

***Memory: Video Poetry* (Synaptic Graffiti Collective 2010)**

'Where do birds go when they die / and why don't dead ones fall from the sky?'
 Though I could barely keep up with the pace of Alana Hicks' poem 'Sorrow Follows Terror', I hold tight to these final words. Memory, like a bird, has wings, transcends the present and makes room for a heightened present which is layered and composite. Its small deaths are not so obvious and in the end, it usually comes back to haunt. Memory is an endlessly fascinating subject for film, an integral path for poetry. Its joint expression in video poetry makes perfect sense.

We are presumably at the beginning of a lingering and complex age of digital media, and so works like *Memory*, produced and edited by the Synaptic Graffiti Collective, should stand out as both inventive in the dawning and an obvious step in the progression of this era. *Memory* is a DVD of video poetry. Whether or not the die-hard poets and poetry readers who collect shelves of books and prefer a bathtub as their reading chaise lounge are ready for is hardly worth discussing. It's here; it must be accepted. What is of major importance is how well the audio and visual components work to get meaning across.

With a subtitle of 'Video Poetry' we expect the pieces in *Memory* to make use of strong images and flashing colours to guide us on the poems' journeys. We desire music that reflects the emotions or styles of the poems. We, above all, long for good poetry. Some of the artists have this down, while some struggle to reconcile this relatively new art form.

In the case of 'Childhood in Richmond' and 'Tanks', both by Komninos Zervos, there is energy in both the audio and the visual. There is rhythm in his spoken word and in the editing of his footage. Zervos clearly understood his task. In 'Childhood in Richmond', graphic illustrations of a fly and fish navigate their way through a collage of distant photographs as the artist remembers his childhood home as the fish shop where his father worked. The fly and the fish lend focus to such grand themes as 'childhood' and 'memory' in both the spoken and the seen art.

Unfortunately not all pieces grasp the unique quality of memory. Sharmy Pandey's 'My Home' did so visually but failed in the spoken word. Her short film is simply stunning, mixing black and white with coloured images of a young girl and her older self. At times the girl and the woman interact with one another, emphasising a longing for the innocent and horror attributed to the innocent forced into a sexual knowledge. The moving images tell the story Pandey sets out to tell so much better than the words do that I find I am disappointed in the melding of the two. The spoken aspect of 'My Home' is far too prosaic, not very artistic in its narrative, and highly generic. The visual worked to elevate the overall appeal of Pandey's work, but not the weight of her words.

Jane Fenton Keane's frantic forms of the computerised human mix with a mesmerising 'beat' refrain, connoting the rhythm of both blood and sound in 'Blood Sonnet'. Similarly Sara Moss and SCART's dizzying 'The Unfolding Night' (which had me questioning how the theme of memory fits in) is what I expect from video

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poetry. Their words – it would appear – came first and the visual followed through fast editing with a fist beating soundtrack. The audio and visual complement one another. But then Moss and SCART (the editors of *Memory*) also contributed ‘To Live’ with Halil I Karatas, which is basically the latter’s autobiography. He managed to fit in two poems but the majority of ‘To Live’ is background to his poems: his oral story, in no pretence of any type of verse form – of imprisonment and torture under an impossible Turkish regime. For me the experiment didn’t work at all. It was more of a mini-doco than a video poem and as Moss and SCART proclaim to be artistic political activists (they got it so right in ‘Always Be Running’), I have to question their decision in the inclusion of ‘To Live’. For me, it is another project entirely.

Likewise, how can one qualify Chris Mansell’s ‘Gerald and Guilio’ as video poetry? It is video in that she clearly videoed still images of a book, a bowl with brown and brittle leaves, and a woman’s leg – all resting on a green carpet. But there are no words. Are we meant to assume that the image, then, is poetry and that the image is therefore enough?

I am one of those die-hard poets and poetry readers who collect shelves of books and prefer the bathtub as my reading chaise lounge, so perhaps I am slightly leaning toward fear when I move my poetry into a digital world. I enjoyed so much of this DVD and think so highly of its contributors for experimenting with and, in most cases, succeeding to entertain me in one of my favourite subjects – memory – but I am not so sure I’m ready to fully submit to this genre. I think I need a clear definition of what video poetry is and I need the pieces to follow that definition; otherwise I can allow myself room for scepticism and fall happily back to the bound page. I need this clarity, as well, so that I can learn to accept its deviations. So is it editing that didn’t work for me, or my own trepidation? That said, I hope Moss and SCART, as the Synaptic Graffiti Collective, continue to make more of these DVDs and help people like me move in a forward motion until I eventually embrace poetry in the digital age. As I remember my apprehension toward email in the early 90s, I am certain I don’t want to get left behind.

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