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## POEM (Film Review)

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### Film Reviews

Ralf Schmerberg, dir. *POEM*. DVD. With English and German subtitles, color and black/white, 88 minutes. Trigger Happy Productions and ZoomMedia. Two-disc DVD release, 2004. €69,99. Single-disc DVD release, 2008. €33,99.

*POEM* is the feature-length debut for Ralf Schmerberg, a self-taught photographer and filmmaker known for his music videos of German bands *Die Toten Hosen* and *Die Fantastischen Vier* and his imaginative television commercials. Schmerberg and his collaborator, the writer Antonia Keinz, spent two years reading poetry to determine the final selection of 19 poems for the film project. The concept of creating a film devoted to visual interpretations of poetry was intriguing enough to attract big name actors, including Klaus Maria Brandauer, Meret Becker, Hannelore Elsner, Jürgen Vogel, and Hermann van Veen, as well as camera men who previously had worked with such renowned directors as Werner Herzog, Jim Jarmusch, and Wim Wenders. The rationale behind Schmerberg's choice of poems and the sequence of visualizations in the film is hard to identify, although all of the texts, ranging from Goethe's "Gesang der Geister über den Wassern" to Ernst Jandl's "glauben und gestehen," are linked by themes of love, loss, life, and death. Schmerberg melds his visual interpretations of each poem into a seamless flow of images, broken only occasionally by black screen and shifts in location. Shot by eight different camera men in seven different countries, *POEM* offers an exotic mix of settings matched by the panoply of styles and film stock, with segments of grainy, hand-held camera footage interspersed with vibrant color and somber black and white.

Schmerberg's visualizations are at times incongruous, irritating, erroneous, or astonishing, but there is no doubting his ingenuity and imagination. For the purpose of this review, I will address the visualizations I found either problematic or particularly successful. In the first category, Schmerberg's decision to combine footage of mentally handicapped adults gathering flowers and exploring a meadow with Claire Goll's "Mörder" risks transforming the poem into a tract on our misunderstanding of the disabled. Ernst Jandl's ironic eulogy to his dead relatives, "glauben und gestehen," is recited off-camera in a loud, telegraphic style over the clinking of glasses and conversation at a wedding party, a juxtaposition that empties the text of meaning, while simultaneously rendering the images superfluous. Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger's lovely and moving poem, "Der Sturm," serves as the stimulus for the most subjective and personal images in the film: footage of the

birth and development of Schmerberg's daughter, Elena. Meerbaum-Eisinger's considerable poetic talents were extinguished in a concentration camp, and in that context Schmerberg's paternal appropriation of her words represents another form of erasure.

In contrast, Schmerberg's inspired visualization of Heiner Müller's "Ich kann dir die Welt nicht zu Füßen legen" punctuates the poem's message of love shorn of any sentimental trappings in a literally searing indictment of romantic materialism. In a museum-like showroom luxurious wedding gowns burst into flames one after the other until the entire chamber is ablaze, accompanied by ethereal music and a male voice reciting the text. In another sequence, Schmerberg offers a poignant tribute to lost love in a reinterpretation of Hans Arp's "Sophie" as a father's mourning for his dead child. The singer/actor Hermann van Veen walks through the bleak ruins of a burned house searching for shards of memory. Using black and white film and combining the off-screen voice of a child with van Veen's recitation, Schmerberg creates an emotionally charged ode to love and loss. Although Arp's poem stems from a collection of elegies for his dead wife, Sophie, Schmerberg's reinterpretation works in its synthesis of sound, image, and text.

Schmerberg concludes his unusual and provocative film with a bizarre staging of Schiller's "Ode an die Freude." Filmed in a quarry outside of Berlin, two armies of naked men and women face off in a battle of the sexes that ends in an orgy of red paint and ebullience accompanied by the final chorus of Beethoven's ninth symphony. Once the screen goes black, the viewer is left with a sense of perplexed amusement and a series of questions. What is the relationship between the image and the text? What is the importance of context in literary interpretation? Where is the line between interpretation and appropriation? Does Schmerberg's film inspire greater appreciation for poetry or does the artifice of his visualization dominate the viewer's imagination? With *POEM*, Schmerberg offers a tribute to cinema and poetry guaranteed to elicit a range of reactions—from ire to admiration—from scholars and the general public alike.

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