Signing the Body Poetic
Essays on American Sign Language Literature

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While this original use of the word *line* more directly relates to the modern-day *linen* and *linseed oil* than to poetry, its spirit is woven deeply into the notion of poetic lines—those metrical threads of words whose length and character lend poems their particular texture and design. As strings of phonemes, syllables, and words, lines form the fiber of verse, often seen as the very ontological stuff of poetic *textiles*. Given the fundamental role of lineation to poetics, questions concerning the line in American Sign Language (ASL) poetry are inevitable and revealing. Is there even such a thing as a signed line? If so, is it every bit the fiber of the ASL text? If not, what is?

Clayton Valli was the first to inquire into the nature of the line in ASL poetry. He begins his essay “The Nature of a Line in ASL Poetry” (1990a) by placing the identification of the ASL line as a centrally important issue: “Since the late 1970s an increasing number of original ASL poems have been recognized, but there has been no definition of the nature of this poetry. A basic difficulty in the effort to interpret ASL poetry and its elements has been the identification of a line” (171). If the ASL line can be identified, Valli reasons, then it may serve as a defining element in ASL poetic discourse.
Valli begins by looking for the signed counterpart to the traditional form of rhymed line breaks, as in this verse couplet by Alexander Pope:

See, through this air, this ocean, and this earth,  
All matter quick, and bursting into birth.  

"An Essay on Man"

But what could possibly be the signed counterpart to “earth” and “birth”? Or the alliterative ‘bursting into birth’? How do signed languages rhyme? Or rather, do they rhyme? Literally speaking, the notion of a signed rhyme is blatantly oxymoronic. Yet decades of sign language linguistic research have demonstrated that sign languages are rich in their own version of phonology. Rather than being constituted through sound patterns, the particular handshake, movement path, palm orientation, and nonmanual signals are all phonemic aspects of a visual, spatial, and kinetic language system. Just as in spoken languages, a rhyme is constituted by the repetition of distinct phonemes. On the basis of the fundamental rhyming of repeated handshapes, movements, facial expressions, and location, Valli proceeds to identify and describe what constitutes a line break in ASL, through the model of end-rhyming patterns. To grasp the basic poetic structure of visual rhymes, see the signed explanation by the ASL poet and humorist E. Lynn Jacobowitz regarding the rhymes in Valli’s poem “Snowflake” (clip 5.1). Figure 5.1 (using a different transliteration of the poem) shows how the ending of the first line, “TREE—FULL OF LEAVES IN TREETOP—LEAVES FALL,” rhymes visually with the ending of the next, “GRASS—SLENDER GRASS WAVE—GRASS WITHER.” Moreover, it shows how there may be multiple rhymes simultaneously, something impossible in spoken languages. Both line breaks are signed with a downward motion, downward inflection of the eyebrows, and a “5” handshake that comes to the end of a sign in the same location with parallel palm orientation. Thus these breaks rhyme in multiple ways at the same time.

While Valli’s analysis is linguistically precise, it may be perceptually murky—that is, when one is watching the poem, the poetic lines do not distinguish themselves as such. Only once they are committed to paper and linguistic analysis do they stand out as lines. At a national ASL literature conference, I asked a predominantly Deaf-ASL fluent audience to identify the line breaks in “Snowflake” before these were revealed to them. Not a single member correctly identified ‘LEAVES FALL’ and ‘GRASS WITHER’
as "line breaks" per se (Bauman 1996). What sort of counterpart to the written line is this? It is unthinkable that a line break could not be identified as a perceptual marker in a poem, whether auditory (earth/birth) or visual (literal "breaks" of the lines cantilevered into the blank space of the page).

The model of the verse couplet echoes the conservative tradition that believes that, as Charles Hartman (1980) writes, "[v]erse is language in lines. This distinguishes it from prose... This is not really a satisfying distinction as it stands, but it is the only one that works absolutely" (11). Yet rhymed verse and poetry are not interchangeable terms. While the line may be the fiber of verse, the linear fiber of poetry may be cut from a wide variety of different cloths and is capable of creating an array of poetic texts that come in all shapes, sizes, and forms. In the century that has explored such different sorts of lines as found in free verse, concrete poetry, prose poetry, Beat poetry, slam poetry, L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E poetry, performance poetry, Chinese calligraphic poetry, and ethnopoetics, we must be wary of identifying a single model for the line that stands for all.

This is not to say that the line loses its importance in modernist and postmodernist poetics; on the contrary, testing the boundaries, directions, and possibilities of the poetic line becomes a central preoccupation with
contemporary poets. In many instances, these forms of experimentation are a reaction against the tradition of the metered line with its rhymed endings. While verse line may have been the form of choice for the elite English literary class, it no longer enjoys dominance in our postmodern, multicultural society.

In attempting to solve the question of the line in ASL poetry, then, Valli’s essay actually raises more questions than it answers: What are the ideological implications of the verse model used by Valli? What would a free-verse line in ASL look like? What about an ASL concrete poem or a prose poem? Are there other models of the poetic line more suited for sign than the verse line? What about the lines found in visual arts? In the performing arts? Is the line even worth discussing at all? What is it about the “line” that is so important in the first place? All these questions lead toward an even more basic question: How does one even begin to discuss poetry in a visual, nonphonetic language?

As these questions suggest, inquiring into the element of the line in ASL poetry leads to reflections on the enterprise of ASL poetics as a whole. Much more is at stake here than the description of a single poetic feature in ASL. For once the line is opened up and examined, we find it to be woven with other threads of ideological, literary, and philosophical issues. Inextricably woven into the “line-division rhyme,” for example, is a phonocentric ideology, the very form of which has been complicit in the repression of sign as a linguistic and literary medium; also entwined is the wholesale adoption of a formalist poetic tradition—exemplified by Robert Frost’s influence on Valli—whose conservative definition of poetry would surely not include ASL as a medium for poetry per se.

Further, as these political threads are teased apart, we find another set of ideological lines: those that inscribe the disciplinary boundaries that maintain a separation between the visual, spatial, performance, and literary arts. The notion of the line is certainly not exclusive to poetry but is a fundamental concept in most art forms: painting, architecture, sculpture, music, dance, and drama are all informed by their own versions of lines. In each of these arts, the line serves a fundamental structural and aesthetic role, lending distinct shape and texture to the work. Given the ubiquity of the line, why limit our investigation to a single prosodic model that held sway centuries ago? Might the lines in visual poetry and visual arts, for example, bear homological affinities to the lines in ASL poetry? Is there something beyond the poetic line that forms the textual fabric, the poetic lin of ASL poetry?
The following inquiry, then, begins by opening up the line, which leads toward the larger lines—those that inscribe the very boundaries of "poetry" itself. To come closer to the poetic *lin*, this essay will have to cross disciplinary boundaries to explore the relations between the visual arts, film, and ASL poetry. In so doing, ASL poetics may be led away from the hegemony of hearing-centered (phonocentric) models of language and literature and guided toward a wider, more inclusive terrain of poetics.

In what follows, this essay moves from the central model of the verse line to an opening up of ASL poetics beyond speech and writing and then toward a wider landscape that includes visual and cinematic art forms. I do not pretend to fully describe this wider landscape but simply to lead toward it. What follows may be read, then, as preliminary notes toward a visually centered poetics and politics of ASL poetry.

**PHONOCENTRISM AND THE LINE IN ASL VERSE**

Just as poetry is always a specific poetic discourse, so line organization always takes a specific historical form and thus is ideological. In her essay "Lucent and Inescapable Rhythms: Metrical ‘Choice’ and Historical Formation," Marjorie Perloff (1988) compares the lineation of poets that span three centuries—Goethe (1780), Rimbaud (1873), William Carlos Williams (1916), and Samuel Beckett (1972)—to demonstrate that particular poetic forms emerge from particular historical formations. Perloff concludes, "We must realize that the choice of verse form is not just a matter of individual preference, a personal decision. . . . For the pool of verse and prose alternatives available to the poet at any given time has already been determined, at least in part, by historical and ideological considerations" (39). Rather than writing with a unique voice, the poet is, to a large extent, "ventriloquized by his or her tradition" (Henri Meschonnic, quoted in Perloff 1988, 15). We must ask what sort of ideological ventriloquism takes place when Valli uses the couplet verse as the model for the line in ASL poetry.

Walt Whitman, who was among the first to stretch the limits of the line—literally, to the end of the page—was also among the first to identify the high forms of English prosody with a particular social-cultural elitism. In the work of Alfred Lord Tennyson, for example, Whitman (1892) finds "the verse of inside elegance and high-life. . . . The odor of English social life in its highest range . . . pervading the pages like an invisible scent; the
idleness, the traditions, the mannerisms, the stately ennui; ... Never one
democratic page; nay, not a line, not a word; never free and naïve poetry,
but involv'd, labor'd, quite sophisticated" (477). The very possibility of this
"verse of inside elegance and high-life" depends on an outside language of
the not-so-elegant low-life, the unstately voices of pidgins, creoles, oral ver-

naculars, and sign languages. The metered, poetic line is one such bound-
ary, ensuring that inside the stately house of English verse, poems and their
practitioners do not get "out of line," that their prosodic feet march accord-
ing to the same beat and make their about-faces in prescribed fashion.
While the words and images of verse may revel in the beautiful and the sub-
lime, the metered, rhyming couplet line dictates conformity with the high
arbiters of literacy and literature.

Such critiques of the high forms of English verse have been rehearsed
often and do not need repeating here. However, the wider literary com-

munity has yet to see that within this high verse there exists a "hearing-
centered" ideology of what is and is not literature. It is perhaps not sur-
prising that this ideological underpinning has been overlooked in the
history of languages, for it is often most difficult to see that which is clos-
est to us. As spoken languages have been the overwhelmingly preferred
mode, they have attained the status of the "norm"; thus our forms of writ-
ing and cultural production have followed suit. As traditional forms of lit-

erature reflect the needs of hearing poets and hearing audiences, one can
hardly fault poets for making use of the oral and phonetic components of
language. Indeed, one does not usually realize that "hearing" could be a
part of one's identity and way of being-in-the-world.¹ The implications of
this unexamined aspect of human identity extend deep into the core of
what it means to be human.

As we have long defined ourselves as "the speaking animal," our modes
of language—speech, phonetic writing, and the book—consolidate and
deploy this image. As Masten, Stallybrass, and Vickers (1997) recognize, we
are beginning to see "how narrow our assumptions of the typicality of a cer-
tain kind of book and a certain kind of reading have been" (5). The domi-
nance of left-to-right, linear writing, then, defends the primacy of speech,
and is, according to Derrida (1976), "the original and most powerful eth-
nocentrism" (3). Any modality that runs counter to this version of human
identity must be repressed. One need only note the historical suppression
of sign as ample evidence of the phonocentric hegemony of the West.²
Despite this recent paradigm shift in our understanding of language, the communities and the modes of production that support the old phonocentric paradigm hold sway. So entrenched is the line that it is difficult to perceive language in any other way. But as Derrida (1976) has shown, “The ‘line’ represents only a particular model whatever might be its privilege,” and this privilege is founded on the “repression of pluridimensional symbolic thought” (86). Given that the phonetic line is the structural embodiment of phonocentrism, why should ASL poetries adopt it as the sole model to explore the nature of ASL poetry?

Clearly, for tactical reasons only. While the “line-division rhyme” does describe linguistic properties of sign, it more importantly serves to validate the poetic potential of ASL in the minds of the academic literary establishment. As Kathleen Fraser (1988) writes, “A poem whose line breaks adhere to . . . comfortably established systems can hope for easier access to the literary community, the canon” (152). It makes political sense to first compare ASL poetry with forms that define standard practice rather than with avant-garde forms like concrete poetry, which some scholars do not consider to be “poetry” per se. In this light, the line division that rhyme offers is an important poetic model in the struggle for the recognition of the subaltern literary forms of the Deaf community.

Yet the line-division rhyme is less strategic in guiding ASL poetries toward a deeper understanding of the nature of ASL poetry than Valli had hoped, for it is precisely the most normative models that perpetuate the exclusion of manual languages from the domain of literature. When the model of the line-division rhyme is taken as the model for the line, it brings with it a whole set of affiliations, like an ideological Trojan horse bearing an elitist, phonocentric literature replete with its traditions, poetics, and genres. Given these ideological implications, we must ask: If the phonetic line is only a model, what other models might be used to explore the line in ASL poetry?

Fortunately, other models abound, models like free verse and visual poetry that have long since superseded the popularity of the line-division rhyme. If, as it has been said, writing poetry without rhymed breaks is like playing tennis without a net, then Valli borrows a phonocentric net and sets out to play the same game as Frost and other traditional lyric poets. Yet once other poets take the net down, the game changes—and so does the field, whose bounds suddenly stretch wider to recognize that poetry, like language, may just as easily be visual as phonetic. Thus it seems quite log-
ical to explore the line in visual poetry for a model for the line in the visual-kinetic form of ASL poetry.

THE VISUAL LINE

The tendency of artists to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice of the arts, one which is not confined to any particular genre or period.

W. J. T. MITCHELL

Iconology

Since the advent of written poetic texts, poetry has been created for the eye as well as the ear. In fact, poetry's visual qualities are commonly cited as a fundamental distinction between poetry and prose. "The fact that we can tell verse from prose on sight, with very few errors," writes Charles Hartman (1980), "indicates that the basic perceptual difference must be very simple" (11, emphasis added). Whenever poetry is committed to the page, line breaks are visual, even in the most acoustically rich prosody. And once poetry is written, the poetic impulse comes into contact with the page and seeks what it has to offer. Who says we have to write in straight lines, left to right? Many poets find left-to-right lines constricting and hence compose lines that sprawl, curve, slither, and wind their way over the page. While many examples can be chosen, here consider two poems by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1980), as translated by Anne Hyde Greet (figure 5.2). In "Far from the Dovecote," we see the sinuous curving of the snake from the "sea to the tender hope of the East." And in the "The Little Car" we can see the shape of a car emerging from a complex arrangements of lines—some long and curving, others short, and others circular. The lines are freed to convey a visual image. One cannot, from hearing this poem, grasp its essential visual imagery (figure 5.3).

Within the long history of visual poetry, the twentieth century has witnessed an increased manipulation of the visual nature of poetry. In the various forms of visual poetry, the line is no longer bound to the left-to-right linearity of the phonetic line but is free to explore the open field of the page. Poetry can be every bit a "graphic art," an art of writing. Given that poetry may just as easily be visual as phonetic, it seems only logical to explore the long tradition of visual poetry for alternative models for poetic lines that may serve as starting points for poetic lines in ASL.
And you know why
Why the cherished snake twines and loves from the sea to the East of pe

Bar
bed
hexa
hedrons
but secretly
blue hills
on sentry duty

in the Oh sprays of the
Woods 305
where in retreat
we sing

FIGURE 5.2. "Far from the Dovecote," by Guillaume Apollinaire.

I shall never forget that nocturnal journey where none of us said a word.

Oh tender night before the war

FARRIERS SUMMONED

BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND ONE IN THE MORNING

to wards
LISIEUX

or else
s the gol
den

and 3 times we stopped to change a flat tire

FIGURE 5.3. "The Little Car," by Guillaume Apollinaire.

THE VISUAL LINE AND SPATIAL COMPOSITION IN ASL POETRY

Line: A direction of course or movement.

*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971

The secret of the art of drawing is to discover in each object the particular way in which a certain flexuous line, which is, so to speak, its generating axis, is directed through its whole extent.

**LEONARDO DA VINCI**

*Treatise on Painting*

The forms of men must have attitudes appropriate to the activities that they engage in, so that when you see them you will understand what they think or say. This can be done by copying the motions of the dumb, who speak with movements of their hands and eyes and eyebrows and their whole person, in their desire to express that which is in their minds. Do not laugh at me because I propose a teacher without speech to you, who is to teach you an art which he does not know himself, for he will teach you better through facts than will all the other masters through words.

**LEONARDO DA VINCI**

*Treatise on Painting*

ASL is at all times composed of lines, invisible and kinetic; they are the paths that etch out a particular “direction of course or movement.” In fact, one could say that signed discourse is composed from an assemblage of lines drawn in space through the body’s movements. While these lines are woven with other linguistic parameters—a particular handshape, palm orientation, location, movement path, and nonmanual signals—the line is more than the sum of its parts. The line carries a generating capacity, an expressiveness all its own whose speed, tension, length, direction, and duration construct and disperse a particular energy. Consider the simple and confident lines in Bernard Bragg’s translation of the beginning of e. e. cummings’s “since feeling is first” (figure 5.4). Here the reader, at least, must pay attention to a new “syntax of things”: a visual syntax of movement, design, and composition. Like the lines in cummings’s poem-pictures, these lines are not bound to a left-to-right order but are free to explore the open space of the text. Even before the repetition of movement paths creates a “line division rhyme,” a movement path is already a line in a very basic, perceptual sense. These paths, more than an occasional signed couplet, truly weave the visual fabric of the text. They could also be
thought of as a poem’s blueprint or its skeleton, what Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi (1979) refer to as the “kinetic superstructure.” For the time being, then, let us consider these “visual lines” in ASL poetry, which may also be referred to as “movement path lines.”

Taken on their own, the individual characters of lines reveal certain visual properties but do not necessarily shed much new light on a particular poem. Just as in the visual arts, discussion of particular line types is usually not an end in itself. Rather, it is the lines in relation that form the fiber of the visual text. The theory of the visual line, then, must be extended to understanding how the lines produce an overall visual composition. Like the lines in an Apollinaire calligramme or a Kandinsky canvas, signed lines forge designs in space for particular aesthetic impact on the viewer.
In Valli’s “Snowflake,” for example, the lines that are most memorable may be not those created from the verse-based rhyming patterns demonstrated above but rather those created from the strong diagonal lines that are produced through the movement of the two snowflakes and that stand out against the rest of the poem (clip 5.2). As you watch the poem, note the overall compositional effect of the zigzagging diagonal lines of the poem’s two falling “snowflakes.”

Consider how the diagonal line of the first snowflake falling stands out against the dominating parallel vertical and horizontal lines in the beginning section of the poem. The first diagonal is echoed at the very end of the poem when the second snowflake falls from the opposite corner to the center, where it melts on the hand that holds the image of the sun. In this sense, these visual lines lead the viewer’s eye toward the center, where the culmination takes place. This is a crucial moment, as the melting of the snowflake—a thing renowned for its unique character—may be seen to convey the melting of the boy’s unique Deaf identity in the heat of his father’s oppressive presence (Rose 1994; Ormsby 1995). The boy, then, becomes just another trickle in the mainstream of society. This point is made even more central to the poem as it is literally composed in the center, as foregrounded through the meeting point of the two diagonal lines—even though separated in time.

Approaching the line in this way makes the invisible pattern of the poem visible, exposing the threads of the poetic fabric. This allows us to slow down signs to ascertain their design and their creation of a whole poetic architecture. Rather than advocating for a precise quantitative set of terms, the visual model may open up poetic practice and analysis to be mindful of how the visual structure has its own impact on the viewer, a visual dimension interwoven with precise linguistic patterning. While “Snowflake” uses strong diagonal lines, other poems may use other lines, such as the strong circular composition found in Valli’s “Hands” and Ella Mae Lentz’s “Circle of Life” (1995) or the spiral shape repeated in Debbie Rennie’s “Notre Dame” (1990). Not all poems have such an obvious discernible visual structure. If one were to spend time examining the lines of a poem, however, certain visual observations might be made concerning balance, symmetry, perspective, and composition. Moreover, the ASL line is not exclusively a “graphic” line like those committed to the canvas or the page; it is also, in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a direction and course of movement (emphasis added).
THE KINETIC LINE IN ASL POETRY: TRANSFORMATION

Approaching the line in its architectural sense gives insight into its visual design but is an insufficient model in itself. For unlike the lines in buildings, paintings, writing, Chinese calligraphy, and textiles, movement path lines vanish the instant they appear. It is the very act of drawing or weaving that creates the poem. In this sense, the actual movement of the movement path line conjures relations with dance and performance perhaps more than with painting. Ironically, as ASL poetics crosses into comparisons with dance, it is not drifting away from poetry but actually coming closer to the very origins of the poetic line and its metric feet. As ancient Greek dancers performed to the spoken word, the rhythm of their feet marked what have become known as the metric “feet” of the poem. Although it does not come across in videotapes, performing ASL poets frequently revive this original notion as they keep the beat of their poem with a tapping foot, reconnecting the poetic line with the movements of the body. But the lines in ASL are not necessarily restricted to the tapping of a literal/metaphorical poetic foot; they gesture through time and space, controlling and dispersing energy as a dancer does.

Unlike a dancer, however, the gestures and movements of the body produce precise grammatical and visual images. In fact, often the interweaving of a gestural line with visual images produces lines that startle the viewer and resonate within the poetic text. These lines are the generating axis of the ASL poetic technique known as “transformation.” In a transformation line, one image or sign transforms into another without a break, threaded together through a single gestural line.

Consider the lines from Ella Mae Lentz’s “Eye Music” (1995): strong parallel lines drawn through space, carving the image of passing telephone poles and wires from the moving eyes of a passenger on a train. These wavy, parallel lines begin as the bars of written music and then flow off the page in one sinuous line into telephone wires. The line here is the continuous movement path used to unite the bars of written music with telephone wires. That is, the lines lift off the page where they represent sound to course through the air, producing a form of Deaf “eye music.” The continuous line enables the transformation to surprise and to weave together incongruent images (clip 5.3).

While transformation lines occur in the works of most poets, they occur with greater frequency and deliberateness in the works of Flying Words

GETTING OUT OF LINE 107
Project. Of particular interest to this chapter is their *ars poetica*, entitled simply “Poetry.” As it explores the relations of ASL poetry and painting, “Poetry” embodies the ideas presented in this essay—the nature of the visual line in ASL poetry—by exploring the analogies between poetry and painting (clip 5.4).

The poem begins with a startling transformation line as Cook signs a gun shooting a bullet that transforms through one gestural line into a celestial body orbiting in space. This transformation creates a radical shift in perspective from human to cosmic scale. The shock of two incongruous images becomes the image itself, recalling the nature of the image in the ideogrammic poetics of Ezra Pound, where two juxtaposed images work to produce a “radiant node, or cluster” of ideas. The viewer is left to struggle with competing frames of reference.

As “Poetry” continues, the poem follows the paths of lines through the painting/poetry analogy. Cook alternates between being a painter and the portrait, yet in this portrait the lines become increasingly abstract until the painter finally smashes a plate of paint into the portrait, rips the canvas off the easel, and throws it into space, where it orbits like a planet. In one transformational, kinetic line, the canvas transforms into a celestial orb, and human scale becomes cosmic without forewarning.

When placed in this context, this particular transformation line may be seen as a milestone in the history of the painting/poetry analogy and in ASL poetics. Here it is not any old canvas being destroyed but the entire tradition of comparing sign poetry to two-dimensional art forms. This *ars poetica* points toward the inevitable: that it is time we move out of the flatland of the page and canvas and into the three-dimensional kinetic arts in search of a wider, more comprehensive poetics of ASL. And this is precisely where *Flying Words* goes. Once released from the limitations of the canvas and page, Cook creates images within a full four-dimensional field that gain a life of their own. First, Cook shows the painter/poet drawing trees into being, but gradually the trees and underbrush grow on their own. The images of the SUN and the FALCON occupy their own realm, not restricted to a canvas or a page. The near-ontological independence of these poetic images is shown most clearly in another transformation line where the falcon swoops down only to become a butterfly landing on the head of the unsuspecting poet/painter. Here, in the words of Ernest Fenollosa (1991) referring to Chinese written poetry, we seem to be “watching things work out their own fate” (9).
Cook and Lerner’s moment of transformation from two dimensions to four heralds the necessity of a poetics not bound to the canvas or the page; what is needed is a poetics where lines, handshapes, movement paths, location, palm orientation, and all the other linguistic ingredients are not ends in themselves but, in their various ways, generators of the moving image.

This essay, then, will ride along with this deconstructive transformational line that hurls flatland poetics into deep space. We find ourselves now at an opening where a poetics of ASL may more fully embrace its own visual-kinetic nature. In doing so, it finds that there is perhaps a greater, more essential lin: the moving image.

FROM LINE TO LENS:
TOWARD A CINEMATIC POETICS OF ASL

The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book... That is why beginning to write without the line, one begins also to reread past writing according to a different organization of space.

JACQUES DERRIDA
Of Grammatology

The grammars of sign languages and film are astonishingly similar—so much so that one could claim that ASL bears as much resemblance to film as to spoken languages. The Deaf performer Bernard Bragg originally put forth the idea of the relations between the two media. His insights led William Stokoe, the first linguist to perceive and validate the linguistic status of ASL, to describe the visual grammar of sign in cinematic terms:

In a signed language... narrative is no longer linear and prosaic. Instead, the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashback and flash-forward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works... Not only is signing itself arranged more like edited film than like written narration, but also each signer is placed very much as a camera: the field of vision and angle of view are directed but variable. (Quoted in Sacks 1990, 90)

Given such a close, homologous relation between techniques used in ASL and film, one wonders why the lexicon of film techniques is not a standard part of ASL poetics. This hesitancy may be due, in part, to the
need to demonstrate that ASL is not simply a collection of iconic gestures but a linguistic system capable of all the symbolic, abstract content of spoken languages. Not only can ASL poetics rest assured that its status as a valid language has been amply proven over four decades of research, but film has itself been thought to possess its own systematic codes and rules, something akin to a visual grammatical structure (Metz 1974). Drawing connections, then, between film and sign does not lessen the grammatical complexity of signed languages; rather, it enriches our understanding of grammar manifested in a visual modality. Further, we may now look to how language artists explore the cinematic properties of sign to produce a heightened visual-kinetic experience for the viewing audience.

An initial breakthrough in the uses of the cinematic properties of manual languages was made by Bernard Bragg. In his early career as an actor in the National Theater of the Deaf, he devised a performing technique he referred to as “visual vernacular.” It is a vernacular in the sense that it appeals to the vernacular codes of the cinematic medium. In clip 5.5, Peter Cook describes Bragg’s visual vernacular technique.

This technique signifies the beginning of exploration into the visual modality; techniques like the visual vernacular represent a clear use of cinematic techniques, and more subtle cinematic techniques also run throughout ASL literature. In what follows, we will inquire into some basic aspects of cinematic techniques and modes of analysis applied to ASL poetry.

At this point, we have drifted so far from the original notion of the line and its phonetic ideology that we must take leave of the written text and seek “a different organization of space”—in this case, a Deaf space. In clip 5.6, Manny Hernandez, an ASL artist, demonstrates the cinematic properties of ASL, offering the beginning of a cinematic lexicon that may be used alongside existing terms from formalist linguistics. The reader is now asked to become more of a viewer, as the following ideas will be presented primarily in ASL.

As Hernandez explains, the modes of analysis developed for spoken and written media do not adequately account for the visual-spatial-kinetic properties of signed languages. However, when one inquires into basic notions of film, there seems to be a greater affinity. In clip 5.6, Hernandez describes three basic cinematic properties that play a role in ASL poetics—camera, shot, and editing. He shows what Stokoe observed decades ago: “[E]ach signer is placed very much as a camera: the field of vision and angle of view are directed but variable” (Sacks 1990, 90). The signer, like a camera, can
produce images from any number of angles (high, low, left, right, so on) and movements, from *panning* across a landscape to *tracking* an individual character through a busy street. In ASL, as in film, the *point of view* of the camera plays a crucial role. Take Flying Words Project’s “Poetry,” for example. When Peter Cook shifts between the painter and the portrait, the position of the camera’s shot shifts: when he shows the painter painting, the camera is positioned as if on the canvas; when he shows the portrait being painted, the camera is positioned from the point of view of the painter. This sequence shifts the point of view back and forth, as is common in film. Thus, when looking at an ASL poem, one may begin to discuss its use of camera techniques—its angles, movements, and point of view.

Within its frame, the camera can capture an enormous variety of shots, which are—like the most basic element of cinematic poetics. Like phonemes, shots are enormously flexible: they are the fundamental and productive components that are woven together to form a visual-spatial-kinetic discourse. The shot is defined as an uninterrupted flow of presentation of the visual field with a distinct beginning and ending. But within a single shot, a variety of perspectives, movements, and compositions may occur, ranging from extreme distant shots (think Hubble telescope) to extreme close-ups (think microscopic flagellating sperm), with the more common distant, medium, and close-up shots in between.

In addition to the varying distances of shots, the length of individual shots provides enormous flexibility. Shots can vary from the split-second visual shards familiar to viewers of MTV to shots that extend over a longer time, such as the excruciating shot in Michael Leigh’s *Secrets and Lies* of the first meeting between a white mother and her adult, mixed-race child she gave up for adoption. Leigh leaves the camera on these two women in an empty coffee shop for six minutes and forty seconds, a shot that seems never to end. Further, shots possess great variability in speed, ranging from slow-motion football catches to fast-forward, such as the accelerated images of city life and junk food–producing factories in the film *Koyaanisqatsi*.

While the individual shot is incredibly flexible and offers a nearly infinite number of possibilities, film cannot truly signify without *editing*, or assembling the shots into a stream of shots. Just as in film, there are numerous editing techniques in ASL. Some of the most basic techniques are *dialogue editing*, cutting back and forth between participants in a dialogue (this is known as role-shift in ASL linguistics); *parallel editing*, cutting between two simultaneous events that take place in separate places; *cut-
away, cutting between two seemingly unrelated shots; and montage, editing images together to produce a visual story.

Many of these cinematic elements are foregrounded in Manny Hernandez’s “Times Squared,” a visual experience of a time-lapsed day in New York City (clip 5.7). The poem begins with what is perhaps the most extreme long shot possible: a cosmic perspective in which the earth is a tiny dot in the corner of the sign-space. Then the camera moves the dot to the center of the screen, and the world rapidly comes into focus. In an intersubjective leap made easy through grammatically laden facial expressions, the viewer actually senses the poet’s approach to earth. This all appears as an uninterrupted visual flow, or shot, reminiscent of contemporary computer graphic capability. Then we cut to a medium shot of the Statue of Liberty and then find ourselves in the midst of Times Square. This initial sequence—from cosmos to Times Square—serves as a series of establishing shots that provide a larger visual context for the ensuing material. We are now clearly situated in a particular place in the cosmos, in a moment not unlike that in James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1964) when Stephen Dedalus realizes that people were all in “different countries and the countries were in continents and the continents were in the world and the world was in the universe” (15). Hernandez’s version of this universal perspective is achieved through an extreme instance of zoom technique, in which we can zoom light years into the Northern Hemisphere and to New York and into a particular site within the city. Manny Hernandez also makes use of variability of speed in “Times Squared” as he moves from the slow motion of a morning in New York City, with a few pedestrians entering the street, cars starting to fill the streets, and the sun rising between buildings, to extreme fast-forward, hordes of pedestrians, cars, and clouds, and then back to slow motion until the sun sets. Taken as a whole, “Times Squared” incorporates a host of cinematic techniques that give viewers the illusion that they are watching film footage. At this point, ASL poetics is poised to explore the phenomenology of the cinematic image to explain how the viewer of an ASL poem registers particular sensations and emotions presented within the text. This is quite easy to do in the work of performers like Bernard Bragg, Flying Words Project, and Manny Hernandez, who consciously exploit the cinematic properties of ASL. But given that ASL has inherent cinematic properties, one should also be able to analyze any ASL poem for its cinematic technique, an analysis that would ultimately lead to a type of viewer-response criticism for ASL poetry.

Take Clayton Valli’s “Snowflake” (1990b), discussed earlier in this chap-
ter. It may be viewed very much as a short poetic film, composed through a sophisticated use of camera work, shot composition, and editing. “Snowflake” opens with a montage of images conveying the passage of the seasons from spring into the barrenness of winter. In what follows, each line presents an individual shot. Specific signs appear in capital letters, and comments about the nature of the shot follow.

1. WINDOW OUTLINE OF WINDOW (close-up)
2. PERSON LOOKING THROUGH THE WINDOW (medium)
3. TREE (medium)
4. TREE FULL OF LEAVES IN TREETOP (close-up)
5. LEAVES FALL (close-up)
6. SLENDER GRASS WAVE (close-up)
7. GRASS WITHER (close-up)
8. NO COLOR; NOTHING; GRAY (this shot is less a specific visual representation than an emotional depiction of a landscape)
9. CLOUDS ECLIPSING THE SUN (long shot)
10. DARK SKY GRAY LAND (again, an emotional landscape shot)
11. SNOWFLAKE (extreme close-up of a snowflake falling in a diagonal path) This image stands out as the first extreme close-up. Previous images of movement involved close-ups of collective movement—leaves falling, grass swaying. Now, for the first time, the camera focuses on a specific element of the landscape. The speed, the energy, and the complementary signs WHITE and BEAUTIFUL foreground the uniqueness of the snowflake amidst a dreary background of gray winter.
12. HEARTBEAT INSPIRES MEMORY NEVER FORGET EYES (close-up of a man startled by the sight of the snowflake that triggers a memory of a young boy and his big blue eyes.) In what follows, the dialogue sequence of a father and a young boy is achieved through dialogue editing of close-up shots.
13. Boy looks at the father with WIDE EYES (close-up)
14. Close-up FATHER TALK TALK showing that he is PROUD of his young boy. He turns toward the boy, asking WHAT IS YOUR NAME LITTLE BOY?
15. BOY SPEAKING: MY NAME IS . . .

GETTING OUT OF LINE II3
16. FATHER; PROUD of his son’s speaking accomplishments. He turns to the boy: HOW OLD ARE YOU LITTLE BOY?

17. BOY SPEAKING: I AM FIVE YEARS OLD (emphasis on the S in years)

18. BETTER NOW! SEE (Father speaking). Now the dialogue editing comes to a close and a single narrator comments:

19. TWO SENTENCES TWO SENTENCES (signifying disbelief that a father would be so proud of such little verbal accomplishment)

20. This shot is a reverse of shot 12, a visual parallel closing the memory flashback. MEMORY to HEARTBEAT

21. SNOW COVERING GROUND DRIFTING AGAINST TREES. (medium shot of the landscape)

22. CLOUD UNCOVERING SUN (long shot; a reverse of shot 9)

23. SUN RAYS FALLING, followed by a single SNOWFLAKE, which melts as it hits the ground.

The symbolism of this ending has been discussed earlier in this chapter and need not be rehearsed now. The point is simply that cinematic description can be applied to ASL poems that are not intentionally cinematic. Valli combines the use of montage of natural images, dialogue editing, and shot composition to make a rich cinematic poem, whether he was conscious of these techniques or not. The techniques are embedded in the visual texture of the language and surface when put to aesthetic use.

Given the inherent cinematic properties of sign poetry, we may begin thinking in new terms to describe the compositional process of the sign poet. What is more, we can begin to muse about the possibilities of the artistic practice of cine-poetics. Who knows what future poetic and cinematic forms could emerge as Deaf poets try to re-create the special effects of a movie like The Matrix while moviemakers re-create the special effects of Flying Words Project’s “Poetry.”

CONCLUSION

Readers more accustomed to the quantifiable, linguistic nature of ASL poetics may find the preceding discussion somewhat unscientific and unsystematic. This is admittedly true: I want to open up the notion of line beyond
the formal line, measured by its number of feet and its accumulation of rhyming patterns, and set the line free to design its own space, to approach the line in its own visual-spatial-kinetic habitat, to view it as a physical extension of the moving body that generates the poetic energies of a poem—and to realize that the models chosen to articulate poetic features such as the line are themselves implicated in a complex ideological framework. We must begin this new poetics, then, by exposing the ideological context of the line-division rhyme and then realizing that in a wider landscape of artistic practices the line is a fundamental structural and aesthetic device. We may follow the poetic line until we encounter a wider visual, cinematic poetics that recognizes that film creates its own forms of poetic lin.

NOTES

1. I, for example, was born with a fully functioning sense of hearing; however, I did not actually become “hearing” until age twenty-one, when I began working as a residential supervisor at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. Once I came into contact with the Deaf world, I began to comprehend the pervasiveness of our phono-centric heritage.

2. See Doug Baynton’s Forbidden Signs (1996) for a history of the repression of manual languages in America. Also, see Harlan Lane’s The Mask of Benevolence (1992).

3. For further inquiry into the history of visual poetics, see Steiner (1982), Mitchell (1987), Drucker (1998), and Frank and Sayre (1988).


REFERENCES


