Poetic Image Now

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Abstract: This article unfolds a story of the image from the vantagepoint of French poetry of the late 20ᵗʰ century which places the question or problem of the poetic image in relation with problematics of the image from art history and media theory. Reflecting on the relation between poetry's now and the now of the image, we will consider recent work by poets in which what it is to speak, perceive, and remain alert to forces of alienation in a liberalizing Europe (and a rapidly commercializing literary field) demands action on and through the image. Taking as a central concern the role played by image in the polemical opposition between concepts of medium and media, this study lingers on a range of works by contemporary poet Pierre Alferi who thinks the temporal capacities of the poem in relation to the problematic of contemporaneity particular to the digital age (what Peter Osborne describes as a technologically enabled 'conjunction of present times').

In response to the call to think the present of poetry, or poetry's 'now' as I'd like to frame it, my title's evocation of such a tired and seemingly antiquated idea as the poetic image might surprise. While lyric theory is back in vogue, enjoying an especially vigorous revitalization in Anglo-American literary criticism of the last ten years, scholarly attention to the concept of the poetic image has enjoyed no such renewal.[1] Furthermore, the question of poetry's 'now'—its alliance with an experience of immediacy and its pursuit of presence effects, its unfolding in the self-renewing present tense of reading or recitation—has generally been approached as a question bearing most pertinently on voice and the phenomenon of lyric enunciation, rather than image per se. At the same time, when we think the term 'image' today and its relation to problematics of presence and immediacy, it is hardly the poetic image that comes to mind. The actuality of *image* would seem to be very obviously elsewhere: in our pockets, on our screens. In what follows, I will be unfolding a story of the image from the vantagepoint of French poetry of the late 20ᵗʰ century that places the question or problem of the poetic image in relation with problematics of the image from art history and media theory. Reflecting on the relation between poetry's now and the now of the image, we will consider recent work by poets in which what it is to speak, perceive, and remain alert to forces of alienation in a liberalizing Europe (and a rapidly commercializing literary field) demands action on and through the image.

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1 The most influential among these: *The Lyric Theory Reader*, eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (2014); Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015).

Poetry belongs, we've been told, to the arts of time. The diachronic unfolding of its meanings, its attendant ability to narrate events, its music as a system for the aesthetic organization and investment of time (the better to resist time by means of the mnemonic efficacy of rhythm and rhyme), all of these evidence of poetry's temporal nature. The tightest association of all, however, is with the present-tense of utterance, of a phenomenalized voice that is, in Paul de Man's account, the 'principle of intelligibility' for lyric poetry.[2] The here and now of utterance is the province of the index or deictic, the context-dependent utterance or gesture ('I', 'you', 'this', a pointing finger) that can only achieve its reference from within and in relation to a given deictic field. In the context of poetry, deictic utterances constitute the central feature of what Jonathan Culler has called the 'enunciative apparatus,' the collection of technical devices contributing to the production of 'effects of voicing' which are the calling card of lyric in his account.[3] A recent wave of scholarship has identified deixis and the concept of indexicality more broadly not only as essential to poetry's intrinsic technicity, but as a rich conceptual field for thinking and theorizing the relationship between poetry and technological media, with some even suggesting that lyric be thought of as itself a technology of presence—a mnemotechnic support for the storage and preservation of presence—in analogy with phonography.[4]

Approaching this conceptual field from my area of expertise— twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry from France—requires a reorientation, however. In the French context, the surrealists recognized lyric as a technology of a different sort: an image technology, one oriented and calibrated towards the explicit end of the production of images. The adventure of the surrealist image—doubtless the most significant poetic innovation to come out of twentieth-century avant-gardism—abolished what we might call technique in favor of the unmediated effusion of the unconscious, and developed an approach to poetic image-making modeled upon the generation of electrical sparks and the automatic inscription of photographic capture: 'a veritable photography of thought,' as André Breton once put it.[5] In this study, I am interested in the long aftermath of the surrealist image, what comes after that practice of the image loses its revolutionary charge and fades into the caricaturable. The 'present' of poetry as I approach it here is characterized by an ongoing grappling with the vice-grip association between poetry and image that is surrealism's bequest, and by the particular forms this grappling has taken

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2 de Man 1985, p. 55.

3 Culler 2015, p. 35.

4 See Kilbane 2016, not paginated.

5 Breton 1970, p. 101.

since the emergence of a so-called literalist paradigm in the late 1970s, premised on the antilyrical pursuit of a poetry without images.[6]

The poets typically gathered under the Literalist moniker—Claude Royet-Journoud, Emmanuel Hocquard, Anne-Marie Albiach, Jean Daive, Joseph Guglielmi—share an interest in the stripping down of the poem, the excision of metaphor, alliteration, musicality, all those features that support 'evocation' as poetry's primary charge. 'Dry as unbuttered toast' is how Emmanuel Hocquard liked his texts, recruiting a gustatory analogy as he rules out sensory delectation as a motivating principle in his poetics.[7] A favorite literalist injunction, from the pen of Claude Royet-Journoud, goes: 'Replace the image with the *word* image.'[8] The demand is not to replace the poetic image with a more evidently denotative formulation, substituting one kind or mode of description for another. But it does present an exchange of figuration for its opposite: swapping an image generated through figure and analogy (an image that is not *in* the words, per se, but that acquires form in the mind of a reader) for the unambiguous visuality of this typeset word. The literalism of these poets is, in a word, literal: having to do with this term's etymological root in *letters*, with approaching words through the rote—and flat—materiality of print. Literality identifies poetic activity not with the primary inscription, the capture in writing of an immediate and new instance of inspired expression, but rather with the deferred activity of the typesetter, for whom writing means copying something that is already there (backwards and upside-down) so as to enable more copying, for whom language is organized materially and in spatial terms (uppercase, lowercase), and who understands the constitutive fullness of blank space in the printer's composing stick.

Emmanuel Hocquard (1940-2019), who set type for a small-press editorial outfit before ever writing his own poems, defines a literal expression as one that reproduces letter-by-letter and word-by-word a pre-existing utterance; it is an act of citation, repetition, copying that severs the utterance from its original purpose and referential frame by making the words refer only to themselves. This literality, then, is not oriented towards reducing referential ambiguity; instead it aims to interrupt or side-step reference entirely by substituting a citational purpose (faithful to the exact formulation of an utterance) in the place of the referential one. The most important literary influences for Hocquard and his cohort do not come from within the French tradition, but rather from American Objectivist poets like Louis Zukofsky and, especially,

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6 In the Anglo-American tradition, we can recognize a correlate of this literalist orientation with the 1970s 'turn to language' of the Language poets (Bernadette Mayer, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, to name just a few) who were seeking to break with the legacy of Imagism.

7 Hocquard 2001, pp. 25-6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

8 Royet-Journoud 2007, p. 11.

Charles Reznikoff, whose 1934 work *Testimony*—composed entirely of verbatim text from court proceedings that the poet versifies—is a seminal instance of literal copying for Hocquard.[9] In explanations of the role of copying and citation in his poetics, Hocquard often evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's claim that language in its entirety is indirect discourse, a vast system of citation that precedes and precludes any claim to immediacy (originality, personality) in linguistic expression.[10] If Hocquard embraces a citational conceit (insisting that 'I am the copier of my books'[11]), it is as a way of estranging expression so that the fact of language's givenness can rise to the surface as the very foundation of the linguistic medium as such and the work of the text can become the performance (dramatization) and contemplation of the properties of language. The act of repeating an utterance, or copying it out word-for-word, transforms it from a site of passage (facilitating the externalization of internal states) into a rigorously non-conductive surface. So instead of cultivating poetry as a channel directing a flow of images, as in his caricatural view of surrealist automatism, Emmanuel Hocquard reminds himself to 'Question the word image // On a table arrange / the words which describe the image // Question the words'.[12] The poem, for Hocquard and the poets he's close with, offers itself as precisely this kind of surface, a table in an interrogation room upon which evidentiary puzzle pieces are strewn.

Image/Medium

The exclusion of the image within a poetic methodology that foregrounds the materiality of the print medium recalls another, better known, theorization of twentieth-century iconoclasm. Beginning in the 1940s, the art critic Clement Greenberg developed a formalist theory of modernist painting based on a concept of medium-specificity, the artwork's self-reflexive valorization of the material properties of its medium. In the case of painting, it is the flatness of the canvas and the quality and behavior of the paint that emerge as most salient to painterly invention, taking explicit precedence over subject matter. For Greenberg, the conventional

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9 Hocquard's first poem 'Spurius Maelius' takes direct inspiration from Reznikoff's 'cut-up' technique, as it 'transcribes' a passage from Livy's *History of Rome* into versified form. See Hocquard 2001, pp. 40-8.

10 Hocquard points to Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of indirect discourse in 'Postulates of Linguistics' in *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'Indirect discourse is the presence of a reported statement within the reporting statement, the presence of an order-word within the word. Language in its entirety is indirect discourse' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 84). Hocquard asserts elsewhere, along these lines, that 'One never speaks of oneself There has never been a subject of enunciation There is no subject but the grammatical one' (Hocquard 2007, p. 182).

11 Hocquard 2009, not paginated.

12 Hocquard 1992, p. 32.

primacy of subject matter, exemplified in the European tradition of narrative painting (especially in the 17th and 18th centuries) and its representation of scenes from biblical and literary sources, reflects a 'confusion of the arts': the infiltration of *literature* within the picture plane as painting tasks itself with imitating effects proper to the (then) more prestigious art of poetry.

While Greenberg tempers this stance, insisting that it is not literature that must be banished from the picture plane (figuration is not in itself inadmissible), but rather the influence of sculpture and the temptation to create three-dimensional illusions on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas, the art historian Peter Osborne has observed that in either case what is at stake in Greenberg's exclusive valorization of the 'literal physical properties' of artworks is the 'exclu[sion of] 'image' as a category of artistic analysis, indeed as a constituent of the experience of modern art itself.'[13] Greenberg does not lean heavily on the term 'image,' and its exclusion, in his calls for the purification of painterly practice, but in art-critical discourse this is indeed the term for the visualizable content of a painting that exceeds the physical properties and brute presence of the art object. For theorists like Hans Belting, a picture (a painting, say) is an image *making use of* a medium, which he describes as simultaneously a 'support, host, and tool for the image' by means of which it becomes visible.[14] It is precisely this metaphysics, which would have the material properties of an artistic medium function as a carrier for an image that does not coincide with its forms, that Greenberg's formalist ontology of medium dispenses with. If paint functions as a host in this way, it is because it is welcoming into its forms something other than itself; the fine-art object would thus find itself captured within a logic of transmission that would, in the mid-twentieth century, jeopardize its autonomy with respect to the mercantilist promiscuity of a rapidly expanding sphere of media (i.e. non-art) images. The radical opacity of the artistic medium that Greenberg championed was not only essential to the project of disentangling a particular medium from the confusion of the arts, recovering or indeed discovering its identity by 'emphasiz[ing] the medium and its difficulties,' in order that 'the purely plastic, the *proper*, values of visual art come to the fore.'[15] In other words, its significance should not be taken to be strictly internal to the world of making, studying and commenting upon art. Rather, it represents a polemical gambit in favor of the autonomy of aesthetic practices amidst the spread of the antiformalist logic of media that threatened to capture every aspect of cultural production as assimilable within capitalistic networks of

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13 Osborne 2018, p. 135.

14 Belting 2011, p. 5.

15 Greenberg 1986, p. 34.

exchange. This is medium against media, medium as a concept requiring this kind of ideological reinforcement as its only defense against the bourgeois commodification of the arts (it wasn't successful!).[16]

In 'Towards a Newer Laocoon,' Greenberg discusses poetry at length and proposes some contrasts that better reflect the relative positions of poetry and the visual arts in the twentieth century, and the state of understanding regarding their respective 'pure' forms. Rather than distinguishing painting and poetry in terms of their unfolding either in space or in time, as Lessing proposes in that older *Laocoon*, Greenberg centers the relation between medium and the site of meaning: while the plastic art medium has its essence in its material composition, 'the medium of poetry is isolated in the power of the word to evoke associations and to connote,' and thus 'pure poetry strives for infinite suggestion, pure plastic arts for the minimum.'[17] This dichotomy affirms the association of poetry with image, and through the language of 'suggestion' claims literality (in the usual sense) for the purified visual arts. Indeed, descriptions of medium-specific artworks, or really any attempt to draw attention to the material composition or self-conscious dimension of an artwork, rarely get by without recourse to the word 'literal' (emphasizing, for instance, the *literal* surface of the canvas, its *literal* flatness). To claim literality for poetry, to devise a poetry that excludes the image and insists on the presence of words where they are, rather than on their facility at deflecting attention into the associative, is to make a claim about the mediumness of poetry. In their valorization of the conditions and processes associated with typesetting and print, literalist poets dismiss incoherent efforts to define the medium of poetry in abstract or ethereal terms (is it the voice? the breath? language itself?) in favor of restoring it to the fact of its reliance on a material substrate and technical apparatus.

Lyric Mediation

Lyric poetry of the Romantic period, a low point in Greenberg's teleological account of medium-relations (Shelley is noted as exalting the superiority of poetry for the express reason that 'its medium came the closest to no medium at all'[18]), has also been of special interest to media theorists—chief among them Friedrich Kittler—who recognize in the expressive paradigm it inaugurates a clearly articulated system of mediation. For Kittler, this kind of expression is structured around the

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16 For a recent and insightful account of the mid-century consolidation of concepts of medium and media in the US, see Shechtman 2020.

17 Greenberg 1986, p. 34.

18 Greenberg 1986, p. 26.

explicit project of transferring images from the poet's imagination to that of the reader, with the poet's language acting as a channel.[19] Describing the action of the Romantic poet, Kittler notes that the intertwined topoi of Nature, Love, and Woman—terms he notes were 'synonymous in the discourse network of 1800'—'produced an originary discourse that Poets tore from speechlessness and translated. It is technically exact,' he specifies, 'to say that language in such a function can only be a channel. If language had its own density and materiality, its own dead spots and transmission lapses, there would be no question of an all-encompassing translatability.'[20] (This is the same scholar who will be one of the first to theorize the kind of 'all-encompassing' intermedial translatability that fiber optics would bring to the digital revolution.[21]) The mediation thus described is necessarily transparent, requiring the absolute submission of medium to message: 'language's own materiality' must remain unremarked or suppressed *so that* this fulsome translatability may become possible.[22] Citing Heidegger, Kittler emphasizes that the early nineteenth century is not a period in which poetry is 'defined in terms of language as language' as Symbolism will initiate and subsequent avant-gardes will carry forward, but rather is viewed as a form that 'leads through language onto something else,' setting it up as a kind of idealized medium whose transmissions generate, ironically, very little noise.[23]

　　　The literalist orientation consolidates during a period which saw the vocal resurgence of lyricism within the French poetry scene and the move to restore voice and image as central features of poetic invention. The contemporary poet Olivier Cadiot recently described the especially contentious period of the 1980s this way: 'It was war between literality and lyricism. Star wars. The grammatico-communist Robots against the real humans.'[24] The hyperbole he brings to this description underscores the extreme exaggeration of positions that was seen at that time, sending up in particular the caricatural depiction of literalism as a force working

19 Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell have recently emphasized that this model of expressive transparency is preconditioned and reinforced by the print culture of the early nineteenth century 'in which the mechanical reproduction of text and visual images was often understood as a 'means' for transmitting thoughts from one individual to another' (Khalip and Mitchell 2011, p. 10).

20 Kittler 1990, p. 73.

21 'Once movies and music, phone calls and texts reach households via optical fiber cables, the formerly distinct media of television, radio, telephone, and mail converge, standardized by transmission frequencies and bit format' (Kittler 1999, p. 1).

22 Contra Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum 'the medium is the message,' this model of transparent mediation relies on a conception of medium as that which gets in the way of message, and posits the possible reduction of medium's salience as a way of guaranteeing the primacy of the message. See McLuhan 2013 [1964].

23 Kittler 1990, p. 73.

24 Cadiot 2013, p.9.

to snuff out those human impulses (towards feeling and self-expression) that lyricism would naturally channel. Hocquard is centrally implicated in this antagonism and describes the partition in the field of contemporary French poetry, for his part, as an opposition between 'those who continue to celebrate 'the highest song of man' and 'the music of the soul' of eternal Poetry' and 'those who have chosen to place emphasis more particularly upon the *language* itself, its functioning and its functions.'[25] The 1980s is also a period when television enjoyed undisputed cultural dominance, a fact that is not indifferent to the dynamics at play in the field of contemporary French poetry. Kittler has remarked that television is 'just as ubiquitous as it is mystifying, and therein lies its much-heralded power.'[26] Thinking television in terms of technical mystification and the special power it wields as the mass-media organ *par excellence*, we can easily imagine that poets working in the midst of such an image environment might be especially wary of efforts to reinstate poetry as a channel of lyric expression with the transmission of images as its primary function. Indeed, given this specific technological context, it is unsurprising that the resurgence of lyric at the height of television's mediatic reign would have struck many as especially (even hyperbolically) nefarious. This would represent not only a return to a transparent model of mediation (language regaining its function as channel), but also a willing re-mystification of the image. And as one might expect, the logic of impasse that orders literalism's resistance to the profligate transmissions of the 1980s (of individualist expressivity in lyric, of noxious commercialism over the airwaves, of capital left right and center), borne as it is of this particular convergence of cultural factors, will appear less operable to the next generation (X) of similarly disposed poets.

Mediating Medium

The most significant development of the last thirty years in the world of French poetry, in terms of shaping the concerns and possibilities of contemporary experimentalism (as well as advancing a vision of what contemporaneity might mean in the context of poetry), comes through the *Revue de littérature générale*, a journal co-founded in 1995 by poets Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot and whose inaugural issue was oriented explicitly towards the reappraisal of lyric as a mediating structure. This issue brought together experimental works from practitioners of a huge range of creative and intellectual disciplines (photography, music, land art, philosophy, history, as well as poetry) that cross every imaginable generic and medial boundary and steer our attention to the technical possibilities

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25 Hocquard 1995, pp. 17-18.

26 Kittler 2010, p. 24.

opened up—for literary creation—by the photocopier, cataloguing systems, the topiary arts, and the new convergence of media enabled by digital technology. The vision of poetry that this journal materialized was uncompromisingly anti-hierarchical[27], privileging no form, style, genre, technique, or professional pedigree over any other, and dispensing full-stop with the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects and practices that stands in the way of interrogating their potential usefulness to literary critiques of the dominant social order.

In their co-authored preface to this first issue, 'La mécanique lyrique,' Alferi and Cadiot present a critique of the French neolyricism of the 1980s (and continuing into the 90s), judged to be anachronistic and intellectually and ethically compromised not only because of its patent alliance with the individualist ideology of a liberalizing Europe, but also because it expresses a (related) naïve disavowal of its own technicity. For Alferi and Cadiot, the term lyric designates a *problem* that precedes and determines the activity of the poet: the externalization of interior states as the fundamental technical challenge of literary creation. How it is that one person's thought—inspired or otherwise—might express itself in language legible to others? This is a question to which Romantic lyric, for example, offers a particular response (recognized by Kittler as an instance of transparent mediation). Poets of the modernist avant-garde respond to this imperative very differently—we might think of Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrams or conversation poems—, in accordance with a different set of technologically-inflected assumptions about the parameters of poetic mediation. Where Hocquard's literalism works to stop up the kind of inside-outside mediation that we associate with lyric expression, Alferi and Cadiot retain this—on the condition that such a mediating procedure be taken seriously and approached as a technical challenge. The '*mechanical* lyric' proposed by these authors is not intended to identify this technical challenge with any specific technological paradigm (mechanical as opposed to electronic, for instance), but rather to demystify lyric by thinking of it as a wholly material affair: the collective functioning of 'des unités de base.'[28] These base materials, which could just as easily originate from a flash of poetic insight as from a vacuum repair manual, must sacrifice their singularity to the standardization that will allow them to participate in the operation of the whole. To describe the functioning of these ensembles, the authors summon in rapid succession operational models related to mechanics (industrial production), mechanical images (cinema and its apparatus), televisual transmission (broadcast standard), computer programming languages (BASIC) and binary code. Amidst this parade of technological models, it is not one or the other of these that

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27 Indeed, the index at the back of the volume includes a winking reference for 'déhiérarchiser' that directs readers to pp. 3-411, which is to say every single page.

28 Alferi and Cadiot 1995, p. 7.

emerges as particularly well-suited to the task of thinking the technics of poetry, rather it is the fact of mediation itself that comes to the fore. Writing at the dawn of the digital age, these poets and the contributors they bring together in the *Revue de littérature générale* take the demystification of procedures of mediation (technological and literary) as the center of their preoccupations—the lyric imperative *par excellence*.

In step with this broader vision of the poetic act, Pierre Alferi's own poetics does not require the kind of distancing between the poet and the language he manipulates that is so central to the procedures of literality. In a 2002 interview, he explains without regret that 'in what I write, I can't keep myself from being there where I am.'[29] His poetry takes on the dynamics of expression as one of its central motivating concerns, and he brings to this work a genuine philosophical interest in what we might think of as para-lyrical questions related to the apprehension of the self, the tension between singularity and universality, and the incommensurability between an experience of presence and its representation. His entire poetics seems to flow from the question: what happens when we take seriously the issues underpinning lyric address? what if we were to understand these issues as technical imperatives, and approach them from a place of technical sophistication, rather than abandon them entirely to the defensive naïvety of contemporary neolyricists? Practicing the generic multiplicity enshrined in the pages of his journal, Alferi's expansive *oeuvre* includes works of philosophy, poetry, narrative fiction, theatre, literary and film criticism, as well as an array of works that extend beyond the page: public art installations, performance and sound pieces, and experimental film.

Temporal ontologies

The extension of his literary project into time-based performance and audiovisual formats attests to a preoccupation with time with deep roots in his poetry. To reflect on questions of time, presence, the experience of a 'now,' is invariably, for Alferi, to reflect on the possibility of their inscription (their becoming at once deferred and contemplable; Alferi is, I ought to mention, the eldest son of Jacques Derrida). We read, in an early volume:

> as soon as you think of it an instant
> splits in two. The breaking
> of this thunderstorm is the *breaking*
> *of this thunderstorm* but the second
> alone was a memorable event (present
> it was already ebbing…)[30]

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29 Cited in Disson 2003, p. 258.

30 Alferi 1991, 67.

What is memorable is not the event but its inscription, the version of it that is its being named in writing. This is its becoming memorable, we might say. The instant, approached above as an object of thought, appears most frequently in Alferi's work as a precipitate of the technical structure of moving images. The 1997 collection *Sentimentale journée* assembles texts 'improvised like conversations' which unfold like the audio transcript of someone else's home movie; alongside a conversational conceit that explores the effects of deictic utterances cut loose from the contextual knowledge that would allow them to signify, this work pursues a preoccupation with images and analogy that centers the relationship to time of different image technologies. The poem 'Allegria' takes as its central concern the description of movement, specifically the movement of an interlocutor as s/he bounds down the stairs and emerges on a city sidewalk. As the text alternates between attempts at describing this person's movement and considerations of how such a thing can be interrogated, it calls upon a parade of technical images.

> […] —The instant you bounce
> Onto the sidewalk after the final step
> You are nothing but a film frame and the landscape along with you
> Frozen by the VCR's 'pause' button
> But which does not want to stop, trembles like a leaf
> Or a rodent in a trap wriggling to go catch up with
> His fellows. The image also wants to rejoin the dance
> Of images/second.[31]

As soon as the figure emerges at street level, s/he is registered as nothing but a film frame, a *photogramme*.[32] This 'nothing but' is just as quickly amended, however, as the figure and its surroundings find themselves not fixed in an isolated celluloid image, but frozen—'gelé'— by the pause button on the VCR. The still image, which in the cinematic context *precedes* the moving image it helps construct, shifts here from a photochemical image to a video image that has no intrinsic relation to stillness. The stillness of the paused video is registered here as stopped motion that retains its forward-moving energy, its desire to carry on, trembling like a leaf or a captive rodent hoping to wriggle out of his unnatural arrest. This image *wants* to get back to its fellows ('semblables'), wants to return to the flow of the moving image—to its frame rate. But something important has broken down in this slide from one kind of image to another. The concept of a frame as the basic discrete

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31 Alferi 1997, p. 98.

32 While there's nothing stopping us from reading 'photogramme' as a reference to the early photographic form (for the cameraless production of contact-print silhouettes), in French the use of this term to refer to a film frame is much more common.

unit for the creation of a moving image simply doesn't carry over to video. The art critic Bruce Kurtz has remarked that 'film, with its twenty-four complete still frames per second, reflects an illusion of movement, while television, with its constantly changing configuration of dots of light, provides an illusion of stillness.'[33] Any still image achieved in television or video—either through the presentation of a still image before the camera or as a result of paused playback in the case of video—is in fact moving: the rasterized light that makes it visible never ceases to scan left to right. And in the inscription of the moving image in video, what we might call a 'frame' is indeed composite: an interlacing of fields based on two consecutive images, with one image coming through on odd numbered lines and the other coming through on evens. Video does not and cannot visualize the spatiotemporal unity of the frame (the frame as spatiotemporal unity). The video 'still' maintains one foot on either side of an instant—locating both sides and neither—which is to say that an 'instant' takes on a unique construction (or technical definition) within the electromagnetic moving-image paradigm.

In 'Allegria,' the isolated certainty of the film frame does indeed emerge in the context of a punctual, instantaneous temporality—'the *instant* you...' That instant is just as quickly swapped, however, for the undecidable instant of the video image which indeed offers a more apt figure for the sense of potential energy that this description is trying to render as it detours through other analogies (leaf, trapped rodent) to return at last to the 'dance' of the frame-rate's naturalized flow. If this movement must be captured—stopped—in order to be considered, the intrinsic dynamism of the video image beats film's intrinsic stillness. This metonymic slide from film to video not only demonstrates Alferi's tendency toward building poetic images out of extant or imagined technical images—his bent towards remediation as a general metaphorical principle—but also stages an instance of image remediation that supports in technologically specific ways this poem's expressive (lyric) objective: to get a particular quality of movement to pass from perception to language.

In the late nineties, feeling a 'need to better materialize the rhythm and movement of a written text, in space and in time,' Alferi begins experimenting with the time-constrained formats of public readings, live performance, and musical collaborations. He is interested, in this work, in a 'modeling of time,' in staging encounters between the virtualities of linguistic representation and the 'palpable time' of the spectator.[34] After familiarizing himself with emerging tools for amateur video production, Alferi moves these investigations to the screen. This progression, from

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33 Cited in Westgeest 2016, p. 31.

34 Trudel 2013, p. 166.

text to performance to film, is a logical one, he tells us, as if 'trying out the same thing with different means.'[35] Over the course of three years, Alferi made a dozen or so short films, each of which manifests this preoccupation with time in various ways: through the animation of text on the screen, the introduction of visual rhythms that disrupt the sequential coherence of the sentence, or through the re-editing of footage from old Hollywood films to give form to the way these works have warped in his memory. His 2002 film *Intime*, however, earns an exclusive claim in this regard: 'the *only subject* of this film is the immersion in time, the fact of being in time.'[36] An immersion that, we will see, cannot be mistaken for immediacy.

In Time

Intime was commissioned to serve as the centerpiece for a solo exhibition of Alferi's audiovisual work at a gallery in Eastern France. The 16-minute film features ten distinct image sequences, each with a minimal text superimposed on its surface, and accompanied by musical and sound compositions by Rodolphe Burger. The images are digital, shot on a Sony camcorder as Alferi traveled eastward from Paris, and they record literal movements through space and time in contact with different mediums of personal transport: three sequences shot from inside a moving train; a brief view of clouds seen from a plane window; exterior shots of a busy street with buses, trams and cyclists passing; or of a city square traversed and re-traversed by pedestrians. The texts are short, elliptical, and appear at incredibly slow intervals, one line at a time. While never in clear referential relation to the images they hover over, these lines largely evoke the kind of suspended or dilated time one can experience while traveling: a deferred landing as your airplane circles above a busy airport, a meeting postponed as soon as you arrive in the foreign city where it was to be held. These texts unfold in the interval of deferred communication imposed on two people—lovers, perhaps—separated in space and time, between departure and return. They sketch a kind of one-sided correspondence, the chatter of the lonely traveler, full of questions—alternately banal and quasi-profound— that go unanswered, full of second-person pronouns that announce a communicative relation but inaugurate something other than the indexical present of lyric enunciation. Indeed, the text of the film's first sequence begins by crossing the wires of enunciation. First, a lament, cited between quotation marks: '« it's been too many days / since we were together »'. Next, without quotation marks: 'I can already hear your last

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35 Alferi 2002, p. 17.

36 Alferi 2002, p. 25.

words,' a phrase whose 'already' seems to recast the preceding line as *imagined* rather than reported speech, a predictable parting expression not yet uttered. The next line to appear reveals itself to be linked by enjambment to one that precedes it, a continuation of that line that shifts its meaning yet again: 'I can already hear your last words | *in a foreign language.*'[37] Which is to say: I can already hear your words in translation, I can hear—now, already—the last words you spoke to me—at a past time—after they've undergone a—still virtual—future transformation. The languorous pace of the text's animation allows each of these interpretive steps—and the various temporal orientations they propose—to assert itself in turn, producing a sense of presence (as a matter of discourse or of experience) that is anything but given, and can only be known in hindsight. The intimacy named in the film's title is caught in this web of displacements. Hovering undecidedly between relationality and isolation, it poses the full paradox of the play of virtuality and mediation within the intimate address, which is constantly negotiating between presence and absence, between self and other, and relying on communicative channels to perform or perhaps rehearse a virtual closeness in the face of actual separation.

These thematic investments are embedded within an image that is engaged in its own investigations of questions of presence, deferral, disjuncture, and the experience of time. Consider this still from early in the opening sequence.

Figure 1. *Intime.*

The outside world flashes by rapidly, right to left, as the train travels express, bypassing the Vesoul train station whose sign we can barely make out. Alferi splits his moving image into vertical panels each of

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37 '« voici trop de jours / que nous ne sommes ensemble » / j'entends déjà tes derniers mots / dans une langue étrangère' (Alferi 2013, p. 9).

which is set deliberately out of sync with the others. At their normal playback speed, these images move slightly too quickly for the precise logic of their editing to be discernible, and the arrival of text, which must be read left-to-right, against the current of the passing façades, is a further obstacle to their study.

Alferi refers to the editing technique applied to these images—in force, with variations, throughout the film—as a 'montage feuilleté.' This expression suggests not only a layering and puffing (like the lamination of puff pastry: *la pâte feuilletée*) but also, activating its participial sense, something 'flipped through,' conjuring the flipbook, a pre-cinematic optical toy that holds a privileged place within Alferi's imaginary. Here, though, the flipping of images happens not between frames but *within* the space of the frame itself. He describes this technique, in which slices of different frames are made to coexist and play back their footage side by side in endless *décalage*, as a means to explore—once again—an *instant* 'whose elasticity becomes visible through the distension, the foliation within the image, and no longer just through slow-motion.'[38] This reference to slow-motion effects serves to define his *montage feuilleté* against the limitations of analog film—its bond to an illusion of continuity that it can only speed up or slow down—and to suggest something about the potential of the digital image to represent, through its distinct means, a distinct experience of this 'fact of being in time.'

For many decades now, the concept of indexicality has provided the chief theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship to time intrinsic to different technical image forms. The index, a sign named within pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's trichotomy of sign-types, is differentiated from the icon (which signifies by resemblance) and the symbol (which signifies by convention) by virtue of the 'existential relation' it bears with the thing or event it signifies. Examples of indexical signs offered by Peirce include a footprint, weathervane, smoke, the pointing (index) finger, the word 'this', and the instantaneous photograph. Discussions in art history and media theory tend to privilege the specific case of the still photograph in accounts of the index, emphasizing the existential and necessary relation between photographic film and the luminous field that scars it upon exposure, in explicit or implicit opposition to the array of subsequent photographic technologies that are not marked by light in the same way. But the physical trace—photographic exposure, footprint, death mask—is not all there is to the index, it is also the pointing finger and utterances that point ('look at this!'), in which the physical relationship between sign and referent is that of the spatiotemporal or discursive contiguity of the deictic field, the speech context within which deictic expressions can obtain. In her essay 'The Indexical and the Concept of Medium

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38 Alferi 2002, p. 44.

Specificity,' film scholar Mary Ann Doane mobilizes this distinction between the index-as-trace (photographic inscription) and index-as-deixis (shifters, pointing), arguing that both are essential to the medium specificity of the cinematic image. The demonstrative, deictic function of the film image is active in the act of shooting film footage, but perhaps more crucially in the actualized present of projection and viewing. In both instances it is the frame of the image, selecting *this* field, *this* focal point and *this* degree of zoom, that we can see something of Peirce's pointing finger: 'Look at this!' In the constrained temporality of film-viewing, where spectators do not have the power to intervene in the image to rewind and re-watch the sequences that pass them by, the ephemeral quality of the deictic is apparent. Look at this, now this, now this, the film reel says. Bringing together these two valences of the index, Doane explains: 'The frame directs the spectator to look here, now, while the trace reconfirms that something exists to be looked at.'[39] Doane is working here to produce a more nuanced accounting of the centrality of the index to the specificity of these photochemical media. And if the index is elevated as a core concept for defining the particularity of photochemical media, it is to define these media *against* the increasing prevalence and cultural dominance of the digital image, which is considered to be *non-indexical*.

The non-indexicality of the digital image is argued as a lack of *necessary* relation, or internal necessity, between the image and the field of reality it purports to represent. As far as the digital photograph is concerned, the instability of its indexical function is due to the translation of the image into binary code, which unlike the film negative bears no *resemblance* to its object, is itself invisible and immaterial, and *manipulable*. The potential alterability of the digital image file means that the trace function of the photograph, which 'reconfirms that something *exists* to be looked at,' is contaminated. The digital format, based as it is on translation, invisibility, and alterability, cannot in itself *guarantee* the existence of what is depicted in a digital photograph, nor can it locate it in time and space. Doane asserts that 'the digital image has no internal, necessary, or inalterable relation to time since its temporal specificity is 'guaranteed' only by an external system, subject to manipulation.'[40] This unstable relationship to time is often reframed as timelessness, the temporal correlate to digital's supposed immateriality. If Doane views the digital era as a potentially dangerous one, it is because the dream of immateriality and timelessness associated with information technologies (data that survives, unchanged and forever accessible, despite the rapid transformation of hardware and software) points to a receding awareness of historicity, of matter and bodies as things subject to time, degradation and death.

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39 Doane 2007, p. 140.

40 Doane 2007, p. 150.

More than any other of Alferi's films, *Intime* takes on the work of probing the specific medial contours of celluloid and digital, very explicitly as they relate to the representation of time and to the relation to time that each of these formats claims. The *montage feuilleté* he employs as the dominant formal principle of this film is central to its investigation of the indexical properties of its own images. Most notably, it is a technique that deploys digital editing tools in order to manipulate the moving image in ways that would not be achievable on celluloid. The editing of celluloid happens between its discrete frames; cuts are made horizontally across the vertical axis of the filmstrip. When the projection of a celluloid image says 'look at this, now this, now this,' as the frames track through the projection gate, the seriality it creates is vertical. This is part of the power the cinematic *dispositif* exerts on Alferi's poetics, as this verticality relates to the sequencing of lines in a poem. Here, though, by cutting into the image frame itself he is able to produce a seriality that is horizontal, and backwards-facing, as each panel begins its playback 'behind' that of the one to its right. And, of course, where the vertical seriality of film frames is erased from view in their projection, this horizontal seriality is not only eminently visible (one could argue that it is the beginning and end of 'what there is to see' in these images) but it indeed impedes—definitively—the viewing of continuous movement that this technical principle makes possible in film.

In splicing the image in this way, Alferi references the discontinuity of film frames that underlies the effect of real-time continuity that the cinematic image achieves. In his notes, he describes these cuts as operating an 'action upon time,' an action that subverts the indexical coherence of the moving image by breaching the unity of the film frame and the uniqueness of the 'instant' with which this photographic unit is associated. Alferi's instant is multiple and unresolving. The train window, which holds together the panels' disjointed playback in that opening sequence, confirms the position occupied by the camera and thus establishes a point of view that is fixed in space but not in time. We seem to know where we're looking from, but not when. For Doane, 'indexicality is inevitably linked with the singular, the unique, with the imprint of time and all its differentiating force.'[41] In these images, which deprive the viewer of a temporally stable point of view, it is precisely the singularity of the instant that is contested (a contestation already in force in his poem's observation that 'as soon as you think of it an instant / splits in two'). Indeed, he seems to take the assumption of the digital image's non-indexicality, its timelessness, as a direct provocation. Alferi's energetic exploration of the indexical properties of digital—its capacity to think and visualize actuality and simultaneity beyond the spatiotemporal conditions of the cinematic image—expresses a rejection of celluloid's monopoly on

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41 Doane 2002, p. 208.

temporal truth-telling, directing attention away from questions of medium specificity and towards a craftsman's appraisal of technical possibilities.

In his critique of Greenberg's formalism in his 2003 *Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière counters the drive towards essentialization of artistic mediums in Greenberg, arguing that the question of 'properness' in this domain is precisely the wrong one:

> A medium is not a 'proper' means or material. It is a surface of conversion: a surface of equivalence between the different arts' ways of making: a conceptual space of articulation between these ways of making and forms of visibility and intelligibility determining the way in which they can be viewed and conceived.[42]

In the place of a medium-specificity that has each art turn inward to find its ways of making, Rancière reminds us that we can only speak of medium in the singular because they exist in a plurality. In this spirit, in their 1995 introduction to the *Revue de littérature générale*, Alferi and Cadiot explain that in bringing together contributions from philosophers and composers and photographers and visual artists for an issue dedicated to poetry, they are not motivated by any interdisciplinary obsession—interdisciplinarity for interdisciplinarity's sake—but rather as a way of 'sinking writing back into the plurality of the arts.'[43] Alferi's approach to intermediality is emphatically not that of the post-medium condition decried by Rosalind Krauss as artistic practice "cut free from the guarantees of artistic tradition" and indifferent to the unique capacities and histories of media and aesthetic forms.[44] Much to the contrary, what he savors most is the encounter between the incontrovertible technical specifics of two or more media forms and the silences and distortions that result from the remediation of one kind of image (for instance) by another, and through which we come to know each a bit better. If he takes his poetic preoccupations to the screen in his filmmaking, it is in part because the screen is an originary site of convergence—the site of potent childhood memories of watching *The Night of the Hunter* broadcast on TV, the depth of its celluloid image flattened out and struck through with scanlines. An experience of the present, of presence (and telepresence), that entails a confusion of temporalities, a layering (*feuilletage*) of times that yields an image of the contemporary.

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42 Rancière 2007, pp. 75-6.

43 Alferi and Cadiot 1995, p. 18.

44 Krauss 1999, p. 57.

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