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Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd. Sound as Environment in Tom Konyves' Urban Pastorals. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2017, Pastoral Sounds. III.Poetry, Fiction, Film, 14.2 (1), <10.4000/erea.5717>. <hal-02528065>

HAL Id: hal-02528065

<https://hal.science/hal-02528065v1>

Submitted on 25 May 2020

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HAL Authorization



E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

14.2 | 2017

1. Pastoral Sounds / 2. Histories of Space, Spaces of History

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5717>

DOI: 10.4000/erea.5717

ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Electronic reference

Bénédicte CHORIER-FRYD, « Sound as Environment in Tom Konyves' Urban Pastorals », *E-rea* [Online], 14.2 | 2017, Online since 15 June 2017, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5717> ; DOI : 10.4000/erea.5717

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.



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Sound as Environment in Tom Konyves' Urban Pastorals

Bénédicte CHORIER-FRYD

“STOP STOP
Muffle the bell on the animal's neck
That it should not ring
STOP STOP STOP”¹

- 1 What bell rings on the streets of Canadian poet Tom Konyves' urban poetry? What animals graze its city parks? No Arcadian flocks there, yet a pastoral yearning for some form of suspension from the decrees of mortality runs through his lines and his other poetic works. A yearning often muffled by the loud, ironic laughter of the world. No sentimental nostalgia is to be expected from a poetry grounded in the contemporary experience. To approach this kind of poetics it seems fitting to equally de-romanticize the very notion of *nature* and turn to that of *environment*, a more comprehensive one which will allow the reader to explore the pastoral impulse in urban poetry.²
- 2 Tom Konyves is one of the founders of The Vehicule Poets, a group formed in Montreal in the mid-seventies.³ Its main goal was to “[gain] access to the means of production.”⁴ It may be argued that, in “[taking] poetry out of the closet and [putting] it on the buses, in the parks, on the dance floor and in the subway,”⁵ these “off-the-page projects”⁶ did not only participate in the democratization of poetry, they also expanded the environment of the poem (i.e. the page) out to the living environment of the urban dweller. The poetic work absorbed this enlarged environment at the same time as it became an integral part of it.
- 3 Here the notion of *environment* quite literally means *that by which the subject is environed*. The poetry of Tom Konyves is grounded in city life and thus does not fit the conventional mode of *nature poetry*; neither does it flaunt any environmental agenda. But I would like to argue that it evinces what, in their article “‘Images adequate to our predicament’: Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics,” Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard call “environmental thinking” (48). Interestingly, it seems to me that Konyves' poetry meets both of the definitions they oppose – “ecophenomenological” vs. “environmental” poetry.

The first focuses “on poetry’s ability to heighten individual readers’ awareness of their physical surroundings,” with an emphasis on individual experience, while the second does away with the distinction between individual subjects and their environment, “highlight[ing] the instability of the idea of the ‘natural’” and “challenging dualistic constructs like nature and culture” (*ibid*).

- 4 Two of Tom Konyves’ poems in particular offer ground to develop both aspects in turn: first, “Into This Space,” published in 1995 (*Sleepwalking... 129-131*)⁷; then a videopoem, “All This Day Is Good For” (2010).⁸

1. “Into This Space” – the poem as environment

- 5 This poem reads as the evocation of the experience of entering a “space” which, though unidentified, seems to be a house in a suburban setting (a “calm [...] neighborhood”). Its structural principle lies in the repetition of the three words in the title at the onset of each stanza, emphasizing the importance of the physical surroundings. It is representative of a strong sense of place observable in all of Konyves’ poetic production. The poet was recently invited to address his own “perspective on writing the city.” The organizers had encouraged him to “consider other spaces that have engaged [his] sense of writing place into [his] work and other potential socio-cultural, economic and ecological threads that have informed [his] approach to writing Surrey [near Vancouver, British Columbia] and place;” to which he responded:

I live in this “super-suburb” of Surrey and I imagine I was invited to represent a poet’s perspective. My immediate thought was to the famous statement by William Blake, “Where Man is not, Nature is barren.”
[...] I will be expanding Blake’s theory of imagination by substituting “The City” for “Nature.”

- 6 This is a provocative statement resting on an anthropocentric premise. Yet he goes further to say:

Like Blake, I too consider the human imagination superseding nature (“throwing off the temporal,” in his words). How are then poets to negotiate Blake’s precept, “the world of imagination is infinite and eternal, whereas the world of generation is finite and temporal?” If we wish to reflect on our own mortality, one (existential) view could have us empathise with the here-and-now temporality of nature. After the Deconstructionists, we can also no longer pretend that the texts we produce are *transparent*. Therefore, we are more than ever aware that a poem has its *agenda* and we – poets in our natural habitats – are the architects and manufacturers of the poetic expression prevalent and necessitated by “our time.” (unpublished communication)

- 7 In this development the anthropocentric becomes existential, which implies the determining role of the poets’ environment (one might say their “natural habitats”) – the “here-and-now.” The statement gains further complexity when one considers this paragraph from his address “To the Surrealists” in his latest volume *Perfect Answers to Silent Questions* (2015);⁹ from anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism, the shaping role of human perception and imagination appears as preeminent in the poetic process.

Finally, where man is not the haiku is barren. What first appears as a cloud, a leaf, or a breeze enveloping a leaf, can also be a gate, a window, or a path, if you like, to the anthropomorphic image which has one extraordinary quality – it tends to address silent questions with perfect answers, in time revealing the sweet bones of poetry. (16)

- 8 How, then, does the poet reconcile the two premises: 1) that human imagination “supersedes nature”; and 2) that poetic expression is “ecophenomenological,” to use Lidström and Garrard’s word, i.e., necessarily moved by this very nature? To be more specific, and following Blake’s suggestion in his use of “temporal,” nature is to be understood here as the poet and the world’s own mortality. What does Konyves mean, then, by the poem’s “agenda”? How does he “write place into his work,” or rather, how does the poetic voice inhabit its here-and-now? I will try and explore these issues in his poem “Into This Space.”

1.1 A physical space

- 9 The title – repeated in the first line of each stanza – creates a physical space: the building in which light penetrates, followed by “the creator” (a figure of the poet, who “interrupts the silence with a song”), then by “two lovers,” a group of squatters and finally, a set of artists (filmmaker, poet, painter). The artists are among the squatters taking shelter in this “battered building with loose floorboard[s].” There is gambling, drinking, and boisterous partying going on. There is also a lone artist (the seascape painter) whose initial act is a “big bang” that shatters the “frail panes” of the window that had been barring access to the outside world (the “crusted window” in the first stanza). This, however, does not give him access to any natural seascape – instead, his next move is to pull out a large blue cloth and turn to the inside view. The whole stanza reads like Beckettian didascalia (with the two black suitcases whose function is totally de-motivated and whose contents end up in a “pile” on the floor, like so many props on the Beckettian stage), and the painter is left in an equally Beckettian final stasis, “naked, he lies on his back, hands clasped on his chest, eyes open, staring at the ceiling.” The artist is not the contemplator or mediator of nature, instead becoming part of the “space” he has entered and we, readers, are invited into.

1.2. The space of the poem

- 10 “This space” is also the blank following each first line, except in the last stanza which runs uninterrupted; it is the space of the page, the title resonating like an injunction to the reader: “[Come] into this space” – and the reader complying in the openly meta-poetic ninth stanza (“Into this space / you enter alone, bearing your heart, mind and body. The poem is illuminated upon the wall of your mind...”). The poem – the writing on the wall – is now the bearer of fear, shame, and pleasure. In “the poem enters your body as an orgasm” there is no simile (“as” vs. “like”), but the actual, physical impact of the poem.
- 11 Is this a romantic view of the poet as demiurge and the poem as oracular expression of his bond with nature? It seems not, due to the ironic distance and the tongue-in-cheek reference to the poetic movement Konyves himself initiated; in the last stanza, their “vehicle” appears in a comic vision, “a great ark, literally floating above the times”: the “coin-operated vehicle” of the seven Vehicule Poets. As for the “creator[’s]” song in stanza 1, it is not met by any responsive nature, instead falling on the deaf ears of an “unforgiving” environment totally devoid of affect (“no comfort or joy”). Is this Blake’s “barren” nature remaining in and of itself, indifferent to man?

- 12 Where, then, is the ecophenomenological “empathy with the here-and-now temporality of nature?” Perhaps in the discreet presence of a poetic voice, the subject of all perception in this poem; a subject sensing the percolation of water (stanza 2), which “drips mysteriously” and pervades both house and “impenetrable forest.” The “you” listening to the poem in stanza 9 implies an “I,” that is, eyes and ears attuned to the interconnexion of human and non-human spaces, and the confusion of physical and textual space.
- 13 This poem reads like a playful take on a romantic vision of poetic power – it does not propose to reenchant the world (the bard’s song falls on the deaf ears of nature), instead taking a phenomenological approach to what it means to create poetry, and to receive it as experience. This experience is determined by the totality of its environment, yet it is in the most minute details in the physical surroundings (the sound of water dripping its “uneven tap”), those not seen but heard, that the subject becomes aware that the “space” of the poem stretches beyond the walls of the suburban house. This is a night scene, and “light at first penetrates uneasily,” giving preeminence to sounds. The “unknown tree in an impenetrable forest” will be affected by the same rain heard falling onto the house. Yet the poetic power that creates this “space” we are invited into, though fueled by a sizeable amount of booze, food and other stimulants in the poem, is under threat. The house itself, together with its potential “occupants” will be the butt of the political power structure, which will ultimately order its demise (stanza 7); the poetic experience ends with the poet “launch[ing] one final metaphor” before he “disappears” (stanza 8). Or does it? As we saw, stanza 9 introduces the second person singular, and the “you” reinitiates the subversive potential of orgasmic poetry, which allows for the (ironic) apparition of the “seven poets” – the last to “retreat” into this space.

2. “All This Day is Good For”: the poem and the world

- 14 “All This Day is Good For”¹⁰ does away with the distinction between individual subjects and their environment. In this piece, Konyves “highlights the instability of the idea of the ‘natural’” and “challenges dualistic constructs like nature and culture.” The videopoem may be said, following Lidström and Garrard’s terminology, to proceed from “environmental thinking.”
- 15 Videopoetry is a hybrid genre theorized by Tom Konyves in his “Videopoetry: A Manifesto”:¹¹
- Videopoetry is a genre of poetry displayed on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, poetic juxtaposition of images with text and sound. In the measured blending of these three elements, it produces in the viewer the realization of a poetic experience.
- Presented as a multimedia object of a fixed duration, the principal function of a videopoem is to demonstrate the process of thought and the simultaneity of experience, expressed in words – visible and/or audible – whose meaning is blended with, but not illustrated by, the images and the soundtrack.
- 16 I will examine what kind of poetic experience is made possible by this multimedia poetic work, and suggest that the process of thought that sustains it may be called “environmental.”
- 17 The “experience” provided by this videopoem is one of estrangement, as for a brief moment the viewer is taken not *into* but *out of* this place – an urban / suburban park,

identifiable as North American baseball or softball training field. The camera provides a fixed point of view placed in the central lawn of the park, and a gradually accelerating 360° pan produces a spinning effect sustained by the acceleration of the beat in the soundtrack. Halfway through the work, the blue sky turns green, then a deeper blue, then red/orange, filling with unidentifiable moving shapes; in the end the spinning stops, the beat subsides and the park recovers its original appearance. The text component is printed on strips of canvas or crumpled paper and consists in a series of disconnected fragments of what is easily recognizable as so-called “letters from Nigeria” – those scam messages circulating on the Internet, calling for the financial contributions of naïve readers.

- 18 The experience of estrangement is mostly due to the combination of visual and auditory stimuli, the acceleration of the spinning and the intensification of sounds. A familiar suburban environment (the drab, familiar park, the humdrum sounds of urban traffic initially associated with it) together with the fake expressions of human distress (the Nigerian messages) are re-inscribed within what may be called an ironic pastoral. The integration of pastoral motifs in urban settings is a leitmotiv in Konyves' work. The eponymous poem of his 1978 collection “No Parking” opens with the following lines:

To die my hair and live again.
 I am in the middle of things, yet beginning
 over and over
 and over and over. [...]
 To die my hair and live again. I am in the middle
 of things, yet beginning over [...]
 To live again in the middle of things, pastures, a farm,
 a penthouse with skylight streaming with the sparkling stars,
 overlooking New York, overlooking everything
 that has happened between us [...]” (*Sleepwalking* 47-49)

- 19 The pastoral ideal of eternal youth is ironically undermined by the pun on “die” and the sharp contrast between the juxtaposed “farm” and “penthouse” (which contains a potential “hog pen”).
- 20 The videopoem “All This Day Is Good For” operates a transformation that echoes the experience of the subject in the poem “No Parking”: the eye of the camera is placed “in the middle of things” – in the center of a suburban park that soon becomes the timeless center of the universe. Visually, the estrangement is triggered not just by the shifting colors in the sky, contrasting with the tame greenery below, but also by the confusion in terms of scale: there is no telling whether those shapes invading the sky belong to the microscopic or the macroscopic realm. They might as well be organic material viewed through the lens of a microscope as cosmic matter caught in the viewer of a telescope. The viewer is urged to take them in, pressed by the shrill injunctions that punctuate the beating soundtrack. Utter confusion also arises from the bits of texts reading in quick succession, too quickly at times for the brain to register; they are fleeting sketches of human sorrow never allowed to enfold into full-fledged stories.
- 21 In his *Manifesto*, Konyves addresses the functions of such fragmentation:
- If each instance of these fragmentations of meaning causes an impediment to the narrative flow, the act of perception is prolonged and the “suspension of disbelief” becomes a suspension of time. Tension and repose, the “ebb and flow” of narrative and non-narrative moments, may also be interpreted by the viewer as simultaneity made manifest; the perception of multiple meanings within the work.

- 22 Here the narrative element is kept to a bare minimum – the first minute may be seen as an opening of sorts: One calm Sunday morning in the park..., the possible beginning of an urban pastoral. The pastoral, though, is short-lived, and the sense of drama and urgency soon takes over as the text starts appearing and the beat replaces the street sounds. The principle of “simultaneity of experience” is taken to an extreme in the second part of the work, and viewers are placed under the injunction of making sense of the confusion.
- 23 The notion of estrangement is applicable not only to the experience of the viewer, but also to the very process at work in this kind of piece. Tom Konyves calls attention to the process of defamiliarization as constitutive of the genre of videopoetry; in a forthcoming essay entitled “In Retrospect: A Manifesto and its Underpinnings” he writes:
- What is specific to a hybrid form like videopoetry is not what is specific to its elements... Text, image and sound tend to arrive complete-in-themselves, self-sufficient, if you will. For the hybrid form, the specificity, I would suggest, is in the collaborative properties (a more accurate term may be synergistic properties) of the individual elements. In other words, not all texts (a good example would be most previously published poems), not all images (obviously) or soundtracks embody collaborative or synergistic potential. This collaborative property implies an incompleteness, indicating the presence of accommodating spaces in each of the elements. These accommodating spaces become apparent in the linear “time-line” structure of a videopoem. At the point where it is juxtaposed with a textual element, the image may or may not possess a collaborative property to effect a new meaning. Similarly, the text element may or may not have been prepared to collaborate. It is only when a particular text or image suddenly suggests a different, supplementary interpretation from its otherwise clear, original meaning that it becomes a motivated device for “defamiliarizing” its otherwise common, everyday “reading”; that is, it becomes a sign for something else, forced – by intent or chance – to reveal an unexpected association between what is seen, read or heard. (*Poe/Trans/Fi*, forthcoming)¹²
- 24 It is the interaction of text, image and sound that makes each of the components both at odds with the other two and indispensable to the whole. The credits at the close of the videopoem provide some clues towards the analysis of this complex piece: the moving shapes in the sky were drawn from French experimental filmmaker Maurice Lemaître’s 1979 work, *L’Amour Réinventé*¹³; as for the soundtrack, it features the beats of German electronic artist Michael Fiedler, aka Tokyo Tower. The music is styled *musique d’ameublement* – furniture music – in reference to Satie’s conception of music as an integral part of life’s total temporality.¹⁴ Here is how Satie defined this kind of music: “‘Furniture music’ is essentially an industrial product. [...] We aim at establishing a kind of music made to respond to ‘vital’ needs – of which Art is not. ‘Furniture music’ creates a vibration; it pursues no other ambition; it performs identical functions as light and heat – comfort in any shape or form.”¹⁵ This is no music to listen to, in that it cannot / should not be distinguished from its environment; it is not meant to be singled out of it but taken in its stride, experienced together with the rest of the “vibrations” of the physical surroundings and the body of the experiencing subject. In the videopoem, the close connection between the beats of the soundtrack, the pulsing light and fleeting images in the central section, as well as the quick pace of the flashing bits of text manifest this “collaborative or synergistic potential” so central to Konyves’ conception of the form.
- 25 Most interesting is the exclusive use of the visual component of Lemaître’s film footage: the original soundtrack, which featured the artist’s voice uttering prophetic-sounding yet nonsensical phonemic sequences, is replaced with the “furniture music” by Tokyo Tower,

itself mixed in with a city soundscape incongruent with the setting of the piece. In a private correspondence, Tom Konyves explains that he used sounds recorded at a busy intersection of the city to create a counterpoint to the image of the quiet suburban park. He also integrated distinctly incongruous sounds into the shrill electronic baseline: we hear a bell (not a cattle bell, though – a train bell? could it be that of a streetcar – named *Desire?* or perhaps the bell signaling the green light at the pedestrian crossing which opens the work silently, with only the visual countdown?), and two brief soundings of a human chuckle which, once the moving limbs in the sky are identified, may be the throaty voice of pleasure.

- 26 The pulsating, organic beat, the fleeting close-up images of human bodies in the act of love, the pathos of the textual fragments all brought together in the second half of the poem may be the manifestations of a kind of re-enchantment of the initially ironic pastoral motif. This is triggered off, at the core of the poem, by the only textual repetition: “a second chance” (01:30 – 01:38). A second chance for a day that started out with the bleak prospect of the usual drudge – “all this day is good for”? A few seconds into the second part (01:42), the following promise appears on the screen just as the shape of a human hand can be made out in the sky: “I will fly out to meet you.” At this juncture, the meaning of *flying out* expands into the marvelous, literal meaning of its components.

3. “dissolving what had taken form”

- 27 In their article, as they develop their notion of “environmental poetry,” Lidström and Garrard quote Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature*:
- ‘Ecology without nature’ could mean ‘ecology without a concept of the natural.’ Thinking, when it becomes ideological, tends to fixate on concepts rather than doing what is ‘natural’ to thought, namely, dissolving whatever has taken form. Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would thus be ‘without nature.’ (11)
- 28 Two minutes and four seconds into the poem, the rotation is inverted as speed picks up, blurring the image. The sense of urgency increases as does the violence evoked in the text. Meaning dissolves into movement and noise, before everything returns to a stance. Has anything changed between the initial frame of the peaceful spot and the final stretch? At 02:27, the beat has subsided, city sounds have resumed and things seem to have returned to their initial state. No more urgent appeals flashing at the bottom of the screen. But the soundtrack features one new kind of sound that resonates like a bird’s crow – another insistent cry for attention challenging the appearance of peace restored?
- 29 Konyves’ programmatic *Into This Space* led us on the way of the poem as experience, and *All This Day is Good For* encapsulates the intensity and confusion of human experience within a given environment, with the association of familiarity and estrangement in the course of this brief piece. Two of the categories examined by Lidström and Garrard seem particularly useful to apprehend what is at stake in Konyves’ poetic practice: Angus Fletcher’s “environment poem” (Fletcher 13), and Timothy Morton’s “ambient poetics” (Morton 96) – which takes us back to the soundtrack of furniture music. To quote Fletcher, “the environment-poem, a genre where the poet neither writes about the surrounding world, nor analytically represents it, but actually shapes the poem to be an Emersonian or esemplastic circle” (13). Here the heritage of Coleridge looms large, in

Fletcher's reference to the "Esemplastic power of true imagination" (ie the power to shape the diverse into one; *Biographia Literaria*, ch. XIII) – evidently the source of Morton's conception of "natural" thought. In breaking down distinctions in terms of kind, scale, inner and outer environment, Konyves' poetry dissolves all without crystalizing meaning.

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NOTES

1. Tom Konyves, "Sympathies of War," a "poem in performance" published in *Sleepwalking Among The Camels: new and selected poetry* (1995), 55. This is a quote from "Things Prohibited on Shabbat because of Noise" in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law.

2. The sentimental kind of pastoral is to be distinguished from the complex one. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx outlines the opposition between "the complex and sentimental kinds of

pastoralism.” The complex kind, he argues, “manage[s] to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture” (25).

3. Born in Budapest, based in Montreal until 1983, Tom Konyves is one of the original seven poets dubbed The Vehicule Poets; his work is distinguished by Dadaist/Surrealist/experimental writings, performance works and “videopoems”. In 1978, he coined the term “videopoetry” to describe his multimedia work, and is considered to be one of the original pioneers of the form. I would like to thank Tom Konyves for fruitful exchanges and his readiness to discuss his work. More information about Konyves is available at <http://www.tomkonyves.com/>.

4. From the author’s website.

5. *Ibid.*

6. TK, private correspondence.

7. The full text of the poem is also accessible on Tom Konyves’ website: <http://www.tomkonyves.com/intothis.htm>.

8. The videopoem can be viewed online: <https://vimeo.com/17713416>.

9. “To the Surrealists” in “23-Skidoo” (*Perfect Answers*).

10. The videopoem is online at <https://vimeo.com/17713416>.

11. https://www.academia.edu/1479620/VIDEOPOETRY_A_MANIFESTO (2011).

12. In an unpublished communication, Tom Konyves explains: “For a number of months now, I’ve been reading a lot about the Russian ‘formalist’ position in the analysis of (mostly) literary works. It’s strange, but many of their statements resonated with my ideas about videopoetry. As one of the translations of *ostranennie*, ‘estrangement’ is often used (the most accepted is ‘defamiliarization’).”

13. The film can be seen online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZHVyfhE52w>. The footage used by Konyves appear 20 seconds into the film.

14. See the discography of Tokyo Tower at <https://www.discogs.com/fr/artist/495192-Tokyo-Tower>.

15. Translated from a letter by Satie to Jean Cocteau dated March 1, 1920:

« La « Musique d'Ameublement » est foncièrement industrielle. [...] »

Nous, nous voulons établir une musique faite pour satisfaire les besoins « utiles ». L'Art n'entre pas dans ces besoins. La « Musique d'Ameublement » crée de la vibration; elle n'a pas d'autre but; elle remplit le même rôle que la lumière, la chaleur & le confort sous toutes ses formes. » (Arfouilloux, chap. 3).

ABSTRACTS

The poetry of Canadian poet Tom Konyves offers sketches of urban pastoral in which sounds play a central part. They are constitutive of the environments construed by the poems as well as of the poems as environmental forms. Resting on Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard’s conception of “environmental thinking” in the poetic process, this paper looks at two poems (a long textual piece and a “videopoem” – a hybrid poetic form bringing together text, image and sound to produce a poetic experience), and examines the ways in which sounds contribute to create the complex environment of the poem, poised between presence and dissolution.

La poésie de Tom Konyves, poète canadien, dessine une pastorale urbaine où les sons jouent un rôle essentiel. Ils sont constitutifs de l’environnement imaginaire suscité par les poèmes aussi

bien que des poèmes eux-mêmes en tant que formes environnementales. En partant de la conception d'une « pensée environnementale » telle qu'elle est développée par Susanna Lidström et Greg Garrard, cette étude aborde deux poèmes (un long poème textuel et un « vidéopoème », forme hybride qui associe texte, image et son pour produire une expérience poétique) pour examiner comment les sons contribuent à la création de l'environnement complexe et fragile du poème, entre présence et dissolution.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Tom Konyves, vidéopoème, son, pensée environnementale, défamiliarisation, expérience, dissolution

Keywords: Tom Konyves, videopoem, sound, environmental thinking, estrangement, experience, dissolution

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Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd teaches American literature and literary translation at the University of Poitiers. She has published mostly on contemporary fiction, notably on Thomas Pynchon; she co-edited *Thomas Pynchon* with Gilles Chamerois in *Profils Américains*, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée (Montpellier, 2014). An interest in the interplay of poetic schemes and narrative has led to her current research on contemporary poets and artists Fanny Howe, Tom Konyves and Gary Hurst, who all experiment in multimedia poetic creation.