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Animating Words: Visualizing William Blake's "A Poison Tree" through the Visual and Textual Elements of Kinetic Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This study applies the visual elements of kinetic poetry to William Blake's poem A Poison Tree. Kinetic poetry, characterized by the seamless integration of visual and verbal elements, transcends traditional static forms, integrating various visual and spaciotemporal elements to convey meaning in a new form and evoke heightened emotional responses. In light of this, the study underlines how the static poem A Poison Tree can be transformed into a kinetic visualization, utilizing the poem's interpretation to integrate various visual and temporal dimensions via Adobe Premiere Pro as the software tool by which the transformation process takes place through the systematic implementation of changes in color, font, shape, and movement. Thus, the study provides a rationale behind the selection of several visual elements that illustrate Blake's poem, deciphering the role of movement, colors, fonts, and shape in conveying mood, tone, and thematic nuances. It attempts to unveil the intricate interplay between textual and visual elements, highlighting how kinetic poetry heightens the reader's interpretive experience. By foregrounding the intersection of technology, design, and literature, the study underlines the innovative approaches adopted by contemporary poets in leveraging kinetic elements for expressive storytelling.

Keywords: *kinetic poetry, digitization, performative language, software application, text as image, experimental cinema*

1. INTRODUCTION

Kinetic typography is a type of moving text in which motion and text are connected to express a certain idea using video animation. Contemporary works of electronic literature focus on the use of such moving texts, which are aesthetically related to the text movies that arose in the experimental film community in the 1960s. The emphasis in these movies was on the complex relationship between language and film as reflected in the transformation of concrete poetry into visual poetry.

With reference to the experimental film programmer, Kim Knowles, language is visible in the sense that words are physically and materially present on the screen. From this perspective, reading the screen is viewing (images) and reading (text). This is clearly reflected in the films and videos of Peter Rose and Gary Hill, where the spoken and the written word are brought together, emphasizing the concrete visual and acoustic properties of language. As such, language is used performatively when the text *is* the image – that is, the only visual signifier on the screen. The performance framework underlines the role kinetic texts play in acting out discourse, communication, and experience. Therefore, it is important to understand the originality of kinetic texts in experimental cinema, specifically with reference to concrete poetry.

In light of this background, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is performative language influential as a textual art in motion?

2. How does kinetic poetry rely on spatiotemporal

transitions with expressive literary, visual, and aural dimensions?

3. In this respect, which tools and features of Adobe Premiere Pro are utilized in the transformation of static text into kinetic text?

In an attempt to answer these questions and address the aim of this study, it is important to elaborate on the origin of kinetic poetry and its development as a form of experimental cinema in the digital world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides insights into the definition of kinetic poetry, its origins, and its emergence into the digital world.

Kinetic poetry is inherently "a fascination with motion, visuality, temporal modification, and how the animation of language can impact the aesthetic experience" (Seiça 2021, 193). In other words, it is the outcome of merging the concept of motion and visuality with language, which enhances the reader's understanding, interpretation, and experience of the text. As such, this form of poetry greatly relies on "temporal and spatial dimensions to achieve literary and artistic expression" (174).

Traditional poetry is static in form as it is characterized by the "modes of textual inscription [which are] dependent on space" (Seiça 2021, 193). Such a concrete form of poetry is the base that kinetic poetry is built on, insofar as it utilizes the concepts of space and visuality in order to enhance the interpretation of the text. Concrete poetry is thus a form of poetry that focuses on "the relationship between the visible form and signifying substance of the word" (Simanowski 2023, 74). In other words, this form of poetry utilizes and merges the spatial dimensions and the signifying meaning of the text in order to form a visual image through the spacing of the words, enhancing the interpretation of the poem. Concrete poetry utilizes the concept of visuality not because it uses images, but because it utilizes the words themselves to create an image while still greatly retaining its poetic aspects. Marcy Meyer states in *Concrete Research Poetry: A Visual Representation of Metaphor* (2017) that concrete poetry "provides the reader with a visual object to be perceived, as well as a text to read" (34). To elaborate, concrete poetry utilizes the spatial dimensions to form "a shape that serves as a container for the text," which not only adds to the reader's interpretation of a poem, but also enhances it. This enhancement, executed as the implementation of the spatial dimensions of a poem, causes an interruption of "the left brain's task of cognitive processing…inviting the right brain to participate in the interpretive process," ultimately achieving "a more emotionally evocative" interpretation (34).

In light of the above, visual poetry utilizes the spatial dimensions in order to enhance readers' interpretive process. With respect to Brian J. McAllister's examination of visual poetry in *Narrative in Concrete / Concrete in Narrative: Visual Poetry and Narrative Theory* (2014), "the layout of text on surface … contributes to the intended effect of the work" (1). The effect of the literary work traces back to the aim of generic poetry, which, as previously stated by Curtis L. Carter in *Visual Poetry: Contemporary Art from Italy: The Artifacts of Poesia Visiva* (2005), "inspires through heightened states of emotion and aesthetic pleasure" (8). Visual poetry thus achieves the aforementioned enhancement of the interpretive process, as it transitions concrete poetry into kinetic poetry. As such, the implementation of the spatial dimension when presenting a poem, regardless of the medium it is presented through, integrates, as stated by Mascelloni, "various linguistic codes, in particular those of words and images" (15).

As kinetic poetry emerges, it presents poetry that utilizes both the spatial and temporal dimensions. With respect to what Seiça states in *Kinetic Poetry* (2021), there are different forms of temporal dimensions relevant to kinetic poetry, such as mechanical, film, video, holo, and digital poetry; all of which utilize different media in order to make poetry kinetic. The medium of the electronic screen is emphasized insofar as "reading the screen" creating a form of relation between the viewer and the text, adding depth and meaning, and enhancing the viewer's interpretation of the text (Knowles 2015, 1). As such, the concept of text appearing on screen, whether on its own or illustrated with images, allows the viewer to utilize different cognitive registers, clearly reflected in how the viewer utilizes both the left and the right sides of the brain, which enhances his/her experience.

One of the first examples of text as image in cinematic contexts is Cecil B. Hepworth's *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900), a short movie whose climax depicts a motorcar rapidly approaching the screen, capturing the entire frame in black, before it is followed by a series of words "written directly onto the filmstrip: ?? / !!! / Oh! / Mother / will / be / pleased" (Knowles 2015, 2). Knowles states that "Hepworth thus employs a process of text *as* image" insofar as the text is presented on screen, "while tangentially commenting on the action, takes on a life of its own as a semiautonomous visual entity." In other words, the text on the screen presents itself as a separate entity, enhancing the meaning that the image it accompanies produces and adding a meaning of its own. In addition, Hepworth's utilization of the text as an image is exactly what forms the climax of the movie's narrative, as the sudden "unexpected, and quite unfathomable, fragmented sentence" creates "a visceral impact comparable to that of the collision itself."

The sudden change from visual to textual elements, each existing as a meaningful entity of their own, "surprise [es] the viewer with the switch of cognitive register"; ultimately forcing him/her to utilize several cognitive registers at the same time in order to properly and extensively interpret the text/image (2).

The abovementioned utilization of the text as image gave silent cinema more power, enhancing the delivered meaning from simply actions on screen, or words describing actions on screen, to texts adding to the signified meanings presented by the visual element, and even going as far as to hold meanings of their own as separate entities. In Edwin S. Porter's film *College Chums* (1907), Porter enhances the meaning presented by the two characters talking over the phone on screen, each at the other side of the city, by implementing a text that moves from one character to the other. As the letters travel from the "interlocutor to [the] receiver," they form the conversation of which the characters are having, and as "the discussion becomes gradually more heated, the words collide, like some poorly navigated linguistic disaster" (Knowles 2015, 2). This "poorly navigated disaster" that the collision of the words illustrates is Porter's successful attempt to implement the textual element to present exactly what it is that occurs when people collide in an argument. This is clearly depicted in the collision of the letters, where important details are lost, matters are misinterpreted, and meanings are no longer identified.

Another example of text as an image is found in the films of Peter Rose, a contemporary American artist, "whose early films and videos directly and consistently engage with what he describes as the 'surface of language'" (Knowles 2015, 6). A prime example of Rose's creative approach to kinetic text and the relationship between text and image is his film work *Secondary Currents* (1982). This film has almost no visual context, focusing more on sound and the text on screen, which appears as "a series of white computer-generated texts…, initially presented at the bottom of the screen" (6). The text first appears cohesive, in contrast to how it sounds; however, it must be noted that the language spoken first sounds as a coherent language, just one that the viewer cannot understand. As the film progresses, the text gradually loses its cohesiveness, and like its presenter, the language spoken also seems to be losing its coherence. The aim of the film itself is to present what it is to be "lost between thought and language" and the tormenting inability to harmonize "the two processes into a single state of being." This aim can be understood to be exactly what kinetic poetry demonstrates and aims to achieve – that is, the harmony between thought and language through the presentation of text as image, merging between the visual and the textual through utilizing both the spatial and temporal dimensions.

Digital forms of poetry achieve the greatest percentage of interaction between the text and the viewer. Seiça states in *Kinetic Poetry* that this form of kinetic poetry is "algorithmically programmed animation…often requiring interaction or participation from the reader-user" (189). In *From Text on Paper to Digital Poetry: Creativity and Digital Literary Reading Practices in Initial Teacher Education* (2022), Moises Selfa Sastre and Enric Falguera Garcia define kinetic poetry as "works where the text's words are gradually moved or modified, either by the user's interaction with text or automatically" (4). This definition foreshadows a significant notion regarding kinetic poetry, that it is, to a great extent, interactive. In other words, digital poetry demands the interactivity of its readers-users by "enabling new learning in accordance with [their] age and reading and literary competence" (7).

An example of such interactive literary art is Jim Andrews's *Seattle Drift* (1997), in which a short 5-line text is present in the upper left corner of the screen with three buttons atop the title, each stating whether to "do, stop, or discipline". When the reader-user clicks on the "Do the Text" button, the sentences break and the words drift chaotically across the screen until they move completely off the screen. The interaction between the reader and the text allows the enhancement of the interpretation of the literary work, as Simanowski states in *Reading, Seeing, Clicking: Kinetic Concrete Poetry* (2023), "time as well as interaction … generate[s] additional meaning." This is clearly illustrated in Andrews's work as the text presents itself as "bad" and thus persuades the reader to "do" it. As the text scatters across the screen, the reader is able to recognize that the text is constrained and wishes to be freed by the reader.

Another fascinating example of such a form of digital poetry is Robert Kendall's *Faith* (2002), a digital poem that allows the reader to begin, move forward, and replay the kinetic poem. The poem strikes the contrast between the words "Faith" and "logic", and as the poem moves and progresses along its five successive states, each state Department of Anatomy. The poem uses both auditory and visual elements in the text, such as kinetic movements, colors, shapes, and sound effects. In *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practice* (2021), Dene Grigar states that Kendall's *Faith*, uses kinetic movements as the reader-user interacts with the poem, its words "literally fall[ing], spin[ing], slid[ing], expand[ing], blink[ing], appear[ing], and disappear[ing]", movements of which represent, "kinetically [,] the confusion and inner turmoil expressed verbally by the narrator" (205). This new form of interpreting text enhances the advancement of digital poetry, the new "injection of movement, a sensory modality not possible to produce in print medium" a uniqueness exclusive to digital poetry (206). As the reader interacts with the poem via

its multimodal elements, the communicated meaning between the reader and the poem is greatly enhanced. This enhancement is exactly what kinetic poetry aims to achieve by making readers utilize its multimodal elements as it merges the visual and textual elements of literature. This achievement is exactly what triggers the reader to use various cognitive registers, thus harmonizing both thought and language.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology provides a description of the data used in the research and the rationale behind choosing the data, the software utilized to transform the data from static to kinetic, and its transformation procedures.

3.1 *Data Description*

The poem, *A Poison Tree*, is written by the English poet William Blake and was first published in the 1700s. William Blake is a poet who is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the early Romantic era. His poem consists of four stanzas, all of which contain the theme of anger and the concept of suppressed emotions. Blake uses the metaphor of anger to depict a fully-grown tree that bears poisonous fruit, which extends throughout the poem to foreground the danger of the suppression of emotions. The key to why this poem was chosen lies in the simplicity of the language Blake utilizes with respect to the rhyme and the visual imagery he uses to express intense emotions. The exploration of complex human emotions makes the poem a reliable example of data that appeals to readers across time and different cultures. Indeed, the poem's themes of wrath, its suppression, and the resulting consequences resonate with human consciousness insofar as it allows for diverse interpretations and applications.

3.2 *Tools*

The software used in this study is Adobe Premiere Pro, which is a professional video editing software application that can be downloaded on personal computers. The software is furnished with tools that allow users to create content by organizing, editing, and adding effects to images, videos, or audio files. Adobe Inc. developed and published the program as a non-linear and timeline-based editing application that can be used by any personal computer user seeking to embark on their audiovisual editing journey.

3.3 *Features*

The software contains numerous features that help transform the poem understudy from static text to kinetic text. First, the tool that allows the application of text on the screen is the Type tool, which is located in the tools menu on the left of the timeline panel. It can also be accessed by pressing the 'T' button on the computer keyboard. The control of the text on the screen enables the control of the shape, color, font, and size of the text, in addition to the control of the shadows and highlights. Another aspect found in Premiere Pro that contributes to the transformation of the poem from static text to kinetic text is the software's effects. The effects can be found in the effects panel and can be utilized for transitions, audio and video enhancements, and so on.

One prominent effect utilized is the 'Linear Wipe' effect, which reveals or deletes the text off the screen. Another significant effect that is also utilized is the 'Warp' effect, which not only allows the external movement of some words but also adds internal movements within the confines of the words themselves. It must also be noted that the effects control panel, found at the top left of the software window, allows immense control with regard to everything on the screen, including the scale [size], position, and duration of any added effects.

3.4 *Requirements*

The poem is first thoroughly analyzed by the researchers. The analysis determines exactly what needs to be executed and presented in the video to transform the inherently static poem into a kinetic one. The analysis of the poem is then divided into four phases that are executed in the video in terms of colour, font, shape, and movement. The next step is the transformation of the text, through which a video is created, as it ultimately transforms the static text into a kinetic one.

3.5 *Procedures*

The procedures used to create the video content of the poem are divided into three phases: 1. Preparations, 2. Making Process, and 3. Exporting. The first phase includes all the technical preparations needed to form all the necessary aspects of the audiovisual kinetic poem, the second is the process of how the audiovisual outcome is created, and the third phase presents the necessary steps to create the kinetic poem.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis presents a thorough description of the poem's interpretation, which determines the creation of its visual content. It also provides the rationale behind the selection of the visual elements in terms of the phases mentioned in the procedures, all of which foreground the researchers' interpretation of the poem.

Blake's *A Poison Tree* tackles the theme of 'anger' and how it is usually accompanied by other emotions,

such as jealousy and hatred. The poem provides a vivid comparison of two cases: when anger is directed towards a friend and when it is directed towards an enemy. According to the speaker of the poem, anger disappears and causes almost no harm when it is directed toward a friend. On the other hand, if not expressed, anger grows over time and explodes, causing harm to many. Blake employs literary devices to demonstrate the negative impacts of anger. For instance, he uses an extended metaphor through the four stanzas of the poem. The metaphor here lies in the use of 'Till it bore an apple bright." The apple is a metaphor for the fruit of the speaker's grudge. Other devices include the use of allusion when the poet uses "Garden", "apple", and "tree" to refer to Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden.

Given that kinetic poetry differs from conventional static poetry insofar as its cinematic nature transforms it into a film with animated words moving across the screen, it brings more words to life than reading words on a stagnant page. In light of this, the abovementioned features of the selected software application help transform the poem under study from static text to kinetic. These features include movement, sound effects, colors, shapes, and fonts. The analysis covers each stanza separately, highlighting how each of the aforementioned features is implemented.

Stanza 1:

I was angry with my friend;

I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

I was angry with my foe:

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

The first stanza of the poem foregrounds wrath as a destructive emotion. This is visualized by utilizing the tools and features of the aforementioned software to transform the poem from a static text into a kinetic text.

Figure 1. A Poison Tree – A Visualization, Stanza 1, Line 2

Figure 2. A Poison Tree – A Visualization, Stanza 1, Line 2

The text is implemented on screen using the 'Type' tool and adding the 'Linear Wipe' effect to make it appear as if being written on screen in time with the recorded audio of the poem. The 'writing on-screen' creates movement, which is exactly where the work's kinetic quality is reflected. The first time the word "wrath" appears, it immediately disappears from the screen, as seen in figures 1 and 2, where it gets 'wiped off' as soon as the voiceover of the word itself ends. This signifies how wrath is dissipated when it is voiced out. In line 4, the word "wrath" keeps on expanding on screen, utilizing the 'Scale' tool, to depict how the emotion swells drastically deep down the speaker's heart when it is not expressed.

Second, the color aspect has the power to trigger moods and feelings and can greatly strengthen the communication between the reader/viewer and the text. The words "angry", "wrath", and "it" are all typed in the color red, with different shades such as Bright Red for the word "angry" in order to signify how intense anger can be, and Blood Red for the words "wrath", as depicted in figure 1, and "it" which refers to the emotion of hatred that is deep and intense. It must be noted that the three aforementioned words are all written in the same font, Viner Hand ICT, as seen in figure 1, adding a gothic taste and building on the tension developed by the speaker's intentions towards his foe. Consequently, as stated by Patti Bellantoni that the utilization of the color purple in scene foreshadows death, the word "foe" is typed in the color Purple as it refers to the foe's tragic fate. Hence, the color is used to foreshadow the foe's ultimate death. On the other hand, the word "friend" is typed in green to convey the comfort that the word signifies. The image is further foregrounded in the Freestyle Script font in which the word is typed. This font looks handwritten, which suggests the subjective inner emotions of one towards his friends as free of judgment.

Stanza 2:

And I waterd it in fear,

Night & morning with my tears:

And I sunned it with my smiles,

And with soft deceitful wiles.

The second stanza of the poem focuses on presenting the 'tree' metaphor, displaying how the speaker "waterd" the tree of wrath with negative emotions and "sunned" it with manipulative tendencies. First, as previously mentioned, movement is the most basic form of making what is static kinetic; therefore, the attempt to make words on screen move is initiated, and as done previously, the words are typed on the screen in time with the voiceover using the 'Linear Wipe' effect. The 'Warp' effect is implemented in the words "fears" and "tears", which creates external movement for the former word and internal movement for the latter. The effect is applied as it is, with some varying control with respect to the speed of the effect on the screen, as clearly reflected in the word "fears", making the word shake to convey how fear often leaves one shaking anxiously. Parallelly, the effect is added on the word "tears" with varying control with respect to the cell pattern by which the speed of the effect on the screen is adjusted in order to make the word appear as if it holds the reflection of water, which foregrounds tears. In order to display how the word "It", which refers to the wrath felt by the speaker, is watered, a PNG GIF is overlayed on the text to evoke how the narrator unconsciously nurtures his anger, literally watering the word.

Figure 3. A Poison Tree – A Visualization, Stanza 2, Line 4

Second, the use of color enhances the meaning communicated between the text on screen and the reader/viewer. In light of this, color is implemented to foreground the significance of words in the poem. For instance, the word "it" is typed in the color Blood Red in reference to the feeling of wrath it inherently refers to, which is depicted in the same color and font, signifying how deep and intense the feeling of wrath is. The word "fears" is typed in grey in order to signify the uncertainty that is associated with both color and emotion. The color navy blue is utilized when typing the word "night" as it is the color of night. Finally, although the color yellow is often associated with happiness and joy, it must be noted that one of the commonly overlooked meanings of the color is deceit. Hence, the color is utilized in the words "deceitful wiles", as seen in figure 3, in order to convey the deceitful and manipulative nature that the words hold. Such a manipulative nature is further intensified through the utilization of the Vladimir Script font, which unfurls the artful schemes that the narrator utilizes to conceal his devious intentions towards his enemy.

Figure 4. A Poison Tree – A Visualization, Stanza 2, Line 3

The shape aspect is utilized in significant words to illustrate the original message of the text in the temporal and spatial dimensions. In the second stanza, both the words "sunned" and "smiles" are curved by typing them in a legacy title and using the 'Path Type' tool to create a path or shape that can be adjusted. The former is curved upwards in reference to the sun, while the latter is curved downwards in reference to how smiles look, both forming half a circle and presenting the literal form of their signified meanings.

Stanza 3:

And it grew both day and night.

Till it bore an apple bright.

And my foe beheld it shine,

And he knew that it was mine.

The third stanza of the poem foregrounds the poisonous fruit metaphor, as it depicts the speaker's wrath growing until it reaches his enemy. As such, the effects control panel allows for the adjustment of the scale/size of the text on the screen, in addition to making the text decrease or increase in size. This manner of control is utilized in the word "it", which refers to the speaker's emotion that has intensified, corresponding successfully to the main motif of the poem.

Figure 5. A Poison Tree – A Visualization, Stanza 3, Line 3

Secondly, the utilization of color is clearly reflected in the word "it" mentioned in the first and second lines of the third stanza. Both words are illustrated in the same color and font as the word "wrath," which they refer to. However, the repetition of "it" in the third and fourth lines

is illustrated as both words are typed in the same bright red color and the Vladimir script font of the word "apple" they refer to. The rationale behind the use of this color and font lies in how the color depicts the bright red color of apples, which attracts the attention of the enemy. The selected font is similar to that of the words "smiles" and "deceitful wiles" to foreground the deceiving nature of the fruit. With respect to the tempting nature of the fruit, the word "shine" is typed in the color Shining Red, as seen in figure 5.

Stanza 4:

And into my garden stole,

When the night had veild the pole;

In the morning glad I see;

My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

The fourth stanza foregrounds the outcome of the extended metaphor of the poisonous emotion of wrath as the speaker eventually avenges himself on his enemy. First, with respect to movement, the word "pole" barely appears on the screen insofar as the "Linear Wipe" effect is utilized and the word immediately disappears from screen to foreground nighttime, "veild", as bathing it in darkness.

The words "garden" and "tree" are typed in green with respect to the peaceful nature of the color. However, they are typed in the font Vladimir Script to signify the poisonous fruit that grows out of wrath. In this respect, the word "tree" is typed in the same font, Viner Hand, in which the word "wrath" has been typed. The words "night", "morning", and "foe" are all typed in the same color and font as their counterparts.

A black screen is utilized as a background for the entire video to allow the audience to focus on the text and the motion of the typed-in-white text only. The contrast between the two colors makes the reader/viewer focus on the text itself. The back screen also foregrounds a dark and gloomy atmosphere since the speaker deals with his enemy in a manipulative and cunning manner.

The soundtrack playing in the background and the voiceover are also utilized in the creation of the video content of the poem. The soundtrack played suggests extra tension and climactic suspense until the foe is doomed to die under the tree that looks fecund, bearing shiny apples from the outer countenance, yet it is quite lethal in its nature. Concerning the voiceover, the tone shifts and changes throughout the poem to illustrate its theme. This is clearly reflected in how such words as "friend" and "end" are spoken in a soft manner, whereas words like "foe" and "not" are rather spoken with some intensity to illustrate the speaker's attitude, which changes according to those he is dealing with.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the dynamic potential of literary expression in the digital age is the foundation upon which the transformation of William Blake's *A Poison Tree* from a static literary text into a kinetic poem is achieved. In light of this, the study presents an explanation of kinetic poetry, tracing its origins and its evolution into the digital realm. The study outlines the process of selecting the poem, utilizing Adobe Premiere Pro as the software tool by which the transformation process takes place through the systematic implementation of changes in color, font, shape, and movement. The kinetic poem, with its animated words, dynamic fonts, and synchronized movements, successfully brings *A Poison Tree* to life. Each element utilized in the transformation process – color, font, shape, and movement – influences the interpretation of Blake's work, enhancing the aesthetic and reading experience that occurs between the reader and the text. In essence, the study not only implements the visual tenets of kinetic poetry but also provides a practical demonstration of transforming traditional literature into a dynamic form, highlighting the potential of kinetic poetry to enhance the reader's experience through the power of technology.

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