

Media and Poetry

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Culture has always had a significant effect on poetry, and that culture is presented to the public and the poet through the media. The media has been a powerful force throughout history, effectively deciding what is recorded and what is ignored or pushed aside. If the winner writes the history books, then the media is the peacetime writer. The power and influence that mass media possesses has been acknowledged, or even used, in several pieces thus far covered in class.

Breathalyzer is unique from the other pieces in that it uses the media far more than it acknowledges it. Its nature as a flarf poem means that without the media, in this case the internet, it would never have been constructed in its current form. The only media reliably present in *Breathalyzer* are pop culture references. In *Imagine There is a Bank Which Credits Your Account Each Morning*, K. Silem Mohammad writes:

"Susan Sontag Iggy Pop Pixies Cat Power lo and behold
John Wilmot later Earl of Rochester
slammed our eardrums with more blowtorch
yes sir he did do some beat like that"

This demonstrates a common practice in *Breathalyzer*, wherein Mohammad mixes in pop culture with his own prose. These pop culture references range from Scooby Doo and Digimon to *The Sound of Music* and Stone Cold Steve Austin. The presence of these pop culture figures gives the book an internet atmosphere. Browsing the web, even when doing so with a specific purpose, will often open up unrelated avenues that one can travel down. The most obvious

example would be doing a Google search for something, and finding another web page in the found sites that interests you. Much more common avenues are ads and links within a web site. A news story read on the internet will often have an ad for a random product or service on the page, and links to other stories. Ultimately all these seemingly different web pages are linked in one way or another, just as *Breathalyzer's* poems are linked through Mohammad's narrative.

Allen Ginsberg's "Witchita Vortex Sutra" takes a very different approach than *Breathalyzer's* by using the media in a much broader sense. Ginsberg has occasional pop culture references, but they tend to be of a higher relevance than Mohammad's. Ginsberg's invoking of "Face the nation", a highly political and long running Sunday morning show, is an entirely different enterprise than invoking Digimon. Not to say one method is inherently better than the other, but they convey very different emotions and give different effects. Where *Breathalyzer* creates an internet atmosphere "Witchita Vortex Sutra" creates a very real and rebellious atmosphere.

In "Witchita Vortex Sutra" Ginsberg does an excellent job of presenting his view of the media, and in particular its coverage of Vietnam. Language is an oft-repeated word in the piece, and the use of language to influence people is a recurring theme. The following passage illustrates this idea of language and its influence:

"Put it this way on the radio

Put it this way in television language

Use the words

language, language:

"A bad guess"

Put it this way in headlines

Omaha World Herald--Rusk Says Toughness

Essential for Peace

Put it this way

Lincoln Nebraska morning star--

Vietnam War Brings Prosperity"

This is Ginsberg's commentary on the nature of the media at that time. He portrays them as shifting the narrative away from the negative aspects of the Vietnam War, and heavily promoting the positive.

Other commentary on the media is present throughout "Wichita Vortex Sutra".

Ginsberg asks, "How big are all the Public Figures? What kind of flesh hangs, hidden behind their Images?" This is a commentary on the distance that the media creates between the public and reality. Later in the piece Ginsberg reinforces this idea, "Has anyone looked in the eyes of the wounded? Have we seen but paper faces, Life Magazine? Are screaming faces made of dots, electric dots on Television-- fuzzy decibels registering the mammal voiced howl from the outskirts of Saigon to console model picture tubes". Another commentary takes place on the forgettable nature of the news. Ginsberg states, "AP dispatch // The last week's paper is Amnesia." The media is described throughout the piece as a negative force, and strongly reveals Ginsberg's views some forty years later.

Today the media is a stronger voice than ever before. It is present in our everyday lives. We interact with it countless times whether intentional or not, and each time we do it influences us to varying degrees. While our culture comes from both the people around us and from the media, it's becoming increasingly clear that the media is far more often seen and has far more influence on us than personal interactions. A parent can have a great deal of influence on their

child's culture, but when that child matures and ventures off on his or her own the media becomes the strongest culture influence for the remainder of his or her life. Given the impact that media has on our culture, the question isn't why Mohammad and Ginsberg openly used and acknowledged the media in their work. The question is, why aren't more poets and writers doing so?