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Surface Tensions: Framing the Flow of a Poetry-Film Collaboration

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The article is a record of collaboration between a poet and a filmmaker – one undertaken under several people’s gaze, becoming aware of itself through the perspectives of the visual and the verbal artist, of the critic and creative maker. It observes the process from the poet’s and the filmmaker’s sides of the interface, in the language and thought processes that come naturally to each, exploring particularly the use of metaphor to throw light upon the collaborators’ investigation of poetry-film. As the project progressed it revealed the tensions between the participants’ allegiance to the idea of collaboration and the urge to retain control of one’s own medium and ways of working. Tracking the collaboration throughout each stage of development, from initial conversations, through false turns and periods of apparent impasse, the article records the inputs and shifts that led to a final synthesis and publication in an unexpected form.

Keywords: collaboration, academic writing, mixed-media, poetry, criticism, poetry-film

Introduction

When two artists from different disciplines collaborate for the first time there is likely to be tension of some description. As a step into the unknown, first time collaborations carry the possibility of stimulating anxiety. These tensions may be inevitable, centering upon personalities (‘Will we get on in moments of crisis?’) or upon practice (‘Will my work be compromised?’). Adding a third party to the equation, to critically observe and document the collaboration, is likely to intensify anxieties due to increased exposure. This is what poet Philip Gross and filmmaker Wyn Mason undertook by participating in an inter-faculty practice-as-research project at the University of South Wales. *In-and-Between* was an internally funded research collaboration between the English/Creative Writing departments and the university’s Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries, with the intention of initiating a sustained dialogue between different modes of critical and creative enquiry that would lead to the development of new methodologies. The aim was to produce artwork, under the gaze of critics, which would satisfy each of the practitioners in terms of their own forms and aesthetics as well as yielding evidence that sheds light on the collaborative process. Meetings and conversations were to be documented, production processes observed and work-in-progress presented periodically over the 18-month duration of the project. This article traces the process from the perspective of two of the participating artists.

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It recounts the process from the point of view of each, sometimes in creative form. Just as Middelton (2013) has used creative writing to articulate the physical awareness of dance, the text boxes below reflect on the interpersonal and intuitive aspects of working together in a language that grows naturally from the work of poetry – that of metaphor.

Poetry-Film as Collaboration

Wyn had previously made a short film to accompany Philip's poem *Sluice Angel* (2010), the opening poem of Philip's prize-winning collection, *The Water Table* (2009), but whether this could be considered a proper collaboration is questionable. The poem was already completed and published, then footage to accompany the text was filmed and assembled, and the final product shown to Philip as a *fait accompli*. Even though this method of working is not uncommon within the tradition of poetry-film, this time, in the context of *In-and-Between*, both participants were determined to advance towards a more fully evolved collaborative process, that described by John-Steiner (2000, 196–204) as *integrative* rather than *complementary*. The final artistic output was to be synergic rather than simply shared.

The history of poetry-film can be traced back to Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's short film *Manhatta* (1921), where footage of New York intercuts with texts by Walt Whitman. As a sub-genre within art cinema, poetry-film has not always sat comfortably within avant-garde filmmaking, mainly because it was seen to be at odds with modernist cinema's pursuit of art that remained true to its inherent form. However, with postmodernism's celebration of hybridity poetry-film re-gained status, and was finally identified and named as a sub-genre in late the 1990s when writer William C. Wees published his short but influential essay, *Poetry-films and Film Poems* (1999). In the essay he defines poetry-film as a film that creates 'a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor visual text would produce on its own' (1999, 1). The aim of poetry-film therefore, at its best, is to produce film where word and image form a symbiotic relationship, so that the end result is more than the sum of its parts. What follows is an account of two practitioners, each with a strong sense of their own creative goals, who nevertheless aimed with this project to achieve that integrative working relationship, which in John-Steiner's (2000, 70) words 'transforms both the field and the participants', blurring authorial demarcations to create a piece which owes its existence to the unique context of the particular collaboration. The narrative will chart the progress and the setbacks of this process and, arguably, its eventual arrival in an unexpected way.

Water boatman and pond skater

It begins as a metaphor – or in this case a Homeric simile, the kind that begins 'As when...' and grows beyond one point of likeness into a small world, with the possibilities of exploring a complex experience, in this case that of creative collaboration. So:

As when two insects, water boatman and pond skater, meet and don't meet at the same point on the stream. They are standing on the same coordinates in space, one above, one below the surface, which to them is unbreakable, though it is nothing in itself. It may pucker slightly at their touch; the images reflected in it bend and flex, and to intelligent insects this might be a clue. But between one medium and the other is this interface that both connects and separates them, held by surface tension; common parlance, not quite accurately, would call it a 'film'.

Collaboration, working across art forms and media in particular, offers a window into creative process. It often begins from the urge to enlarge one's own vocabulary; a writer collaborating at sufficient depth with a painter learns to see the world 'through painter's eyes', and vice versa. Observing a collaboration between art forms not only reveals the differences and the commonalities between their ways of working, it also offers a chance to capture traces of the blind spots, impediments or disjunctions in the creative process as they pass not within but *between* the participants. Collaborators across forms cannot presume a common language; they have to make their work apparent to each other. Like the cloud chamber in which the momentary tracks of sub-atomic particles can be observed, collaboration creates a palpable, experimental space-between. Some passages in a collaboration can be effortless; collaborators might describe them as empathetic, intuitive, almost instantaneous. Paradoxically, the most revealing moments in collaboration may not be these moments of 'success', but those of disjunction when the parties have to make the exchange articulate. Some accounts of co-working, such as Gilligan and Street (2011, 44), initially regret how a transmission process (in their case, by e-mail) can 'both influence and be a limiting factor in creative collaboration'. More positively, Harper (2011, 331) observes that 'the critical sense of each participant appears enhanced by the activity of collaborating, collaborating across these technological bridges'. For *In-and-Between*, each difficulty was an opportunity; it slowed the reaction down sufficiently to be observed.

This poetry-film collaboration offers a series of disjunctions, states of tension or difference, when one medium's demands seemed to contradict the other, or when agreed intentions did not match the material in hand. There were periods when poet and filmmaker seemed to be pond skater and water boatman: in the same place but divided by the surface-tension film between.

Surface Tensions

Subject matter and haiku

Philip and Wyn knew they were going to collaborate, and were aiming to do so as fully as possible, and the end product was likely to be a poetry-film, but at the outset they did not know what their subject matter would be. As part of the early discussions Wyn showed Philip a poetry-film he was making at the time, *Trails* (2013) – based on his brother's un-published, Romantic poems. In watching the film Philip found himself resisting any assumption that the

figure of the poet must be as it appeared in *Trails*: sensitive, melancholic, introspective, drawn to 'natural' landscapes, lyrical. In response, one of the locations Philip suggested was a Gothic-colossal scrap metal smelting plant near Cardiff. Filming the smelting works proved impractical and problematic, so Wyn proposed the river Taff as possible subject matter. Philip agreed, having once lived on the banks of this short and at times ferocious river that runs almost as a straight line from the Brecon Beacons to Cardiff in South Wales, and it had inspired previous poems of his.

So what was Philip's desired poetry writing procedure, if not 'lyrical'? Philip cited the thinking style (not the literal form) of *haiku* – rapid and physically immediate, with a focus on direct sensation and a willingness to appear (to European eyes) fragmentary, unfinished. The *haiku* aesthetic chimed with Wyn's wish for grounding in a sense of place and the detailed observation of actuality, which is evident in *Trails*; and previous work of Philip's, such as *The Water Table* (2009), had paid close attention to place – to the Severn estuary and the river Taff. The *haiku* method informed Philip's everyday approach to writing and his tendency to write in sequences whose short sections depended on each other for their full effect. This working method also seemed congruent with Wyn's interest in 'database filmmaking', a term borrowed from Lev Manovich (2001), in which images are not produced for a predetermined narrative, but first collected as a database, only to be compiled in post-production to suggest narrative, with the intention of images retaining their multiple meanings. At this stage, Philip posed a question: Is there a filmic equivalent of the *haiku* – a self-contained but open-ended moving-image containing more than one possible story or significance? This seemed an abstract question at the time, though an answer would appear later, to creative effect.

Note: to participate fully in collaboration it is necessary to abandon one's home terrain. *Trails* in many ways is a film about a river, the river Ystwyth in West Wales, so in suggesting a river as subject matter Wyn was choosing to tread familiar ground. Similarly, Philip had previously written about the river Taff so was also remaining securely within already explored territory. Outwardly, the collaboration was progressing well, but opting to tread familiar paths of practice revealed an inner resistance to full collaboration.

Direction versus spontaneity

In order to start the process, an exploratory visit was organised along the banks of the river, where the *In-and-Between* critics came to observe the poet and filmmaker at work. This eventually led to a short 'making of' documentary, called *Land of Hinter* (2012), where both collaborators appear in front of the camera. On the first day of filming a tension became apparent between the writer's and filmmaker's working methods: speed. In practical terms this is obvious; someone whose tools are a pocket-sized notebook is unlikely to move at the same pace as a film crew, comprising of director, cameraperson and sound recordist. The tension went deeper; someone whose aesthetic seeks out stray detail and rapid associations may well feel frustrated at being asked to repeat a spontaneous moment for the camera. The attempt to record a working

process was in tension with the process itself. Witness a (partly) humorous exchange, when the poet was becoming over-conscious of addressing the camera:

'What do you want me to do?'

'Act naturally.'

'Which do you want – 'naturally' or 'act'?

This is not only an aesthetic question; it is one of control. With database filmmaking, no less than in pre-scripted films, actors and subjects, along with landscape details, become data to be structured later in the editing suite. They consent (or not) to being raw material. Wyn wanted to collect a database of 'Philip shots' to be edited later, whereas Philip resisted by offering complete performances to the camera. Once more, despite commencing the collaboration in good faith, both parties had not yet grasped the extent to which it is necessary to relinquish control in order to achieve true synergy.

A narrative detour

From the start, a tension existed between different futures for this film project. It could address an audience of academics as practice-as-research or aim for a commercial market as a feature film. Discussions with a potential film producer indicated that some sense of narrative would be preferable in the latter case.

For Philip (sometimes a novelist as well as poet) narrative offered a way of structuring the fragmentary moments in which he had worked so far. In his poetics, the traditional distinction between lyric and narrative has limited use; every lyric moment draws on the story-making habit of the reader's mind. Creating characters, with implied relationships and motivations, also had the appeal of decentering the work from a poet's single point of view. And for Wyn (sometimes a scriptwriter as well as director) developing a co-authored narrative offered a reassuring alternative to the tensions experienced whilst filming *Land of Hinter*. Picking up an early hint of Wyn's about a possible young female character limping home along the Taff from an all-night party, Philip incorporated most of the poetry fragments already written, locations and details, plus some purpose-written pieces into the evasively-named *Not The Shooting Script*.

That script was, indeed, not shot, though it did prompt a more professionally-informed screenplay from Wyn. A pilot version of the opening scene of the screenplay, with atmospheric still shots rather than a live-action sequence, was made and shown at the first work-in-progress reflective symposium, with practitioners and critics present, as well as a number of invited 'critical friends'. This received mixed responses. In the aftermath, poet and filmmaker shared a loss of faith and of momentum in the narrative plan. The tension between marketable feature film and experimental practice-as-research artefact had been exacerbated, not resolved.

One of the key elements Philip and Wyn had in common in terms of their creative methodology (as evidenced in *Land of Hinter*) was a process of

Space-between

A previous collaboration with engraver Peter Reddick on a book *The Abstract Garden* (Gross and Reddick, 2006) had left Philip with a concept of the space between two individuals having a shape and dynamics of its own. At its simplest, this might be the visual trick in which the profiles of two faces is simultaneously a candlestick. Working artists and teachers use the concept of 'negative space' as a way to circumvent the habits of the eye and brain in seeing only what they 'know'. Negative space can be a positive element in the composition, and when the 'composition' is the working relationship between collaborators, that space-between can be experienced as generating ideas that neither party quite sees as their own. In *The Abstract Garden*, this principle was embodied in the printer/book designer Nicolas McDowell, whose decisions about the relationships of word and image on the page became an active element in both of their meanings.

Some collaborations are destined to resemble the water boatman and pond skater, forever facing each other across the seemingly impenetrable divide of the water's surface. The metaphor can only be transcended by performing that visionary leap where two face-to-face profiles magically transform into a single candlestick – and the possibility of willingly switching back and forth between the two opposing images. Learning to focus on negative space, the space-between, is a trick of the eye and of the mind that can become habitual for both visual artists and collaborators.

Beyond Either and Or

At different points the surface tensions seemed like oppositions or like failures to engage. In hindsight, several of these contradictions were resolved by discovering a different perspective. As with other aspects of life, it sometimes takes a crisis within collaboration before one is ready to let go of the old and embrace the new.

Not long before the final *In-and-Between* presentations, Wyn participated in an interactive documentary symposium called *iDocs*. This exposure to a wide variety of ways documentary filmmakers were using Web technology (most notably HTML5, where Web content can connect directly to a video's timecode) opened up the possibility of creating poetry-films specifically for the Web. The aim from the start had been to strive towards the ideal of poetry-film, which required more than that the poems become the film's raw material. In re-conceiving the project as a Web-based project, it finally became possible to imagine a range of ways that poetry and film could interact more equally. Earlier shifts in the collaborative process had been ones of artistic form or of kinds of discourse, but this deciding move was one of new technological means. Now, not only did it become possible to create a field in which poetry and film could co-exist without one leading the other, but also all the visual

and written material generated to date, including Philip and Kevin's Track Changes exchanges and the *Land of Hinter* documentary, could be fully incorporated. It was decided the project would now be named *Flow & Frame* (building on Kevin's intervention), and the attempt to hold or frame the flow would be the project's working metaphor; and Philip's *Heraclitus* poem would become the centrepiece. Finding the right form and subject matter for the project resolved many of the tensions that had previously been present and created an opportunity for a fuller collaborative process to unfold.

Creative processes have ghosts – ideas and impulses seemingly discarded but not laid to rest. Creative writing pedagogy counsels students not to discard early traces, for they may contain an element that proves essential in the end. In this project many elements that were initially disregarded returned in different guises. The location along the banks of the river Taff, which was used for the pilot version of the opening scene, was re-visited for the *Heraclitus* poetry-film. The notion of having only one film to accompany a poem seemed limited, and fundamentally at odds with the multiple readings and interpretations poetry can offer. Creating an interactive website presented an opportunity to explore a multi-faceted aesthetic. The website's interface was to be a constant flowing river, down which the videos would float and the users could be able to drag them into a frame to be viewed. It was decided that there should be 13 separate films in total. Thirteen, in response to Wallace Stevens' *Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird* (Stevens, 2010), an example that Philip offered of a *haiku*-inflected frame of mind, and conveniently symbolic of the idea of multi-perceptiveness. Another ghost was the female character from the screenplay, who was stumbling home from an all-night party, which was arguably too close to a victim stereotype, but now returned and transformed into the more robust shape of performance artist Eddie Ladd. Including a figure in the films functioned as a means of providing a human point of reference to the series of filmed moments on the riverbank and functioned as a counterpoint to the poem's conceptual tone. As the poetry-film footage was conceived and developed in collaboration with Eddie, the ghost of Philip's question 'What would a visual *haiku* be?' returned to be the guiding principle for these two-minute micro-scenes.

On watching these films, only a few days before the concluding *In-and-Between* presentation, it became clear that to repeat the same poem thirteen times was tedious; the films were, and demanded, *variations*. In the few days that remained before the presentation Philip wrote 12 more matching poems in the same formal pattern, with echoes and variations on key lines and phrases, each responding to one of the 13 films and continuing the conversation with Kevin's theorising of flow and frame. Once there were 13 films with 13 matching poems the next logical, database-inflected step was to explore the surprising effects that could be obtained by randomising the connection between poems and films. The website would include a 'shuffle button', where users could opt not only to view poems and films the way they were originally conceived, but also by chance – to witness what new, unexpected associations, connotations and metaphors would be generated by combining words and images in unplanned for ways. This idea was very much in keeping with one of the central themes of the project: 13 times 13 poetry-films provides enough variations for users to believe that 'you can never step into the same website twice'.

During these final stages of the project a method of working had been achieved, more by accident than design, where the creative baton was passed backwards and forwards several times between the collaborators. A poem by Kevin led to one by Philip, which led to 13 films by Wyn, which led to an equivalent set of poem variations by Philip, which led to a website that allows users to experience 169 versions of a poetry-film – one might characterise the creative outflow as exponential. For the first time, in the rapid action of the project's closing stages, the collaborative process approached the original ideal – equal, mutual and arising from immediate response. Neat authorial demarcation lines become partially blurred: Philip would not have written his poem if it were not for Kevin's intervention, Wyn's films were filmed to accompany only one poem but these in turn became the launch pad for a whole set, etc. The work also took both parties to unexpected places, inconceivable beyond the context of the collaboration; and for this to happen the collaborators had to loosen their grip on certain conventions. Philip had to let go of writing a particular poem for a particular film; and also his stepping beyond the *haiku*-like fragment turned out to be not narrative or even lyric description of specific scenes, but into an appetite to deal with ideas, even arguments, in poetry. Wyn in turn had to let go of the authorial power usually bestowed upon a film director, by allowing randomness to decide which sound would accompany which image. For Philip, this accords well with his poetics: to allow the poetry to be changed by different readings in a different context, opening the way to an active response. Neither medium would simply serve the other, nor would either take control. Rather than one or 13 pieces, now there were potentially 13 times 13, quite enough to establish the principle that each film/poem pairing was a new relationship. They were free to combine and split and recombine, like double-helix strands of DNA, each time producing a different life.

Moiré

When two regular patterns or grids are overlaid on each other, slightly out of alignment, the chimera of another pattern is created, known as *moiré*. When the angle of overlap changes, the *moiré* pattern becomes animated and seems to move or flow.

Both Philip and Wyn had worked with this image in collaboration with translator-academic Alexis Nuselovici and artist Glenn Davidson (Mason and Nuselovici, 2012 and Davidson and Nuselovici, 2013). Filmmakers are familiar with *moiré* effects in the interference patterns TV screens can create, but writing about his creative/critical conversation between himself and Kevin, Philip found his way back to the word's earlier use in textiles, as in 'watered' silk:

irruption of one process

into, in and through
another . . . much as this

rippling shiftless shift
of interference patterns, con-
-versation, moves
of itself, without moving, as
silk flows, its waves

of *moiré*, something of
us and between us, made of

you and me, yet neither me nor you.

Moiré, a term borrowed from physics, has already been presented within a cultural context: as a conceptual framework to discuss 'how different cultures incline to or against one another', and the term 'moiré aesthetics' has been coined to discuss the 'unexpected and unforeseeable outcomes or interferences at the encounter of two or more cultural entities' (Mason & Nouselovici 2012, 90). *Moiré* is also a workable metaphor for collaboration: where two parties incline to or against one another and the resulting overlapping outcome is unexpected. Neither party is compromised by the exchange, as both grids hold on to their original form, but the resulting pattern, dynamic and unforeseeable, whose potential was always there, only becomes manifest in the encounter with another.

Summary

Flow & Frame is a project between poet and filmmaker, whose collaborative process was observed by critics. Despite both parties entering into the collaboration with every intention of collaborating fully, in actuality each unconsciously resisted any threat to their freedom to continue operating artistically in accustomed ways. This led to tensions that limited the flow of the encounter. What seemed at first like a further complication, the creative intervention of one of the observer/critics with a poem, a metaphor and a position to argue against, enabled the collaborators to re-conceive the project. Another significant breakthrough occurred when at a very late stage the opportunity arose to construct the output as a website rather than a single poetry-film for traditional media. The interactive possibilities of a website dissolved the disputed power relationship between poetry and film within poetry-film by shifting some of that power to the viewer/user. It also took the collaborators to neutral territory, because creating work for an interactive website was relatively new terrain for both. Once an appropriate form, or field of play, had been established then a rapid and synergic collaboration could finally unfold. Previous contributors to this journal (Gilligan and Street, 2011) have explored a 'cyclical' image of collaboration, in which the creative impetus is passed back and forth, and in which all work produced plays a role in the process. Not only was all the poetry and film produced by

Flow & Frame a necessary part of the creative conversation, but creating a website offers a way of publishing as much of this process-based work as possible. However, what this account adds to such articulations is to accentuate the element of relinquishing necessary for collaborations to progress. Until that point – to use the water boatman/pond skater metaphor – much of the time spent on the project could be viewed as an impeccable dance on either side of the water's surface without touching. In order for integrative collaboration to emerge both collaborators needed to move beyond their usual *modi operandi*.

Finally, within this article three collaboration metaphors are offered: water boatman/pond skater, between-space and *moiré*. A metaphor is neither a definition, nor a theory and it does not claim to contain a whole experience; rather, it offers an angle – a correspondence that draws attention to some of the characteristics of the thing described, and enables new associations, new perspectives. It is not an allegory, 'standing for' the thing; it has a logic of its own, beyond the original intentions of the writer. Some insights are reached or creative steps taken by means of metaphor; at a certain point, the limit of correspondence is reached and the metaphor 'breaks down'. This is not a failure; rather, it is to be welcomed. As in the moments of impasse in the *Flow & Frame* collaboration, it may be a point at which a creative leap, a paradigm shift, can take place.

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