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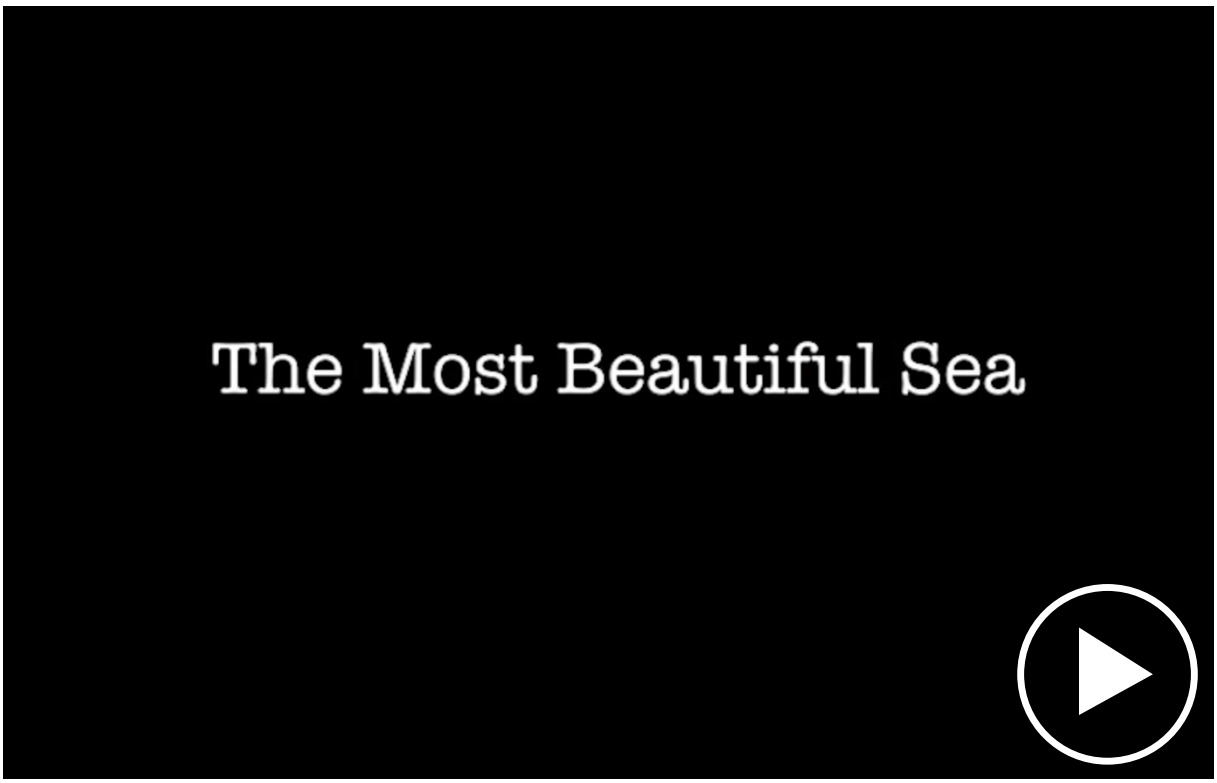
Moving Poems: The Most Beautiful Sea



Abstract

The video essay *The Most Beautiful* Sea comes out of my *Moving Poems* project, a small (but growing) online collection of videos that features poetic texts, specifically in response to the following prompt: make a short video in which you pair a single poem (or parts of a poem) or multiple poems with a single or multiple moving-image media text(s) (a film, a TV show, an online video, etc.). I consider it an explorative and a pedagogical tool, which does not assume a specific output, but which prompts students and video makers to approach the relationship between literature and audiovisual images in a new, digitally tactile way. As such, it might

expand our ideas of the "poetic mode" in videographic criticism from an aesthetic to an interdisciplinary and methodological approach.

Keywords: video poetry, poetic mode, sound, voice, found footage

Academic guiding text

My contribution to this collection is one of two video essays (the other being Drew Morton's) that have come out of my *Moving Poems* project. As of now, *Moving Poems* is a small (but growing) online collection of videos that features poetic texts (see link below). It is also the following prompt:

> Make a short video in which you pair a single poem (or parts of a poem) or multiple poems with a single or multiple moving-image media text(s) (a film, a TV show, an online video, etc.).

I consider the prompt an open invitation to engage with poetry in multiple forms – the poetry of text, of images and sounds, as well as the poetry of your own "material thinking" (Grant, 2014), meaning the poetic aspects of one's intellectual, affective, and intuitive process when working with, through, and on a given videographic piece. Considering the act of making a video essay as poetic in and of itself emancipates process from outcome to a certain extent. I have noticed that since I started the project, many people have told me that they were working on a moving poem but did not find the result good enough to be shown online. I wonder if this is because videographic engagements with poetry are especially driven by intuition and therefore make their makers feel even more exposed and vulnerable when it comes to releasing them to the public. While I encourage everyone to share their videos, regardless of whether they think they are "good enough" or not, I see value in making a moving poem just for one's own eyes and ears, too. Above all else, I consider the prompt an explorative and a pedagogical tool, which need not be tied to a specific output, let alone a public one. The initial idea came out of my lifelong interest in poetry, as well as videographic engagements with language, voice(-over), and sound, above all Barbara Zecchi's work on the gendered, accented, and linguistic implications of vocal performance (see Zecchi, 2021, 2022, 2023). The "videographic epigraph" model from the Middlebury Sight & Sound Workshop

(Keathley, Mittell & Grant, 2019) was another obvious inspiration. Given the prevalence of the English language in videographic output (and academic publications altogether), I was curious whether poetry might encourage makers to turn to their first languages more than usual. As someone who has primarily worked in a second language (English), I have always sensed that poetry, more so than other literary modes, connects me to my first language (German) in an intimate, intuitive way that is specific to it. While the majority of videos are still in English, several people have indeed picked up the prompt to make video essays in their first languages. In my own case, the prompt unexpectedly also inspired me to return to *writing* poetry, which I could see as another pedagogical outcome, if not an additional prompt in the classroom context.

Both within the videographic scholarly community and in-between different media ecologies (specifically academia and the art world), there seems to be a lingering anxiety around videographic definitions and ontological distinctions. As such, Tom Konyves defines what he calls "videopoetry" in opposition to "*poetry films, film poetry, poemvideos, poetry videos, cyber-poetry, cine-poetry, kinetic poetry, digital poetry, poetronica, filming of poetry*" (Konyves, 2011, p. 3), claiming that videopoetry is "a genre of poetry on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, *poetic* juxtaposition of images with text and sound" (ibid., p. 4) which "produces in the viewer the realization of a *poetic experience*" (italics in the original). In videographic criticism, we tend to assume a spectrum of stylistic modes that, inspired by Bill Nichols' (2001) theory of documentary modes, places "explanatory" on one end and "poetic" on the other (see Keathley, 2011, p. 180 and Álvarez López & Martin, 2014). A lot of discourse has centered on how this spectrum does or does not fit into other traditions of scholarly writing and the essay form, as well as how videographic output in different places on the spectrum does or does not garner academic credibility (see Lavik, 2020 and Loock, 2020).

Discussions of uses of text and language in videographic works further evoke a hierarchy between text and audiovisual images. Skepticism towards poetical modes tends to rest on the idea that poetical modes privilege experience and affect over information and argumentation (see Keathley 2011, p. 181-83, Morton 2017, p. 131-32, and Kiss, 2024). At the same time, videographic pieces that are centered on texts run the risk of privileging textual information

over audiovisual imagery to the extent that they might fall into the "illustrated lecture" category (Álvarez López & Martin, 2014) from which most scholarly video essayists shy away. These anxieties about text vs. audiovisual images and experience vs. analysis are just as prevalent in video artist Konyves' writing. His understanding of "videopoetry" is fundamentally linked to a "poetic experience" and is distinct from works that simply integrate and share poems in videographic form (2011, p. 3). While I appreciate the conceptual groundwork laid out by these scholars and practitioners, many of whom are my cherished colleagues, I am not sure why we should always assume these hierarchies – whether it be between text and footage or between information/argumentation and experience/emotional resonance. There seems to be an implication that one element must dominate the other and that this relationship informs how we should categorize a given piece.

The *Moving Poems* project obviously foregrounds language and text not despite the poetical mode but as a vital part of it. Yet, it does not prescribe a definition of what a suitable video essay or video poem is, could or should be. The relationship between poetry (or literature more generally) and audiovisual imagery is its main and only pre-given focus. It also does not present a definition of either "poetry" or "footage". This is quite deliberate. It is meant to inspire experimentation and leaves it open to the video maker on which sources they want to draw and which hierarchies between text/poetry and footage (or lack thereof) they want to create. The project is not specifically intended as a prompt for academic publications or as an intellectual or definitional exercise (though it can be and has been used as such). So far, the videos have mostly lived on Vimeo and in social media circles, as well as the occasional film festival. They do not come with individual written statements or peer reviews, which are a common (but not universal) form in which scholarly video essays get published online. Some makers might be inspired to add such statements to the videos on separate platforms or to present their videos in the context of academic talks or seminar presentations (I have given guest lectures on the collection myself) but I hope that the project as a whole gestures towards a more wide and open understanding of poetic videography that can take on many different forms and that might challenge the boundaries we draw between scholarly and non-scholarly output.

The pedagogical incentive is *to make first, think* later, which in videographic circles has become known as the Middlebury method (Keathley & Mittell, 2019). Students and video makers are welcome to pick up the prompt and in the process of making a moving poem to reflect on their ontological and hierarchical preconditions and assumptions about their material. They are just as welcome to simply play with it intuitively. Some of the students who have contributed to the collection have taken the prompt as an exercise in applying scholarly thought to poetry and to film. As for myself, the project began as a freeing exercise that allowed me to fully indulge in the poetical mode without worrying too much about the completeness or academic value of any given piece. Yet, while some *Moving Poems* might be understood as artistic-poetic pieces first and foremost, I would argue that as a collective, the project definitely demonstrates scholarly rigor. Christian Keathley (2020) made a similar point about the scholarly value of videographic collections in his response to the *Once Upon a Screen* project I co-curated with Ariel Avissar.

My own video essay in this collection, "Moving Poems: The most beautiful sea" connects the Turkish poem "En güzel deniz" ("The most beautiful sea") by Nazim Hikmet (written while he was imprisoned in 1945 and voiced in my video by my colleague and friend Enis Dinç, who had suggested the poem to me in the first place) with the musical composition *Four Sea Interludes* (III. Moonlight) by British composer Benjamin Britten (1945) and a range of American archival travel and home movies from the public domain which I sourced online. The underlying current is the sea – as a literary, visual and musical motif and as a metaphor for the many layers of our memories (individual, collective, archival). While the poem suggests a utopian, imaginary future, it also evokes a strong sense of nostalgia – a nostalgia for a past that may not have happened (yet). The many small moments of joyful vacation days captured in the amateur movies similarly are both archival and universal, both past and present. In the video, I attempt to connect, layer, and superimpose these temporal layers. Someone's memory might be someone else's imagined future. Someone's present will turn into someone else's recollection of the past. In editing the piece, I followed the rhythm of my materials, which are purposefully presented outside of their respective historical or political contexts. Tuning into my own sentimentalities, my nostalgia for childhood (whether my own or someone else's), and my ur-fascination with art's ability to connect you to people across

time and place, it was as much a poetic experience for me to make the video as I hope it might be a poetic experience for some viewer-listeners.

If you are interested in contributing to the Moving Poems collection, please find all information here: https://vimeo.com/showcase/9576546

Please also consider using the prompt in your classes.

Note on copyright

The film material I draw on is in the public domain. The music is used in accordance with fair use principles for non-commercial, critical and research purposes, as set out in Mittell (2019). This understanding of re-use in found footage and essay filmmaking is now established by more than a decade of international practice and peer-reviewed academic journals like *[in]Transition*, *NECSUS*, and *Tecmerin*. The music piece employed here is not used for mere affective purposes but its historical, lyrical and musical significance for the conceptual and critical undertaking of the video essay is vital.

About the author

Evelyn Kreutzer is a postdoctoral researcher and video essayist in the SNSF-funded research group "The Video Essay: Memories, Ecologies, Bodies" at the Università svizzera italiana in Lugano (co-initiated with Kevin B. Lee and Johannes Binotto). Her work primarily engages memory studies, media historiography, as well as sound and music studies.

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