Tony Harrison’s film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, first broadcast in 1992 on BBC 2, shows as its first fix on human horror a slow motion clip of a young woman with long brown hair, on one knee, half-leaning against the trunk of a large tree in a park and carefully injecting heroin into her forearm (FIG 1). The lingering, almost numbing, footage is set to a melancholy piano and vocal track: the final stanza of Schumann’s *Lied* ‘Was will die einsame Träne?’, ‘Why this solitary tear?’ a setting of a poem by Heinrich Heine, beautifully sung by soprano Angela Tunstall:¹

¹ Schumann’s song is from his *Myrthen*, ‘Myrtle’ (1840, Op. 25.21).

Tony Harrison’s film poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, first broadcast in 1992 on BBC 2, shows as its first fix on human horror a slow motion clip of a young woman with long brown hair, on one knee, half-leaning against the trunk of a large tree in a park and carefully injecting heroin into her forearm (FIG 1). The lingering, almost numbing, footage is set to a melancholy piano and vocal track: the final stanza of Schumann’s *Lied* ‘Was will die einsame Träne?’, ‘Why this solitary tear?’ a setting of a poem by Heinrich Heine, beautifully sung by soprano Angela Tunstall:¹

Ach, meine Liebe selber
Zerfloss wie eitel Hauch!
Du alte, einsame Träne,
Zerfliesse jetzt und auch!

Ah, my love itself
Vanished like a mere breath of air!
Old, solitary tear,
Vanish now as well!²

² Translated by Richard Stokes (2005) 514.
The shot runs for just over fifty seconds, in which time our view, fixed as it is on the young woman, is disturbed by passers-by who walk between us, the viewer, and the viewer’s subject, the woman. The slow pace of the clip and its musical accompaniment stylises the documentary subject, and prolongs the brief disruptions of our gaze, thereby heightening the intensity of focus on the woman and her actions. Five blurred people in total walk through the shot, but they are not the only people the viewer is aware of at this early point in the poem. The sequence begins with birdsong and a two-second zooming clip of a close-up of a male face in bronze relief, who has already been identified as Heiner and with the narrator’s voice. The centre of the shot is the bronze figure’s eye and—as is made plain by two further short cut-aways to his eye from the observed woman—it is this man’s eye that sees what we watch. He is the steady and sardonic focalizer of the sequence in the Frankfurt park.

As we watch, the woman draws blood into the syringe, ensuring she has the vein, and just as she is about to loosen the tourniquet, our view is disrupted for the final time, and we move back to the bronze’s eye and the
music slowly plays out. When the final piano notes fade, Harrison’s voice is heard:

Schumann set those words I wrote
that might bring lumps into your throat
(unless you grabbed for the remote!)
And even if you turned away
you could still hear the lieder play.³

As the poem progresses we understand that Harrison has taken over the voice of the dissident German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). They were Heine’s words that were set to music by the German Romantic composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856).⁴ Harrison not only hijacks the poet’s voice, but he adopts Heine’s poetic metre too.

I have described this scene at some length in the hope that it might give a sense of the richness and scale of Harrison’s poem, as well as provide a small window into the kinds of creative decisions made by the team of filmmakers, from writing through to post-production. This early verse - equating to just ten lines in the printed version of the poem - shows both how much more there is to the poem than meets the reader’s eye in the book, and how the poem is uniquely adapted to the medium for which it was created: it is ‘TV-born’. When Heine/Harrison speaks to the viewer of turning away and ‘grabb[ing] for the remote’ it is nothing short of a public invasion of the private sphere. Harrison has stormed the viewer’s house and taken control of the front room.

³ In Harrison (2007) 159 the text has been corrected to ‘sung lied’ from ‘lieder’.
⁴ The poem is no. 27 in Heine’s cycle Heimkehr, ‘Homecoming’, in Heine (1826).
He dares his viewer to keep watching, to join him and hold the gaze of that which is not easy to look at, i.e. the petrifying ‘gaze of the gorgon’.

As Harrison writes in his preface to the poem in his collection *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, ‘The poem film follows [the statue’s] fortunes through the century from its eviction from the island [of Corfu] by the German Kaiser [Kaiser Wilhelm II], who bought the palace after the Empress [the Empress of Austria, Elizabeth, or ‘Sissy’, of Bavaria] was assassinated in 1899, to its present resting place at Toulon in France.’

This chapter aims to introduce—or reintroduce—the important body of work that Harrison produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s in collaboration with filmmakers and musicians, and in particular his audiovisual poems composed and created on location and especially for television. He has to date made twelve full documentary film/poems, and one film/poem feature, entitled *Prometheus* (1998). They are all unique and considerable achievements in their own rights, replete with their own complex and colourful worlds, and jam packed with the darker side of European history, current affairs and class politics. I have limited myself to just one poem *The Gaze of the Gorgon* – one that I think showcases Harrison’s fantastic contribution to a still somewhat underdeveloped poetic medium in which he has no equal. I shall illustrate my discussion with reference to a few sections of the film poem and attempt to set it in its formal context, illustrating some key features of the poet’s boldly experimental and extraordinarily ambitious poetic mode.

But before we get into discussion of the poem, I would like first to introduce two important forerunners to Harrison’s conception of the

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5 Harrison (1992) 58.
6 All can be read in Harrison (2007), and most can be viewed by appointment at the British Film Institute, and the British Library’s Sound and Image Archive.
‘film/poem’. The first was born—like Harrison—in Britain in the 1930s, and the second in 1970s USSR—where Harrison would also coincidentally find himself—but both were operating within a stylistic tradition enriched by the pioneering works in cinematic montage by the early Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Dziga Vertov. In 1936, the General Post Office film unit produced what has become a classic of British documentary film, *Night Mail*. It is most famous for its poetic sequence written by W.H. Auden and set to music Benjamin Britten (19:40 – 22:07). The film was a collaboration between the leading (and left-leaning) British artists and filmmakers of the day.7 [FIG 2] When you watch the sequence, the oily RP British voices you hear are those of the much-lauded Scottish filmmaker John Grierson and the Wiltshire-born filmmaker Stuart Legg—two other pioneers of the documentary film world.8 Harrison tells us that in addition to the films of Eisenstein, the experimental documentaries made by Grierson’s GPO film unit were those to which he was drawn as a student at Leeds University, where he studied Classics.9 In his writing about his collaboration with Harrison, the director of *Gorgon*, Peter Symes, takes pains to set *Night Mail*’s poetic montage sequence at the beginning of the tradition in which he and Harrison were working.10 Videos of the poetic sequence can be found easily online.11

Following is the second half of the famous Auden/Britten sequence:

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7 On the influence of Soviet filmmaking on Interwar Britain, see Sexton (2008).
8 On Grierson see Ellis (2000). On his international influence see Druick & Williams (2014).
9 Harrison (2007) x.
11 Reproductions of varying quality can be found on YouTube. The British Film Institute (BFI) Screen Online service also provides access via [http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/530415](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/530415) (last accessed 1 November 2017). *Night Mail* is also included in the BFI DVD compilation ‘We Live in Two Worlds: The GPO Film Unit Collection Volume 2’. For more about the film see, e.g. Anthony (2007) and the BFI DVD *Soviet Influence: From Turksib to Night Mail* (2012).
All Scotland waits for her:

In the dark glens, beside the pale-green sea lochs.

Men long for news.

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,

Letters of joy from the girl and the boy,

Receipted bills and invitations

To inspect new stock or visit relations,

And applications for situations

And timid lovers’ declarations

And gossip, gossip from all the nations,

News circumstantial, news financial,

Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,

Letters with faces scrawled in the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins, and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands
Notes from overseas to Hebrides
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
The cold and official and the heart’s outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

_Thousands are still asleep_

_Dreaming of terrifying monsters..._¹²

Some of those ‘dreaming of terrifying monsters’ may well have been dreaming about the petrifying figure of Medusa, from Greek myth—the monstrous protagonist of Harrison’s _Gaze of the Gorgon_, and therefore this chapter.

The collaborative creative process, rhythmical montage style and editing techniques show _Night Mail_ to have been an important forerunner to Harrison’s film/poetry. It was not, however, concerned with reflecting human suffering and atrocity, which was a major preoccupation of Harrison’s film/poems and _Gorgon_ in particular. For that deeper kind of reflective gaze we ought to turn to the 1975 Soviet feature film _Mirror_ by Andrei Tarkovsky.

It just so happened that Harrison was in Moscow at the time this film was

¹² 00:21:18 - 00:22:07.
released, and he watched it with its leading lady, Margarita Terekhova. In *Mirror* Tarkovsky—without explanation and in some ways reminiscent of the Homeric simile—weaves archival footage into his narrative. Twice he incorporates a voiceover of his father, the poet Arseniy Tarkovsky, reading his liltingly melancholic verse. The experience of watching this film—Harrison himself tells us—made a huge impression on him. He felt that ‘the stark documentary and the poetic were interdependent. The film moved from colour to black and white, from lyrical fields to newsreels of the Spanish Civil War and more extended footage of the Red Army crossing Lake Sivash during the Soviet advance of 1943’.  

The footage of Lake Shivash was shot by a man who was killed that very day, and poignantly features ordinary men half walking, half wading through a lake, with no apparent end or goal in sight. Precious few soldiers survived the advance. While they trudge, Tarkovsky’s father Arseny reads his poem ‘Zhizn’, Zhizn’ (or ‘Life, Life’), a reflection on immortality, which states ‘On earth there is no death. All are immortal… All is immortal. No need to be afraid of death’. As the footage changes from archival to modern—a transition the continuity of the verse aids—he reads: ‘I would readily pay with my life / For a safe place with constant warmth’.

Harrison remembers that although he could not understand much of the Russian (there were no subtitles), he could ‘hear the strong metre and the rhymes of the poem, and the combination went deep into my heart’. I urge the reader to seek out these two poetic sequences. These seminal verse voice

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14 The poem is well translated by Virginia Rounding in Arseny Tarkovsky (2000) 47-8.
15 Tarkovsky (1976) 00:59:27 – 01:03:16, and especially 01:02:40.
16 Harrison (2007) xvi.
17 For the first, see note 641 above, and for the second, the official Mosfilm version is freely available online, direct link in Bibliography.
overs provide the formal and aesthetic context for Harrison’s work in the film poem. They show that although Harrison certainly pioneered the large scale, stand-alone, TV poem, he was both directly and indirectly influenced by Soviet film-making.

In a 1997 feature on Channel 4’s *Film Night*, Harrison in interview said:

The film poem for me grew out of a dissatisfaction with the way… when my poetry, the kind of poetry which I write for books and so on, had been put on television, I had been reading and someone had gone out to find images to put to it, and these are often appallingly chosen… So, I began to see that there was a close correspondence in the way rhythm unfolded in film and rhythm unfolded in strict verse metrical systems we use in poetry… In filming you also begin to understand what kind of shots suit certain kinds of developing poetic structure… Compared with the circulation of a book of poetry, then a film poem on Channel Four or BBC 2 has huge accessibility compared to a readership of poetry. And I would like to feel that I’ve worked to make things accessible enough to be shown anywhere.\(^\text{18}\)

Harrison thus explains his attraction to the film/poetry medium, given a few glimpses into the creative process, and spoken about the dramatic new reach that TV can give to poetry. This would have had a strong appeal to Harrison, since he is and has always been a writer of ‘public poetry’ and poetry with a

\(^{18}\) Channel Four *Film Night* (3 June 1997).
political agenda. If it cannot help does not then art become, in Harrison’s words, ‘just another dope’, leaving ‘the Gorgon in control / of all the freedoms of the soul’?\(^{19}\) The bard as well as any reader of world poetry knows that poetry has had and may at a moment’s notice acquire again important political agency – in addition to the personal transformative potential it has to contextualise high emotion and change the way individuals think and feel about the world and societies in which they live. Although poetry may also be just another dope, it does not have to—and perhaps should not—limit itself to this alone. Just such a lesson might be learned by young writers and artists from the study of Harrison’s life and works.

The project of bringing people face to face with the barely bearable aspects of reality stands as something of an antidote to such reactionary poisons as political inactivity and ignorance. It may also be considered as an ambitious form of social psychotherapy. The ability to collectively visit our society’s sites of trauma, and to demystify and learn from them, rather than suppress or be petrified by them – is something Harrison was clearly exploring. But more on that below. Harrison was and is not interested in writing for literary or artistic elites. He has kept a cautious distance from what he has called the ‘corporate poetry world’. This makes sense when you consider, as Harrison does, that poetry is for everyone and it may do great things. He has also remained admirably committed to exposing the deeper roots of terror, be that imperialism, racism, or religious fundamentalism. This fearless commitment has brought him into very real danger on more than one occasion. His polemic film/poem, for example, against the notorious fatwa of

\(^{19}\) Harrison (1992) 62.
1989, which pronounced a death sentence on the writer Salman Rushdie for his 1988 book *The Satanic Verses*—was broadcast on BBC 1, at prime time. This powerful film/poem, *The Blasphemers’ Banquet*—a broadside on the fatwa and religious fanaticism in general—was seen by millions of viewers up and down the country.

But, I want to focus on *The Gaze of the Gorgon* and particularly on the way that the film poem can provide a platform onto, or a moment in which a poet can bring their viewer face to face with atrocity. To do this effectively the poem must to some extent defuse the natural aversive, or even dissociative reactions to such things. How can poetry and film/poetry in particular, strike a tone that allows for the rational experience of reality in its most hideous forms? Again, I call upon the poet to summarise:

One of the reactions people have when they look at authentic or created footage of terror is they turn away. And it seemed to me that, once again, if the word, if it was seductive enough and powerful enough, could make the ear, as it were, go into close-up and take the imagination further than it would have gone had it simply been presented with the raw archive. More than any other of his film poems, *The Gaze of the Gorgon* attempts – and I think generally succeeds – to create this synesthetic ‘close-up’ effect on the horrors of the 20th century—from the brutality of the World Wars, through the

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20 It was aired by BBC TV 1’s programme *Byline* on 31st July 1989.
21 Channel Four *Film Night* (3 June 1997).
‘ghettos, gulags and genocide’, right up to the Gulf War, neo-Nazism and the heroin addiction of disaffected Frankfurt youth, whose glazed looks are presented by Harrison as the barbarous by-product of unresolved trauma and the superficially civilising force of ECU-land capitalism.

This summary will no doubt sound improbably strange to anyone unfamiliar with the poem, in whatever form: the levels of historical parallelism are high. It is a complex poem with an astonishingly broad historical sweep, but it is also quite a long poem, with a running time of around an hour, and with the poet as guide, the viewer is not thrown off by the complexity.

Another potential pitfall could have been sensory and emotional overload, since the viewer is continually presented with differently manifested forms of the Gorgon’s gaze, or the horrors of 20th-century Europe. There are, however, well-placed moments of unvoiced montage and, of course, Tunstall’s soprano—which acts as a kind of refrain for the whole piece—not to mention the odd wry joke. These all allow much-needed moments of decompression.

Unity is established through the use of a single voice (i.e. that of Harrison/Heine), the same four-beat metre throughout, and the presence of a steady overarching narrative in which the same characters and ideas recur. Tunstall’s operatic vocals in Heine’s German have by the end morphed almost imperceptibly into Harrison’s own English iambic tetrameters.

As will have been gathered by my description of the opening sequence above, another consistent feature of the poem is the tight control the poet has on our vision. We are constantly watching some statue or figurative frieze watching other things, both in its immediate surroundings and wherever the

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23 ECU stands for European Currency Unit, the precursor to the Euro.
24 For a good discussion of the poem see Rowland (2001) 69ff.
archival footage or historic photographs take us. Harrison’s heavy use of ecphrasis, or the verbal description of visual art, finds its natural home on the TV screen. Edith Hall has written about Harrison’s use of statuary in *Loiners* (1970) and *Palladas* (1975). This is just one technique which encourages these poetic links to emerge, for it is a way of seeing, not only a way of writing. His body-snatching of statues was not, as we might have expected, born in his multimedia compositions.$^{25}$

The interplay between image and word, as Harrison has often said, is easy to do badly, and hard to do well. Through their practice, he and his experienced team of documentary makers have really ‘written the book’ on how to do this effectively, enabling the images to take their place in the hermeneutic process on a level pegging with the words. Peter Symes, in this volume, writes about Harrison’s thrilling immediacy of response to his surroundings on shoot. The high contingency factor of what was essentially improvisation on shoot speaks to the confidence of the bard in his craft, and occasions his film poems to soar like much of Harrison’s other poetry through the uncanny and often exhilarating interconnectedness of things. At 31:49 Harrison presents highly disturbing images—stills of the faces of German gas victims—directly into the narrative of the poem. Heine, the first person narrator, presents them in an interactive way. The language is pared back. The lines end-stopped and metrically simple:

> The tragic mask of ancient days
> looked with eyes that never closed

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$^{25}$ Hall (2018). Harrison (2017) 469 himself writes that he uses statues as one of the ways he ‘tests the traditions of European culture against the most modern destructive forces’.
straight into the gorgon’s gaze
and sang Man’s history through its throes.

But now, where is she, when we need her?
Tragedy’s mask has changed its style
Lips like these won’t sing my lieder.²⁶
They’ve forgotten how to smile.

What poems will this mouth recite?
There’ll be no Schumann sung from this.
Before these Germans went to fight
they’d been beautiful to kiss.

This is the Kaiser’s gorgon choir,
their petrifaction setting in,
grunting to the barbed-wire lyre,
gagging on snags of Lohengrin.²⁷

By referring to the photographs directly, using demonstrative pronouns, e.g.
‘lips like these’ and ‘This is the gorgon choir’, Harrison builds the visual
inextricably into the hermeneutic plane of the poem. At moments such as this
the poem can least effectively be represented in textual form. The poem reads
as if it has something missing—which of course it does. In a book that
Harrison notes was an important influence on his film work, the Soviet film-

²⁶ Harrison (2007) 171: ‘But where is she when she sees our need? / … / Lips like these
won’t sing my lied’.
²⁷ Harrison (2007) 171. Wagner’s Lohengrin was first performed in 1850.
maker Andrei Tarkovsky writes: ‘The literary element in a film is smelted; it ceases to be literature once the film has been made. Once the work is done, all that is left is the written transcript, the shooting script, which could not be called literature by any definition. It is more like an account of something seen related to a blind man.’

The still images of deformed faces are given movement through pans and zooms, using what has long been referred to as the Ken Burns effect, after the famous US documentary filmmaker. This effect can be almost unperceivably subtle, containing very little movement into, around, or away from the still image, but at this point in the Gaze of the Gorgon it is far from subtle. The images are given a relatively large distance to move over a short time, making for speedily moving shots with a strong directional quality. The effect of this is that it brings the visual element to the fore of the multimedia narrative. With the visual element high in the hermeneutic mix, the textual gives space. There is no music or sound effect until the sequence, running at just under a minute, is over.

On reflection, another detail that stands out from this powerful section is the question Harrison poses: ‘Where is Tragedy?’ And why, we might ask, do we need her? Why should we hold the Gorgon’s gaze at all, when our base instincts tell us not to? Are we to believe that the positive effects of this confrontation outweigh the traumatic experience and once-upon-a-time perceived dangers of rationalizing atrocity?

28 Tarkovsky (1986) 134.
29 Adorno’s much quoted, misquoted and contested claim that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, on which see Harrison (2017) 186 and 516. Adorno actually wrote, in his Prisma in 1955, ‘nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch’ – ‘to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno (1977) 30). For a recent discussion of Adorno and this famous
To sing ‘Man’s history through its throes’, however, is absolutely central to Harrison’s ambition in poems such as these. In his Introduction to the 2007 film poem collection, he calls upon the authority of the psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, who has written extensively on the causes and behavioural effects of committing and surviving atrocity. Harrison writes of ‘the deeply numbing effect’ atrocity commonly has and quotes Lifton’s call for artists to discover a ‘theatre that can imagine the end of the world and go beyond that… [a theatre] that can believe in tomorrow’. ³⁰ It sounds to me,’ Harrison reflects, ‘like a call for the rebirth of tragedy’. This comment is itself allusive, pointing to Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy in which the philosopher explains that Dionysiac art ‘forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified by the vision’. ³¹ In the 1992 Bloodaxe collection, the poem carries as an epitaph a version of this very line from Nietzsche, indicating that Harrison at some level saw his poem as a revival of Dionysiac art and the spirit of Greek tragedy in the televisual age. The Gorgon poet’s desire to face down terror in his work appears to be an attempt towards some kind of global redemption for the evils spilt on 20th-century Europe.

In The Gaze of the Gorgon Harrison holds for us the horrifying gaze in more ways than simply marrying up traumatic footage with a seductive tone. He also adopts a generalizing and unifying symbolic system. Rowland has referred to this as Harrison’s ‘mythopoeic’ approach, which allows for the high levels of historical parallelism. ³² Harrison gives the major ‘dehumanizing’

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³¹ Nietzsche (1993) 80. For discussion of this see Rowland (2001) 74-75.
³² Rowland (2001) 70.
powers of the world, as experienced in the 20th century, a single emblem or abstract agent. And this agent comes in the shape of the mythic gorgon, Medusa—and in particular one from the 6th century BCE dug up on Corfu by the Kaiser, which once stood at the center of the pediment of the Temple of Artemis.

As luck would have it, at the very beginning of the film poem, Harrison gives us another source of this conceit. In the opening credits he shows an epigraph from the French philosopher Simone Weil’s *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*. It reads: ‘To the same degree, those who use force and those who endure it are turned to stone.’\(^{33}\) Her essay on force in the *Iliad* was written in 1939 during the Nazi occupation of France and the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. She writes memorably about the death of Hector as an example of ‘force’ in its grossest form – the force that turns humans into things, into stone, by killing them: ‘Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. […] The hero becomes a *thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust […]. The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered to us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero’s head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends.’\(^{34}\) But force, she explains, can also petrify without killing, and as Harrison’s epigraph picks up – and Lifton’s work on those who commit atrocity supports – it will petrify both the victim and the wielder of the force in equal measure.\(^{35}\) Weil called Homer’s *Iliad* ‘the purest and the loveliest of mirrors’,\(^{36}\) reflecting the undiluted horror of human experience. If


\(^{34}\) Weil (2005) 3-4.

\(^{35}\) Lifton (1986) *passim*.

\(^{36}\) Weil (2005) 3.
we were to look to Weil’s essay to learn both why she thought the Greek epic and the *Iliad* in particular was such a good mirror, and what the mirror’s function might actually be, we are largely frustrated. She gestures towards conclusions, but we are certainly left with more questions than answers.

The ‘Greek’, or ‘epic’ genius appears to be genius due to the fact that it shows an awareness that ‘there is no refuge from fate’, a knowledge that one should not ‘admire force’ nor ‘hate the enemy’, nor ‘scorn the unfortunate’. If we go along with the idea that the best art, like Weil’s reifying, petrifying ‘force’, has a transformative effect – then what is it? And what does it transform us from, and what into? The former we can assume is that untransformed state, the one in which (if we are not careful) we all find ourselves ‘now’: that of the unenlightened, un-Greek, un-genius human. But what do we become through exposure to atrocity without petrification? Where force turns us to stone, what does the creation and use of mirrors actually do? In the Medusa myth, Perseus’ reflective shield enables the hero to avoid looking directly at the monster in order to kill it. But what of mirror-art, which encourages to look in spite of the danger?

The simplest answer seems to be that such artworks allow us both to avoid petrifaction and to see atrocity for what it is. In other words, to hold the gorgon’s gaze enables us to see the world as it is, and to come to terms with its evils, thus giving us a fighting chance of avoiding them, or (better) defeating them. Another answer might come from that folklore tradition of ‘giving a monster a name’, giving it a form, which allows it to be contextualised, or given some compartmentalising frame. War, for example, (at least used to)

37 Weil (2005 [1940]) 32-5.
take[s] place on a battlefield, and most people do not grow up in a battlefield, and therefore to some extent feel safe. It is there, not here. We fear the dark, for what might be in it. If we flood the darkness with light and get to know what is in it, we will quickly learn that it is not to be feared, or at least we will begin to quantify and delimit its scariness. The experience of real horror within the frame of art, or within the frame of storytelling, allows us to get to know it without falling victim to it. It is a form of inoculation. Seeing things for what they are allows us to challenge them. Seeing the homeless in the cardboard boxes outside the National Theatre, and acknowledging their presence (as Harrison did in the National Theatre production of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*) goes some way towards alleviating homelessness. Showing the dangerous insanity of religious fanaticism of all colours (as Harrison does in *Blasphemers’ Banquet*, 1982) goes some way towards protecting people from it. The instinct to look away, to not know, to escape – is the act of cowards. Look and see and do something about it. That seems to be the message, at least in Harrison’s reception of Weil’s beautiful but mercurial theorising.

I believe that, maybe, poetry, the word at its most eloquent, is one medium which could concentrate our attention on our worst experiences without leaving us with the feeling, as other media can, that life in this century has had its affirmative spirit burnt out.39

38 See above, 000.
From Harrison’s theoretical crucible, then—in which Weil’s ‘epic force’, Nietzsche’s ‘Dionysiac art’ and Lifton’s tonic for trauma are treated with extraordinary creative intensity—emerges this remarkable poem. A poem that demands its viewers confront, and contemplate, atrocity and fears they perhaps did not even know they had. Importantly, it also creates a space in which movement and fluidity can be brought back into those petrifying fears, and ultimately imagine a world beyond them.

Harrison alludes to Weil’s essay inside the body of the poem too by placing her influential pacifist reading of Homer into the minds of both the narrator—Heinrich Heine—and Elisabeth of Bavaria, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, or Sissy (as she was nicknamed), whose favourite summer palace was the Achilleion on Corfú. Weil’s work haunts the extended ‘ecphrastic’ sequence in which Heine takes the viewer on an interpretative tour around the German artist Franz Matsch’s oil painting ‘The Triumph of Achilles’, which constitutes the fresco on the upper level of the main hall of the Achilleion palace. The film crew took panning and zooming shots of the painting in the Achilleion, and Harrison skillfully directs our gaze:

FIG3 * Caption: Still from The Gaze of the Gorgon (1992) 23:32, showing ‘Franz Matsch’s Triumph of Achilles, 1892’

The Kaiser, though a Homer freak, despised the victim and the weak
and looking at Sissy’s picture saw
Achilles riding high in war.

For him the focus of the painting
was triumph, not some woman fainting,
but Sissy always used to see
Hector’s wife, Andromache,
who has to gaze as Achilles hauls
her dead husband round Troy’s wall.

The soon-to-be-defeated rows
of Trojans watch exultant foes
who bring the city to the ground
then leave it just a sandblown mound,
but the Greeks who’ll watch Troy blaze
are also in the Gorgon’s gaze,
the victims and the victimizer,
conquered and the conquering Kaiser,
Greeks and Trojans, Germans, Jews,
those who endure and those who use
the violence, that in different ways
keeps both beneath the Gorgons gaze.\textsuperscript{40}

The final lines of this sequence are intimately related to Weil’s central concept
of the ‘epic genius’ of \textit{The Iliad}. Weil closes her essay with what must have
been the perfect bait to hook a classicist and poet like Harrison. She writes:

\textsuperscript{40}Harrison (2007) 168.
‘Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question.’

That Harrison’s film poems are not widely available now is lamentable. Not only are they remarkable poems that belong in the public realm, but they may also be considered the ‘missing link’ in the evolution of contemporary film and video poetry. They are, conceptually as well as formally, streets ahead of the vast majority of their modern counterparts, which overwhelmingly tend towards supplication of all other elements before the textual. This small body of exceptionally well balanced and professionally created poems has the potential to lead contemporary film and video poets out of their loop of reinventing the film-poetry wheel, and into more ambitious and equal marriages of word, sound and image.

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41 Weil (2005 [1940]) 37.