

## Cinematic Techniques in Modernist Poetry<sup>1</sup>

Modernist poetry is the cultural product of the movement of modernism, a term that is not easily summarized. As M. H. Abrams suggests, it is widely used to “identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and style of literature and other arts” (167). The modernist movement got underway in the closing years of the nineteenth century, coalesced immediately following World War I (1914-18), and was influential past World War II into the late 1940s, when postmodernism began to take hold. Modernism usually refers to the radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in arts and literature; it marks a distinctive break with “some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general” (Abrams 167). With the explosive bombardment in World War I, the whole world seemed to be breaking apart. People were disillusioned with Victorian idealism and optimism. The meaning of everything was being questioned. In philosophy, great thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and James G. Frazer, began to question the “certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional modes of conceiving the human self” (Abrams 167). In literature, the movement is associated with the works of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and Knut Hamsun (among others). Their works subvert the “basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of the modes of narration” (Abrams 167). Some writers experimented with “automatic writing (writing that has been freed from control by the conscious, purposive mind)” (168). Modernist artists also shared with modernist thinkers and writers the same concern: how to portray multiple dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas. Therefore, the pioneering form of all abstract art, Cubism, was created and developed by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris. Picasso’s remark, “I am not interested in beauty,” gives a new perspective that was in opposition to the desire for the aesthetic beauty in arts (Perkins 5). The cubists were interested in exploring new subject matter, new painterly values, and spatial relationships. “A Cubist painting attempted to render the object simultaneously from several points of view, and at several moments in time, combining these multiple perspectives in a kind of collage on the two-dimensional canvas” (Showalter xx). This cubist perspective not only fractured space, which was a fixed single point of view, but also time, which was in linear chronological order. After World War I, surrealism started another revolutionary movement in painting, sculpture, and other arts, as well as in literature. To exhibit everything in the “deep mind” (Abrams 310), surrealists turned to automatic writing (writing delivered over to the promptings of the unconscious mind). They experimented with “free association, a broken syntax, nonlogical and nonchronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking, or seemingly unrelated images” (311). By giving up logical reason and consciousness as the creative source, surrealists have opened up more possibilities for understanding the modern world.

The true birth of modernism in poetry is often dated back to the publication of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1917. After World War I, “the world is hard and heavy, needs more than individual goodwill and poetic fancies” (Croce 31). Modernist poets such as Eliot, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, e. e. cummings, William Carlo Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Guillaume Apollinaire, employed visual, fragmented, and nonchronological poetic forms and free-from-convention styles as fitting this new disillusion-

sioned worldview. They presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of culture in disarray. The motto line from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* expresses their true emotions: "These fragments I have shored against my ruin." With the new technology, modernist poets found a distinctly contemporary mode of expression to present the destructiveness prevalent during the war. The image in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was created from one of the postwar developments—cinematic technique: "a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (Meyer 924). My cinematic approach to modernist poetry has led me to a supplementary explanation of why some of the modernist poems have gained canonical fame and of how cinematic techniques have influenced them. Of course, this is not the only approach that we can adopt to study modernist poetry, but it does offer specific new insight.

Modernist poetry ought not to be read just in terms of its sound and rhythm; it needs to be viewed as well in a way similar to movies. This is because modernist poets lived through the period of a "moving-picture craze" between 1907 and 1918 (Bowser 1). Responding to this new cultural influence of moving pictures, they began to practice poetry, whether consciously or not, as a kinetic art within the dominant mode of filmmaking. As a result, poems by e. e. cummings, Ezra Pound, W. C. Williams, and Wallace Stevens often run parallel to cinematic techniques. Each poem is presented to the audience as a tiny movie with "resonant images, subtly arresting sounds, intriguing characters, and significant story lines" (Kawin 2), making use of cinematic techniques of juxtaposition. In this sense, modernist poets became both artists and technicians, bestowing on poetry a "fresh start with a fresh language." In Pound's term, they sought to "Make it New," or as W. C. Williams put it, to offer "a re-examination of the means" on a fresh basis (Bloom 1). Poetry, which for so long belonged to an oral literary world, was now composed to be viewed in ways analogous to film images. As H. L. Mencken observes, "English writers who note this change lay it to the influence of the American movies" (Bloom 2). Movies, as a new technology and medium of art, have provided "new modes of seeing and showing" (Chow 170) even in an older medium like poetry. Modernist poets have made brilliant use of cinematic techniques such as montage, flashbacks, fragments, juxtaposition, and snapshots to make poetry as both visual and audio arts.

In contrast to the filmmaking procedures adopted by the above-mentioned poets, another group of poets represented by Guillaume Apollinaire in Paris realized that modern technology would threaten the integrity of the aesthetic act. They not only used the actual pictorial forms such as the Chinese ideogram, whose charm derives from its character beauty, but also used a variety of type fonts and sizes, different colors of type, and sometimes supplemented the text with drawings and photographs. The visible text offers a concrete physical object, but the meaning that the object carries is not easy to decipher. When Apollinaire published a collection of poetry in 1918, he coined the name *Calligrammes* to describe the visual form of his poems. As critics have observed, his poems are largely realistic and derive their effect from mimetic conventions.<sup>2</sup> Actually, the experiment with the visual shape in which a text is presented on the page was not a new form in the early twentieth century. As early as the third century BC, some Greek poets started to shape a text in the form of the object that the poem describes or suggests. Apollinaire modernized this form by adding pictorial typography to it. Because of the limited effect that typography could achieve and the difficult verbal text to decipher, Apollinaire's poems, to some degree, are overshadowed by the modernist poetry produced in cinematic technique. However, the emphasis on spatial form, as Bohn observes, "resulted in the creation of new rhythms and an increased reliance on parataxis and fragmentary discourse" (31).

In *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell analyzes the power of movies with respect to this new medium's characteristic features, the technical skills filmmaking used in movies and the psychological curiosity of early moviegoers. He quotes Erwin Panofsky and André Bazin to show that film images differed from linguistic images. Panofsky puts it this way: "The medium of the movies is physical reality as such" (26). Similarly, Bazin reminds us, "[c]inema

is committed to communicate only by way of what is real"; consequently, "[t]he cinema [is] of its essence a dramaturgy of Nature." Based on Panofsky's and Bazin's definitions, Cavell concludes, "the basis of the medium of movies is photographic," and that "a photograph is of reality or nature" (26). Paradoxically, Roland Barthes states in his *Camera Lucida*: "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). Therefore, photography can be defined as "a form of automatism demanding a revised understanding of reality" (Williams 192). Barthes expresses the very close link between photograph and cinema in a very humorous way: "I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it" (3). Consequently, the question arises: Why did even Barthes fail to separate the two from each other?

The novelty of a photograph is that "the original is still as present as it ever was." The original is "not present as it once was to the camera; but that is only a mold-machine, not the mold itself" (Cavell 20). In this sense, the Chinese translation of the word "movies," *dianying*, which means "electric shadows," shows the true nature of the image and its relation to reality. Actually, the audience is shown only shadows of real things. When the photographic image is projected and gathered on a screen in a darkened house, early viewers of motion pictures were captivated by "the motion in motion, as if by the novelty" (Cavell 122). "Instead of a dull, lifeless screen, there is shown the actual movement of life, realistic to a degree positively startling" (G. C. Pratt 20). So the question becomes: "What happens to reality when it is projected and screened?" (Cavell 26).

Cavell explains, "The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it." Thus, "Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it" (23). It is not difficult to imagine how excited early moviegoers became when they witnessed the past, even as they experienced it in the present. They saw everything happen in the world in which they lived, without being seen themselves in the movie. Psychologically speaking, "In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know." In this sense, there seems to be a magical power that creates the "wish for power over creation" (Cavell 40-41).

Yet, it is cinematic technology that also makes the process of knowing the unknown possible in an arresting way in other art forms, such as music, painting, performance, and poetry, which have to adapt to this medium. Indeed, our sense of time and space is profoundly altered by the cinematic techniques of shooting and editing. In an instant, we see things happening at any time and place; differing places come to occupy the same space on the screen; differing times from the past reappear at once in the instant of viewing. Moving pictures work wonders, for people see "how the past lives in the present" (Williams 193). This sudden attraction drew millions of Americans to the cinema in the decade before World War I.

The nickelodeon, the theatre of the masses, encapsulated the American cinematic experience. *The Saturday Evening Post* of November 1907 depicts the extent to which the American people were fascinated by this art form:

Three years ago there was not a nickelodeon, or five-cent theatre devoted to moving picture shows in America. Today there are between four and five thousand running and solvent, and the number is still increasing rapidly. This is the booming time in the moving-picture business. [...] The nickelodeon is tapping an entirely new stratum of people. [...] Over two million people on the average attend the nickelodeons every day of the year, and a third of these are children. This gives all the nickelodeons 16,000,000 a week, or over 2,000,000 a day. Two million people a day are needed before profits can begin, and the two million are forthcoming. It is a big thing, this new enterprise. (G. C. Pratt 46)

The number of moviegoers, on the one hand, speaks of the fact that the movie business was booming during that period of time. On the other hand, it implies that "the impact of movies is too massive, too out of proportion with the individual worth of ordinary movies, to speak politely of involvement. We involve the movies in us" (Cavell 154).

Like other forms of art, film not only offers the pleasure of visual and auditory entertainment, it is also the venue where the inspirations of artists and the expectations of the audience come together. There is no doubt that modernist poets had to satisfy new expectations of film audiences, even as they took their own inspiration from the movies. If we look at imagism as an early poetic expression of modernism, it is a striking fact that the originating moment of modernist poetry coincided with the period of this "moving-picture craze" between 1907 and 1918. During the decades between 1910 and 1920, a small group of English and American poets invented a new poetic style in the imagist poem. The imagist poets adopted ancient Chinese, classical Greek, and contemporary French Symbolist models, at least as they understood them, but they also responded in ways they never fully understood, to the new medium of film.

Instinctively, in creating an image, which "represents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," the imagist poets applied cinematic techniques to the writing of their poetry (W. Pratt 18). The three rules of imagist poems, as Ezra Pound outlined them, were not found in any previous literary tradition:

1. To directly treat the "thing," whether subjective or objective;
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation; and
3. Regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome. (cited in W. Pratt 18)

Pound clarified the rules by adding, "[i]t is the presentation of such a 'complex' which instantaneously gives the sense of sudden liberation; the sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; the sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art" (W. Pratt 18). These are the merits offered by cinematic techniques: camera shots directly bring the "things" to the screen from different angles and within any lengths; all the stories are presented in photographic performance except the exact title of the movies; and the inter-title is superimposed when another image appears on the screen. In a movie, there is never a "word that does not contribute to the presentation"; when the visual image is accompanied by music, the sound image is the "creation of a new orchestral counterpoint" in cinema (Eisenstein 83). In modernist poetry, the musical rhythm adds to the implication of the spoken word as far as language is concerned. T. E. Hulme maintained that real communication between human beings is made only by means of images. His belief was: "Thought is prior to language and consists in the simultaneous presentation to the mind of two different images" (cited in W. Pratt 27). These images form a "visual chord" in the mind, and can be presented to the readers or audience through the "passage from the Eye to the Voice" by cinematic techniques. Therefore, it is not surprising that modernist poets introduce cinematic techniques into their poetry. In place of a static picture on paper, the imagist poem developed into a little movie, in its visual and audio form, to challenge the older mode of perception based on sound. As a result, after 1917, imagism became a tool, which each poet could adapt to his own use.

e. e. cummings, for example, revolutionized poetry in his experiments, not only with typography, but with fragmentation and juxtaposition as well. His poem, "l (a)," cannot be read at all in the conventional way because the poem is fragmented into nonsense syllables. It is even hard for readers to identify the words in the poem as they read the poem. It seems that it is the typography that makes the poem new. Yet, this is not on the whole an explanation. As early as 1896, Stéphane Mallarmé gave his long poem, "Un Coup De Dés," typographical variations for different purposes. To evoke the reader's attention, he arranged the letterpress to run diagonally down from left to right, and to the bottom on the double page. The use of various types enables the reader to recognize the themes as they occur, with the opening and dominating themes in very large capitals. Spaces, colors, and background on the printed page comply exactly with the suggestion that the poem makes. Everything in the poem is exaggerated by the typography. The image still looks static; "'kinetic' evolves only as we turn the pages" (Abram 46).

By contrast, e. e. cummings's "l (a)" has achieved the "kinetic" effect simply by rupturing the words in a camera angle. Thus, this poem is like a silent movie, working its magic through "conveying the unsayable by showing experience beyond the reach of the words" (Cavell 152):

l (a)  
le  
af  
fa  
ll  
s)  
one  
l  
iness (Meyer 505)

Such typography opens the way for e. e. cummings to present a tiny movie of this lonely leaf. The experience of loneliness, separation, and loss, as well as the emotion of unity, "oneliness" or "oneness" is presented to the readers without speech, for there is no way to read this poem as a system of rhythmical sounds. The image of a leaf falling to the ground has evoked the reader's poignant feeling of loneliness; this feeling is so sad that it can only be conveyed by the art of the silent film: the silent scenes of the falling leaf intensify and exaggerate the independent significance of the visual image itself. Cinematically, the visual image is powerful enough to convey its meaning without sound. Thus, the inability of language to express the human emotion is presented by the unutterable syllable such as le, af, fa, ll, s, and l. Furthermore, by viewing this poem as a silent film, we get "a leaf falls" within the parentheses, and the juxtaposition of "loneliness" and "oneliness" outside the parentheses. By breaking up words and arranging them in different lines, cummings presents a visual picture of a leaf twisting and turning as it flutters to the ground; by using parentheses to separate "a leaf falls" from "loneliness" or "oneliness," cummings sets up his visual equation—that loneliness is like "a leaf falls." The idea is so simple that it hardly appears worthy of a poem. But the fragmentation and recombination of words, and skillful use of parentheses, dramatize the experience of loneliness and "oneliness." The idea of "oneliness" is realized in visual terms of fallen leaves rejoined on the ground. Thus, the falling of a leaf becomes part of a natural process of decay and rebirth. While it encapsulates a traditional and romantic idea of death and rebirth, cummings has expressed the experience in this tiny silent movie to display "what remains beyond the power of words" (Williams 204). To view the typographical form of the poem is to see a fluttering leaf turn and fall as if it were shot at different camera angles. Different sizes, shades, and colors of leaves are presented as they twist and fall. Of course, all these movements of the leaf can be achieved easily by moving the camera in a different angle. Actually, it is what Barthes called *camera lucida* that permitted "drawing an object through a prism, one eye on the model, the other on the paper" (106). As a result, we have this silent little movie on paper, in which "there can be no speech" (Cavell 148). Yet, it is an excellent visual poem. What makes the poem new or modernist is the cinematic technique of fragmentation and juxtaposition by which the poet takes static things or words on the page, sets them into motion, and presents a moving image, all characteristics of movies.

Cavell defined the medium of movies as "the medium of an art," which helps us "to understand what has in fact been achieved and accepted within the various physical bases of an art" (69). Usually, a movie consists of different shots. The shots are the basic means by which movies work. It is different shots, "a series of individual or composite frames that gives the impression continuously exposed," that help to achieve the perfection of the art. The audience watches each shot and is led by the filmmaker to assemble the shots into a conceptual or spatial whole. In his poetry, cummings achieves an effect similar to the film-

maker. By “moving the camera” in his typography—the arrangement of words and the use of space on the page in his visual poem—he achieves in a poem such as “in Just” the same effect as different shots in cinematography:

in Just-  
 spring when the world is mud-  
 luscious the little  
 lame balloonman  
 whistles far and wee  
  
 and eddieandbill come  
 running from marbles and  
 piracies and it's  
 spring  
  
 when the world is puddle-wonderful  
  
 the queer  
 old balloonman whistles  
 far and wee  
 and bettyandisbel come dancing  
 from hop-scotch and jump-rope and  
 it's  
 spring  
 and  
 the  
 goat-footed  
 balloonMan whistles  
 far  
 and  
 wee (Meyer 664)

If we analyze the repetitions of “far and wee” in terms of the movement of a camera, we can see how this poem achieves its cinematic effects. cummings presents “far and wee” through different shots: a long shot makes “far and wee” wide; a closing-up shot offers a narrow view of “far and wee”; an extreme close-up provides a vertical view of “far and wee.” Visually, the movement shifts in its direction from the horizontal to the vertical. A panning over-shot swings horizontally from the boys, “eddieandbill come running from marbles and piracies,” to the girls, “bettyandisbel come dancing from hop-scotch and jump rope,” to produce different spaces moving onto the screen, where the children are shown enjoying the pleasure the spring world offers.

Additionally, “whistle far and wee” functions as the first inter-title in this filmic poem just before the happy boys, “eddieandbill,” appear on the screen. Showing the sound in words, “whistle far and wee,” between the two images, the little lame balloonman and the happy children, the inter-title invites the audience to view the image with the whistling background. The second inter-title, “when the world is puddle wonderful,” appears before the second instance of “the queer old balloonman whistles far and wee,” and invites the

audience to judge the image rather than to view it. By combining the names, “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel,” cummings achieves the effect of intimacy among children. This intimacy can be felt inevitably and delightedly only by viewing the typeset poem. Obviously, various shots of “the balloonman whistles far and wee” are juxtaposed in the transformation of the repeated “balloonman” to produce a new perception of the relationship of human beings and nature. The setting is in spring with the balloonman appealing to the children playing in the luscious mud. The camera moves from “the little lame balloonman” in the long distance to “the queer old balloonman,” and ends up with an extreme close-up of “the goat-footed balloonMan,” a capital M, “Man,” who fills the frame. But now the “little lame balloonman” towers over the viewer. He is no longer “little” or “lame,” once the angle of the shot has revealed him in this new light. Now we see him with the same eyes as the children have always viewed him.

The “goat-footed balloonMan” is clearly associated as well with the Greek god, Pan, in Greek myth. The use of myth is one more way in which the modernist poet is able to give coherence to his work. In Greek myth, Pan is considered the paragon of fertility and rebirth, the essence of Spring. Here, the balloonman is transformed from the “little lame,” and “the queer old,” finally to the paragon of Spring, the god of woods and shepherds, who symbolizes rebirth. In this sense “the goat-footed balloonMan” also is connected with death and rebirth, the cycle of nature, and the order of seasons. In this context, the balloonMan (with Man capitalized) visually reenacts the rebirth of Man in spring. In the whole process, as Pound would say of the image in general, “a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (cited in W. Pratt 31).

In much the same way as movie audiences, readers are invited to assemble the four shots of this poem into a spatial whole. Meanwhile, they are invited to see the “balloonman” change from insignificance to significance, to see the essence of spring through sophisticated and complicated cinematic techniques. The filmic changing of the shot makes the transformation of the image possible, moving the whole transformation into the viewers’ consciousness. Viewers can only understand the transformation from the imperfection to the perfection of the balloonMan, in the spirit of spring. To understand the motion of the movie camera as it projects an outward and objective thing in the distance, does not look like much until it is brought closer. Then the viewer can clearly see the image as the spirit of perfection—the spirit of rebirth. The transformation also shifts from the adult view of “the little lame balloonman,” who is nothing special, to the perspective of the children, who see it as “the goat-footed balloonMan.” The four shots provide the viewers’ eyes only with the image of the balloonman. Viewers are prompted to see what is behind the image, as it is a prominent feature of modernism to leave further interpretation to the reader. Again in Ezra Pound’s phrase, the function of such art is “to make it new.” According to Kevin Dettmar, “making it new was to make it difficult” (1997), but cummings shows how language can be assimilated with ease to new cinematic modes of perception.

In addition to the cinematic techniques in his poem, e. e. cummings also uses the typography of his name to suggest his role as an anonymous viewer, no different from anyone else. As Eliot maintains in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Dettmar 2450). Typically, cummings uses lower type case for his name as a way of aligning himself with ordinary readers or viewers when we refer to him in his poem: “the poet e. e. cummings as everyman and anonymous” (Bloom 6). The sense of being free from personality is much the same as viewing film as “an expression of modern privacy and anonymity” (Cavell 40). Yet, the importance of film is, “A world without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality” (Cavell 160). Hence, in the relationship between his poem and himself as a poet, cummings attempts to be “everyman and anonymous.” However, his film-like poem establishes himself as a “citizen of immortality” (Bloom 6).

Like cummings, other imagist poets insist on economy, concentration, and directness. They work out their imagist principles by “beginning with a sudden striking visual image, then forming a ‘visual chord’ or pattern of colors in the mind, finally searching for exact

words to express it" (W. Pratt 32). This comes from Pound's own doctrine of the image: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." His most famous imagist poem, "In a Station of the Metro," is a crucial example of this "complex" of juxtaposition. The account of his experience of writing the poem gives us his inner process of composing the imagist poem:

In Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I would not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying, and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation [...] not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that—a "pattern," or hardly a pattern, if by "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. Nevertheless, it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour. (cited in W. Pratt 31)

Obviously, Pound wanted to precisely capture one such "single glance" when a series of beautiful faces ascended from the Paris Metro. He was overcome by the sudden emotion of seeing these lovely faces in the crowd. He wrote a 30-line poem to express his instant feeling and destroyed it because the long poem failed to present the "complex in an instant of time." Six months later he made a poem half that length<sup>3</sup>; a year later he compressed the poem into three lines, including the title:

In a Station of the Metro  
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Meyer 833)

As the title and accompanying note tell us, the Metro is the underground railroad in Paris and Paris is a metropolitan city; the title would then seem to fix the time and space of the poem in the modern world. But the visual experience of the crowd in relation to the beautiful faces touches a responsive chord in Pound's heart. The sudden emotion evokes Pound's recollected sense of classical myths. The Greek myths of Persephone, as well as Orpheus and Eurydice, come to his vision. He seems to see Persephone "playing in a glade and picking flowers." "Dis, the king of the Underworld, saw her, raped her, and carried her away to the Underworld" (Melville 111). He also feels the ghost of Eurydice, who was picking flowers when death carried her off, following her husband Orpheus upward to the light, when he looked back and condemned her to darkness (Melville 226). Both Persephone and Eurydice are women associated with flowers who now appear to the poet as ghostly "apparitions," but who also bring their ancient past into the present. The imagery in the poem allows the simultaneous explanation of different episodes, which have occurred at different times in the past, much as a film projector brings past scenes into the viewer's present.

The images, "apparition" and "petal," are juxtaposed by crosscutting with one quick shot followed by another to produce many simultaneous perceptions in the audience's mindscreen (a visual and sometimes aural field that is encoded to be generated, remembered, and perceived in the mind). The ghost-like figures in the past are part of the crowd in the present; the dead are related to the living, the objective to the subjective. The experience of a certain man in a certain place at a certain time has turned into a recovery of the world in the past now seen in a single instant. The emotion of ancient literature associated with modern life is expressed in such a short poem through two "hard and dry" images, "apparition" and "petal," whose consonants chime in unison, showing how "Imagist poems sharpen our intuition of its expressive gaps and omissions" (Whitemeyer 11). It is because a film "screen has no frame; that is to say, no border" (Chow 169), that Pound can make a mindscreen of his poem, in which time has no borders. The fact that the ancient and the modern can be presented simultaneously shows that all time is eternally present in the space of the screen-image. From the eye's point of view, according to Barthes, "the essence of the image is to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more accessible and mysterious than the thought of the inner depth of any possible meaning; unrevealed yet manifest" (106).



Finally, Pound adopts the Japanese *haiku*-like form to get a markedly “greater emphasis on the use of the eye” by bringing more than one place and time into the same scene before the viewer (cited in Brooker 34). The images in the traditional Japanese *haiku* are almost exclusively nature images, while Pound’s spiritual image, “apparition,” responds to the natural image, “petal.” The length of a *haiku* is usually three lines containing seventeen syllables, ordered into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Pound’s excellent parody in the loosened English form catches the true essence of “brevity and the distinctiveness of the image in the Japanese original” (Abram 114). The rhythm ending with the vowel sound, /au/, in the “crowd” and “black bough” is composed in the sequence of the musical phrase together with the internal rhythms of /ei/ in the “apparition” and “faces,” and the /e/ in the “petal” and “wet.” The rhythm of the poem, like the music in a movie, “invisible coming out of space” (Donald 200), enhances the power of the visual images of “apparition” and “petals” while we read and reread the poem until “the full significance of the image ha[s] communicated itself” (W. Pratt 30). Psychologically, in much the same way as film music, the rhythm also serves as “an antidote to the technologically derived ‘ghostliness’ of the images” (Gorbman 43). Thus, an impersonal relationship with the world is revealed in this little movie. In sum, the poem works in ways analogous to a movie, telling us “a story about the relationship between absence and presence, between disappearance and reappearance” (Cavell 169).

What is captured in the faces of the crowd is not very important to Pound. It is significant that the sense of sudden emotion and of being in more than one place and time is “an automatic accomplishment,” and that “the brain keeps doing its job, both reporting on and constructing the relationship of subject and object, self and world” (Kawin 45). This is made possible by juxtaposing the abstract, such as “apparition,” with the concrete, “petals,” which brings this poem close to the *haiku*. The notation for a *haiku* is only the writer’s impression of a visual object or scene without comment, which is exactly in line with the working out of the imagist principles.<sup>4</sup> However, only the cinematic technique can bring the brief images of a short poem into a full understanding, in a kind of story of how modern life is related to ancient life and ancient Greek myths. In a film, the image usually brings the past to life in this present space of the screen; it also brings differing places together in the same space. In fact, hard and dry imagism makes this poem modernist, because the images are viewed in a cinematic way. They must be projected rapidly, precisely, and economically, as film works so quickly by juxtaposing the images—one quick shot juxtaposed to another. Therefore, poetry has to stop being explanatory and descriptive in order to produce its sudden emotions.

Cinematic techniques dealing with images vary in the world of each imagist poet. William Carlos Williams does not change the shot or the camera angle, as Cummings does in “in Just.” Rather, he adopts fragmentation of lines and new juxtapositions to create a rhythm, which can then animate static images in “The Red Wheelbarrow.” It is by keeping his focus on the still objects and animating them that he produces extra meaning behind the freezing frame:

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens. (Meyer 668)

If this one-sentence poem is arranged in a linear way ("so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens"), it certainly does not have any poetic quality. By breaking down the sentence, however, and rearranging it, Williams develops a four-stanza visual poem, each stanza consisting of a long line of two feet and a short line of one foot. The four-stanza poem presents a photograph with still images of "barrow," "water," and "chickens." The images are emphasized by the narrowing focal point and the freezing frame, finding different colors for the objects. The red wheelbarrow, glazed with rainwater, and the white chickens may yield a pretty picture, but it is only a still one without life as Roland Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida*: "The photograph itself is in no way animated" (Barthes 20). To him, the myth of photographs is "the return of the dead" (9); "they are so without existential posture" (19). However, the long-and-short line in each stanza actually establishes a visual rhythm in terms of the sequence of images. Therefore, static images in the poem become animated by the rhythms of expansion and contraction, analogous to the heartbeat or the movement of breathing in and breathing out. This is what Barthes calls *animation* of photography. To him, photography with animation creates adventure. In his words, "it animates me, and I animate it," "because of [the] resemblance to human beings" (20). Rhythmically, the long-and-short line in each stanza provides the visual punctuation. At the same time, Williams's assertion of the significance of the thing is accentuated: "no idea about the thing but the thing itself" (cited in Castellitto 1).

On the one hand, a series of visual scenes freezes things on the screen, conveying the importance of each object and the possibility of meaning behind the things. The ideas are still rooted in the things themselves. On the other hand, the rhythm of reading the images, the process of expansion and contraction, brings the static images to life. As the static images are unfolded before the viewers in a heart-beating rhythm, the man-made wheelbarrow is associated with Man, water with Nature, chicken with animals. Then, a whole system of order, a combination of a whole way of life, is presented to readers or viewers, where life itself is presented as a harmonious combination of man, the elements, and animals. Yet, as George P. Castellitto notes, the unique rhythm that the imagist poet employs is similar to the cinematic rhythm of suspending and freezing an image on the screen. The cinematographer likewise employs juxtaposition and arrangement of the objects in a seemingly narrative and decorative way; both delve into the "thing itself," a movement from one object to another, from a concrete thing to an underlying emotion and theme. It is a kind of creation of movement out of stasis (Castellitto 27). This is exactly what Pound has advocated for the imagist poets: "concentration, creativity in rhythm, and avoidance of unnecessary decoration" (cited in Castellitto 27). Of course, no poet merely attempts to present a still life in a picture with words, even though "writing deals with words and words only" (cited in Steinman 404). What Williams does is to use the reader's rhythm as a projector for his image, much as Cummings uses typography as an instrument for changing camera angles. Williams is trying to record the precise meaning of the images when, as Pound put it, "outward and objective things become an inward and subjective thing."

In contrast to W. C. Williams, Wallace Stevens juxtaposes scenes from two different rooms in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." By repeating a final line in these two different settings, we get two scenes sharply distinguished: enjoyment of life and mourning of death:

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspaper.  
Let be be finale of seem.<sup>5</sup>  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once

And spread it so as to cover her face.  
 If her horny feet protrude, they come  
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
 Let the lamp affix its beam.  
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (Meyer 853)

In a movie, the setting helps to define the tone and mood of a scene; it also plays an important role in characterization. In this poem, Stevens characterizes "the Emperor of Ice-cream" in terms of binary structures. He sets ice-cream in two opposite settings: a party and a funeral. Seeing the ice-cream in a setting with "big cigars," "flowers," "wenches," and "boys," all of whom are smoking, eating, and dawdling in the kitchen, we get a feeling of sweetness, a sense that pleasure is the only power. Placing "ice-cream" in a setting where "horny feet protrude," and a "sheet is spread so as to cover her face," however, clearly associates "ice-cream" with coldness: death is the only power. Two different scenes are juxtaposed to create a new meaning: how to live a life in the face of death.

Juxtaposing these opposite scenes, Stevens uses a similar form in each stanza to bring together two differing images, which are united, in one repeated phrase: "the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." The similar imperative sentences in the two stanzas are employed to invite the audience to participate in the transformation from reality to imagination so that they can better understand life: life can be as sweet as ice-cream and it can also be as cold as ice-cream. The sweetness and coldness are juxtaposed and united in the repetition of the same concluding line to produce a kind of philosophy of life. When these two opposite scenes with two different images are brought together by the same concluding line, there is a dialectic tension between reality and imagination: the reality is that life is of equal value to everyone; while imagination makes life different. Imagination of ice-cream as a metaphor of life is presented to the audience by setting images in different scenes separated by the white space between the two stanzas, which seems like an inter-title in the cinematic sequence. The white space as an inter-title without words, which appears just before the image of death, functions both as the description of the bleakness of life and the transition of shots. In this sense, Stevens is a cameraman as well as an imagist poet.

From the cinematic perspective, we see that imagist poetry conveys meanings in the same way as does a movie: fragmentation, juxtaposition, various shots, and sequence of crosscutting and editing. There are the same principles of the "picture in motion" in e. e. cummings's, Pound's, Williams's and Stevens's poems, although Williams uses rhythm to animate the picture; cummings, the movement of the camera; Pound, the rapid shot and mindscreen; and Stevens, the same image placed in two different settings. Film techniques thus provide us with the means to know what we know and how we know it. As Chow notes, film offers us "new modes of seeing and showing" and confirms "the predominance of modes of relativity and relations" (170). Such techniques do add charm, but also new insight, to modernist poetry. On the one hand, modernist poetry announces the death of pure poetry, which, "in the pure sense of the term is certain 'sounds'" (Croce 22). By introducing symbolic and pictorial forms and shapes into poetry, French poets such as Mallarmé and Apollinaire, have created visual poetry, which has given a new birth to the genre of poetry. Furthermore, visual poetry has influenced Cubist artists such as Picasso, Braque, and Gris. In return, the Cubist revolution in visual artistic expression has spurred an alternative of thought throughout all artistic expression, including poetry, prose, sculpture, theatre, and cinema. Surrealism takes the pure psychic automatism, by which it intends to express, verbally in writing, and visually in staging, the real process of thought. When the English and American poets Eliot, Pound, cummings, Williams, and Stevens develop the visual arts into kinetic arts with cinematic techniques, modernist poetry really has sharpened and intensified our awareness of the complexity of existence in the world from fragmentation of perspective and in artistic expression.

On the other hand, the fragmentary worldview of perspective has spread across the whole period of modernism and found its expressions in various arts. Modernist poets have rejected the single point of view of the subject by disrupting language into both sound images

and visual images to present their subject audibly and visually; cubist artists have fragmented their subject into planes and reconstructed it into an interlocking pattern; surrealists have depicted their subject matter not as the eye but as the deep mind sees the subject. The avant-garde artists have broken away from the conventions in their fields and have established their own expressions to interact with the changing subject. They help us to understand better the complexity of the world by presenting many perspectives of the subject. Yet, the cinematic approach has brought fragments of time and space relatively into a literary spatial form so that readers can assemble pictures of human existence from different perspectives.

Ying Kong  
University of Manitoba

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have taught some of the poems discussed in this essay in China. I never associated them with cinematic techniques until I heard Dr. David Williams, who teaches literature at the University of Manitoba, talk about cinematic influences in modernism. His cinematic approach provides a new theoretical insight into modernist poetry, too. More significantly, it aroused my interest in poetry, which I thought too difficult to teach. I would like to thank Dr. Williams for his generous suggestions and enthusiastic support in the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Willard Bohn provides an interesting discussion of how Apollinaire modernizes the ideogram in his *Modern Visual Poetry*. He thinks the structure of Apollinaire's poems is similar to Chinese calligraphy. The limited effects that the printer could achieve make Apollinaire abandon typography for more fluid forms (31-51).

<sup>3</sup> According to the typescript of various translations of the William Bird Ezra Pound Papers provided by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, the translation of "In a Station of the Metro" exists as follows:

#### A LA GARE DU METRO

Le spectacle de ces faces dans la foule :  
Petales sur une branche [scratched out], [     ].  
   toute noir,     trempee.

   [     ]  
Qu'es tu donc que les chansons du mond entier  
Soient eparpillees a tes pieds  
Te laissant sans consolation

   Tel qu  
Qui donc; pour que / on rentre les bles

Tu ramasses les epis des erreurs  
Et en portes le fardeau, [     ]  
O Dame des douleurs / et des peines  
Sans honte.

Tous les ames     sous les tenebres  
Qui passent comme des points de flamme  
Tous     passent     une a une  
Tels que des Christs pour racheter et mourir  
Le mal que l'un a seme  
Est recolte par l'autre  
Nul homme ne porte sa peine  
Mais beaucoup de peines  
S' amthassent en brouillard sur la chemin  
   route

Des humains .

(WILLIAM BIRD EZRA POUND PAPERS YCAL MSS 178, Box 3, Folder 120)

<sup>4</sup> In his *The Imagist Poem*, William Pratt summarizes the principles: beginning with a sudden striking visual image, then the forming of a "visual cord" or pattern of colors in the mind, then the search for the exact words to express it, the deliberate effort at concentration, and finally the use of a foreign poetic model to produce the crystallization that becomes the finished poem (32).

## 40/Cinematic Techniques in Modernist Poetry

<sup>5</sup> "The true sense of Let be the finale of seem is letting being become the conclusion or denouement of appearing to be: in short, ice-cream is an absolute good. The poem is obviously not about ice-cream, but about being as distinguished from seeming to be." See Wallace Stevens, *Letters* 341.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1999.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1981.
- Bloom, Clive. Introduction. *American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal*. Eds. Clive Bloom and Brian Docherty. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. 1-9.
- Bohn, Willard. *Modern Visual Poetry*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2001.
- Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915*. Vol. 2. New York: Scribner's, 1990.
- Brooker, Peter, and Simon Perril. "Modernist Poetry and its Precursors." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Ed. Neil Roberts. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. 21-36.
- Castellitto, George P. "Imagism and Martin Scorsese: Images suspended and extended." *Literature Film Quarterly* 26.1 (1998): 23-30.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed*. New York: Viking, 1971.
- Chow, Rey. "Film and Cultural Identity." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 169-75.
- Croce, Benedetto. *The Defense of Poetry: Variations on the Theme of Shelley*. Trans. E. F. Carritt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1933.
- Dettmar, Kevin, and Jennifer Wicke, eds. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Twentieth Century*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999.
- Donald, James, and Anne Friedberg, eds. *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.
- Eisenstein, S. M. "The Sound Film." *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*. Eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg and Laura Marcus. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. 83-86.
- Gorbman, Claudia. "Film Music." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. 43-50.
- Kawin, Bruce F. *How Movies Work*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1992.
- Melville, A. D., trans. *Ovid: Metamorphoses*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Meyer, Michael, ed. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1990.
- Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976.
- Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film*. Rochester: U of Rochester P, 1966.
- Pratt, William. *The Imagist Poem*. New York: Dutton, 1963.
- Showalter, Elaine. Introduction and Notes. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Ed. Stella McNichol. New York: Penguin, 1992. xi-xlviii.
- Steinman, Lisa M. "William Carlos Williams: *Spring and All*." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. 403-13.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Letters*. New York: Knopf, 1960.
- Whitemeyer, Hugh. "Modernism and the Transatlantic Connection." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. 7-20.
- Williams, David. *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal & London: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003.