

Article

# Remediating 'Prufrock'

Scott Freer

Independent Scholar, Leicester LE2 1TN, UK; scottfreer8@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** This article examines remediated examples of T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915). Eliot's innovative dramatic monologue has sustained an enduring inter-media afterlife, mainly because visual artists generally capitalized on the poem's residual Victorian painterly and semi-narrative qualities. Here I look at a wider range of visual forms from old and new media that, for both pedagogic and artistic purposes, remediate the poem's ekphrastic, semi-narrative and modernist aesthetics: the comic strip, the animated film, the dramatic monologue film, the split-screen video poem and the photographic spatial montage. Together, they demonstrate the dialogic and multi-directional nature of remediation and articulate via inter-media strategies various literary properties and themes (e.g., character, setting, visual motifs, paralysis) of 'Prufrock'.

**Keywords:** T.S. Eliot; Prufrock; remediation; comic strip; animated film; split screen; video poem; YouTube dramatic monologue; photographic montage

## 1. Introduction

As I have argued elsewhere, the ekphrastic dimensions (the painterly aspects) of T.S. Eliot's experimental modernist poem are instrumental to its trans-media legacy (Freer 2019). What I term 'reverse ekphrasis' is an artistic extension of 'painting pictures' or the mental visualization of a poem. Unlike the literary form of the novel, poetry does not appear to offer the optimum starting point for a diverse tradition of remediation. Sylvia Plath, in her essay 'A Comparison' (1962), expresses her envy towards the novelist because with the poem "there is so little room [ . . . ] The poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases. [ . . . ] If a poem is concentrated, a closed fist, then a novel is relaxed and expansive, an open hand [ . . . ]" (Plath [1962] 2000, pp. 145–47). However, in the new media age, the form and meaning of literature, in the words of Gunther Kress, are often "realized, 'spread across' several modes" (Kress [2003] 2005, p. 35). So, remediation offers the platform for the 'expansive' opening up of a 'concentrated' form. 'Prufrock' is probably the most popular poem of the twentieth century, which is remarkable given Eliot's use of literary modernist techniques (such as compression and allusion) that are often deemed 'difficult' for contemporary readers. The enduring inter-media appeal of 'Prufrock' has much to do with the poem being a 'semi-narrative' monologue that lends itself to remediation in visual narrative forms. 'Prufrock' is invariably read as the journey (mental or physical) of an alienated male character through a modern city who in the lyrical closure imagines singing mermaids.

This is a follow up essay to 'Screening 'Prufrock'', extending a study of cinematic adaptations to a study of multiple and often amateur and new media forms (Freer 2019). The following examples of remediated 'Prufrock' testify to what Bolter and Grusin view as the ever-expanding spiral of refashioning—media forms appropriating aesthetic properties from other media. This invariably means a trace of older media innovation/s remains in new media: for instance, according to André Bazin, the moving image of cinema is an advancement of photography with regards to realism (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 26). However, Ezra Pound's modernist injunction, 'Make It New!', is a disingenuous rejection of the past for earlier forms linger in new forms: "For our culture, [ . . . ]

mediation without remediation seems to be impossible” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 271). New digital media also recycle and do not automatically ‘replace’ the older ones. For instance, a computer screen layout, in order to create an interactive narrative, may incorporate a montage effect—one that replicates the logic of hypermediacy (a non-linear medium of multiple information sources) (Bolter and Grusin 2000, pp. 55, 221). Dru Jefferies agrees that media history should not be perceived in teleological terms. For example, the use of split screen is synchronously present in the history of silent cinema and the graphic art of comics (Jefferies 2017). In other words, a degree of cultural convergence also exists: “media flow”, as points of departure, overcomes the ghost of the fidelity model (Jenkins 2006, pp. 3–4).

This is relevant to modernist literature that is both the source and repository of experimental art. For example, T.S. Eliot’s use of multiple fractured voices in *The Waste Land* (1922) bears a close resemblance to the cinematic montage of city symphonies, such as *Manhatta* (dir. Paul Strand & Charles Sheeler, 1921). Eliot’s use of ‘the mythical method’, which disturbs temporal orientation by invoking trans-historical parallels, is not only present in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) but also in films such as Powell and Pressburger’s *A Canterbury Tales* (1944) and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (Freer 2007). David Trotter has argued Prufrock’s vision of the mermaid has “something of the magic-lantern show about it” (Trotter 2006, p. 245). And Avishek Parui likens Eliot’s ekphrastic use of the dramatic monologue to “the convergence of neurosis and cinema”—with the self-conscious Prufrock occupying the male gaze and women as the spectacle of fantasy (Parui 2013, p. 9). In other words, remediation is multi-directional, and, in the case of ‘Prufrock’, various refashioning techniques bear a trace of modernist aesthetic borrowings. In fact, some examples are not constituted by content translation but rather embody the aesthetics of modernism.

The following five media examples constitute paradigms of remediation from an ever-expansive list. Each individual artist uses a range of visual strategies from old to new media as a means of responding differently to literary ideas of either character, narrative, setting, poetic imagery, voice or fragmentation:

1. Comic strip (Julian Peters)
2. Animated short film (Christopher Scott)
3. Dramatic monologue short film (Karl Verkade)
4. Split-screen video poem (Jelena Sinik)
5. Photographic spatial montage (Mat Collishaw)

The order is not meant to imply a linear telos—though, what is revealed is a general polarity between the narrative tendencies of the comic strip and animated film, and the indeterminate poetics of photographic montage. The latter, a continuation of the split-screen technique, is more akin to the Lev Kuleshov effect (when the viewer infers meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots) and so pays more respect to the modernist form of Eliot’s poem. Jelena Sinik and Mat Collishaw are less interested in visually resolving poetic ambiguity. Visualizing the printed word is inevitably an act of interpretation, and each visual artist, as we shall see, is wrestling with remediation as an adaptation of both form and meaning. Each artist is also responding to the ekphrastic properties of ‘Prufrock’ (e.g., the metonymic motifs of Prufrock’s zone of consciousness), and in this sense each example of remediation draws on specific potentialities in the poem: e.g., the setting or neurosis of modernity, the dislocated flaneur.

This article does not present a comprehensive study of Prufrockian remediation but nonetheless testifies to the proliferation and variety of inter-media visualizations (whilst also drawing in part on interviews with three of the main artists). With regards to T.S. Eliot’s poetry, probably the first remediation example of a ‘graphic poem’ is Martin Rowson’s *The Wasteland* (1990) which undercuts the hermeneutic quest for a submerged pattern of meaning. For the comic artist, Julian Peters, graphic art remediation is a means of unlocking poetry for a new visual media generation. Animated films that transpose the static visuals of graphic art into a sequence of moving panels also tend to

literalize the ‘mental landscape’ of ‘Prufrock’. By foregrounding the narrative qualities of character and setting, Christopher Scott’s remediation further demonstrates the inter-media parallels between the visual devices of cinema and the comic strip. Despite the fact that Eliot subverts the traditional sense of a specific or fully rounded character and naturalistic setting, most remediated examples found on YouTube are ‘inhabited’ dramatic monologues that render Prufrock into a modern-day archetype. They capitalize on what Conrad Aiken described as a “semi-narrative psychological” portrait (Aiken and Realists 1997, p. 81). They also exemplify new media fandom in terms of identification and performance, and Karl Verkade’s short film perfectly illustrates this. For Hugh Kenner, J. Alfred Prufrock is not a character and we are instead entering into a “zone of consciousness” (Kenner 1960, p. 35). In this respect, Jelena Sinik’s short video poem uses the split screen format to express the fractured poetics of the inner self. And finally, Mat Collishaw’s work adopts the spatial mode of photographic montage in order to defy narrative sequential meaning and to underscore the idea that visualization and conceptualization do not adequately correlate.

## 2. Comic Strip (Julian Peters)

Adaptations of canonical poems in comic book form are not a novelty. With regards to T.S. Eliot’s poetry, probably the first remediation example of a ‘graphic poem’ is Martin Rowson’s *The Wasteland* (1990), and is a rare example, as Brian McHale has noted, of postmodern ‘anti-narrative’ in comic strip adaptation (McHale 2010). For many readers, Eliot’s epic collage poem invites a hermeneutic quest—to decipher from out of the broken images an underlying pattern tantamount to a sequential narrative. As Brian McHale puts it: “Successive generations of readers and critics have willingly assumed the task of recovering *The Waste Land*’s submerged narrative” (McHale 2010, p. 252). In fact, Rowson sees his irreverent parody as a “postmodernist comic book” that by synthesizing film visual quotes with allusions to other Eliot poems, such as ‘Prufrock’, frustrates the quest for narrative completion (Rowson [1990] 2012, pp. 68–73). For Brian McHale, Rowson’s parody is “anti-narrative”, and his analysis shows that various forms of narrative poetic segmentivity interact in this complex multimodal text (McHale 2010, p. 4). In other words, comic books may appear to be a sequential visual art (narrating a flow of events) but can also be analogous at times to the multiple and shifting voices of modernist poetry. As McHale states: “Rowson’s adaptation of Eliot gives us a rare opportunity to reflect a little on the possible parallels between segmentation in narrative poetry and segmentation in comics” (McHale 2010, p. 6). In this respect, comics as remediation, whilst filling in narrative gaps, sometimes exhibit affiliation to avant-garde poetry by also opening up gaps.

Julian Peters is a ‘comic strip’ artist with a particular interest in deploying the graphic form in order to unlock poetry (the most imagistic of literary forms) for “a new generation raised on visual communication” (Peters 2020a). In his book, *Poems to See By*, Peters states that the “primary function of a comic book is usually to tell a story” (Peters 2020a, preface). His comic strip narrativizations of poems are often deployed as a pedagogic tool and his version of ‘Prufrock’ has been remediated into animated film too. Peters’ approach to the visualization of poetry is based on identifying common visual parallels. In an interview, he speaks of poems that “immediately conjure up vivid imagery in my head” (Peters 2020b, interview). Drawn to ‘Prufrock’ as a teenager when an English Literature teacher recited the poem in class, Peters was immediately struck by the opening lines and the “atmospheric street scene [ . . . ] unfurling itself in front of my mind’s eye” (Peters 2020b, interview). For Peters, “the regular repetition of visual elements throughout a comic” can be composed similar to rhyme in poetry (Peters 2020b, interview). Peters also gives credence to the “expressive potential of juxtaposition” or the bringing together of disparate images, and in this respect refers to the lines: “spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table” (Peters 2020b, interview and Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37). This effect in a comic, for Peters, is achieved in “the contrast between successive panels, as well as in the contrast between the words and the images” (Peters 2020b, interview). In other words, Peters creates a semi-narrative through recurring visual motifs, such as Prufrock’s face refracted in a mirror to echo the line “To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). And Peters

interrupts “the more regular reading flow”—the linear pull of the comic strip—by manipulating the reader’s eye across the page in order to linger on certain panels (Peters 2020b, interview). By editing the visual information, in a way that is similar to a film montage editor, or cinematographer in terms of *mise-en-scène*, Peters is able to achieve what he refers to as an “in-between quality” (Peters 2020b, interview). In this sense, the visualization of a poetic image is only half-realized (see Peters 2018).

For Stephen Spender, the opening metaphor in ‘Prufrock’ is ambiguously suspended between “naturalistic” and “symptomatic” imagery—metonymic motifs of Prufrock’s interior world (Spender 1975). The initial simile of “the evening spread out against the sky” is realizable as a mental visualization. On the other hand, the simile or metaphor that hangs on the word ‘etherised’ is ‘symptomatic’ because the ‘patient’ is the “soul” of the city, and in turn the mental-scape of Prufrock “hangs” on this dreamy unrealizable visual imagining (Spender 1975, pp. 41–42). On the title panel, following the epigraph, Peters juxtaposes the opening lines with a literalized image of the etherised patient and below a translation of Guido da Montefeltro’s (from Dante’s *Inferno*) confession (Peters). This way, the panel sustains an ambiguous tension between the ‘naturalistic’ and ‘symptomatic’ reading of the surreal image (see Figure 1). In turn, Peters respects Eliot’s intention to superimpose a vision of hell onto a modern setting that suggests both a metaphysical and living form of paralysis. Generally, YouTube animated comic strips omit the *Inferno* epigraph and instead zoom onto the patient—thus imitating a cinematic effect of close-up and establishing shot.

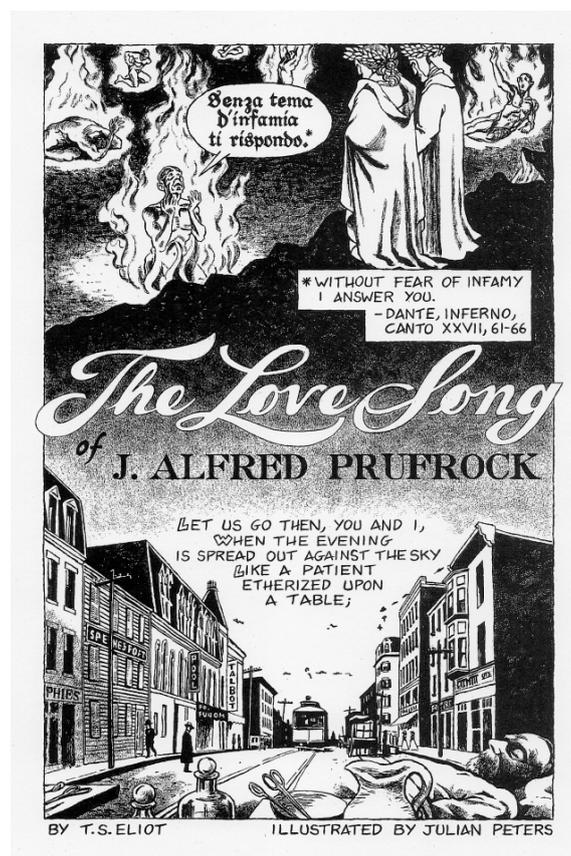


Figure 1. Julian Peters. (See Peters 2018)

Whilst the opening panels respect Eliot’s poetics of paralysis, Peters generally exploits ekphrastic elements of the poem in order to visualize what he sees as “the genteel social setting” of the poem (Peters 2020b, interview). For instance, the fog could be suggestive of Edwardian London, but Peters specifically focused on Boston (Massachusetts) as a specific urban and cultural setting. While a student at Harvard University, Eliot composed the poem, and the autobiographical reading is underscored

with Prufrock envisaged as the poet himself. As Peters puts it: “Prufrock is a stand-in for the poet” (Peters 2020b, interview). In assuming the speaker as the poet, Eliot’s poetics of impersonality are undercut, and the dramatic monologue reverts to a confessional mode and a psychological self-portrait. As we shall see in other examples, this is a typical strategy of visualization: to translate the speaking voice into an identifiable protagonist who inhabits a naturalistic setting. And in rendering the character “stuffy class-conscious” moving through a “claustrophobic” Boston, a certain caricature of Eliot as repressed Puritan is pictured (Peters 2020b, interview). Peters heightens the “melancholic” mood through the use of extreme camera angles that are reminiscent of film noir or German expressionism (Peters 2020b, interview). In other words, there is very much a filmic quality to Peters’ visualization. There are aerial shots that create the impression of a labyrinthine city and low angled and interior shots that invoke the urban Gothic of gaslight melodrama. The anthropomorphized fog, echoing too the opening of Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, further frames the setting with a touch of the Gothic.

So even though poetry does not offer the optimum starting point for successful cinematic adaptation, ‘Prufrock’ is suggestive enough of character, setting and plotline to lend itself to narrative adaptation. Peters also creates a visual narrative out of the poem, by treating the line “Let us go then, you and I” as an invite to a journey (through a mental or physical landscape) that leads to the room where the women talk of art: a “social gathering [that] had only occurred within Prufrock’s head” (Peters 2020b, interview). The single low angled image of stairs to a grand Edwardian door as well as those of Prufrock dressing himself in preparation to the “visit” and the yellow fog that winds its way to a “house” underscores the spatial sequencing of events (Peters 2020b, interview). And by literalizing the “you” as a gentrified lady from the line “Time for you and time for me”, Peters interprets the ‘love song’ as a narrative of frustrated romance and an Edwardian gentleman fraught with neurotic anxieties about women (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). In following panels, words are put into the mouth of the same imagined female, because Peters wishes to depict a “single love interest” (Peters 2019, p. 78). The closing panels showing Prufrock “knocking on the door of the house [ . . . ] anticipating how the social call will play out for him” is framed to suggest that what is occurring “is actually taking place in the protagonist’s mind” (Peters 2019, pp. 74–75). Even though the closing panels depict Prufrock physically returning to the site of ill-fated romance (Prufrock is knocking on the door of the house where the women are “Talk of Michelangelo”, Peters is toying with a ‘semi-narrative’ psychological portrait to also echo the metaphysical dimensions of a Dantesque ‘living hell’ (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37):

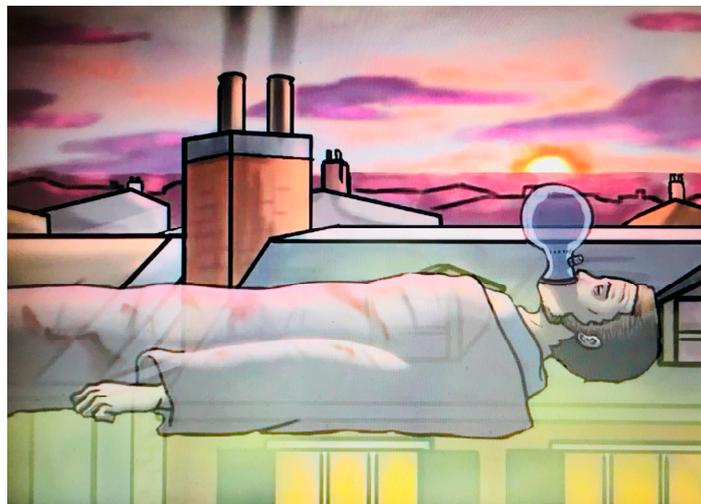
I liked the idea of showing Prufrock stepping through the entrance of the house from an exterior side angle in which only one of his legs is still visible, in such a way as to suggest that he is being swallowed up by the terrifying social event within. However, the relative visual banality of this image seemed not quite appropriate as a fitting conclusion to the comic. In the end, I must say I’m quite happy with the solution I came up with, which was to rotate this last panel onto its side, in a way that Prufrock appears to be falling into the open door of the house, and this refers back to the descent into the underworld alluded to in the poem’s epigraph from Dante. The position of the leg here, by the way, is inspired by the protruding leg of Icarus in Brueghel the Elder’s painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. A reader pointed out in a comment on my website that the vaguely floral design on the wrought iron railing, when set on its side, recalls the shapes of fish. (Peters 2020b, interview)

So, even though the final panel gives closure to an imagined narrative sequence of panels, Peters draws on various visual media to both ‘unpack’ and compress visual-poetic meaning. And Peters’ reading of the last line is similar to Mat Collishaw’s: “One of my readings is that he is awoken from his reveries by the real world, and that awakening from these interior ruminations, plunges him back into the world he is not equipped to dealing with” (Collishaw 2019, interview). Peters deploys a variety of cinematic shots, including the surrealistic rotated shot, to symbolize the going into the underworld that accompanies the re-entry into an artificial one. By giving visual form to Prufrock’s psychodrama, Peters’ comic strip suggests continuity between the modes of paralysis, the mermaid fantasy and unfulfilled male desire.

### 3. Animated Film (Christopher Scott)

Animated film adaptations of ‘Prufrock’ found on YouTube invariably show a moving sequence of still illustrations synchronized with T.S. Eliot’s reading of the poem. In *Comic Book Film Style*, Dru Jeffries details how, despite the inherent aesthetic differences between a lexico-visual medium to an audiovisual medium, the remediation of comic to film foregrounds potential parallels. Edwin S. Porter’s direct adaptations of serialized adaptations represent “an ongoing conversation between the two media” (Jeffries 2017, p. 58). The experimental use of synchronized intertitles replicates and overcomes the limited use of bubble speech. As Jeffries puts it: “remediating comic books’ word-image hybridity represents a return to a pre-classical approach to film style” (Jeffries 2017, p. 59). Whereas Julian Peters’ comic strip visualization demonstrates the creative combination of text and image that exists in a visually static art form, animated film fulfils more the moving visual dynamic of cinema.

Christopher Scott’s adaptation of the poem into a short, animated film for an interdisciplinary thesis (School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University 2011–2012) demonstrates further the dialogic remediation of the printed page into new media (see Scott 2012b). The YouTube video poem is a popular tool for teaching ‘Prufrock’ and has had 158,523 viewings since 9 April 2012 (Scott 2012a). In his thesis, Scott details the production process with regards to the storyboard, timing sheet and animatics. Scott uses an abridged version of the poem, omitting lines 70–87 and 99–110 in order to focus on Prufrock “as a would-be lover” (Scott 2012b, p. 24). Scott has a clear goal-oriented narrative (à la classical Hollywood) in mind: “I want to show Prufrock move from the streets to the party [and] to the sea chamber” (Scott 2012b, p. 1). With T.S. Eliot’s synchronized reading serving as a timing sheet, Scott breaks down lines into individual shots. Scott describes creating “backgrounds for each scene” (Scott 2012b, p. 3). Moving realistic effects, such as smoke from a chimney, are also added prior to implementing an iMovie editing program. Scott uses 8–12 drawings per second and used Audacity to edit the soundtrack with Eliot’s voiceover. Similar to Peters, Scott focuses on ‘Prufrock’ as a character whilst acknowledging the difficulty in transposing a “static character” with a narrative arc: “To combat this lack of action I move Prufrock through different places and times” (Scott 2012b, p. 9) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Christopher Scott. Prufrock as an etherised patient floating above Boston.

Scott’s shot plan that served as a storyboard in many respects is revealing of how the transposition from static graphic image to moving animation is dependent on cinematic aesthetics. There is an “establishing shot: Boston circa 1910”, prior to panning shots across the cityscape and a shot of a house (Scott 2012b, p. 30). In order to establish a character in time and place, Scott further deploys the strategies of classical Hollywood. The exterior shots precede interior shots of the house and close ups of the women talking of Michelangelo “with mouths opening and closing” (Scott 2012b, p. 30). Scott also deploys ‘cut away’ shots to emphasis body parts and to foreground Prufrock’s metonymic

perspective: for example, his small bald patch indicates his ageing anxiety, or the focus on the women's arms or hands suggesting the male desire for women is fractured and repressed.

As Jeffries points out, an irreconcilable ontological difference between comics and film is the absence or presence of sound (Jeffries 2017, p. 53). Whereas Peters' comic strip remediates the textual, visualizing devices of the silent film era, Scott's use of Eliot's reading as a soundtrack parallels the audio-visual synchronicity of the 'talkie'. Furthermore, Scott's emphasis on 'movement'—e.g., so many drawings per second and the sequential movement of Prufrock through place and time—captures more the kinetic dynamism of the cinema.

#### 4. Dramatic Monologue Film (Karl Verkade)

Another example of 'Prufrock' remediation is the dramatic monologue short film, one that involves new media fandom via which a creative reader inhabits or impersonates the role of the character. As Henri Jenkins points out, fan works offer a rich model of multimodal literacy because they "almost always involve the translation of characters, worlds and stories from one medium to another" (Jenkins 2019, p. 84). New media fandom is thus a cultural practice of refashioning—the reproducing of a cultural object in other forms. Performativity and self-expression are also integral parts of new media fandom. This is a means by which fans identify with certain fictional characters and integrate themselves more fully with the text (Lanier and Fowler 2012, pp. 285, 290). As Mark Duffett argues, fandom legitimizes public performance via which the fan with invested passion performs an allegiance of identity—hence the drive to "remake" (Duffett 2013, p. 68). The literary character is an enabling source that unlocks the performance of the self, because it 'speaks to' the reader—it is a role the reader recognizes and wishes to assume. Usually fandom is directed towards objects of popular culture, but, despite its modernist status, 'Prufrock' has become somewhat of a cult fan object that deals with male adolescent themes. This said, 'Prufrock' is very much a male-centered and mock-heroic poem and so any dramatic monologue performance raises questions with regards to masculinity and self-expression in terms of disclosure or non-disclosure. Is the performed inhabitation an extension of the self or a self-effacing means of conveying a diminished masculinity (e.g., Prufrock paralyzed by indecision or depression)?

Probably the enduring appeal of 'Prufrock' is due to Eliot's use of the dramatic monologue, and its transmedia legacy can primarily be put down to certain formal aspects that lend themselves to visualization: character, setting and narrative. However, as Glennis Byron notes, Eliot's modernist treatment of the poetic mode, through inter-textuality and the fragmentation of voice, subverts the traditional sense of a 'specific' or fully rounded character and 'naturalistic' setting: in what identifiable milieu do we place the speaker (Byron 2003, p. 114)? Initial critical reviews, when published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), generally recognize the poem as a 'satirical portrait' and point to its ekphrastic 'observations', whilst lauding Eliot's appropriation of a Victorian tradition, in particular the influential author of dramatic monologues, Robert Browning (for example, 'My Last Duchess' is a poem about the visual medium of a portrait). As Ezra Pounds states: "Mr. Eliot has made an advance on Browning" (Pound [1917] 1997, p. 72). For Hugh Kenner, "Prufrock is strangely boundless", because he "isn't a 'character' cut out of the rest of the universe and equipped with a history and a little necessary context" (Kenner 1960, p. 35). In this respect, new media adaptations reveal new visual possibilities for appreciating Prufrock's mental landscape. As Glennis Byron puts it: "Ezra Pound's experiments with dramatic monologue in *Personae* are primarily the result of his concern to find an appropriate poetic voice through which to speak the self, and right from the start this 'self' is seen as something necessarily fragmented, multiple and shifting" (Byron 2003, p. 113). In other words, adopting the dramatic mask conceals or fractures the expression of selfhood. With this in mind, it is curious that contemporary video poems of 'Prufrock' frequently involve a male person inhabiting the voice of the character as though an actor inhabiting a role. This could suggest an additional distancing mask, but the dramatic persona should also be conceived as enabling self-expression. So, in a way, it is not an original literary character that is being inhabited but a dramatic persona. For Margaret Synder, because

the poem features in English classes for High School, Prufrock has become a “blueprint for modern masculine expression” (Synder 2015, p. 95). In fact, the performative dimension of Prufrock as persona appeals to the rite-of-passage teenager. Both Julian Peters and Jelena Sinik fondly recalled ‘Prufrock’ speaking to them in their teen years. Prufrock is regularly identified as a solipsistic teenager alienated from the social world and self-consciously struggling with issues of self-expression and identity-crisis. Typically, participating in the fandom performance enables the reader to be imaginatively transported to “exotic or ethereal fictional worlds” (Booth 2008, p. 520). Fandom identification with Prufrock, though, is a means of relaying modern-day neurosis.

In a ‘Shmoop’ YouTube video for educating students, ‘Prufrock’ is comically visualized as a poem of masculine crisis, focusing on the character’s body image (e.g., hair loss and skinny limbs) whilst he seemingly frets about his “wimpiness”. The short pedagogic video also poses the question: “Why does J. Alfred Prufrock not tell his love how he feels? Is it unrequited love, self-loathing or does he feel lost?” (Shmoop University, Inc. 2013). The implication is that the ‘love song’ is an indirect kind of confession of a single male. In ‘The American Conservative’, Prufrock is a byword for: “the wince-inducing incompetence of single men today”, or “Millennials who prefer to cohabit and forgo families” or “phone-addicted insular iGens” (Meyrat 2018). Invariably, short films found on YouTube treat the poem in this fashion: a caricature of self-conscious masculinity. The example by Jones and Spears (2014) is ambiguously comical, with the wearing of theatrical masks to indicate either multiple selves or the performative solipsism of Prufrock (Jones and Spears 2014). The general trend amongst short films for school projects is a self-portrait of a depressed, lonely teen in a naturalistic setting. A student’s black and white short film example uses a voice over to imply interior monologue, and the ending conveys a bleak sense of future rather than a regretful past. The film closes with an individual returning to a teenager’s bedsit (Samples 2012). Occasionally, the person who occupies the Prufrock role is a disengaged middle-aged male (Miller). In this example, the Prufrockian type is for most of the time a silent observer. There is a series of stills and little sense of movement, to imply a lack of psychological or physical journeying. In a restaurant scene, the male sits alone and from his point of view we see people conversing around a table, to suggest a parallel between superficial social chat and the “Talking of Michelangelo” lines in the poem. The film deploys time cuts too: from the Prufrockian male daydreaming in a bath to a beach (echoing the mermaid vision) and returning to Prufrock staring at banal life, reading a book and women chatting. The words, “That is not what I meant, at all”, reverberate, suggesting an inability for the male to directly express an interior life (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 41).

*A Lovesong*, shot in New York and directed by Laura Scrivano and featuring the actor Daniel Henshall, best exemplifies how short films remediate ‘Prufrock’ into a ‘psychological portrait of a neurotic man’. The film itself is described as: a “solitary man [who] wanders the streets of a city, restless with indecision. As he tumbles down a rabbit hole of seedy bars, half deserted streets and shots of whiskey, time fractures—and it seems he might be destined to walk these streets forever” (Henshall 2016). The project, in fact arose, from Henshall’s own fascination with the poem, and his performance is described as “pensive, brooding and hip—a whiskey-sipping Brooklyn flaneur” (Open Culture 2017). The invocation of ‘rabbit hole’ (reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*) suggests a dystopian fantasy space and the shots of a bedridden Prufrock intercut with shots of Prufrock as a flaneur in a neo-noir cityscape in order to convey a sense of dislocation from a contemporary setting. Prufrock is presented as a universal urban male type—a nocturnal depressed drunk who talks to himself but who is normal when it comes to public performances of the self. At the very end, Prufrock stares out of the apartment window and sees his double in the street passing by. They look at each other and we hear lines from the closing stanzas of the poem (“each to each”) to underscore the general impression of Prufrock in terms of self-division and as separated from the outside world (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 42).

In Karl Verkade's 2013 short film (directed and scored by) in which Verkade narrates the poem and performs the role of Prufrock, the poem is clearly envisaged as a direct extension of the individual self, thus remediating the dramatic monologue into fandom, confessional mode:

This poem means the world to me; I am not sure that I have ever resonated with a piece of art like I have with this piece. And the older I get, the more poignant it becomes. [ . . . ] It is not the only interpretation [ . . . ] But it is exactly what is inside myself [ . . . ] For those of you who know me, this may be deeper than you are used to. I believe the deep and dark serve to bring the light into focus. (Verkade 2013)

In this YouTube video, there are very few shots of the outside world but plenty of similarly framed close-ups of a prostate and anguished self. Verkade is rarely seen fully in a surrounding environment, except for brief black and white flash shots of Verkade at a windowed door. Flashes of a ceiling fan, coupled with a heavy whispering voice, an eerie soundtrack and lyrical pauses, create a general mood of paralysis, claustrophobia and solipsism. When speaking the words "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was not meant to be", a close-up of Verkade's face (looking troubled or depressed) fades into a shot of sea waves crashing onto rocks (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 41). The film cuts back to Verkade staring into an empty space, and shortly after when uttering the final lines ("Till human voices wake us, and we drown"), a black blank space frames a close-up of Verkade's mouth opening to imply horror (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 42). The video's closure, with the use of rapid edited metonymic shots, appears post-impressionistic and this amplifies the anti-epiphanic mode, one that resonates with modernist literature of James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). So rather than the narrative of mental-scape journeying, Verkade transforms the mock-heroic poem into an intense and over-dramatic study of the inner self (see Figure 3). In other words, this is a prime example of fandom remediation that involves creative new media interaction. Verkade regards the poems as a conduit for channeling an inner life, one that in public life is frustrated. Even though the video eschews Eliot's doctrine of impersonality (in that poet is not identified with the speaker), the poem has enabled a sense of the self, one that is 'deep and dark' and fragile and normally private.



**Figure 3.** Karl Verkade. Prufrock performed as a 'deep and dark' extension of the self.

### 5. Split Screen Video Poem (Jelena Sinik)

The salient aesthetic feature in Jelena Sinik's multi award-winning video poem, 'Imagining Time' (directed and animated by Sinik with the voice of Alex Rabey), is the use of a dual screen format (Sinik 2015). This very much remediates the split screen, one that "bifurcates space and makes clear the spatial relationship between two areas by displaying them simultaneously" (Jeffries 2017, p. 42).

The split-screen technique that innovates the single-frame entity has a long cinematic history, allowing for a spatial experimentation that produces a range of stylistic effects. However, for Jeffries, the impact that comics had on the multiplication of perspective in cinema is generally underestimated: “When one thinks of cinematic techniques that have the potential to evoke the comics page, split-screen photography is probably the first thing that comes to mind” (Jeffries 2017, pp. 99–100). Sinik’s visualization of Prufrock also demonstrates how split screen as a montage effect was instrumental in the aesthetics of literary modernism. Jay David Bolter, in *Writing Space*, points out that T.S. Eliot’s experimentation with fragmentation resulted in palimpsestic texts, such as *The Waste Land* (1922), that disrupted the linear experience of reading and that in turn became interactive electronic hypertexts (Bolter 1991, pp. 131–37). For Sinik, the split-screen format too was effective in disturbing the linearity of a film narrative. The demand on the reader is then closer to modernist montage and poetic realization:

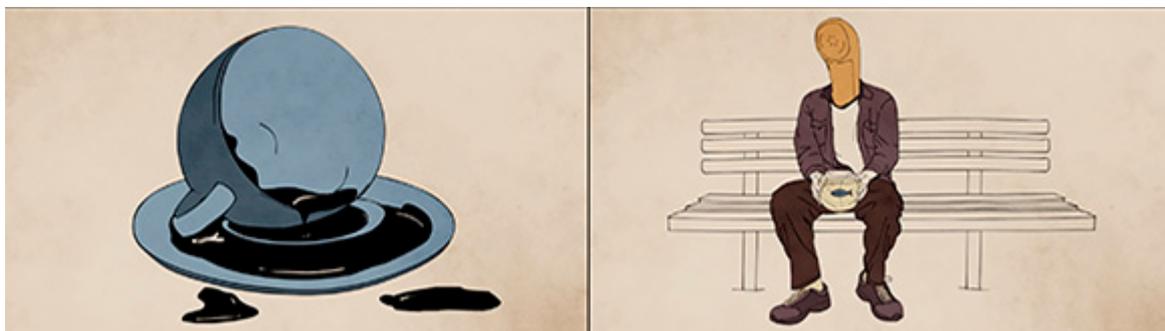
The split screen allows the viewer freedom to observe that which attracts their attention more immediately across the competing screen. A shot in the frame on the left or the right side has its own self-contained and separate meaning, but this at the same time is inflected by its relationship to the shot adjacent (on the left/right). (Sinik 2020, interview)

‘Imagining Time’ combines “magical realism and surrealism with themes of isolation, introversion and passivity from the poem” (Sinik, website). Sinik also comments on the cumulative effect/s through repeated visual motifs. In this respect, the struggle to complete meaning mirrors Eliot’s fractured use of the dramatic monologue as a means of conveying Prufrock’s self-conscious inability to act.

The work, though very short (1.50 min), like a poem, invites multiple readings. Unlike Scott’s animated film, Eliot’s voiceover is absent. The title, ‘Imagining Time’, is in response to the phrase “There will be time” that recurs through ‘Prufrock’—for example: “There will be time, there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). For Sinik, imagining time as an existential experience suggests “procrastination” as well as the “inability to connect meaningfully with the realm outside of the self” (Sinik 2020, interview). In other words, it is an attendant mode of paralysis. Certain visual motifs, such as a fly or the circular motion of a fan, the hand circling a coffee cup and a crackling spinning vinyl record—objects of mundanity—accompany Prufrock on one side and on the other of the split screen. The viewer normally has to watch the video poem many times to identify visual motifs corresponding to the poem. In other words, the viewer becomes a ‘montagist’. And the cumulative montage effect is kind of a circular disturbance, which visually conveys the “cyclical nature of Prufrock’s thought processes” (Sinik 2020, interview). Sinik also plays on the surrealistic imagery of the poem: for instance, translating the elusive mermaids into fish in a tank to suggest that fantasy of the external world inevitably returns to the metonymic objects of entrapment (see Figure 4). One of the most striking metaphoric devices deployed to convey paradoxically connection and alienation is the image of a phone or the phone booth. And in a way, Sinik continues the cinematic association of the split screen and the modern communication device of the telephone that is central to Hollywood films such as *Pillow Talk* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959) and *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, 1970). Sinik ends the video poem with an image of Prufrock as a phone-headed man on a bench holding a fishbowl. The phone assuming “possession of the protagonist’s self” encapsulates the metonymic perspective of Prufrock: to see the world through objects (Sinik 2020, interview). For Sinik, the fish are “a subtle nod to the mermaids” and Prufrock’s frustrated desire for a female fantasy that “will not sing to me” (Sinik 2020, interview). In many respects, Sinik’s video poem captures the visual art of post-impressionism and surrealism that inspired various literary modernists. ‘Imagining Time’ is a superb example of the video poem—a new media art that blends the linguistic and the visual in a multi-layered and suggestive manner.

Sinik’s visualization of what she terms “in-between spaces” aptly chimes with how Eliot scholars generally read the memorable and enigmatic opening lines (Sinik 2020, interview). For instance, Frances Dickey states: “Eliot situates Prufrock’s utterance at the crepuscular or twilight hour, a favorite time of day for French Symbolists and British fin-de-siecle poets, signifying the transition to nighttime and the demi-monde, and suggesting personal and historical decline” (Dickey 2014, p. 123). The ‘in-between’

state of the etherized patient is visualized through images of ennui, and Sinik inverts the spatial division of the “outdoor urban space of the male” and the “feminine indoor space of social convention” to imply that Prufrock’s “story of missed opportunity” is one of solipsistic and agoraphobic entrapment (Sinik 2020, interview). Unlike narrative visualizations, Sinik does not establish a quest for identity or contact with the outer world. By focusing on imagined time as an extension of the self, Sinik realizes Henri Bergson’s 1889 account of “spreading time out in space” in *Time and Free Will* (Dickey 2014, p. 124). Sinik’s split screen format conveys the fragmentation and spatialization of time and selfhood. As Dickey puts it: “Prufrock is incapable of seeing a whole person” (Dickey 2014, p. 125). The final Magritte-like metamorphosis is a particularly apt metaphor of Prufrock who can only see people as disconnected parts and who identifies with non-human selves, such as a crab: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws” (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 40). The split-screen visualization in itself creates the experience of incompleteness via the reader’s quest for a unified meaning. And Sinik’s video poem also echoes Manovich’s notion of spatial montage in which “[t]ime becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen” (Manovich 2002, p. 325).



**Figure 4.** Jelena Sinik. Split screen: the left panel a visual allusion to “I have measured out my life in coffee spoons” and the right panel depicting Prufrock in a Magritte-inspired pose.

## 6. Photographic Spatial Montage (Mat Collishaw)

By increasing the multiplicity of co-existing shots to replicate the mode of hypermediality, Mat Collishaw’s digital recording of photographic montage further remediates Eliot’s poetics of indeterminacy. Mat Collishaw trained at Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s and his work, *Bullet Hole*, was shown in the legendary ‘Freeze’ exhibition curated by Damien Hirst in July 1988, which launched the generation of Young British Artists (YBA). Collishaw works with a visual language that embraces diverse media, fusing old and new media: in particular, the freeze frame of photographic realism, the moving image of film and the manipulative tool of Photoshop. In fact, he “often combines modern technology with historic framing devices” in order to foreground the equivalents of artistic media (gadgets and hardware) across time (Hedley 2010, p. 11). To mark the centenary of the publication of ‘Prufrock’ (2015), Collishaw was asked to make a film for a BBC program (see Collishaw 2015):

Generally, I would have said no as I think it’s a preposterous idea to imagine you can add visuals to a poem which is a medium that already generate images in your head. However, as one of the currents in Prufrock is the constant stream of images he conjures up, and the way they dissipate mirroring his own lack of belief he has in himself. I felt it was an interesting challenge to take on. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw’s fusion of photography and cinematic montage situates the ‘Prufrock’ in its technological context, the era of photographic reproduction, and that also captures the tension between the frozen image and the moving image. Collishaw’s montage film is one of developing photographs that correspond to images that “pop up in the poem and then disappear to be replaced by the next image” (McCullin 2015). Collishaw’s digital film shows in motion 9 (3 × 3 on screen) sequences of images. At any one time, nine sequences can be visible, so there is a constant crossover

between developing photographic images (see Figure 5). The images were taken from paintings, films and photographs. Collishaw likens this to “a collage happening over time” or a “hall of mirrors with multiple reproduction”, with each image potentially “complementing or contaminating each other” (Collishaw 2019, interview). In other words, Collishaw eschews the discourse of linear fidelity:

I didn’t just want to have an image of what was being said, e.g., “trousers rolled” and a picture of rolled up trouser legs. I felt the poem required something less literal, although I do respond to images from the poem in the composition I made. Essentially, I set the film in a photographic darkroom, a subterranean light proof vault, designed for making images come into being. The visuals were always in a state of becoming—they never endure—but are constantly cast aside ready for the next image. A relentless flow of reproductions that don’t have the facility to exist in the real world—in the light. They were interior images from the mind of the poet, daydreams and thoughts without substance. (Collishaw 2019, interview)



**Figure 5.** Mat Collishaw. “The visuals were always in a state of becoming—they never endure—but come into being.”

Collishaw is also drawn towards the twilight aesthetics of the poem that is conveyed through the spatial divisions of Prufrock’s mental landscape. He likens Prufrock’s descent into the underworld to the darkroom:

The darkroom provides this other space where images form but are not necessarily real or fixed, for they exist in the slippery netherworld. I also included the sound of the clock ticking and the water dripping, both elements of the photographic darkroom, as well as implying a subterranean place where time is present but suspended. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw also chose to use Eliot’s unabridged reading of the poem because the “old recording [ . . . ] had a slightly distorted, creaky quality, which added a patina to the perception of it. It feels like you are listening to the voice of a ghost” (Collishaw 2019, interview). In remediation terms, the narrating voice of the poet is the trace of old printed media. However, the audio-visual dynamic is not entirely synchronized. We see glimpses of images that correspond to metonymic objects in Eliot’s linear reading (e.g., a coffee spoon), yet some images remain for a longer period. The ‘slippage’ was not intentional and was the result of combining old and new media technologies:

To film all 9 sequences in one take I had to calculate the timing of the poem with the images I was using, and the time the developing fluid would act on the exposed paper. There was evidently going to be a little bit of slippage with timings, something that I was happy to let unfold within the framework I had created. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw's visualization also deliberately eschews the story of incomplete romance, because for him the "words don't accumulate to becoming a narrative" (Collishaw). Most video poems clearly read the repeated phrase "Let us go then" as a theatrical invite to a spatial journey through a specific setting that leads to a female indoor space (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37). As Cleanth Brooks states: "Prufrock makes his entrance by inviting the reader, whom he seems to accept as inhabiting his own social world, to take a walk with him, a stroll that will take them to an afternoon tea (Brooks [1988] 2000, pp. 79–80). Collishaw's response echoes Brooks' account, but he rejects the idea of a goal-oriented narrative and embraces instead an idea similar to Sinik's view of 'drifting':

I get the impression from reading Prufrock that he is taking you through these dark deserted streets, but there is nothing particularly engaging to see, just a series of meandering passages with dead ends. Nothing leads anywhere, the words don't accumulate to becoming a narrative. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw's montage art underscores Anne Friedberg's view that the experiments by filmmakers and Cubist painters who broke free from the single-screen/image paradigm and fractured the single viewpoint is continued in the prevailing multiple-screen composition of digital technologies (Friedberg [2006] 2009, p. 192). Collishaw too expects the viewer to be a 'montagist', placing hypermedial demands on the viewer that exceed Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000). With the use of four digital synchronized digital cameras, Figgis was able to shoot the action in real time (no cuts). The four simultaneous plotlines appear on the screen as four quadrants. As Marilyn Fabe argues:

*Timecode* [ . . . ] involves more active participation and attention, and calls for tolerance from the spectator, than is demanded in conventionally constructed films. [ . . . ] The use of crosscutting in the conventional [single screen] film narrative affords us omniscience [ . . . ] In conventional crosscutting the action unfolds linearly, one image at a time.

In other words, spatial, as opposed to linear, montage means: "we get to 'edit' what we see ourselves" (Fabe 2014, pp. 5–7). Identifying inter-media correlations 'spread across' Collishaw's sequence of resolving and dissolving images requires also a hypertextual mind. By refashioning two visual technologies (the static image of photorealism and the moving image of the camera), Collishaw reminds us that modernist aesthetics was not about satisfying "our culture's desire for immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 26). Collishaw's moving montage imitates the polyfocal effects of new digital hypermediality, and in doing so remediates the fractured, polyvocal aesthetic of 'Prufrock', the indeterminacy of an imagistic form as well as the non-linear, interaction of close reading. And, in embodying the aesthetics of modernist experimentation, Collishaw shows that the Rhizomatic pulse of online remediation is not teleological. In the words of Eduardo Kac: "There's a general misperception when we talk about online culture. Everyone is so obsessed with the internet, but to me, it's a historical phenomenon. It will be superseded by other networks in the future" (Chatel 2019). The 'other networks' or inter-media forms could be propelled by a continuous refashioning of modernist poetics.

## 7. Conclusions

The broad shift from the dominance of print culture to "the new dominance of the image" could be perceived in certain quarters as augmenting the current English Studies crisis (Vandermeersche 2011). That said, adaptation studies have shown that the transmedia phenomenon has not only refashioned, but also regenerated interest in, literary sources. Remediations can open up the 'concentrated form' of poetry and become an effective pedagogic tool, whilst the kineticism of visual media be harnessed to enhance the appeal of the static word. Publishing companies such as Button Poetry are utilizing

YouTube videos of performing poets with the advertising slogan: “Poetry is the new adult coloring book” (Boog 2017). In the words of Keven Stein: “New technologies create new human receptive abilities [ . . . ]”, and in turn new forms of expression (Stein 2010, p. 92). Hypermediacy can attract new forms of participation, by also satisfying a digital audience’s polyfocal attention (Stein 2010, p. 110). The co-opting of new technology, as Stein argues, does not replace the written page but supplements it (Stein 2010, p. 112). In his chapter, ‘Why Kids Hate Poetry’, Stein further states: “Many instructors make the act of reading a poem for its ‘meaning’ into a solemn game of pin the tail on the donkey” (Stein 2010, p. 195). The quest for extracting meaning from a poem is the logic of a goal-oriented education system, one that inhibits the reader’s potential pleasure. Visual remediation with its focus on refashioning formal features is a necessary reminder that the pleasure of reading poetry derives largely from a poem’s aesthetics. Naturally, visual remediation is not a substitute for the private intimacy of close reading. Embracing only comic strip narrativizations closes down the complex aesthetics of poetry. Nonetheless, multi-directional remediation—from the comic strip to spatial montage—offers multifarious possibilities for appreciating further the inherent visual properties of modernist poetry.

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