

Howl: A Poetry-Movie Bridging Spontaneous Poetry and Avant-Garde Film

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In the 1950s, McCarthyism, characterized by anti-Communist and anti-foreign policy, was rampant throughout the United States of America. The public recitation of the poem “Howl” marks the beginning of the Beats’ rebellion against McCarthyism. As a successful poetry-movie, the film *Howl* bridged the gap between vision and hearing through a series of diversified presentation forms, such as documentary reenactments, archival photos, and the reconstruction of court trial scenes, thus breaking the boundary between poetry and film. As a kind of displaying the authorship of Ginsberg, the close-up pictures of typewriters repeatedly appear in the film to vividly interpret the Beat writers’ style of spontaneous composition.

Keywords: *Howl*, poetry-movie, typewriter, spontaneous composition

Introduction

In the 1950s, McCarthyism, which was mainly characterized by anti-communist xenophobia, was rampant throughout the United States. As a contemporary replica of the core values of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, such as the Innate Mission and white supremacy, McCarthyism was an extreme expression of the Anglo-conformity value system in the United States. The American public has paid a heavy price for this extreme anti-communist xenophobic campaign instigated by the American authorities. With the authorities’ complete reliance on the state forces to suppress and even erase any dissent against the Anglo-conformity value system, there was a widespread loss of freedom and an unprecedented squeeze and deterrence on the psychological capacity of the people. While the majority of the population went along with the crowd, the Beat writers, together with some pioneering American producers, jazz musicians, and expressionist painters, launched a rebellious movement that refused to join the crowd. Unlike the increasingly conservative modernist emphasis on the principles of unity and coherence, these pioneering artists, represented by the Beat writers,

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generally promoted the postmodernist model of diversity and difference. The public reading of the poem “Howl” at the Six Gallery poetry reading in 1955 marked the emergence of the Beat writers from the underground, thus formally opening the curtain of the Beats rebellion against McCarthyism and the writing of rebellious postmodern poetry texts. Combining the poetic text of the poem “Howl” with its film adaptation, this paper will focus on the theme of typewriter to briefly explain the Beat writers’ concept of spontaneous postmodern creation and explore the effective ways of creative cross-border integration of poetry text and film.

Spontaneous Composition

Beat poets generally held a concept of spontaneous poetry creation, inspired by improvisation at Bebop jazz concerts. In the early 1940s, Charlie Parker and some other young bebop jazz players conducted a series of jazz performance experiments at underground bars in Harlem. As an innovative Jazz genre, Bebop accelerated the expansion of Jazz’s influence to other fields. By the 1950s, “the jazz vanguard catalyzed much activity across the US arts” and “interdisciplinary exchange had become a common motive” (Hrebeniak, 2017, p. 251), which inspired the Beats’ spontaneous creation mode and the American New Film Group’s rejection of Hollywood commercial films.

Because of their close composition ideas, Beat writers generally regard Bebop jazz as an important source of inspiration for their own creation. The improvisation of bebop Jazz completely breaks the tradition of Swing jazz. Whether it is an ensemble or a solo, it has a soul-stirring instantaneous sensuality, which is of great enlightening significance to the spontaneous composition concept of Beat writers. Bebop has provided for them a way to capture the rhythm of life in American society after World War II. An important reason why Ginsberg’s long poem “Howl” is recognized as “suspicious” literature by the American government authorities is that it is essentially a “wild new Bebop jazz prose” (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 253). Kerouac once related his creative skills of prose poetry with expression skills of Bebop: “As for the creative rules of my English poetry, I will write it as quickly as I write prose”, just like a “jazz musician must complete his composition within one theme or several sections” (Berrigan & Kerouac, 1968, p. 70) and Ginsberg called this skill as “spontaneous bop prosody” (Clark, 1984, p. 173).

“Spontaneous composition” is a composition concept first proposed by Kerouac in his famous essay “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”: To break through the obstacles between inspiration and specific creation, “spontaneous composition” means no “selectivity” of expression but “following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement”; it is a sign of the writer’s attempt to realize in the filmic medium the “sketching language”, an “honest, confessional, spontaneous [...] blow (as per jazz musician)” (Kerouac, 1995, pp. 484-485). Ginsberg later defined “spontaneous composition” as “the effort to express, without retrospection or revision, all the relevant points that come to mind” (Miles, 1998, p. 126). Moreover, as “when the thought is good, the art is also good”, the essence of Kerouac’s “spontaneous composition” was summarized by Ginsberg as “the first thought, the best thought” (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 267). According to another important Beat poet Gary Snyder, poetry is the self-presentation of things that “come naturally” (Halper, 1991, p. 125).

Typewriter: An Effective Means of Spontaneous Composition

In terms of means of expression skills, the only way for the Beat writers to achieve the instantaneous

feeling of spontaneity that the bebop jazz musicians could achieve was to write at high speed on a typewriter. In fact, after reading Kerouac's most important long poem *Mexico City Blues*, Ginsberg has taken Kerouac's creation principle of spontaneity as his "model of thinking", "writing fast" without much revision "at the keyboard" with a "cheerful mood" and "spontaneous organization" as "a whole" (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 396). Indeed, Ginsberg once said that, unlike traditional forms of poetry, his method of writing poetry was to "use a typewriter" to express his transient thoughts at the time of composition "in a way that best expresses their actual 'emergence'" (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 260). Specifically, in "Notes Written on Finally Recording of *Howl*" (1959), Ginsberg focuses on the creation of *Howl* as a specific and nuanced practice of spontaneous "quick writing" of poetry: The entire first part of the poem was "frantically printed on a typewriter" in just one afternoon", "letting the messy sentences of abstract poetic beauty and meaningless imagery run through my mind and interconnect" and then comes "true new poetry", which puts the "imprisoned poetry" back into the lines of poetry so that the "spontaneously generated" meaning and thoughts "conceive and create their own form with its own imagery"; Like "Howl", "Sunflower Sutra" was "done without thinking" with "just twenty minutes" (Ginsberg, 2005, pp. 237-239).

Likewise, Kerouac "typed" his masterpiece *On the Road* "in three weeks on a 120-foot-long paper scroll" in April 1951 and then in September he began to rewrite it "in an even more spontaneous form" (Phipps-Kettlewell, 2012, pp. 701-702). Several years later, the Beat poet Philip Whalen recalled Kerouac's creative state during these three weeks:

He would sit—at a typewriter, and he had all these pocket notebooks, and the pocket notebooks would be open at his left-hand side on the typing table—and he'd be typing. He could type faster than any human being you ever saw. The most noise that you heard while he was typing was the carriage return, slamming back again and again. The little bell would bing-bang, bing-bang, bing-bang! Just incredibly fast, faster than a teletype ... Then he'd make a mistake, and this would lead him off into a possible part of a new paragraph, into a funny riff of some kind that he'd add while he was in the process of copying. Then, maybe he'd turn a page of the notebook and he'd look at that page and realize it was no good and he'd X it out, or maybe part of that page. And then he'd type a little bit and turn another page, and type the whole thing, and another page, and he'd type from that. And then something would—again, he would exclaim and laugh and carry on and have a big time doing it. (Kerouac, 2007, pp. 23-24)

In fact, this high speed of typewriting allowed Kerouac to put little thought into the use of punctuation, so that, in both poetry and fiction, Kerouac's works are often passionate and rarely punctuated with dashes as an exception. This is partly because the use of dashes can eliminate the need to consider the logical relationship of the context like other punctuation, but the more important reason is that the dashes seem to show Kerouac's intention to imitate a jazz musician's change of breath after a period of delightful and wholeheartedly improvisation: The change of breath does not involve too much personal thought and consciousness, and the composition before and after the change of breath maintains the true state of improvisation as much as possible.

Typewriter as Authorship in *Howl*

In 2010, *Howl* was co-directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman and produced by 3W (Werc-Werk-Works) Pictures. The film seeks to recreate through visual media the process of composition and publication of Ginsberg's long poem "Howl" and the spiritual world behind it. The film's animation design was created by illustrator/animation designer Eric Drooker. Ginsberg is played by James Franco and Kerouac is played by Todd Rotondi.

The most important central theme of the film *Howl* is to equate typing with Ginsberg's true identity as a writer and presenting this authorship in a dynamic way. In the film's close-ups of Ginsberg typing his poem "Howl" at a breakneck speed, one word after another appears quickly on ink ribbons of the typewriter; immediately; as these words take shape at a breakneck speed, they turned into animated scenes of musical notes, cityscapes, and various degrees of urban frenzy and anguish. In this way, the filmmakers, especially director Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman and illustrator/animation designer Eric Duke intervene directly in the creation of the poem themselves. In fact, as early as 1996, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Howl and Other Poems*, Ginsberg worked closely with Duke to publish *Illuminated Poems*, an illustrated edition of his selected poems. In fact, the film *Howl* features some of Duke's illustrations created for *Illuminated Poems* in an animation form. Later, Duke also published *Howl: A Graphic Novel* (2010) through Penguin Press in the form of a cross-referenced text, which includes not only Ginsberg's poem "Howl" itself but also some stills taken from the film footage Duke himself animated. It is really impressive that there is a series of publications around the poem "Howl" from poetry, film, animation, illustrated text across different media to a circular publishing process. Anyway, in the film *Howl*, the filmmakers interact closely with the poem "Howl" itself, creating animated cartoon imageries through the use of some vivid colors, which are both illustrations of the poem "Howl" and its corresponding polyphonic product. Consequently, *Howl* is a pioneering film that dares to actively intervene in the process of recreating and reinterpreting the poem "Howl": It "captures and suggests the heightened aesthetics of an evocative trip of morphing shapes and shifting associations, using words as tools towards images and felt responses"; moreover, "in giving an abrasively dynamic account of the relationship of the life of the writing (Ginsberg at his typewriter) to the life of the thing written (graphically suggested through phantasmagoric animated sequences)", the film itself also "poetically metaphorizes the processes by which words become films" (Buchanan, 2013, p. 12).

Through the visual presentation of film images, the otherwise inconspicuous clicks of the typewriter as Ginsberg types seem to reveal greater meaning than the mere words written on paper. The film images of Ginsberg's rapid composition of a new poetry through the typewriter have become a mechanism for presenting the poet's contradictory creation states of wildness or anxiety in his real life. This presentation mechanism dynamically demonstrates the close relationship between the poet's poetry creation through the typewriter and the life displayed in the poem "Howl" itself, as graphically illustrated by the film's shifting series of animations. It is particularly noteworthy that the close-ups of Ginsberg's poetic creation on the typewriter seem to have a unique narrative function. Ginsberg's identity as poet is represented by typing scenes, which shows to some extent the more effective narrative function of the film than that of the poem itself.

By virtue of documentary and archival reenactments of photographs or footage, the film *Howl* mainly features Ginsberg's poetic creation through a typewriter, his impromptu reading of the poem at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955, his interview in 1957, and the replay of the San Francisco trial of "obscenity" in 1957 against *Howl and Other Poems*, these scenes changing freely back and forth in the film. The film also creatively uses a long series of animations to represent the visual imagery of the poem "Howl" in a graphic novel style. The visual replay of the scenes and the aural recitation of the poem have a certain unpredictable quality, which seems to be related to the habit of American pioneer artists in the 1950s to enhance their artistic senses and imagination through the use of hallucinogens and other drugs in their creation.

The opening credits of the film begin with a scene of Ginsberg's heated and spontaneous reading at the Six Gallery poetry reading. The film then switches to a close-up of a typewriter with the following caption,

triggered by “meditative jazz” in the fourth line of the poem “Howl”: “In 1955, an unpublished 29-year-old poet presented his vision of the world as a poem in four parts. He called it ... Howl. His name was Allen Ginsberg” (Epstein & Friedman, 2010). The film then switched to an interview with the poet in 1957, and later there was a return to the time of two years ago. At this point, the typewriter reappears and the poet Ginsberg writes the first line of the poem “Howl” through the typewriter: “I see the best minds of our generation being destroyed”. The letters on the typewritten paper immediately turn into musical notes, and then a series of animations: Firstly, a naked animated figure of a crawling man, and then the human figure of the man seem to have a sudden life as he has been inspired and motivated when he hears poet Ginsberg recite this meaningful poetic line in the form of off-screen voice. As a typing figure appears in the animation one more time, the viewer sees poet Ginsberg typing again. In this way, to a great extent the typewriter in the film represents Ginsberg’s authorship.

Indeed, the typewriter is an extreme existence to Ginsberg. He has written clearly in the poem “Howl” that “typewriter is holy”. In a discussion about the creation of “Howl”, Ginsberg once said the “typewriter imagination tells the writer what to write” (Raskin, 2005, p. 167). In a further retrospective account of the poem’s composition, Ginsberg remembers vividly how “the whole first section” was “typed out madly in one afternoon, a tragic custard-pie of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin’s walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines” (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 237).

To Ginsberg, the typewriter becomes a mediator between writing and film: Typed composition is represented as at once spontaneous flow. Ginsberg shared this understanding with other Beat writers, including his friend Jack Kerouac, whose novel *On the Road* (1957) was, famously, written on a typewriter using a continuous roll of paper, which both removed the interruption of the page break and rendered the act of writing, and the writing produced, akin to a continuous reel of film.

As Al Leslie (co-director, with Robert Frank, of the avant-garde film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), starring Beat writers including Ginsberg and Kerouac) once told critic Daniel Kane in an interview:

Pull My Daisy was made in response to Jack’s language. Jack used the typewriter as an instrument. He would sit down, he would get into his state, whether he was high or not, the idea was to get himself free enough to unleash all of those ideas and thoughts, but since he was a speed typist, he was able to pull that stuff out as fast as he could get it all down, and then by having his so-called roll of paper he was able to do it without any interruption. (Kane, 2009, p. 20)

As Kane observes, there is “a blurring of the boundaries between the various mechanisms of typewriter, film projector and saxophone” (Kane, 2009, p. 20).

In fact, for Jack Kerouac writing in the mid-1950s, bookmovie is “the movie in words, the visual American form” (Raskin, 2005, p. 129). The various modes of Epstein and Friedman’s *Howl*—archive photographs, constructed photographs, animation, documentary re-enactment, reconstructed courtroom scenes—become multiple ways of interpreting the “bookmovie” that is Ginsberg’s poem. The depiction of the process of creation (the typing hand/body), which is then translated into the colorful and moving forms of the animated poetic imagery, is an attempt to represent the relationship between word/text and visual/mental picturing. The film also moves repeatedly between the act of writing/typing the poem and its reading/performance by Ginsberg, to audiences that include Kerouac and Neal Cassady: The reading of the poem indeed frames the film, providing its narrative line and temporal progression, though there is also a

continual return to the lines of verse. The different sites and contexts represented in the film are also the various reception sites of the poem “Howl” (Ginsberg’s own “reception” of his typed words, the reading at the Six Gallery, the dissection of the poem in the courtroom). These in turn bear on different modes of mediation in and between writing and film.

In a word, the film *Howl* is not a biopic of Allen Ginsberg, but an exploration of the relationship and transmutation between visual and verbal images. Poetic images mean complexity and multisensory while visual images have been seen to be more limited in their resonances and sensory aspects. *Howl* refuses the implied containment of such a division, intertwining the visual and the verbal. Indeed, the film *Howl* represents a new way to make literature and film encounter as a new media form.

Conclusion

The repeated close-ups of typewriters in the film *Howl* illustrate the spontaneous creative style of the Beat writers represented by Ginsberg. Moreover, as a successful “Bookmovie”, *Howl* breaks the boundary between poetry and film through a series of diverse and creative forms of presentation, such as documentary re-enactment, archival photography/film footage, and reconstructed courtroom scenes, which combine the gap between visual and auditory senses. When poetic language appears in the film in the form of captions or off-screen voice, movies meet literature and contemporary movies consequently show a more fascinating and meaningful depth.

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