategies to deal with it, like the superimposition, the split screen, the frame-by-frame back and forth editing, all of which were working on the idea of a simultaneous multi-spatial visual experience. This notion of the multiple visual experience, which the viewer encounters and has to somewhat put together in his/her brain seems like a very important issue in my own work and in the development of the notion of the film poem. But simultaneity is the key here, for an image that follows another has the potential of narrative implication or the fixing of directionality, while simultaneity seems closer to the idea of 'parallelism' (and echoes Deren's ideas on 'verticality').

While considering the problem of time and space development in my work, I came across an installation work called *Palindrome* (Israel, 2001) by artist Orit Raff.

Still from Palindrome

Raff's methods are fairly simple (and often semi-abstract or minimal) examinations of (usually) site-specific situations. *Palindrome* presents us with a back-and-forth parallel cutting between a woman inside an igloo and a coyote walking in the snow. While the woman has to put significant amounts of effort in her attempt to perhaps create a warm environment, the coyote seems to somewhat effortlessly walk through a snowstorm. I will not analyse at this stage the metaphorical implications / possibilities the work could produce. Rather what was important for me at that stage was that this work, despite its simple structure, was neither a narrative piece, nor created very straightforward metaphors between the shots presented. I believe that this would have been different, should the work have been part of a larger filmic structure. The fact that the work is installed and therefore the audience first encounters the parallel of images presented at a random point not only positions narrative as a secondary issue (if at all important), but even discourages the viewer from establishing any sort of directionality of the metaphorical structure of the images. Therefore the viewer is left to spend as long as s/he pleases with the work and decide whether to view it for its kinaesthetic impact or metaphorically or both. Contrasting video art to

narrative film, Holy Willis suggests that "the narratives displayed in video art are often about space, fragments, and the abundance of meaning" (Willis 2005: 84). This is enhanced significantly by the fact that the gallery space generally seems to be a space for interrogation by a self-aware audience, whereas the cinematic experience is often about 'escapism' (an investigation into these issues follows in the next chapter).

Bringing together my understanding of *Palindrome* and Vertov's investigation into cinematic space, while trying to address the issue of multiplicity of meaning and parallelism, I decided to experiment for the first time with a multi-screen installation. This was not only a shift for me as a practicing artist and researcher, but also opened up new possibilities about the way the film poem has been addressed in artists film theoretical texts. Despite the fact that multi-screen work has not frequently been associated with poetics, this move towards the multi-screen seems to me to have sprouted organically through my own investigation of the film poem. As such, I am planning to suggest (via my practical work, analysis of it and analysis of the work of other practitioners) that multiple screen installations could be not only relevant to the idea of bridging the conceptual and the formal, but also could provide a more contemporary dimension in investigating these issues.

Chapter 7

Towards the multi-screen

As was suggested at the end of the previous chapter, most of the writing around the film poem focuses on single screen works. My own practice had also stayed with the single-screen strategy, as I had considered that adding multiple screens was irrelevant to my project. The remaining chapters however will argue that multiple screen installations can add a different dimension to my examination of notions of parallelism and the tension between the conceptual and the formal that the film poem deals with, while at the same time help reposition the place of the spectator regarding the process of understanding a work.

a. The multi-screen as multi-suggestive

Chris Meigh-Andrews suggests that:

> single screen works that do not in some way address the relationship to the space they occupy offer a direct, almost cinematic, experience. [...] a multi-channel work challenges the viewers to engage with the work on a spatial level in that they are deliberately left free to make decisions about the order of priority of images, the relative relationship between the multiple screens, the viewing position, and to consider the space between the screens, their relative size and even how they are mounted or displayed (Meigh-Andrews 2006: 245).

Of course, it is important to make clear that single screen works are not de-facto non-challenging and multiple screen works are not de-facto challenging in terms of the spectator's engagement. Many structural single screen pieces – like Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (USA, 1967) for example – certainly do not present what Meigh-Andrews calls a direct cinematic experience, as they do question the placing of the spectator within the cinematic experience and demand an active, perceptive audience. But what is important is that multiple screens are indeed useful for my purposes as they add an important spatial dimension to a work's realisation and reception.

By opening up the space and rendering the audience free to move in space, multi-screen works can open up interpretation and demand a more active viewer. Tanya Leighton has gone as far as to suggest that "freeing of film from its flat, fixed-screen perspective [...] is analogous to the notion of 'the death of the author' and the empowerment of the viewer" (Leighton 2008: 29). To what extent such a claim is valid is arguable, but definitely most video installations, by the very fact that they demand the movement of a mobile audience, engage the spectator in a kinetic way that offers an alternative to the seated cinema's frequently escapist experience. This idea of the 'freed image' in video installation has often been discussed in video art theory in relation to the multiplicity of screens used. Chrissie Iles suggests that "the multiscreen clusters of monitors [...] or the often complex constructions that characterized sculptural video installations during the 80s, took the eye away from the mesmerizing pull of the single image" (Iles 2003: 132). The single-screen can have a 'mesmerising' capacity, as Iles suggests (reminding us of the "going to

the movies" experience), a capacity that multi-screen work questions. When the 90s introduced a wider move from video monitors to video projections in the gallery, multiple projection was still used for similar effect. Françoise Parfait argues that in 90s video art work "double projections, multi-projections, overlapping narratives, simultaneity [...] would all take part in [these] new narratives which have now incorporated their critical dimension" (Parfait 2006: 59). Both Iles and Parfait seem to suggest that the use of multiple screens can offer a multiplicity of perspective and question the authority of a first-person narrator.

This idea is not far from Dziga Vertov's attempts to create a multiple plane field of meaning and present a world of opposites and contradictions and a world open to the audience's interpretation. Whether Vertov himself would use multiple screens had he had the resources to do so can only be speculated upon. But he was undoubtedly interested in a simultaneous multiple perspective, which he considered fundamentally connected to his poetic vision. Malcolm Le Grice points out the influence Dziga Vertov had in the 'expanded cinema' movement, one of the most important artists' film movements regarding notions of dealing with cinematic space and the placement of the audience in a cinematic experience:

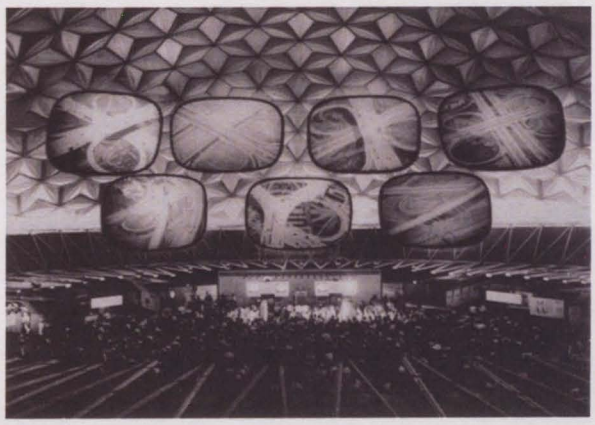
> Vertov particularly exploited the cinematic equivalent of 'collage' through the simultaneous combination of different film sequences adding to the more established concepts of sequential montage. It involved shifting the reading of the cinematic image towards that of

a-temporal symbol rather than a sequential narrative, or if narrative, towards simultaneity, dream or parallel action (Le Grice 2001: 279).

In that sense, it would not be far-fetched to see the split-screen elements in Vertov's *The Man With a Movie Camera* as some of the earliest examples of multi-screen work. Vertov's split image in which two parallel street movements in the city are juxtaposed does not seem to be far off the double screen projection work of Jane and Louise Wilson some 80 years later.

b. Charles & Ray Eames, Stan VanDerBeek and expanded cinema

Vertov's portrayal of the simultaneous action in the city also seems to echo in the work of Charles & Ray Eames *Glimpses of the USA* (USA, 1959) which was interestingly enough created to represent American life to Soviet audiences.



The Eameses installed 7 large format screens that showed multiple actions taking place throughout a casual day in the United States, ranging from large, impressive shots of highways to intimate, family-moment close-ups. In an

essay on the Eameses' work, Beatriz Colomina argues that "rather than wondering cinematically through the city, we now look in one direction and see many juxtaposed images, more than we can possibly synthesize or reduce to a single impression" (Colomina 2001: 7). This is again reminiscent of Vertov's project, although the major difference between Vertov's and the Eameses' work lies in the choice of the content itself: the former presented a city with all its contradictions, whereas the latter focused only on wealth and productivity.[29] However, they both shared an interest in simultaneity and multiple perspective and this multiplicity is exactly what is relevant for the purposes of this chapter.

Before having a look at recent work incorporating multiple screens and then relating this to my own practice, it is important to contextualise some earlier writing and practices on multi-screen projection. While there have been instances of using multiple screens since the beginning of cinema (Abel Gance's epic *Napoleon* in 1927 is a narrative example of this), it was not before the late 1950s that the field was truly explored. At the same time that Charles & Ray Eames created their Cold War propaganda pieces, many young film artists conceptualised a different reality in relation to the multiple screen image. In 1966 Stan VanDerBeek created the "Movie-drome," a dome-like space in which the audience sitting on the floor would be presented with a very large amount of images projected on the ceiling.

29 This is a major political difference between the context of the works: whereas the Eameses were actually commissioned by the US government to create the work, Vertov was eventually ostracized by the Communist regime for creating works that were not polemical enough.

VanDerBeek wanted to create a space in which the audience bombarded with a series of images would hopefully pick-and-mix and make their own connections. In his own words "each member of the audience will build his own references from the image-flow [...] and each individual makes his own conclusions" (VanDerBeek 1967: 175-6). VanDerBeek's declaration sounds very relevant here; however, it can be argued that the overwhelming format of the Movie-drome does not seem to engage the spectator in a way that is as active as VanDerBeek would hope. Gene Youngblood who is one of the most important writers on 'expanded cinema' and a contemporary of VanDerBeek, argues that "multiple-projection lumia art is more significant as a paradigm for an entirely different kind of audio-visual experience, a tribal language that expresses not ideas but a collective group consciousness" (Youngblood 1970: 387). VanDerBeek and Youngblood arrive at an almost contradictory view of the same works – while VanDerBeek stresses the individual experience, Youngblood places more importance on the collective consciousness. The

truth is probably somewhere in the middle, but what is either way the case is that the Movie-drome and any other overwhelming structure does not help a conscious engagement of the spectator. Liz Kotz sees this as the more "painterly, expressionist" type of expanded cinema which "tends to rely on notions of sensory impact and visual presence that imply an ahistorical subject, a viewer whose physiology can be accessed directly through sensation" (Kotz 2004: 45).

Malcolm Le Grice, in a more general discussion on expanded cinema works suggests that

> the audience or individual spectators are being dislodged from the condition of passive consumers fundamental to the previous discourse of cinema – through:
>
> - a confrontation of the cinematic as a physical experience in the context of their real world;
> - an extending uncertainty about the stability of symbolic systems brought about by works where the symbolic meaning is in flux; (Le Grice 2001: 278).

This definition of expanded cinema renders the spectators more active – through its expansion of the area of cinematic space – and is in this respect related to my attempt in creating the open metaphors / parallelisms of the film poem. However, it can be argued that the extent to which most expanded cinema questions the cinematic apparatus removes the question of symbol or metaphor altogether and renders it unimportant (as I have already discussed). Nevertheless, what is important is that the questioning of the cinematic space

that expanded cinema incited certainly results in a more engaged spectator. Thomas Zummer suggests something similar in terms of installation work:

> Installations were reterritorialised spaces, simulating, co-opting, or contaminating the museum or theatre, tampering with private spaces and public spaces, in order to confront or destabilize conventional positionings of art and its audience. They were reflexive interrogations of the status of all sorts of objects, subjects, materials, language, and cognition and the discourses and institutions that authorized and guaranteed forms of perception and interrogation (Zummer 2001: 77).

What connects expanded cinema and installation work for my purposes – other than / or possibly related to a self-reflexive attitude – is that they are both concerned with space, which is a key issue in the way my research on the film poem has developed.

c. The audience's itinerary

In her analysis of video installation works, Margeret Morse offers some most useful remarks that seem to bridge elements of the different approaches presented so far. One term that Morse applies is that of kinesthetics: "the underlying premise of the installation appears to be that the audiovisual experience supplemented kinesthetically can be a kind of learning not with the mind alone, but with the body itself" (Morse 2004: 158). This suggestion seems neither to refuse the possibility of a metaphorical approach to the making and reception of a work, nor to deny the importance of its materialist

nature, but by inserting the term of the body it fuses the two at once. She continues:

> insofar as spatial positions outside the two-dimensional field are charged with meaning that is an essential aspect of the work, all these levels partake of the poetics of installation. The spectator thus enters a charged space-in-between, taking on an itinerary, a role in a set in which images move through different ontological levels with each shift in dimension, a kinesthetic art, a body art, an image art that is rather an embodied conceptual art (ibid: 163).

This 'itinerary' Morse describes is extremely useful for this discussion as it is an itinerary that affects the work's structure, importance and meaning, but it is an itinerary that the viewer is free to choose. Making sure therefore, that the possibilities of different itineraries are open enough for the spectator to choose their preferred one is key to ensuring that the work is at once multi-dimensional and open to interpretation and is therefore relevant to the ideas of parallelism. Further, what Morse calls the itinerary the audience chooses when walking through a series of installed video works is actually a medium-specific (but not self-referential) action that has a direct impact on the way the content itself is perceived and synthesized within the viewer's mind. In other words, a multiple-screen work does not only present viewers with a series of visual parallels that need to be placed into couple/juxtaposition relationships; it also places the viewer in a field where connections can happen within two time-developing elements on one screen, between two simultaneous elements on different screens or between two asynchronous elements of any

screens. By the time one starts multiplying all this by the number of screens, the possibilities for connections in the mind of the spectator are endless.

Morse suggests that this video installation setup "can be compared to the spectator wandering about on a stage, in a bodily experience of conceptual propositions and imaginary worlds of memory and anticipation" (ibid: 159) and in that respect it "is performative or declarative" (ibid). By declarative she means that "a world is declared into existence. It need not match the world outside [...], nor does installation video command the visitor nor commit the artist nor merely express some state of mind" (ibid). What Morse calls the "declarative function" of the video installation is significant for my purposes as it is exactly this function that allows the putting together of images which are not commanding the audience in terms of what they are trying to achieve, but are rather suggestive of multiple ideas.

d. Sigrid Hackenberg's 'Spanish Tape'

From the early days of the video installation as a medium, a number of artists have used multiple screens for various reasons most frequently not connected to poetic qualities as such. At times, multiple screens are employed by artists simply as elements of excess and immersion rather than out of methodological rigour, as I would argue is the case with someone like Bill Viola. A rather early video example of a multiple screen work that tries to achieve ideas on the poetic is Sigrid Hackenberg's *Spanish Tape* (Spain, 1988).

As Hackenberg herself suggests, her work is interested in an "ongoing exploration of the poetic" (Hackenberg 2008 www.sigridhackenberg.com). Hackenberg creates simple and minimalist portraits of a place, a person or/and a situation that are suggestive but do not direct the viewer towards any particular reading. In *Spanish Tape,* Hackenberg uses two screens that are showing simultaneously different parts of footage recorded over a four-week period in southwestern Spain. The two images, which play alongside, seem to comment on one another, but there is no sense of any clear metaphorical implication imposed by the artist. Especially in moments when a close-up of a person on one screen is placed next to a wide shot of a landscape on the other screen, all sorts of ideas about the relationship between humans and nature could arise, but most of all *Spanish Tape* is an investigation of a place that tries through the use of a double perspective to achieve what Maya Deren would call a "vertical" investigation of a situation. What I learned from Hackenberg for the purposes of my research is that simultaneity is by itself a means of producing a parallel between two elements. As it can be argued that two strips of film placed next to each other would produce a third space (montage), in the same way (if not more clearly so) two images placed next to

each other would produce this third space in the mind of the viewer. Furthermore, in installation work, no image precedes the other and therefore the issue of fixing directionality of metaphor becomes irrelevant. Further still, in a simultaneous parallel of two images, those images are not (as easily) in danger of becoming parts of a time-based narrative structure. From all the above it seemed to me that working with two screens next to each other would solve a series of problems, providing of course that consideration has been given to the precise relationship between the two.

e. Chris Marker's Zapping Zone

I soon became more interested in work that does not operate in a diptych or triptych format, but rather disperses meaning over a large number of screens that the viewer would have to walk through (taking a personal itinerary) in order to experience. One such multi-screen piece whose spatial structure interested me was Chris Marker's *Zapping Zone* (France, 1990).

For this work, first presented at the George Pompidou in Paris in 1990, Chris Marker installed more than twenty video monitors of all different sizes in different heights and positions across a room. In those monitors he presented a wide variety of visual material, ranging from extracts of documentaries he had made, photos and stills he had taken or collected and even extracts of other filmmakers' work. The result is an experience which was to be prophetic for the 'zapping' generation of the information superhighway: the viewer is so overwhelmed by visual material that s/he is unable to focus on one particular screen and 'zaps' between them, trying to find what satisfies him/her best or in this case trying to piece some sort of meaning together. As Barbara Filser argues, "the viewer creates his own film from the store of images on offer. In the framework of this installation, zapping is given a spatial dimension, in that the viewer must physically move around and walk from channel to channel" (Filser 2003: 330). This method of working seemed to me very relevant for my research, as what Marker does is suggest possibilities for meaning through the parallel of screens, but not impose any given ideas. The multiplicity of screens and durations makes it impossible for the film experience to be the same for any two viewers. Both time and space set-ups ensure that the viewing experience is ever-changing:

> the film sequences [...] are of different lengths and are played as a loop, with the result that the view of the installation as a whole is always changing, constantly producing new connections [...] each viewer follows his own route through the pictorial universe, determining how long to remain in front of which images, and

drawing his own connections between the individual pieces (ibid: 328).

In this respect, the complicated time-space relationship between the different screens of *Zapping Zone* not only evokes multiple simultaneous readings; it is actually in a constant flux, depending on the viewer's 'itinerary' and on the time they first start engaging with each of the screens. What is even more worth-noting is the way the screens are placed in the room. Catherine Lupton suggests that the room "first strikes the gallerygoer's eye as a ramshackle, junkyard assemblage of elderly televisions and computer monitors" (Lupton 2009, website). This way of placing the monitors not as something very precisely calculated (as for example it would be in a Bill Viola installation) strongly entertains the idea that the meaning of the installation is not fixed and there is something temporary, almost 'work-in-progress-like' about it. The multiplicity of screens and possibilities as well as the non-systematic placing of the screens around the space were both elements that I was interested in applying to my own work.

However, there are arguably a number of practices that Marker uses, which make his installation irrelevant to ideas of the film poem. Marker, who through most of his career has created what could be seen as philosophical visual 'essays', is not primarily interested in parallelism as a mode for poetic abstraction and incorporates narrative and documentary works in his mixture. His main interest is that of conceptual dialectics and in this respect his work is significantly different to the kinesthetic project of Vertov, although certainly nowhere near as fixed as Eisenstein either. At the same time, the variety of

visual material he uses results in rather overwhelming the audience than allowing a space for effortless metaphorical connections to emerge. In this sense, the viewer, unable to establish any graphic / formal similarity between the different elements, discards the importance of metaphor altogether. The result is closer to the overwhelming neo-Dada / Fluxus events of John Cage in the 60s (whose main purpose was to reach an impossibility of meaning) rather than a personal exploration of subjective symbols, which is important for the film poem as it has been defined by this thesis.

f. Wolfgang Tillmans' photographic installations

Although a series of multi-screen video works interested me for a number of reasons, I felt that none of the artists I had come across was offering a spatial solution that seemed to appropriately deal with the notion of parallelism / the open metaphor / multiplicity / viewer's choice of itinerary that I wanted to attempt myself. The answer came from a different medium in the work of photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, who is rarely discussed in relation to poetry, but who I will argue is very relevant to my project.

Wolfgang Tillmans' photography installations often consist of a large number of images in different sizes; hung in different heights and varying significantly in content, yet creating formal and conceptual clusters.

Installation view, 'Vue d' en haut', Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2002

In a catalogue of Tillmans' work, Jan Verwoert, Peter Halley & Midori Matsui suggest that:

> this strategy of contrasting a tight web of interrelated images with single isolated pictures might be compared to the visual language of cinema. The first technique is similar to that of montage, the dynamic arrangement of many images that increases the speed of perception. The latter is comparable to long unedited shots that allow the gaze to rest on one subject over an extended time (Verwoert, Halley and Matsui 2002: 66-7).

The way Tillmans places his images across the wall seems relevant not just as a method of montage, but also in terms of both Shklovsky's notion of a geometrical resolution of a composition (by means of spatial choices within the placing of photographs) and Maya Deren's vertical investigation of a subject matter (by means of altering the size of and spacing around a

photograph). It could even be argued that a Wolfgang Tillmans grid of multiple moment / perspective images investigating a visual situation is almost like a frame-by-frame layout of a flicker film.

Concorde Grid, 1997

Furthermore, in a review of the first major US Tillmans show, James Yodd suggests that

> like the imagist poets of a century ago, Tillmans can do a lot with a little – the tail end of a rat escaping down a sewer grate, or some snow covered stairs with useless rails nearby, a pair of jeans hanging on a banister, or portraits of awkward but determined young couples. His work suggests that volumes of meaning are embedded in the fragmentary, and little bursts of revelation and a quickened pulse of life are implied everywhere in his wide-ranging images (Yodd 2006: 10).

Through an investigation of the fragment, a very specific element of a situation, but relating this back to the whole or connecting it to other fragments of other situations, Tillmans manages to bring up poetic connotations in a way reminiscent of Brakhage's synecdochical framing or Vertov's graphic connections.

At the same time, Tillmans does not guide the viewer into a specific experience, but rather offers a terrain for personal connections to happen by throwing together a playing field of visual possibilities and letting the viewer decide for themselves: to do what Mark Wigley calls "curating a personal exhibition" (Wigley 2006: 149), which is close to Morse's ideas of the personal itinerary of the viewer. Tillmans creates a world that, as Verwoert, Halley & Matsui put it,

> consists of a system of interrelated images into which you enter physically when you move within the exhibition space and orientate yourself among the visual material, [...] a network of meaningful connections, differences and affective links that branches out and diversifies the more you engage with it (Verwoert, Halley and Matsui 2002: 71-2).

By placing together a large number of images that seem to relate, but certainly do not have clear symbolic / obvious literary metaphorical connections, Tillmans opens up the possibility for multiple, different, even contrasting readings. Every element in his installations is important by itself and in relation to every other element and yet none of them is specific in its purpose. The result is what Tillmans himself calls a "multi-vectored" (Tillmans

cited in ibid: 33) approach. The multi-vectored approach is at once complex and polyphonic in terms of the artist's point of view when putting together an installation but also in terms of the way each individual separately experiences the installation by using their subjectivity as a "navigational tool" (Ault 2006: 126).

The size and format that Tillmans chooses for his photographs are also important concerns. A large photograph in the midst of a room in which primarily small photographs are displayed may seem to work as something of an accent or unifying piece or a rhythmical disruption. Although large photographs work in Tillmans' installations as moments in which the eye rests for a while, it is difficult to claim that they are 'headlines' of an exhibition. As Verwoert, Halley & Matsui argue "a large-scale print may be integrated into a montaged cluster, but may at the same time also disrupt its coherence" (Verwoert, Halley and Matsui 2002: 71). Tillmans continuously subverts any formulaic method of choosing a size and therefore seems to suggest that nothing is more important than anything else. An image could even be presented in the same installation twice in a small and larger scale. At the same time, the format of images varies significantly. Tillmans would put a large, very high quality-print next to a magazine cutting attached with tape. Julie Ault suggests that this highlights "ephemerality" (Ault 2006: 136), which places yet another doubt in the mind of the viewer about the specificity of the meaning of the work and suggests that everything is open to interpretation.

It could be argued that there is a further dimension in the way Tillmans' installations are set up in terms of the placement of the audience. Ault describes traditional displaying practices in museums as "dispassionate" (ibid: 121). She suggests that

> spaciousness deployed in galleries and museums communicates an authority of uniqueness and invokes aura. [...] Uniform pacing, and, relegating wall works to a median-eye-level sightline are among the devices used to position artworks as masterpieces and the curator/institution as judge, offering spectators the relatively passive role of witness (ibid: 120).

In that sense, typical curatorial practices where everything is placed uniformly and with abundant spacing takes away the amount of decision-making left to the viewer and presents him/her with something fairly 'fixed'. Instead, Tillmans, Ault suggests, "actively engaging in these situations interrupts the imposture of objectivity" (ibid: 121-2) and as such opens up meaning completely into something that is not just fully subjective, but also continuously changeable. Ideally, a Tillmans exhibition would never be experienced in the same way twice.

To sum up and return to some of the theoretical concepts of this research, I would argue that although Tillmans' installation strategies are certainly medium-specific, they are not reduced to being solely self-reflexive and their arrangement is such that it actually opens up possibilities for the development of very personal metaphors that would vary significantly according to the viewers' experience. Verwoert, Halley & Matsui also argue that Tillmans' work

could be seen to combine such possibilities: "the installation could equally be read as a reflection on the constitution and transmutation of the photographic image, and as the opening up of a world of personal experiences" (Verwoert, Halley and Matsui 2002: 70). In a sense, by focusing on the very specific and combining it in a conceptually rather unclear way with something else very specific, Tillmans creates a world that is as much personal for him, as it is actually paradoxically totally abstract and open to interpretation. He claims that the way he puts an installation together "comes largely from a very personal approach – things that are meaningful to me at this point, in that room or in that month" but equally "underlying decisions regarding content there are, of course, formal decisions about colors, shapes, sizes and textures" (Tillmans cited in ibid: 33).

Before I examine my own work in terms of the use of multiple screen projection vis-à-vis issues of parallelism, it is important to note that the existence of multiple screens / planes by itself does not necessarily equal openness of meaning, as in the work of Tillmans or Marker. There is a particular case of an artist whose project uses multiple screens, but they are so specifically placed and deal so strictly with symbolist dialectics, that his project is much closer to Eisenstein's than to Vertov's. This artist is Bill Viola.

g. Bill Viola's immersive environments

Bill Viola has been viewed by video artist historians as related to ideas of poetics more than any other video maker. With a consistent vision and an opus spanning more than 30 years, together with his own claims that his work

is akin to poetry (frequently quoting poets as an influence), Viola has been seen as one of the most important artists investigating lyricism, transcendence and the sublime, ideas that have been connected to poetry and the poetic. Michael Rush argues: "Bill Viola's work, perhaps more than any other, represents the tendency toward the lyrical in art" (Rush 1999: 140). Working with a minimalist aesthetics and often using visual material that can be seen as 'fundamental' – images of nature, shots of faces etc – Viola creates experiences that seem to relate in some ways to ideas of the poetic as sublime. His narratives are non-linear and mystical and invariably removed from the socio-historically specific in order to arrive to some sort of spiritual inner essence of the human being. At the same time, his work is very personal and the visual material itself he sometimes uses stems from the experiences of his own life. For all the above – amongst probably more – reasons, Viola's work has been seen as bearing a close relation to poetry.

Although Viola seems an understandable reference at first in the investigation between video and poetry, I will argue that for the purposes of this research Viola's methods and especially his installation strategies are actually closer to Eisenstein's closed symbolism project than the world of multiple possibilities that Vertov (and others) have striven for. Viola might not have a strict polemical agenda in the Eisensteinian tradition, but his intention for the viewer to have an almost religious experience is so strongly defined that it can be argued that he actually leaves very little space for the viewer to conceptually manoeuvre. Instead of presenting the audience with a series of images that they could compose in their heads in the way they would, taking into

consideration their own personal perspective and experience, Viola presents a mystical world of 'sacred' connections, removed from reality, in which the task of the viewer is to piece together a holistic puzzle, to decode a series of 'transcendental' symbols, while staying immersed in an engulfing spectacle.

In most of Bill Viola's work, the viewer is surrounded by images and sounds, entering a space that seems to exist outside the reality of the given space where the installation is happening. In this sense, Viola's work is closer to the traditional cinematic spectacle than to the reflexive, critical space installations could occupy (or closer to VanDerBeek's and the Eameses' immersive environments). He often projects his images in dark spaces, recreating in a way the 'sacred' cinematic spectacle. As the viewers enter the room where an installation of his takes place, they are initially in darkness, gradually approaching vision. Viola often requires that the walls in the room around where his work is projected are painted black, as in his installation *The Stopping Mind* (USA, 1990). In fact this is an appropriate example of an immersive piece, as it consists of four screens hanging from the ceiling forming a square which the spectator has to walk through / inside of in order to view the work, hence being completely surrounded by video projection. The size of the screens is also a further element adding to the feeling of being engulfed, measuring at 4 x 4 metres each. Tanya Leighton sees this as potentially problematic:

> such immersive installations, where the viewer appears to *merge* with the projected image, and which are described in terms of effecting some kind of sublime experience and 'technological

> mysticism' or 'spiritual immediacy', have been perceived as having an affirmative relation to dominant society because of the seemingly passive mode of perceptual and social experience they seem to support (Leighton 2008: 34).

This is not just a political issue in terms of the viewer's positioning within the reception of the artwork, but affects significantly the way a viewer would make sense of the meaning of the work.

One of the key strategies that Viola often uses is a conflicting dialectics between a set of images, which brings him close to Eisenstein's montage. Although he often displays a number of screens that could potentially interact with each other in a multiplicity of ways, he directs the way that the combination of images is to be experienced by the viewer. Viola's installations are choreographed in such a strict way that there seems to be a preferred mode of relating them (a preferred itinerary to refer to Morse's concept). Screens often make diptychs or triptychs or are placed exactly across in a gallery space, forming conceptual opposites. In his three-screen installation *The City of Man* (USA, 1989), Viola installs three sets of images projected next to each other, each of which deals with a separate visual environment and idea and whose conceptual positioning in the triptych is fixed. David A. Ross, who curated the Whitney Museum Bill Viola exhibition in 2000, describes the work:

> The triptych reflects the traditional Western cosmology of the threefold universe, the underlying structure of heaven, earth and hell. The left panel focuses on light and nature and depicts early

> morning in a small town at the foothills of mountain [...] The image on the right panel shows the nocturnal forces of destruction – a blazing fire on a city street at night [...] Positioned between those two extremes are the affairs of men here on earth, represented on the central panel as a meeting of a political council (Ross and Sellars 2000: 90).

Although it could be argued that the symbolic separation between the three screens is more Ross's than Viola's creation, it is telling that Viola does not upset the cohesiveness of each of the pieces and even makes sure that they all play in synchronisation, in order to exactly control the moments of symbolic tension between the screens.

Viola's attempt to use multiple screens in order to create symbols and specific metaphors increased paradoxically as his work expanded in size. In his exhibition for the Deutsche Guggenheim *Going Forth by Day* (USA, 2002), he installed five projections, each of which represented a metaphorical situation: "the deluge", "the voyage", "the path", "first light" and "fire birth". In this respect, Viola's images are not multi-levelled spaces for interaction that could trigger a number of connections between them or within the mind of the viewer (as for example Tillmans' photos), but are pre-determined symbols, similar to those of Eisenstein. Thus, the viewer's position is not to creatively synthesise, but to simply decode the various symbols presented. At this stage I would argue that the actual experience of *Going Forth by Day* is potentially more open than Viola seems to present (something which as I have mentioned could be argued for Eisenstein's work as well). But it is

nonetheless important that Viola suggests which of the screens represents "deluge" and which represents "voyage," even if in the mind of the viewer those terms could be represented by the opposite screens in the installation or could be irrelevant altogether.

Viola's interest in the specific metaphor / symbol, which relates to Eisenstein's dialectics, is also seen by his treatment of his work *The Messenger* (USA, 1996). The work was initially presented as a single screen piece installed on the ceiling of Durham Cathedral (the video shows a naked man submerged in water). In this setup, a particular type of dialectics is formed between the video itself and its site-specific positioning resulting in a 'sacred' experience. For the later restaging of the work in a gallery context, Viola has placed it opposite *The Crossing* (USA, 1996), a film in which a man is gradually covered by flames. By placing the two opposite each other, Viola creates metaphors about life, death and rebirth, which in a sense are not far from the sort of religious experience of the single screen image projected in a cathedral context. Had Viola presented the single screen image of a man subsumed in water within a gallery context, more open types of reading would emerge or even the importance of symbolism could have been removed altogether, but counter-presenting it with *The Crossing* narrows down its interpretational potential.

To sum up, multiple screen installations can be very relevant for the purposes of this thesis, as they provide – through their investigation of space – a place for a series of simultaneous parallel things to happen without fixing

directionality and as they can be very form-driven but equally open for interpretation. It has to be understood that the use of multiple screens is not a priori enough for a work to have poetic qualities and, of course, the material itself has to communicate with the spatial choices and to provide enough synecdochical abstraction (which does not happen in Marker's work). At the same time, it is important that the spatial dialectics are not conceptually fixed (as is the case of Bill Viola). Yet as a general format, the multi-screen video installation can provide new perspectives on the discussion of the relationship between film and poetry.

Chapter 8

My work for multiple screens

As I have suggested in the previous chapter, bringing in a multiple screen element to a work can offer a different dimension to my project. The ideas of parallelism and the synecdoche that are central to this thesis can be closely tied to multi-screen installations. This is of course not always the case and for this reason, the previous chapter uses the example of Bill Viola as some of the least open types of installation work in the multi-screen plane. Using multiple screens does not result in parallelism by default, unless a series of concerns are taken into consideration. However, when this is the case (as I have argued happens in a Wolfgang Tillmans exhibition), the result is a synthesis that is relevant to my concerns.

a. Early multi-screen and split-screen work

In most of the research within this project and in most of my work as a practicing artist, I had resisted working within an installation setup and especially with more than one screen. The only exception to this in the roughly 12 years I have been producing video work was my MA degree piece entitled *Filmstallation* (1999), in which I projected on three screens simultaneously in London's Lux Cinema (then at Hoxton Square). Inspired by my MA research on 60s expanded cinema and synaesthesia, I aimed to create a multi-sensory experience that bombarded the seated audience with multiple audio and visual 'phrases' (generally structured in terms of intensity)

and asked the viewers to piece together an interpretation of the audiovisual environments. Despite the fact that I was generally satisfied with the experiential potential of such a venture, it seemed to me that what I was trying to achieve in that project were notions of synaesthetic 'universal abstract languages' and other experience-unifying ideas (I even distributed a questionnaire to discuss the similarity of experience between viewers).

By the time I embarked on my PhD project about 4 years later, I was no longer interested in ideas of synaesthesia and the unified experience, but on something different: the subjective experience, both in terms of myself as an artist sharing an experience and concerning the viewers of my work, who would experience my films in their own personal way. At the same time, my practice was becoming more materialist in some ways or certainly more medium-focused, primarily investigating structures, abstraction of camerawork and editing methods. As such, it seemed to me that the investigation of the film poem would be a de-facto single screen investigation. In her analysis of expanded cinema, Liz Kotz suggests that often in artists film theory "single screen work is not simply one option among several, but the dominant convention to which all cinematic work inevitably has to respond" (Kotz 2004: 45). Influenced by such purist film notions I took the single-screen option for granted. After all, nearly all analyses of the film poem have existed in relation to single-screen works and therefore it seemed appropriate to continue this tradition.

However, combining what I had learned from Vertov with the results of my earlier practice prompted me to at least try to experiment with multiple screens. It seemed to me that my work had arrived at a point that it was in 'danger' of developing towards a fairly passive experience in which the audience just accepts a seemingly random succession of images (as in my last piece *Reaction Cannon*). In order to avoid this, it was necessary to create something more broken into parts and to have a more 'alert' audience. What I had tried to create in my previous films was an experience which is open to interpretation (open metaphors or parallelisms) but what I had actually achieved was either a technological / materialist vision (as in my film *The Garden*) or a non-formal but also passive and almost random experience (as in *Reaction Cannon*). These two cases are different from each other but they both present the audience with a fairly fixed position. In recent writings on the moving image, this has been considered a general problem that could arise out of single screen investigations or at least a concern that could be dealt with in multi-screen works.

Although *Filmstallation* was the only piece in which I had worked with multiple screens up until that point, on two occasions I experimented with a split screen image, in fact the incorporation of two 4:3 images ('screens') within one screen. The first example was my film *Small* (2003) that was shot just before I embarked on my research project.

In this film, the investigation of an event is presented in two simultaneous 'screens'. The film that lasts only about 3 minutes shows the moments of waking up of a person and the objects around the person (primarily the window in the background). The combination of images and the chromatic gentleness of the film presents the sensitive moments between being asleep and awake. However, the strongly shaky and close-up camerawork together with time manipulation in the editing phase (the same sequence of images is repeated in the two screens with one being ahead of the other but as their speed is different they eventually meet) make the overall experience of the film more of a structural time / split screen discourse that detracts from the film's potential poetic quality.

In the second part of a much more recent 3-part film of mine called *3 Odes to Yellow* (2008), I tried to combine a series of simultaneous images whose only shared characteristic was that they included some elements of a bright yellow object / subject. In this respect, what I attempted here is what Trevor Whittock calls "chiming," as I have mentioned in a previous chapter: the connection of two conceptually irrelevant shots by an element of visual similarity, which then causes all sorts of conceptual suggestions.

In a sense what I aimed for in this work is similar to what Vertov was trying to achieve by cutting between shots that included graphic similarities, but instead of doing it in consecutive shots, I have placed the similarity over two 'screens'. In particular, the parallel between shots of a little boy in yellow playing and other parts of the city that are yellow create a profile of forms for the colour yellow, which is at once celebratory and contradictory. Yellow comes across as a colour of 'fun', but also as one that has significant practical importance in both nature and society (yellow pollen attracting yellow bees and construction sites where men wearing yellow hats work with yellow machines). Using a simple structural device, that of the picture-within-picture, the film presents the audience with a number of images that are connected by a common visual theme, but are equally open to a very wide variety of interpretation. This idea of using a common visual motif to connect a series of images, which would then juxtapose themselves conceptually against each other, was something I would investigate in my final PhD work (discussed below). The first and third parts of the film are rather irrelevant here, trying to achieve a more abstract vision in space and time respectively, but rather ending up looking like random collages.

b. The final installation: 'Lines'

Bringing together my thesis' concerns, some of my split-screen films and my research into various artists' multi-screen works I started putting together an idea of what I wanted my new, installation-formed work to look like and be involved with. I was interested in the way Hackenberg places two simple images next to each other, images that have some spatiotemporal relation without being clearly metaphorical. But I wanted to use more than two screens and place them in architectural space in order to create the possibilities of more 'itineraries' that the viewer could choose from. Yet, I wanted to avoid the overwhelming feeling early expanded cinema installations could have and actually to achieve the opposite to what the Eameses were working towards: not to impress and overwhelm the viewer, but to make sure the viewer was aware and on top of everything (almost as in a materialist film experience) picking and mixing meanings. I found the way Marker places screens in *Zapping Zone* interesting, as it didn't specify an itinerary, but it also felt like a missed opportunity: that there could be more done with the placing of screens in space.

Summing up, what I wanted to create was an installation that would use:

- images that connect to each other but not in an obvious symbolic way
- images that have some formal characteristic in common
- multiple screens (more than 2 or 3) playing simultaneously

- screens placed throughout a room, so the viewer can walk through the installation
- a series of films that all have different durations and play simultaneously looped and thus the installation in terms of screen connections constantly changes
- a placement of the screens that does not engulf the viewer
- a placement of the screens that is simultaneously 'casual' and medium-specific

Embarking on this new project, I decided to start working on a piece in the same way as I would if I was to make a single screen work (ca. the time I was making *Reaction Cannon*), I aimed to capture a series of shots that relate in a way to each other or belong to a central theme, but without knowing exactly what they would be used for in the final work. The only difference was that I would now take significantly longer takes of shots as I was dealing with a large duration of simultaneous time. When the material was captured, I would then place the various shots on different screens next to each other. In a sense, I would transfer the time-based montage project I have been working on up to that point to a montage within space. By the end, each film will be able to work as a separate small entity, but also as part of a larger piece.

After collecting the footage for what was to become my first multi-screen installation, I started considering how to place the screens across the space of a gallery in order to achieve this sort of dialogue between them that would lead to notions of parallelism. It felt somehow obvious to me at that stage that

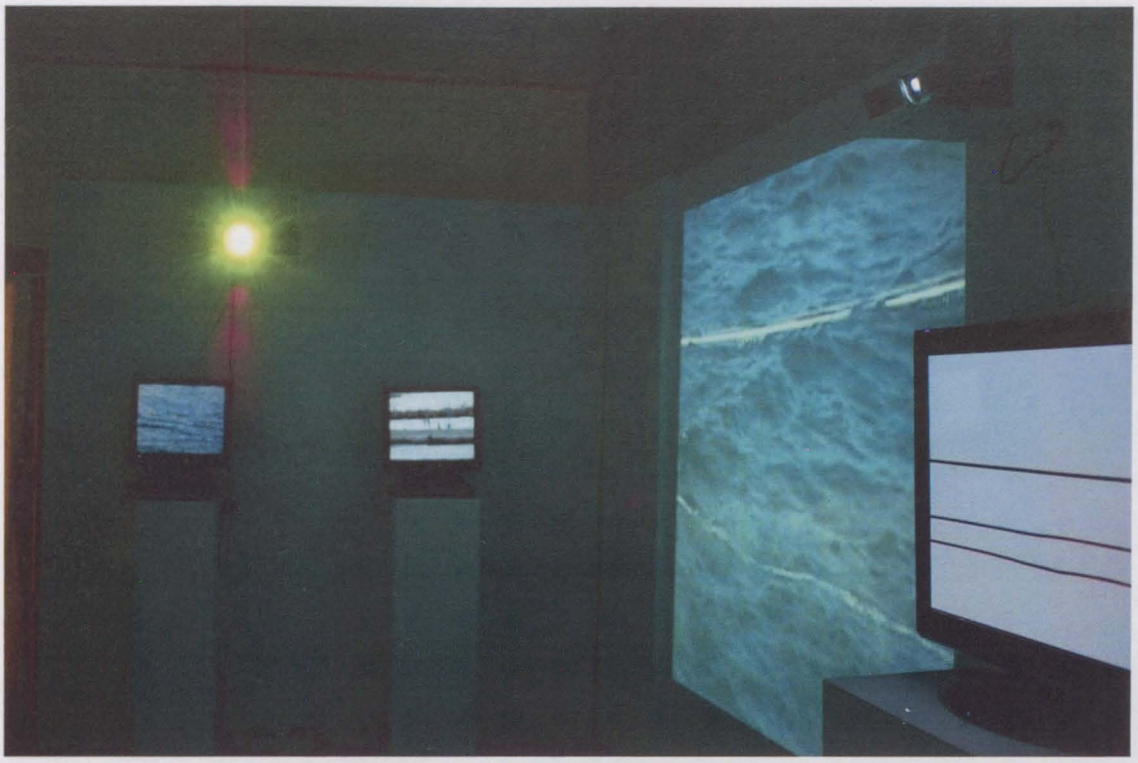
the placing of the screens in space would have to be decided after choosing the venue of the exhibition, in other words that it would have to be very much a site specific choice. Around that time (November 2008), I was approached by the fine art department of Buckinghamshire New University to install some work in their new gallery space in High Wycombe and I decided that this was the opportunity for me to test some of my multi-screen ideas. The space was designed in a white-cube style, primarily put together to host non-video pieces, which I found useful, as I did not want to work on a black-box / dark-room situation that would remind of the cinematic experience or Viola's immersive environments.

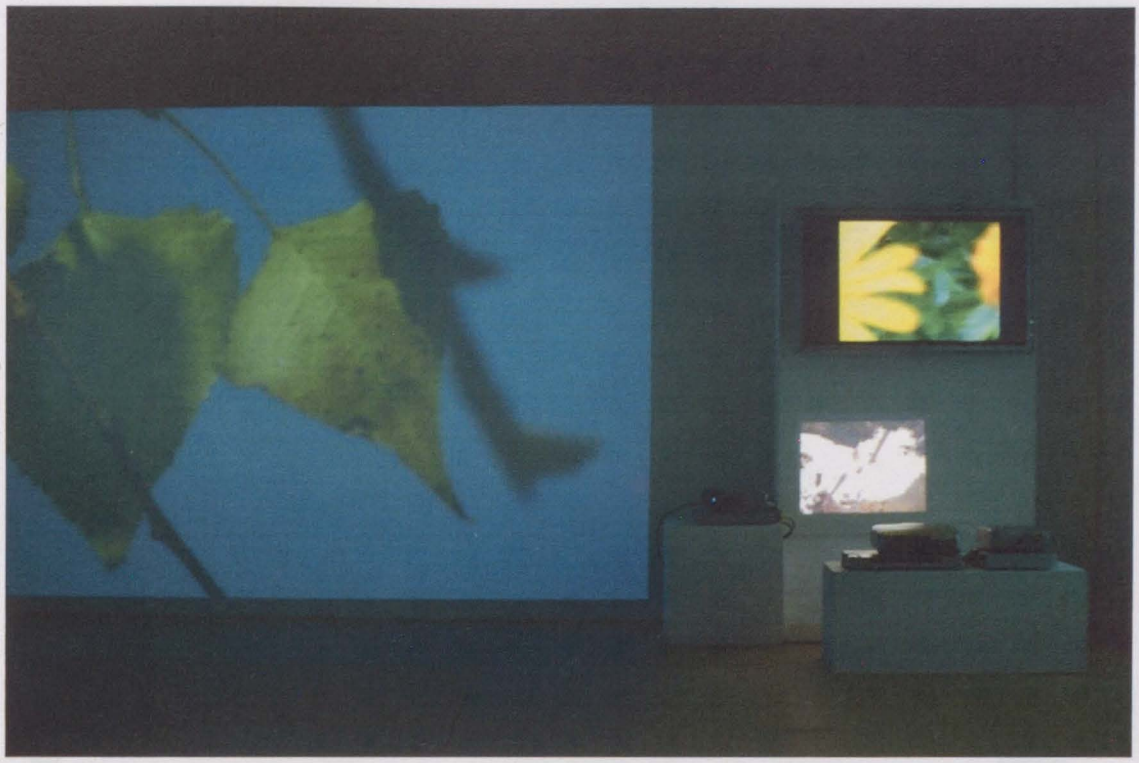
As the space was not large enough to accommodate many projections, my first idea (which would be easy to achieve practically) was to present one large projection on each of the walls (coming from a beamer from the wall across). Each of the projections would present a self-contained film poem, but all of which would be around a loose central theme. The viewer in this sense would enter a space where an investigation of a specific situation/idea would be taking place but where also a number of points of view or slightly different concerns / elements would be shown. I soon discarded this idea as I felt that being surrounded by projection would create the sort of overwhelming experience that I wanted to avoid. At the same time, I started being cautious of the cinematic referencing that large projections have, whereas smaller projections (or video screens) had something more tangible, as they don't engulf the viewer and thus conceptually negotiate more with a conscious audience. Therefore, I considered using a significantly larger number of

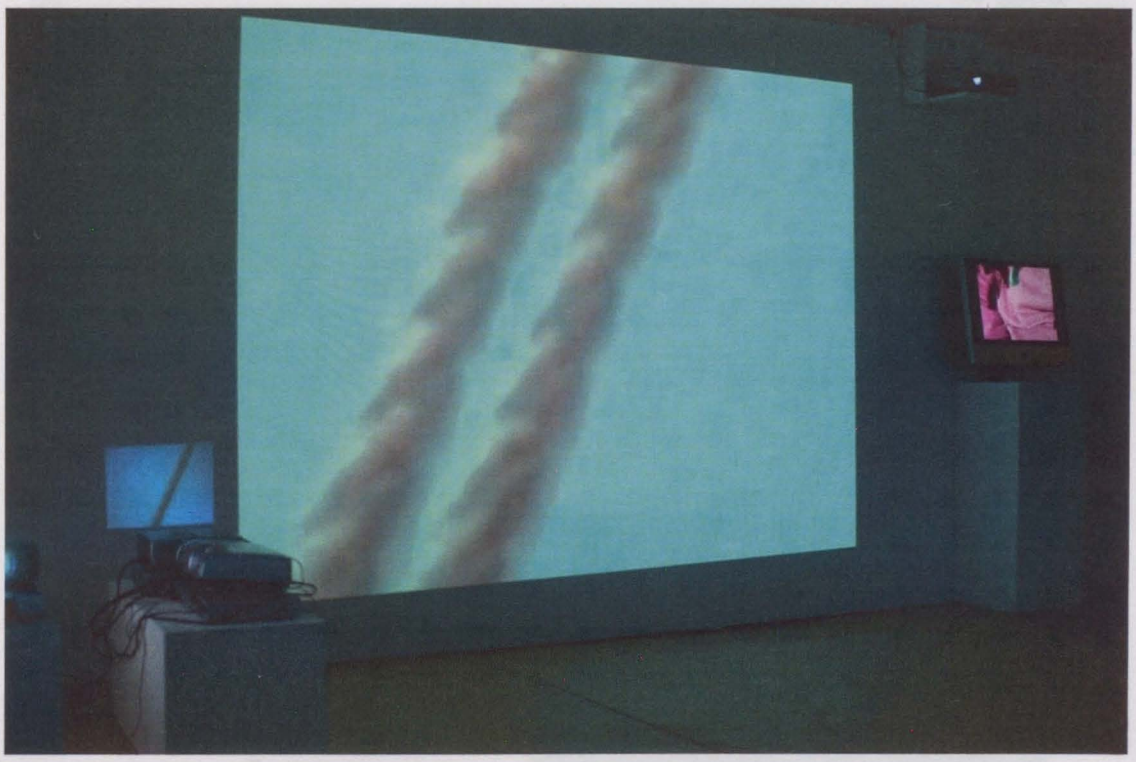
projections / screens and possibly different types of formats and sizes. At that stage I remembered the layout of an exhibition by Wolfgang Tillmans I had seen a few months before at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, *Lighter* (Germany, 2008), which provided an alternative display solution, using multiple media, size and heights all over the gallery walls.

I went to the gallery space in High Wycombe in order to experiment with different installation possibilities. I started gathering as much equipment I could find and I decided that the installation would develop in size according to how much equipment I manage to get. Instead of using one specific type of image source (i.e. just video projection), I would work with different types of media. In the final installation, I presented three large video projections, one large but divided to two pictures (split-screen) projection, two small projections, two flat TV screens and three computer monitors. Some projections and screens were close to others forming clusters, while others stand more in isolation; some were high in relation to the viewer's point of view and some were low (although again the space I had to work with was limited in terms of height), and screens and projectors were placed in different types of stands and plinths.

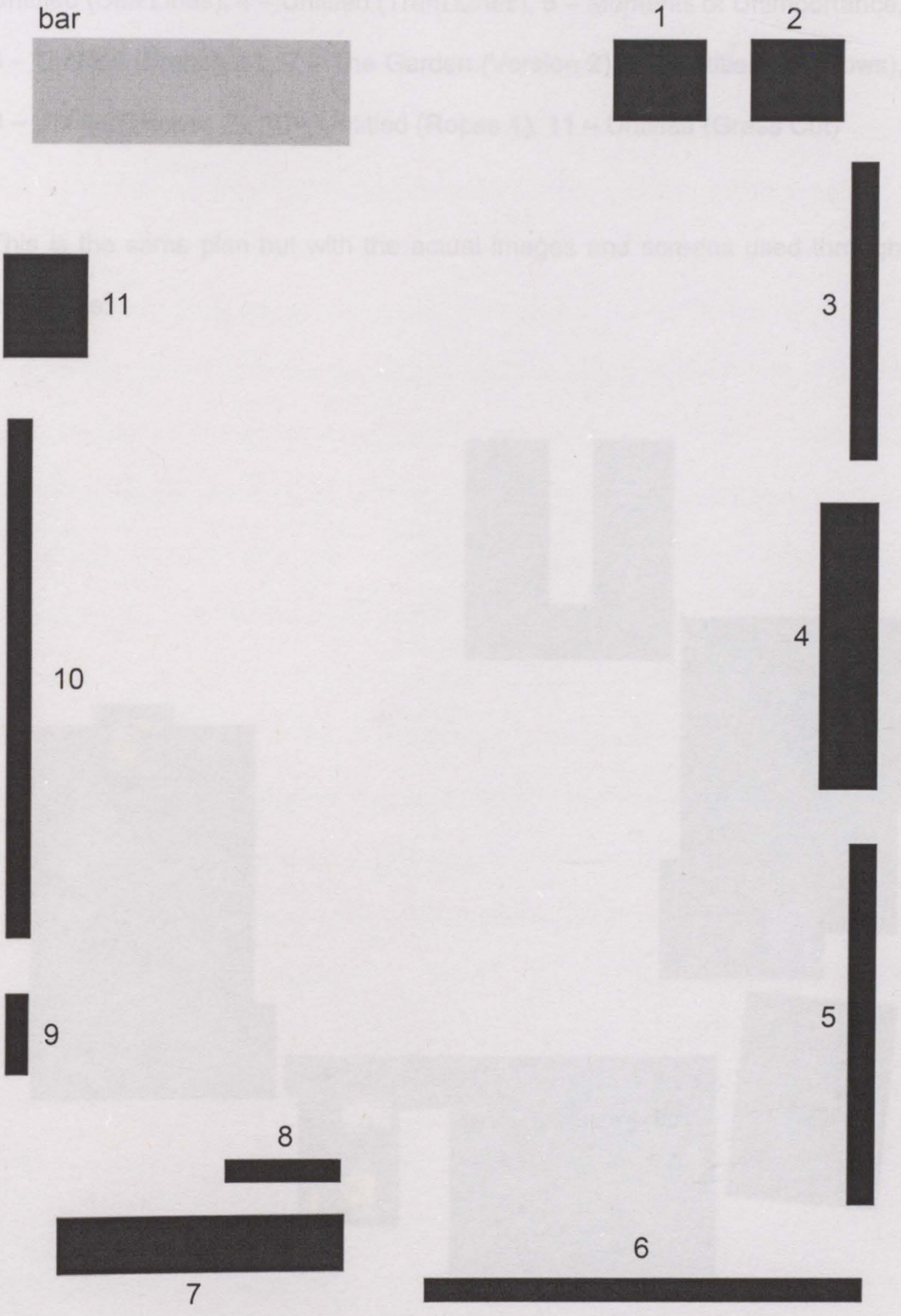
Images from the installation follow.





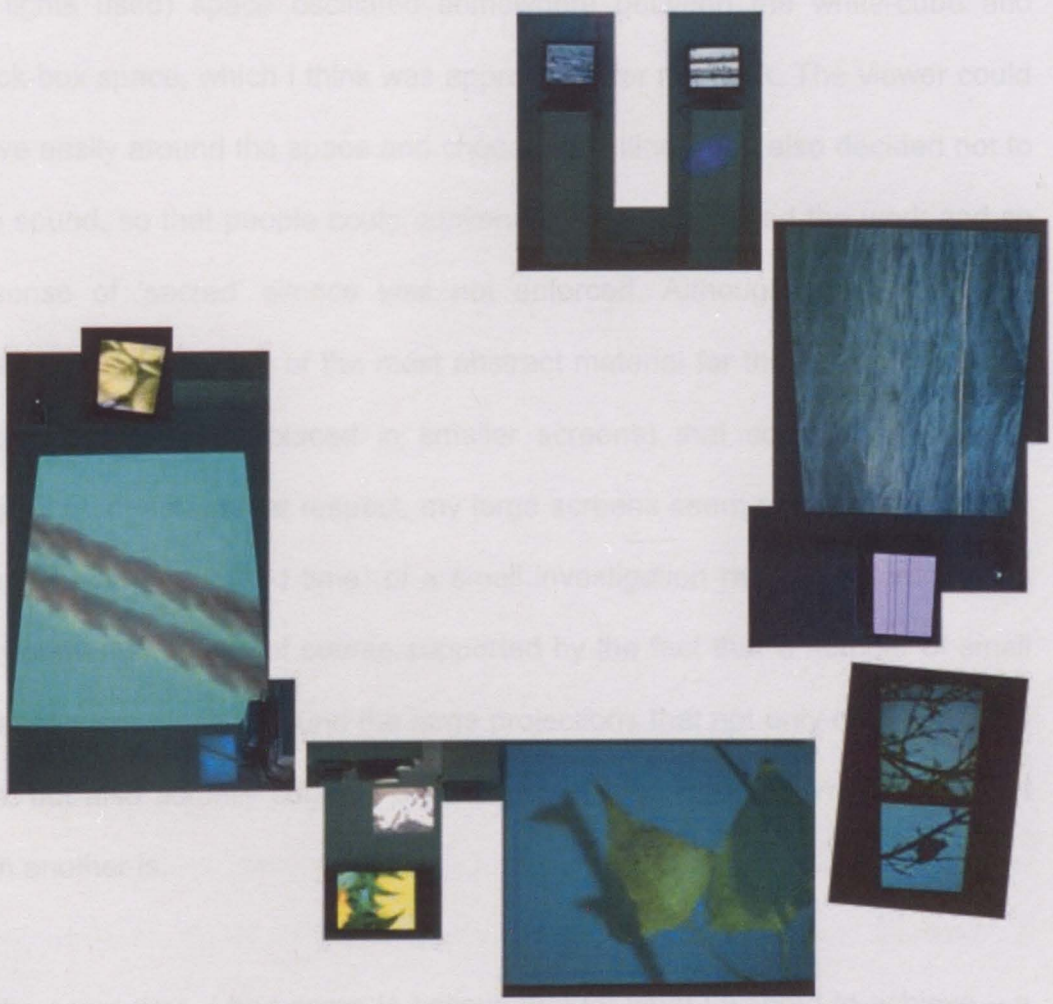


This is the plan of the final installation:



Films presented (all 2009): 1 – Untitled (Buoys 1), 2 – Untitled (Buoys 2), 3 – Untitled (Sea Lines), 4 – Untitled (Tram Lines), 5 – Moments of Unimportance, 6 – Untitled (Branches), 7 – The Garden (Version 2), 8 – Untitled (Shadows), 9 – Untitled (Ropes 2), 10 – Untitled (Ropes 1), 11 – Untitled (Grass Cut)

This is the same plan but with the actual images and screens used through the space:



While building the installation, I was at all times aware that I wanted to avoid the immersive feel as much as possible, although I still wanted to use large projection screens and to surround in a sense the viewer with imagery. The first strategy I employed was to try to work against the overwhelming black box space that multi-screen video installations often employ. For this reason, I did not paint any walls black and I did not try to enforce a situation of total darkness around the works. Although I did not use any lights, the projections and screens illuminated the space brightly. The result of the bright (but with no lights used) space oscillated somewhere between the white-cube and black-box space, which I think was appropriate for my work. The viewer could move easily around the space and choose their itinerary. I also decided not to use sound, so that people could converse as they perceived the work and so a sense of 'sacred' silence was not enforced. Although I did use large screens, I chose some of the most abstract material for those, avoiding wide landscapes (which I placed in smaller screens) that could have had an engulfing impact. In that respect, my large screens seem more like magnified moments (in space and time) of a small investigation rather than immersive environments. This is of course supported by the fact that a number of small screens were placed around the large projections that not only counteract the size, but also actually suggest that no image is conceptually more important than another is.

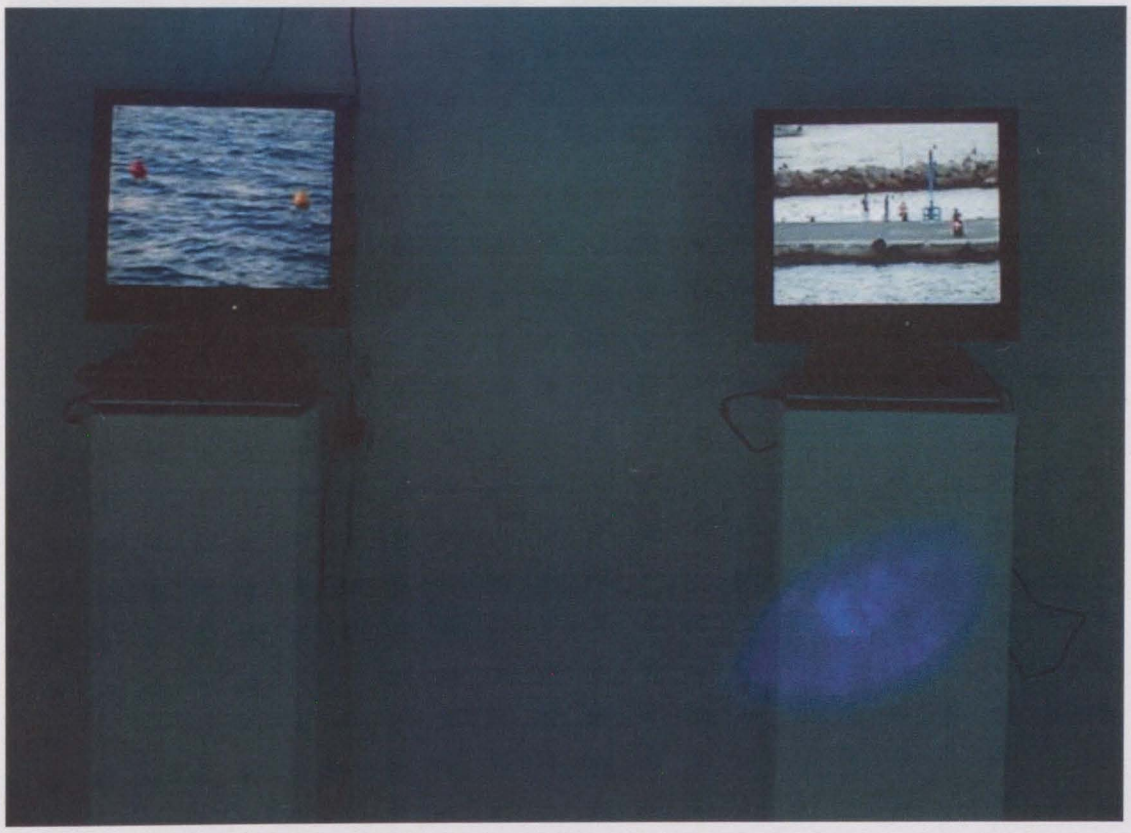
At the same time, I had come to believe that for what I wanted to achieve – a contemporary visual poetic experience – the reference to the medium itself would be embedded in the work, without becoming a central concern. In order

to do that, I decided to make the instruments of vision obvious in my installation. To display my videos I used all sorts of different media and placed some of the video projectors in the middle of the room, a practice that is not very common. I did not painstakingly try to conceal cables and everything around the screens that makes them work, but did not make technology the central theme of the work either. At the same time, I engaged with the materiality of screens used: I used flat TV screens to present the rigid 'technological' lines of the tram and the flickery, visually 'impressive' garden piece, whereas computer screens presented the more 'informational' / documentarist pieces and large projectors the more abstract / painterly pieces. Of course, these concerns are not overtly obvious or necessary elements of the understanding of the work, but they were all conscious decisions and references in the making of the installation.

The images, most of which were fairly abstract but were all roughly connected by the graphical theme of lines, communicated with each other in a very subtle way and invited the viewer to make a series of different connections. Every member of the audience that gave me some feedback had different things to say about how they felt the screens were interacting with each other. Some people preferred to watch each one separately and then try to piece something together. Others liked to see two images at a time. Other members of the audience spent very little time with each piece initially, but went round more than once, so it seemed they wanted to experience the passage between the different screens quickly. Equally, everyone I spoke with gave

me a different conceptual understanding of the installation. It seemed that I had achieved what I was interested in – the multiple itinerary possibilities.

Let us now look at each wall / combination of screens separately. Exactly to the right of the entrance on the floor map or to the left as the spectator comes in, I placed two computer monitors (the smallest screens in the installation) that displayed some of the most representational imagery I used for the exhibition.



In these two screens, I presented investigations of two simultaneous visual events: a line of multi-coloured buoys going up and down in the sea and a fisherman that was working roughly in the same space and the people around

him. The left screen primarily focused on the buoys themselves cutting quickly between them, while the right screen presented the same frame while using slow motion and repetition to investigate the movements of the people.

Some of the images of the left screen:

And some of the images of the right screen:

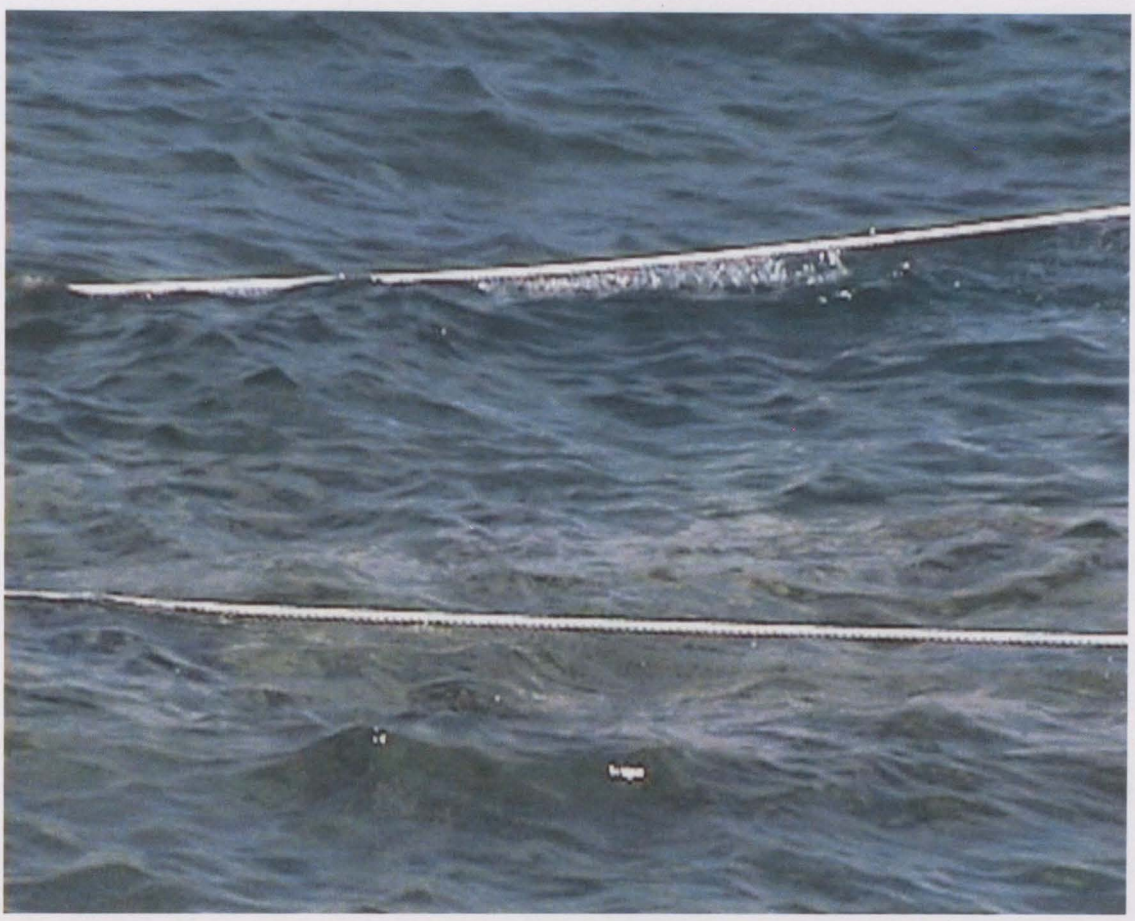
By placing the images next to each other the spectator is presented with an investigation of a situation where two parallel modes of action are happening: the dancing of the swimming buoys and the people[30] interacting and going about their actions next to the buoys. The parallel of the two screens stresses the choreography between the moving elements (in both cases), while being an investigation of two dimensional / three dimensional space. At the same time both sets of images present a group of elements that were individual yet also cohesive as a group. Conceptually, all sorts of open metaphors of togetherness and solitude spring to mind; themes that arguably ran through

30 Interestingly all of them seem to be men: boys, a conceptual 'pun' to the buoys

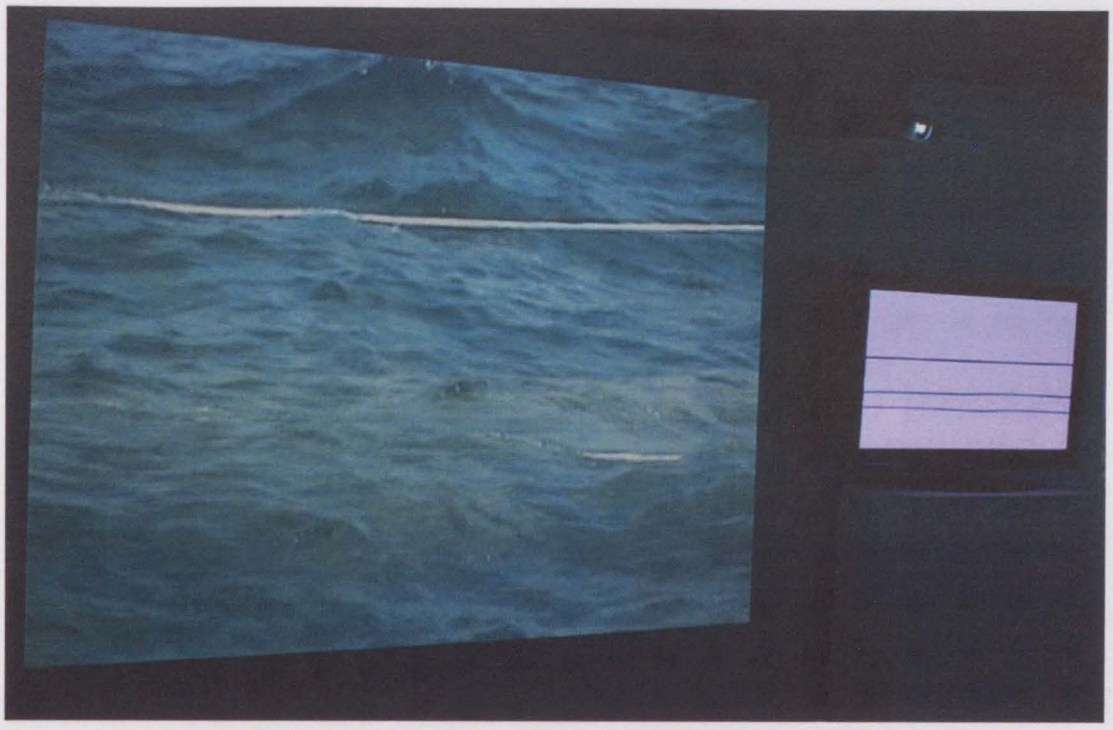
the whole installation without however being overtly obvious. This is the way the parallelism in my project works: by allowing various metaphors to emerge without privileging one over another or ever prescribing them too clearly.

In terms of their format, I decided to place these two images on computer monitors, as – being the least spectacular – a computer monitor seems to engage the spectator in a more active / somewhat informational way. Since those videos were possibly the least aesthetically driven but most full of action, it seemed appropriate (of course in a different installation setup they could come up as projections which would have a different impact). The decision to place them at this part of the room had to do with the fact that although those images were closest to the spectator at the point of entrance, they were the most discreet as they were the smallest. As such they could work as an 'informational intro for some viewers (similar to the text often available at exhibition entrances) or as an outro for others who would not notice them as they enter. Screen number two is also the only screen that shows full human figures in the whole installation.

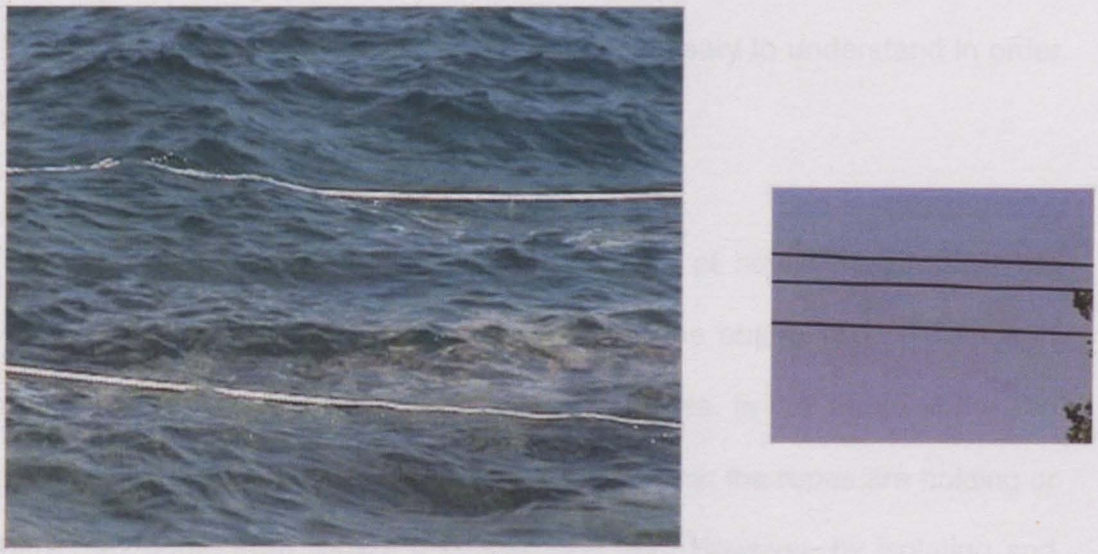
Keeping with the theme of the sea but using more abstract imagery the next projection to the right displays an image of two ropes (probably holding boats) floating in the sea.



This was the longest single take presented in the installation. This semi-abstract image evokes a series of metaphorical readings to do both with the contextualisation of the ropes (where do they start and end, where do they belong, why do they float) and with them being a couple, being parallel lines (which was also the title of the exhibition). But more importantly, a series of parallels come up when the image is seen as standing next to the following screen, which has some similarities but also some significant differences. An exhibition view:



Or a frontal view would be:



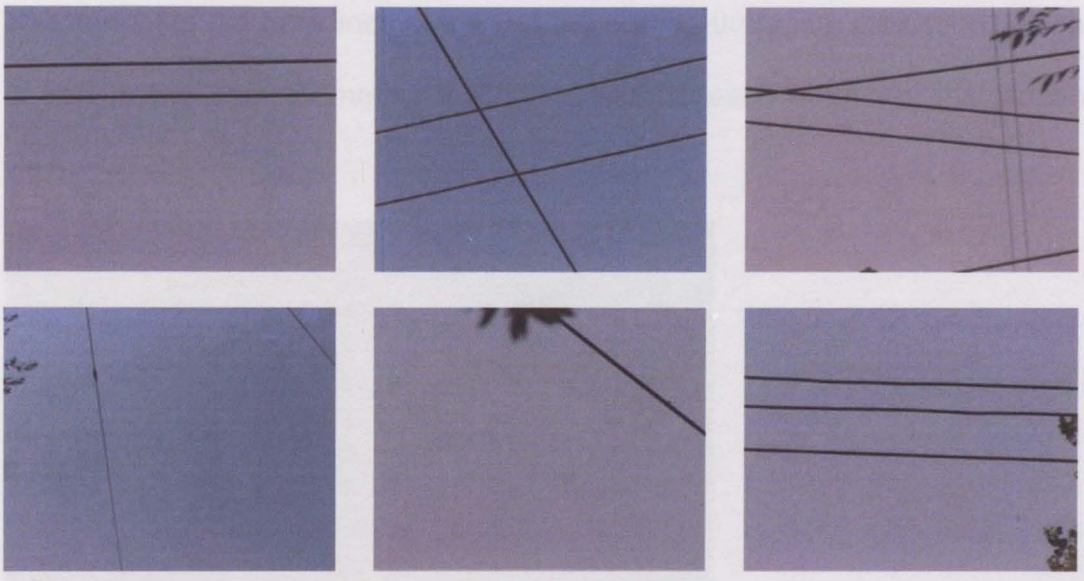
These images present two graphically similar situations: some parallel lines, located on the horizon against a blue background. In both cases, it is impossible to see where the lines start and finish and in both cases, the lines are the creation of a human being. But while the movement of the lines on the

left screen is gentle and soft, the tram lines of the right screen are much more stiff, almost unshakable by the wind, 'unable' to communicate with the natural elements around them. Both images intimate a sense of human intervention, although no human action is seen in either. In a way, the pictures occupy disparate spaces in terms of notions of nature and the human. In the left screen, the lines seem to be the unnatural human intervention that has appeared on the surface of a section of sea, while in the right image (taken in a city), the tram lines seem more at place than the tree branches next to them. This technology / nature parallel is further insinuated by the fact that I had presented the right screen on a flat high-quality screen that enhances the technological feel, whereas the left screen is presented through the 'imperfections' of light projection. Yet it is still important to pinpoint again that none of these symbolic and/or technically induced readings are made obvious, enforced or considered in any way necessary to understand in order to experience the installation.

Those two shots are also appropriate examples of how I tried to use the 'synecdoche' framing mode that is not far from the abstraction strategies in Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*. In the image of the two parallel ropes floating, the audience can not see what the ropes are holding or where they come from, where they start and end. However, by isolating and making visible this particular part of the ropes, the viewer focuses on their combination, their togetherness and the parallel buoyancy they share, while the context to which they belong is left open to the viewers' imagination. This I would suggest is an example of what Sitney calls a 'synecdoche', a method of

presenting shots that are at once abstract and concrete and invite a series of metaphors, but without ever imposing specific symbolic meaning.

The tram lines work in similar ways with respect to abstraction.



In these shots, perspective is unclear and although the title gives away the fact that what appears is tram lines (and not any other type of wire against the sky) [31], the context to which the lines belong is still unclear and it is ultimately up to the viewer to piece together the off-screen landscape. On the edges of the frames, details of tree branches or some sort of plant appear, but again a tree or some other source is not shwon so it is impossible to establish where exactly those leaves belong, therefore leaving the landscape again open to be created in the mind of the viewer using mental models of past visual experience. At the same time the relationship between the gently shaking leaves and the firm, stiff tram lines evokes all sorts of thoughts about the

31 This was changed for the very final version of this installation in which I did not present any titles in order to not limit signification.

relationship between nature and technology, nature and man-made things, the city and the countryside, but again without imposing very specific readings.

To the right of the tram lines screen, at the corner, there is a projection, which is split in two sets of images that stand next to each other. An installation view:

And a still from the picture-in-picture projection itself:

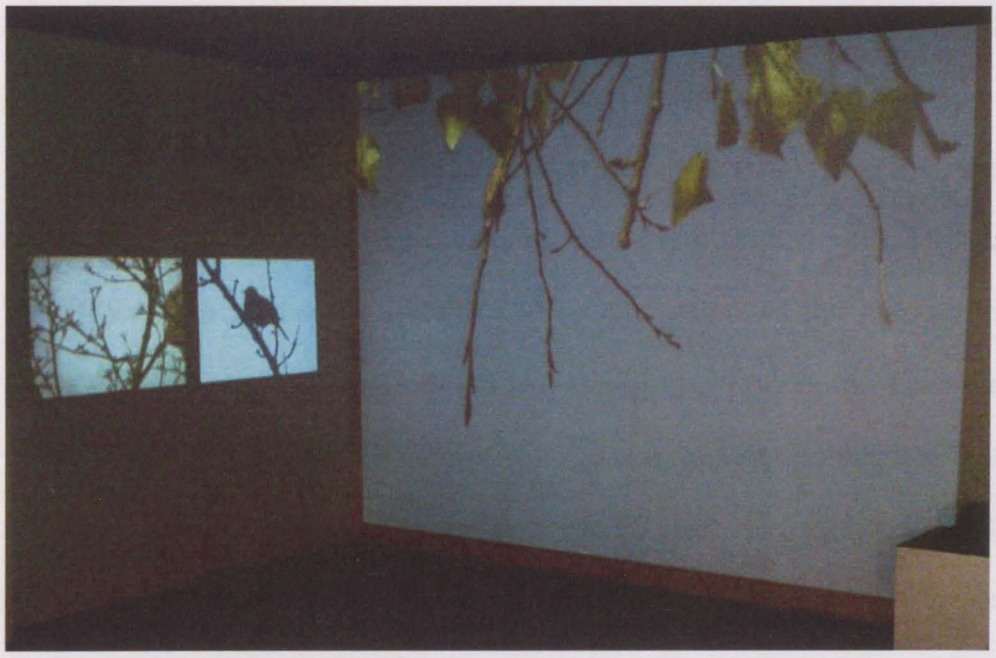
In this combination of images that are actually a reworking of a film I had made in 2008 for the Aarau 1-Minute Film Festival in Switzerland[32] a few months before the installation, there is a parallel action between the movements of a plastic bag trapped on tree branches and a bird sitting on another branch of a tree. This was a pre-multiple-projection investigation into the parallel action as split screen, using a diptych-of-simultaneous-time strategy, similar to Sigrid Hackenberg's *Spanish tape*. In this film there is almost a sense of a narrative developing as I have connected movements of the bag with moments in which the bird chirps and I have closed the film by showing a bag flying, almost suggesting (perhaps even too clearly for the purposes of this thesis) that the bag has become like a bird / wants to be like a bird. Although the narrative of the original film on its own would have been too specific for the purposes of the film poem, since it could close / direct the meaning of two images' metaphorical impact, when it is placed within an installation / looped space, the viewer encounters the narrative in random moments and therefore it is less probable that s/he will try to piece together a storyline. However, after completing the exhibition and after seeing it within the space of the gallery, I have considered the possibility of making this film simpler and with less of a narrative progression, if I was to use it in another installation.

I threw the largest projection of the installation on the other side of the same corner in the exhibition, which is the first thing the audience was faced with as

32 The one minute film festival of Aarau is a yearly-ran festival dealing with films that develop in less than 60 seconds. The website for the festival is www.oneminute.ch. In the 2008 showcase of the festival, I presented a semi-narrative piece about a bird and a bag on a tree, which I simplified for the purposes of the PhD installation.

they walked into the space, but which also (due to its very bright lumen properties) worked as the most important light source for the space. Continuing with the theme of tree branches – which first slightly appear in the tram lines film and then is given more space (but not from the branches' 'perspective') in the red bag / bird film – in this film the branches and the 'dialogue' between them becomes central.

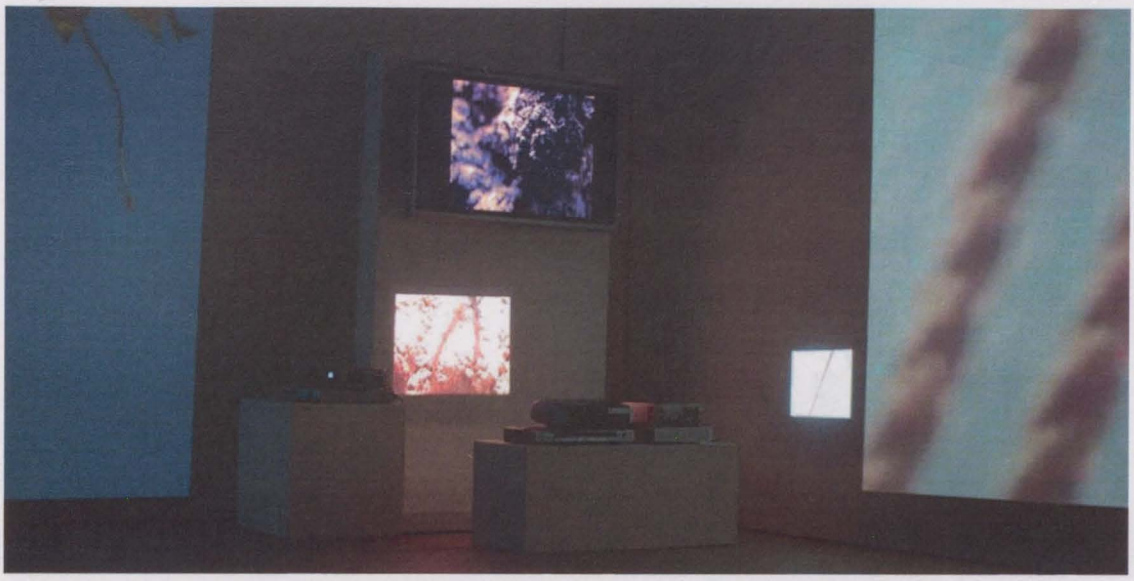
This is an installation view:



And two shots from the video itself:

This film is made of shots I took on a very bright day and with a high definition camera, so the result of the investigation of the nature of the branches is very textured. The detail in which the branches are seen, coupled with an unexpected angle that does not show the full tree, has a very abstract effect and almost makes the branches appear unreal. To intensify this experience I decided to make this the largest projection in the space so that the details become more prominent. At the same time, I projected this onto a white wall that was set up for the gallery in front of the normal wall and which had a gap at the top and did not connect to the ceiling. In this way, the branches seem to come from the sky and a much larger image, which is possibly the rest of the tree, could be imagined. Whether this film – placed near the centre of the installation and at the largest size – was perceived as the holding-together piece of everything is difficult to predict. It might as well be the case for some viewers, which would be an acceptable reading, but the installation itself does not necessarily pinpoint to this. My approach to size is similar to the way Julie Ault describes the work of Wolfgang Tillmans: "scale is a tool for creating rhythm and emphasis. Yet the connotations of each format remain unfixed, dependent on specific contextual relations: "small" does not denote intimacy any more than "large" denotes dominance" (Ault 2006: 133).

In this installation, one of the more multi-layered clusters of images is located to the right of this large projection. This cluster consists of a combination of different media, heights and projectors that are placed in the middle of the gallery showcasing semi-abstract, synecdochical images of nature.



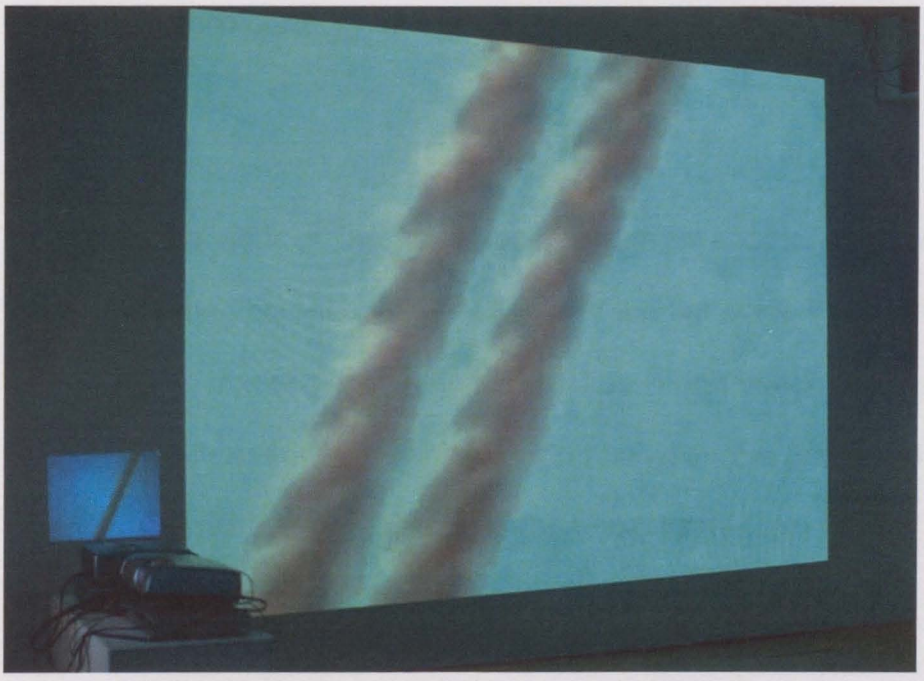
In this corner, I used the space of the gallery as a further investigative space for the viewer, similar to Tillmans' 'multi-vectored' approach. The possibilities of connections become multiple as the peripheral vision of the viewer can easily see five screens at the same time. In order to focus on details the viewer has to 'zoom in' on one or two screens and then step back again in order to relate them to the rest. The different paces in the different screens also intensify this zoom in / out process. The rhythmically busiest of the screens in the picture above (screen 7 to follow the floor map) is a simpler re-cut of my film *The Garden*, created early for the purposes of this research. Although I initially rejected this piece due to its intense flickering, overly-medium-focused nature, it works well here as it is rhythmically counterbalanced by the piece underneath which is a very slow and gentle investigation of weeds softly shaken by the wind, as well as by the two large screens that surround it, both of which move in a slow pace.

The piece underneath the flat TV screen showing *The Garden* is the most rhythmically straightforwardly structured piece in this installation: equally-lasting shots of dried weeds moving in the wind are followed by shots of their shadow on rocks.

The contrast between this gentle piece and the frantic and very complex rhythms of *The Garden* creates a contrapuntal feel where the viewer encounters a simultaneous steady, clearly-rhythmically-defined feeling and a palpable ever-changing world of image rhythm possibilities. Interestingly enough, the image that feels more serene is the one projecting what would at first strike us as unimportant elements (dried weeds), whereas the changeable image consists of more visually (and possibly conceptually) important themes: flowers and airplanes. Yet the image that appears unimportant assumes a lot of meaning due to its rhythm and the fact that it is placed closer to the floor (hence earth) than any other screen in this installation and in some way almost transmutes to become the most timeless and essential picture.

To the uttermost right of this image cluster is the smallest projection of this exhibition, coming from a projector placed very close to the wall. It shows two

parallel tight ropes holding together strong, while blowing in the wind (in general wind is a recurring theme). This is a return to the straight parallel lines theme that the installation dealt with in the part of the room just across from this area. The small projection works as part of the corner cluster I have already analysed, but more importantly so in relation to the large image next to it, which is exactly the same footage but slowed down by 1000%, so that the movement of the rope almost becomes like stills fading into each other.



While filming these two pieces of rope (on a boat) I noticed that at times the two closely held together ropes would overlap and appear to become one, which incited all sorts of ideas about 'parallel lines', as well as working as a (hopefully open) metaphor on this whole exhibition's attempt towards parallelism. In order to stress this, I decided to cut two different versions of the same shot that I would place next to each other. Not surprisingly, the slowed down shot turned out to be a completely different piece. Watching the two

next to each other is an experience similar to Maya Deren's notion of the simultaneous horizontal and vertical. Whereas the small screen that plays at normal speed can be interpreted as the horizontal, narrative investigation of a situation (that these are two ropes holding things together), the large, slowed-down screen is the vertical investigation of a situation, which is an investigation of a feeling or idea (the ropes being two and one simultaneously). Placing a single screen on this occasion would seem to me like stressing more one over the other, but combining the two screens and giving them such distinctly different formal properties works better.

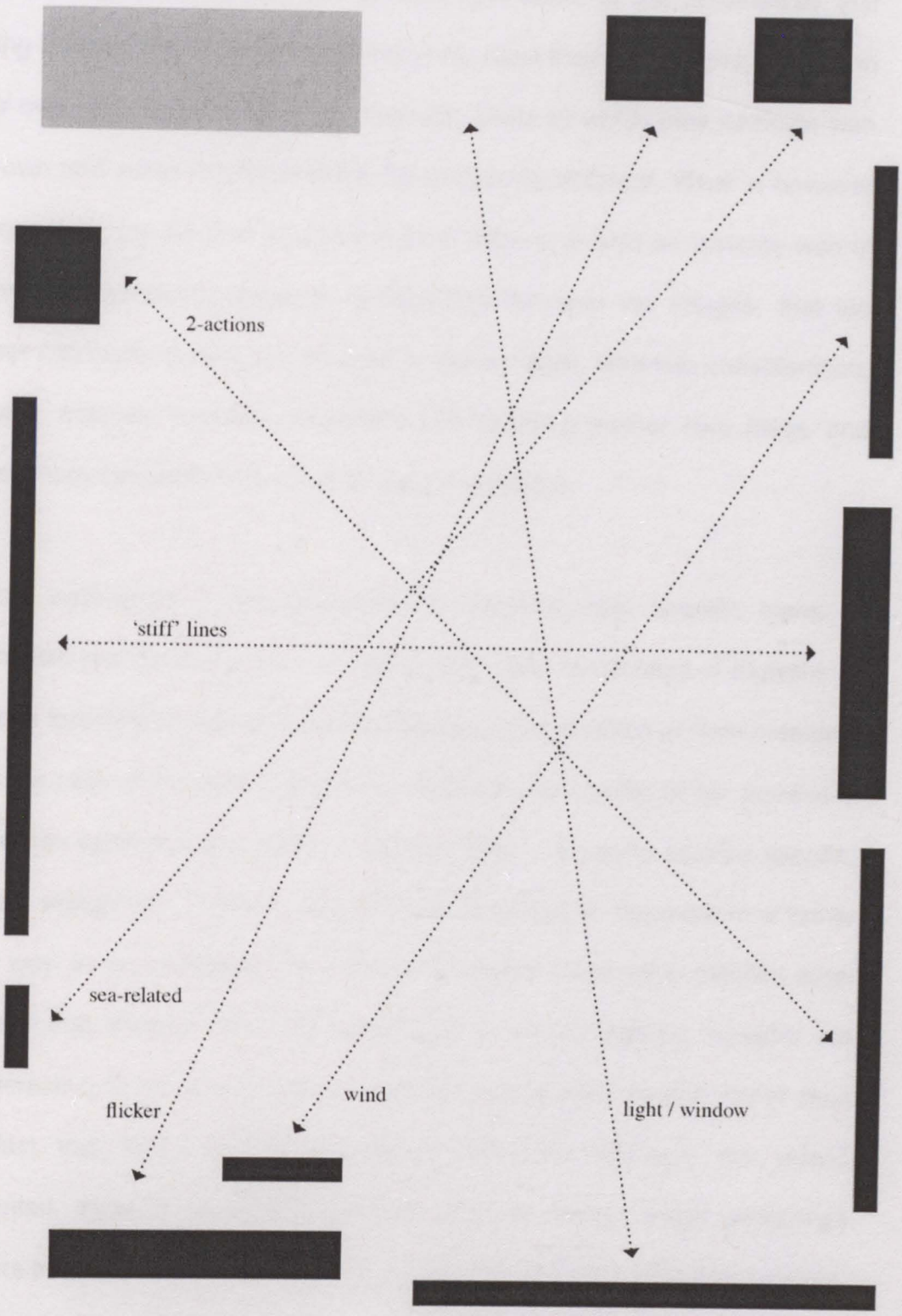
Finally, to the right of the large rope screen is another computer monitor (larger than the first ones, but smaller than the flat screen TVs) that shows a human action, that of grass cutting, almost as seen through the perspective of the grass itself. At first, the parallel cutting between the grass and the human sitting and having a cigarette and then the interaction of the two. Some screenshots of the film:

This seems to work well as a final piece, as it consists of a number of topics/concerns I have seen/dealt with throughout the installation. There is parallel action, humans and nature, elements blowing in the wind,

interventions within landscapes, nature and technology, blue skies, leaves and weeds shaking, humans at work and leisure and a much larger number of metaphorical connotations. Equally, the film can work as a connection to the first two-piece unit (with the buoys), as they are the only two screens that feature human beings, thus bringing a cyclical path to the overall experience.

Considering the installation as a whole, there are further screen connections within its structure. If the viewer were to follow the numbered itinerary provided by the floor map, they would encounter a path that develops from the human (fishing) to the interventional (ropes in the sea), to the technological (tram lines), to the natural (branches), back to the technological (planes), back to the interventional (parallel ropes moving in the wind), back to the human (grass cutting). Of course, this itinerary is not as clear-cut; it is neither over-pronounced by the installation nor in some respects even that important, as each viewer would probably follow his/her own itinerary.

Another element of structure I have used is the relationships of screens across and diagonally in the space. The diagram in the following page shows some of those conceptual or formal connections.


2-actions
'stiff' lines
sea-related
flicker
wind
light / window

I could probably draw many more similarities between the screens as they are placed in space and these are perhaps just some of the resonances that spring to mind. Each viewer would hopefully have their own readings and form their own interconnections of the material, some of which may coincide with my own and some would probably be completely different. What is however important for my practice research is that I tried to thread an intricate web of formal and (gently) conceptual relationships between the images, that the viewer can come across and connect in his/her brain, take into consideration, discard, bypass, but then reconnect and inputting his/her own ideas and experiences formulate in the end all sorts of parallels.

In this installation, I was interested in avoiding very specific types of symbolism and for this reason, I tried to stay clear of conceptual diptychs or screens that directly connect or contrast each other in terms of their meaning, as is the case of the work of Bill Viola. Although the placing of the screens in space was carefully constructed, it was not done in a way to enforce specific, 'closed' metaphors. The aim was to allow meanings to resonate in a rather open way. In my exhibition, the viewer's peripheral vision often catches other screens that distract from the sense that a set of specific screens are counteracting in order to produce a concept out of their conflict. Other than the fact that there are some graphic similarities between the videos presented, there is no specific strategy followed which would encourage viewers to form particular conceptual connections between particular screens. The films next to each other could relate graphically or conceptually, but so do the films opposite each other or across the room. Finally, each of my films has

a different duration, which means that as they loop while the installation is taking place, different sets of images appear next to each other each time. In a sense, I have tried to put together a plaid-like, multi-connective world, similar to *The Man with a Movie Camera*, but laid out in space. As Vertov's work plays with similar simultaneous elements creating a thread of relations,[33] my installation *Lines* similarly consists of multiple interacting elements, but also adding the issue of architectural space.

Overall, I was happy with this piece of work as I think that it deals with the ideas of parallelism and the open metaphor successfully, being at once suggestive and multi-linear. It is made of a series of videos that can be viewed individually, in pairs or as a whole. It requires an active audience that needs to choose a personal itinerary to experience the full installation. It could produce all sorts of conceptual dialectics, but it is not clearly symbolic. It deals with abstraction but in the synecdochical, rather than fully self-defined objects-as-qualities-of-light way and it refers to the medium itself without becoming self-consuming. The audience response I got for this installation was very encouraging, as people on the one hand suggested that they enjoyed that the installation was so open for them to produce it in their heads, but equally could see the poetic analogy as useful in terms of form.

33 Both Vertov himself (Vertov 1984e: 118) and Anna Lawton (Lawton 1978: 44) stress this multi-plane approach

Conclusion

The film poem is not a specific genre of film, as it is an approach towards the structure, methodology and reception of a work of art. This is exactly what makes this investigation not only historically valuable, in the sense of clarifying the theory and mapping a territory, but brings a contemporary significance to the term. The relationship between artists' film and poetry was examined from different perspectives and different theories have developed over the last one hundred years, but what remains important and relevant is that the film poem, as used in my conceptual and theoretical research, is a synthetic term that deals with areas of tension and opens up definitions.

Through an investigation of the theory around the term of the film poem and through my own practical research, I have attempted to clear some of the confusion that the term could produce due to its synthetic nature. Poetry by itself and all the different poetic tropes can have multiple definitions, which means that the application of poetic ideas to film can be as many as those different definitions. At the same time, as this thesis has argued, the very application of poetry-related ideas to film is problematic, as it considers poetry as an a priori mode of expression and this way of thinking could potentially bypass the particularities of the moving image (which was in some ways the case of the 1920s Soviet film writers). Instead, what this thesis has attempted is to understand the film poem as a grey area between different elements in artists' film, elements that have at times be seen as opposed both in terms of the making of a film work and its reception.

One of the main areas the thesis has dealt with in terms of the making of a work has been the idea of a work's structure. Structure was examined primarily through Maya Deren's horizontal vs. vertical perspective, which can also be related to Jakobson's model of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language. While the horizontal axis is the linear, narrative axis, the vertical axis is that along which connections happen in a non-spatiotemporal and non-linear way: they can take multiple forms and they can have multiple readings. The idea of multiplicity of option and meaning, which was something Jakobson considered essential to poetic expression, also became a key concept for the thesis. At the same time, Deren's theory is extremely important, as it is definitely medium-specific but not self-referential. This is at the very essence of my film poem project. The film poem is a film that deals with structure and whose structure is inherently connected to its purpose, but its raison d' être is not to point at the medium itself and comment on its very properties. Through the vertical investigation, Deren suggests – and I agree – that it is possible to deal with a subject matter in a medium-focused way, yet to let the content itself produce the structure rather than to impose structure on the material. As I have seen with my own work for the purposes of this PhD, the idea of a pre-scripted, systematic strategy of approaching a subject matter (as for example is the work of someone like Michael Snow) produces structurally-focused work whose aim is to be self-reflexive. In a Deren film instead, the subject matter itself guides the structural choices.

Abstraction has also played an important role in the investigation of the film poem. With regard to the moving image, the term abstraction could be argued to have multiple definitions, but for the purposes of this research, abstraction has been seen as the non-specifically representational. The term that has been very useful for the investigation of abstraction is that of the synecdoche, a literary trope. The use of the synecdoche that this PhD finds the most relevant is P. Adams Sitney's use when referring to the work of Stan Brakhage and others. By making a parallel between the literary synecdoche and cinematic framing, Sitney offers us a term, which very much operates on a useful tension – that of an object for what it actually is and as a pure quality of light. In Brakhage's work, as well as in mine, it is often unclear what an object is and more so, what sort of context it belongs to. Yet it is this not fully abstracted image that is extremely important for my purposes, as it is the one that opens up a space for multiple interpretations.

Another central term is the literary metaphor, specifically in relation to cinematic montage. Many authors have made a parallel between the way cinematic montage and the literary metaphor bring together two objects producing a third space. Metaphor is of course a debatable term itself that has evolved dramatically since its earliest definitions by Aristotle. This thesis finds the more open understanding of metaphor that was offered by Modernist critics in the 20th century more useful. For this reason, it has presented Sergei Eisenstein as a filmmaker who used cinematic metaphors in the closed sense that a term A and a term B could only synthesise to a particular situation C. Yet I challenged this idea of the pre-coded system, as it not only reduces the

understanding of a work to that of decoding a system, but as it also pre-supposes that any cinematic experiencing process is based on verbal language itself.

Thus, the thesis develops and refines towards a different term, one which has rarely been applied to texts on film, but which is key to the analysis and discussion, that of parallelism. Parallelism shares qualities of metaphor in that it brings together two (or more) entities (words, phrases, shots etc) in order to produce new spaces out of their simultaneous or closely-timed perception. Yet what makes it different is that it does not carry the historically limited definitions that a metaphor can imply and it neither presupposes a particular context or system, nor does it strive for a particular equation. In this respect, it is useful as a filmic term as it is less literary-tinged than metaphor. This thesis ultimately considers parallelism to be at the very essence of the film poem project and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* was extensively investigated as an example of cinematic parallelism. Through a large amount of montage strategies, Vertov applies many different types of visual parallels between elements in film, parallels that create areas of interest and are suggestive of ideas/concepts/situations, but which are not specific and commanding in the Eisensteinian sense.

The idea of multiplicity vs. singularity that German philologist Hermann Paul considers the essence of poetic expression also became a very important issue in the development of this thesis. All of the key writers and practitioners of the film poem that this thesis refers to (primarily Vertov, Brakhage and

Deren) were committed to this idea of the multiplicity of possibility, both in terms of the making and the reception of film work. Taking this idea a bit further and expanding my own practice, this research extends the involvement of the film poem to address the issue of multiple screen installations. This is a new, relatively untouched territory and my contribution to new knowledge, as the relationship between film and poetry has traditionally been examined from a single-screen perspective. What this thesis has argued is that multiple screen installations can produce the parallelisms that are central to the film poem project. Similarly – if not even more clearly – to *The Man with a Movie Camera*, multiple screen installations due to their simultaneity do not impose directionality: nothing comes before anything else and therefore it is not clear what is referring to what. In this sense, multi-screen installations can break the prescription of B refers to A equals C that is the traditional structure of metaphor and open up the space for multiple interplays between elements.

Adding this new perspective in the way the film poem has previously been approached is a challenging intellectual task and this thesis makes it clear that the multi-screen area is not an area of interest by default. As in single-screen pieces, in multiple screen work, I have investigated and presented how the strategies for putting together a series of images can vary and so do the results of their synthesis. Two important practitioners were analysed in terms of their multi-plane work: Bill Viola and Wolfgang Tillmans. This thesis suggests that the strategies that the former employs bring him closer to the Eisensteinian closed metaphor / directed symbolism project. Bill Viola is interested in the viewers having a specific, unifying experience and in order to

achieve this, he creates installations that suggest a singular itinerary for the audience. Wolfgang Tillmans, although not a moving image practitioner, puts installations together that bring up metaphorical connections through the combination of elements, but do not aim at delivering a specific experience. This thesis argues that Tillmans' installation methods are a spatial re-appropriation of Vertov's parallel-action city in *The Man with a Movie Camera*.

Finally, this thesis has presented and analysed my own work, from the early videos I first created when embarking on the project six years ago, all the way to the penultimate installation for the purposes of this research project. It followed closely the transition from the earlier, structural-inclining pieces to the more parallelism-based middle-period work and to the final decision to move to a multi-screen area. This final decision is an advancement of the way the film poem has been viewed in artists' film theory and can be beneficial in the field for future research. My thesis is the first occasion in which poetry related terms such as metaphor and parallelism are extensively discussed with regards to the methodology of multi-screen installation and as such it opens up the film poem area to encompass installation works from within a contemporary context. It also offers a new space-related understanding to the literary idea of parallelism by stressing the importance of spatial simultaneity.

At the same time, my practical work brings up a number of issues to do with the curating and reception of installation work altogether. Being committed to an aesthetics of parallelism, which stems from my theoretical research on the film poem, the methods for putting together my installation have striven for a

more open model than those that are frequent in contemporary video installation, a clear example of which is the work of Bill Viola. Multi-screen installations that are put together on the principle of parallelism (like my installation) are self-reflexive (through their investigation of space) but also open to interpretation (by avoiding limited signification relationships). In that respect, they can be useful in redefining contemporary curation practices, as they occupy a mid-point between the conceptually fully disconnected and random (as in the 60s events of Fluxus / John Cage or the 20s Dadaists' anti-art statements) and the conceptually pre-defined (as in the work of Bill Viola). Using the principle of parallelism as a guide can open up curatorial possibilities.

In relation to the above and as a closing statement, it can be argued that one of the more contemporary reasons why my investigation between film and poetry can be seen as currently relevant is because it re-addresses the importance of the audience in the reception of a work of art. In the film poem, the artist and the audience have to put something together. This could be argued to be the case for any work of art. But what is different is that the film poem project is purposefully open for this to happen. It is almost as if the artist completes the picture only partly and offers a very wide variety of itineraries for the audience to take. Thus, the full bloom of the work cannot be realized before the itineraries have been taken. Maya Deren's idea on the use of images of natural phenomena cited in chapter 5 is a good example of this: "Natural phenomena don't intend anything, as the setting of the sun might be the beginning of an ominous night for one, the end of a perfect day for another" (Deren 1963: 65). When an artist uses the image of a sun in the

context of the film poem, the audience can connect this with a number of concepts. But just because the image of the sun does not have a singular way of being read, it does not mean that the use of the image by the artist is not important in the first place. In the film poem, a situation is put together by the artist, but always completed by the viewer. As such, this is no longer the death of the author, but the opening-up of the partnership between author and audience.

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