



## Álvaro Seiça

### Depending or Transgressing? Kinetic Writing that Belongs and Breaks Away

#### Résumé

Cet essai explore la relation entre l'avant-garde et le populaire dans l'écriture cinétique. Pour ce faire, il s'inspire du débat d'Alberto Pimenta sur les degrés de "dépendance" et de "transgression" dans l'art littéraire. Il se demande si des exemples spécifiques d'écriture cinétique semblent dépendre ou transgresser, ou s'ils appartiennent à une tradition antérieure tout en s'en détachant par des aspects novateurs. Dans un premier temps, il fournit une définition de travail des termes "avant-garde" et "populaire", car ils génèrent de multiples interprétations. Deuxièmement, il discute des moyens possibles de dépasser la notion selon laquelle les arts sont basés sur les zones distinctes de l'avant-garde et du populaire, en déplaçant l'attention sur la coexistence de divers courants d'influence entre les deux. Le débat autour des formes populaires d'écriture cinétique dans un spectre aussi large que la littérature, l'art, le cinéma et le design implique une compréhension de la fonction, de la pragmatique du langage, de l'expression artistique, de la communication et des contraintes commerciales. En faisant un zoom sur les œuvres des premiers films d'animation et les titres des films, cet essai propose ensuite un récit complémentaire sur la façon dont la poésie cinétique des artistes d'avant-garde et des poètes expérimentaux a co-évolué avec d'autres formes d'écriture cinétique au cours du vingtième siècle.

#### Abstract

This essay explores the relation between the avant-garde and the popular in kinetic writing. To do so, it draws on Alberto Pimenta's argument on the degrees of "dependence" and "transgression" in literary art. It questions whether specific examples of kinetic writing seem to depend on or transgress, or whether they belong to a previous tradition while, at the same time, breaking from it with innovative aspects. First, it provides a working definition of the terms "avant-garde" and "popular", since they generate multiple interpretations. Second, it discusses possible ways of going beyond the notion that the arts are based on the distinct zones of the "avant-garde" and "popular", by shifting attention to the coexistence of various streams of influence between the two. The debate around popular forms of kinetic writing across such a wide spectrum as literature, art, cinema, and design entails an understanding of function, the pragmatics of language, artistic expression, communication, and commercial constraints. By zooming in on works of early animation film as well as film titles, this essay then proposes a complementary narrative to how kinetic poetry by avant-garde artists and experimental poets co-evolved with other forms of kinetic writing during the twentieth century.

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## **DEPENDING OR TRANSGRESSING? KINETIC WRITING THAT BELONGS AND BREAKS AWAY**

### **Introduction**

Kinetic poetry and kinetic literature have a long trajectory that can be approached through different fields and critical frameworks. These literary works were first devised in analogue film and continue to be reinvented in digital media, which allow for the animation of letterforms. Throughout the twentieth century, experimental artists have been most prolific in creating this type of work. Yet their works have been influenced by – and at times overlapped with – other forms of kinetic writing developed in animation film, film titles, motion graphics and typography, and advertisement.

Outside conventional narratives and verse culture, the variety of modalities in which writing is understood as literature tends to be approached through the lenses of the avant-garde or the popular arts. This essay argues that creating a dualism between the “avant-garde” and the “popular” is not the most useful way to frame historical and more recent modes of creative production, in which artistic and literary practices are permeated by technology. This applies especially to digital literary works where the perceived avant-garde, experimental, and popular tendencies often coexist, or resonate as sources.

This discussion embraces writing as an estuary of influences that derive from various forms and functions of kinetic experimentation. By drawing on Alberto Pimenta’s critique of the function of the literary arts as depending on, or transgressing, normative models, this essay investigates whether certain works depend on or transgress previous norms, or if they might do both at the same time. In order to do so, it is important to question which functions of language and art are at play in a broader perspective than just the case of specific examples of poetry, visual arts, and film. This perspective can be seen as complementary to an expanded history of kinetic literature, since other forms of kinetic writing inform and interface with it.

### **Intersected Fluxes: The Avant-Garde and the Popular Arts**

Considering kinetic writing in relation to the concepts of the “avant-garde” and the “popular” arts is challenging, because these two terms have been deeply theorised and need to be considered in their various nuances, as well as in their common usage. Moreover, literary criticism tends to focus on one or the other side of the spectrum, leaving little room for how specific fluxes of practices intersect.

Speaking of the *avant-garde* is already speaking about a position. The “avant-garde” is a term originating in French military jargon, meaning *that* which is *avant la garde*, that is, “before the guard”. The expression was appropriated by Henri de Saint-Simon in the 1820s, and later by art critics and artists. So, the “avant-garde” – a term extending two hundred years back in history before becoming one of the most influential in modern art criticism – has come to denote the forefront, in the sense of an innovative group or movement that leads the rupture with academicism in the arts by creating non-conformist and novel works. This meaning of the term is mostly associated with the transgressive artistic attitudes of the 1910-30s, during which artists reacted against bourgeois art. Their approach was, as David Cottington points out, quite opposite to how Charles Baudelaire considered the “avant-garde”. For Baudelaire, it was a source of discipline and conformism.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the avant-garde has thus evolved, and it has most notably come to be associated with what the Marxist critic Peter Bürger called the “historical avant-garde”, that is, art movements such as Dadaism, early Surrealism, and Russian Futurism.<sup>2</sup> This position equates the avant-garde with revolutionary politics on the Left, to which Bürger later added Cubism, Italian Futurism, and German Expressionism. Debate has been generated around which movements to include in this historical perspective, but also around the notion of the “neo-avant-garde” of the post-Second World War period. For the sake of clarity, I will hereafter refer to the “avant-garde” as those art movements theorised by Bürger, but I shall refer to the 1950s and ‘60s as “experimental”, given the way they were generally theorised by the artists and writers I am discussing in this essay. In both instances, at least in poetry, this approach involves a critique of normative and discursive modes of language, as well as a critique of the commodification of culture. Moreover, whereas both Italian and Russian futurists greeted war with much enthusiasm, even if on different ideological grounds, their use of war jargon seems to contradict today’s feelings towards what war represents, and in effect destroys, as well as the notion of art as a battleground. Thus, “neo-avant-garde” in the post-war era does not seem like the best term.

The term “popular culture” was first used by Johann Herder in 1784, in opposition to “the culture of the learned”. Since then, in the fields of cultural studies and cultural theory, scholars Tony Bennett and John Storey have surveyed multiple definitions of “popular culture” that are both qualitative and quantitative.<sup>3</sup> To consider popular forms in the sense of Bennett and Storey’s quantitative definition is already problematic, because it asserts that “popular” is that which is “liked” by “many” people. But exactly how many people are meant by “many”? In the context

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<sup>1</sup> David COTTINGTON, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Manchester, MUP, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Tony BENNETT, *Popular Culture: History and Theory*, Milton Keynes, Open U P, 1981. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

of this essay, it is perhaps better to speak of degrees, that is, degrees of popularity, which, when applied to artistic and literary works can frame our understanding by way of simpler comparisons: some forms, some genres, are more popular than others. But even with these definitions, it is impossible to discuss kinetic writing in relation to the “avant-garde” and the “popular” without considering modes of production, modes of reception, and the functions that specific works perform, or are intended to perform. As Stuart Hall has emphasised, class is an essential notion in any definition of the “popular”.<sup>4</sup> When recovering Hall’s “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’”, Jayson Harsin and Mark Hayward have pointed out that the “popular” needs to be addressed not only in its relation to popular culture, but also as a “site of political struggle and change”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, to only think of the “avant-garde” and the “popular” as distinct zones, without considering the way they are intersected by common fluxes, can be reductive and restrict one’s judgements of value. That approach tends to be enclosed with opposed notions: the elites and the masses, the privileged and the oppressed, the few and the many, high and low arts, fine arts and arts and crafts, marginal and mainstream, alternative arts and industry, the indie scene and the corporate world, art and market, etc. The wider implications and manifestations of these divisions are well beyond the scope of this essay, but nevertheless need to be acknowledged, especially because erecting walls in order to understand phenomena poses risks. Borders create ghettos.

One of the ways to overcome these dualisms is by considering the contemporary digital landscape as a media ecosystem that combines elements from multiple genres, artistic programs, social strata, and ideological paradigms. Consider authors in the Free/Libre and Open Source Software community, who argue for a continuation of the usage of the “avant-garde” term while advocating for open models of knowledge distribution, or writers working within, and affirming their identity against a background of vanguard poetics who disseminate their work on popular platforms. There is a perception that creative practices in digital environments have fostered the elimination of traditional divisions between genres, as well as have challenged established ideas of authority and authorship. The collective oRx-qX, drawing on Lev Manovich’s criticism, emphasise this aspect: “Manovich notes [that the] traditional division of art into genres according to a medium (photography, film, video) is pointless in cyberspace. Through transmitting onto the internet, everything is sampled into a digital version [...] Hypertext, net-art and new forms of art, the process of cut, paste, rip and remix are natural information patterns of behaviour.”<sup>6</sup> This is a valid assessment, however if decontextualized this argument risks missing the material infra- and superstructures that sustain such media ecosystems, as well as the strong institutional and corporate forces that galvanize particular works.

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart HALL, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’”, in: John STOREY, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2006, 477-87.

<sup>5</sup> Jayson HARSIN and Mark HAYWARD, “Stuart Hall’s ‘Deconstructing the ‘Popular’: Reconsiderations 30 Years Later”, in: *Communication, Culture and Critique*, vol. 6, 2013, 201-07, doi:10.1111/cccr.12009.

<sup>6</sup> oRx-qX, “Information Nomads and Community Surfing”, in: Aymeric MANSOUX and Marloes de VALK (eds.), *FLOSS + Art*, Poitiers, GOTO10, 2008, 43.

Another way of overcoming the avant-garde/popular binary is by using the degrees involved by Alberto Pimenta's framework. In *O Silêncio dos Poetas* [The Silence of Poets] – a book of essays heavily influenced by Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* – Pimenta argues that, traditionally, in philology, the function of literary art can be divided into two degrees: the “degree of dependence”, which perpetuates the norm, and the “degree of transgression”, which establishes a new norm.<sup>7</sup> The author reflects on literature's function as an ultimate act of emancipation, which needs to be understood from the relation of three dimensions: intention, form, and effect.<sup>8</sup>

These notions gesture towards conformist and non-conformist approaches to creative practice, which may affect self-conscious attitudes in relation to the popular and the vanguard. Authors who are more concerned with depending on the norm of the many to quickly reach the many (the conventional popular paradigm) tend to be at odds with those who are more concerned with transgressing the norm of the many, and at times even the few, to reach the few and, eventually, the many (the conventional avant-garde paradigm). It is also true that, at times, those who more remarkably transgress may be by no means concerned with reaching the many, but only the few, even though they might eventually reach the many. Thus, besides intention and form, the effect, or reception, has great impact. The distribution networks play a crucial role here, as well as the functions and modes of writing. I will reflect on the function of kinetic writing in this context below.

Let me now present a case of kinetic poetry that can illustrate this intricate set of factors, if we broaden Pimenta's spectrum to include the production and reception of literary works in media beyond print. In 1968, E. M. de Melo e Castro, a Portuguese poet and artist, was asked to create, present, and explain the content of an experimental poem using the new video machines of the Portuguese public broadcasting company RTP, so that it could be broadcast in a 1969 literary program. This event had its potential risks: the invited author was known for his unorthodox literary and artistic creations and, moreover, he was critical of the Fascist regime that ruled the country with a full-fledged censoring department. The video the poet created was called *Roda Lume* [Wheel of Fire]. It was experimental in form, content, and media. It was preceded by an introduction on concrete poetics and broadcast to an audience of circa two million spectators.<sup>9</sup> Now, in the sense that the work was broadcast via a mass media transmission network, if enjoyed, it could have acquired popular status. In the sense that it presented experimental poetry and it transgressed TV norms, it could be seen as vanguardist. Yet not only did RTP destroy the piece's master videotape, but the poet was also banned from entering the station's facilities until the 1974 Revolution of the Carnations. He was further threatened by people demanding that taxpayers' money be not used to “subvert” Portuguese culture. This case shows that these issues are more complex than what they may seem at a first glance, if they are to be analysed not only in technological, but also in cultural and political context, whether synchronically or diachronically.

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<sup>7</sup> Alberto PIMENTA, *O Silêncio dos Poetas*, Lisboa, A Regra do Jogo, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> PIMENTA, *Ibidem*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> E. M. de MELO e CASTRO, *Roda Lume*, 1968. Recreated as *Roda Lume Fogo*, 1986, U-Matic, 2'43", [online], < <https://bit.ly/3hfWiB0> >.

Similarly, discussing the notion of writing beyond poetry and literature opens a much wider field. This debate has been addressed by, among others, Florian Cramer's notion of "post-digital writing".<sup>10</sup> Cramer contrasts writing with literature, in a sense questioning the domains of the textual and the literary. Cramer's problematisation of writing as a broader category, which in other terms could recall that of Gertrude Stein, opposes DIY practices to literature as an elite domain. It therefore adds another layer to the question of how literature and writing are both affected by popular and avant-garde forms and traditions. Writing goes beyond specific literary forms and genres as a system of inscription. Thus, writing is a system involving both textual and visual inscriptions. On the contrary, "asemic writing" is a visual but illegible system, in that it can resemble textual elements without containing recognisable words or alphabetic and ideogrammatic units. Consider Henri Michaux's 1927 *Narration*.<sup>11</sup> One of the legacies of this piece – and especially the legacy of the Concrete and Experimental poets – is to remind us that writing is not just a system of inscription on surfaces demarcated by, and representing, letters and words; that writing is not just about the conception and the written composition of text. Writing is a subjective representation of language created with symbols on variable surfaces of inscription. Thus, broadening the scope from literature to writing marks an approach to other uses of text, potentially more prone to higher degrees of popularity. Deriving from Pimenta's discussion on the "dispragmatisation" of language in literary art versus communication, from a functional point of view, the main argument is that writing requires a pragmatic dimension of language in order to communicate which literature might not need.

Kinetic writing – writing that physically or digitally moves in space and time – also encompasses a wider perspective than kinetic poetry or literature. Questioning kinetic writing as a popular form is, then, to question the function of writing as well. For if the function of literature is of the order of the aesthetic – the pleasurable, connected to the senses – the social, and the political, kinetic writing – as intervention and engagement with societal issues – that is implemented in animation, motion graphics, and advertisement often has very dissimilar functions. If, among others, literature's function is to convey aesthetic experiences, or to engage in social and political critique in literary forms, advertisement's function is to persuade and to sell. Furthermore, film titles and animations may also have to respond to thematic and commercial constraints.

Thus, there are immediately two main distinctions. Firstly, between art object or process, and commodity, and secondly, between different recipients and their overlap: the readership or audience, and the consumer, as well as today's prosumers and free digital labourers. It is generally accepted that there is a dichotomy between cultural knowledge, as permeated by humanistic inquiry, and economic and cultural capital, as permeated by money and social status. In addition, kinetic text in literary

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<sup>10</sup> Florian CRAMER, "Post-Digital Writing", in: *Electronic Literature Review*, Dec. 12, 2012, [online], <<http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/post-digital-writing/>>. Rep. in: Joseph TABBI (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 361-70, doi:10.5040/9781474230285.ch-020.

<sup>11</sup> Henri MICHAUX, *Narration*, 1927, in: Claire PAULHAN, "L'Invention des signes", in: *Genesis*, vol. 37, 2013, 137-40, doi:10.4000/genesis.1237.

or artistic forms can often be unreadable, precisely because it does not need to accomplish the quality of readability as its primary function. By contrast, kinetic text in motion graphics, advertisement, and film titles almost always requires readability. It needs certain temporal features that allow humans to consciously apprehend it in order to persuade and sell, except, of course, in the case of subliminal advertisement.

Yet the seemingly distinct zones of the avant-garde and the popular have been entangled and intersecting each other throughout their history. In order to recognise these fluxes that intersect each other, instead of considering them as isolated zones, it is necessary to envision an expanded notion of kinetic writing that goes beyond the strictly literary. In the latter part of this essay, I will sketch a brief trajectory of kinetic poetics that is complemented by examples from animation film and film titles.

## Kinetic Poetry and Writing



1. Side A of the “Phaistos Disk” (ca. 1700 BCE), “as displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion after the 2014 renovation”.

Source: C. MESSIER, Wikipedia. CC BY-SA 4.0

PATTERN POEMS

ΣΙΜΙΟΥ ΡΟΔΙΟΥ ΩΙΟΝ ΧΕΛΙΔΟΝΟΣ

1	Κωτίλας	
3	τῆ τοδ' ἄτριον νέον	
5	πρόφρων δέ θημῶ δέξο δὴ γὰρ ἀγνῆς	
7	τὸ μὲν θεῶν ἐριβόας Ἑρμῆς ἔκιξε κάρυξ	
9	ἄνωγε δ' ἐκ μέτρον μοινοβάμοιος με τὸν πάροισ' ἀέξει	
11	θοῶς δ' ὑπέρθεν ὠκὺ λέχριον φέρον νεῦμα ποδῶν σποράδων πύφωσκει	
13	θοαῖς ἴσ' αἰόλας νεβροῖς κῶλ' ἀλλάστων, ὄρασιπῶδων ἐλάφων τέκεσσι	
19	κᾶτ' ὦκα βοᾶς ἀκοὰν μεθέπων ὄγ' ἀφαρ λάσσιον νεφοβόλων αὐ' ὄρέων ἔσσυται ἄγκος	
20	ταῖς δὴ δαίμων κλυτὸς ἴσα θοοῖσιν ὄδον > δονέων ποσὶ πολύπλοκα μεθίει μέτρα μολπᾶς	
18	ρίμφα πετρόκοιτον ἐκλιπῶν ὄρουσ' εὐναί, ματρὸς πλαγκτὸν μαιόμενος βαλῆας ἐλέω τέκος	
16	βλαχᾶ δ' οἶων πολυβότων αὐ' ὄρέων νομὸν ἔβαν τανυσφύρων τ' <αὐ' > ἄντρα Νυμφᾶν	
14	ταί τ' ἀμβρότῳ πόθῳ φίλας ματρὸς ῥῶοντ' αἴψα μεθ' ἡμερόειπα μαῖζόν,	
12	ἔχρει θειῶν τὰν παναίολον Πιερίδων μοιόδοουπον αἰδᾶν,	
10	ἀριθμὸν εἰς ἄκραν δεκάδ' ἰχρίων κόσμον νέμοντα ῥυθμῶν,	
8	φύλ' ἐς βροτῶν ὑπὸ φίλας ἐλὼν πτεροῖσι ματρὸς,	
6	λίγειά νιν κἀμὶ ἀμφὶ ματρὸς ὠδῖς	
4	Δωρίας ἀηδόνοσ	
2	ματέρος	

2. Simmias RHODIUS, “Egg” (ca. 325 BCE), in *Theocritus. Moschus. Bion*. Edited and translated by Neil HOPKINSON. Loeb Classical Library 28. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, 568. doi:10.4159/DLCL.simmias-egg.2015



In Western culture, visual and textual forms in movement that came to be known as “kinetic poetry” emerged with the 1950-60s Experimental poets. First, these poems were created with typewriters with patterns on the printed page that suggested movement. As cybernetics progressively sparked the interest of visual artists and poets, they started naming their poems “poem machines” when referring to mechanical and mixed media sculptures featuring moving text. But film and video were also part of their media palette. Media-specificity started to be employed in the vocabulary of titles, as shown by several “film poems” and “video poems”, a practice that continues in the realm of electronic and digital poetics. Despite these various media used to produce the factual movement of literary structures, the general impetus of kinetic poetics can be seen as disparate efforts to explore the possibilities of motion in literature and the arts. Even though authors were not always necessarily aware of a continuum, their works can be placed within a larger history of verbo-visual poetry.<sup>12</sup>

Visual poetics and literatures draw on a “natural human impulse to combine one’s visual and literary experiences” (Higgins, 17).<sup>13</sup> This tradition goes back at least to the Minoan and *ekphrastic* “Phaistos Disk” (Figure 1). Frequently cited landmarks include Simmias Rhodius’s poem “Egg”, from ca. 325 BCE (Figure 2), and the Greek *technopaegnia*. The visual arrangement of words and letters, whether or not with literary aims, continues throughout the centuries, but it seems to have had a boost during the prodigious age of literary games: the baroque period.

This lineage was in part constructed by the Experimental poets themselves, as several theoretical and anthological books referencing this thread were put together by, among others, E. M. de Melo e Castro, Adriano Spatola, Ana Hatherly, Klaus Peter Dencker, or Dick Higgins. Higgins’s comparative study of what the author calls “pattern poetry” unearths a wide catalogue of affiliations among different epochs, languages, and geographies, but more importantly, it showcases how visual poems seem to have co-evolved across multiple countries during the baroque period.<sup>14</sup>

In the Portuguese case, Ana Hatherly studied the intricate visual structures of baroque poetry and made them available in an anthology for her contemporary twentieth-century readership.<sup>15</sup> These poems include anagrams, acrostics, emblems, echoes, enigmas, rhopalic verse, lipograms, chronograms, verse, cubic, and letter labyrinths (Figure 3). But if baroque visual poems were not “avant-garde” in the sense we now use the term, they were not popular either. Written by authors close to the circles of power between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, who were dependent on the support of the monarchy, or members themselves of the clergy, their visual poems did not reach an audience beyond the literati. But even within this context, they could become a target of scorn, as it happened with poets that

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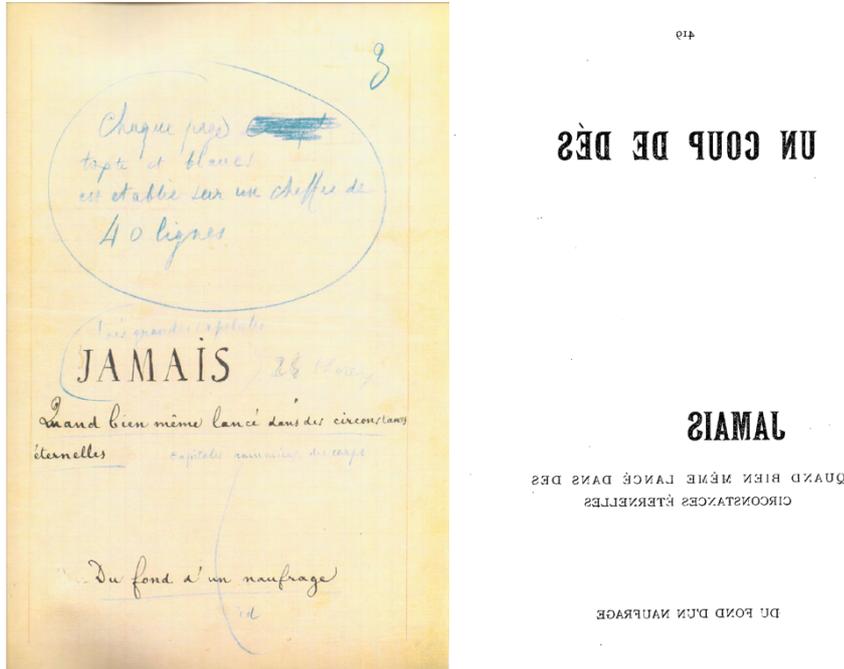
<sup>12</sup> For a brief history of kinetic poetry, see Álvaro SEIÇA, “Kinetic Poetry”, in: Dene Grigar and James O’Sullivan (eds.), *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 173-202.

<sup>13</sup> Dick HIGGINS, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, Albany, SUNY P, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Dick HIGGINS, *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Ana HATHERLY, *A Experiência do Prodígio: Bases Teóricas e Antologia de Textos-Visuais Portugueses dos Séculos XVII e XVIII*, Lisbon, INCM, 1983.

used visual forms. Furthermore, due to the low levels of literacy, people in the wider society were prevented from accessing these cultural artifacts.



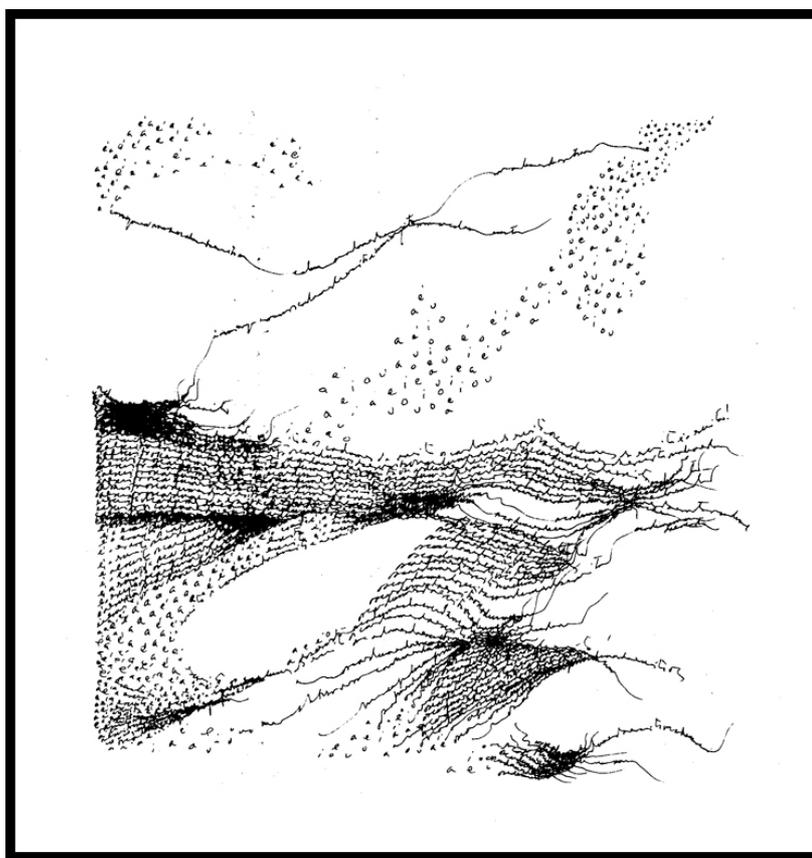
4. Comparison between the manuscript version of Stéphane Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard" and its print edition, 1897. Source: Sotheby's autograph sale and *Cosmopolis*.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Stéphane Mallarmé emphasised the voids on the page spread as poetic spaces equally important as words, as the manuscript and the print version of "Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard" make clear (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).<sup>16</sup> Twentieth-century authors such as Apollinaire, the Futurists, Dadaists, and then the Experimentalists furthered these explorations. Concrete and Experimental poets, from Brazilian Augusto and Haroldo de Campos to Portuguese Hatherly and E. M. de Melo e Castro have investigated such poetics in practice and in theory. They were also highly influenced by visually-oriented and ideogrammatic writing systems, such as the Chinese. Their work shows us that, despite the different cultural contexts in which they worked, words and shapes are fundamental for the construction of meaning. Composition is multimodal. As minimalist poet Aram Saroyan has argued, when writing on Ian Hamilton Finlay's poetry, the question was to see "how a poem could enact rather than simply describe a meaning."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Stéphane MALLARME, "Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard", in: *Cosmopolis*, vol. 6, no. 17, May 1897, 417-27.

<sup>17</sup> Aram SAROYAN, in: "Singular Vispo :: First Encounters Part 1", in: *Coldfront* 9 November 2015, [online], n.p.

It was also at the end of the nineteenth century that the kinetograph and cinema were invented. Suddenly letters, words, and textual structures could start moving in unforeseen rhythms and twists. Experiments with kinetic writing unfold soon after, as intertitles and kinetic typography superimposed on film scenes emerge in early silent films, namely in Edwin S. Porter's work.<sup>18</sup> As I will show below, these explorations continued with several experimental filmmakers. In the post-Second World War era, first working with film and then with video and electronic systems, poets saw the possibility of expanding visual and textual literariness with kinetic writing. Letters and words became seemingly alive and broke free from oppression. "At last", Melo e Castro once said, "the words and the letters could be free."<sup>19</sup>



5. Ana Hatherly, *A Reinvenção da Leitura*, Lisbon, Moraes, 1975, 40. Source: Po-ex.net

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<sup>18</sup> For examples of kinetic writing in early silent film, see the analysis of kinetic text as image by Kim KNOWLES, "Performing Language, Animating Poetry: Kinetic Text in Experimental Cinema", in: *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 67 no. 1, 2015, 46-59.

<sup>19</sup> E. M. de MELO e CASTRO, "Videopoetry", in: Eduardo KAC (ed.), *Media Poetry: An International Anthology*, Bristol, Intellect Books, 2007, 176.

DEPENDING OR TRANSGRESSING?



6. Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia L. Jaramillo, *slippingglimpse*, 2007.  
Screenshot from [slippingglimpse.org](http://slippingglimpse.org).

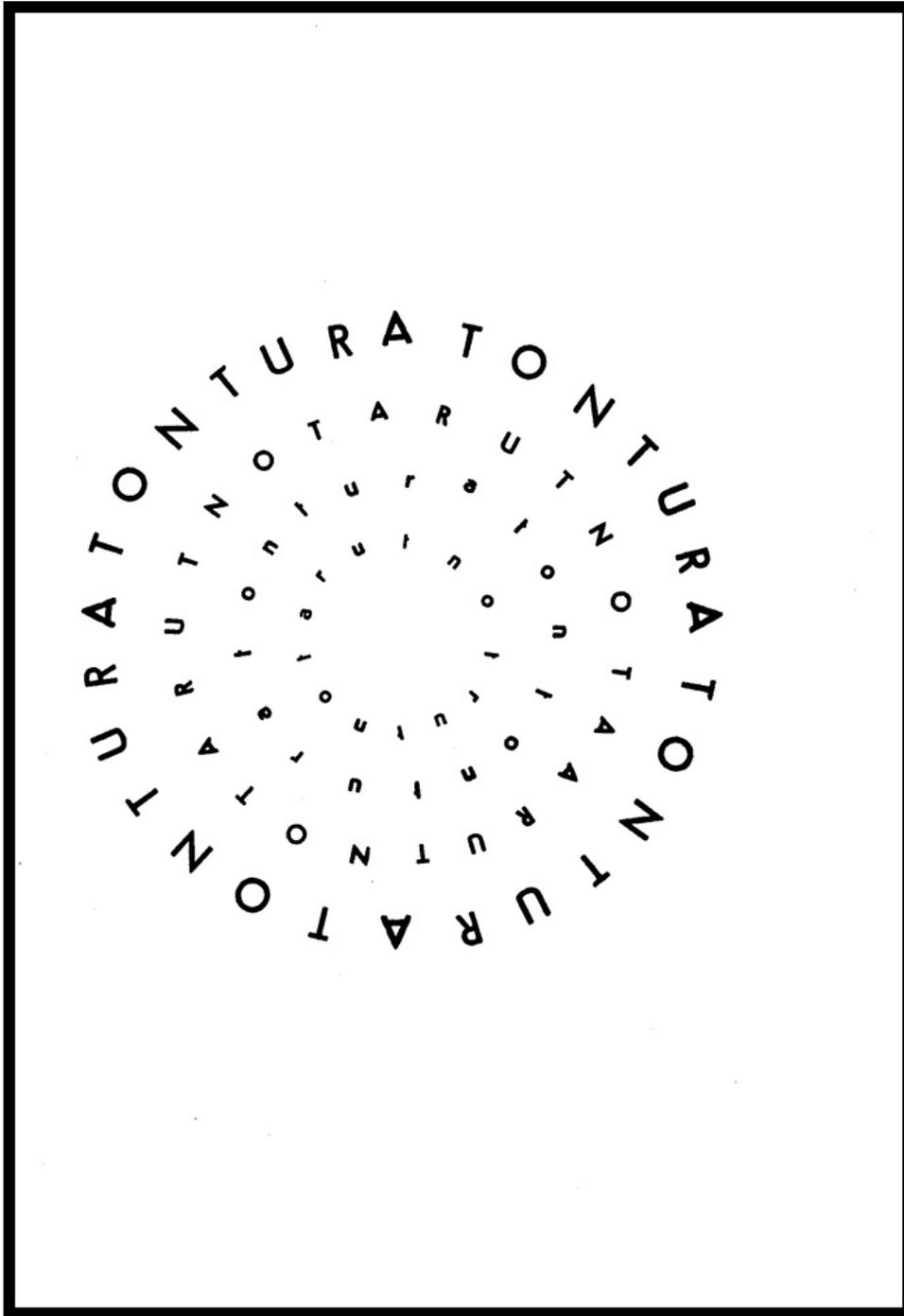
In this respect, it is striking to detect resemblances between pre- and post-digital contexts. For instance, between the handwritten poems by Ana Hatherly (Figure 5) and the adoption of the Scriptina font by Stephanie Strickland (Figure 6).



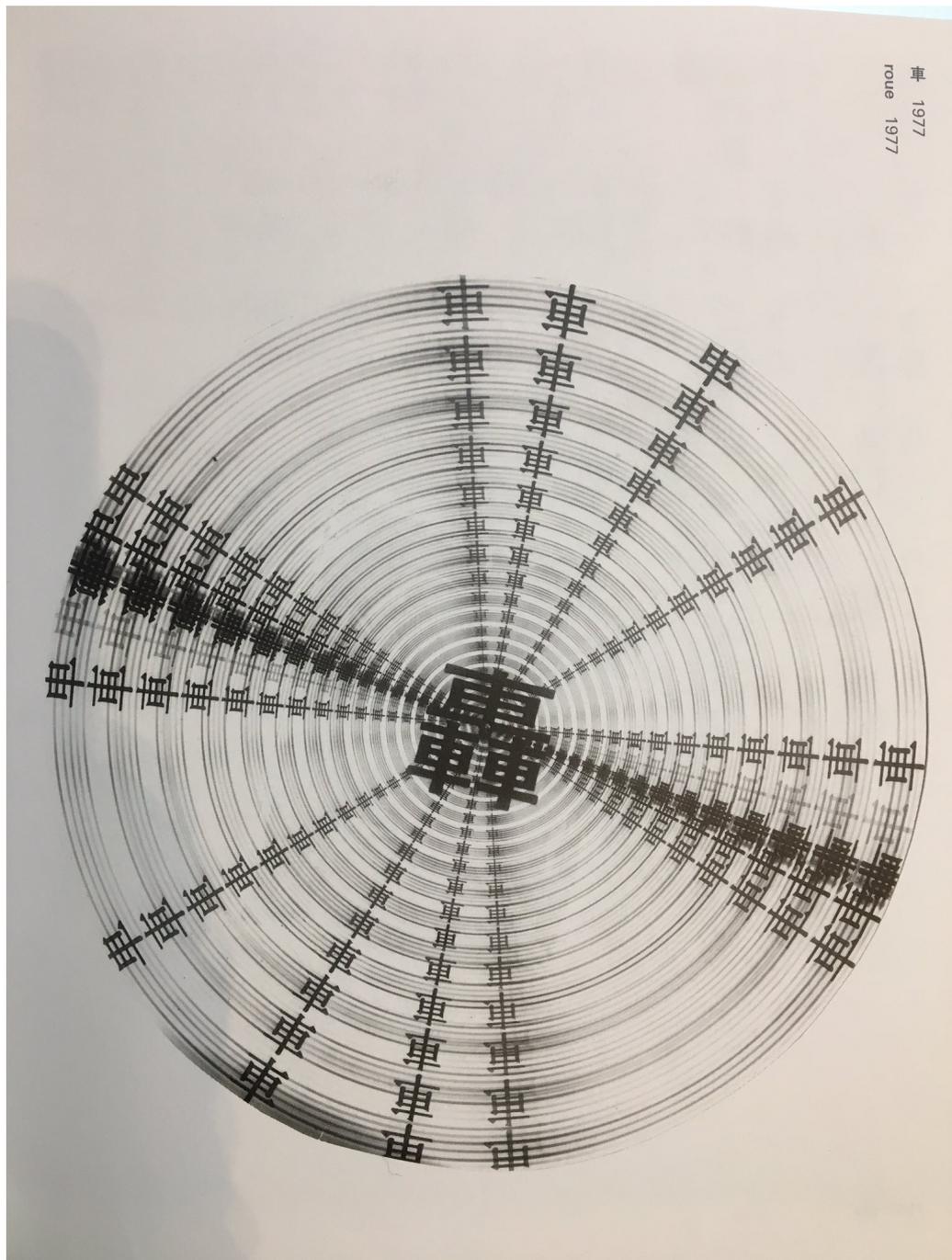
7. Marcel Duchamp, *Anémic Cinéma*, 1926, 35 mm film, 6', b/w, silent.  
Screenshot from [Archive.org](http://Archive.org).



8. Ferdinand Kriwet, "Rundscheibe IX" [Round Disk IX], 1962/1963, variable object; offset print on rotatable chipboard, wooden board, 62 cm diameter, ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. © Ferdinand Kriwet; Foto © ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Foto: Franz J. Wamhof



9. E. M. de Melo e Castro, "Tontura", in: *Ideogramas*, Lisbon, Guimarães Editores, 1962, 25. Source: Po-ex.net



10. Niikuni Seiichi, “roue”, 1977, in: *Niikuni Seiichi: Works 1952-1977*, Osaka, National Museum of Art, 2008. Source: @hyppocampus\_mdk, Twitter, Oct. 10, 2017, [twitter.com/hyppocampus\\_mdk/status/917648463478661120/photo/2](https://twitter.com/hyppocampus_mdk/status/917648463478661120/photo/2)



11. Saul Bass, film opening titles, *Vertigo*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1958. Screenshot.

Across time and artistic fields, authors have also explored similar shapes in art and literary forms. There are revealing comparisons: for instance, between the disorienting spiral wordplay by Marcel Duchamp in the “rotoreliefs” of the film *Anémic Cinéma* (Figure 7) and Ferdinand Kriwet’s (Figure 8) series of round disks, which place text in different font sizes and reading directions; between Melo e Castro’s (Figure 9) and Niikuni Seiichi’s (Figure 10) circular poems; or even Saul Bass’s equally disorienting animation in *Vertigo* (Figure 11). Except for Bass’s, these works depend on a similar shape, but they break away from normative representations of language in their own art forms because they do not need to reply to language’s pragmatic dimensions. These examples also allow us to consider points of contact between concrete, visual poetry, and graphic design, similarly to what happened between modernist works and newspaper typography. The relation between kinetic poetry and film title sequences may be no different. In the digital realm, David Jhave Johnston’s animated letters are surely in dialogue with the language of motion graphics and advertisement.<sup>20</sup> Mass communication systems and media inform poetic adventures; conversely, visual poetry informs mass media and advertisement.

The desacralisation of art practices and objects – what Walter Benjamin called “loss of aura” – is a good example of how the popular and the avant-garde have played out on each other during the twentieth century. A program of desacralisation of art was proposed by the Futurists and Dadaists, and most obviously by Pop artists, who literally brought objects of consumerism into art venues and serialised them (though their American counter-part’s relationship to consumer society was ambivalent, and it could in certain cases be described as an opportunistic critique, as in some of Andy Warhol’s works). Yet the Futurists and Dadaists appropriated

<sup>20</sup> See the compilation of videos “Bifrost for Bill”, in: *Vimeo* 3 April 2019, [online], <<https://vimeo.com/328253080>>.

typographic forms and graphic design strategies from newspapers, advertising material, storefront lettering, and companies' logos in their printed material: in manifestos, pamphlets, posters, and poems, via typesetting, collage, and other techniques. Poets such as Apollinaire, Hausmann, Marinetti, Mayakovski, Sá-Carneiro, Tzara, and Zdanevich assimilated and subverted the visual forms of print and graphic design communication in much of their work. Johanna Drucker, who has carefully studied the influences of typography and graphic design on the material practices of Modernist poetry, points out that “[t]he permeation of the boundaries of literary discourse by the polluting elements of commercial speech, linguistic forms which were vulgarly associated with advertising practices, was an outrage against the literary establishment. The arguments of avant-garde poetics, in this sense, are with literature, not with popular arts.”<sup>21</sup> Although Drucker does not provide a definition of the “popular arts”, the fact is that in the 1960s, the influence of mass media and advertisement in the works of the Experimental poets still happened in the same vein. They used advertising tactics to subvert the consumerist, capitalist, and mercantile logic of the post-Second World War period in defiance of the literary establishment. But similarly to how some Modernist artists were also graphic designers, some Surrealist and Experimental poets, such as Alexandre O’Neill, also worked in the advertising industry.

Progressively, the flux of influences becomes bidirectional, especially as popular arts, as well as advertisement, start mass disseminating and employing techniques and strategies used by the vanguard arts. This argument is made, for instance, by Klaus Peter Dencker in *Text-Bilder*, which Pimenta relates to “an absorption phenomenon: some of the most expressive processes used by visual and concrete poetry went on to be copied by the advertisement techniques”.<sup>22</sup> As the explorations of visual and kinetic forms entered into the electronic and digital realms, the influence of advertisements, billboards, and cinematic techniques on kinetic writing became even clearer, especially with the later impact of computer software and the Web. In the study *Aesthetic Animism*, Johnston presents examples of kinetic poetry and advertisement as works that have brought new insights to kinetics for a development of typography as living matter; letterforms that display animistic qualities – moving shapes, charged with semantic attributes, that replicate or embody features of living beings.<sup>23</sup>

But before the introduction of animation software, animation film techniques were invented by filmmakers, not only for artistic purposes, but also within commercial and mainstream settings. This is certainly one of the sources of kinetic writing. Yet if the term “kinetic” has become associated with the visual and literary arts, the term “animation” has become part of the lexicon of animation film, graphic and communication design, motion graphics, digital cartoons, and advertisement.

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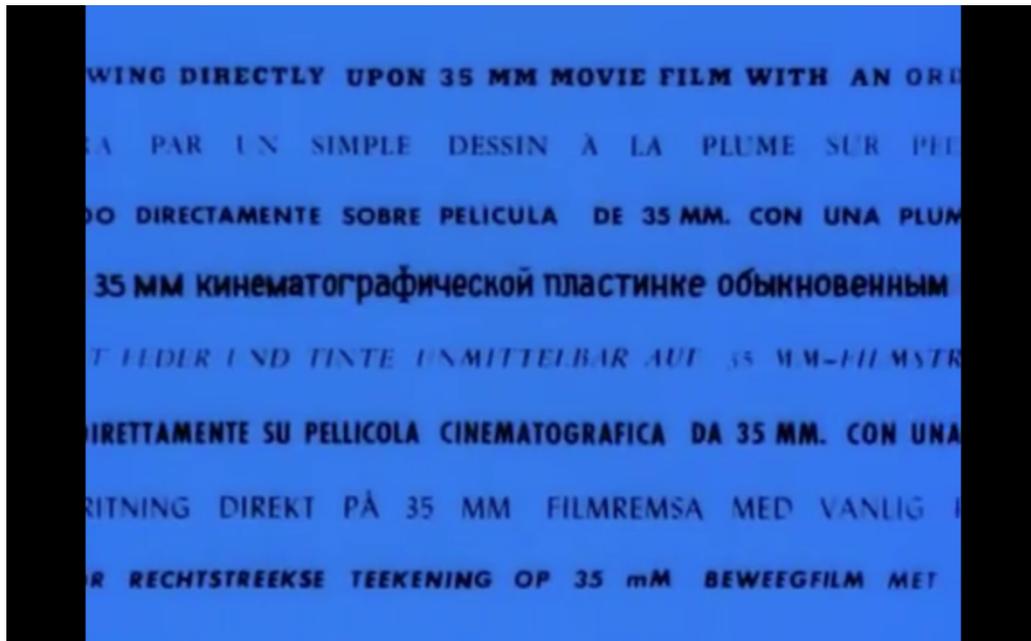
<sup>21</sup> Johanna DRUCKER, *The Visible World: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*, Chicago, CUP, 1994, 199.

<sup>22</sup> PIMENTA, *Ibidem*, 45n34 (translation mine). Klaus Peter DENCKER, *Text-Bilder. Visuelle Poesie international*, Cologne, M. DuMont Schauberg, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> David Jhave JOHNSTON, *Aesthetic Animism: Digital Poetry's Ontological Implications*, Cambridge, MA, MIT P, 2016.

## Kinetic Writing in Animation Films and Film Titles

Artists Lotte Reiniger, Oskar Fischinger, Berthold Bartosch, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, and Mary Ellen Bute are relevant in this context because they bridged the divide between experimental filmmaking (at times associated with cinema and art venues) and animation film (at times associated with television and commercials). As such, beyond their work, they have been important as well as agents of change who overlapped the boundaries between art and industry. Len Lye worked with film since the 1920s and produced vibrant and, at times, psychedelic short experimental films with painting techniques and writing inscriptions directly on celluloid. In *Kaleidoscope* or *A Colour Box* from 1935, Lye created the impression of superimposition of shapes at a fast pace, by hand-painting celluloid film and adding the words “cheaper parcel post”. According to Jamie Sexton, *A Colour Box* was, in fact, commissioned by the UK’s General Post Office “Film Unit to advertise the postal system.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this abstract film, repurposed for commercial aims with a large distribution, received great exposure, as Sexton highlights: “*A Colour Box* eventually secured quite a wide theatrical release and became popular with both general audiences and critics. Because it was colourful and dynamic, with a catchy musical score, it was more accessible than many abstract films of the period.”



12. Norman McLaren, *Boogie-Doodle*, 1948. Screenshot.

<sup>24</sup> Jamie SEXTON, “Colour Box, A (1935)”, in: *BFI Screenonline*, n.d., [online], <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/442234/index.html>>.

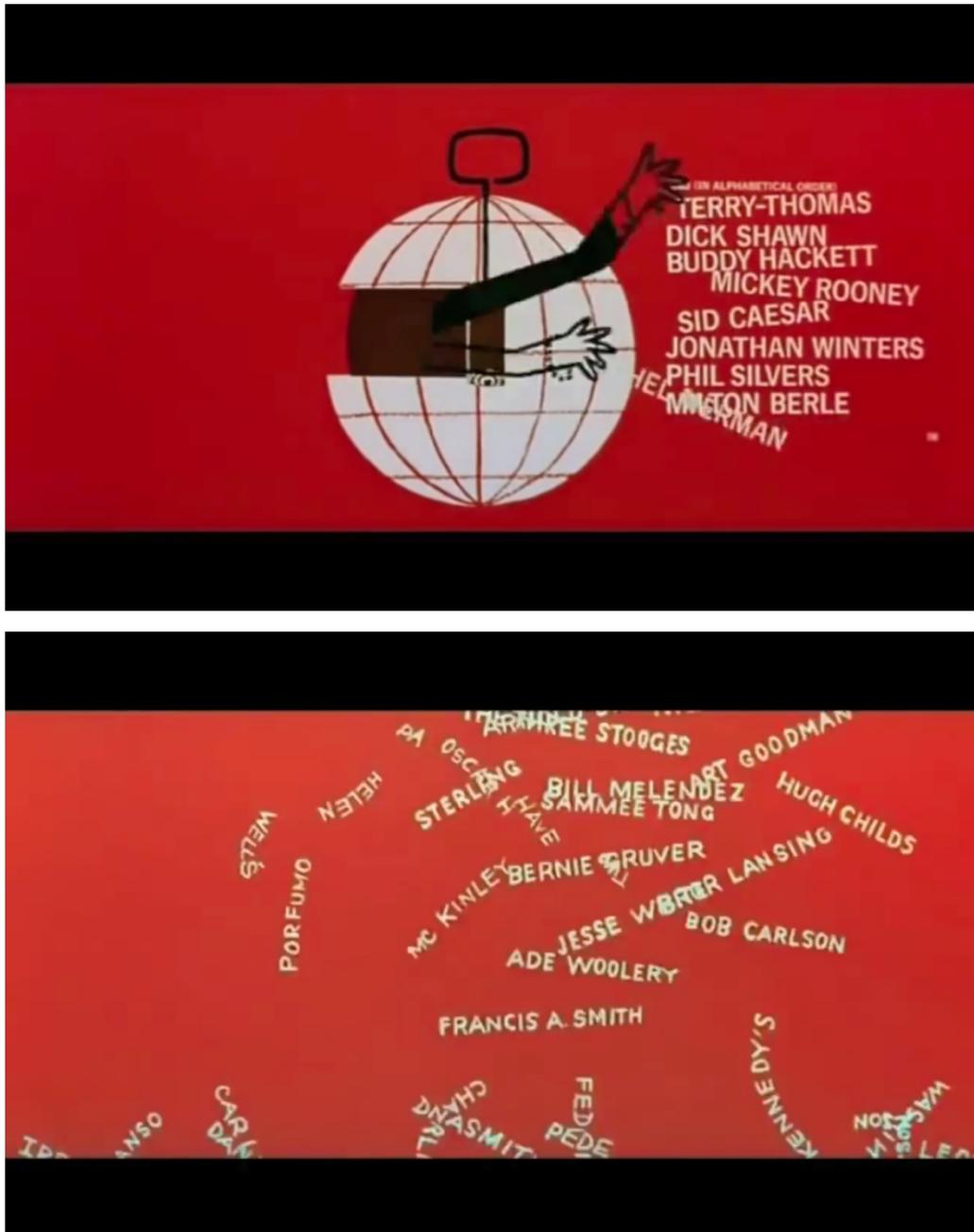
Norman McLaren, who in the 1940s directed *Dots*, *Loops* and *Boogie-Doodle*, presented eight languages as a scroll film intro for the National Film Board of Canada (Figure 12). As I have argued above, contrary to kinetic poetry, animation is an art as well as a commercial venture driven by and established within certain industries, a fact that potentially creates a double-edged situation. Oskar Fischinger, for instance, after fleeing the Nazi regime was commissioned by MGM to make a film. Eager to build a career at Hollywood, Fischinger released the incredibly synchronised *An Optical Poem* in 1938. However, he got disappointed with the film's lack of success and quit.

Experiments with kinetic writing that started in the silent film era and continued with experimental film reached the mainstream when animation started to be used in film titles. Previously, most intertitles and opening titles were presented as a static script.



13. William Beaudine, *Born to the Saddle*, 1953. Screenshot.

Usually, film credits and opening titles were designed in two columns of justified text superimposed on top of the moving image that would change with simple frame-by-frame and fade-in and fade-out effects, as the example of the Western *Born to the Saddle* shows (Figure 13). But from the 1950s and '60s onwards, graphic designers such as Saul Bass or Pablo Ferro transgressed the way pairs of text-image could act as moving semiotic constructs.



14. Saul Bass, film opening titles, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Stanley Kramer, 1963. Screenshots.

Bass, who designed titles in iconic and dynamic ways in numerous motion pictures, was most inventive when applying explicit cartoon animation techniques to titles and figures, which would shape short introduction narratives to films, especially in Otto Preminger's works like *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959). Starting with Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959), moving words in titles

began to be used in such a way as to illustrate their meaning. Unexpected animation techniques occur in Bass's titles designed for Michael Anderson's *Around the World in 80 days* (1956) or Delmer Daves's *Cowboy* (1958) – but especially in the virtuosic titles of Melvin Frank and Norman Panama's *The Facts of Life* (1960), and in Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963, Figures 14 and 15). As John Cayley has argued, Bass's innovative and expressive implementation of titles for Preminger's and Hitchcock's films show the

unacknowledged prehistory of textual animation as pioneered in the art of film titles, arguably the first medium in which words moved. Apart from helping to give writing in programmable media a historical context, Cinematic titling also demonstrates that the complex surface of writing is not, of necessity, media-specific. It does not require the screens of programmable machines.<sup>25</sup>

Cayley's acknowledgement of Bass's inventiveness also demonstrates why the history of kinetic poetry needs to be complemented with that of other forms of writing, especially because equating kinetic poetry with digital and interactive systems only tells us just one side of that story.

Film Opening Titles (FOT) have come a long way, but recent research in kinetic typography, social semiotics, and graphic design highlights how the creation of meaning through movement requires a proper vocabulary.<sup>26</sup> Theo van Leeuwen and Emilia Djonov argue that kinetic typography is a “new semiotic mode”, and that a grammar of movement can be traced from early experimental film and film titles to its popularisation in schemes of animation in software such as Flash and After Effects, as well as the effects of PowerPoint.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Gisela Leão elaborates on “a system of options, consisting of elements and ‘changes’, which are the structural components, or ‘lexicon’ of animation. Elements and changes are the equivalent of nouns and verbs in verbal languages. The ‘grammar’ of animation thus combines elements and changes to realize ‘animated’ experiential statements”.<sup>28</sup> Leão goes further and demonstrates how animation does not depend only on movement, but also “changes of luminance and form.” Developing a specific grammar that relates to animation techniques is a much-needed resource, whether in digital literary studies, film studies, social semiotics, motion graphics or design studies.

Film titles, motion graphics, and graphic design have a much wider history, but I would like to gesture towards one final example that bridges these areas, while at the same time paying tribute to experimental writing and the “avant-garde author bpNichol”. Justin Stephenson's *The Complete Works* (2015) is not only a creative

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<sup>25</sup> John CAYLEY, “Writing on Complex Surfaces”, in: *Dichtung Digital*, 2005, n.p., [online], <<http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2005/2/Cayley>>.

<sup>26</sup> See Barbara BROWNIE, *Transforming Type: New Directions in Kinetic Typography*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Theo VAN LEEUWEN and Emilia DJONOV, “Notes towards a Semiotics of Kinetic Typography”, in: *Social Semiotics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015, 244-53, doi:10.1080/10350330.2015.1010324.

<sup>28</sup> Gisela LEÃO, “A Systemic Functional Approach to the Analysis of Animation in Film Opening Titles”, PhD diss., University of Technology, Sydney, 2013, xvii, [online], <https://bit.ly/3tpE6tk>.

biography of the Canadian poet, but it also reimagines bpNichol's sound, visual, and print work with the added layers of animation techniques.<sup>29</sup> Its careful use of kinetic typography often reinforces the performativity of bpNichol's oeuvre, but it goes beyond it by recreating unique cinematic and poetic landscapes. In this sense, it depends on bpNichol's poetics, but it also breaks away from it with a new vision.

## Conclusion

The works I have selected to illustrate my arguments are either paradigmatic or fall in-between certain avant-garde, popular and experimental forms. There are other fertile forms such as video clip lyrics, motion graphics, videogames, and virtual reality, where kinetic writing is activated at those intersections. These expanded forms can help to redefine what kinetic typography and writing's various audiences associate with kinetic writing, as well as the most appropriate ways to study them.

Thus, kinetic writing is an open and fertile cross-disciplinary topic that can be studied in almost any type of moving system of presentation and representation – in any art form, and in any media. This perspective acts as a complementary narrative to how the practices of kinetic poetry co-evolved with other forms of kinetic writing during the twentieth century in diverse media, and how they still co-evolve. Moreover, this complementary narrative can incite further investigation on a common grammar of movement and meaning making, independently of the fields authors see themselves belonging in, whether as writers and visual artists, filmmakers and animators, or designers. In the pre-World Wide Web context, it seems reasonable, however, to highlight a difference between forms of kinetic writing created by poets, and by film animators and designers. What the former at times lack in graphic sophistication, the latter lack in semiotic density. On the one hand, poets seem more engaged in contradicting or transgressing the relation between signifier and signified, by creating complex and slow modes of meaning-making – modes that not always enact or reinforce the semantics and movement literal paradigm. On the other, animators and designers seem more engaged in formal innovation, while relying on quick ways of meaning-making because of a dependence on communication or commercial constraints, that is, replicating or matching the expected movement behaviour of the signifier with the signified. This is obviously not a general rule, but, as discussed above, this fact might arise from their work's functional needs. The main reason for such a range of approaches resides in the contrast between the pragmatic and non-pragmatic uses of language in the variety of forms where kinetic writing is employed.

A pragmatic take explains, in some cases, the higher degrees of dependency in the kinetic writing strategies. Higher freedom and less functional constraints can lead to higher degrees of transgression, or innovation, though Bass's case seems to contradict this assessment. Perhaps the works we have come to single out as

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<sup>29</sup> Justin STEPHENSON, *The Complete Works*, film, 2015, <<https://thecompleteworks.ca>>.

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outstanding are those that managed to present higher degrees of surprise or transgression from their normative models within their own dependencies. Those that belong and break away.

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