

Flip-Book & other poems

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Translated from the French by Barbara Beck

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Foreword

As long as I can recall, my sensitivity to images – a colour drawing, a photograph, a film on TV in black and white or in Technicolor at the movies, or, more recently, a digital pic enlarged at the flick of a finger on a smartphone screen – has always been very strong, able as they were to catch my attention twice: formally (through the ever-efficient apparatus that is frame composition) and narratively (through the stories they tell). Albeit in the back of my mind when I started to focus on language as my favoured toolbox, this early responsiveness remained active ever since. In retrospect, I guess it was just a question of time before such a deep-seated sensitivity to images and a growing, compelling drive to express things with words would converge. And indeed they did, following the publication in the early 2000s of my first collections of poems, which were more attentive to the physicality of language itself, as the material in which primary concerns such as the body, identity, or cognition could be sketched out. Over time, the silent distance imposed on to me by images capable of commanding my gaze channelled my expressive urges towards the demands of receiving / describing / translating the visual into the linguistic – which in turn opened up new ways for standing in today's world as a writer, for talking of and amidst it. The three books translated in the present volume are various steps of this on-going journey.

Looking at an image and describing one with words are two different things. The latter of these gestures is shaped by grammar and lexicographic rules when the former is so by ‘naturalized’ conventions. Yet both often give way to reading motifs and discourses whose signification is very swiftly recognized or figured out. So how could we introduce (or reveal) something a bit loose or unsettled in an image, in the gaze we have of it, as if the virtual space-time it assembles out of representations of bodies, landscapes, events or colours, however expected, was always still becoming, was *toujours en devenir*?, as if the sensation of this space-time stood before signification for a few seconds (or longer), and thus opened up various pathways to meaningfulness? The answer this volume offers to these questions is *To write as we see*, more specifically: to take to poetic writing the tools and operations observed up close in cinema and photography—e.g., framing, depth of field, lighting, colouring, editing etc.—and so interrogate the visible (its material history, its shapes, its powers) through the legible (poetic invention), and *vice versa*. How can we see today—the world, the real—through, despite, or even thanks to the proliferation of all types of images: old and secretly active in our intimacy, or new and so numerous out there that they become almost transparent? How can both addressing our fascination with images and resisting the current saturation of our visual field (re-)fabricate some visible? And how can words and poetic narratives be helpful in the attempt? More than a century ago, a teenager from Charleville-Mézière warned us of the reciprocal importance of words for senses. Since then, poetry has often been keen to try itself at *voyance* in many different ways. As a poetic strategy Rimbaud’s general decentring of perception and expression still remains a powerful road map for the epoch, to catch one’s breath in it, to reaffirm one’s resolve, emotionally, intellectually and politically. What makes cinema and photography so close to my writer’s heart is their capacity to show and tell simultaneously. This dialectics – along with the ethical and critical capabilities it affords poet and reader alike – reformulates the tension I grapple with between saying and telling, often seeking to manage the two more or less simultaneously, the better to draw the

many becomings at work in life, bolstering them in the face of neo-capitalist bio-cognitive violence. Deciding to pause our gaze, to choose its rhythm – that of reading – is a resistance.

All the while as I was composing the poems translated here, I was exploring further ways of intersecting writing with other media through the production of CDs of sound-poetry, performative public readings, a DVD of videopoems and various other collaborations with different types of artists. Little by little, capturing codes from other formal languages and then retranslating them into my own vernacular led my work into what I call a *continuation of writing by other means*: an ongoing (re-)learning of writing through seemingly non-literary tools and procedures. Correspondence, adaptations and reappropriations between languages, practices and modalities: it is amidst these gaps / ties that my poetry equips itself and refines its project. My work around the visual is a crucial part of this endeavour.

Although I translated a few of my own poems into English when in Cambridge back in the late 1990s (as well as *The Girl of the Golden West*, the middle section of this volume), the ambition here has been to render as distinct as possible my bet that images can teach us how to write again, and so I am extremely grateful and very much indebted to Barbara Beck, whose craft, sheer talent and generosity have made this book possible. I am delighted to extend my deepest gratitude to her. I am also very appreciative of Nadja Cohen’s in-depth and evocative analysis of the various types of image-poems gathered in the volume.

To Andrea and Keston, my dear friends and colleagues since we first met on an early edition of the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, I want to announce my happiness and pride in joining the ranks of Barque, *et les remercié chaleureusement d’un si bel accueil*.

Jérôme Game
Paris, September 2018

The Porous Boundaries of Jérôme Game's Poetry

Under the influence of images

“Porous boundaries”:¹ it is under this title that Jérôme Game chose to publish a collection of articles in 2007 on the relationship between text and image in French literature. The same metaphor can be applied just as appropriately to his own poetic texts. In the work of this writer with two hats – he is both poet and essayist – critical and poetic discourse respond to each other and collaborate flexibly. Indeed, Game reflects, both in theory and practice, on the phenomenon of poetry ‘overflowing’ into other art forms.

In this, he can be linked to a sensibility in contemporary poetry for which the very notion of ‘poetry’ has become hard to pin down and is ironically all the livelier for it. This is the result of several phenomena: the progressive loss of poetry’s defining features since the 19th century

¹ Jérôme Game (ed.), *Porous boundaries. Texts and Images in Twentieth-Century French Culture*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2007.

(metre, rhyme, verse, fixed forms, specific topics and registers); its leaving the book provisorily advocated by Apollinaire from the beginning of the 20th century and a recurring area of thought on poetry ever since, continued using other means (film, radio, visual arts, dance, etc.) in the contemporary field. Such a migration is facilitated by the extension of what is referred to as ‘poetic’ and this has led to transpositions to all spheres, artistic or not.

These different questions stimulate Jérôme Game. The three books that can be read here in English translation for the first time address, from different angles, the question of poetry’s turning towards images produced using other media. Jérôme Game’s writing draws its material from outside of itself: from photography (*Développements*), film (*Flip-Book*) and contemporary art (*La Fille du Far West*), the poet then writing ‘under the influence’,² following an expression he has a liking for and by which he pays homage to a famous film by John Cassavetes. However, this centrifugal movement is followed in his work by a ‘reflux’³ movement towards the space of the book, allowing us another look at the opposition, deemed simplistic and artificial, between word and image, in order to study more subtly “the ways in which specific works arrange within their formal limits the irreducible internal alterity of their project”⁴

Entitled *Développements* [*Developments*] (2015), the most recent of these works is thus composed of small “block-texts”, verbal photographs inspired by real (but concealed) images taken by the author during a trip to Asia, attributed here to the fictional Benjamin

² See, for example, Jérôme Game, *Sous influence. Ce que l’art contemporain fait à la littérature*, Vitry-sur-Seine, Mac/Val, 2012.

³ Both these terms are taken from an article by Jérôme Game, “In and Out: How Poetry Leaves the Book and is Better for It”, *Poetic Practice and the Practice of Poetics in French since 1945*, a double special issue of *French Forum*, 37:1-2, 2012, ed. by Hugues Azérad, Nina Parish, Michael G. Kelly and Emma Wagstaff, pp. 7-18.

⁴ *Porous boundaries*, op.cit., p. 11.

C., a character from Jérôme Game’s first novel *Salle d’embarquement*.⁵ The book turns itself into a fictional exhibition space, accommodating short texts, types of poetic reprints, which have moreover been the subject of four actual exhibitions since 2015.⁶

Following a fairly similar system, *Flip-Book* (2007) appears to inaugurate a form of generic invention, the poetic flip-book, presented by its author as a “meta-film in which each image/text is a photogram”.⁷ Game thus reminds us that film is a medium and that the same goes for his poetry which he calls a “materialist poetry fully engaging with its *dispositif* aspect”. The paradigm of the “flip-book” preferred here to that of “film” or of “cinema”, underscores at once a tension at work throughout Game’s book between hiatus (a sequence of distinct images) and fluidity (the impression of movement due to retinal persistence). The rival model of cinema remains dominant, however, as is shown, on the peritextual level, by the iconic clapperboard presented on the cover of the original edition, and the closing credits established by the author that list “by order of appearance” the sixteen films evoked in the short book.

La Fille du Far West [*The Girl of the Golden West*] (2012) places these closing credits at its very centre; the work not taking place in an *after* but in a *before* cinema. Instead of writing under its influence, Game here stays prior to the projection, at the stage of ‘desire that remains desire’, using René Char’s elegant turn of phrase. Practising a poetry of the list, the poet in this book in fact selects film titles and technical information which endlessly postpone the projection of the film to come, even if artist Jean-Luc Verna’s work, *Paramour*, to which Game is responding here, can be situated entirely in cinematic fantasy.

⁵ Editions de L’Attente, Bordeaux, 2017.

⁶ Exhibitions ‘Développements’ (Atelier la Source du Lion, Casablanca, April 2015; Friche-La Belle de Mai, Marseille, Sept.-Oct. 2015; Espace A Balzac A Rodin, Paris, Nov.-Dec. 2017) and ‘Frontières/Borders’ (Anima Ludens Gallery, Brussels, June-Sept. 2017).

⁷ Interview with the author (Paris, 17 June 2016, unpublished. *Idem* for the following quotation).

Flip-Book: evanescent visions and poetic sequence shots

Let us look in more detail now at *Flip-Book*, as this book inaugurated very convincingly this writing under the influence of images which the poet claims as his own and which probably served as a model for the two following volumes. Far from being only a thematic element, cinema in fact deeply informs the aesthetics of *Flip-Book* in which the filmic medium allows Game to put syntax to the test (“sequence shot cinema has something to teach me about the sentence”,⁸ he states directly) by inviting him to create a poetics of flow.

The book presents a poetic re-editing of film sequences from the 1970s to the 2000s, drawing essentially on independent cinema, as often American (John Cassavetes, Jim Jarmusch, Abel Ferrara, Larry Clark, Gus Van Sant and David Lynch) as European (Michael Haneke, Philippe Garrel, Philippe Grandrieux and Claire Denis). But the films enumerated by the poet find their merit here above all for the mark they have left in the spectator’s mind and the poetic germination they have created. The book only depicts an oblique, very partial, view of them; Jérôme Game’s interest is above all in the experience of the senses that these images offer to the spectator.

The evanescence of visions and their circulation from one film to another can be explained even better by the fact that the story of different films is often forgotten to make room for evocations of movements, of light and of sensations described precisely and laconically: for example, “Sunlight enters from upper left. The light’s edge splinters the darkness full frame”, elsewhere “The clear water shows them”. Attentive to textures, to colours, to the whole dimension of the senses of the image, Jérôme Game thus depicts Gerry, the hero of the eponymous film by Gus Van Sant, in the manner of a behaviourist:

“His face raw pink lies on the cream-colored leather headrest.” The descriptions sometimes border on abstraction in an evocation of a shot such as: “The two black spots Gerry and his friend move forward slowly in the black blue. Are slowed down. Become iridescent. Freeze. Are suddenly *gerried*.” In the same way, the hero of *Elephant*, whose famous gangling silhouette in a yellow T-shirt, filmed from behind by a long travelling shot in a school corridor, has remained mythical, is depicted by the poet with the same apparent detachment as that of the film-maker: “The yellow adolescent has pink skin, he drinks milk, his soft skin is blond”. The elementary syntax and the paratactic style which place us in the world of minimalism are counterbalanced by the abundant use of qualifiers (“yellow”, “pink”, “soft”, “blond”) which express on the contrary close attention to colours and textures, the sensitive components of the image.

If the plot of the films is placed in the background, it does not mean that it is absent from the book. For Jérôme Game, images from films are always full of story, but he prefers moments of imminence to the spectacular: “Something will take place, something will happen”, he writes in a passage on Reygadas’s film. He doesn’t focus on the climax but on what happens before it (“He’ll go kill the Chinese bookie”), what follows it (“Gerry is lost in the desert [...] his friend is dead”) or on lulls in the action when the violence is absent from the surface but hidden underneath. The importance conferred to atmosphere, to light, to corporeal movement is one of the constants of the book. A certain idea of cinema can be found here, but it is also a way for the poet to effect the passage from one film to another and maintain the cohesion of the whole.

This cohesion is ensured by different linking procedures which give the book a special added layer. I would like to identify further aspects of this by way of a short study of the literary workmanship of the flip-book.

A primary element of the sewing together of the *mashup* forming the book is its American hue. As the poet notes, in *Flip-Book*, “the L.A. machine is in full swing”. Indeed, if the films selected by the author are on the margins of Hollywood in its sense as a standardized system of film production, the city nevertheless remains a powerful pole of

⁸ Interview with Thomas Baumgartner, ‘L’Atelier du son’, *France Culture*, 16 December 2011.

attraction, as thematised in a film like *Mulholland Dr.* which emerges here in the middle of *Chinese Bookie*, thanks to a personal reediting of the films' sequences. This presence is also expressed at a linguistic level because, in the original version of the book, English emerges on many occasions, creating an effect of local colour but also allowing the poet to 'massage [his] French'.⁹ In this, it participates fully in Jérôme Game's poetic project of writing under the influence.

But the book's cohesion is above all ensured by stylistic procedures with convergent effects: the repetition of words, a syntactical tying together and the use of certain stylistic figures which work in different ways to give a unification of the whole, lending an aspect of cinematographic blending to his poetry.

First, on a lexical level, the author resorts to many repetitions and, significantly, the same can be said for the adjective "smooth" repeated insistently, as it offers a key to the author's aesthetic programme. Jérôme Game is in effect looking for fluid linking without collision, in one word smoothness, as can be felt in this passage about the *Chinese Bookie*:

The dancers are putting their clothes back on six of them in a smooth car with black leather that drives smoothly. A big set of wheels starts up smooth geared [...] Ben makes his way smoothly holding his breath across the roofs of houses in Bel Air.

Applied as a filter to the most diverse elements (a car, a type of driving, a clutch, a way of diving), the adjective "smooth" contributes towards the unifying effects sought by the poet, as does his marked use of synaesthesia, the transfer of one quality of an object to another. Hence in *Ghost Dog*, "the pale green speeds and rap music carry Forest along", whilst in *Elephant*, the "sound is white". Pushed to its fulfilment, the synaesthesia sometimes achieves the presentness of the scene and ensures the spectator's immersion. The evocation of a scene from *Mulholland Dr.* thus ends with the involvement of all the reader's

senses: "You can smell the heat, the night is warm, the air still very pearly black like the houses nearby."

On the level of syntax, the search for smoothness in *Flip-Book* finally takes the form of a consideration of the sentence, which works at the same time towards connecting and disconnecting images but above all, it seems, towards a search for fluidity rather than a poetics of collision. In this way, some ungrammatical turns typical of the author (which can also be found in *Developments*) and often indicated by the omission of the relative pronoun in French, can be explained: "I saw Ben's smile is standing straight backstage" and "The light blinds Gerry sees a black car in the distance". It is almost as if these two sentences have collided. Is the poet returning here to the stuttering that characterized his speech as a young performer? Listening to the audio-CD of Jérôme Game reading which comes with this book in its original edition refutes this impression. Jérôme Game provides here, on the contrary, a smooth reading of his text and the model of cinematic sequence shots that he claims for this book would be in contradiction to a poetics of nervous editing.

This fluid reading and the converging effects of meaning mentioned earlier instead give the impression that the author aims to blend his sentences together, as if the writing was working to smoothen itself out but also to capture the rhythm of the cinematic images. Consequently, the title of the book, "flip-book", could be conceived not as an aesthetic model, as the author seems rather to be pursuing a poetics of flow, but as a form of lucidity in the face of the impossibility of linear writing to compete with the model of simultaneity offered by a film shot.

In any case, in the work of Jérôme Game, the text is insistent, or rather – as he also performs his poetry – the verb, whose ability to bear images he relentlessly seeks to release. At a time when poetry is endlessly migrating towards other forms, Jérôme Game is a major voice in a field teeming with poetic practice and reflection at the crossroads of word and image.

Nadja Cohen (FWO / KU Leuven)

Translated by Nina Parish (Bath)

⁹ Interview with the author, op.cit.