



AESTHETIC OF VIDEO POETRY IN CHUMA NWOKOLO'S "SUDAN SUDAN" BY AL-AMIN EL-NASIR

Mohammed El-Nasir Al-Amin

Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences, Kwara State University, Malete.

Email: elnasir11@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: *Video poetry is an embodiment of literature called 'mediature'. This paper focuses on the new forms of poetry based on virtual reality. This is located in the fields of critical hypothesis, hermeneutics, semiotics, semantics of the text and digital culture. These new forms emerging from the expedition of literature (poetry) and new media are collectively called Digital Poetry. Digital poetry is referred to as E-poetry, short for electronic poetry, meaning a wide range of approaches to poetry that have in common the prominent and crucial use of computers or digital technologies and other devices. This work studies only video poems created to be read on the media accessible online or any video player such as electronic gadget. The paper offers the close-readings of Nwokolo's "Sudan Sudan" one of numerous video poems available on the internet. This paper has been organized around two deeply interconnected approaches: aesthetic and analytic. The first approach judges the "novelty" of the phenomenon within a historical context. The aesthetic approach that is examined on the corpus is fundamental in order to establish a sort of typology of e-poetry and, consequently, to be able to start the analytic work. The aim of the study is on the one hand to highlight the basic features of video poems in order to make them more approachable and understandable as objects of study; and on the other it is to provide those who are interested in this new area of study with a sort of critical analysis of video poetry.*

KEYWORDS: Digital Poetry, Poetic Language, Aesthetics, E-Poetry, Critical Hypothesis



INTRODUCTION

Creative arts are manifestations of an artist's spontaneity. Scholars have agreed to consider poetry to be a spontaneous overflow of emotions. As a branch of literature, poetry mirrors human experience and captures the imaginations of the writer. In the past, poetry was sung by a specialist in the oral traditional setting before evolving to be written in verses, and meters. Aesthetically, poetry is considered to be a compressed detailed account of a writer, in which concrete images and symbols are employed in words to gain its aesthetic values. As the world evolves into a digital and more technological sphere, the conveyance of literary pieces has been influenced in taking a step forward, in its presentation. Though, written poetry is still considered to be the best mode of presentation just like the sung poetry was considered to be, when written was introduced. The development is revealed in the emergence of media poetry which requires additional experts in voice recording, mixing, image decoding and many more. Great informed technicians are sometimes required for editing and review which gives the composer more grounds for creativity.

The paper tends to view poetry from the ambit of emerging technology. It is evident that the video poetry has not gained much ground in the academic sphere but it has on the internet and media outlets. More so, video poetry is a visualized form of poetry composition that gives the readers, now viewers some new experience of poetry through sonic and visual layering. The aesthetics in video poetry are in its mode of presentation such as; musicality, imagery, audibility, symbols, and authorial inference.

The Image of Literature in the New Media

Media convergence and cyber-reality are especially apt points of entry into the work of some of the best-known contemporary writers, not in the least because of their engagement with different media, and especially their digital media presence. The world problematize the notion that digital media spell doom for literature, especially in Africa as opined by Pier Paolo Frassinelli and Lisa Treffry-Goatley in *Digital Media, Literacies, Literature, and the African Humanities*, (2020). They further opined that “for the humanities in Africa, the study of literature, of art, of language and of philosophy were what Europeans exported to their colonial outposts. While others are of the opinion that “African readerships are under siege” by “the cost of books, varying degrees of general literacy, inadequate library services and the seductions of the web and social media” (Ojwang and Titlestad 2014). This is responsible for the decline in form of attention given to “older forms of ‘deep’ and refined literature,” in favor of “visual salience, speed, brevity and the predominance of surface over depth.” In this view, the steady fact and information flow of new media has rendered the pastime of reading fiction, with its effects and “stylistic or literary pretensions to beauteous form, [...] seem evermore superfluous” (de Kock 2015).

Frassinelli and Lisa assert have a similar view towards the decline and marginalization of literature, literary studies, and, more broadly, reading unique to recent discussions about African literature, which they summed thus, “they have become a kind of ritual for some literary scholars, who have taken to equating their own loss of centrality in the academy, as well as that of the study of their preferred expressive forms, with digital barbarism and the looming terminal crisis of the humanities.” Even so, this could be set as a base for preferences. Though, their opinion is expressively subjective as one must move with time.



This is supported by Nicholas Carr's techno-pessimist views on "the effect of the internet on our thought processes," whereby "we touch on ideas and then our attention shifts," to defensively argue "that it is not reactionary or Luddite to stress the importance of sustained and careful reading of literary works" in what is otherwise becoming "a world of browsing." In addition, Lisa corroborates that the South African Nobel laureate John Maxwell Coetzee portrays a world where the yes-or-no binary thinking that he says governs the logic of digital devices "extends further and deeper into our daily existence." As "one can only foresee a further and deeper takeover of mental life among human beings," it is up to the poets" to "keep our children from the single vision of YES or NO" (2016, 1152). In multilingual communication, "speakers are engaged in a negotiation of multiple identities which cut across traditional language boundaries" (Frassinelli and Lisa 2020, 6). The internet, digital media and social media do indeed signal momentous changes.

In addition to the study of written texts and other multimodal expressive forms within their socio-cultural practices Lisa classifies these to; "contexts, conditions of production, and value chains, a social and communicative turn in literary and cultural studies, comparative media studies, or whichever new name we might want to give to this kind of transdisciplinary work," which would entail reconsidering and reimagining its objects of study outside the bases for aesthetic value. This would enable it to open up to a multiplicity of forms, formats, and platforms, genres and categories, media, and modes of production and reception.

The Aesthetics of Video Poetry in "Sudan Sudan".

Philip Mallory Jones and Jennings in *Black-High Tech Documents* (2002), assert that "Iteration, serialism, open structures, fuzzy logic, language design, and interactive media can be a potent combination in the hands of today's artists." This means the development of these new tools is crucial to the development of interactive designs that push the horizon of storytelling and image making in new media. It is a waste of energy and resources to make applications that merely imitate media which exist in other forms such as print, television and radio. For instance, as photography prepared the ground for the moving image, today's video poetry is the forbearer of this age's poetry rendition.

It is evident that the video poetry has not gained much ground in the academic sphere but it has on the internet and media outlets. Furthermore, video poetry is visualized poetry or digitized poetry. It gives the readers, now viewers some new experience of poetry through sonic and visual layering. The aesthetics in video poetry are in its mode of presentation such as; musicality, imagery, audibility, symbols, and many more. The background music helps in the conveyance of meaning. The effect is now like that of a music video and given how the invention of that medium, with its unique point of access and presentation, brought a new audience to poetry. The video poem may be ushering a whole new demographic to poetry. For instance, we have "Reticent Sonnet" and "Sonnet of Addressing Oscar Wilde" by Anne Carson, "Pleasurable complexity" by Thylia Moss, Chuma Nwokolo's "Sudan Sudan" and El-Nasir Al-Amin's "My Dear Friend". In all of the aforementioned video poems are vivid representations of authorial images, vivid mood, tone and atmosphere, readability and viewership, mobility, use of Emoticons, arousal of interest, and many more. This study will attempt the aforementioned aesthetics of video poems and to further explain these points on how video poetry is embedded with visual and literary aesthetics, especially in Chuma Nwokolo's "Sudan Sudan".



Basically, to create poetry using these technologies requires both the patience, creativity and capacities to learn the technology or collaboration with computer specialists. As an artist desiring to explore the relationship of technology and art, it is pertinent to learn the tools. This gives artists a choice, either to develop the technological component themselves, if they have the ability to do so, or to seek knowledge from a computer specialist. Nwokolo must have gathered the pictures or images together while he was composing or after he had composed his video poems. Though, all the images depict an authorial meaning in the video poem, by feeding the audience with his own meaning.

This approach to poetry is a rapidly developing one in the art of literature, marked by the most recent developments in media technology. Illustrating and reflecting the use of languages and sign systems in the symbol machine computer or Smartphone. According to Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the World* (1982), he is of the opinion that; “our writing (Literacy) and our talking (orality) have merged. Our writing is much more like talking then, compared to now where we have to think about texting, email, IMing, to mention but few. Agreeing with Ong’s assertion, Nwokolo has successfully converted his imagination into a literary piece as well as into visuals. The visual aesthetic of the poem is descriptive enough for the viewers to understand the authorial meaning. Also in the poem, there is the use of background music and subtitles which go in line with the tone, mood and atmosphere of the poem.

Meanwhile, the poem also reveals the declining and ruinous beauty of Sudan, which in recent times has ended up in a dilapidated wall of existence, “Your lure has fallen on the souls” (line 2). The video poem does not only paint the picture of a dying nation but describes it in a moving picture. This could be seen in stanza four;

Sudan, Sudan.
You torch your soul again.
Meroe burns again.
Their buried souls have gone and hope.
No man, no woman walks these dunes
but becomes Sudanese.
Arab and Berber. Nomad and Dimka. Tuareg.
- And now, Igbo.

This stanza reveals the agony that has befallen the Sudanese and how the buried souls of the past could possibly be of hope for the living. In this video poem, there is a picture displaying the ruins of a once celebrated country. Though, the poet must have used the media to source for proof or perhaps, he could have visited the country, as evident in his vivid portrayal in an interview. He reveals the condition of his trip to Sudan which is plausible in the poem. He recalls that;



“Although they converse in Arabic I can see from the questions he puts to me that they are in turns suspicious about my security status and what a Nigerian visitor was doing in their town. It is at times like this that you recall that Sudan is at war...”

Nwokolo displays the images of Nomad, Dimka and the Tuareg. Depicting the different tribes Sudan encompasses. As a feature of a video poem, the poem's musicality should be in line with the voice, mood and the atmosphere it conveys. Poetry in video form is an interesting example of how the visualization of poetry can affect perception of its language, and how the material medium of film can work in harmony with poetic mode to create a full poetic experience. This, perhaps, fuses the use of spoken-words, poetry, visual images and sound to create a stronger presentation and interpretation of the meaning being conveyed in the text. According to Look (2012), he suggests that this fusion of image and word create a more substantial poetic experience, than if word was not combined with image or “a synthesis of poetry and film that generates associations, connotations and metaphors neither the verbal nor the visual text would produce on its own” (1). For instance, Nwokolo's video poetry reveals this illustration better, as in the use of sound, image and words (subtitle) to achieve an artistic cohesion in his work. The various images of Sudan and its environment give further information to the poem. Perhaps, for someone who has not been to Sudan or conversant with its historical background, can as a matter of fact vividly have a documented image of it, but not an abstract one like we have in the written poem. Here, the video poetry contributes to the artistic formation of poetic images and symbols.

The style of the video poem is simple as the plot is chronological. It is more of biographical poetry. The language used is simple as well, which is easier to comprehend, though there are connotative meanings in some parts of the poem. Another beauty of the poem is the duration and the concise approach. The video could be viewed in a matter of three minutes at most. Unlike the written that, perhaps, may be boring to some reader's sight. The tone, mood and atmosphere of the poem set a balance to the beautification of Nwokolo's poem. He deploys a background tone which unifies with the visual language to create meaning for the poem. According to Goldsmith (2008), he believes that;

To read any poem as visual art is a grievous mistake and perhaps is the most common misunderstanding. While concrete poetry employs visual means, it's the tension between textuality and visuality that gives the work its punch, making it a successful poetry... although both employ radical idea of speciality, to read them through an identical lens would be an inviting confusion of genres, discourses, and intention” (186).

Agreeing with Goldsmith on this opinion, since video poems for the poet, are like plugging into an amp and having all these interesting effects at your disposal. The power of this array is palpable. Logically, it ought to do for “readers” what MTV did for music. To knock away a whole set of psychic obstacles to the word and image. Technology has made these poems accessible and powerful.



Conversely, in one of Tate's works titled "Text and language" (2018), he asserts that the term "Visual language" or 'vocabulary' are often used to help describe the distinct characteristic of an artist's practice. This analogy with words is apt within the content of modern and contemporary art, since the use of text, written or verbal, has been a significant feature of artistic practice since the early twentieth century". This relates to the visualization of language in artistic works likewise the aesthetics of poetry, that is, how poetry has grappled with its materiality in the past and the future of this relationship between tangible poetic forms and semantics is seen in Nwokolo's poem. Though the poet tries to give an extensive image of his work, not all the images in the written poem can be revealed in the visual. Perhaps, Sylvester Magritte (1992) in his Essay "Words and Images" wrote that "everything tends to suggest that there is little connection between an object and what represents it (212). Magritte is more interested in the relationship between words and the object. This can also be understood in the context of the linguistic terms of Ferdinand de Saussures' *langue* and *parole* in which *parole* refers to the concrete instance of the *langue* i.e. *langue* being the language and *parole*, speech. And in terms of the sign", the sign consists of the form of the sign (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified). The video poem makes poetic language easier to decipher because it shows, sometimes the visual imagination of the author. For instance, Hamilton Finlay's works explore the formal qualities of language through both its visual arrangement on a page, and the context in which it was exhibited, with a particular interest in language and sculpture with nature material circumstance, which can produce different reading of a work, and how the signifying potential of a piece of art or a poem is altered when its material situation is altered, giving visual or concrete poetry ability to stimulate the signifying possibilities of its material aspect in away that other poetic form cannot.

More so, Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" is rejected in the same mode as a single authorial figure is rejected. Here the author is alive to feed the audience with visual illustration which in the end, subjects the meaning of the poem to that of the author. This could be agreed with, as Art Historian James Meyer quotes Mary Ellen Solt (2005), when observing that the visual poetry is a representation or emphasis on the physical material from which the poem is made, that "an object to be perceived rather than read" (21). This statement is reminiscent of the shift within readers to become viewers, then perceivers, projecting a more subjective experience.

CONCLUSION

Digital poetry is a rapidly developing genre in literature, marked by the most recent developments in media technology. From the foregoing, this paper has illustrated and reflected on the use of media language and sign systems in the symbols machine computer and in digital networks and digital poetry denoting creativity, experimentation, playfulness, or even critical exhibition of literary aesthetics. This paper has discussed "Sudan Sudan" by Nwokolo, to depict the multifaceted aesthetics of digital poetry. This paper focused on Nwokolo's use of emoticons and visuals which are vital aesthetic in video poems presentation and how it helps in giving a probable detail of a given poetry. This study has provided us with the conclusion that video poetry is one of the advancement in the field of literary creativity. It has been foreground that literature is aware of new media exposition and how these media are ready to succumb and blend literary aesthetics with technological advancement.



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