

‘Who you Love  
is a Fact’

## Richard Birkett and Metahaven

*A conversation taken from the Metahaven book PYSOP, edited by Metahaven and Karen Archev, published by Koenig books on the occasion of exhibitions at the ICA and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.*

**Richard Birkett:** I have been thinking about your use of the poem “I know the truth” (1915) by Marina Tsvetaeva in your film *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* (2018), and the excerpt from Anna Akhmatova’s poem cycle *Requiem* (1935–1961) in your first full-length film *The Sprawl (Propaganda about Propaganda)* (2015).<sup>1</sup> Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva were contemporaries in early twentieth-century Russia who both experienced the disappearance of loved ones during the Stalin era. The first section of *Requiem* describes, in prose, how Akhmatova, standing in the queue outside Kresgy prison in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) awaiting news of her son, meets a woman who whispers in her ear, “Could you describe this?”<sup>2</sup> to which she answers, “I can.” The first line of Tsvetaeva’s poem is, “I know the truth – give up all other truths!” In both poems, there is an imperative to witness from deep within a collective condition of opacity and loss, but also a distinct ambivalence around what it means to speak for the experiences of others. How do you see the space carved out between their voices and their function in relation to one another? In what way do you find resonance with these particular personal/historical forms of voice?

**Metahaven:** In the Akhmatova excerpt in *The Sprawl*, we hear about the quietly flowing river Don and a house that sits under a yellow moon. It seems relatively peaceful at first. The moon is not full; it wears a tilted “cap.” It does not merely shine; it “sees.” It gazes into the house, where it sees a lonely woman. She is desperate. Her son is imprisoned and her husband dead. “Pray for me,” the poem follows, an embodiment of the abyss of loss. The moon, an actor in the scene endowed with vision, is used similarly in our film when it becomes a huge red sphere with “REC” written on it – the moon is a witness.

In “I know the truth,” Tsvetaeva shows a harsh reality: despite the fact that we will all soon be dead, we do not let each other live in peace; we do not let each other sleep, even though we will soon all sleep beneath the earth’s surface. This, for her, is the one truth that should make us give up “all other truths.” There’s a quieting in the middle of the poem, where the wind stops and the stars are still in the sky, and everything seems almost peaceful. It is hard for us to elaborate on this poem as it is conclusive in and of itself. There are a lot of differences between Tsvetaeva’s and Akhmatova’s work. Even in “I know the truth,” Tsvetaeva begins with enthusiasm, ending the first sentence with an exclamation point. By comparison, the voice of Akhmatova appears more controlled, if equally uncompromising. Tsvetaeva wrote a collection of poems for Akhmatova, whom she greatly admired. When considering the connections between Tsvetaeva’s life and her poetry, the sincerity of her work comes to the fore even more.

It took us only a split-second to decide to work with these poems in each case; there wasn’t a lot of reflection involved. Even though they were written in czarist Russia or in the Soviet Union, they create a strong connection with listeners outside that context.

What do you think or feel when you read these poems? How do you feel about their use in moving-image work?

**RB:** I agree that there are notable and insightful differences in tone and feeling between them, despite both dealing with mortality and lyrically summoning up earthly and cosmic natural forces. My experience is of uncompromising and deeply affecting appeals, voiced distinctly by women, toward and against violence and death perpetuated in actions and language: Tsvetaeva’s line, “what do you speak of, poets, lovers, generals?” is particularly powerful. However, Tsvetaeva’s poem has a universal declamatory tone relatively absent of personal loss when placed in contrast to Akhmatova’s, which is comparatively rife with it. Your description of Akhmatova’s poem as an “embodiment of the abyss of loss” is incredibly fitting.

There is of course a direct correlation with the personal and historical circumstances under which the poems were written: “I know the truth” was written in 1915, a year after Tsvetaeva’s husband volunteered for the Eastern Front of World War I, but two years before the Russian Revolution transformed their lives through famine, exile, and their eventual persecution on return to the Soviet Union; Akhmatova wrote the section you excerpt from *Requiem* in 1938, following the death of her first husband and the year of her only son’s arrest and incarceration by the KGB in the midst of the Great Purge.

In your moving-image works, these poems carry a lyrical and affective texture: they are part of a layering of textual and visual symbolism, operating alongside different modes and rhythms of voiced address, as well as imagery that is graphic, documentary, and cinematic. Within this weave of materials, the poems are immediately striking in their generation of mood and atmosphere, and work in concert with your underlying musical themes. This emotive aestheticism, that is to say, a conveyance of felt experience through an alignment of words, images, and sounds, is to me quite rare within moving-image work seen in the context of contemporary art – a now global “genre,” but one with an infrastructure and set of logics still heavily oriented toward Europe and the United States. I understand your choice to use the poems was not overthought, and that reducing them to critical tools is not productive. Yet I am interested in how their presence alongside other elements in your films performs a crucial role in relation to the witnessing and writing of history that is central to your moving-image works since *The Sprawl*. You focus on Russian and Soviet history and recent geopolitical shifts. But you also examine the position of speaking within a complex of political and ideological forces, and the conceptual and emotional relation of these forces to different forms of linguistic and/or media production. How do you think about poetry as linguistic texture in placing it in relation to the moving image? How does a line like, “I know the truth – give up all other truths!,” speak from history and into the present and future?

**MH:** Poetry is a way to express what can’t be expressed any other way. The work of Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova speaks of necessity, first of all. It is also *field reporting*, which, somehow, in an emotionally gripping and linguistically precise way, betrays circumstances around the time of their writing, forging a permanent link between the past and our current lived experience through rhyme, meter, and motive. Neither the starting point for Tsvetaeva’s nor Akhmatova’s work is similar to that of avant-garde poetry. Their work is rather lodged in a narrative-poetic tradition that flourished during the so-called Silver Age of Russian poetry. It is then enacted

in the context of the Soviet Union, itself a continuation of the czarist era in some respects, and current Russia is also a continuation of these preceding epochs. The perception or experience of flagrant injustice can lead one to critique systems through writing, image, and action; the lyrical form both poets use to enact their critique doesn't give in to sloganeering or propaganda – it is an antidote to these. We find that Tsvetaeva in particular is a kind of filter who lets the listener (or reader or viewer) co-experience a startling reality mediated through the poet's personal experience imbued with unsentimental warmth. The difference between subject matter and its treatment becomes strikingly apparent; and there is a dynamic range of emotions that can be addressed within that difference. The persistence of her sense of "love" – can we call it that? – is what gives her work its inescapable directness, especially when describing the most dire circumstance. At the same time, as she writes, "the way of comets [...] is the poet's way."<sup>3</sup> The poet is like a train that everybody "always comes too late to catch."<sup>4</sup> This is almost the inverse of Baudelaire's romantic idea of the poet as a majestic albatross, chained to the deck of a ship, prevented from flying, and mocked for its clumsy appearance. The self-pity in Baudelaire's poet is missing from Tsvetaeva's, who even in the harshest of circumstances, is the comet, at the vanguard of possible feelings.

Making *The Sprawl* made us dive more deeply into all of this, prompted by the overly reductive way in which Russia was talked about in much of the Western media. We found that we ourselves shared the same sense of epistemic uncertainty as Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, and even Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* (1897). Coming to terms with this convergence through a texture, a mesh of emotions, is what we try to do in much of our work since *The Sprawl*.

It makes no sense to deny the content of facts, or their existence. For Tsvetaeva, however, versions of the truth coexist, and in spite of this splintering it is possible to put what is shared into words and images. Poetry always speaks to necessity, saying things impossible to state as facts that nonetheless need to be said. Given current debates about truth – and the hyper-fragmentation of the political and social landscape due to mutual exclusion among the fundamentalisms that arise from it – the epistemic uncertainty we've been thrown into likely won't go away soon, even if certain pivotal figures vanish from the scene.

**RB:** Hunting for poems online involves navigating a web of Tumblrs, Google Books citations, and often, with original non-English language poems, a dizzying number of translations. Happily, this particular Google search for Tsvetaeva's "The Poet," from which the line "the way of the comets" is taken, took me to poet and writer Jackie Wang's fantastic Tumblr *Giulia Tofana the Apothecary*, and from there to Hélène Cixous's 1991 essay, "Poetry, Passion and History: Marina Tsvetayeva [*sic*]." In an early passage, Cixous describes a world consumed by "more and more sonorous [...] noise machines." If the "milieu of the media," where "people are entirely governed by the obligation to create scandal," embodies this invasion into every aspect of life, then equally, Cixous states, "even an organization like Greenpeace is just another noise machine from which one cannot imagine that justice or truth will appear."<sup>5</sup> In opposition to this condition, Cixous turns to the desire to "plant some paths, some slowness, some trees, some thought and silence," and to Tsvetaeva's texts that "work on this inside of an outside, on an inside-outside." Cixous extols how "underneath a worldly surface, we can

find in [Tsvetaeva's] oeuvre a woman full of wealth, an extraordinary tapestry, a writing gathering thousands of signs."<sup>6</sup>

For me, this last passage really resonates with the texture, "mesh of emotions," that you pinpoint as a central aspiration in your work since *The Sprawl*. Particularly, "a writing gathering thousands of signs," suggests an oppositional movement between the "hyper-fragmentation" and occlusion that accompanies the "noise of machines," and the gathering of signs is a means to generate a shared orientation within this epistemic uncertainty; as you say of Tsvetaeva's poetry, it is a form of *field reporting*, within and outside history. This might be a somewhat literal transition, but I want to ask you about the interface as a key instrument within a contemporary economy of signs. Defined within critical research as "interface politics," the nature and design of interfaces as mediating and discursive makes them central to establishing trust – and suspicion. In your moving-image work there is almost an overload of converging and layered modes of visual, linguistic, aural, graphic, and symbolic communication. The moon in *The Sprawl* is a good example of this as an image and a linguistic signifier (spoken in Russian and written in English), a graphic motif that also stands for the red "REC" symbol, and a recurring drawn circle as both free-floating graphic and a functional "circling" of image evidence. In any of these aspects, the allegorical use of the moon as a witness in Akhmatova's *Requiem* remains operative. How do you see poetry, a "writing gathering thousands of signs," as equating to and functioning within this system of interfaces that your work employs?

**MH:** In our understanding, an interface is a graphic representation of a digital platform, tool, or machine, meant to enable the user to interact with and operate it. And, as platforms work at reality, interfaces enable users to do this on their own terms to, according to the Oxford English Dictionary Online:

*follow|unfollow, block|unblock, see|unsee. But that is only the beginning. Interfaces can mediate the world on their own terms. Interfaces are political because they are reductive; their buttons carry words that categorize and force choices. They are – must be – reductive to have any real effect on the world. Interfaces condition us to believe things about reality while acting on it.*

Poetry uses language for the opposite effect. Buttons with words on them for you to click, do not currently exist in poetry in the same way as in interactions with machines. Poetry disrupts the relationship between the use and ends of language; it disrupts the straightforward use of language. So, on some level it can be seen as running counter to the interface. This is not to say that interfaces cannot have poetry.

We just wanted to add something from "Lyrical Design," a lecture we gave at the Design Museum in London in July 2018:

*Especially amid all things post-truth, there are things that are beautiful, and there are things that are true, and there are things that need to be said. Lyrical design, as we see it, is simply this. A return to the bare necessity of what needs to be said in the way that it is sensed, and cannot be said in any other way.*

**RB:** I was thinking of the term “interface” as operative within your moving-image works more broadly: on one level, your work gestures toward the language of the user interface – graphic shapes as generic buttons or frames float unmoored in layers of moving images as artifacts of “representations of choices”; on another level, the generic interface as “a point where two systems, subjects, organizations, etc., meet and interact,”<sup>7</sup> a shared boundary where conditioning occurs in both directions, appears in your work in multiple meeting points between communicative, linguistic, and symbolic systems.

**MH:** Yes, they are representations of dialogues and log-in attempts. They are the signs and signals of an unspecified floating OS.

**RB:** In contrast to your production of an online platform such as *The Sprawl*, the direct functionality of a user interface is absent in your moving-image works created for galleries or film festivals, yet the viewer is still called on to navigate moments of confluence and interaction, a designed space of mediation. For instance, in the two-screen film *Hometown* (2018) the binary nature of the image (sometimes one image that is split in two, sometimes two separate images that at times mirror each other) is echoed in the relationship between two spatial locations, Kiev and Beirut, and the two young women around which the film revolves. There are also two principal registers of imagery: filmed footage, and interstitial sequences of 2D animation. There are distinctive meeting points generated in these visual binaries, but the work also generates points of semiotic confluence. Within the poetic text, the lyrical and absurdist analogy of a caterpillar “murdered in cold blood” is read once by each character, in Ukrainian and in Arabic. I would say that a form of interface exists in this figure of the caterpillar (that also appears in rudimentary graphic form in one of the sequences of 2D animation, and is alluded to in a shot where one of the women catches and releases a butterfly), wherein different systems of representation (linguistic, cinematic, graphic) meet and a multivalent form of symbolism is generated. What also comes to mind is your use of several languages within your work, and the interplay between different writing systems in subtitles.

**MH:** One could draw a four-square diagram in which technology is aligned according to one axis leading from invisible to visible, and another from past to future. Technology feels at its most advanced, and most interesting somehow, when it is in the future, and when the machine itself appears absent except for its effects – when technology’s presence is implied and overarching and at the same time understated and ephemeral. Obviously, technology is not invisible: its absence in one space is always connected to its presence in another. The absence of fossil fuels in a Tesla car implies a massive, resilient electrical grid, for example, to charge it anywhere; it implies batteries, the factories where these batteries are made, the mines where their parts are won, and the places where they go after use. Every invisibility implies a very physical food chain behind it. But what we are interested in is how the specter of technology – in the widest sense – can be implied in everyday things. That is, both in the sense of distributed and decentralized intelligence – sensing landscapes, “steppe of pixels” – as well as in ordinary objects that cannot be addressed, not part of an internet of things, and by that virtue connected to us by emotion, memory, or desire, more than communication

links. In 2012, futurologist Venkatesh Rao asked: “what if all surfaces are potential screens?”<sup>8</sup> It is a good question, especially when taking into account that a surface no longer technically needs to *be* a screen as soon as we are intent on *seeing* it as one.

**RB:** If a conditioning is occurring within the form of interface that your work points to, beyond “communication links,” it seems to displace a belief-based notion of reality with a “gathering of signs.” Within “lyrical design,” how do you approach combining registers of signification? How does this speak to versioning and as you mention earlier that “in spite of this splintering it is possible to put what is shared into words and images”?

**MH:** Maybe it’s partially about continuously developing ideas around rendering equivalences between data and space. For example, what currently interests us is the spatial (lack of) logic that we are trying to build in *Eurasia*. We filmed in the heavily polluted basin of the Sak-Elga River near Karabash in Chelyabinsk Oblast, Russia. It is an ecological disaster zone where everything in the surroundings has a reddish hue and is polluted with metal, predominantly copper. There is a copper smelting facility there straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*. Our contemporary gaze looks at this kind of zone as an aberration that needs to be corrected.

But we realized that multiple historical time periods co-exist in the same space, overlapping each other. Most of the time to cope we “unsee” these simultaneous other versions of reality, which becomes impossible when another version suddenly appears as the predominant one.<sup>9</sup> We like to think that progress is our benchmark, but the membrane of our progress is very thin. We are in non-linear time where the “now” feels exceedingly complex and thick but matters less.

Data plays a crucial role in this (and hence its architecture). Data is not just the “material” that keeps this landmass conceptually “as one” (through satellite data, geo-sensing, surveillance, 4G networks, communications and logistics infrastructure, etc.), but it is also the material that sustains the belief system around each of the “versions” of reality that are being seen and unseen. In data, you can live inside a coherent bubble of beliefs. In physical space – such as in Karabash – you can find yourself trapped in the version you were unseeing. The shared is what we were unseeing from each other.

**RB:** I greatly appreciated my epistolary engagement with you during the *Eurasia* shoot you describe above in Karabash and the surrounding area, receiving the daily shot lists and image updates via email in London, getting a vicarious sense of the intensity of your encounter with the landscape. What felt most compelling about these missives was strangely not the images, however, but the simple diagrammatic representations of particular shots that appear in your shot lists. These schematizations of the cinematic gaze seem appropriately logistical, yet somewhat surreal when imagining them mapped onto an environment so otherworldly and inhospitable.

In one particular diagram, the icon for the drone camera is positioned above a solid red strip, simply marked “INSANE RIVER.” A caption reads: “DRONE (CAMERA POINTING DOWN).” The accompanying description of this scene provides an interpretation of the diagram: “The DRONE is hovering over the red waters and is TRYING to see itself, filming itself.” I see within this the idea of the sensing landscape: the river actively receives and returns

the gaze of the drone camera; equally, there is the attempt of the sentient drone – a technology entwined with both the present-day violence of remote “logistical” warfare and futurist predictions of technological singularity – to be visible, to be witnessed. It’s a scene that in my imagination is simultaneously horrific and poetic. It resonates deeply with the sense in both Tsvetaeva’s “I know the truth” and Akhmatova’s *Requiem* of the landscape, the cosmos, as witnesses beyond history and language. In Tsvetaeva’s “The Poet,” the line, “For the way of comets [...] is the poet’s way,” is followed by, “And the blown-apart [...] links of causality are his links.”<sup>10</sup> This phrasing seems to beautifully render both a state of epistemic uncertainty, and a sense of being within non-linear, non-teleological time.

I wonder if you could elaborate on your words above, and say more about the role of data (as much a material spatial architecture as a digital one), in relation to this poetic concept of “the blown-apart links of causality”? It seems to me that we are talking here less about willful occlusions of the “truth” enacted by nefarious state or extra-state forces – and therefore the forensic work required to reestablish broken links – than an active process of “seeing” and “unseeing” written into conceptions of reality and heightened by technologically enhanced cascades of information.

**MH:** We love to get asked questions that contain their own answers! We could just copy-paste that last paragraph in here and be finished.

First, we have realized that disinformation is always there, but slightly differently situated within our epistemic landscapes; second, we are developing forms of literacy around it; and third, we are beginning to accommodate it in our lives, coping with the “nefarious” state and extra-state pollution of discourse as part of the real. Andrew O’Hagan’s long piece on the Grenfell Tower fire in 2016, exploring the lives of the tower’s residents and victims, the fire’s aftermath, and the institutional, social, political, and policy frameworks around the tragedy, begins as follows:

*It was a clear day and you could see for miles. From her flat on the 23rd floor, Rania texted one of her best friends from back home and they talked about facts. Who you love is a fact and the meals you cook are facts. When the sun shines it is a fact of God and England is a fact of life. Rania always said she had preferred living in Mile End because the markets were better over there, but at least Westfield was near her now in White City. She was 31. “I was born in Egypt 11,426 days ago,” she told one of her neighbours, pleased with the new app on her iPhone that could count days.<sup>11</sup>*

O’Hagan establishes the scale at which an event is real, and the scale at which it is reproduced in the lives of those directly affected. The piece collapses all versions of actual and possible realities into a single point, where everything is true. All lives lost or changed, hopes crushed, and futures cancelled are as true and real as the fire, its cause, the need for its explanation, and the fallacies that occur in the story that gets told about it. As O’Hagan writes, “who you love is a fact.” Likewise, Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova are not defending some kind of abstract, universal love. In their writing, they embody real limits. They embody a struggle and sacrifice for concrete objects of love, set inside a distressed episteme.

The understandable counter-response to post-truth, and especially to some of its identifiable perpetrators, is the desire for a reality that is purged of all ambiguity. We

should defend a world in which facts matter, and in which the rule of law gives equal rights to all. But we should not strive for a dictatorship of the Real.

## Notes

1. The Akhmatova poem excerpt can be read in the script of *The Sprawl* on page 137.
2. Or in some translations: “Could one ever describe this?”
3. Marina Tsvetaeva, “The Poet” [1923], in *Selected Poems*, trans. Elaine Feinstein, London: Penguin Books, 1994, 48.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hélène Cixous, “Poetry, Passion and History: Marina Tsvetayeva,” in *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 111, <https://loneberry.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/cixous-on-tsvetaeva.pdf>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.
6. *Ibid.*, 112.
7. Venkatesh Rao, “Public Computing and the Screens World,” talk, *The Conference*, Malmö, August 23, 2012, <https://videos.theconference.se/venkatesh-rao-publiccomputing-and-the>. Last accessed on August 29, 2018.
8. Tsvetaeva, “The Poet,” 48.
9. See Rao, “Public Computing.”
10. Tsvetaeva, “The Poet,” 48.
11. See Andrew O’Hagan, “The Tower,” *London Review of Books* 40, no. 2 (June 2018), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower>. Last accessed on August 8, 2018.