

Reading Canadian Poetry with its Experimental Films October 8, 2015 by Jacqueline Valencia

Avant-garde filmmakers often say that there is far more freedom in doing their work because they are almost entirely in control of it. Poets are also liberated in the mediums they choose. There are so many rhythms and fashions available to them and if the poet doesn't find what suits their vision they are free to create a new way to conceive their poetry.

My affinity for experimental film stems from my love for poetry. Best-selling novels and big budget features get profiled constantly in the media, while avant-garde film and poetry is often overlooked. Maybe it's because they lack the glitz, glamour, and gossip that their counterparts do.

However, there is much to be said for the beauty of poetry by linking it to the cinematic essay form. An experimental director condenses an idea within visuals, sound, and often, time constraints. Like a reader processing verse, a viewer interprets avant-garde film images using their own internal schemas and learned archetypes. Avant-garde filmmakers often say that there is far more freedom in doing their work because they are almost entirely in control of it. Poets are also liberated in the mediums they choose. There are so many rhythms and fashions available to them and if the poet doesn't find what suits their vision they are free to create a new way to conceive their poetry.

During film festivals I often take poetry books with me because they are something small I can digest while waiting in line or for the film to start. More often than not, a weird synchronicity occurs. Read on as I compare three Canadian experimental films with three Canadian poetry books to show how poetry and avant-garde film can form an interesting connection when read and seen side by side.

CrackBrutalGrief



Crack, Brutal, Grief (2000) by experimental filmmaker R. Bruce Elder is inspired by a friend's violent suicide by chainsaw. It was made as a way for Elder to deal with the devastating grief he felt in that loss. The images in the movie are mixtures of brutality and pornography. They are then degraded through film processing and result in abstract textures and hues. All of the visuals are taken from the internet and through their reassemblage become moldable structures that extoll the fragility of the body in human hands.

Web-based images, no matter how they are filtered, are mutual exchanges based on popular societal images. Those images can be calming or assaultive, but they are often there to provoke a reaction in the viewer. Death evokes strong feelings because it reveals a lack of control over our lives, especially to protect the ones we love. Elder takes the emotional chaos of his mourning and forms a cohesive and interpretable pastiche in what most people see every day on their computer monitors. Film can help a filmmaker, and in turn a viewer, try to make sense out of something so calamitous as death. Similarly in poetry, words can be used in the very same way.

In MxT (Coach House Books) Sina Queyras attempts to create a machine to help parse grief. It is divided into nine chapters that read like mathematical descriptors and a graphed view of mourning. One chapter starts with a drawing of a geared mechanism and the following:

“EMOTIONAL CIRCUIT BREAKER

A device for automatically interrupting an emotional circuit to prevent an excess of excessive feeling from damaging...”



MxT

One of the poems in this section is “Over To You” whereby the poet writes:

“There will be no one to write an elegy for me and so I am writing my own now, I want you to keep up with me. I want you to feel the way the wind holds a bird, or a balloon, the slightly different movement of feather versus plastics, smooth surfaces gliding, dodging, come lie under the red balloon with me, come trace the horizontal motion...”

“Can the situation of breasts be about life? I want to pitch you this idea. I want you not to tell me this is too abstract. Women’s bodies are fairly solid. They stack well. They are a current item...”

(Queyras)

And ends with:

“It takes so long to say anything. I haven’t time to be optimistic.

Spit. Breathe. Carry on.

I did not want to air my feelings.

Fuck you who eat feelings.”

(Queyras)

While there are no explanations for the machine described in the chapter diagram, the poem itself is the apparatus in action. The poet creates a comprehensible framework for the reader to go through by writing a eulogy made up of her own emotions and pictures that are full of meaning to her. The images of a red plastic balloon compared to the lightness of a feather are contrasted and shared as a way to navigate the reader through the grief that comes ahead.

The poet details the things she has seen and experienced and then frames it in the struggle for women to be heard. Breasts give life but can also take life away in the cancer that often affects them. She makes clear her vision for what she wants those in mourning to know, but also recognizes the possibility of the erasure of her feelings despite her explicit affirmations. The

order she frames her confident images in become hardened stances for validation of those emotions.

She ends by cursing the inevitable and thereby preventing the “excess of excessive feeling from damaging,” her sense of independent hope. Like Elder with his visuals, Queyras takes over the reins of her grieving processes to create malleable texts for her readers to use as tools to deal with death.

Words and images are powerful architectural tools when they are used to communicate feeling such as grief or loss. They can also help create thought-provoking evaluations of people or places by subverting or remixing the visuals and texts that are associated with them. Furthermore, stripping bare visuals and our means of communications to its foundation in letters exposes a possibility for recreation and renewal. These days, language and symbols form and evolve rapidly over time. Experimentation in film and poetry is an anchor by which artists can create new coping schemas and mechanisms through their artworks.

Poetry and experimental film take the fabrics of their formation and spill them onto the page, the screen, and the ever-consuming internal view-master of the human mind. These mediums always interplay in synchronous ways in my brain and it is extraordinarily fun to find myself digesting a poet’s words while I watch a filmmaker’s dream come to life.

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