

The Meaning Behind "No Poetry"

Jennifer Hardacker

The title of this film block, "No Poetry," is a bit of a game the festival curators are playing with the audience. The title "No Poetry," seems to say, "Don't expect any eloquently stated insights stated in a pretty way." But the irony is that by taking away regular talking, the films end up feeling poetic anyway, just through visual rhythm instead of words.

A major theme connecting these films is how they manipulate the mechanics of filmmaking to explore history and human connection. This is beautifully evident in *Holding Time Gently*, a digital composite that looks like one continuous, unedited take inside a shophouse. Here, seven characters from different eras coexist in the same rooms. As they perform everyday routines like making tea, sewing, or playing with VR controllers, their tiny moments of care and connection lean across the decades, creating a deeply contemplative sense of community and belonging. Rather than using dialogue to connect these characters, the film creates a kind of visual poetry through repetition and rhythm, allowing gestures and routines to echo across time.

In sharp contrast, *Just a Dream* uses footage from historical news and iconic Hollywood movies to present us with a massive historical void. By erasing the statue of Abraham Lincoln from the monument in each scene, the filmmaker leaves behind a hauntingly empty chair. The erasure invites viewers to consider what Lincoln symbolizes and what the absence of that symbol might suggest about contemporary political life.. Juxtaposing the hopeful patriotism of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* with the terrifying dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the film emphasizes the grand scale of the monument versus the smallness of the individuals within it. In doing so, it captures a powerful sense of modern political uncertainty, using Lincoln's missing presence to mirror a nation currently grappling with its own fractured identity. The film's poetry emerges through absence; the empty chair becomes a visual refrain that gains meaning each time it reappears.

The mood of the program jumps back and forth between playful fun and deep, heavy anxiety. On one side, you have a light, energetic charm: *A Playful Short* lets us see the world through a kid narrator making sense as best they can of what they see, and *EXP #1* uses upbeat electronic music and kaleidoscopic grids to feel like a whimsical 1980s new-wave music video. But that fun sits right next to the spooky, post-apocalyptic vibe of *Fata Morgana* and, most powerfully, the visceral terror of *Hurricane Season*.

While *Just a Dream* focuses on a missing political icon, *Fata Morgana* takes a more intimate, eerie look at how historical trauma ruins personal memories over time. Focusing on Karelia, a region invaded by the Soviet Union during World War II, the film uses heavily processed celluloid and abstract layerings to show how past summers on the riverbank disintegrate. Old, peaceful archive photographs of people at the beach are obscured by layering the images with a chaotic, moving texture. This mixed with shots of modern-day nature reclaiming discarded trash creates a post-apocalyptic mood. It reveals how easily history can distort and rust, leaving us with a landscape where a physical photograph left on the rocky ground feels like a relic from a lost civilization.

This tactile, weather-beaten style translates the most intensely in *Hurricane Season*, where scratched emulsion, layered imagery, and an overwhelming soundtrack create a sustained sense of claustrophobia. It forces the audience into the experience by layering images of rushing water directly over windows being boarded up, while the soundtrack shifts from gentle waves to fierce, slamming winds that make you feel like the narrator, who tells us it is "so dark, like a bug in dirt." The scratching of the film's emulsion, the limited field of vision throughout the film, and the relentless soundtrack of fierce wind builds a suffocating sense of claustrophobia. Even its peaceful moments feel disorienting, ending with the chaotic sound of water sloshing against a microphone as the camera bobs above and below the water.

The block of films also contains the completely wild *Napa / Navel*. The director explicitly designed this bizarre video art piece as a parody of self-important, "high-art" films where comfortable creators preach deep wisdom while living luxury lives. To mock that kind of institutional pomposity, the film throws together a nonsensical story featuring random spiritual figures, slightly overcranked movement, and literal gingerbread men, culminating in a giant ogre laughing and eating it all.

A film that is somewhere outside the anxiety/playful dichotomy is *I Was Here – Come With*. Its quiet beach scene leaves the audience suspended right in the middle of the block's competing moods. It is deeply serene, but the muted, brownish-gray colors and isolated figures make you feel a distinct, underlying loneliness.

Together, these films explore how fragments of history, memory, landscape, and image can be rearranged to create new forms of meaning and connection. Whether through accumulation, erasure, distortion, or parody, the films in *No Poetry* demonstrate how meaning emerges from the ways images are assembled, altered, and placed in conversation with one another.