

# Exploring Contemplative Effects in text-based videopoems

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extracted from the *The Poetics of Poetry Film*, Intellect Books and online at: *Moving Poems* [www.movingpoems.com](http://www.movingpoems.com) (June, 2017), *Atticus Review* <https://atticusreview.org> (July-Aug, 2017), *Poetryfilmkanal* <http://www.poetryfilm.de> (Aug, 2017) and *PoetryFilmLive* [www.poetryfilmlive.com](http://www.poetryfilmlive.com).

In 2005 I first began experimenting with rhythmic effects in relation to text-based, minimalist videopoems, as an extension of my work as a painter, filmmaker and writer. Influenced by a fusion of concrete poetry, feminist inquiry and Structuralist and Surrealist experimental film I wanted to approach the essence of poetic structure in a concentrated way, reconsidering the route to meaning through the traditional double pattern of verse – metre and rhythm – in moving, audiovisual terms.

Whilst contemplative effects exist across all forms of conventionally narrative-based poetry film, I wanted to strip down and magnify the prosody (rhythm) itself, and the letter became an ideal form, bringing less suggested context to the inquiry. My aim was to focus on a series of minimal, visual text-based video poems as a way of exploring the remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) of aural or verbal prosody in page-based verse. I am terming these videopoems rather than poetry films as they weren't created from pre-existing poems, but more as artworks with the screen as canvas. In examining traditional page-based verse, I focused on the prosody of the linear word and metre/*metronomic* form or 'beat' combined with the *cyclical* form (turning of the verse at the end of the line). These two essential formal components of the verse form: metronomic and cyclical patterning, became central to my research, but revised dynamically through audiovisual motion. Expanding on this, I was interested in creating

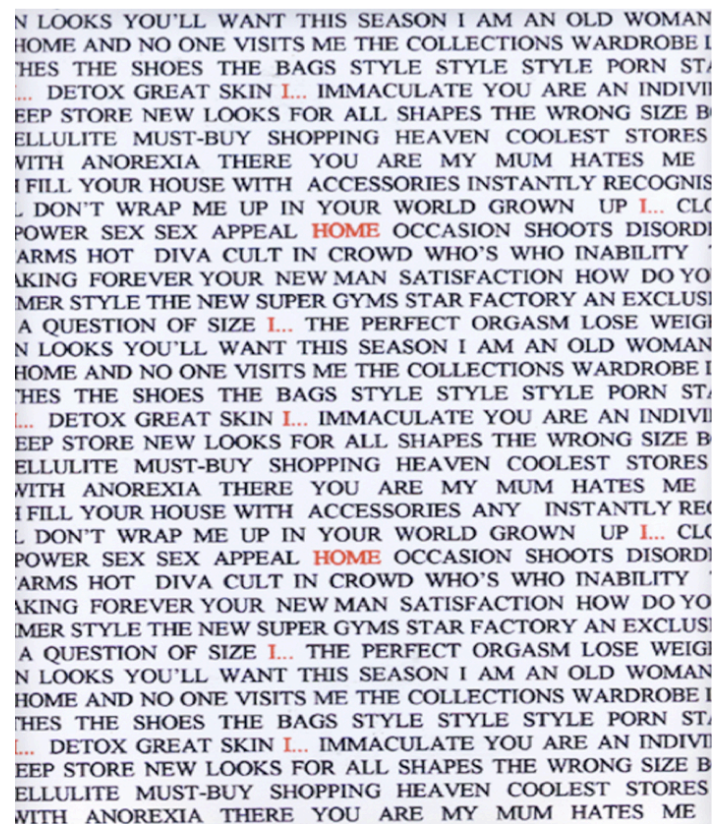
a particular type of contemplative effect, based on turning, or transition, where a letter or word slowly disappears and reappears, that I termed *de/rematerialising* prosody. Apologies for the weighty terminology!

My initial experimentation with moving visual verse became a research project entitled *Re: Turning – From Graphic Verse to Digital Poetics: historical rhythms and digital transitional effects in Graphic Poetry Films*. I went on to deliver papers or organize exhibitions/talks around the subject at: Chelsea College of Art and Design, including the work of artist Liliane Lijn; VideoBardo 'For The Earth' conference in Buenos Aires 2012; MIX conference in Bath (2012 and 2013); the e-poetry conference, Kingston, 2013; The Southbank Centre Poetry International Festival of Love in 2014; and TARP audiovisual festival, Vilnius National Gallery of Art, 2015. A more in-depth account of contemplative effects and prosody will be included in the forthcoming publication *The Poetics of Poetry Film*, including essays from many of the top practitioners in the field.

My work has always looked over its shoulder to historical forms that expanded on the dual verbal / visual letter (or *verbicovisual* as the Brazilian concrete poetry Noigandres group have stated, following James Joyce's neologism in *Finnegan's Wake*). As is commonly known, in the mediaeval period illuminated manuscripts such as 'Books of Hours' (commissioned books of religious / spiritual contemplation) featured large initial letters of opening paragraphs that were also pictures depicting the scene being verbally described. In a similar way, several hundred years B.C. prayer wheels containing short, linear texts were turned or spun by Buddhist monks as a means of attaining enlightenment, effectively turning texts according to the natural rhythm of the wheel of life, dissolving the linear word in the cyclical elements beyond human control.

As such the dual word as image and the deconstructed linear word, subject to turning, has historic precedents, and these deconstructions of the word align with the need to access spiritual concerns. It is hard to ignore that the very foundations of verse, metre and rhythm are also said to have a spiritual base. As the English critic and poet T.E. Hulme (1883–1917) has noted in his *Lecture on Modern Poetry* (1908): 'The older art (double pattern of traditional form) was originally a religious incantation [...] The effect of rhythm, like that of music, is to produce a kind of hypnotic state, during which suggestions of grief and ecstasy are easily and powerfully effective'.

The binary, dual aspect of a letter as both visual and verbal, and also linear but also *turned* in poetic verse form, sat at the centre of my research. However, I was deterred by my supervisors from mentioning anything to do with spiritually-related matters. And I should point out that I am not inferring in an absolutist way that a moving poetry film can create spiritually uplifting effects. What I have aimed to do is to appropriate and translate, in a form of broad *metanarrative*, historical structures and conventions as approaches to weaving a thoughtful and *contemplative surface* in its own right, as opposed to creating a poetic dramatic narrative containing effects. As can be imagined many types of poetry film can be argued to utilize contemplative effects (knowingly or not) and I will discuss this further in the upcoming publication.



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#### *Mistaken Identity*

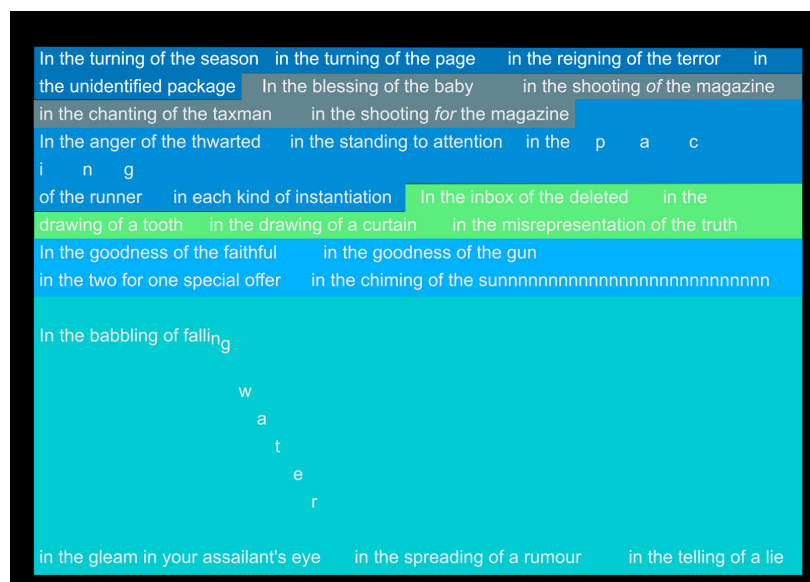
colour, sound, Sarah Tremlett, 2005.

<https://vimeo.com/102637208>

In 2005 I made a work that referenced the 'carmina figurate' in Renaissance texts, where typically a sacred image was picked out in red letters against a field of black type so that a holy figure could be seen and meditated on during the process of

reading. The resulting film – *Blanks in Discourse 3* – which became known as *Mistaken Identity*, was a commentary on consumer depictions of female identity. Found black text copy from women's magazines became a foil against which the words *I* and *Home* were added in red, but juxtaposed with a computer error beep. At a British-Council funded solo exhibition in Lithuania, the resulting beep created a delicate, random, plaintive 'tune' or irregular (non-metronomic) sequence. In some ways the pattern of notes, without direction or discernible timing, evoked a sense of disconnection and pathos, but also humour and irreverence, in terms of 'expected musical patterning'.

As poetry is a temporal art I sought to integrate metronomic time or interval measure with the durational or flowing rhythmic elements. This applied to both the aural and also the visual patterns before our eyes. In the early films, I did not include voice as an extra decipherable element in meaning creation. I also examined ways of thinking about audiovisual structure as pure structure: repetition, blank space, cut-ups alongside minimal soundscapes.



*In the Turning*  
colour, sound, Sarah Tremlett, 2014.  
<https://vimeo.com/110399362>

It is also important to note that in these graphic poetic contemplative films there is no definite beginning or end, which is why they cannot be defined by length; there is also no narrative trajectory, simply a continuous play of audiovisual pattern that can be endlessly looped, and gradually interpreted. In one of the last films in the project *In the Turning* (Tremlett, 2014), with music and voice, the spoken word is heard synchronized with the scrolling text appearing on screen, where scrolling is another form of turning.



*Innocent Beat*

colour, sound, Martha McCollough, 2012.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY2fXJ9S-1U&feature=youtu.be>



### Things I Found in the Hedge

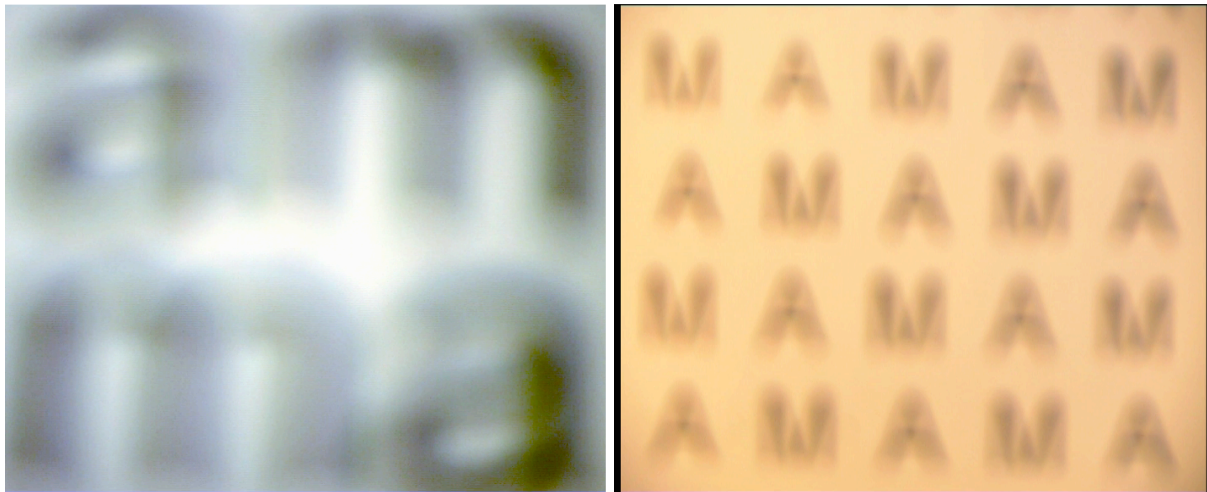
colour, sound, Lucy English and Kathryn Darnell, 2018.

<https://vimeo.com/292294183>



Other different types of turning include Martha McCollough's endlessly rotating texts in *Innocent Beat* (McCollough, 2012); whilst, more recently, in Lucy English's *Things I Found in the Hedge* (English, Darnell, 2018) with animation by Kathryn Darnell, for *The Book of Hours* Darnell has employed similar rotating texts, synchronized with English's voice.

There is some correlation between non-dramatic poetry films, (more or less without a plotted narrative) and a more consciously *affective* reliance upon metronomic and rhythmic patterning. A still, framed space that changes and alters durationally, but not in tune with a sequential narrative can have an effect on us that may be hard to put into words. One aspect of such a space can be its non-referential function. It does not talk



AMAM/AMMA

contemplative, minimal, graphic videopoem;  
colour, sound, Sarah Tremlett, 2010.

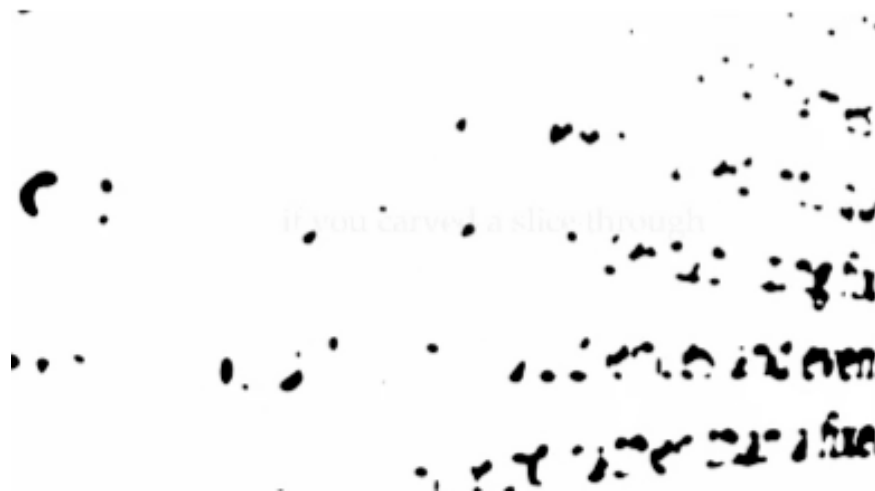
<https://vimeo.com/218602573>

of another space or time, but only its own being; which is why this sort of film is more accurately described as a videopoem and most purely when the audio as well as the visuals are newly composed, rather than associated with any other situation.

As a minimal, contemplative form of graphic videopoem my work *AMAM/AMMA* in its letter formation comprises two paradoxical parts concerning the binary nature of the relationship between self and mother or mother and daughter. This work takes the words AM and MA, which not only palindromically, phonetically and visually but

semantically create a parallelism of prosodic form with content. It asks the viewer to consider how the paratactical relationship between the two groups of letters which seem interchangeable function alongside the sound of a heartbeat. In minimal videopoems, we are not only examining a gestalt dialectical play between the parts and the whole or the text and the rest of the image, but also the dynamic motional play within the text itself. This work utilizes an irregular, fluttering pulsing motion, to explore a different understanding of beat or metre, and how blurring can have a conceptual relation to content, the tremulous of new life, as well as blurring boundaries of identity. Meaning is saturated throughout audiovisual form and content, supporting but testing Roman Jakobson's theories of equivalence (1960) based on purely verbal poetic forms. On a wider scale, the dual pattern of constant beat (the heart) that underpins the rhythms of life in the womb and 'outside', also happens to be the core double essence of traditional verse-based poetry. The parallel between the way of human 'being' and the prosody of poetry might have a correlation that could explain the effects of poetry far deeper than we can imagine.

Another film concerned with de/rematerialisation of text and included in *Liberated Words II* at The Arnolfini, Bristol, in 2013, is British artist Steve Fossey's *Thought Acts* ([www.stevefossey.com](http://www.stevefossey.com)). Here the sway of text and light with a moody soundtrack shifts between legibility and pattern – a fluctuating de/rematerialisation of text like



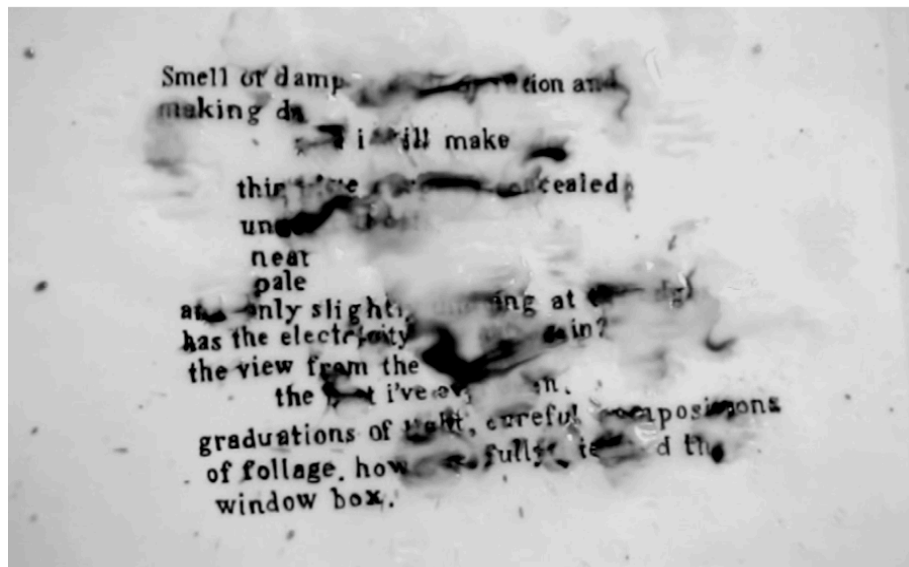
*Thought Acts*

B&W, Steve Fossey, *Liberated Words II*, 2013.

<https://vimeo.com/73937379>

AMAM/AMMA operates. The filmmaker is concerned with the visual effects of light and pattern and their inclusive relation to meaning. The disappearance and reappearance of visual text in itself encapsulates a form of *gradual* change through motion. A transitional effect that could be utilized to produce either slow cyclical repetitive rhythms, sometimes in relation to metronomic aural beats, or metronomic visual effects.

*Les Lieux de Memoire* by British artist Tamsin Taylor, which I included in *Liberated Words* poetry film screening at MIX 2012, is a slowed-down filming of a verse poem that has been scattered with water (seemingly tears), reconstituting itself through film reversal. Slowly we see the poem reappear, transcending conventional temporality, accompanied by the occasional blip, blip sound of what must have been the flicking of water onto the page. This echoes my film *Mistaken Identity*, in the heightened attunement to the smallness of random, repeated, identical sounds. This sublime video poem, which also engages with the liminal aspect between materiality and language and what I would term 'elemental sound' is an example of a de/rematerialisation process in a very profound and direct way. *Les Lieux de Memoire* asks us to engage with its very process of creation, its fundamental becoming or dynamic of change.



*Les Lieux de Memoire*  
B&W, sound, Tamsin Taylor, *Liberated Words I*, 2012.  
<https://vimeo.com/user13033321>



In *Unrest* by Italian artist Marco de Mutiis (marcodemutiis.com), (included in *Liberated Words I*, 2012) the beginnings of a de/rematerialisation process have come into play – bringing forward the blank into a type of temporal form. Here words are diffused before blurring or disappearing alongside an eerie, repetitive, muffled bleep sound, creating a metronomic sense of isolation, a non-narrative within a semi-narrative of scenes that seem played out rather than lived.

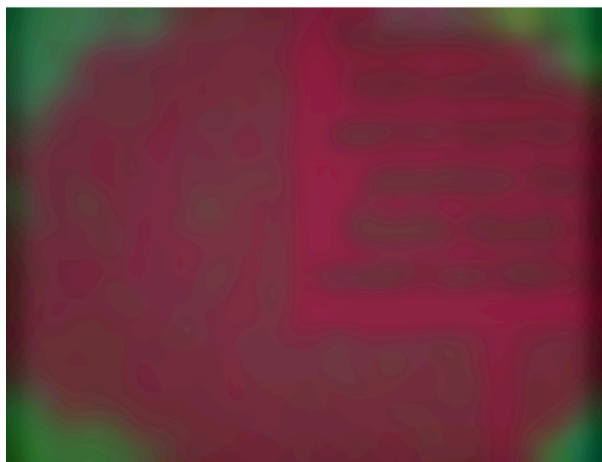
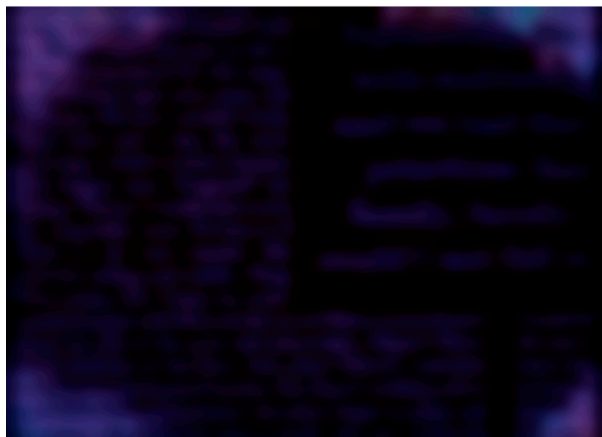
The metronomic interplays with the abstracted rhythms and it is as if we are the systems that control us; we are discourse, but a discourse that is pre-written and out of our control; we don't make it we align with it. In fact, at a far bleaker and catastrophic level we are written or we are erased. To me this film contains signs of traditional prosody but in a new, conceptual way; and these rhythms appear to be embedded in the very fabric of our accelerated, overly-constructed human condition.



*Unrest*

colour, sound, Marco de Mutiis, *Liberated Words I*, 2011.

<https://vimeo.com/21470043>



*She/Seasons/Contemplating Nature*  
Sarah Tremlett, 2010/11.  
<https://vimeo.com/218596398>

In my videopoem *She/Seasons/Contemplating Nature* ([www.sarahtremlett.com](http://www.sarahtremlett.com)) I aimed to blur the conceptual divisions between culture and nature, combining de/rematerialising prosodic texts from women's magazines accompanied by metronomic star sounds and a pulsing coloured sphere that changes from cool to hot colours. *She/Seasons/Contemplating Nature* generates a cyclical return in four chromatic movements or phases which begin with 'winter' (in terms of colour) and returns to it again and again on an endless loop. As the blurred effect increases, so the figure/ground (Arnheim, 1974) distinction lessens. Letters lose symbolic meaning as they become diffused into pattern. This cycle of chromatic prosodic change occurs as the text and the image slowly emerges and disappears. In some senses then, we can view the text and image like we might view the simple shapes of nature around us – trees and flowers which are subject to alteration due to the passage of seasons and time. American poet Stephanie Strickland's notion of text decay (Kac, 2007) springs to mind, but in this film the whole screen changes at once.

In all the films mentioned text has remained in its traditional, linear form yet also operates as visual, turned text. Meaning shifts *between* and as a fusion of text- based verbal language and audiovisual rhythms and effects, with almost non- existent narrative and a screen behaving as a contemplative canvas. Examining prosodic elemental forms is an attempt to naturalize how poetry works: how it weaves sounds and felt moments to create what we call 'poetry', or measured words through time. But whether an absolute comparison can be made between the verbal notational structures of verse prosody and those created via the moving audiovisual image is another question completely; one we will continue to debate for years to come.

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