

**Poetry and the Arts (ENG 266)**  
**Professor Jeff Dolven**

**Readings for Monday (3/28)**

None (just the exercise).

**Readings for Wednesday (3/30)**

Anne Carson, "H and A Screenplay" (you can read about the story of Heloise and Abelard [here](#))  
Frank O'Hara, "Ave Maria"

Plus:

Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, and Willard Maas, "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium"  
Viktor Shklovsky, "Poetry and Prose in Cinema"

(A note on "Poetry and the Film": a transcription of a symposium held in 1953, it features a piercingly intelligent female filmmaker, Maya Deren, in conversation with some men, in particular Dylan Thomas and Arthur Miller, who do not exactly rise to the challenge. You can get most everything you'd want to think with from reading Deren's contribution, but the whole exchange might make a good movie in the right hands...)

**Exercise (due Sunday 3/27 at 5 PM)**

Choreograph a poem (or a portion of a poem; at least one line) that we have read this semester. You can submit your choreography in any medium or format: as text, score, video, or another of your choice. As usual, your submission should be accompanied by a brief essay describing what you have done and why.

H & A S C R E E N P L A Y

S C E N E 1

*Back lawn, smeared moon.*

*Abelard stands.*

*Heloise stands.*

*Chair (near Heloise).*

Abelard: I made Heloise stand up.

*Heloise sits down.*

I made Heloise sit down.

*Heloise stands up.*

Four minutes to one.

*Heloise sits down.*

Start with the bone.

*Heloise stands up.*

She couldn't stay.

*Heloise sits down.*

She could not go on.

*Heloise stands up.*

I made Heloise stand up.

*Heloise sits down.*

I made Heloise sit down.

*Heloise stands up.*

And moreover I was able  
to quote a variety of scriptures pertaining to this.

This changing of Heloise.  
For example  
*the king's daughter is all glory within. . . .*  
Can bone be changed?  
Yes bone can be changed.  
How can bone be changed?  
By removing it.

*Heloise picks up her chair, walks off, Abelard follows her with his eyes  
and then yells to the empty lawn.*

*Scratta! Scrupeda! Strittabilla! Sordida!*

S C E N E 2

*Heloise goes down to hell. Close-up on Heloise's face, talking quietly to herself as the world flies past.*

Heloise: Hell is nothing unusual.  
Hell is exactly the same as Heloise's life  
except  
no Abelard.  
Abelard never existed.  
Abelard never will exist.  
Hell you know is outside time.  
Still the absence of time divides itself perpetually  
into the one same moment  
(repeat)—  
moment of her realizing *no Abelard*, moment  
which exports his being outward  
from her idea of it  
into  
nothing—one  
same smooth cold lurch of the rod  
of her idea  
into a groove of nothing,  
(repeat)  
(repeat)  
(repeat) although

you might say  
that the overall fact of her idea of him constituted  
a bit of existence for Abelard right there  
no matter how reliably it  
inserts itself into the clear plastic cover  
of a particular negation (repeat)—a point  
Heloise would love to have argued  
with the *magister* of Paris himself, whose theory of universals  
was a bit of embroidery between them  
since earliest days of seduction and study,  
*had he existed*—  
Lurch.  
Click.  
Film this however you like.  
Important to make it look different from the following  
scene  
where Heloise returns from hell to her  
same life.  
How to subtract hell:  
faintly.

S C E N E 3

*Heloise goes down to hell.*

*We see her appear at an upper window,  
step out and sheer toward the ground,  
her clothes long white gusts around her.  
Perhaps she repeats this.  
Fade between.*

S C E N E 4

*Heloise returns from hell.*

*Smell of sidewalks after night rain.  
In the windows we see women waiting.  
Upstairs are others waiting.  
There is a black and white cat who strolls on the sidewalk, stops.*

S C E N E 5

*Heloise and Abelard are parked on the edge of a gravel road, hot night, no wind.*

Why do you fight?

To fight.

If it's a reward you want—

No.

Or do I frighten you—

No.

Whatever the case, I take the road that I take.

Can I touch you?

No.

So what now?

Discipline!

Ah.

Contemplation!

Hmm.

*Blessed are the ransomed of the living God.*

Abelard you dull me. But don't stop.

I shall give you a prayer.

Fine.

Compose a prayer for you.

Do that.

You can repeat it morning and evening.

I'll hide your name in every word.



Just say it.

Okay.

Let us use Psalm 84—

*My soul longeth my soul fainteth my heart and my flesh crieth out—*

Exactly.

I welcome your healing, Abelard.

You are not incurable.

Do you want me to be someone else.

I want you to be nothing.

Metaphysically difficult.

Heloise don't bait me.

*Purple flash bounces through the car.*

*Lightning! says Heloise.*

*Police! says Abelard.*

*He shoves a pile of books and papers onto her lap and turns to roll down the window on the driver's side.*

SCENE 6

*Frame contains a black steering wheel and two hands in short white gloves.  
Voice-over Heloise.*

Answer  
only  
what he asks stay  
away  
from the  
backwall keep low keep  
dry keep his respect. Heloise talks  
to herself where Heloise has  
to where  
the soul oh  
Heloise  
where the  
soul with its soft  
edges  
cuts

into

the  
sharp  
body.

S C E N E 7

*Heloise and Abelard at the kitchen table in a slow August kitchen spearing chunks of watermelon from a plate with forks.*

Hot day.

It is.

Supposed to be hot tomorrow too.

Really.

Hot as today I bet.

Oh no.

That's what they say.

Hard to imagine.

Couldn't be this hot two days in a row you think.

Well I hope not.

But then why couldn't it.

I don't know.

I mean it's August.

Good point.

The hot season.

True enough.

Like it or not.

Not.

You know I wonder about those leftovers.

What about them.

Will they last.

Last.  
In this heat.  
Oh.  
I wonder.  
Well they're in the fridge.  
But still.  
Do you want any more watermelon.  
No go ahead.  
Just one piece left.  
It's yours.  
I love this colour.  
You mean watermelon.  
Red flesh black seeds.  
It's two colours.  
Yes.  
Hot colours.  
No cool.  
You think so.  
I do.

S C E N E 8

*What Heloise thinks on an ordinary day.*

Here comes another blank one.

*What Heloise thinks on special days.*

How lips work.

S C E N E 9

*Heloise's motel room (outside the window a Best Western sign) furnished in tones of beige and brown with red silk pillows here and there.*

*Heloise is backing away from the door as Abelard enters.*

*Throughout the first part of this scene Heloise speaks to Abelard (he does not answer) while holding one of the red silk pillows against her body.*

What do you want?

Are you unwell?

Depressed?

Need money?

Have a bad dream?

*The room is silent.*

*A wind moves outside.*

*The door rustles on its hinge.*

*Heloise whips the red silk pillow hard at him.*

*The pillow hits him and falls to the carpet.*

*He looks at the pillow, bends, picks it up, tosses it back to her.*

*She holds the pillow a moment.  
Whips it at him again.  
He bends, recovers and tosses it back.  
She whips it at him again.  
He tosses it back.  
Whips it.  
Tosses it.  
Whips it.  
Tosses it.  
Whips it.  
Tosses it.  
Whips it.  
Tosses it.  
She screams. Turns away, replaces the pillow on the bed, stands with her back to him.*

You always win Abelard : it's not God who wins, but you.

S C E N E 1 0

*Heloise and Abelard are seated side by side on swings in a playground.*

I feel bad.

Why?

Our film is almost over and we haven't explained anything.

It's a documentary.

So?

Has no thesis.

Here I come! *She stretches her arms out straight. I'm a thesis! Soars out of frame.*

What did you wish to explain?

The darkness, for one thing.

It's true I don't know how to light a film.

That's an understatement.

Well I grew up in tenements.

Should have shot the film there.

I think the building is gone.

Where was it?

Down by the river.

Really.

It's a skating rink now.

That would have been nice.

You like skating?

I like the sounds the smells.

Me too.



Never got very good though.  
Takes practice.  
Takes a lot of practice.  
Practice with the same partner.  
Well yes.  
One person has to learn to go backwards all the time.  
Don't they each go backwards?  
You mean alternately?  
Yes going one way then the other.  
No there's a turn.  
Oh.  
They turn and go back.  
Oh.  
That's why it looks elegant.  
I guess I missed the turn.  
It's the turn gives it symmetry.  
That turn fooled me.  
It's quick on skates.  
Looks so free.  
Heloise.  
What?  
I have to leave now.  
No.  
Yes.

The camera is still running.

My time is up.

What shall I—?

*Abelard has let go his swing and flies out of the frame without answering.*

*Heloise continues to swing.*

S C E N E 11

*In the mild dawn a row of women is picking chickpeas on the banks of a river.*

**Snap snap**

*go the chickpeas into the little buckets. Women slide forward in river grass  
with a wet shshshsh. Their bending backs tremble the day. Heloise is last in line.  
The motion is very small.*

**Snap snap**

*a sound falls through that day.  
No one approaches on the road, no one departs.*

where's Lana Turner  
she's out eating  
and Garbo's backstage at the Met  
everyone's taking their coat off  
so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers  
and the park's full of dancers with their tights and shoes  
in little bags  
who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the West Side Y  
why not  
the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won  
and in a sense we're all winning  
we're alive

the apartment was vacated by a gay couple  
who moved to the country for fun  
they moved a day too soon  
even the stabbings are helping the population explosion  
though in the wrong country  
and all those liars have left the U N  
the Seagram Building's no longer rivalled in interest  
not that we need liquor (we just like it)

and the little box is out on the sidewalk  
next to the delicatessen  
so the old man can sit on it and drink beer  
and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day  
while the sun is still shining

oh god it's wonderful  
to get out of bed  
and drink too much coffee  
and smoke too many cigarettes  
and love you so much

AVE MARIA

Mothers of America

let your kids go to the movies!  
get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to  
it's true that fresh air is good for the body

but what about the soul  
 that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images  
 and when you grow old as grow old you must  
 they won't hate you  
 they won't criticize you they won't know  
 they'll be in some glamorous country  
 they first saw on a Saturday afternoon or playing hookey  
 they may even be grateful to you  
 for their first sexual experience  
 which only cost you a quarter  
 and didn't upset the peaceful home  
 they will know where candy bars come from  
 and gratuitous bags of popcorn  
 as gratuitous as leaving the movie before it's over  
 with a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg  
 near the Williamsburg Bridge  
 oh mothers you will have made the little tykes  
 so happy because if nobody does pick them up in the movies  
 they won't know the difference  
 and if somebody does it'll be sheer gravy  
 and they'll have been truly entertained either way  
 instead of hanging around the yard  
 or up in their room  
 hating you  
 prematurely since you won't have done anything horribly mean yet  
 except keeping them from the darker joys  
 it's unforgivable the latter  
 so don't blame me if you won't take this advice  
 and the family breaks up  
 and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set  
 seeing  
 movies you wouldn't let them see when they were young

TO MUSIC OF PAUL BOWLES

Dear Bill I think it was very nice of you to have me  
 for spaghetti and meatballs and champagne  
 and is very nice  
 to read *History II* and *Hat* which previously hadn't been finished  
 and TV is not superior, though a comfort

Bancroft

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# POETRY AND THE FILM: A SYMPOSIUM

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WITH MAYA DEREN, ARTHUR  
MILLER, DYLAN THOMAS,  
PARKER TYLER. CHAIRMAN,  
WILLARD MAAS. ORGANIZED  
BY AMOS VOGEL

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[On October 28, 1953, Cinema 16 held two sessions of a symposium with Maya Deren, Parker Tyler, Dylan Thomas, and Arthur Miller. Willard Maas acted as chairman. The following excerpts make up about one half of the symposium. Ideas repeated for the second audience and personal introductions of the panel make up, for the most part, the missing half.]

*Maas:* In a prepanel discussion earlier this week with the majority of the panel, we decided that maybe the best way to start this discussion would be to try to have the members of the panel outline . . . some of the basic aesthetic principles of the poetic film; and, therefore, I think I would like to call on Mr. Tyler first. . . .

*Tyler:* Thank you. My thought was that the question, rather than the assumption, by which the symposium will proceed tonight is that of what poetry, in and outside the film, actually is. Perhaps it would be necessary, for such a demonstration, to conceive the question at the start, and honestly, as faced with the two horns of a dilemma. Now that dilemma is: On the one hand, there's the *theory*

of poetry, its possibilities as such in the film medium, and on the other hand the *practice* of poetry, as concentrated in the avant-garde film. It should be hoped that we don't snag on either of these but will steer a just course between them. Now I thought we might get an over-all picture of the field to be surveyed, and to that end I'd like to give you a memorandum, so to speak, of the types of poetical expression that do appear in films today; that is, these expressions may be whole or fragmentary, they may be pure or impure, but at least they exist, and they are to be recognized as such. Now, poetical expression falls rather automatically into two groups: that is, poetry as a visual medium and poetry as a verbal medium, or, in a larger sense, as auditory, and that would, of course, include music. We might well begin with some of the shorter films that concentrate on poetry as a visual medium, and this, of course, leads right to Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*, and to Buñuel-Dali's *Andalusian Dog*, and to Watson's *Lot in Sodom*. All these are classics now, and they emphasized a surrealist poetry of the image and gave rise to schools and styles of avant-garde all over the world. Cinema 16 patrons are familiar with some of these outstanding works—those of Maya Deren, of James Broughton, of Kenneth Anger, of Curtis Harrington. All these film-makers concentrated on what might be called pure cinema—entirely without words as a rule, although sometimes with music. Then to go back (after all, the avant-garde movement in poetry in America goes rather far back, at least to the 1920's) I know there was a type of film which got the name of cine-poem, and these films were impressionistic, but they concentrated on pictorial conceptions of city life, of nature, and, importantly, they stressed abstract patterns. Then, of course, there's the poetry of painting in motion—the pure abstract film—which also has a considerable history (there are Norman McLaren, the Whitney brothers, and many others). Then, also as a candidate in this list (perhaps disputable, but at any rate certainly worth mentioning), a school of naturalistic poetry of which Robert Flaherty was the pioneer. And we presume that his films can be considered integral without the commentary. And, finally, I would include the dream and hallucination sequences, with sound effects sometimes, that appear in commercial films.

Now poetry as a visual-verbal medium: We have the fantasy films of Jean Vigo (these films are primarily visual); and we have the avant-garde films that are set to poems or to poetic prose (those of Sidney Peterson, of Willard Maas, of Ian Hugo); then there's what I would term the "severe formalism" of Sergei Eisenstein, whose

montage borders on pure poetry. There are, of course, the Cocteau myth films: *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Eternal Return*, and *Orpheus*. And we might also include a special class of naturalistic poetry documents, such as *The River* and *The Blood of the Beasts* . . . of course they had commentary. And, then, to conclude, the fifty-fifty fusion; that is, Shakespeare's plays, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and the numerous operas that have been filmed. Now these are, admittedly, only the main leads of a very broad field, indeed. Many definitions are required in order to isolate the poetic content and the poetic potentialities in these various manifestations . . . Above all, there's the indications of value that have to be made. I'm sure that the members of the panel, including myself, have a number of significant distinctions and perhaps even more important opinions on these aspects.

*Maas*: Well, Miss Deren, will you take over from there?

*Deren*: I'm going to do something I think is a bit risky, and that is to go a little bit into the question of what is poetry, and what distinguishes what we would call poetry from anything else, because I think that only if we can get this straight, can we sensibly discuss poetry in film, or the poetic film, or anything else. Now I say that it's risky, because this is a subject that has been discussed for many, many centuries, and it's been very difficult to pin down. But the reason I'm going into it is not because I think distinctions are important as formulae and as rigidities, but I think they're important in the sense that they give an audience, or any *potential* audience, a preparation, an approach, to what they're going to see. In the sense that if they're thinking they are going to see an adventure film, and if they are confronted with a poetic film, that's not going to go very well. I don't think one is always predisposed toward poetry; the whole notion of distinguishing and, if you will, labeling things is not a matter of defining them so much as a matter of giving a clue to the frame of mind you bring to them. In other words, what are you going to be watching as this unrolls? What are you going to be listening for? If you're watching for *what* happens, you might not get the point of some of the retardations because they're concerned with *how* it happens. Now poetry, to my mind, consists not of assonance; or rhythm, or rhyme, or any of these other qualities we associate as being characteristic of poetry. Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience, in the sense that a poet is looking at the same experience that a dramatist may be looking at. It comes out differently because they are looking at it from a different point of view and because they are concerned with

different elements in it. Now, the characteristics of poetry, such as rhyme, or color, or any of those emotional qualities which we attach to the poetic work, also may be present in works which are not poetry, and this will confuse us. The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by "a poetic structure"), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, 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. A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms for something that is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I would call the "vertical" attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the "horizontal" attack of drama, which is concerned with the development, let's say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling. Perhaps it would be made most clear if you take a Shakespearean work that combines the two movements. In Shakespeare, you have the drama moving forward on a "horizontal" plane of development, of one circumstance—one action—leading to another, and this delineates the character. Every once and a while, however, he arrives at a point of action where he wants to illuminate the meaning to *this* moment of drama, and, at that moment, he builds a pyramid or investigates it "vertically," if you will, so that you have a "horizontal" development with periodic "vertical" investigations, which are the poems, which are the monologues. Now if you consider it this way, then you can think of any kind of combination being possible. You can have operas where the "horizontal" development is virtually unimportant—the plots are very silly, but they serve as an excuse for stringing together a number of arias that are essentially lyric statements. Lieder are, in singing, comparable to the lyric poems, and you can see that all sorts of combinations would be possible.

It seems to me that in many films, very often in the opening passages, you get the camera establishing the mood, and, when it does that, cinematically, those sections are quite different from the rest of the film. You know, if it's establishing New York, you get a montage of images, that is, a poetic construct, after which what follows is a dramatic construct that is essentially "horizontal" in its development. The same thing would apply to the dream sequences. They occur at a moment when the intensification is carried out not by action but by the illumination of that moment. Now the short

films, to my mind (and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time), are comparable to lyric poems, and they are completely a "vertical," or what I would call a poetic construct, and they are complete as such. One of the combinations that would be possible would be to have a film that is a dramatic construct, visually, accompanied by a commentary that is essentially poetic; that is, it illuminates the moments as they occur, so that you have a chain of moments developing, and each one of them is illuminated. It's things of this sort that, I believe, occur in the work of Mr. Maas, who has done that to a certain extent in his last film, *Image in the Snow*, where the development of the film is very largely "horizontal," that is, there is a story line, but this is illuminated constantly by the poetic commentary so that you have two actions going on simultaneously. Now this, I think, is one of the great potentials of film and something that could very well be carried and developed much further, and I think that one of the distinctions of that film and also of *Geography of the Body*, is that it combines these principles. I think that this is a way of handling poetry *and* film, and poetry *in* film . . . I don't know how the other people feel about it.

*Maas:* Well, Mr. Thomas, being a poet, what do you feel about it?

*Thomas:* Well, I'm sure that all Maya Deren said was what I would have said, had I thought of it or understood it (*laughter and slight applause*). I was asked, on the side, whether that meant that I thought that the audience didn't understand what Miss Deren was saying. I'm sure they did, and I wish I was down there. But it sounds different from that side, you know. Now I'm all for (I'm in the wrong place tonight) . . . I'm all for horizontal and vertical (laughter), and all for what we heard about in the avant-garde. The only avant-garde play I saw in New York was in a cellar, or a sewer, or somewhere (laughter). I happened to be with Mr. Miller over there. We saw this play going on . . . I'm sure it was fine. And, in the middle, he said, "Good God, this is avant-garde." He said, "In a moment, the hero's going to take his clothes off . . ."

*Maas:* Did he?

*Thomas:* He did. (*Laughter.*)

*Maas:* All to the good.

*Thomas:* But I don't know. I haven't a theory to my back, as they say. But there are, all through films that I've seen all my life . . . there have always been . . . bits that have seemed to me . . . Now, this is a bit of poetry. They might have been in the UFA films or something that I saw as a child. Or somebody coming



down some murderous dark, dark, silent street, apart from the piano playing. Or it might have been a little moment when Laurel and Hardy were failing to get a piano up or down a flight of stairs. That always seemed to me the poetry . . . when those moments came. Well, I have to go a step beyond those UFA films, now, to the non-silent films. In the best of those moments, the words seemed to fit. They were really the right words, even though the right word might only be a grunt. I'm not at all sure that I want such a thing, myself, as a poetic film. I think films, fine as they are, if only they were better! And I'm not quite sure that I want a new kind of film at all. While I'm recharging an almost empty mind with an almost empty battery, perhaps Mr. Miller would say something. (*Applause.*)

*Maas:* Well, I don't think I'll let it go at that, Mr. Thomas. Surely you must realize that the film is a popular medium, and you, more than anybody else, have tried to bring poetry to the public from the platform. Don't you think, in the popular art, in the way that the Elizabethan theater was a popular art, don't you think it would be possible in some way to weld poetry to the film? Do you think that it's just a verbal thing? That it would not be possible in the way that Elizabethan drama somehow welded language to the film?

*Thomas:* Well, just as a poem comes out . . . one image makes another in the ordinary dialectic process (somebody left out the word "dialectic," well I may as well bring it in, you know). So, as in a poem one image breeds another, I think, in a film, it's really the visual image that breeds another—breeds and breathes it. If it's possible to combine a verbal image to a visual image in this sort of horizontal way, I'd rather see horizontal films, myself. I like stories. You know, I like to see something going on (laughter and applause).

*Maas:* I shouldn't be saying anything; I'm the moderator. So, Mr. Miller, you talk about it.

*Miller:* Well, there've been about forty different ideas that have come across this table. It seems to me that to create a poetic film is, at bottom, the same problem as the drama presents when you contrast what is normally called naturalism with what is generally called a poetic drama. The only criticism I would have of such a discussion as this is that it is not tied to what anybody wishes to say. If I'm speaking to you now with a reasonable amount of confusion, I will sound confused, and I will speak in this tone of voice. If, on the other hand, I was clearly imbued with something very emotionally important to me, I would start speaking in a different rhythm. I would possibly use some images and so forth, so that to speak in

the blue without reference to our lives, without references really to the age in which we live, about this problem is an endless talk. Ah, that's the first place. On the question of technique, there's one obvious thing to me: The motion picture image is an overwhelming fact; it is different from any other experience we have in the arts because it is so much larger than we are. The possibility for the poet or the writer to tell a story or to transmit an emotion in their films, it seem to me, is contained within the image, so that I'm afraid, even though I'm much in sympathy with Willard's desire to join poetic speech with images, that, possibly, in the long run, it will be discovered to be a redundancy—that the poetry is in the film just as it is in the action of the play first. I was gratified to see that the poet's poet, T. S. Eliot, not long ago said as much, that, after pushing the drama around on his desk for many years, he had come to the conclusion that if the structure of the drama was not complete and beautiful, nothing he could do in the way of technical manipulation of words could get him out of the hole. I think, at bottom, that the structure of the film is the structure of the man's mind who made it, and if that is a mind that is striving for effect because it is striving for effect, the film will be empty, however interesting it happens to be on the surface. If it is a mind that has been able to organize its own experience, and if that experience is cohesive and of one piece, it will be a poetic film. Mr. Thomas has said, as (Mr. Tyler) has said, too, that the commercial film is full of poetic things because, at certain moments, in almost any poor structure, certain accidental qualities come into synchronization, so to speak, where, as in life sometimes, one needs only to drop a package of cigarettes, and the world explodes. Symbolic action is the point of all organization in the drama as well as in the film. To get back to the first proposition again . . . I think that it would be profitable to speak about the special nature of any film, of the fact of images unwinding off a machine. Until that's understood, and I don't know that it's understood (I have some theories about it myself), we can't begin to create, on a methodical basis, an aesthetic for that film. We don't understand the psychological meaning of images—any images—coming off a machine. There are basic problems, it seems to me, that could be discussed here. I've probably added no end to the confusion, but that's what I have to say at the moment. (*Applause.*)

*Maas:* Well, it seems to me that we have to start thinking about the image—the visual image and the verbal image. Can they be welded in some way?

*Miller:* I think that the basis for my remarks is perhaps almost

physiological. I think that the reason why it seems to many of us that the silent film is the purest film and the best is because it mimics the way we dream. We mostly dream silent, black and white. A few of us claim to dream in technicolor, but that's disputed by psychologists. It's sort of a boast: Certain people want to have more expensive dreams . . . I think that the film is the closest mechanical or aesthetic device that man has ever made to the structure of the dream. In a dream, montage is of the essence, as a superimposition of images in a dream is quite ordinary. The cutting in a dream is from symbolic point to symbolic point. No time is wasted. There is no fooling around between one important situation and the most important moment in the next situation. It seems to me that if we looked at the physiology of the film, so to speak, and the psychology of the film, the way it actually turns off the machine, we begin to get the whole question of style and the whole question of aesthetics changing when one sees it that way. In other words, sound in films and speech seem, perhaps, like the redundancy they so often are in films. I'll just leave it at that for the moment; maybe somebody else will have something to say about it.

*Maas:* Maya, I'm sure you have something to say about it.

*Deren:* If everyone will forgive me, Mr. Miller has made several references to "the way it comes out of the machine," he obviously hasn't made a film because first you have to put it in the machine, and that's awfully hard. It does begin before the machine. And it begins in the mind of the creator. And your reference to montage, and so on, is, if I may be permitted to return to my "vertical"—that is, the relationship between the images in dreams, in montage, and in poetry—is . . . they are related because they are held together by either an emotion or a meaning that they have in common, rather than by the logical action. In other words, it isn't that one action leads to another action (this is what I would call a "horizontal" development), but they are brought to a center, gathered up, and collected by the fact that they all refer to a common emotion, although the incidents themselves may be quite disparate. Whereas, in what is called a "horizontal" development, the logic is a logic of actions. In a "vertical" development, it is a logic of a central emotion or idea that attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core, which they have in common. This, to me, is the structure of poetry, so that, for example, you could have a dramatic development, in the sense of a "horizontal" development, for a while, as I said, in Shakespeare, and let us take the monologues where, in a poetic or a "vertical" structure, he brings

together all various images that relate to the feeling, let us say, of indecision. Now what I mean there by being essentially a "horizontal" development, is that it would have sufficed for Hamlet to say, "I can't make up my mind," and that's all, and that would not have affected the drama of the play, do you see? The poetic monologue there is, as it were, outside it or built upon it as a pyramid at that point as a means of intensifying that moment in the "horizontal" development. That is why film, I believe, lends itself particularly to the poetic statement, because it is essentially a montage and, therefore, seems by its very nature to be a poetic medium.

*Miller:* That's why I'm wondering whether the words are at all necessary, you see. Because the nature of the thing itself is so condensed. It would be like adding music to Hamlet's soliloquies.

*Deren:* May I answer that? The words are not necessary when they come, as in the theater, from what you see. You see, the way the words are used in films mostly derives from the theatrical tradition in which what you see makes the sound you hear. And so, in that sense, they would be redundant in film if they were used as a further projection from the image. However, if they were brought in on a different level, not issuing from the image, which should be complete in itself, but as another dimension relating to it, then it is the two things together that make the poem. It's almost as if you were standing at a window and looking out into the street, and there are children playing hopscotch. Well, that's your visual experience. Behind you, in the room, are women discussing hats or something, and that's your auditory experience. You stand at the place where these two come together by virtue of your presence. What relates these two moments is your position in relation to the two of them. They don't know about each other, and so you stand by the window and have a sense of afternoon, which is neither the children in the street nor the women talking behind you but a curious combination of both, and that is your resultant image, do you see? And this is possible in film because you can put a track on it.

*Miller:* I understand the process, but you see, in the drama there was a time, as you know, when action was quite rudimentary, and the drama consisted of a chorus which told the audience, in effect, what happened. Sometimes, it developed into a thespian coming forward and imitating action such as we understand action today. Gradually, the drama grew into a condition where the chorus fell away, and all of its comment was incorporated into the action. Now for good or ill, that was the development of the drama. I'm wonder-

ing now whether it's moot, whether it's to any point, to arrange a scenario so that it is necessary (and if it isn't necessary, of course it's aesthetically unwarranted) for words to be added to the organization of images, and whether that makes it more poetic. I don't think so. I can see the impulse behind it, but it seems to me that if it's a movie, it's a movie.

*Maas:* Well, doesn't it seem to have something to do with who is going to make this film? Is it going to be the man who has a poetical idea at the beginning, who then decides to work with a film director on this thing? Or is the poet going to work on it himself? Through words or through nothing, but just through a poetical idea, which is both visual and verbal at the same time? If he is going to work with a director, he is going to have to be terribly close to that director. He may as well be the same person. Then you have to have a poet who can also make a film.

*Thomas:* Oh, I think that's absolutely true—or you could work very closely with someone who knew film technique to carry it out. But I think the poet should establish a scenario and a commentary that would do that as well. And he may as well star in it as well.

*Maas:* Miss Deren has played in her own films, and I think she played in them because she couldn't get people to do the things that a director asks people to do unless they pay them ten thousand a week. I know that for myself, because I'm working on a new poetic film with Mr. Ben Moore, another poet; we found that he had to play the leading role because nobody would go through the trouble to do it. You see, you're not going to get commercial people to do this. What I am interested in at the moment is Mr. Miller's idea about film, and I'm afraid, Mr. Miller, that I think that you think that it must always be a drama. Then if it is a drama, is there not a difference between prose drama and poetic drama? There is certainly a difference between Shakespeare and even Ibsen. Don't you think so?

*Miller:* I wasn't thinking only of the drama. Of course, there have been poetic pictures made, as you know, which are silent. I suppose most of them, as a matter of fact, are not dramas. But my preference is toward drama because I'm primarily interested in action. It seems to me an aesthetic impurity to introduce words into a picture of any kind. I was against, as a whole, the idea of spoken pictures, anyway. It simply attests to the poverty of imagination of screenwriters that they need the words, and to the poverty of the imagination of the audience that it demands the words. I don't think that it has anything to do remotely with real films. The words came in

because the movies came after the theater, and the first people who moved into the movies were theater people, and the first commercially made films were, many of them, simply filmed plays. There's no relationship between the theater in that sense, and the films, for the simple reason I return to—a technical, physiological reason, and that is, that you're looking at an image many, many times larger than yourself, and that changes everything. It is a redundancy to add to that image, it seems to me. I just hope that your ambition to add words to film is not because you love words so much (which you should because you are a poet). I wouldn't want to interfere. I think that what you would say in words should be said instead in images.

*Maas:* Well, you must realize that there is a difference between Shakespeare and, let us say, any dramatist of repute. And there is a difference within poetic language, is there not?

*Miller:* There is, of course. The difference, however, is not of the same quality as the difference between words in a movie. The whole posture of the Elizabethan drama, so to speak, is larger than life as opposed to the modern drama, which is trying to be about the same size as life. Well, the movie starts out that way. It's almost impossible, as you know, to photograph reality in pictures and make it come out reality. I know that people have tried with cameras to destroy the . . . this leads to a humorous remark. I was involved with a director once who wanted to make pictures in New York that would look real. They photographed and photographed, and it ended up looking glamorous, no matter how deep down into the East Side they went. (*Laughter.*) They tried to dirty the film and do everything they could do to it. And I kept telling him that what was required was an organization of an idea to make this look like the East Side. My point is that, in the Elizabethan drama, it takes an effort of aesthetic will to raise life larger than it is on the stage. As soon as you point a camera at anything, it's no longer real.

*Maas:* Mr. Tyler, I don't want to answer this. You ought to say something. You must have been thinking a lot.

*Tyler:* We are snagged on the horns of a dilemma in a way, although I'm sure we've covered a lot of ground. I think one of the most interesting things is the shape and the character of these horns—that is, Miss Deren, who is a professional artist in the poetic film, started out by using a rather complex, a rather difficult, technical vocabulary in order to describe her theory about what she does. Now that's perfectly all right. But it struck Mr. Thomas as not precisely all right, and he then proceeded to talk about his very

spontaneous reactions to films in terms of what he thought was poetic in them, various little incidents, certain aspects, just points of emotion. And then Mr. Miller took over and started to talk about dreams and the pure medium of the film. Now the fact is that both these gentlemen—both of whom are professional writers, and one a professional poet—expressed the very view of life, the cinematic attitude toward life that Miss Deren and a number of other film-makers started out with and, in this primitive way, are simply reflecting, perhaps, the first stage of her development when she had the impulse to make poetic films—that is, to create meaningful images through the medium of moving photography. Now, it becomes the problem, especially here tonight, as to why she started out by using a very difficult vocabulary, a technical vocabulary, to express a sort of intellectual specialty in the way she regarded her art. As a matter of fact, the surrealists started out by excerpting parts of commercial films, jumbling them up, and making little poems out of them. It is simply a question of the editing, the montage, as Mr. Miller intelligently hinted a moment ago, a question of integrating a series of photographs, of spontaneous shots into a form, a shape, and then you have something. That is, you have a feeling about reality—which is what art is. So I think that the rudimentary ground is present; that is, poetic film means using the film as a conscious and exclusive means of creating ideas through images. As for poets and other artists collaborating with film-makers, the method of Eisenstein was one of strict collaboration in a technical sense. It was also one of literature in that he wrote out very elaborate, very detailed scripts, action for action, shot for shot, beforehand, and then, when he was in the field, since he was an artist, he remained open so that his technical advisors were always listened to. It was a question of using an original script, which was really literature, which was written as a starting point and, out of this kind of literature, creating a film. Certainly, among big film-makers and artists who created full length films, and films that were commercially distributed, Eisenstein was, in the history of films, the most conscious artist. So it seems to me just a little strange that Mr. Miller, in particular, being a dramatist, should take a purist point of view toward the film. I mean, that's his privilege, if he feels that way. But the hard part, at least to me, is that this is the way that the little film-makers, the poets of the film such as Miss Deren, feel—this is their approach to life. So now I don't know where we are! It's a question of what role literature, what role verbal poetry, should have in film. I don't know why Mr. Thomas and Mr. Miller

should insist, and I'm waiting to find out if they will insist, why poetry as literature should not, or cannot, collaborate with poetry as film.

*Deren:* I wish mainly to say that I'm a little bit flabbergasted at the fact that people who have handled words with such dexterity as Mr. Thomas and Mr. Miller and Mr. Tyler, should have difficulty with such a simple idea as the "vertical" and the "horizontal" (applause).

*Thomas: (aside)* Here we go up and down again.

*Deren:* These seem to me the most elementary movements in the world and really quite fundamental.

*Maas:* I don't think you ought to get vulgar.

*Deren:* That has really flabbergasted me to the extent that I am unable to develop the idea any further . . . I don't see anything so difficult in the notion that what I called a "horizontal" development is more or less of a narrative development, such as occurs in drama from action to action, and that a "vertical" development such as occurs in poetry, is a part of plunging down or a construction that is based on the intent of the moment, so that, for example, from a short story, one should be able to deduce the life of the hero before and after. In other words, the chosen moment should be of such significance that one can deduce all history from it. So, in a poem, in a way, from the emotion one can particularize to the incidents that might contain it, whereas in a drama, one generalizes the emotion from the particular instant. That is, the actions of the drama may not be personally known, but one generalizes the emotion that comes from it, and then it becomes possible to identify with it as a generalized emotion. I still don't know what's so difficult about those two differences, and I think I'd like to hear something from the floor myself.

*Miller:* Let me just say, I didn't intend to make it so difficult; it isn't. It's just not separate. There is no separation in my mind between a horizontal story and the plumbing of its meaning in depth. (Applause.)

*Maas:* Well, surely, Mr. Miller, you must see the difference between presenting something by words or dialogue, as you do and I do and Mr. Thomas does, and presenting something by the visual image. Now Ezra Pound said, in a definition of the image, that it is an emotional and intellectual complex caught in an instant of time. It's a very direct and quick way of saying things, a lyric way of saying things, whereas the way a dramatist says things is by putting the characters that speak back and forth in conflict. We know that

you can't have any sort of situation, poetic or otherwise, without dramatic conflict. I agree with that, but it's quite different in developing a narrative action from presenting it imagistically and quickly, and I think in the film you can do that. You can do it by word; you can do it by visual image, and by the combination of the two, which is a very complicated thing. Though mentioned, no one here tonight has talked very extensively about Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet*. Anybody who sees that, sees the perfect welding of the two. It can be done. Though he is the father of the poetic film, Jean Cocteau does not have many forebears. Still, I know there is a technique that could be done, and is essentially different, I'm afraid, from one of presenting things imagistically and presenting them narratively, and by statement and by dramatic action. There's a great difference there.

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*Miller: (answering a question from the floor)* To hell with that "vertical" and "horizontal." It doesn't mean anything. (*Applause.*) I understand perfectly what it means, but the point is, if an action is worth anything emotionally, it proceeds to get deeper into its meaning as it progresses, as it reveals. The whole intent of any good playwright is to construct such action as will finally achieve the greatest depths of meaning. So that it is simply a question of, here again, an image, which is, in one case, when you speak of "vertical" and "horizontal," rather mechanical. And I'm sure the lady didn't mean it that way, and that's why it was taken so absurdly. But it isn't absurd; it's just that they aren't separated in any way. A perfectly prosaic play, as we all know, can sometimes arrive at a point which creates a very high poetic feeling. Now, it's a different problem; you have the whole question of verse structure and so on. But the verse structure will never come without that plumbing, without that going deep. You can't implant it on a vacuous piece of material. My only point is that it's of one piece. The technique cannot be used simply because one wishes to use it. (*Applause.*) It's all a question of the degree. But you might say that the best example of the relationship between words and action is that while we're talking here, all these people are walking out. (*Laughter, applause.*)

*Maas:* We spent most of our time talking about what Miss Deren called "vertical" and "horizontal." I think in a way she was talking about narrative and lyric. Is that right?

*Deren:* Yes. The gentleman who brought it up, brought up the

question here as to the fact that he thought poetry and film were different ways of doing the same thing. That is why I went into the whole nature of what I call the poetic structure, because I believe that this poetic structure can be present in any one of the forms. For example, in dance, you would have a narrative ballet or you would have an essentially lyric ballet; or you might have a *pas de deux*, in it, which was an exploration of a moment that occurred. The *pas de deux* is over, and you go back to the line of your plot. So that I'm not thinking of the poetic structure as referring to poetry simply as a verbal form; I'm thinking of it as a way of structuring in any one of a number of mediums, and (I think) that it is also possible to make the dramatic structure in any one, or that it is also possible to combine them. When Mr. Miller says he doesn't think they are different, it is another way of saying that they can be combined, in which sense he is contradicting his rather purist insistence that they should not be combined. To me, this comes out a contradiction. I think that they can. Now I am speaking for a combination, although personally, in my films, there has not been such a combination. I'm speaking of other films and of the way poetry occurs in them, either as an image—the sudden development of a poetic image, which you might have in a dream sequence of a film that was otherwise narrative in its structure, and the whole narrative stops while the hero has a dream which illuminates the particular moment in the story, and then he goes back to the narrative, somebody wakes him up or something like that, and you go on with the narrative development. It's this sort of nightmare that was present in *Death of a Salesman*, which was a moment in which, in effect, the action almost stopped, and you had this poetic illumination of the moment.

*Miller:* That's a good point because I know something about that. You see, that's precisely the point; it didn't stop. It never stopped. This has been confused with a flashback. It was never a flashback. The design of that play is concurrent stories. Now we can get right to the movie, and here's a good example. I am wedded to action; I can't bear "narrative drama." It's to me an impossibility; it bores me to tears. There's a difference between narrative and dramatic, obviously. Now the place that you would speak, I presume, of the "vertical" investigation, let's call it, is in those sections of the play where the man goes back into time. To be sure, the present moment vanishes in the sense that he goes back in time, but every word that is in those memories changes the situation that will arise as soon as those things are over. They are not, in other words, excursions, for

the sake of reaching outside the structure of the play to bring in some information. They are incorporated, completely wedded to the action. They *are* action. Now the only argument I have here at all, and the reason I have a feeling that verse, possibly, doesn't belong in the movies, is that if you have on the screen an image . . . an image is a bad word because it seems static . . . an action. Now it can be an action that is seemingly real or a fantastic one. And then, on top of it, you have an unseen narrator who is speaking—I'm afraid that the spoken word will be a kind of narrative, or lyrical, nondramatic verse. And that is going to stop the motion of the motion picture. And I'm against that. I think it's an intrusion on the medium. That's all I mean, I'm speaking for an organic art, that's all. (*Applause.*) . . . There's a good example in the making of the movie of *Death of a Salesman*. This was a very fascinating problem, and it is right to the point here. On the stage, it seemed perfectly all right to most people that the man should move into his memories which were evoked by the action in the present. I didn't like the script of the movie, and I quarreled very much with it. One would think, offhand, that it would be much easier in a movie to dissolve the present, because the very word dissolve is so natural to the camera and simply throws the man into the past. When the present was dissolved, the meaning of what happened in the past was less. And the reason for it was that, on stage, you had the present with you all the time. We couldn't remove the set. The man had his dreams in relation to the real set that he was standing on, so there was a tension involved. There was, in other words, a reproduction of reality, because when we talk to ourselves on the street, the street is still there, and we don't vanish in thin air. But, in the movie, they made the terrible mistake of evaporating his surroundings, so that he was thrust completely into his dream. And what happened was: It became a narrative. The conflict was that this man—after all, it's not quite as bad to talk to yourself when you're alone in the desert as it is when you're standing in front of a girl at Macy's counter—that has an entirely different meaning. In one case, the man can be quite balanced; in the other case, he begins to look as though he's losing his balance. This, to my mind, is an analogy between anything that stops action, that is bad in a picture. I think, in the movie of *Death of a Salesman*, the action was stopped because the visual thing that kept the tension of those memories was evaporated. And I'm afraid that the same thing would happen with speech in a picture.

# *Poetry and Prose in Cinema (1927)*

[...]

In film making, we are still children. We're only just beginning to consider the object of our work, but we can already say that there are two cinematographic poles, each with its own laws.

Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* is certainly prose; it's based on semantic meanings, on things made clear.

[Dziga Vertov's] *A Sixth Part of the World*, even though it was made by order of the [state export agency] Gostorg, is a poem, an ode.

[Vsevolod Pudovkin's] *Mother* is a centaur of sorts, and centaurs are weird animals. The film begins as prose with convincing captions (which fit the frame rather badly), and ends as purely formal poetry. Repeated frames and images that become symbolic support my conviction that the essence of this film is poetic.

Let me repeat: there is prosaic cinema and poetic cinema, and this is the main distinction. Prose and poetry differ from each other not in rhythm, or not only in rhythm, but in the prevalence of formal technical aspects (in poetic cinema) over semantic ones, with formal elements replacing semantics and providing compositional solutions. Plotless cinema is "poetic" cinema.