**The poem, the reader and the camera:**
**Using camcorders as notebooks for the study of poetry**

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the potential of using camcorders when studying poetry in secondary school English teaching. Drawing on the work of trainee teachers on a Secondary English and Drama Postgraduate Certificate in Education course in the UK, it argues that the process of representing poetry as moving image enables learners to deepen their explicit understanding of how both kinds of texts work.*

KEYWORDS: *Reading, poetry, moving image, textual studies.*

English teachers who integrate the study of language, literature, drama and media, and who draw on related disciplines such as music and art, provide a rich variety of perspectives from which their students can study and produce texts. Mark Reid, Teacher Development Officer at the British Film Institute, offers several justifications for combining the study of print and film media, including the belief that placing film and print versions of texts alongside one another "opens up a space for pupils to gain an explicit understanding of the ways in which texts operate" (Reid, 2003, p. 111).

## THE CAMCORDER AS A LENS FOR READING

One such space was created at a conference workshop run by Mark in Manchester. Working in small groups, our task was to use a camcorder as a "notebook" to gather ideas for a possible film of Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" (Roberts, 2000, p. 21), to be set in contemporary Manchester. The point was not to make a complete film, but to make notes, as a filmmaker might, scouting for possible locations – landscapes or interiors – and possible faces for casting. Since participating in the workshop (which I describe in more detail below) I have undertaken the same task with several different groups of Secondary English and Drama PGCE trainees. It raises interesting questions about reading poetry and how working in a different medium illuminates the reading process.

The task has great potential for teaching about both poetry and moving image. Nevertheless, my particular question here is: What does working in the complementary disciplines of literature and media teach us about textual study and production? Cary Bazalgette argues strongly for an inter-disciplinary approach to learning about English and moving image media:

> If English teachers were to admit that moving image media really are as capable – and worthy – of study as are literary forms, English as a subject would be shaken to its foundations. It would have to address more than one distinctive and important medium – and that would change everything. As anyone who knows anything about bilingualism knows, to understand more than one language affects one's awareness of language itself...that languages are both analogous and different; that they are systematic and rule-bound (Bazalgette, 2004, p. 9).

Using camcorders to study poetry will not, for some English departments, be foundation-shaking practice. However, it does provide a creative, practical way to reflect on the value of an interdisciplinary approach. As Andrew Goodwyn (2004) suggests,

> In a textual studies mode, in an educational paradigm, we move from what might be called casual attention to a focused and reflective attention; we seek to explain as well as enjoy and understand. That is why the study of the moving image will be different from its mere presence in the classroom as adornment or decoration (p. 18).

Furthermore, he argues that

> English will need to be the curriculum focus for teaching about how the moving image works just as it strives to teach how language works and how specialized forms of language, like novels and poems, "work"...English is concerned with all forms of textuality, including the spoken and now the visual text, and with our response to, and understanding of, text and the creation of texts of our own (pp. 20-21).

In theoretical terms, the camcorder task seems to align itself well with reader response theory and I have found it helpful to look again at some of the arguments in Louise Rosenblatt's influential work, *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work* (Rosenblatt, 1978). She proposes that a poem is not an entity but an "event in time", an "experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text" (p. 12). It is important to appreciate her distinction between "text", by which she means what has been written by the poet, and "poem" which is the collection of ideas evoked by the reader. She also draws a valuable distinction between two types of reading which she terms "efferent" and "aesthetic". The main focus of efferent reading is "what will remain as the residue *after* the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (p. 23) whereas in aesthetic reading "the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event" (p. 24). The extent to which reading is efferent or aesthetic depends partly on the "stance" of the reader and partly on how far a text lends itself to one or other reading. In the classroom, of course, it also depends on what students are asked to do when they study a text and whether or not they are encouraged or enabled to read efferently or aesthetically. So, how do these ideas correspond with the workshop activity on "The Lady of Shalott"?

Before filming begins it is necessary to have read the "The Lady of Shalott". If one of the aims of the activity is to encourage an aesthetic reading, there are powerful arguments for reading it aloud without interruption; it is a narrative poem with strong rhythms and undercurrents. It is propelled by the intriguing story of the Lady of Shalott, eternally "embowered" on the island of Shalott, blighted by a curse that forces her to see life only through her mirror. She perpetually weaves shadowy reflections into a "magic web" until her eventual death, caused by her inability to resist looking at the glittering Sir Lancelot riding by. Other momentum is provided by the changes of the seasons evident in the early reaping of barley, stormy east winds in autumn and continuing changes of the moon. The river flows relentlessly down to Camelot, whilst the Lady of Shalott sits at her loom, weaving. These ideas are evoked not just by the words themselves but by patterns, rhythms and hypnotic rhymes which need to be both heard and felt like a musical performance if they are to become an

event in time.  Rosenblatt is at pains to stress the importance of a work of art as an experience to be lived through, by which she does not mean simply imagining yourself in such a situation. Rather,

> The reader's main purpose is to participate as fully as possible in the potentialities of the text.  But much of the interest and vitality and texture of the total literary experience arises from the intensely personal activity of thought and feeling with which the literary transaction is impregnated and surrounded.  And the matrix of this is, of course, the personality and world of the individual reader (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 69).

Having "The Lady of Shalott" read aloud well may result in a pleasurable, aesthetic literary experience. But what then happens when attention is turned to sketching ideas for a film? The PGCE trainees provide some answers.  Because they are working as groups, they need to talk about camera shots or angles. In justifying their views and referring to the text, it becomes clear how each of their readings differs according to the individual's stance or circumstance. Indeed, they may soon feel they have each constructed a slightly different poem in their minds. Furthermore, when they re-read the text to clarify their thoughts they realise that the words are much less explicit than they thought. Other influences, therefore, have been at work shaping their ideas: their personality, their cultural background, their prior reading. Most readers, if asked, would say they have a strong image in their heads of where the Lady of Shalott resides, and could probably sketch something quite detailed.  All the text offers us, however, is this: "Four gray walls and four gray towers / Overlook a space of flowers" (Roberts, 2000, p. 21). Prompted by the task to talk about their reading, the trainees see how a few words are capable of being powerfully transformed in the mind's eye into a complex image of perpetual imprisonment.

The next stage of the activity yields further insights. It is often difficult, when filming images, to find an exact equivalent.  Quite apart from the subtle distinctions between the images each person conjures up, matching them with reality may simply not be possible (no mediaeval castles to hand). Groups must therefore work with visual synonyms, metonyms or symbolism. The process involved seems to correspond with what a writer does with words. This is an opportune moment to raise questions with trainees, not only about how and why they have chosen their particular moving images, but how and why Tennyson selected the precise words and syntax he did.

This relationship between the image and the world is described by Seamus Heaney as "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (Heaney, 1995, p.1). Poetry, he argues, offers "excitements and transformations" (p. xvii) which help us to consider human existence differently. "As long as the co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function" (p. 8). In the attempt to achieve a relationship between the co-ordinates of the text ("Four gray walls and four gray towers") and, with the camcorder, those of the world, we learn to see more clearly what both writer and reader are doing. "We neither capture nor create the world with our texts, but interact with it", says Robert Scholes (Scholes, 1985, p. 111). In his work on reading and textual studies, Scholes consistently stresses the importance of students as producers as well as readers of texts (Scholes, 1985; 1998). In the camcorder activity, trainees are required to be both readers and producers of texts. They read and evoke a poem from the text of "The Lady of Shalott" on the one hand; they create a notebook of

ideas represented in moving image on the other. The task therefore has the potential to meet another of Scholes' criteria for the English curriculum, which is "to lead students to a position of justified confidence in their own competence as textual consumers and their own eloquence as producers of texts" (Scholes, 1998, p. 66).

As well as enabling trainees to learn about teaching print and film texts, the activity can engender powerful learning in other respects. It involves several of the ideas which underpin what Robin Alexander terms "dialogic teaching" (Alexander, 2004). For dialogic teaching to take place effectively, students need to work collectively, supportively and purposefully. Like Alexander, David Buckingham (2003) emphasises the importance of pedagogic interventions which bring about dialogic teaching and collaborative learning in media education:

> The key point here is that the potential benefits of digital technology will not be realized without informed intervention on the part of teachers – and, in a different way, of peers. There remains a need for reflection, deliberation and dialogue; and opportunities and requirements for these things need to be systematically built into the process, even if they seem like a distraction from it...In this respect, it seems particularly important to insist on the need for collaboration in digital production (p. 187).

There are other good reasons, therefore, why it makes a good activity for trainee teachers, not least because it forms a learning process designed to deepen their understanding of subject teaching. Some further examples of the activity in practice may help to exemplify these points. I will return first to the Manchester conference workshop.

From the conference venue, it was a short walk to the recently rebuilt Arndale Centre, a large shopping mall. To get there involved walking through older parts of the city. Initially, it seemed that these older streets would yield more material to film. However, it soon became clear that finding exact equivalence between a city like Manchester and the roads and rivers, islands and meadows, towers and balconies of "The Lady of Shalott" was unrealistic. It was therefore necessary to think symbolically, bearing in mind Heaney's point about finding corresponding co-ordinates, rather than seeking actual likenesses.

Take, for example, three of the most striking lines of the poem:

> And moving through a mirror clear
> That hangs before her all the year,
> Shadows of the world appear (Roberts, 2000, p. 22).

In the Arndale centre the world was mirrored everywhere:  in the plate-glass shop windows, shiny metallic surfaces, flickering television screens and CCTV monitors. Capturing these images on film, we were influenced by key words and phrases from the poem ("moving", "mirror", "shadows of the world"). These words and phrases formed the co-ordinates of "the imagined thing"; a CCTV monitor and people moving back and forth across the screen then became the co-ordinates of "the thing itself"; the film clip became the text, now in need of an audience to view it, to interpret it, to make connections with the original poem.

We were not only reading and re-reading the poem, but also reading another text – the environment – skimming and scanning its architecture, the people, decorative details on buildings; we were "site" reading. [See also Mark Reid's article on montage and poetry in this issue.] Although the group only had one camera, the task prompted all of us to look around *as if* through the lens of the camera. Those not using the camera were able to take in the wider view, unlike the person looking through the lens who was seeing things at one remove (much like the Lady of Shalott). In this way, the group was genuinely collaborative, each member reading the environment differently but with a common purpose.

## THE CAMCORDER AS NOTEBOOK IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

Having found the task such a thought-provoking one myself, I wanted to adapt it for the PGCE course on which I work.  Since time is always at a premium, such activities have to earn their place in the subject studies curriculum. This one, I feel, does so on a number of grounds. It involves learning about poetry teaching as well as how to develop practical media work in English. The requirement to use the camcorder as a notebook relieves the pressure of making a complete film but still offers valuable insights into areas of knowledge and understanding in media education. It teaches how to plan for and organise purposeful, creative group work. It explores working in contexts beyond the classroom. Crucially, it seems to offer an enjoyable means of learning. Groups are highly motivated to review what they have collected and to compare their notebooks with those of other groups. There also seems to be a sense of satisfaction in creating new moving image text drawing on a written poem and the immediate surroundings, whatever the context.

Having offered some justification for its place on the course, I now want to return to a couple of questions central to the idea of textual studies: How did the activity affect trainees' reading of "The Lady of Shalott"? How did the activity help trainees to reflect explicitly on the process of reading and making texts?

As one would expect with a diverse group of trainees, their initial readings of the text were affected by whether or not they were familiar with it, had studied it at school or university, knew any of the pre-Raphaelite paintings of it and so on. For all of them, however, working on it through film involved reading it again, but differently. Some felt the experience seemed to help them articulate what the text was making them think about, to explain the poem they had evoked. For example, Deborah wrote:

> It captured my idea of stillness and movement. Images of shadows on the wall helped me to engage with how [the Lady of Shalott] felt.

It also helped her appreciate the characteristic features of the two disciplines, poetry and film:

> Choosing visual images to illustrate the poem also urges you to think about how the poet uses language to create its images. Interpretation and illustration of the language encourages you to appreciate the qualities of the two disciplines.

When filming, the trainees were drawing on concrete images – people and objects – which seemed to make their reading of the original text almost tangible. They felt as if the imagery of the poem was being made real, as if the camera was enabling them to film what was in their heads. As Nicola explained:

> The poem makes extensive use of nature in its imagery. Actually using the camcorder to capture images of nature, water, shadow and the stillness and movement within the natural environment captures well the mood of the poem and takes the reader into the poem. Then imagery becomes reality. It takes you into the poem and the words become a painting in your mind.

Lucy felt it encouraged close reading of the text in order to make decisions about shots:

> It constantly makes you refer back to the text, to analyse it, to pin-point key themes. It really brought it to life and made us work together to negotiate a group interpretation.

It enhanced the mood of the poem and brought out into the open some of the techniques Tennyson uses such as contrasting and shifting viewpoints. Furthermore, it made certain things apparent to her such as the fact that the Lady of Shalott and Sir Lancelot never actually met. Both of them

> fell in love with images, illusions, reflections, partial disembodied glimpses and the distortion that happens this way.

Using the camcorder to film their immediate environment and sometimes themselves as figures in the frame, the trainees created connections between the modern world and the mythical world of the poem itself. Deborah pointed out that

> filming draws attention to the way in which the poem may have relevance in the modern world. Using images from daily life encourages you to make the connection between the poem and modern concerns.

This would be a fascinating area to explore further with students in different school settings, seeing how the "co-ordinates of things" in the text related to the "co-ordinates of things" in the physical environment of each school and the students' own individual circumstances. This point was well made by Amanda:

> Using the camcorders as "sketchbooks" would make students look closely at the poem, the themes, imagery and symbolism, as well as the narrative. It allows you to seize on a particular line or few lines and focus on why they are there and what the effect of them is.

> Interestingly, because you can never find what you *actually* need to film to be strictly accurate, you are forced to look at tiny details, imagery, and to create your own symbolism e.g. to show death, you cannot show a body or cemetery, so you have to think of other ways of representing death. In this way, it makes you creative.

> It would be a good exercise to encourage reading and enjoying poetry, and to some extent interpretation. I am not sure it encourages criticism on its

own. It makes you look closely at some examples of the poet's craft – a close reading that might not otherwise have happened.

I am aware that some English teachers feel that pressures on Key Stage 4 and post-16 curricula rule out this kind of practical work altogether. On the other hand, they may feel that if this kind of textual study develops students' learning it should be integrated in the curriculum much earlier, in Key Stage 3, providing a formative experience that will influence their English work later on.

## TRANSFORMING *MANIFOLD MANOR* MULTIMODALLY

With that thought in mind, I have tried the activity with poems from *Manifold Manor*, a collection by Philip Gross written for younger readers, based on the exploration of an imaginary old house. The poems have a dreamlike quality, as if the reader is moving firstly into the grounds of the house, then into the house itself and wandering through the empty rooms. Ghostly inhabitants haunt every page: whispering lawyers; a cry-by-night; a gardener's boy; an heirless earl; a poltergeist; serving maids; housekeepers; sea-captains; old-colonialists; a hot-air balloonist. The reader, prompted by the text, is constantly wondering: Have I been here before? What was that I heard? Perhaps this sounds like a universe with which many young readers might find it difficult to connect. But for two reasons, I think not. Firstly, the idea of exploring haunted houses is on the whole a common aesthetic experience, in fiction or film; secondly, although within the collection you encounter a vanished world, modern comparisons are not hard to make. As Philip Gross points out, for example, a poem entitled "The oubliette", about a dungeon in the grounds of the house, now covered with brambles, in which prisoners were simply left to die and forgotten makes the reader wonder, "In how many countries are people still forgotten like this?" (Gross, 1989, p. 66).

Some of the poetry in *Manifold Manor* is challenging; deliberately so. It is, however, ideal for making explicit the way in which texts require readers to animate them. Gross addresses this idea both in the poetry itself and in his end-notes to the collection. One of the poems, "The twenty-sixers", personifies the letters of the alphabet as characters from a carnival. In a playfully threatening way, they chorus:

> We are the twenty-sixers:
> gypsies, jugglers, necromancers.
> Hear, sir, here we come:
> Fortune-tellers, cheapjack tricksters.
> Cross our palm, sir. Join our dance, sir,
> or we'll strike you dumb  (p. 3).

In the final verse they explain why they need the reader to join them:

> But without a twenty-seventh we are less
> than breaths of wind.  So we have come for you (p. 3).

In the end-notes Gross invites the reader not only to participate actively in bringing the poems into being but to extend them, and even contribute their own:

> *Manifold Manor* is not my private property. If you feel at home there, it is just as much yours as mine. It is big enough for you to find a room for anyone or anything you can imagine. If you want to make further discoveries, all you have to do is write them for yourself (p. 65).

In another helpful comment, Gross explains why the last few poems in the collection might seem difficult, citing reasons which chime well with Rosenblatt's belief in poetry as an event in time or a transaction:

> Sometimes thoughts and feelings come together in a way that can't simply be explained, at least not without using such a conglomeration of words that you risk losing the original thrill. Really, the difference between poetry and prose isn't to do with lines and rhymes. Ordinary prose can tell you what has happened, but poetry can make it happen to you now (p. 67).

Not only is Gross's invitation to participate actively in *Manifold Manor* encouraging, but the poems lend themselves very well to being studied in film. As texts, they are very impressionistic, offering glimpses of people and places, but deliberately leaving the reader to bridge the gaps. When creating a film notebook as distinct from making a film, there is less tendency to find a match for the images and ideas, as we have already seen, liberating students to think and solve textual problems through use of symbolism. Several of the poems address the reader explicitly and the grammar therefore sets up interesting possibilities for considering point-of-view shots (where and how is the "you" of the text to be positioned?). Moreover, many of the poems convey a strong sense of movement, the meaning of which, of course, is especially pertinent to explore in moving image. What is going to move – the subject matter or the camera or both? How is the medium of moving image best exploited to represent movement? A brief description of one or two of the sequences the PGCE groups produced may serve to illustrate these points.

The poem they worked with was "Trespassers will..." (p. 1), the first in the collection, which gradually draws the reader into the world of the old house. Following his own dictum quoted earlier – "poetry can make it happen to you now" – Gross ensures that there is a sense of immediacy about "Trespassers will...":

> The sign says PRIVATE.
> Tall scrolled-iron gates
> are rusted shut.
> Nobody comes here,
> but...
>       now and again
>       was that the dull chink
>       of a padlock chain? (p. 1)

Inside the gate, the drive is lost in old man's beard, brambles and uncut grass:

> The trees close round
> like lawyers whispering the clauses
> of a long-forgotten will.
> They won't tell you a thing.
>
> But still...

> though no one spoke
> you feel you've come too late
> to join the joke. (p. 1).

Sometimes "a gutted tower" is glimpsed. Windows seem at first empty, next filled with "long slants of sunlight". Then come further sensory prompts:

> Look. Nothing. Listen. Nothing.
> Through scents of leaves and soil
> here comes a sweet sharp whiff
> of...what? (p. 2).

Finally, the reader is guided to a wooden gate into the garden, stiff hinged, the wood "soft with mildew", and the sense that a private party is about to happen: "They're expecting you" (p. 2).

There were several reasons why I felt this poem would be an interesting one to explore: it is about movement, about discovering the grounds of an old house, about illusory sensations and ghostly presences. Reviewing the video notebooks, it is apparent that filming has been largely guided by the tone, atmosphere and imagery of the text.  These ideas have been creatively transformed into visual language, sometimes in quite literal ways, sometimes symbolically.  Take, for example, three different representations of the opening stanza. One group found a padlocked iron gate on the perimeter of the college grounds.  They shot a close-up sequence, with someone out of shot gently rocking the gate to make the padlock chink.  Another group filmed a hand-painted, wooden "Private" sign nailed to a neighbouring garden fence in another part of the grounds, tilting up from it to include the ivy and brambles growing above.  A third group found a water meter set into the ground with "Private..." written on a blue enamel plaque.  They covered it with dried leaves and filmed the leaves being blown aside to reveal the writing underneath. All three moving image sequences, different though they are, demonstrate an ability to transform ideas creatively from one medium into another, an implicit acknowledgement of how texts are produced and how readers read them.

An analysis of the last group's filming, a mere two-and-a-half minutes in total, reveals thoughtful interplay between poem and film.  One long shot, for example, is of an avenue of tall, leafless trees. Firstly, it positions the viewer as if already in the drive of "Manifold Manor", looking in the direction of the old house. Zooming back however, it becomes apparent that the viewer is still outside the gate as its iron railings gradually come into view.  The effect is a dreamlike reconfiguration of the first two stanzas, unsettling anyone who initially thought they knew where they were.  Later in the sequence, the same avenue is used differently again to explore three particular lines:

> The trees close round
> like lawyers whispering the clauses
> of a long-forgotten will (p. 1).

Once more, the group experiment with the moving image potential of the camera. They tilt it upwards until the high branches appear interlinked.  Then they pan the camera to create an impression of trees closing round. Serendipity has a part to play,

too.  As the camera pans, the sunlight refracted on the lens creates unforeseen effects – not "the odd long slants of sunset" in windows, but equally suggestive and unsettling beams of light.  Most serendipitous of all, however, is the wisp of smoke which suddenly blows in from a neighbouring garden bonfire, twists round and disappears behind the trees as quickly as it came.  It echoes that

> ....sweet sharp whiff
> of...what? You might remember
> if... (p. 2).

For their final idea, they experiment with the possibilities afforded by gothic-style double doors at the entrance to the old part of the college.  The camera starts at the top of the stone arch and tilts down to reveal wood-panelled doors and a Victorian brass door handle.  There is a close-up shot of the door handle being turned by an unseen hand on the other side, and then the door slowly opens inwards. Although there is no-one there, the sequence strongly affirms the poem's final line,

> They're expecting you (p. 2).

Although I have described only one film notebook in detail, each group's ideas offer a different reading of text and environment, and there are many opportunities for discussion and further learning when they are later reviewed and compared.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

In terms of teacher education, I would argue that the activity is beneficial in many ways, especially because it invites trainees to think imaginatively about transforming subject knowledge for teaching. It provides them with a means of reflecting on inter-disciplinary teaching about texts within English. It demonstrates, in an immediate and practical way, the potential for combining disciplines in order to gain explicit understanding of texts. Having undertaken the activity themselves, they can examine how it affects their own learning. How did creating film-clips provoke new readings of a poem? How did the different roles involved in collaborative group work call on different reading skills? How does reading a moving image text compare with reading a print text? What is meant by "text" and what is meant by "reading"? Watching one another's film clips, as I have already said, prompts critical reading and thinking, setting texts alongside one another to compare and contrast, and not just the different film versions, but also film and poem.

Using iMovie, the groups who worked on "The Lady of Shalott" later edited their films, added sound-tracks and made use of a range of other functions afforded by the software such as transitions between clips to create particular effects, sound effects or superimposition of text on images. When they viewed each other's work, there were yet more opportunities to discuss the original poem, the edited sequences they had created and the reading process itself. When asked to recall what was going on in their heads as they watched the clips, they were sometimes critical of misjudgements, for example of shot-length, whether too long or too brief, but they were very interested in their aesthetic responses, for example how the mood of the poem was evoked through visual images, movement, point-of-view shots and camera angles. They were struck

by how effectively the Lady of Shalott's isolation, imprisonment and wistfulness were interpreted in film. They appreciated each other's different approaches to capturing reflections and "shadows of the world". Several commented on the sense of foreboding they felt. However, although learning about digital editing is a valuable extension of the original task, it is not fundamental to it, since the focus of the activity is on making notes, not a finished product. There is plenty to be learnt about editing and selection from the filming itself.

The evidence of working with different groups of trainees on this task suggests that it can be highly motivating and makes explicit some of the hidden processes of reading and production of texts. In schools where media studies teaching is flourishing, both within and beyond the English curriculum, this kind of work needs no encouragement. But in English departments where digital cameras and camcorders remain under-used, I hope the experiences cited here stimulate readers to experiment for themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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