



Sign Language Poetry on Screen: A Case Study of Ella Mae Lentz's *Silence, Oh Painful*

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Abstract. Film and videography have played crucial roles in the documentation of performing arts. One such case is of sign language poetry (SLP), which materializes as a phenomenon through the polylogics among different media like visuals and the performing body. The ways of representation within these intersecting language systems of the body, camera, lights, etc. determine how SLP is received. This paper focuses on Ella Mae Lentz's American Sign Language poem *Silence, Oh Painful* as a case study, and analyses multiple performances of it. Lentz's own performance of the poem from her presentation at the *1987 National ASL Poetry Conference* is the primary site of inquiry. In comparison, Alexis Boardrow Green's performance of the poem, for her ASL Poetry Discourse Analysis course at UC San Diego, is examined. Current research aims to study sign language poetry as an intermedial phenomenon, and see how changes in the performing body and its visual representation affect the poem's unfolding in space and time, with focus on Martin Heidegger's concept of poetizing, Yuri Lotman's semiotics, and Lars Elleström's material intermediality. Moreover, the article also probes into how the usage of the two media (video and the performing body) affect the intended artwork. In light of varying performing bodies, the article further questions the autotelic qualities attributed to poetry from a new-critical approach to artworks, and inquires into the possibility of multiple unaffiliated intermedial phenomena branching from similar intentionalities.

Keywords: material intermediality, performing body, sign language poetry, Ella Mae Lentz, autotelic text.

Introduction

All forms of literature produced in sign language, whether it is theatre, poetry, narrative storytelling, or any other, can be defined as performative arts. A clear definition of performative arts has been a point of contestation for academics, but a commonality amongst the various claims “is that they designate the genre as a combination of different art forms presented live in front of an audience” (Ljungberg 2015, 548). A documentation of such performances has been possible through video and film recordings. This paper focuses on Ella Mae Lentz’s ASL poem *Silence, Oh Painful* and compares its two videographed performances. Lentz’s performance from the 1987 National ASL Poetry Conference¹ is analysed in comparison with Alexis Boardrow Green’s performance of the poem² for her ASL Poetry Discourse Analysis course at UC San Diego.

The ubiquity of digital platforms and their consumption has altered the way we engage with and understand literature. “They have modified our aesthetic expectations,” writes Heike Schaefer, “and changed the ways in which literary texts are composed, distributed and read today” (2015, 169). She further proposes a shift in the critical perspective that literature should be seen as produced and experienced in “the different medial constellations,” and not just a liminal product that engages independently with other media forms (170). This argument situates sign language poetry in an intermedial network, a constellation of media, where each medium holds an agency to affect and dictate the constitution of the artwork. In this paper, three main questions are brought into consideration: a) to study sign language poetry as an intermedial artwork, and delineate (some of) the important affective medial interactions that contribute to the manifestation of the performance as a poetic phenomenon; b) to see how changes in the performing body and its visual documentation affect its unfolding before the audience/viewer; and c) to question the autotelic qualities attributed to poetry, i.e. to see if such intermedial performances have the potential to change the very fabric of the artwork. To that end, the analysis is divided into three subsections. The first section focuses on the poet/performer, with a special attention to the usage of their body and how it becomes an expression of their intentionality. The dialogue between the poet/performer and the audience/viewer develops

1 RIT Libraries, dir. 2019. 1987 National ASL Poetry Conference: “Evolution of a Deaf Poet.” Presentation by Ella Mae Lentz. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2DWKc0laAk>. Last accessed 15. 05. 2024.

2 Green, Alexis Boardrow, dir. 2015. ASL Poetry Discourse Analysis Performance: *Silence Oh Painful*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS6EvvBVtCw>. Last accessed 15. 05. 2024.

on a shared intentionality that informs the essence of the poem. It is from this place of commonality that a sign poet attempts to “poetize” (Heidegger 2014) the world as they understand it and affect a similar understanding of the world in the audience. Sutton-Spence and de Quadros confirm the aforementioned idea when they define sign language poetry as “a deaf cultural event where poet, poem, and audience interact, creating a range of potential difficulties that poets and audiences need to work together to resolve” (2014, 556). While this may be a remark for live performances, this three-way interaction isn’t completely lost when the audience engages with the recorded documentations. The primary, if not implied, audience is considered to be deaf, and the ideal poetic effect is based on a cultural and linguistic connection amongst deaf people (556). Because the linguistic choices and embodiment of signs become the “text” of the poetry, every linguistic system gains agency to become a medium to carry meaning in its own right. This type of intermediality is delineated in the second section using Yuri Lotman’s semiotics. The third section probes the two performances and observes the roles and effects of the various media that weave into the fabric of the poems. Language, embodiments, visual renditions, audience receptions, and settings become some of the crucial sites of comparison and critique for the innate nature of ASL poetry to be intermedial.

ASL Poetry as “Poetizing” of Intentionalities

The obvious departure of sign poetry from written poetry is the embodied nature of language. Unlike fixed ideas of form and content, an ASL “text” exists in the body of the performer, as they perform it. These ideas are realized in time with the rendering of the intentionalities by the poet/performer. In phenomenological discourses, we find two crucial moments where the body and language are brought to the centre. Edmund Husserl prioritizes language to thought in *Logical Investigations*, when he opines that what one speaks about [here, sign] can only be translated into experience in the same way in which it is said [here, signed] (Husserl 2002). This is to mean that the way of articulation changes its semantic and connotative meaning, and consequently, the experiences of the speaker as well as the listener. Maurice Merleau-Ponty elaborates on “motor-intentionality,” which emphasizes the active, embodied nature of our interaction with the world, hence bringing the intuitive, shared understanding of the world as a point of departure for communication to be possible (Carman 2021, 43). Martin Heidegger, too, has extensively talked about

this shared understanding and has added the dimension of the audience's, listener's, or reader's role. He claims that for an interlocutor to understand a speaker, the interlocutor must give the speaker uptake. This requisite makes "hearing" a decisive component of discoursing – which Heidegger defines as having four structural components of what is spoken about, what is said, the communication, and what is made known (1967, 206; 1985, 265). "Poetry is a distinctive form of discoursing," Katherine Withy reaffirms Heidegger's view, "because the world that it communicates and so brings us to share is in some sense novel" (2021, 140). Therefore, despite coming from a shared understanding with their interlocutor, and yet being situated in their individuality in the world, the poet speaks from a "novel place."

Both Ella Mae Lentz and Alexis Boardrow Green have their own understandings of the language, culture, and the society they come from. Moreover, their individuality, that is, a varying use of their bodies and language, places them not in exactly the same "novel place" but in several "places." Heidegger's poet speaks "from out of an attunement" (2014, 73), a place unfamiliar to the interlocutors, to attune them to a new world (2014, 123–124). Ella's and Alexis's audiences are also unfamiliar to the world the poet/performers would unfold through their performances. Having gone through that "hearing" (or seeing), the audiences' "house of being," the "system of intelligibility" (Withy 2021, 137), is also modified by the poet's word. This phenomenon, or more precisely, these phenomena, reconfigure the world as the audiences know it, and bring them to a new intelligibility. The poems are experiences that directly affect the audiences and open them up to new worlds in the way they unfold in space and time. But do both these performances unfold in the same way? And if not, do they lead up to form different experiences or affects? ASL signs for the first four lines are translated as (see Figs. 1a and 1b):

KNOWING HE HAS SOMETHING TO SAY
 BUT DON'T KNOW WHAT.
 KNOWING I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY
 BUT DON'T KNOW HOW.

Beginning with Ella's performance, the poem opens with her signing the title of the poem, *Silence, Oh Painful* and her eyes gazing at the audience. She draws their attention to what is to follow. From the start, there is a third person, "HE" established somewhere in the space on her right. While the first line follows her

posture, orientation, and eye gaze towards the third person “him,” in the second line her eyes and head turn to the audience. The first line reveals something intimate to the onlooking viewers. They are not participants in the action, nor are they supposed to see it, but are somehow privileged to be allowed into the private lives of two people in a relationship. The dynamics changes in the second line, when Ella confides in the audience about her helplessness. The right hand is established to be for the other, while the left hand is for the self.

In the next two lines, it is interesting to notice that here the speaker talks about herself. We observe that both these lines are addressed to the audience, as the gaze doesn't shift from the audience after line two. This action secludes the poet and her audience from the lover. This is logical as the monologue is confessional. So, gaze, here, acts not only as a requisite for communication, but also, it enables her to translate her knowledge about her lover to the audience. Not knowing how to communicate to the lover removes her from an understanding of herself. Withy elaborates on nonlinguistic (NLM) and linguistic (LM) modes of discoursing, pointing out that while NLM “makes known first of all how the speakers find themselves, and only through that making known does it say something about something,” “LM... ...say something of some entity, and only through that saying do they make known what matters to the speaker” (2021, 136). The dilemma of a broken communication between Ella and her estranged lover disrupts her attempt to find herself. However, in their thematic alignment, Ella's non-manual signals (NMS) – that act as the counterpart of NLMs – attest to her signs (LMs) and give them credibility. This “supplementarity” (Derrida 2016) further emphasizes and concretizes the intentionality of the poet/performer. Unlike written poetry, where one has to draw from the general mood of the poem, or read for clues to omit or explore alternate interpretations, ASL poetry offers other signifying elements in the form of NMSs to enhance authorial/performer control.

When observing the same lines being performed by Alexis, one finds that she starts talking to the camera, making the viewer the intended estranged lover. Her rendition of the same materials is not a projection of a personal crisis for the non-participant audience, it is rather the crisis itself unfolding on screen. A major distinction between the two performances is that while Ella's version has three stakeholders – the speaker, the absent lover, and the audience – Alexis's version has just two, namely, the speaker and the audience. The audience isn't only pulled into assuming the position of the lover, but is also accused of absence. From the very beginning, a stark contrast can be seen in the “novel space” of poetizing. Consequently, the poetic intentionality also differs.

The next four lines can be glossed as:

LOOKING INTO HIS EYES,
 A WALL FORMS BETWEEN US.
 NO MORE EYES PASSING INVISIBLE WORDS.
 NO MORE QUIET HEART MESSAGES.

Here in the first couple of lines, Ella signs a desperate effort to meet her lover's gaze, to look into his eyes – again, impressing on the viewer the idea that to see is to understand. As the wall forms, her expression falls into disappointment, and she turns to those who would pay attention (the audience, again). As she tries to hold the lover's gaze, her body tilts towards his direction, and it appears as if she is drawn towards him in expectation. But she halts as the attempt fails. A willing gravitation towards him in her body language shows her keenness to leave the place where she is – frustrated, cut-off, and hopeless. Only out of this confinement, a crisis of not being on the same page with her audience or her lover, does her need to express and poetize arise, and she breaks the fourth wall by bringing the viewer in.

The next lines, if studied separately, are cyclical in terms of the times and references they point at. Focusing on Ella's eyes, they both begin with the sign: NO MORE, when she is signing to the viewer. Her face is contorted to show loss that she feels in the present time. But then she turns to the lover, and not only her orientation changes but also her attitude. Here, she reminisces about the past as she signs EYES PASSING INVISIBLE WORDS/ QUIET HEART MESSAGES/ EXCHANGES. The nostalgia on her face, a smile representing her dreamlike musing of the time gone by, ends at the audience again, in a trip from present to past to present. The pain, along with disappointment and a sense of loss, returns to her.

While NO MORE is the state of affairs in the present indicating what is lost in the past, the stare at the people at the end of the lines is again a display of her present condition. The sign that loosely translates “eyes passing invisible words,” shows Ella's hands becoming a two-way road for transportation. The eyes are meant to establish a pathway for the words (invisible as they might be to someone outside their relationship). Similarly, the sign in the next line loosely means “quiet heart messages/ exchanges.” We can notice how the sign for message/exchange looks so much like telegram wires between two stations, Ella and her lover, and becomes a visual metaphor. Not only do the movements for

“eyes passing” and “exchanges” create rhyme, but they also align with the cycle/circular structure of the lines they are contained in.

Moreover, adjectives like “INVISIBLE” and “QUIET” play significant roles. “INVISIBLE” finally excludes the “other” from the sanctimonious intimacy of their relationship and confirms that the primary audience is not the lover; it also reveals a larger truth about relationships and intimacy. Similarly, “QUIET” contrasts with the titular silence. That quietude transcends language to achieve the most honest and intimate communication. The words always remain “invisible” to the viewer because, in order to see, know and understand them, they need to be in the relationship in question.

Ella is not trying to tell an objective reality. She needs the gaze of the lover for those “invisible” words to be interpreted. So, the metaphor of the wall is now extended to the audience as well. And by this extension, she is not only estranged from her lover but also from the world at large. Her loneliness and isolation transcends the liminal space of poetry and delivers an experience of estrangement from her to the audience. There are a variety of emotions that she goes through, from hope to despair, frustration, and hopelessness. Her performance is much more invested, involved, and emotive than Alexis's, doing justice to the idea of the movement between the past and the present.

Alexis's performance, on the other hand, essentially has the same signs, but a very different delivery of them. The facial expressions show little variation from disappointment and resignation. Where Ella, with her switching gazes, exhibits a range of non-manual signals, Alexis seems to narrate with a sense of pre-knowledge. There is no surprise left for her. That makes her signs more of a “talking at” instead of “talking to.” This shift in the attitude leaves little space for the audience/ the lover to respond to her charges.

Contrarily, Ella unfolds her experience as she tries to engage her lover's gaze, and then fails. She turns to the audience to confide every single one of her setbacks. Ella registers her heartbreak. She emotes and expresses, but it is the lover who has shunned himself away. Alexis acknowledges her reality with a stern blankness on her face. The wall seems to have silenced her, and not the lover.

When compared to Ella's energy or intensity of emotive expression, Alexis's emotions are far more subdued. Ella's well-defined flips and switches between the present and the past are marked by her clear changes in body language. When she reminisces, she momentarily seems to be lost in that nostalgia. The viewer can feel it palpable, almost tangible. But Alexis's reserved flow of the body again underlines the weight of her pre-knowledge. She isn't invested in that nostalgia

enough. Her recollections are informed and marked on her face with an ever-pressing assertion of the present, of the loss, of the heartbreak. Even though she smiles, she is sad.

Looking at the different approaches taken by the two performers to deliver the poem, two different intentionalities come to fore. Ella's distinct invocation of the lover in some distant place allows her to confide in the audience, and the "novel place" reveals her situation in having lived an experience in the past that she wants to share with the audience. However, Alexis clings to the same direction, supposedly toward where her lover is, giving an impression that the events described in the poem are happening in real time. The audience finds themselves as witnesses to something uncomfortably intimate, and the whole reception becomes as a stand-in, a role-playing of the absent lover. From being confided about some distant past to being a witness to an accusatory conversation between lovers, a lot changes in the experience the viewer is subjected to.

ASL Poetry and Intra-Linguistic Intermediality

Now that the two performances have been established as leading to different experiences, this chapter will focus/delve into their intermediality. As Irina Rajewsky claims, "designating or not designating a particular phenomenon as intermedial depends on a given approach's disciplinary provenance, its corresponding objectives, and the (explicit or implicit) underlying conception of what constitutes a medium" (2005, 49).

Medium is the agency or means to achieve a particular communication (Berlo 1977). Therefore, when Yuri Lotman says (1977) that a poem is not just a structure or system of signs but a "system of systems," we can assume that linguistic systems like metre, rhyme, rhythm, morphological relations, meaning, etc. also act as media for the poet to create a particular effect in their poetry. These systems exist "in dynamic interaction with each other, an interaction which includes collisions and disparities between them. And this, in effect, is in Lotman's eyes what constitutes the poem as a whole" (Eagleton 2011, 52). Therefore, this engagement of linguistic elements in a poem can be seen as intermedial interactions at an intra-linguistic level.

This intermediality at the structural and systemic level can be substantiated through examples. The lines that follow are (See Figs. 2a and 2b):

TOUCHING HIM,
GOOSEBUMPS ON MY ARMS.
NO MORE TIGHT HAND CLASPS.
NO MORE WARM EMBRACES.

From the start, Ella maintains the right and left side of her body as signifiers for her lover and herself, respectively. Therefore, the interaction between the two characters, and their respective actions, are delineated through the clear demarcation within the same body. Here, Ella's right hand stands for the body of the lover, and she looks in that direction tentatively, with an intention to approach and touch him. In the poem, the narrator moves beyond the visual towards the tactile. And the estrangement of the two lovers is, now, experienced in the tactile realm. Classifiers act as a clear system and interact with other linguistic and NMS components to create the poetic effect.

In ASL, a sign is dependent on the four parameters of handshape, location of hand with respect to body, movement, and orientation of the palm (Lewis 1997, 11). Compared to the spoken languages where phonemes are the smallest unit to constitute a word (a signifier), sign languages have these four elements to depend on. "Change one, and the whole meaning changes" (Lewis 1997, 11). These elements exercise agency in assigning a semantic value to the sign and, by extension, become interconnected systems. Moreover, the paralinguistic features also weave into this network of systems to imply a certain meaning.

A deviation from these intra-linguistic systems of Ella's performance can be observed in that of Alexis. At this point of the poem, Alexis makes a bold change in her classifiers. Till this point, she conforms with Ella's assignment of the left and right sides of her body. But when it comes down to signing TOUCHING HIM, she changes hands. Her right hand tentatively approaches the left – a tentativeness barely expressed on the face or even in the body. A lack of NMS leaves the effects of that touch ambiguous, unlike Ella's touch which gives an immediate reaction of goosebumps, seconded by her expressions and fluttering mouth.

There is more to it than just a syntactic difference. The change of hands creates the ambiguity of who performs the action of touching. If it is the right hand (so far, designated to, and a representative of, the absent lover) touching the left, is it the lover touching the speaker and not the other way around? If so, the whole narrative that the poem constructs to this point is violated. There is a conflict between the system of classifiers that maintain the two personas situated in the same performing body and system of semantics, and the overall narrative of the

poem. As Eagleton emphasizes, “We can examine a particular word in relation to the poem’s semantic system, which is to see it from the standpoint of overall meaning; but we can also locate it within the work’s phonic system or pattern of sounds, its metrical system, its symbolic system, and so on” (2011, 53). In the same way, the system of NMS can be examined for engaging with the signing in varying degrees, and steer towards quite different meanings.

One must recall the difference between the nature of participants/stakeholders in the two performances. Ella engages with the absent lover and the audience, while Alexis merges the audience with the lover. This is one of the most significant differences in their usage of the medium of eye-gaze. In the next lines, Ella furthers delving into the tactile aspects of her relationship. Again, she discusses them within and through the sustained structure of present-past-present, underscoring the loss. Here, she moves her eyes faster between the audience and the imagined persona of her lover. This not only reflects her progress in adjusting between her past and present but also her raised impatience and a foreshadowing of the crumbling structure of their relationship.

Alexis, on the other hand, makes some artistic choices to modify or adapt different signs for HAND CLASPS, and WARM EMBRACES with respect to Ella. Attuning one of the parameters that make up the sign is akin to changing one of the phonemes in a spoken language word. However, it can offer more flexibility and range to articulate an intent through combinations of these variables without a significant loss of overall meaning. Nevertheless, it still affects the content-form gestalt, since poetry emerges from the deliberations among systems functioning as media. Lines 13–16 go as below:

WHEN HE GOES,
HE VANISHES.
NO MORE GETTING LETTERS SIGNED, “LOVE.”
NO MORE SETTING ASIDE THINGS TO SHARE.

This part can’t be seen as the third stage of delineation. What happens when the lovers are not visually and physically together? The word “vanishes” is vital. In the physical absence/non-presence of the lover, his metaphorical absence becomes absolute. The estrangement is existential as when he is gone, she feels his non-existence. The same is clear in her signing with both hands. Here, Ella makes a genial use of the system of classifiers. Her right hand (representing the

lover) and left hand (representing her sense/belief of his existence) mimic the sign VANISH to doubly assert the absence.

When Alexis uses just one (right) hand to sign VANISH, it leaves the protagonist's stance ambiguous. In the process of defining the audience and the lover in the same persona, she does not need to shift her gaze from one to the other. Her choice to consistently hold the lover with her gaze, however, nullifies the absence the whole poem refers to. And here, the medium of sight/gaze conflicts with the thematic system of the poem.

Again, the following lines reminisce about, and add on to, the loss of that love. While Ella chooses to make air quotes and mouth the word "love" while signing an ASL sign for it, Alexis never once opens her mouth in the poem, let alone to mouth words, and chooses to finger spell L-O-V-E. These can be seen as stylistic choices, but they are informed by certain intentional preferences.

Finally, the closing lines are:

WHY?

WHY?

SILENCE.

Here, in the questions, Ella doesn't look at the audience. Her primary, and almost only, concern is the lover she is engaging with. One sees that the different levels of estrangement in the earlier stanzas and the structural uniformity of the NO MORE lines crumble here. But this break in the structure produces the poetic effect of a crescendo. The poem progresses on these medial vehicles of thematic and syntactic media and comes to a transformation at this juncture.

It seems like a last effort on Ella's part. The audience is again secluded from this intimacy. Once again, it's the moment when the public trespasses into the personal. She implores the lover with WHYS. The whole poem and her descriptions trickle down to these questions. Now the audience knows the root of her restlessness and anxiety. She hasn't found her closure. All that she finds is more silence. As Ella comes back dejected from her last call to her lover, and signs SILENCE, a sad smile returns to her face, while she is trying to save face and adjust into a public display of vulnerability.

Rhyme as a medium also carries a lot in the delivery of these performances. Ella's movements for "EYES PASSING" and "EXCHANGES" (lines 7 and 8) create rhyme and an agreement with the cycle/circular structure of the lines they are contained in. But, since Alexis doesn't have a separate audience, she chooses

not to take pauses to address them. That makes her sign lines 7 and 8 without the original pause, making them look more like internal rhymes. The rhythmic medium is used accordingly to cater to both, Ella's and Alexis's, intended audience/s.

Both performances culminate in the single, repeated question: WHY? Ella's questioning looks desperate, inquiring, and expectant. She looks as if she's really waiting for an answer. This is a true end to her engagement in the unfolding of the events. Alexis's whys are more rhetorical. She gives an impression of acceptance, with all having been said and done. All of this binds up justifiably with the tone set from the onset of the performance. The weight of knowledge and lack of surprise renders the speaker and the whole poem hopeless and predestined. Ella's angst transforms into Alexis's melancholy.

Despite being driven by different intentionalities and approximate (yet not the same) "novel places," the two performances show strong networks of linguistic systems that form intermedial relations.

ASL Poetry as Intermedial Artwork

Cleanth Brooks, in his *Heresy of Paraphrase*, talks about the content-form gestalt and claims that the form of a poem is part of the meaning, and cannot be transferred or paraphrased into another form (Brooks 2015). This concept echoes Marshall McLuhan's famous statement "the medium is the message," emphasizing the mediality that informs the construction of meaning and not a "pure message" that is communicated (McLuhan 1964, 23–24).

Bolter and Grusin build on McLuhan's theory, situating the concept of the medium culturally. According to them, a medium co-exists in relation – either of "respect or rivalry" – to other media (1999, 65). Harking back to the previous section of this paper, this cultural positioning of a medium is akin to the formal aspects of poetic language, as posited by Lotman. This is not the first time Lotman has been linked to McLuhan. Though not directly, Marcel Danesi (2008) in his *The Medium Is the Sign: Was McLuhan a Semiotician?*, traces links between McLuhan and semiotics. Now that the formal aspects of the language in the poem *Silence, Oh Painful* have been delineated as intra-linguistic media, the paper shifts its focus on the recorded versions of the two performances as a composite whole.

A filmed version of embodied performances and its viewership is a result of "remediation" in the sense Bolter and Grusin (1999) use the term. Media, like camera, lights, setting, etc., do not only carry the performance over to the

audience; they also enhance and transform it in the process. In that sense, when Walter Ong writes, “adapting a term used for slightly different purposes by Jurij [sic!] Lotman, we can style writing a ‘secondary modeling system’, dependent on a prior primary system, spoken language” (2012, 8), the spoken language is remediated to the written form. Similarly, the live, embodied performances act as media of the first degree, remediated through lights, camera, and digital platforms to their recorded forms into media of the second degree. As Jensen remarks, “in the perspective of communication history and theory, human beings can be understood as media of the first degree (Jensen 2016, 5), whereas, “media of the second degree include various analogue technologies — from printed books and newspapers to film, radio, and television” (2016, 6).

While Ella performs her version in front of a live audience and the camera captures it remotely, aided by the roles of the setting and lights, Alexis performs it to and for the camera. Here, the camera assumes the role of the audience. What travels to the viewer of these two recorded documents is an intermedial endeavour. Besides material intermediality, there are many dimensions to intermediality and a few of them are traced here. One of them is “implied intermediality,” which refers to the instances where the presence or influence of other media forms is not explicitly expressed, but merely felt in implication by the viewer (Rajewsky 2005). For example, Alexis’s performance doesn’t explicitly instate the camera as the lover, yet the audience draws the connection between the shot and the position of the imagined interlocutor, i.e., the love interest. Similarly, a distanced capturing of Ella’s performance in front of a live audience situates the camera somewhere in the audience. Despite being a spectator of the whole phenomenon, the “hypermediacy” introduced by the camera is transcended to “immediacy” by positioning the viewer of the recording alongside the audience (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 20–51).

The two performances also make use of intermedial metaphors, sometimes differently. The relationships among media are metaphorical, and one medium often becomes a vehicle to understand another (Englund 2010, 69–80). The body of the performer as a medium is a metaphor for the bodies of the two personas it narrates about. Both Ella and Alexis embody the two characters of the estranged lovers and become a vessel for them to claim a physicality and express themselves. Commenting on such theatrical bodies, Fensham suggests that they contribute to “a kind of distinctive kinaesthetics that is operating at another level than perception in the sensory apparatus, [and] this movement produces its own distinctive poetics” (2009, 177), which affects the spectator (2016, 40).

She goes on to add that the affective states thus achieved in the audience during a performance “provide an occasion to bring forth an otherwise absent, yet fluid, memory of the bodiliness of life” (2009, 177). Another intermedial metaphor is that of space. Besides being distributed amongst the stakeholders, the space around the performers likens the “horizon of interpretation” (Gadamer 2013) for their intentionalities to manifest.

Conclusion

In the aforementioned discussion, the two poem-performances have been analysed through three approaches towards intermediality – phenomenological, semiotic, and material. Phenomenologically, the performers, Ella and Alexis, situated in their respective “novel places,” articulate their intentionalities through embodiment. It is observed that their motor intentional differences are reflected in the way they perform. Ella’s body orientation, usage of NMSs and space, choice of signs and other formal aspects of language produce a very different effect than that of Alexis’s. The circumstantial presence (and lack thereof) of a live audience also affects the perception and artistic choices. A difference in the nature of interlocutors is clearly observed between the two performances, again dictating a certain kind of dialectical progression across the performance.

Although both Ella and Alexis use ASL and set out to communicate a certain poem through their performances, the network of linguistic systems disrupt and challenge one another in their unique ways and produce conflicts. As a result, quite different poetic effects are produced. So much so, the English gloss of the two performances should be really different. For example, the opening of the two performances would be:

Ella: KNOWING HE HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Alexis: KNOWING YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ... (Line 1)

Ella: TOUCHING HIM/ GOOSEBUMPS ON MY ARMS

Alexis: TOUCHING ME/ GOOSEBUMPS ON HIS ARMS ... (Line 9–10)

Therefore, it can be seen that a change in the performing body is bound to introduce a change in intentionality, especially motor intentionality, and it informs the poetizing of the “unattuned place.”

Lars Elleström echoes Schaefer when he writes, “One important move has been to acknowledge fully the materiality of the arts: like other media, they

are dependent on mediating substances. For this reason, there is a point in not isolating the arts as something ethereal but rather in seeing them as aesthetically developed forms of media” (2010, 11). The ASL performances, as a whole, come to the viewer as “hypermediated” artforms “immediated” for consumption. An interplay of various media, at phenomenological, semiotic, and material levels, add to the oversignification of the produced text and establish them as aesthetic forms of media. “These media within media,” writes Pethő, “produce an intermedial structure that in each case conveys not a sense of infinite regress of signification, [...] but a configuration that conveys paradoxically a sense of immediacy” (2009, 49).

Looking back at Sutton-Spence and de Quadros (2014), it is clear that sign language poetry is a cultural event. But what makes up for the text of that poetry? Between the two (and by extension, many) performances of apparently the same poem, which “novel place,” which structural and linguistic arrangement and which intermedial composition becomes the original poem? Does Ella’s performance, being the original creator of the poem, hold more currency to that of Alexis’s? Should things change if Ella performed in a similar setting with a camera as Alexis finds herself in? Which of the two Ellas would be truer to the poem, then?

A formalist approach to poetry prompts a deviation from authorial intentions. While Roland Barthes (1977) proposes the death of the author by freeing a text from its filial relationship, Sutton-Spence and de Quadros claim that “we consider intention to be as important as close-reading or any other approaches to the appreciation of signed poetry” (2014, 549). Novak (2012) also attests that the intentions and aims of the performer are far more crucial to understand the effects of the poem. The various contingencies of media like intentionalities, body, space, technology, and the audience constitute a more holistic definition of the performer. The research finds that unlike written forms of literature, the filial relationship cannot be ignored in the case of sign language poetry. Therefore, no one performance can be prized over the other as long as it performs the primary function of affecting the audience in a certain way. Sign language poetry performances with seemingly the same origin, and despite sharing a titular identity, exhibit individuality in their form-content gestalts, therefore establishing themselves as texts, i.e., distinct poems in their own right.

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Figures 1–2. Ella and Alexis performing KNOWING HE HAS SOMETHING TO SAY (Line 1).



Figures 3–4. Ella and Alexis performing TOUCHING HIM (Line 9).

