

## Turning Metaphor into Moving Images

by Sally Bayley, Suzie Hanna and Tom Simmons

### Moving Metaphors

How easy is it to turn poetry into moving images; to turn poetry into film? What is the relationship between the core component of poetry – figurative language– and the narrative arc required of film? How do you turn metaphors into stories?

These are some of the questions asked by animator Suzie Hanna who, since 2007 has been working with sound composer Tom Simmons and poetry expert, Sally Bayley in creating animated films that interpret the work of three metaphorically dense American poets Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson and Hart Crane. The essential challenge in making these films was how to transfer the compressed language of metaphor to the equally compressed forms of animation in visual and sonic forms. In bringing together the languages of sound and moving images we hoped to find a new way of thinking about the structures of poetic metaphor.

In its most basic definition, metaphor is a process of carrying over one body of language to another; from that marriage of two languages a third language is born. ‘Metaphor’ stems from the Greek word ‘meta’ which means “across” and ‘pherein’, which means “to carry.” You might think of metaphor as being a bit like the changeling child in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* who is carried over to us from the exotic world of India in the poetic language of Titania, Queen of the Fairies, who tells us his story. We learn of the

child's dead mother, who was once one of her followers. That history is dead and gone, but Titania would still have the child enter her world; she wants to adopt the changeling child as her own. But in the story of the play, the child never appears. The changeling child remains nothing more than an alluring idea belonging to another poetic realm and cultural history. Despite Titania's desire to carry him over from India, he never appears. We can only imagine him.

Metaphor is a kind of imaginative transference or transplantation of one language-body to another. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson, metaphor is often a way of representing what is not easily imagined: namely God and everything to do with God. Dickinson's poetry is built upon a several cryptic metaphorical codes that seem to be trying to represent things that are difficult to imagine or remain invisible (like Titania's lost changeling child). In making our film, what later became 'Letter to the World', we began to think about Dickinson's famous remoteness from the social world and her reliance upon letters sent to friends, neighbours, family and especially her future editor, T.W. Higginson, a Colonel in the American Civil War. It was during this period of turbulence that Dickinson was at her most productive as a poet. She produced poems as she produced letters, and letters often carried poetry with them. Dickinson parcelled up poems inside letters and sent them away from her everyday world of small town Amherst, Massachusetts. These poems and letters were read and no doubt transformed in the mind and environment of her recipient.

### **The Letter Writing Plot**

In her devotion to writing letters, Emily Dickinson enacted a form of leaving home. Our film, 'Letter to the World', was inspired by Dickinson's busy world of linguistic (letter) writing and transportation that begins with the animated movement of her writing tools. As Dickinson asks in one poem, 'Who'll let me out some gala day/ With implements to fly

away?’ For someone who rarely left her father’s house after the age of 44 (the year her father died), writing was Dickinson’s basic method of travelling – imaginatively – through the world. In the opening of the film we see Emily Dickinson, (played by the American actress, Elisabeth Gray who studied Emily Dickinson at high school in America) sitting at her writing desk in her room in Amherst writing with her quill pen onto a sheet of paper. Dickinson had a very particular relationship to paper and much of the sound track of the film **imitates** the sound of the pen marking the surface of paper. Dickinson very much crafted her own private paper world. Between the years 1858-1864 she made poetry booklets (the contemporary equivalent of self-publishing perhaps) by folding a sheet of paper into four parts to create what editors have called her fascicles. She then stitched together these miniature paper-books, leaving forty in total upon her death in 1886.

The film’s central drama is the action of the writing poet. It begins with actress Elisabeth Gray, seated at her writing desk, shot in the form of a pixelated silhouette. A key reference point for this action was Dickinson’s poem, ‘This is my letter to the world’, no. 519 in the Ralph W. Franklin Reading Edition of her poetry:

This is my letter to the world,  
That never wrote to me –  
The simple news that Nature told  
With tender majesty.  
Her message is committed  
To hands I cannot see;  
For love of her, sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me!

Dickinson's poem voices the work that poetry does in giving expression to her feelings for a form of intimacy she doesn't experience. The poet seems to be saying that she wants intimacy ('hands'), but she can find that only in her relationship to the natural world where 'hands' remain invisible. 'Hands' in this metaphoric sense are the 'hands' or 'work' of God. And yet the speaker is addressing a wider audience, her 'sweet countrymen', and asking for tenderness. In the poem's opening line, she tells us that the world has never written back. For Dickinson, writing is not a fulfilling two-way conversation but something more bitter-sweet. Her poet-speaker is addressing an audience, but that audience remains silent and invisible. Perhaps her larger audience is in fact God, or something like God - what we might call the realm of the transcendental – all the things in our living world that cannot easily be explained, such as death.

'Transcendental' is a word usually associated with Dickinson's poetry and in its most basic definition it means an experience above and beyond the ordinary and commonplace; perhaps an encounter with the supernatural or otherworldly. In developing his soundtrack, Tom Simmons **wanted to create** a sound that would resonate with the image of the poet reaching for hands she could not see. From the start of the film **we hear the amplified human sounds of writing and breathing**, the diaphragm lifting and falling. **Tom's idea was to produce a close-up sonic experience**: as though we, as listener, were passing from Dickinson's living, breathing body into the internal realm of her mind or brain. **Ringling harmonic tones** plunge us deep inside the mind. Even before we see anything on screen we hear the pulsating soundscape of what, in musical terms, is **called 'stimmung', which**, roughly translated means the sound of the soul tuning itself to its internal patterns and harmonies. Tom's soundscape conjures the sounds of deep, soulful breathing; a pulsating rhythm that suggests a body plunging into deep internal waters: what might be the fluid around the brain.

### **The Metaphoric Plot**

What Dickinson produced from her brain as she wrote became the film's only real plot. *Letter to the World*, the mixed-media animation that we produced in August 2010, combines representations of Dickinson-the-poet, in the form of American actress Elisabeth Gray, and a **small paper cut-out puppet based on her silhouette**. The major dynamic of the film is an oscillation between several scales and ways of seeing some of Dickinson's recurring metaphors: small and large, near and far, grand and obscure. One of these is the image of Heaven as it collapses into the form of a bumblebee drinking nectar from its favourite flower. This act of compression – of folding away a very large idea into a miniature form - reflects Dickinson's working relationship to metaphor as well as to her own writing implements: her folded sheets of paper.

The first sequence poses the poet against a window frame cut into four dark-blue squares. Inside the frame sits the white round of planet-earth-cum-moon. Dickinson the poet-persona is seen tossing letters through the window; these are her letters "to the world that never wrote to [her]". In the blink of an eye, the poet becomes miniature, and flies through the window to join her beloved bee. Together, they drink nectar and kiss the heads of flowers. But this erotic communion is interrupted by the outbreak of a storm, signalled by the sound of Civil War gunfire. Dickinson's most productive period of writing was the early years of the Civil War, 1860-1863. Triggered by the sounds of war, an image of a volcano **appears spewing lava and smoke**. We wanted to show how sound and speech also stimulate and produce imagery. Soon after, the entire screen begins to flicker with the impact of sound and poet and bee fly off to avoid danger.

In Dickinson's metaphoric world, volcanoes signify the eruption of speech, the violent act of communication after a long period of silence. The metaphor describes, what is, for her, the violent act of writing. As she puts it in one of her letters, "Vesuvius dont talk – Etna – don't – one of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago,

and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – she couldn't look the world in the face afterward". Dickinson's "still – volcano – life" is her dormant yet stirring collection of poetry stored inside her own head. It is this world of silent words, words heard only inside the poet's own head, words left hidden and unspoken, that is the film's ultimate metaphorical plot.

### **Bridging Gaps: Hart Crane's proem 'To Brooklyn Bridge'**

In **December 2013** Suzie Hanna, Tom Simmons and Sally Bayley completed a new short film that continues their research into designing representations of **poetic** metaphor. This time their subject was modernist poet Hart Crane's proem, "To Brooklyn Bridge", the poem that sits at the front of Crane's epic narrative, *The Bridge* (1930). *The Bridge* is a mythical allegory of American history embedded in metaphor; a metaphorical coming of age story of America that takes as its beginning and ending point the structure of Brooklyn Bridge. Crane's dynamic, wheeling stanzas carry us back and forth through several aerial views of the bridge as it intersects with aspects of New York City:

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest

The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,

Shedding white rings of tumult, building high

Over the chained bay waters Liberty –

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes

As apparitional as sails that cross

Some page of figures to be filed away; –

Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

The strongest image here is the “inviolable curve,” an image that suggests the ever-receding and invisible sightlines of the implied viewer inside the scene. This implied viewer is a version of you and I, the reader and onlooker of the poem who must make of Crane’s obscured and often unfinished metaphors – metaphors that often drop away from us like the elevators in tall buildings – what we will. We hope that this film will help with the process of building new meanings in the gaps left in between one metaphor and the next.

‘Letter to the World’ and ‘Proem’ can both be viewed online via <http://www.suziehanna.com>

Screenings and symposia

**Letter to the World**

Plymouth University Transatlantic . . . .

Emily Dickinson International Symposia, Oxford University (2010)

Norwich City Professorial Lecture 2011 'Poetry & Animation'

Imagetext conference UEA 2011

6th ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival, Berlin (2012)

Sylvia Plath Symposium Indiana University, Bloomington, USA (2012)

John Lyons School, Harrow, April 2014.

Kent School, Connecticut, USA

**Proem**

Filmpoem Festival Antwerp Belgium 2014

Laugharne Castle Poetry & Film Festival Wales 2014

8th Zebra Poetry Film Festival, Berlin

Liberated Words Festival, Bristol UK,

Ottawa International Animation Festival Canada 2014

FLEXIFF Sydney Australia 2014