Line/Shot/Montage:
Cinematic Techniques
in American Sign Language Poetry

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After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in English, I felt that I had worked hard to acquire a broad understanding of literature. Four months later, however, I realized just how limited my education had been. During that time, I had become employed as a dormitory supervisor at a residential school for Deaf students. One evening as I monitored dinner in the cafeteria, I noticed something more than everyday conversation occurring at one table of high school students. This was a table of storytellers. It was then that the question dawned on me: Does American Sign Language have literature? The thought of a literary tradition without recourse to speech or written texts ran counter to everything I had been taught. Yet, it made perfect sense to me: ASL performance seemed to be a synthesis of the areas I had explored in college: poetry, folklore, and drama. After that night, I queried co-workers, students, and former English professors: “Does ASL have literature?” My Deaf co-workers said, “Yes, definitely”; Deaf students said, “Literature? No, we just tell stories”; and former professors cocked their heads—some had not even considered ASL a language, let alone a literary medium.

Indeed, the emergence of poetry in American Sign Language represents a type of paradigm shift away from what we commonly think of as literature. Because traditional notions of literature have developed exclusively within speaking and writing, they do not, at present, account for signed literature. Students of literature and Deaf Studies, then, are faced with a challenging situation: What is the best method to explore poetry in manual languages? What lexicon should be used in identifying the poetic elements in a language without sound? The following ideas center on exploring these two questions.

Clearly, there are aspects of signed poetry that bear similarities to spoken and written poetry. Deaf poet and linguist Clayton Valli has documented these similarities, creating the existing standardized lexicon for ASL poetry. Valli has demonstrated ASL’s use of formal poetic elements such as rhyme, rhythm, and line breaks. According to
Valli (1990a, 1990b, 1995), an ASL rhyme is formed through the repetition of particular handshapes, movement paths of signs, or non-manual signals (i.e., facial expressions). Identifying such counterparts to spoken/written poetic elements has proven indispensable in establishing a standardized lexicon for ASL poetics.

However, fundamental differences between spoken/written literature and Sign literature limit this traditional approach. As oral literature takes place primarily through time, and writing through space, hearing-centered criticism proves inadequate in accounting for Sign’s unique synthesis of vision, space, and movement. This becomes especially evident as Valli uses his analysis of ASL rhymes to discern what he feels to be the fundamental element of poetry: the line. The “line division rhyme,” according to Valli (1990a) is “identified by looking at rhyming patterns and finding their repetition” (p. 174). This definition raises some questions: what exactly determines a repetition of a repetition? Are “lines” in ASL only possible if there is a rhyming pattern? Why should ASL lines be limited to rhyming patterns when written poetry has broken away from rhymed verse over 150 years ago? What about free-verse poetry? Or the types of line breaks found in concrete poetry, or prose poems?

Clearly there are structural differences between written and signed poetry that must be accounted for. While line breaks in written poetry are immediately recognizable, they are not in ASL poetry. While modern forms of poetic line breaks rely more and more on visual perception, the model for the ASL line division rhyme still borrows a sound-based concept.

The difficulty in identifying line breaks is symptomatic of a larger problem: the uncritical adoption of spoken-written poetics as the sole analogy used to explore ASL poetry. Literature is not a neutral concept, but a social and historical phenomenon that has been formed within the hegemonic practices of linguistic production. In other words, literature has been produced within the assumption that speech and writing are the only normal forms of language; anything else is abnormal and should be shunned. As the linear model is the structural embodiment of phonetic writing, Valli’s concept of the ASL line places Sign literature within a phonocentric/audist tradition. The “metaphysics of phonetic writing,” Derrida (1976) shows, is “nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism” (p. 3). According to Derrida (1976), the linear model signifies “the repression of pluri-dimensional symbolic thought” (p. 86). The dominance of the linear phonetic model, then, may be seen as complicit in the historical repression of sign languages.

Rather than adopting the linear model based on rhymes, meter, and line-breaks, the study of Sign poetry needs a criticism that recognizes Sign’s unique ability to wed movement with visual-spatial imagery. Such a criticism can be found in film, a type of sister-art to Sign poetry. Comparing ASL with film is not a new idea. Over 30 years ago, Deaf actor Bernard Bragg clearly perceived the inherent cinematic nature of manual languages. Bragg’s insights led the preeminent sign linguist, William Stokoe (quoted in Sacks, 1990), to describe ASL grammar in the following terms:

In a signed language . . . narrative is no longer linear and prosaic. Instead, the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashback and flash-forward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works . . . Not only is signing itself arranged more like edited film than like written narration, but also each signer is placed very much as a camera: the field of vision and angle of view are directed but variable. (p. 90)

Given such a close relation between techniques used in ASL and film, one wonders why the lexicon of film techniques is not a standard part of a lexicon for ASL poetics. This hesitancy may be due, in part, to the need to demonstrate that ASL is not simply a collection of iconic gestures, but a linguistic system capable of all the symbolic, abstract content of spoken languages. Yet, describing ASL in cinematic terms does not mean that it is as purely representational as cinema. If it were, non-signers would be able to comprehend ASL without training, just as they would mime; yet, they cannot. As four decades of linguistic research have shown, ASL possesses all the symbolic properties of spoken-written language. Criticism of sign poetry may now be freed from the duty of validating ASL as a language to explore Sign’s most unique quality: movement within three-dimensional space.

Thus, Sign criticism need not shy away from film, but should explore its similarities with this popular art form that itself possesses linguistic properties. While not a language in the traditional sense, linguists, semioticians, and literary critics have long recognized that film has developed its own set of rules that guide the combination of parts to produce a comprehensible narrative (Arjona, 1976; Metz, 1974). As Sharff (1982) notes, through the course of its development:

Film has become very much like a language . . . it possesses the ability to generate a nearly infinite set of propositions from a set of rules. Cinema “syntax,” like the syntax of
language, is in itself a creative force, to use Noam Chomsky's terminology. Its rules, no matter what is being expressed, make possible the formation of a large number of film phrases, including ones that have never been used before. As long as grammatical order is adhered to, these phrases will be accepted and understood. (p. 33)

ASL, then, may be said to exist somewhere between written-spoken languages and film language. Like spoken languages, ASL possesses a complex grammatical structure, and like film, ASL operates according to a visual-kinetic logic.

This position becomes evident as Deaf performers seize on ASL's spatial-kinetic grammar; the effect is, as Bernard Bragg puts it, like watching "the camera eye in motion" (personal communication, March 25, 1999). Through his years of performing with the National Theatre for the Deaf, Bragg has developed his own dramatic and cinematic method of signing that he calls "Visual Vernacular." In this method, Bragg explains, "The performer remains all the time within the film frame, so to speak, presenting a montage of cross-cuts and cutaway views. [Visual Vernacular] liberates latent resources of visual self-expression in creative signing that leads to a new fluency and dramatic impact." If ASL performers themselves describe their work in such cinematic terms, why shouldn't ASL poetics include these terms as a part of a standardized lexicon?

It must be stated, though, that borrowing cinematic vocabulary to discuss ASL poetry does not imply that the creative processes involved in the two arts are identical. While film is an intensely collaborative art, ASL poetry is generally the product of a single author who assumes a variety of creative roles. The ASL poet is the screenwriter, who composes the linguistic text; the camera-man arranges the visual-spatial composition of individual shots; the editor decides how to arrange the various shots together; the actor embodies the characters and images; and finally, the director unites all these interconnected aspects into a single text. Despite the differences in the process of creation, film and signed texts bear enough grammatical and aesthetic similarities that the lexicon of film language may be applied to sign language.

In what follows, then, this essay will begin to articulate a cinematic lexicon for ASL poetry. The purpose of such an approach is to widen the parameters of ASL poetics to include terminology rooted in visual-spatial-kinetic modes of experience. By doing so, we may delve deeper into understanding how a text produces a particular effect in the mind and body of the viewer—what Shariff (1982) calls “cinesthetic impact.”

**Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact in ASL Poetry**

A shared lexicon logically begins with the basic unit of construction for film grammar: the shot. Like photography and the visual arts, the limits of visual/spatial composition are determined by the frame. The shot's spatial composition is largely dependent on the distance between the camera and the objects within the frame, ranging from extreme long-shots to medium to extreme close-ups. In addition, the duration of a single shot may vary from the split second shots characteristic of MTV to shots sustained over a lengthy period of time.

Unlike the shot in photography, the cinemagraphic shot is able to record movement within the frame and also make the frame itself become mobile.

By themselves, individual shots do not constitute film grammar. Filmmaking is largely about using a variety of editing techniques to bring about desired effects. Consider, for example, the famous Odessa steps massacre of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. Eisenstein's brilliant montage, which lasts for 75 seconds and consists of 55 shots, powerfully conveys a sense of terror and pathos that a single, unedited camera shot could not. Through his use of parallel editing, crosscutting, camera movements, multi-angular shots, and a remarkable array of close-up, medium, and long shots, Eisenstein creates an unforgettable cinesthetic experience.

As in film, the individual shot may be thought of as the basic compositional unit in ASL poetry. The frame in ASL poetry is not quite as rigidly inscribed as the frame in the cinematic shot. The signer's body and its immediate environment create the frame of the text. ASL poets fill this space in a similar manner to how cinematographers fill cinematic space: through a series of close-up, medium, and long shots. Because ASL's grammar consists of the body's movements through three-dimensional space, it has a wide array of visual and linguistic tools to use to create a variety of shots. Non-manual markers such as facial expressions often convey a close-up shot of a character. In addition, ASL makes extensive use of a classifier system, consisting of classes of handshapes and their movements that are able to describe the physical properties of objects—their location, size, shape, dimensions, scale, and number—and also their movements: speed, direction, and attitude. Classifiers easily create distant shots (as in the examples below) but can also be used to describe the shape and dimensions of an object, say a single cell, from an extreme close-up shot.
While ASL can present visual material in a variety of dimensions and perspectives, it is how a poet edits a poem or narrative that creates a particular cinesthetic impact. In order to discuss editing techniques in ASL poetry, it is necessary to turn to the poems itself. The following discussion of cinemographic technique begins with a brief excerpt from Clayton Valli's “The Lone, Sturdy Tree” (1990b). Representing sign poetry through writing itself demonstrates the vast differences between sign and spoken and written forms of poetry. Translating the body's movements from the three-dimensions of space into written form obviously entails great aesthetic and linguistic loss. If it were possible, this essay would be much more effective if presented on videotape. For the time being, though, we have to suffice with print.

The Lone, Sturdy Tree

Shot 1: The opening shot operates as a type of narrative voice-over; the signing persona signs: Every morning, I drive through the dry landscape. As the sign “drive” is highly mimetic—the persona holding the steering wheel with both hands—we see the driver from the waist up, similar to a medium shot in film.

Shot 2: Long, reverse-angle, moving shot. The camera has turned away from the driver 180-degrees, (reverse-angle) now looking from the driver’s perspective watching the dry, hilly terrain roll by the moving car. The surface of the terrain is created through the “five” classifier handshape, palms facing the ground, designating flat surfaces. Valli manipulates this classifier to convey the rolling motions to indicate the contour of the landscape. As the shot comes to a close, the camera moves from facing forward to the signer’s left where it shows an object on a hill in the distance. At this point, the camera comes to a standstill, thrusting the viewers' attention directly on the distant object.

Shot 3: Static, medium shot of a tree centrally located in the frame. Now we see that the distant object was a tree. Here, Valli modifies the conventional sign for TREE to convey the particularly gnarled nature of the “lone sturdy tree.” This shot includes the whole tree, from the trunk to the branches, thus corresponding to a medium shot of a tree in film.

From shots 4-20, Valli cuts between the sun, tree, wind, and narrator voice-overs to convey the tree's endurance. The poem then repeats the shots described above (1-3) before the final two shots of the poem. The penultimate shot shows the driver, thinking of all the conflicts he must face at work. He looks at the tree and identifies with its endurance. The final shot is the familiar image: medium shot of the lone, sturdy tree.

The initial cinematographic phrasing is crucial to creating the cinesthetic effect Valli intended. Here Valli makes effective use of what is called an establishing shot, frequently used as an opening shot of a sequence, showing the overall spatial context of a scene. Typical of Hollywood Westerns, the wide, establishing shot of the open landscape precedes focus on particular elements within it. As Valli's second shot covers much of the barren landscape, he conveys the broad geographical location of the tree before he focuses on a particular tree. Had Valli begun with the medium shot without the establishing shot, the "lonesomeness” of the tree would be lost, as would the meaning of the poem.

As Valli explains in the videotape, he created the poem about a time he worked in a program for three deaf students in Carson City, Nevada. Perpetually frustrated by the lack of services and support for Deaf students, Valli identified with the tree's endurance in a harsh environment with no support. This barren environment parallels the educational environment provided for many mainstreamed students: they are forced to endure without being given the essential ingredients for intellectual growth; further, they are constantly monitored by the panoptic gaze of the hearing educators, roughly corresponding to the brutal gaze of the sun on the tree. While the sun may be responsible for growth, without water and nurturing, no growth will occur. The tree survives, though, on its own, despite its scarce encouragement. The feeling of the tree's solitary position is crucial to the impact of the poem, and is created through the technique of the establishing shot in contrast with the familiar and repeated medium shot of the tree.

While Valli's poem uses the popular long establishing shot to direct the viewers' focus to the main object of attention, there are, as with film, numerous other strategies for creating a particular focus of attention. The opposite technique—beginning with a close-up and then moving back—can also be found in ASL poetry, as seen in the work of another Deaf poet, Debbie Rennie.

Rennie's (1990) "Missing Children" uses a variety of cinematic techniques to contrast the still photographs of missing children often seen on flyers and milk carts with the more in-depth narratives offered by film. Rennie begins the poem with a medium shot (waist-
of an unidentified child handing a picture to an adult. The second shot cuts to an adult looking at the card. The third shot is a close-up of the photo itself: Rennie’s expressions convey an innocent looking child asking the question, HAVE YOU SEEN ME? The poem responds to this question, not by giving a simple yes/no answer which the question elicits, but by speculating on the possible lives of abused, maimed, and murdered children throughout the world. From the central image of a still photo, Rennie tells three separate stories in three sections, each introduced through a finger-spelled location: Nicaragua, South Africa, and Ireland. While all three sections of the poem use cinematic techniques, this essay focuses on the Nicaragua section of the poem.

Missing Children: “Nicaragua”

- Shot 5: NICARAGUA fingerspelled, like titles on the screen.
- Shot 6: Close-up, from the neck up. Description of a boy: CUTE BOY; HAIR DARK; SKIN DARK. WHAT? PLANTING COFFEE ON A FARM.
- Shot 7: Medium close-up (waist up) of the boy planting the coffee beans carefully.
- Shot 8: Medium close-up of the father, (waist up) planting coffee alongside his son.
- Shot 9: Boy looking at his father and then planting beans.
- Shot 10: Wide, distant shot conveyed through what corresponds to a narrator’s voice-over. MANY PEOPLE VARIETY ALL OVER THE LAND PLANTING HOEING RAKING PLANTING ALL OVER

- Shot 11: Father planting as before.
- Shot 12: Boy planting as before.
- Shot 13: Camera moves to face the dense forest. The movement of the trees shows the movement of the camera through the trees. The rhythm begins slowly, then picks up showing rapid camera movement in the density of the forest. This leads to a crescendo as out of the jungle come figures, shown by the one-handshape classifier. Then a horde of soldiers comes. This is a distant shot.

- Shot 14: Medium close-up of a soldier, describing his uniform: buttons, hats, guns. The soldier then opens fire on the farmers.

- Shot 15: Distant shot of bodies being riddled with bullets, dying. This is shown through the two-handshape classifier on both hands.

2Credit must also be given to Kenny Lerner, a member of the ASL poetry duo, Flying Words Project, for his collaboration on this poem.

Shot 16: The boy planting as before.
Shot 17: Distant shot of a body being shot.
Shot 18: Boy planting, after looking in the direction of the shot body. Hands grab his shoulders.
Shot 19: Soldier grabs the boy’s shoulders.
Shot 20: Boy with a hat being shoved on his head, obviously from the soldier.
Shot 21: Soldier shoves the gun in the boy’s face.
Shot 22: Boy looks at the gun, and offers a coffee bean slowly to the soldier.
Shot 23: Soldier cocks his gun and shoots the gun, laughing. Then offers the gun back to the boy.
Shot 24: Boy offers the soldier another coffee bean, obviously stricken with terror.
Shot 25: Soldier cocks the gun and fires again, and again,
Shot 26: Boy offers the bean, only halfway, slowing down.
Shot 27: Slow-motion: the soldier cocks the gun, with a smug smile on his face; a gesture signifies a loud noise. Without actually showing the body of the boy being shot, we can infer that is what happens.

Rennie’s poem shows an opposite approach to Valli’s “establishing shot” by opening the scene with a close-up of the boy. Here, Rennie uses a cinematic technique that Shariff (1982) calls “slow-disclosure.” Beginning with the central focus of the poem, the shots gradually widen, guiding the audience to first connect with the boy and then to see him in the context of his world—father, community, land, brutality.

In addition to “slow-disclosure,” Rennie also uses the spatial composition of her shots for cinesthetic impact. Rennie does not actually show the father being shot, but the audience infers this as the soldier occupies the same location as the father within the frame. The space, once occupied by the image of giving life—father and son planting seeds—is now occupied by a scene of death. Rennie also makes conscious use of modern cinematic techniques as she employs slow motion frequently in the poem: as the Nicaraguan death squad soldier kills the boy, as the South African police riddle a mother with bullet holes in her back, and as Malotov cocktails fly through the air in the Ireland section. Slowing down at these moments opens up the horror, enlarging it for viewers to behold. By the time she uses slow motion, we are so involved with the characters that we cannot look away. Interestingly, the moments of slow motion are the moments when the children become missing, which leads to their ultimate still-
nes as photographic images. It’s as if Rennie is slowing the scenes to return the poem to its opening and ending scenes: stills of photographs.

**Conclusion: Toward a Viewer-Response Criticism**

Through these two examples, we can begin to see how the poet constructs a particular moment in time and space, a particular lived experience. The viewer, then, helps to construct the particular cinematic experience. As with any medium that incorporates the human body, a type of intersubjective communication occurs between performer and viewer. Whether flesh, celluloid, analogue, or digitized, the ASL text is always a human body, projecting its own visual-spatial-kinetic experience, awakening similar lived experiences in the minds and bodies of the viewers. As Merleau-Ponty (1989) writes, bodies understand each other:

> It is precisely my body which perceives the body of another person and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon . . .

(p. 233)

The two bodies together, the poet’s and the viewer’s, ultimately combine to create the final text which is more than a script of linguistic signs, but a lived cinesthetic experience. Valli’s shot of the rolling hills can actually make the audience feel as if it is moving over landscape. As we witness Valli’s open phrases, we relive the sensation ourselves of moving through landscape in a car. Similarly, Rennie’s editing techniques make us feel as if we are actually in the presence of a boy and a father planting coffee. As the boy looks up toward his father, we perceive that he is shorter than his father; when the father looks down we perceive he is taller. While Rennie’s height does not change, cutting from character to character evokes a familiar visual-spatial experience in the minds and bodies of the viewers, only to be drawn into a most unfamiliar and horrifying experience.

As the famous Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein (1969) described, “The image planned by the [filmmaker] has become flesh of the flesh of the spectator’s risen image . . . Within me, as a spectator, this image is born and grown. Not only the author has created, but also I—the creating spectator—have participated” (p. 34). The cinesthetic elements used by filmmakers like Eisenstein and ASL poets carry their impact as the body itself is constantly moving through space and experiences the world through a massive array of angles and physical relations to the visual field.

These two brief examples may begin to illustrate how a theory of cinesthetic impact may help ASL criticism to understand how a poem creates particular experiences in the minds and bodies of viewers. In addition to opening up Sign criticism to include more visual-kinetic lexicon, a theory of cinesthetic impact may also encourage further experimentation with the codes of cinematic language among ASL poets themselves. We can only assume that a rich exchange between the visual languages of ASL poetry and cinema will take place as both art forms continue to explore the seemingly endless possibilities of cinesthetic experience.
References


