

This paper is a theoretical approach to videopoetry. The concept of videopoetry as distinct from videoart came as the result of experimenting with video for creative and poetic production using verbal and nonverbal signs in 1968. It was not until 1985 that I had the opportunity to develop a new body of video work. Videopoetry soon became a new kind of poetry in its own right, with its own grammar and semantics. Thus videopoetry is a challenge for poets and readers as we are drifting away from Mallarmé's galaxy and cannot escape the worldwide information sphere.

Videopoetry

E.M. de Melo e Castro

Videopoetry

Poetry is always on the limit of things. On the limit of what can be said, of what can be written, of what can be seen, even of what can be thought, felt and understood. To be on the limit means often for the poet to be beyond the frontier of what we are prepared to accept as being possible.

The task of breaking these frontiers has been mostly in the hands of scientists but the appropriation of scientific concepts and of technological products is certainly the most exciting challenge the poet can set for himself or herself both as an inventor and a producer of things of beauty. I refer to a beauty of a different kind, one that necessarily goes beyond the established canons and sensibilities. But the use of new technologies to produce art is not only the appropriation of new tools. It is much more the breaking through to a different poetic perception.

The idea of the poem as a verbal galaxy of signs, first proposed in modern times by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, haunted the creative writing of the first half of the twentieth century. This galaxy includes the idea of the white page as a musical score standing as a challenge before the poet. This white page belongs to an ideal book the poet must write as his or her ultimate goal. But in the second half of the twentieth century things gradually changed under the pressure of scientific discovery, technological sophistication and the democratic diffusion of their effects on our perception of the world. The poet is no longer facing a white page. He or she faces a complex set of electronic apparatus and their multiple possibilities to generate text and image in color and in movement. The poet is confronted with his or her own skills to operate technological equipment.

The page is no longer there, not even as a metaphor. Space is now equivalent to time and writing is not a score but a virtual, dimensional reality. Thus the idea of the book is coming to a crisis as it is gradually replaced by other means of external memory such as the video-tape, the floppy disk and even more by the CD-ROM. These media bring new possibilities for writing and reading as simultaneous space-time sequences, metamorphoses of signs and colors, and the navigation on the highways of global communication. Videopoetry is thus a new possibility in the domain of the virtual.

When I began using video technology to produce my first videopoem, *Roda Lume* (Wheel Light), in 1968, I did not know where the limits were and where my experiments would take me. I was really experimenting on the most elementary meaning of the word "experience." A sense of fascination and adventure told me that the letters and the signs standing still on the page could gain actual movement of their own. The words and the letters could at last be free, creating their own space.

The poetic function of language as defined by Roman Jakobson emphasizes the message and its materials and structure. Thus the importance of phonetic values in oral poetry, of scriptural values in written poetry, of visual values in visual poetry and of technological values with computer use and video for the production of poetry, and not only for simple repetitive and non-creative tasks. Videopoetry is then inevitable as a concept, responding to the challenge of the new technological means for producing text and image. Videopoetry is also an investigation of the specific characteristics of the electronic text, as opposed to those of the motion picture and the massification of television broadcasting. But what are the specific characteristics that make video an adequate medium for poetic production?

Until it is possible to establish a new set of aesthetic values belonging specifically to each new medium, we know that a new medium is at first seen and judged against the medium that came before it. Photography was judged against painting; cinema against theater; video against cinema. As for videopoetry the immediate reference is the experimental poetry of the '60s as iconized text. But the ultimate goal is to investigate video as a medium capable of developing by itself a new kind of reading pleasure. At first sight the aesthetic values present in video are the intimate relation of space and time, the rhythm of movement and the changing colors, all pointing to a poetics of transformation and to a grammar of integration of verbal and non-verbal signs. All these features contribute to a different and perhaps new meaning of reading.

One important point that needs careful consideration is time, because it is precisely a complex kind of time that the videopoem gives us.

On the static written page the characters, the syllables and the words are still. The movement of reading belongs to our eyes following the sequence of signs commonly organized as horizontal lines from the top to the bottom of the page. In some forms of print-based visual poetry this may not be so, and it is the reader who with his or her eyes must find the starting point and the possibilities of the reading sequences. But in both cases the movement belongs to the eyes and to our imagination as reading goes on. During the watching of a videopoem on the television monitor, the text (verbal and non-verbal) is not still. Letters, syllables and words all move in different and sometimes unexpected directions and ways. The scale of the signs can also be variable and so can their definition against the ground. Color is also a variable sign in itself.

Reading a videopoem is a complex experience as different moments of perception will coincide with moving and changing images. Thus we are confronted with different times and rhythms: a) the time belonging to the videopoem as one of its variables; b) the move-

ment of our own eyes trying to find a way to read the signs; c) the time of our own decoding and understanding of what we are actually seeing.

A new poetics of reading is thus on the way.

Then we have also to consider the different possibilities of editing the images, creating either slow or quick sequences that will give different perceptual values. A quick time results in instantaneous visual apprehension tending to the limit of the subliminal. On the other hand, a slow time of editing will tend to the internalized reading opening a subjective enjoyment.

A concept of "visual time" is thus very important for a grammar of videopoetry as it defines the appropriate time of reading of each poem. Editing becomes for videopoetry a kind of musical tempo for visual images.

Color is a fundamental element of grammar as an orientation element to the movement of verbal and non-verbal elements. It also drives the reader's eye movement acting as a semantic and emotion generator.

Sound, as music, human voice or noise, is part of the videopoem. It makes a counterpoint to the visual images and to create an atmosphere that facilitates the reading. But silence as a musical element is also important.

On the whole, a verbi-voco-sound-visual-color-movement complex and animated image is created calling for a total kinesthetic perception.

It is interesting to note that the motion picture image is primarily a natural one captured by the camera, and that what we actually see on the screen are images representing only a part of the total reality of the scene. However, the images of the videopoem are completely generated or transformed by electronic devices or digital functions. These images do not exist outside the apparatus that produces them — they have no outside reference and can be stored on magnetic or optical supports.

Videopoetry is therefore made of virtual images organized in metonymic sequences. We are thus forced to recognize that, contrary to traditional and verbal poetry, it is not the metaphor that prevails in videopoetry. The images have a more iconic character rather than a symbolic one.

Nevertheless, video as a medium and as an organizing principle of virtual images is a metaphor of reality. It constitutes a metalanguage. It is a multiple generator of visual discourse and poetic perception.

A personal trajectory

As for my personal experience, I began experimenting with words within the frame of verbal poetry in the '50s, searching for an economy of language that very soon brought me to the transgression of grammar, experimenting with combinatory algorithms applied to verbal materials, words and letters. I went from the hypotaxis to the parataxis abolishing the difference between verbal and non-verbal and reaching a totally visual concept of invention. The next step was starting to experiment with the means of making poetry. Concrete poetry in 1960 was for me not an arrival point, but rather a launching platform.

At first I wrote experimental poems by handwriting them or using old typographic fonts. Later letterpress techniques made the work easier. Soon it became evident to me that experimenting with letters and with different materials was the appropriate way to produce visual poetry. So I made poems with paper, wood, textiles, stone and plastics, often using collage techniques. Now I use light to produce infopoems and videopoems on the computer. My first videopoem — *Roda Lume* — is from 1968 when I realized that heavy materials were coming to an end as a support for communication. The dematerialized virtual image was in itself a poetic image and therefore the poem could also be dematerialized.

Videopoemography

My own production of videopoems can be seen as a development of experience in three different tempos:

An impulse towards the use of new technological means resulting in the production of my first videopoem — *Roda Lume* — in black and white, consisting of animated geometric shapes and letters that were previously hand drawn. The animation was made by direct editing on the camera, registering image after image with a time-based corrector. A storyboard was first made with image sequence and respective time. Sound was added afterwards as an improvised phonetic reading of the visual images. I produced the sound myself.

This videopoem was shown on a literary magazine on Portuguese television in the beginning of 1969 and it produced a scandal amongst the spectators. It was then destroyed by the official television station as it was regarded without any interest. Now I am told that it is probably the first videopoem made as such, and that it is different from the techniques and aesthetics of videoart. I kept the storyboard drawings and was able to make a new version of it in 1986. The sound track is different as I didn't keep a recording of the original improvisation and had to make a new one from memory. The duration of this version is 2'58.' In 1985, as a result of an opportunity given to me by the Portuguese Institute for Distance Learning (IPED) and later by the Open University of Lisbon, I was able to use television studios to explore the creative possibilities offered by the new electronic and digital equipment recently installed. As a result I devised the project *Signagens* (Signings) which I developed up to 1989.

This project intended first of all to investigate video possibilities as a new medium for reading poetry. It was meant to be used in Portuguese literature classes. Very soon I realized that intersemiotic trans-

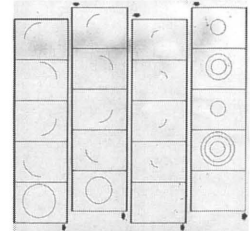


Figure 1-a.

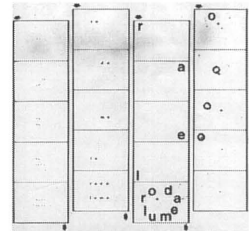


Figure 1-b.

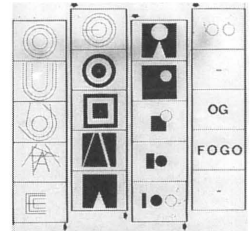


Figure 1-c.

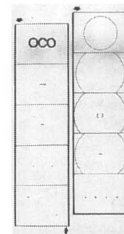
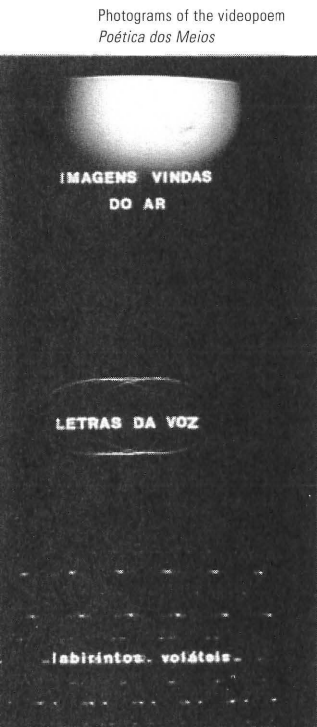


Figure 1-d

Storyboards of the videopoem *Roda Lume*, 1968.



Photograms of the videopoem
Rede Teia Labirinto (Signagens
 project)



Photograms of the videopoem
Poética dos Meios

lation of print-based visual and experimental poems was obvious, as video seemed to me a perfect medium for animation of letters and words. Then I produced a set of videopoems based almost exclusively on pre-existing poems from the '60s. I used mostly poems of my own from that time. The following videopoems were produced in this context:

- As Fontes do Texto* (The Fountains of the Text) - 8'30"
- Sete Setas* (Seven Arrows) - 1'29"
- Sede Fuga* (Thirst Escape) - 1'23"
- Rede Teia Labirinto* (Net Web Labyrinth) - 2'12"
- Vibrações* (Vibrations) - 4'13"
- Um Furo no Universo* (A Hole in the Universe) - 2'
- Come Fome* (Eat Hunger) - 1'44"
- Hipnotismo* (Hypnosis) - 33"
- Ponto Sinal* (Period Sign) - 3'55"
- Polígono Pessoal* (Personal Polygon) - 8'15"
- O Soneto, Oh!* (The Sonnet, Oh!) - 5'34"
- Objectotem* (Objectotem) - 5'37"
- Escrita da Memória* (Memory's Writing) - 2'14"
- Concretas Abstrações* (Concrete Abstractions) 1'30"
- Dialuzando* (Daylighting) - 5'

Having made these videopoems I realized that video has its own identity and that it is a suitable medium for the production of images which have no existence outside the system. A new period started: I explored the specific virtual possibilities of video for poetic creation without having to use a poem created outside the medium. True videopoetry was beginning. My production from this period used exclusively computer generated images transformed by digital effects. The camera was practically of no use at that time. The titles of the poems then produced are:

- Poética dos Meios* (Poetics of the Media) -9'50"
- Infografitos* (Infograffiti) - 5'24"
- Ideovideo* (Ideovideo) - 7'50"
- Metade de Nada* (Half of Nothing)- 5'55"
- Do Outro Lado* (On the Other Side) - 5'
- Vibrações Digitais Dum Protocubo*
 (Digital Vibrations of a Protocube) - 5'20"

When the *Signagens* project came to an end in 1989 I was confronted with the difficulty of finding a suitable studio to carry on my experiments. After various frustrated attempts I decided to install at home my own studio and started buying old and discontinued equipment still in good working condition though of very small commercial value, together with VHS, VCRs and personal computers. I believe that more important than very sophisticated hardware is the creative mind that uses it. Thus in 1990 I began to produce a different kind of videopoetry using all types of virtual images and, contrary to expectation, the results were much more interesting and aesthetically sophisticated than the ones obtained at the Open University studio. They are much more intense and give a disturbing visual experience — they are a more advanced step in poetic experimentation. Up to now I produced in my studio the following videopoems:

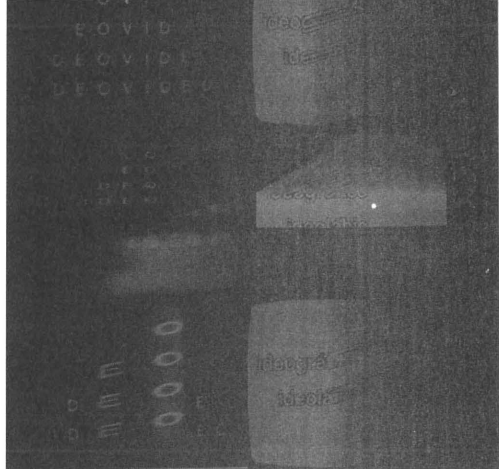
Ian Palach (Ian Palach) - 5'40"

Lixo Super Lixo (Junk SuperJunk) - 6'

Sonhos de Geometria

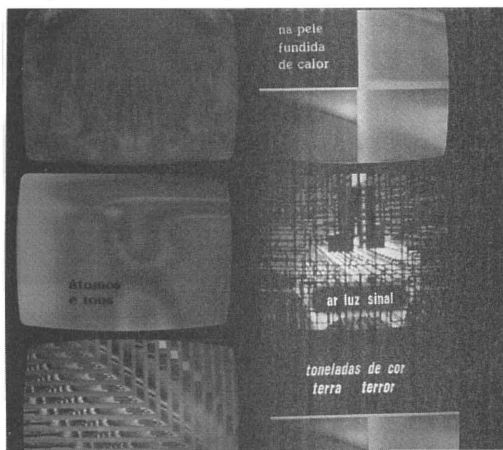
(Dreams of Geometry) - 30'

Sonhos de Geometria is a visual meditation about transformation of shapes in space and time, developed in five videopoems. The first is *Sonho dos Bisontes Geómetras de Lascaux* (Dream of the Geometer Bisons of Lascaux) and is an evocation of the enigmatic pre-historic drawings stressing the importance of the contrast between light and dark in the production of those images.

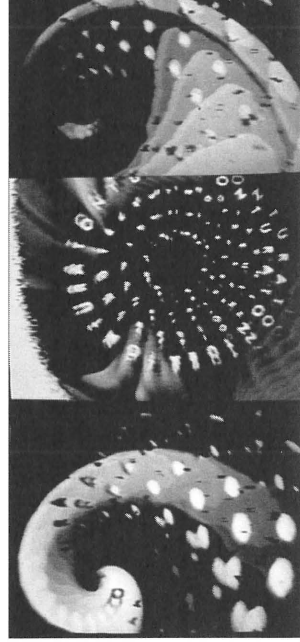


Photograms of the videopoem *Ideovideo*

Photograms of the videopoem *Infografitos*



The second is *Sonho de Pitágoras* (Pythagoras' Dream). It is about the birth of the numerical symbols up to the organization of the decade and the Tetraktys as a symbolic form of all numerical relations. From there we go to the invention of the famous theorem. The third one, *Sonho de Euclides* (Euclid's Dream), gives us Euclidean geometry in two dimensions hoping for the third one: the laws of perspective. The fourth poem *Sonho de Mandelbrot* (Mandelbrot's Dream) shows the forms of nature, clouds and trees as the original source of fractal geometry, rendering interactions between these shapes and the Mandelbrot set. Finally the fifth one is *Sonho de Melo e Castro* (Melo e Castro's Dream). In this poem I use my own first video poem *Roda Lume* in an intertextual relationship together with other poems of mine. All are a proposition of a new way of reading and poetic enjoyment using feedback effects with an accelerated rhythm. In the large majority of my video-poems I use electronic music specially composed by the Portuguese duo TELECTU (Jorge Lima Barreto and Vitor Rua), mostly of a minimal, repetitive character which I find perfectly suited to the nature of video-poetry. I want to particularly emphasize the original music for *Sonhos de Geometria* for its high quality and perfect aesthetic coordination with each poem. *Sonhos de Geometria* was published in Cuenca, Spain, in 1993, as a VHS videocassette by the literary magazine *Menú* under the direction of Juan Carlos Valera.



Videopoem 5 *Sonho de Melo e Castro*

Photograms of *Sonhos de Geometria*



To complete this videographic reference it is necessary to include the videopoem *Vogais, As Cores Radiantes* (Vowels, The Radiant Colors — having as a starting point the sonnet by Rimbaud) which I made in 1986 in the RTP (Portuguese Radio and Television) studio after an invitation to participate in the series *Memória Audiovisual* (Audiovisual Memory) by Vasco Pinto Leite. Its duration is 3'7" and the original music is by TELECTU.

Another aspect of my video work is editing the videos of my wife Cecília Melo e Castro. She is an infopainter working since 1986. In her exhibitions she often presents animated videos made from some of her infopaintings. The static work is presented in photographic prints and the animated videos are a complementary form of showing her work. But I consider her videos as non-verbal videopoems because of her intense experimental work and true questioning of the inventive possibilities of the media used. These videos, all in VHS, are:

Infoarte (Infoart) - 13' - 1987

Inforritmos (1,2,3,4) (Inforythms 1,2,3,4) - 27' - 1989

As Aves, os Números, as Cores (Birds, Numbers, Colors)

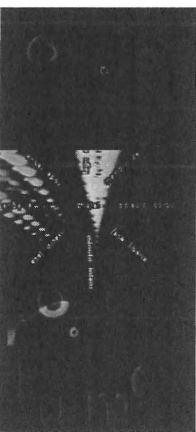
Computer Dreams:

1/ *A Imagem e a Máscara* (An Image and a Mask)

2/ *Grafismos interiores* (Interior Graphic Signs) - 15'19" - 1993

A Escrita das Esferas (The Writing of the Spheres) - 13' - 1994

Photograms of
*Sonhos de
Geometria*



André Vallias is a Brazilian experimental poet based in São Paulo. He is concerned with the creation of a non-logocentric poetry, able to compound all forms in which knowledge manifests itself, such as words, numbers, images, sounds, etc. He regards the suitable poem for the telematic society as a kind of open diagram: compelling a non-linear, active way of reading. In 1992, while living in Germany, he organized a show of computer-generated poetry, with works from poets/artists of five nations: "p0es1e-digitale dīchtkunst."

