Redesigning Literature: The Cinematic Poetics of American Sign Language Poetry

After graduating from college as an English major, I found myself, like most English majors, working in an unrelated field. I was to find out, however, that my job as a dormitory supervisor at a residential school for Deaf students was more related than I had anticipated. One evening as I watched Deaf high school students exchange stories in the cafeteria, a question came to me: Does American Sign Language (ASL) have literature? The thought of a nonwritten, nonspoken medium of literature shook the very foundation of my education. It ran counter to everything I had been taught about literature, yet it made perfect sense. What the students were doing seemed akin to drama in that it was a type of performance, akin to poetry in that it involved creative use of language, and akin to folklore in that it had no written form. Yet I had never heard of ASL literature in my four years as an undergraduate. As I began to discover the Deaf community’s active storytelling and poetry traditions, I realized that it was not just my education, but the entire

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hearing-based definition of literature that was lacking because it did not account for the full human range of linguistic and literary media.

Indeed, as literature and its criticism have evolved within speech and writing, the emergence of poetry in ASL raises important questions for anyone interested in the study of literature: Because ASL texts have no written form, can they rightfully be called literature? Would it be more accurate (though ironic) to speak of ASL texts as forms of “oral literature”? How does one even begin to discuss sign poetry? What lexicon should one use in identifying the poetic elements in a language without sound? This article explores the latter question concerning the lexicon of ASL poetics.

The first critics to embark on the study of creative works in ASL were linguists seeking to validate ASL’s linguistic and aesthetic properties. In doing so, they have discerned equivalents to formal poetic elements such as meter, rhyme, metaphor, simile, and line breaks. Leading the way in this effort is Deaf linguist and poet Clayton Valli, whose identification of ASL rhymes and meter the Deaf community commonly accepts today. According to Valli, an ASL rhyme is formed through the repetition of particular handshapes, movement paths of signs, or nonmanual signals (i.e., facial expressions) (Valli 1990a, 1990b). Identifying these counterparts to spoken and written poetic elements has proven indispensable in establishing a standardized lexicon for ASL poetics.

One must ask, though, whether it is necessary to limit the lexicon to the elements of spoken and written poetics. After all, couldn’t one view ASL poetry as a visual art that shares similar features such as composition, line, balance, space, scale, and perspective? Couldn’t one also discuss ASL poetry in terms of musical rhythm and phrasing? Still, none of these concepts sufficiently accounts for ASL’s simultaneous foregrounding of the visual-spatial-kinetic dimensions of experience. In this regard ASL bears greater affinity with another art form that weds vision with movement: film. This article is an initial attempt to apply cinematic language to a discussion of ASL poetic practice and analysis.

Comparing ASL with film is not a new idea. More than thirty years ago Deaf actor Bernard Bragg clearly perceived the inherent cinematic nature of manual languages. Bragg’s insights led William
Stokoe, the preeminent sign linguist, 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. (quoted in Sacks 1990, 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 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 of 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, nonsigners would be able to comprehend ASL without training, just as they understand mime; yet, they cannot. Four decades of linguistic research have shown that ASL possesses all of the symbolic properties of spoken and 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.

When Deaf performers seize on ASL's spatial-kinetic grammar, the effect is, as Bragg puts it, like watching "the camera eye in motion" (personal correspondence, 1999). Through his years of performing with the National Theater of the Deaf, Bragg has developed his own dramatic and cinematic method of signing, which he calls "visual vernacular." In this method, Bragg explains, "[t]he 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?
One must point out, though, that borrowing cinematic vocabulary to discuss ASL poetry does not imply that the creative processes involved in the two arts are identical. Whereas 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 cameraperson, who arranges the visual-spatial composition of individual shots; the editor, who decides how to organize the various shots; the actor, who embodies the characters and images; and, finally, the director, who unites all of these interconnected aspects into a single text. Despite the differences in the creative process, film and signed texts share enough grammatical and aesthetic similarities to enable us to apply the lexicon of film language to sign language.

Nevertheless, a cine-poetic lexicon should not replace the formalist approach that is currently in place. Valli’s approach, which forms a foundation of ASL poetics, continues to be a rich area of exploration and research. Because it focuses in particular on the creation of visual, spatial, and kinetic images, a cine-poetic vocabulary can only enhance this approach. By delving deeper into the realm of “images” we may arrive at a better understanding of how a text produces a particular effect in the mind and body of the viewer—what Stefan Sharff calls “cinesthetic impact” (1982).

Basic Elements of Cine-Poetics: The Shot and Editing

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 long to medium to close-up shots. In addition, the duration of a single shot may vary from the split-second shots characteristic of MTV to shots carried out over a long period of time. Unlike the photographic shot, the cinematographic 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. Film making 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 seventy-five seconds and consists of fifty-five shots, powerfully conveys a sense of terror and pathos that a single, unedited camera shot could not. Through his use of parallel editing, cross-cutting, camera movements, multangular shots, and a remarkable array of close-up, medium, and long shots, Eisenstein creates an unforgettable cinesthetic experience.

As in film, one may think of the individual shot as the basic compositional unit in ASL poetry. The frame in ASL poetry is not quite so 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 manner similar to the way in which cinematographers fill cinematic space: through a series of close-ups, medium shots, 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 with which to create a variety of shots. Nonmanual markers such as facial expressions often convey a close-up shot of a character. In addition, ASL makes extensive use of a classifier system that consists of classes of handshapes and their movements that describe the physical properties of objects—their location, size, shape, dimensions, scale, and number—and also their movements—their speed, direction, and attitude. Classifiers easily create distant shots (as the following examples show) but can also describe the shape and dimensions of an object, say a single cell, from an extreme close-up shot.

Even though ASL can present visual material in a variety of dimensions and perspectives, it is the way in which a poet edits shots into the stream of a poem or narrative that creates a particular cinesthetic impact. To discuss editing techniques in ASL poetry, let’s turn to the poems themselves.

The following discussion of cinematic technique begins with a brief excerpt from 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 through three dimensions of space into written form obviously entails great aesthetic and linguistic loss. For the time being, though, print will have to suffice.
"The Lone, Sturdy Tree"

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

**Figure 1.** The handshapes and movements convey the contours of the rolling landscape.

**Figure 2.** The end of the shot: a distant object created by a classifier handshape.
Shot 2. A long, reverse-angle, moving shot. The camera has turned away from the driver 180 degrees and is now conveying the driver’s perspective, watching the dry, hilly terrain roll by the moving car. The surface of the terrain is created through the 5 classifier hand-shape, palms facing the ground, designating flat surfaces. Valli manipulates this classifier to convey the contours of the rolling 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 distant hill. At this point, the camera comes to a standstill, thrusting the viewers’ attention directly on the distant object.

Shot 3. A static, medium shot of a tree centrally located in the frame. Now we see that the distant object is 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 to 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 earlier (1–3) before the final two shots of the poem. The penultimate shot shows the driver, thinking of all of the conflicts he must face at work. He looks at the tree and identifies

Figure 3. A static, medium shot of a tree centrally located in the frame.
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 cines\-thetic effect Valli intended. Here Valli makes effective use of 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 a focus on particular elements within the landscape. Because Valli's second shot includes much of the barren landscape, he conveys the broad geographical location of the tree before focusing in on one particular tree. Had Valli begun with the medium shot without the establishing shot, the "loneness" 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 when he worked in a program for three Deaf students in Nevada. Perpetually frustrated by the lack of services and support for them, Valli identified with the tree's endurance in a harsh environment. The tree's barren environment parallels the educational environment provided for many mainstreamed students: They are forced to pursue their education without the benefit of the essential ingredients for intellectual growth; further, they are constantly monitored by the panoptic gaze of hearing educators, roughly corresponding to the brutal gaze of the sun on the tree. Although the sun may be responsible for growth, without water and nourishment the tree will not grow. It survives, however, on its own, despite its impoverished environment. The feeling engendered by the tree's solitary position is crucial to the impact of the poem and is created by contrasting the establishing shot 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, as with film, numerous other strategies also exist for creating a particular focus. The opposite technique—beginning with a close-up and then moving back—is also used in ASL poetry, as the work of another Deaf poet, Debbie Rennie, illustrates.

Rennie's "Missing Children" (1990) (created with Kenny Lerner) uses a variety of cinematic techniques to contrast the still photographs
of missing children often seen on flyers and milk cartons with the more in-depth narratives that film offers. Rennie begins the poem with a medium (waist up) shot of an unidentified child handing a picture to an adult. The second shot cuts to an adult looking at the picture. The third shot is a close-up of the photo itself: Rennie’s expressions convey an innocent-looking child asking, “Have you seen me?” The poem responds to this question not by giving a simple yes-or-no answer but by speculating on the lives of abused and tortured children throughout the world. From the central image of a still photo, Rennie tells three stories in separate sections, each introduced through a location: Nicaragua, South Africa, and Ireland. Although all three sections of the poem use cinematic techniques, this article focuses on the Nicaragua section. Space constraints require that the following section be rendered in prose rather than illustrations.

“Missing Children: Nicaragua”

The Nicaragua section begins with a close-up of a boy (neck up) described as cute with dark skin and hair. The narrator tells us that the boy is working on a coffee farm. In the next shot, the camera moves back, presenting a medium close-up of the boy (waist up) carefully planting coffee beans. Rennie then cuts to a medium close-up of the father, planting coffee alongside his son. This is shown by the standard role-shift in ASL, in which a narrator shifts her body to convey the presentation of another character. This is strikingly similar to the film technique common in dialogue scenes in which the camera shifts from speaker to speaker.

After one more shot of the boy, Rennie cuts to a wide, distant shot that describes the wider geographical and social context with the help of a narrator-like voice-over: “People all over the countryside are planting, raking, and hoeing.” Rennie then cuts back to the now-familiar image of the father planting, then again to the boy planting, and then to a shot of the dense forest surrounding the farmers. The camera moves through the trees, slowly at first, then increasing in speed, leading to a crescendo: Out of the jungle come figures, shown by the 1 handshape classifier, followed by a horde, shown by all of the fingers representing people (distant shot).
The next shot—a medium close-up (waist up)—reveals that the figures are soldiers emerging from the forest. After the narrator describes a soldier’s uniform—buttons, hat, gun—one of the soldiers opens fire on the farmers. We then see a long shot of people being massacred; the handshape classifier suggests the legs of bodies thrust backward and falling to the ground as they are riddled with bullets. Rennie cuts back to the boy planting as before, then to a distant shot of a person being shot, and then back to the boy once again. Hands grab the boy’s shoulders. Rennie then cuts to the soldier who is grabbing the boy’s shoulders. This particular cut matches the action from one shot to the action of another but is shown from different angles.

What follows is a series of alternating shots that shows the soldier putting his hat on the boy’s head, offering his gun to the boy, and shooting over the boy’s head while the boy offers a coffee bean to the farmer. By cutting from one of these acts to another, the narrator creates a poignant contrast. At the end of the sequence, Rennie moves into slow motion, showing the soldier cocking the gun and firing at the boy. The section concludes with a gesture signifying a loud noise.

By opening the scene with a close-up of the boy, Rennie’s poem shows an opposite approach to Valli’s establishing shot. Here Rennie uses a cinematic technique known as 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, and brutality.

In addition to slow disclosure, Rennie also uses the spatial composition of her shots for cinesthetically impact. She does not actually show the father being shot, but the audience infers this because the soldier occupies the same location as the father within the frame. The space, once occupied by the image of creating life—father and son planting seeds—is now occupied by an image of death. By frequently employing slow motion in the poem, Rennie also makes conscious use of modern cinematic techniques: 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 Molotov 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, she uses slow motion at precisely those moments when the children become missing, which foreshadows their ultimate stillness as photographic images. It’s as if Rennie is slowing the scenes to return the poem to its opening and ending scenes: motionless people in photographs.

Conclusion: Toward a Viewer-Response Criticism

These two examples illustrate how we can begin to see the way in which a poet constructs a particular moment in time and space, a particular “lived experience.” Yet it is not only the poet who creates the images; the viewer also enters into the co-creation of the particular cine-poetic experience. As with any medium that incorporates the human body, a type of intersubjective communication occurs between performer and viewer. Regardless of whether it is celluloid, analogue, digitized, or made of flesh, 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 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. (1989, 233)

The two bodies together, the poet’s and the viewer’s, ultimately combine to create a text that is more than a script of linguistic signs; it is rather a lived cinesthetetic experience. Witnessing Valli’s shot of the rolling hills makes us feel as though we ourselves are traveling over the undulating terrain. Similarly, Rennie’s editing techniques make us feel that we are actually in the presence of a boy and a father planting coffee. As the boy looks up at his father, we perceive the child’s shorter stature; when the father looks down, we perceive that he is taller. Even though Rennie’s height does not change, cutting from character to character evokes a familiar visual-spatial experience in the viewers’ minds and bodies. As Sergei Eisenstein, the famous
Russian filmmaker, describes, “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” (1969, 34).

These two examples—Valli’s and Rennie’s poems—illustrate how a theory of cinesthetic impact may help us to understand how poets and their audiences create particular visual, poetic effects. Yet this is only the beginning of a dialogue between film studies and sign languages. Now that we have seen how the lexicon of film criticism may be applied to ASL poetry, the next step is to see how the cine-poetics of ASL can enrich our understanding of the nature of film studies.

In opening an exchange between film and sign, perhaps the first issue we wish to consider is that of “film language.” In the early seventies Christian Metz explored the relationships between linguistics and film, seeking to understand how films signify. Although film cannot be said to constitute language in the strict sense of the word—no one spontaneously acquires the ability to produce film in order to communicate—both systems reflect larger syntagmatic similarities. Like language, film 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, those phrases will be accepted and understood. (Sharff 1982, 33)

A film thrown haphazardly together would have little meaning, just as words thrown randomly on a page would make no sense. If scenes are not edited properly, disconcerting jumps—grammatical mistakes, if you will—occur. For example, if a full shot of an actress is shown on the right side of the screen, then she should also appear on the right side if there is a cut to a close-up along the same visual axis. If she were to appear on the left, the viewer’s ability to correctly understand the film would be impaired. As Daniel Arjon writes, “The spectator must be given a comfortable eye scan of the shots...
with a constant orientation that allows him to concentrate on the story” (1976, 20).

Although future inquiry into the grammatical requirements of both film and sign is necessary, these initial observations raise interesting questions: To what extent do the techniques of film and sign operate according to a similar visual-spatial-kinetic logic? Could ASL linguistics offer a more precise means of identifying the grammatical constraints of film? If indeed sign and film grammars behave similarly, we must wonder what this reveals about the cognitive structures of the human mind.

Although many people presume that film has introduced a uniquely modern means of perceiving the world, we can reasonably assume that the cinematic-like composition of sign predated the cinematograph by a good twenty-five hundred years. We can speculate that the Deaf signers that Plato’s Cratylus mentions conversed through a series of visual images that they were constantly framing, cutting, and editing throughout the course of a narrative. In this sense, cinematic experience may be akin to aspects of Deaf epistemology that have been around as long as signing communities. Cinema is but one medium through which we can produce moving images; sign is another such medium—perhaps even the ur-medium—for producing moving images.

In addition to examining the relationships between film and sign within criticism of the arts, a wide-open area for exploration exists in the creative practice of the arts. Indeed, a theory of cinesthetic impact may also encourage further experimentation with the codes of cinematic language among ASL poets themselves. Conversely, could this dialogue open creative possibilities to directors who understand the cinepoetics of ASL? 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.

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Note

1. For this reason, the future of ASL criticism must be in the form of video, CD-ROM, or DVD texts. Bauman, Nelson, and Rose are currently editing and producing a book and DVD format a collection of critical approaches to ASL literature (2004, forthcoming from the University of California Press).

Bibliography

How the Alphabet Came to Be Used in a Sign Language

This historical account of the development of the manual alphabet in ASL (and of representational systems in other sign languages) traces fingerspelling back to the monks of the seventh century, who devised a system for representing speech without needing to speak. Many years later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their manual alphabet underwent significant adaptation as a result of the contact between the monks and the deaf children they tutored. This article describes the evolution of the manual alphabet from that time to the present day.

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Symbolic Properties of Graphical Actions

This study aims to determine whether graphical actions used in a military planning task with a map have symbolic properties that are