frame of mind

tragedy is life in
close up and
comedy, life in
long shot

method / sentiment

Real

October

D W Griffith

Sigmund Freud

from *fox-trot/frame* by Yong Soon Min

LANGUAGE

from Z to A	ART	REVIEW	*talking about* Discourse
language and oppression	POLITICS	FILM	*a woman's voice*
movement as language	DANCE	DRAMA	*from the workshop*

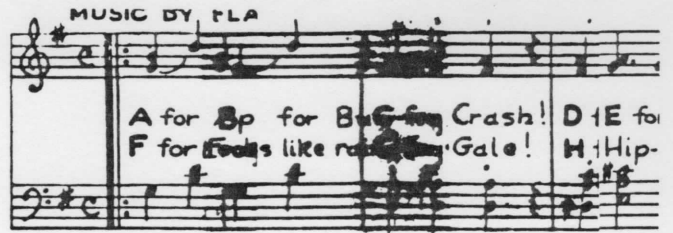### POETRY

the Berkeley Graduate *Poetry Translation Contest*

fragments

of a song sung
some where some time
of a movie seen
some where some time
of a love loved
some where some time
of a life lived
some where some time
of a dream dreamt
s me where some time
of a story read
some where some time

from *fox-trot/frame* by Yong Soon Min.

A VISUAL POETIC

–JOE TORIS–

The artist Yong Soon Min, who works here at the ASUC studio, is a teacher of printmaking. This fact provides us with a possible direction in unraveling the complexity of her installation piece, *fox-trot/frame** p. 521 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College Edition*. Min is fascinated with the potential of the printed page, and especially the printed word, as a poetic and visual entity. This fascination is transformed, through Min's art, into new and adventurous conceptions of language and meaning, conceptions found "on the wall, where the handwriting is, so to speak, spelled out."

fox-trot/frame is made up of approximately 135 two-by-two inch squares, which run the length of two adjacent white walls. The strip on one wall is imagistically rich; The other is a series of mirrors. (We are immediately attracted to the mirrors (the result of a knee-jerk voyeurism?), as they reflect the totality of the environment: the other wall, the other horizontal strip, the gallery, the street outside, ourselves.

But just as every Narcissus needs an Echo, it is the other strip that insists upon a deeper gaze. The title, *fox-trot/frame*, a main entry taken from the dictionary, suggests both the strip's tempo and structure: a slow/rapid dance between "frames." Remaining honest to the text, the frames form a readable continuity. Yet each one can be isolated and interpreted as a unique image/object.

In this way, Min not only reinforces the delimiting visual formula of the text — the dictionary's static, black-and-white, horizontal organization — but also destroys it through fragmentation. This procedure is born out of Min's attempt to create a visual poetic.

The figure of French film director Jean Luc Godard looms behind all of Min's work: *fox-trot/frame* can be seen as an homage to Godard's artistic modus operandi of "method/sentiment." But despite liberal references to Godard's written and filmic work, not to mention other aspects of film medium, Min's piece nevertheless retains the static, non-narrative dynamic of two dimensions. The filmic conceit Min employs, more for its effect than any allegiance to film per se, is that of the mise-en-scene. This technique of juxtaposing static images in order to transubstantiate their meaning is well-suited to Min's framing of images and words.

The frames themselves move logically, though in reverse order, through the alphabet (from Z to A). The information contained in each frame can be a simple statement ("like getting words caught in the eye") or an image, such as that of a unicycle. Many of the portraits and images used in the sequence are pulled from the margins of the dictionary. Their integrity is thus called into question: the unicycle is not merely a unicycle, it is part of the *definition* of the *word* "unicycle." These endless relations between word and image (and image as word, word as image) are explored within Min's framed units.

The dictionary is their most productive reference source. And Min sifts through its implacable pages like an archeologist who has uncovered some dim culture and who must now piece together its array of artifacts. The culture is of course our own; the artifacts our words.

The frame, the fragment, isolates the word and its groupings, imprisoning language in a new context. This contextual shift shatters the utilitarian quality of the word as signifier. The framed-word no longer simply refers to something other than itself—the frame creates a new visual reference in which the word becomes merely an object.

Take, for example, the image/word "lawnmower." Though Min has lifted it from the dictionary, it no longer refers back to either its source, the dictionary, nor to its presumed original index, a "real" lawnmower. Its transmutation into an object has been too radically stated and framed. It can now only be "seen" in this way: as a word-object-image, all in one. But this unification, this "all in one" quality, is achieved by a kind of stripping away, a radical dislocation of what are normally considered to be the constituent elements of the sign. What here can we take to be the signifier? the signified? And where, in these framed images and words, can we find a referent?

Godard's dictum is thus reworked by Min to read: sentiment *is* method. This visual and poetic art is emotion becoming a *thing*. These frames are thus monadic totalizations of a kind of poetic and visual de-struction that, in its analytic method, creates a unity of word, object, image.

Thus Min frames a wider context — a "frame of mind." Her art is concerned with how we structure, and thus "objectify," the external world. Remember the mirrors on the wall? It is now easier to see that they are a kind of phenomenological punctuation point, a natural extension of what the artist struggles to say: " . . . as I speak . . . I limit the world . . . I end it."

FOX-TROT AS FILM

– JAMES SCHAMUS –

The "sequence" from *fox-trot/frame* reproduced on this month's cover is a direct take-off on the famous experiment made by the early Russian film director Kuleshov, in which close-ups of a famous Russian actor were joined with other bits of film in three different segments. The close-ups, as Kuleshov's collaborator Pudovkin later recalled, "were static and . . . did not express any feelings at all." The close-up of the actor's face was followed, at one point, by a shot of a plate of soup, at another point, by shots of a coffin in which lay a dead woman, and again, by a shot of a little girl playing with a funny toy bear.

Pudovkin went on to note that:
when we showed the three combinations to an audience which had not been let into the secret, the result was terrific. The public raved about the acting of the artist. The audience noted his pensiveness over the forgotten bowl of soup, his sorrow over the death of the woman, his light, happy smile at the girl. But in all three cases the face was exactly the same.

Min's adaptation of this editing technique is an elaborate and witty critique of the ways in which film (and other media) manipulate us. Robbed of film's infamous "temporality," the sequence appears to us both in its entirety (beginning and end can be viewed concurrently), and as a kind of poem, to be "read" over time from left to right, from line to line.

The face in Min's sequence is not that of a famous actor, but rather that of a famous director, Sergei Eisenstein, a pioneer of editing technique. So instead of an actor viewing people or objects, we find a director confronted with what are obviously *images*.

And these images all have in common a certain violence, from Duchamp's polemical toilet/artwork to the gun pointed at Eisenstein. Eisenstein is, literally, being assaulted by images. But, as opposed to the film experiment, the main thing we notice about his face is that *it never changes expression*.

And from where do these images come? The last "shot" of Eisenstein pulls away just far enough for us to see what he has been viewing all this time — a strip of film. And, like us, his view is that of an editor: he is not watching a movie but rather contemplating individual images.

The presence of Godard staring at his zerO later on in the piece gives us a hint as to Min's method. Elements from a number of art forms — painting, poetry, film — are forcefully seized and "reduced" until whatever effect they might have had in their own media is stripped away from them, just as Kuleshov's editing technique is found not to "work" on his fellow director Eisenstein's face.

These techniques are no longer methods of communication. Meaning, for Min, cannot be produced in accordance with the rules of grammar — whether it be a grammar of film, poetry, or painting. Godard, when speaking of his musical *A Woman is a Woman*, once quoted Charlie Chaplin's remark that "tragedy is life in close-up, comedy is life in long-shot." Added Godard: "I wanted to film a comedy in close-up."

Min's art is such a comedy — a comedy of words, images, meanings. She zooms in on the words of the dictionary and the newspaper, framing suprising close-ups that casually obliterate Webster's serious efforts at meaning. Min creates new meanings not by a poetry that moves gramatically from one word to the next, not by editing that creates a narrative, but by a minute isolation of signs.

Only here, close up, can one begin to build meaning. As the character Patricia in Godard's *Le Gai Savoir* points out, we are not allowed to start from zero: "it is necessary to return to zero first."

TALKING ABOUT *DISCOURSE*

–JON CRUZ–

The enormous importance of mass media and mass culture and their central role in the constitution of modern sensibilities cannot be denied. Yet this denial takes place inadvertently in two general ways: through fragmentation of fields of knowledge where self-serving blindness masquerades as disciplined thought, or through cant theoretical recipes that embrace some form of philosophic-analytic reductionism, yielding narow explanations that barely succeed in concealing dogmatic paralysis in the face of media and culture.

The attempt to articulate the complex relationship between media and cultural communication, symbolic production and social identities demands theoretical openness, and a commitment to draw upon and go beyond traditional fields of knowledge. This is one of the major tasks which the new journal *Discourse* is attempting to confront.

Sponsored by the Committee on Publications and by the Graduate Assembly, and edited by an interdisciplinary group of Berkeley students and faculty, the journal seeks to establish a new form for theoretical investigations of media and culture. The editors of *Discourse* summed up their project on the introduction of their first issue (of which there are two to date):

Our notion of cultural communication emphasizes the interdependence between the economic relations of production, ideological institutions and expectations, and the production of symbolic forms ... As editors of *Discourse* we seek to explore the connections among various approaches — linguistic, sociological, semiotic, political, philosophic and psychoanalytic — in the belief that all of these enterprises are related and that their respective points of intersection merit further investigation.

In this introductory review I will sketch an overview of the contents in *Discourse* No. 2, the most recent issue, and attempt to illustrate the theoretical flexibility that informs the wide-ranging content that the journal attempts to engage.

Discourse No. 2 opens with a translation of an interview with French cultural and literary critic Roland Barthes, focusing his recent book *The System of Fashion*. The interview brings out Barthes attempt to extend his semiological method to the arena of fashion, where the meaning of fashionable clothing is constituted as a grammar with levels of signification, units of composition and rules of combination that yield a syntax of description.

Bathes' attempt to "write fashion" draws its impetus from analyzing literary texts as a "dialogue of texts within a text." Since literature, for Barthes, is a dialogue of texts, the whole of history is implicated in literary discourse. Furthermore, if language permeates all forms of expression, then fashion only exists through the discourse on it. Although the interview focuses on *The System of Fashion*, there are numerous illuminative references to theoretical aspects engaged by his work in general. The analytic categories of Sausserian linguistics, the relationship between literature and science, the relationship of myth to signifying narration, and the struggle of writing in a bourgeois consumer society are raised.

In "Connotation Reconsidered", Christian Metz engages in a careful reading of Hjelmslev's classic and seminal *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Using the latter text as a springboard to clarify a misunderstanding (which Metz admits to having shared) of Hjelmslev's definition of connotation, Metz attempts to outline a kind of relative autonomy for connotative codes. Instead of understanding connotative codes as simply the form of denotation, Metz asserts that connotation comes about only after it has added its own form onto that of denotation:

The signifiers of connotation possess an autonomous theoretical existence; and only on the material level do they merge into the plane of denotation.

This reformulation of the relationship between connotative and denotative codes is more consistent with the notion of a "plurality of codes" that draw upon, and cannot be easily collapsed into, each other. Thus, in the cinematographic text, it is still necessary to "distinguish between the codes that 'precede' (denote) the perceptual analogy (which is responsible for the impression of resemblance itself), and the codes that 'follow' (connote) the analogy, which presuppose it and superimpose upon it their particular meanings." The plane of denotation, then, has its own primary codes, but in its relationship to connotation, it provides the support for new transformations that

like the period   at the end   of a sentence . . .

close the book!   that as I speak   I limit the world   I end it . . . .

to begin   I must end this talk   that goes   nowhere . . . .

zér