
Blobs in Tartan Colours: Margaret Tait's Painted Eightsome

By Kayla Parker

This essay explores the ways in which the Orcadian film-poet Margaret Tait's creative processes, including the physical engagement between her body and the filmmaking materials, effect and inflect the interplay of Julia Kristeva's concepts in her hand-painted audiovisual artwork *Painted Eightsome*, in which the music of a Scottish reel is combined with animated imagery painted frame-by-frame onto clear 35mm film. Methodologically, I am responding to the material itself and the materiality of semiotic and symbolic in Tait's 'painted surface' as a maker of direct animation films, attuned to certain types of processes, in order to generate a particular reading of the work.

As a creative artist, Tait used a range of forms. She wrote prose and poetry, and made short films, usually shooting on 16mm with her clockwork Bolex camera. In her cinematic work she explored an array of highly experimental techniques, including painting and scratching on the film surface, from the beginning of her filmmaking career in Italy in the early 1950s. Tait regarded her short films, of which she made over 30 across almost half a century, as 'film poems'. Notable for her experimentation, improvisation, and innovation, she pursued a uniquely individual and independent engagement with filmmaking in relation to concerns and interests arising from her concern with the everyday. In her hand-painted works she engaged directly with the materiality of film and the creative potential of its physical properties. *Painted Eightsome*, made over a period of 14 to 15 years and completed in 1970, combines music and painting within the artform of poetic film. The running time of the film, just over six minutes,^[1] is determined by the length of the accompanying music. The frames of the 35mm filmstrip are delineated with hand-drawn lines and have been painted with aniline dyes^[2] in a range of vibrant colours.^[3]

In her foreword to Sarah Neely's book *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings* (2012), the poet Ali Smith refers to Tait as a "film-poet",^[4] in acknowledgement of her duality as an artist who created films that are visual poems and wrote poems that conjured cinematic images. Poetic language is distinct from our everyday verbal communication, in that our attention is drawn to the words through which meaning is constructed.^[5] To use Margaret Tait's own words, "In poetry, something else happens". The words are no longer transparent, we become aware of the language being used and the words themselves, their sounds and rhythms and

juxtapositions.^[6]

The philosopher Julia Kristeva's views are aligned to those of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in her understanding that the speaking subject is a duality divided into a conscious mind and an unconscious mind.^[7] However, she positions the body within discourse and argues that we should consider unconscious and conscious processes of language, as both are needed to create meaning. For me, Kristeva's re-imagining of Freud and Lacan, and her theorisation of the connection between mind and body, suggests a conceptual framework within which the film poem *Painted Eightsome* may be 'read' in order to open out thinking about Tait's practice. Kristeva's emphasis is on the maternal and pre-oedipal in the constitution of subjectivity, in that she is interested in the development of subjectivity before Freud's oedipal stage or Lacan's 'mirror' stage, and foregrounds the interplay between the 'symbolic' structure of language and the 'semiotic' of rhythms and the maternal body.^[8] In *Painted Eightsome*, the dancing music of the Scottish reel that drives the animated imagery forwards, together with the materiality of the 'hand-made' visuals, foregrounds the presence of the filmmaker and her making processes. In addition, the continually mutating pictorial forms of Tait's poetic moving image language convey an 'open' subjectivity, enabling a cascade of meanings to be generated through the interplay of the viewer's conscious and unconscious.

My own critically reflective praxis as an artist filmmaker gives me a spectatorial perspective on Margaret Tait's direct animation that is inflected by my 'know how,' the term used by Robin Nelson for the "practical knowing-through-doing" of embodied knowledge and understanding that is acquired through practice.^[9] I have an understanding of film as a physical substance and the processes of direct animation filmmaking from working with the materiality of photochemical analogue film for over 20 years.

In Greek, a spectator or onlooker is *θεατής*, from which the word 'theory' comes. Philosopher Hannah Arendt states that thinking derived from Greek philosophy rests on the premise that only the spectator, who is removed from the action taking place, is in a position to see and comprehend the entirety of what is occurring before their eyes: "as a spectator you may understand the 'truth' of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is the withdrawal from participating in it ... only the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole play - as the philosopher is able to see the kosmos as a harmonious ordered whole."^[10]

My position as a spectator is informed by my 'know how.' When I watch Tait's film poem *Painted Eightsome*, her work 'speaks' to my body. I

cannot 'un-know' the embodied knowledge of direct animation filmmaking acquired through years of experience. As an artist filmmaker, my research is practice-led; as a researcher, I adopt a dynamic multi-layered approach that modulates across the modes of maker and spectator, accentuating the fluidity between these positions.

Tait described *Painted Eightsome*, completed in 1970 and made by her over a period of 14 to 15 years, as:

"An eightsome reel played by Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society, recorded in about 1955 - 1956, later transferred to 35mm optical stock with clear picture,^[11] and gradually painted over the years. Eights of different things - figures, antlers, or sometimes just blobs in tartan colours - dance their way through the figure of the reel."^[12]

The eightsome reel is both traditional fiddle music and its accompanying energetic dance, a complex combination of a Scottish reel and the quadrille. Intended for four couples to dance at social gatherings, such as weddings, the beat is fast and regular, driving the motion of the dancers ever onward as they twirl and interlink. The dancers form into different positions and move to counts of eight beats, such as: all holding hands in a circle for eight steps and then moving back to their original positions, women and men each making a chain, with women moving clockwise and men anti-clockwise, and individual women taking turns to dance alone in the centre of the circle while the rest of the dancers move around.

Tait's film has received few public screenings, but a digitised version is freely available for viewing online at the National Library of Scotland's Scottish Screen Archive website. Here, at the *Full record for 'PAINTED EIGHTSOME'* page,^[13] a doughy white face with a quizzical look peers from a small video window, pressed against an almost-square pane of tropical turquoise. Despite the pixelation that presents the image as tiled, like a mosaic, I can discern that this is an image painted by hand with a brush using colours in liquid form. In the upper left corner, deep cerulean brushstrokes form the letters: PAI / NT / E.

An azure curl with an inner crotchet of orange-yellow curves around to make the left eye, the right eye a swirl of diluted orange squash. These shapes remind me of musical notes seen in a mirror, one crotchet or quarter note with its stem upmost, like the letter 'b' makes the left eye; the other crotchet, the right eye, has its stem pointing down, like 'g'. The artist has left a dot of amber in the centre of each eye. Amber on cobalt makes greenish cheeks: slashes for the left cheek, a circular swab for the right. The muted peach hook of the right eye reaches down to suggest a nose, and the mouth sits on the windowsill as parallel strokes of pale gold and ultramarine.

As I look, I respond to the work as a maker, and become aware that my body is following the actions of the artist's hand at the time of creating this image. My fingers' memory feels their pressure on the paintbrush as Tait loads the sable hairs with liquid colour, pauses momentarily to concentrate the energy, then releases by stroking the surface of the picture. She has created the face from the transparent field of the unmarked film surface which appears here as a white ground, patching in a blue wash at the frame edges to leave a rough oval free of colour except for a suggestion of features. The face looks surprised and melancholic, as if caught inside the confines of a digital prison cell, its window branded National Library of Scotland / Scottish Screen Archive in white letters at the top right hand corner. This is accompanied by a white icon of an open laptop, or a book open at empty pages, pictured in stasis, caught in the act of flying away through an imaginary sky. So far, I have looked through the surface of my screen to the space beyond, where the face stuck in the frame implores me to press that flat dark grey square with a white arrowhead facing right, placed dead centre, seemingly on top of the picture. I adjust my focus, then click to set the face free, and animate...

Neely and Riach, among others, place Tait within the international avant-garde and consider her film poetry to share a common heritage with moving image work made by other avant-garde filmmakers such as Maya Deren.^[14] They observe that a "fecund relationship between cinema and poetry ... developed through her experimental film work"^[15] and consider that the constraints of budget and equipment she experienced throughout most of her filmmaking career influenced the development of her unique film language. She was driven through necessity to economical and resourceful ways of capturing and representing the world cinematographically "in a way comparable to written poetry"^[16].

Margaret Tait said of her filmmaking: "The kind of cinema I care about is at the level of poetry - in fact - it has been in a way my life's work making film poems."^[17] Her work explored the lyrical potency of the everyday, and sought to reveal the transcendence of the 'ordinary' she intuited through her deep connection to the things, places and people she loved. She often quoted the poet Lorca's notion of "stalking the image"^[18] to explain her own position as a film-poet. Tait practiced an acute observation of the world and her embodied and knowing psychic responses to being in place, patiently lying in wait, hunting 'mind images'.

Tait's partner Alex Pirie wrote the following about her filmmaking in 1977:

In 25 years of unremitting application to the film medium, Margaret Tait has evolved the style that allows her to display and offer what Alfred Kazin, writing of Simone Weil, called 'a loving attentiveness to all the

living world'. That definition of her philosophy, of her method, holds true, whether the setting is an Edinburgh street, the banks of an Orkney burn, a domestic interior or a human face. Unlike so much that is called experimental and avant-garde, her films are not merely exercises in perception. Her film images are accessible (A thistle is invariably a thistle), they are of the everyday, and, at one level, a presentation of things as they are. But, in their framing, in their rhythmical patterning, in their duration, those images offer a vision of the mystery and ambiguity with which so-called common objects are saturated.^[19]

Her insights into her own creative process as a film-poet can be seen in Tait's comments about her work. Of her film poem *Where I Am is Here* (1964), Tait wrote: "my aim was to construct a film with its own logic, its own correspondences within itself, its own echoes and rhymes and comparisons, all through close exploration of the everyday, the commonplace".^[20] Tait's notes for her seven short film poems,^[21] released in 1974 under the collective title *Colour Poems*, indicate the organic, evolutionary, 'to and fro' relationship between experience and psychic processing in the generation of film poetry: "memory gets somewhat lost in the present observation, although it never disappears, and there are reverberations back ... Out of one's own memory and thought one then finds (or arranges) the external scenes which can be filmed and made into something else again."^[22]

Kristeva's paradigm of 'semanalysis' (*sémanalyse*) combines de Saussure's semiology, or semiotics (*la sémiotique*), with Freud's psychoanalysis. She explains that the 'bodily drives' of the unconscious display their energy through language: Kristeva's 'living' language is interwoven with the unconscious and its drives (energies/forces). The semiotic oscillates with the symbolic, it is preverbal, feminine, connected to the body, and associated with the maternal (although it is available to the masculine). Tait allowed the memories, dreams, and imaginings of her unconscious to emerge, catching these 'mind images' and then setting them free within the dynamic visual poetry of her films. When I watch Tait's film poem *Painted Eightsome*, I feel her connectivity with the 'living world' she experienced and I am touched by its vibrant energies. I am, in effect, feeling 'affect', a collective term that embraces both feelings and emotions. When these embodied processes reach consciousness, they are perceived as feelings, and emotions when they are experienced as more complex physical sensations. Watching *Painted Eightsome*, I am 'brought back' to my body, and it is through this interwoven conscious and unconscious processing that I, the spectator, create meaning and the work becomes meaningful, significant, to me.

It seems to me that the playfulness of the animated imagery in Tait's film evokes Kristeva's semiotic, which has its origins in childhood play, before

language. The painted drawings are unsophisticated and communicate the immediacy of Tait's response as a film-poet to the everyday things of the world, and her remembered experience of the musical dance of the eightsome reel. She applies sufficient motor control to her mark-making within the 35mm frame to suggest shapes that can be recognised by the audience, but these childlike images have an affinity to Kristeva's pre-oedipal *chora*, her term for the symbiotic dyad of mother and child. The dyes, in the colours of Scottish tartan, were chosen for their affect, the feelings they generate and their emotional impact. *Painted Eightsome* is reminiscent for me of our first coming to language as children, and becoming part of the socialised world. The animated imagery presents a child's view of the world, a sensorial encounter of kinaesthetic immersion that is initially experienced directly in relation to the mother's body. In contrast, the formal structure and complex choreography of the dance aligns with the Kristevan symbolic, which can be seen as the child's post-oedipal identity, when the child separates from the maternal, acquires language and submits to the 'rules' of the masculine in order to enter the social world of patriarchy. The eightsome reel is a dance for eight people, it is an ordered activity governed by a specific series of moves that requires an individual to be socialised, to 'belong' to the symbolic order.

Through my encounter as a spectator, *Painted Eightsome* conveys a fluid intertwining of semiotic and symbolic. Kristeva's conceptualisation of the semiotic is as a pre-oedipal 'underground space' of bodily pulsations that interacts with, and gives meaning to, the 'empty' symbolic of syntax and grammar, and the judgement position of language is embodied by the energies of the semiotic rhythmic 'bodies' in motion. The animated coloured light enters my body and affects me, generating feelings of rhythmic motion, drawing forth sensory memories and tactile sensations and a deep, unspoken level of immersive engagement with the screen world of Tait's film. The play of the pictorial forms on the screen and my body's response to my experience of watching the film connects to Tait's own movements as she painted the artwork and her recollections of the Scottish reel, woven through with the oscillating rhythms of the maternal *chora*.

Film has a specific size, weight, thickness, and material composition. Small rectangular holes punched through the material at regular intervals have rounded corners to avoid tearing when the film is advanced through the teeth, or sprockets, that pull or turn the strip. The picture area shown on the screen is within a 'frame'. These 'picture' frames are arranged in a ladder formation along the width of the filmstrip, the rungs acting as a line between the bottom of one frame and the top of another. Each frame occupies the same area as the other when the filmstrip is projected or seen in a mechanical viewer. The filmstrip is moved at a regular pace so that the small changes in the images are not

discernible by the spectator's brain as individual frames, but are perceived to be a continuous flickering stream of movement or change of shape, colour or texture. The symbolic of film's form and the controlled actions of its presentation therefore produces a structure which contains the semiotic of the marks within its frame borders, and creates a spectatorial experience of the moving image.

Photochemical analogue film has a material presence. Even if no image has been created photographically on the emulsion layer or marked by other means, the film surface on both sides picks up debris and detritus, dust, fluff, fibres and flakes of matter discarded from the body. The film is marked further through the touch of fingers and scratched by contact with hard objects and surfaces. Film only exists in a pure, pristine state when it emerges newly coiled and sealed in an airtight wrapping after its manufacture.

As a maker of films, when I watch *Painted Eightsome*, an immediate question is, 'How is this made?' From my position as a spectator, I can tell from the 'look' of the moving pictures on the screen that the imagery is painted by hand at a small scale, because of the quality of the brushstrokes (the traces of pressure and direction applied have resulted in changes of width and shape of the marks), and the imperfections caused by detritus caught in the coloured liquid medium used. From my 'know how', I understand that the artist has painted directly onto successive frames of movie film because of the visual 'shiver' produced by imperfect registration, and that the gauge used is 35mm because of the size of the flecks of dust and dirt embedded in the images, relative to the size of the frame. There is a pellucid quality to the colours onscreen that suggests the images were painted with dyes rather than with pigments.

The animated imagery of the title sequence unfolds, then a hiss and rustle on the soundtrack as the musicians of the Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society ready themselves and their instruments. A traditional Scottish reel begins, and the coloured figures appear to dance in time with the sound. To me, there seems to me to be a synchronous relationship between the up-and-down quick tempo of the music and the nimble shape shifting of the painted imagery. I want to know how Tait kept track of the music for this film during the decade and a half in which she painted the images, and how she contrived and maintained such a complex synthesis of audio and visual elements while she was making the animation.

According to Peter Todd, Tait worked through the visual elements of her films first, adding the sound components after the imagery was edited.^[23] Todd reports that, as an integral part of her filmmaking process, Tait would screen her 16mm work-in-progress to her partner Alex Pirie. This allowed her to experience her work 'within an audience' and to discuss

the films as they evolved over a period of months, or even across several years of intermittent production.

Todd comments on the importance of editing for Tait, and describes her process in terms of an 'evolution'.^[24] In filmmaking, Tait's post-production was iterative and practice-led. She would edit, project the work-in-progress to her partner Alex Pirie, discuss it, then resume editing. Her method involved a triangulated engagement: firstly herself working with the film material; then the reception of the projected rough cut by a critical audience of herself and Pirie, feedback from him and her own response as spectators; and finally she would return to editing, reflexively informed by feedback from Pirie, her own response, and their subsequent discussion. Todd explains also that Tait would incorporate film from previous projects and "often reworked and reused bits of film and sequences."^[25] She continually revised and re-edited her work, and there are several versions of many of her titles. For Tait, language is alive, and its heterogeneousness, its diversity and infinite possibilities, is stressed. The modalities co-exist: for Kristeva, the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, and in process; in Tait's film poems, film was material to be used, and creativity was fluid and constantly in process.

Other women makers of poetic film, such as Maya Deren and Marie Menken, share with Tait the key role of editing in the construction of their films. These artists also used the ambulatory hand-held camera as a 'seeing eye', feeling their way to capturing the world photographically in an intuitively choreographed dance. The filmmaker's body here in contact with the ground, the mobile camera in hand, her eye looking there through the viewfinder, and her body moving towards the framed image. Deren in particular used editing as a process of organisation and transfiguration, reinforcing visual rhythms, patterns of movement, the relationship between a performer and the space of filming and the film space seen within the frame.

However, the making of work for cinema through the direct animation techniques used by Tait for *Painted Eightsome* requires a different set of strategies and psychological processes. Here, the artwork is a continuous strip of 'found' 35mm film, the length of which is fixed by the soundtrack it contains: in order to retain the flow of the Scottish reel, the film cannot be physically edited. In contrast to Tait's methodology used in her 'photographic' work for cinema, for her films which were entirely hand-painted, the audio pre-existed the visual element: the music track was laid along the edge of a 35mm filmstrip, leaving the 'picture area' empty so that Tait could paint each frame using aniline dyes, intense colours that stain the analogue film base. The imagery of *Painted Eightsome* is created entirely through colour, which is for Kristeva, pure semiotic.^[26] The presence of the drive energies is a continual manifestation on the screen.

Even where Tait has used a line to 'contain' an infill of colour, the line is itself coloured, a gestural mark rather than a controlling perimeter. The pictorial forms are crudely sketched, the coloured squiggles suggest representation and their interpretation remains with the viewer - a wiggling hoop of reddish-brown becomes a worm, then the body of a writhing snake, as an exuberant kaleidoscope of carnival flags, bright yellow sun, forget-me-not blue sky, and swathes of rose pink, plays within the frame. For Kristeva, "all colours... have a non centred or decentring effect" and therefore bring the spectator back to the maternal *chora*.^[27]

I would suggest that Tait followed a similar 'evolutionary' method for her 'hand-made' films to that used in making her 'photographic' films, and that she and her partner would have viewed and reviewed *Painted Eightsome* 'in progress' at several times during its 15 year period of making. Whilst I have found no record of Tait owning a 35mm projector, Todd mentions that Tait edited her 16mm films on a pic sync, a film viewing device that allows the film-in-progress to be seen at speed and for its accompanying soundtrack to be heard. Once editing was completed, she then sent her films to London for sound dubbing and printing in the laboratory.^[28] It is likely, therefore, given her self-sufficiency and independence as a filmmaker, that she would have had a 35mm pic sync or other motorised editing device, such as a Moviola or Steenbeck flat-bed editing table, which allow the filmmaker to control the speed at which the film moves through the machine and enables the soundtrack encoded in the filmstrip to be heard at the same time as viewing the moving images. If this is not correct, then Tait could have arranged to have access to 35mm projection in a cinema, as she did for checking her 35mm *Calypso* filmprint when she moved to Edinburgh from Italy in 1954.

The self-reflexivity of Tait's methodology sustained her creative focus and the evolution of animated imagery over a lengthy period of time, during which she made several other films. From my 'know how' as an experienced practitioner, I would suggest that the symbolic structuring of the film's material specificities to enabled Tait to return repeatedly to the process of making the visual artwork, the semiotic drives within her body responding to the music as she conjured rhythmic patterns with her brush loaded with coloured dye, for almost one and a half decades. In addition, it seems to me that Tait demonstrates an integrated shifting between modes that is symbiotic, a form of 'dispersed subjectivity' described by Kristeva's 'subject-in-process', who, "accentuates *process* rather than identification, *projection* rather than desire, the *heterogenous* rather than the signifier, *struggle* rather than structure." (Author's emphasis)^[29] For *Painted Eightsome*, its process - the extended act of making - remains visible in the work and the space of the film frames in which the creation occurred; when projected, or viewed as a moving

image work on a screen, the spectator is aware of the filmic material and its materiality through the presence of brush marks and accumulations of detritus; it is heterogeneous – as a dynamic procession of continually evolving and mutating coloured shapes, its meaning is contingent; and struggle is evident in the instability of the pictorial elements, as the figures made of coloured dyes wrestle to emerge from the clear ground and continually refresh the imagery.

Additional research would be most welcome in order to confirm the methodology used by Tait for *Painted Eightsome* and *John MacFadyen (The Stripes in the Tartan)*, the artwork for which is contained on the first part of the same, unbroken roll of 35mm film with its optical soundtrack. Records available at the time of writing, by Winn and from the Scottish Screen Archive, and LUX, among others, indicate that Tait hand-painted these two films ‘consecutively’ between 1955 and 1970. The total length of the combined length of the artworks is given as 880 feet,^[30] with *John MacFadyen* having the first 316 feet of the roll and *Painted Eightsome* having the remaining 564 feet. From my ‘know how’ as an experienced practitioner of direct animation, I know that an artist can unravel hundreds of feet of 35mm film in order to work directly onto the surface of the film in a precise manner, without any specialist film equipment, although one must take care not to damage the sprocketholes, which are vulnerable. Also, the dyes can take several hours to dry, especially if colours are overlaid as they are in *Painted Eightsome*, and newly painted artwork must be left exposed to the air until all the moisture has evaporated, and the surface is no longer tacky, before ‘winding on’. From making *Calypso* with Peter Hollander’s assistance whilst in Rome, Tait was already an experienced practitioner in the art of painting on film, and Winn notes that Tait began work on *Painted Eightsome* shortly after *Calypso*, and it is likely that she used the same aniline dyes. However, from the records available to me, I cannot know for certain whether Tait was able to listen to the *Painted Eightsome* soundtrack during her making process – as I believe she did – and, if so, exactly how she did this.

Tait was familiar with the Len Lye’s *A Colour Box*, made in 1935 for the GPO Film Unit, and was inspired by this work, which chimed with her own ideas of making a film to a ‘musical beat’. From his conversations with Tait in the 1970s, Mike Leggett reports her as saying: “I had always enjoyed the Len Lye films which used to appear in the cinemas in the ‘30s... The use of sheer colour, screen-wide, coloured my idea of film (and perhaps colour) from then on.”^[31]

A Colour Box on a large cinema screen is a powerful experience, and stunned audiences around the world from its release in the mid-1930s. Horrocks considers it a “breakthrough film,” which “demonstrated the

potential of the direct method in such a thorough and sophisticated way that the paint-brush had to be accepted ... as a viable alternative to the camera.”^[32] Lye was drawn to experimental film by the potential the form offered for movement and colour, and used “expressionistic automatic drawing and free association techniques”.^[33] Although it is not known whether Tait had a deeper knowledge of Lye’s hand-made film practice, in particular his interest in Freud’s theories of the unconscious and psychoanalysis, it is clear that *A Colour Box* influenced Tait’s decision to paint visual music onto film. Joss Winn cites several similarities between Lye’s film and Tait’s first hand-painted work *Calypso*, such as, the adoption of the hand-painting process as a means of making a short film ‘on the cheap’ – because it didn’t require a camera and didn’t use much film stock; the exuberant rhythmic style of mark-making, and both films painted with the aniline dyes used in histology to study cell structures.^[34]

Tait was familiar also with the work of Scottish-born experimental animator Norman McLaren, including his innovatory techniques in expressing music as imagery through direct animation.^[35] His films inspired the making of her first hand-painted film *Calypso* (1955), which used as source material an unwanted 35mm optical track of some music, ‘found’ while she was in Rome. Lye’s *A Colour Box* was a pivotal influence for McLaren, who reported that he was “electrified and ecstatic” when he saw the film for the first time: “Apart from the sheer exhilaration of the film, what intrigued me was that it was a kinetic abstraction of the spirit of the music, and that it was painted directly onto the film.”^[36] This experience was such a powerful one for McLaren that he was compelled to watch the film over and over again at every opportunity, and said that he “felt like a drug addict”.^[37] McLaren’s reflection is resonant for me with the Kristevan *chora*, a pleasurable immersion in the materiality of existence, a chaotic swirl of undifferentiated feelings, needs and perceptions when one feels a ‘one-ness’ with the mother and the world.

McLaren was a pioneer in experimentation with film sound and developed a sophisticated notation system for creating music by marking the optical track area of a 35mm filmstrip, which he referred to as ‘animated sound’. I would suggest that Tait was aware of his use of the optical track to inform the painting of sequences within the picture frames of the filmstrip. There is a regular ‘beat’ marked along the edge of Tait’s 35mm artwork for *Painted Eightsome* – a painted mark along three frames at intervals of approximately every nine frames – which I think would be used during the making process as a visual reference for rhythm.^[38] Throughout the lengthy process of painting over nine thousand individual frames, the visual representation of the film’s sound was a constant presence.^[39] Tait was highly observant and attuned to small changes in things: “It’s the looking that matters, / The being prepared to see what there is to see. / Staring has to be done: / That I must do.”^[40] She looked at

the world in detailed close-up with an intensity of vision, and I believe she used the wavering lines of the optical track an additional guide or score as she painted the frames, though not necessarily in an analytical manner – the visual appearance of the miniature optical code’s symbolic structuring providing an opportunity for the embodied semiotic of the film-poet’s imaginary to emerge as chromatic mark-making.

Additionally, there is evidence that Tait had an interest in codes. Peter Hollander, Tait’s fellow student at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome and collaborator, remembers that she “devised an arcane system to indicate the opus numbers of our films in their titles”, which he referred to as “Margaret’s code”.^[41] I believe that Tait would have been interested in the visual coding of music within the 35mm filmstrip, and would respond to it during the protracted period in which she painted the frames. There is no evidence that Tait attempted a detailed analytical correlation between the visual waveform and the marks she made, and I am not suggesting this. Tait, with her acutely ‘peering’ eye, did refer to the variations of the sound wriggles as she painted. This affected her mark-making performance and reinforced the “elasticity and multiplicity of meaning” which, as Ali Smith observed, is embedded deep in Tait’s cinematic work.^[42]

So that the reader may gain a deeper understanding the translation processes by which live sound is recorded and then played back during the traditional making and presentation of a cinematic film such as *Painted Eightsome*, I describe the key stages of coding and decoding:

Music is played and recorded onto magnetic audiotape. Sound waves, produced in the air by the actions of the musicians’ bodies upon their instruments, vibrate the diaphragm of a microphone, which registers the changes in atmospheric pressure and converts them into a variable electric current. An electromagnet then represents the acoustic sound wave as magnetic particles of ferric oxide arranged on a thin plastic tape. This audio analogue is transposed cinematographically into juddering waves of light embedded within a perforated strip of cellulose acetate or polyester film: the audio waveforms are translated into a visual code, rendered photographically by the laboratory as an optical soundtrack printed throughout the length of the filmstrip next to the sprocket holes. This is an analogue of the stereo sound waves, their variations of loudness and frequency converted to changes in the shape of two clear (white) lines. In 35mm film the optical track takes the form of a pair of wavering clear lines within the black ground of the film stock, running alongside the perforations on the left hand side.^[43] These allow varying amounts of light to pass through: changes of brightness correspond to changes in volume and pitch. When decoded via the bright light of a projector or pic sync, the embedded optical track can then be heard by

the listener: the film projector converts the optical code to electrical pulses, which move the diaphragm of a loudspeaker, an electroacoustic transducer, to create changes in atmospheric pressure, audio waves which act upon the bodies of the listeners and re-embody the original sound.

The optical sound embedded in the *Painted Eightsome* filmprint is an analogue of the music. Its waveforms bear a direct relation to the original audio recording and to what the audience will hear 'played back' during projection. In the film, the animation is integrated with the sound and becomes visual music, a film poem in which the body's presence is reinforced by the highly mobile, intensely coloured imagery that seems inseparable from the Scottish reel.

My 'know how' suggests that the eightsome reel's swell of tiny waves, with its pattern of troughs and crests, informed the creation of the film's visuals in a similar way to that in which Tait's experiential observations were processed, embodied, then flowed... and became inscribed rhythmically and metaphorically in her poems. These short lines capture of the relentless pushing and pulling movements of the Orcadian sea in its watery connection to the Earth's lunar satellite: "It never gets anywhere except to where it came from, / But keeps up that regular surge and heave / Of the tides / As it hurls itself / for ever towards the moon".^[44]

Then, in these lines from another poem, she draws on a deep genetic and cultural memory to evoke the dominant force of the Vikings, who came first to Orkney at the end of the eighth century: "With the swift sides of their longships entering between two lips of water / And at speed rushing ... And the dream of the deepest sea in their eyes / Took them spinning down the coasts, / Ripping out into the ocean".^[45]

For Kristeva, human subjectivity is a dynamic open system 'driven' by the constant movement and 'ceaseless heterogeneity' of the maternal *chora* that underlies the process of subjectivity and 'significance', a term used by her to indicate the infinitely changeable, unbounded and never-ending vibrations of the drive energies, which transform language through an vibrant fluctuation of organisation and superabundance.

All Tait's work, both films and writing, carries many layers of meaning within it. This is evident particularly in her use of light. Throughout her career Tait was fascinated by the phenomenon of light and its perception, and was clearly aware that is electromagnetic radiation that has observable behaviours such as refraction and reflection, and with different colours being 'seen' because of absorption. In her poem *The Scale of Things*, she refers to the "stunning frequencies" that are absorbed close to the ground so that the "full light of the sun" becomes

calm, but not too blue.^[46] As well as her detailed observation of light and its affects in microcosm, Tait also possessed a ‘macrocosmic’ understanding of the seasonal rhythms and cyclical changes of light, particularly on Orkney. In her long form poem *Cave Drawing of the Water of the Earth and Sea*, Tait wrote of making “an abstract picture out of magic water”, and how a rainbow can be “water particles, refracted light, curvature of space” yet still “irrefutably a miracle.”^[47]

This deep knowingness of ‘how things work’, and the interconnectedness of the world and ourselves, can be clearly seen in these lines:

“The world is reeling out to its very utmost once again
Until it must shudder to stop and turn
And let the light back to us,
Back into the lower dark storeys and the foot of the valleys.
It is revolving in the darkest possible way now for us in the North,
And the time of all-light is half a year away”^[48]

Finally, to return to my point about Tait’s likely use of the 35mm filmstrip’s optical sound code to inform her mark-making for *Painted Eightsome*, in her poem *Light*, she refers directly to the electromagnetic waves of which light is constituted, with its final lines evoking Kristeva’s immersive semiotic:

“Did you say it’s made of waves?
Yes, that’s it.
I wonder what the waves are made of.
Oh, waves are made of waves.
Waves are what they are,
Shimmeringness,
Oscillation,
Rhythmical movement which is the inherent essence of all things.”
(Author’s emphasis)^[49]

In cinema, previous frames of films, ‘aspects of experience’, are ‘expelled’ from the mind as their place is taken by a succession of new images. The phenomenon of cinema can only come into being because we cannot recall, precisely, the single, still images once they are not present before our eyes for the fraction of a second they appear on the screen. We see an illusion of movement and change: distance travelled, shifting form and changes of colour, texture and pattern. By the stroking action of her brush, Tait ensures that we cannot sink beneath the surface, and drown in the seamless, illusory moving image stream, unaware of the underlying material processes by which it is constructed. Each frame is newly created, unique; a dynamic moment that enfolds past, present and anticipated future. In parts, alternating images produce a flickering effect

in the brain, sand and ocean seen in a rapid shimmer of yellow blue. This oscillating instability ensures that we retain the awareness that we are watching a series of static frames whilst simultaneously perceiving the phenomenon of moving image. The coloured light has no indexical link to a material presence in the world, other than its own materiality. The marks and washed grounds are simultaneously suggestions of recognisable objects and coloured splodges, “figures, antlers, or sometimes just blobs in tartan colours”,^[50] continually forming and re-forming, becoming a multiplicity of possibilities. In Tait’s poetic film *Painted Eightsome*, this contingency is the ‘structuring and de-structuring practice’ of signification. Tait’s hand-painted animation embodies what Kristeva refers to in her doctoral thesis, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, first published in 1974, as the ‘negativation’ of representation, in which ‘revolution’ signifies the disruption to subjectivity.^[51] In *Painted Eightsome*, nothing is still. Like the sea, there is change in each moment of consciousness, every frame, as it is eclipsed by memory. The film is a life lived, a linear event wound on a reel, energised by the revolutionary action of the projector, made visible by the light that shines through its frames, and transformed in the mind and body of the audience to the ‘animated shiver’ that signifies the living.

In her later work, *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva links the maternal to abjection: that which is revolting and repressed becomes revolutionary through its emergence in patriarchal symbolic systems.^[52] Here, Kristeva’s key notion is that subjectivity is established through expulsion. In other words, in the dynamic system of subjectivity, something must be expelled, excluded, cast out beyond the border into formless death-womb, the abjected maternal, as an integral part of the process of significance and the maintenance of one’s identity and psychic health. This aspect of Kristeva’s thinking is developed from her theorisation of the anal stage, in which the young child expels faeces from its body and derives pleasure from this expulsion. The waste matter is an excess, something that cannot be contained indefinitely within the biological body, and must therefore be ‘rejected’. However, for Kristeva, the prompt for the child’s process to language and subjectivity is generated by the *jouissance* of pleasure and material excess, rather than a merely a lack and separation, as argued by Freud and Lacan.

Tait left the residues of excess dye to dry on the surface of her filmstrip, unlike Lye, who cleaned his painted film artwork.^[53] During drying, these deposits have accumulated flecks of fluff and dust. This waste matter, expelled from the body of the world, is caught in the surface of the dried aniline dye. The dancing flickers of dust seen by the spectator on the screen are a disruption to the visual synthesis of the painted animated imagery. They mark the presence of an excess of materiality, an over abundance of *jouissance*. There is a knowing pleasure for the spectator in

this: the dust reinforces awareness of the materiality of film, and the time and place of making is inscribed in the work through the particles of airborne matter that landed on the sticky dye residue, and which cannot be erased.^[54]

Kristeva argues that the 'logic of signification' is present within the materiality of the body from birth. The infantile body incorporates food, digests and expels what is left over as waste, prefiguring the identification and differentiation processes that create and maintain signification. The mother regulates these bodily functions, and therefore 'maternal law' predates and displaces the 'paternal law' with its threats of castration. The Kristevan paradigm is counter to that of Jacques Lacan, who, following Freud, foregrounds separation (a lack) as the causal event of the mirror stage, through which castration, or signification, is effected. Kristeva's semanalysis argues that the corporeal body of the young child carries within it the 'logic' that will lead to signification.

The artist, the mother/parent and the psychoanalyst all share a similar relationship to the semiotic. The artist channels her drives and gives this energy form; a mother/parent teaches their infant to recognise and then control its bodily rhythms; the psychoanalyst gives structure to their patient. Each of these roles brings the pre-verbal, and the non-verbal, into the structuration of the symbolic where socialisation may occur, and so facilitates access to culture and language. In recent work, Kristeva refers to a lively, poetic and musical language as revealing, "a carnivalesque, playful body that joins opposites and exults in its skillfulness in manipulating language."^[55] It seems to me from my 'know how' as a maker of direct animation, that in *Painted Eightsome* Tait is speaking to us with what she called the "blood poetry",^[56] using a chromatic pictorial language that emerges from the maternal *chora* and is 'directed' by *jouissance*, the unbounded, embodied pleasurable exuberance of the feminine, being alive and in the world, interwoven with the symbolic of the film structure as a material in 'living motion.' The abstracted animated imagery of the *choral* drive energies in *Painted Eightsome* push to the very limits of possibility, threatening to burst forth at any moment from the screen to rupture the symbolic order. Within the affective dimension, the sensorium of Tait's audiovisual Scottish reel recreates itself anew through the fluency of her 'mother tongue' each time I play the film.

The avant-garde artist is allied to the avant-garde poet in that both rupture and break apart the meaning, syntax and grammar of their respective realms of language in order to render visible and/or audible what is unnameable. For the film-poet Margaret Tait, sight was the primary sense that connected her to the world. She transformed wave particles of light into film poetry. In *Painted Eightsome*, as in much of her

cinematic and written work, we, as viewer-audience/reader-listener, 'become' her experience of seeing and being. Tait's vision is mediated through her embodied experience of living. She connected with the things she saw and her seeing became transmuted through time spent within her body. Sight emerging from embodied memory, as the 'blobs of tartan colours' are transformed through animation into something 'other': the transcendent visual poetry of the screen.

^[1] There is another, longer and slightly different version of *Painted Eightsome*, at *Scottish Screen Archive*, "Full record for '8SOME'", reference number 4444A, accessed 14 May 2014, <http://ssa.nls.uk/film/4444A>

^[2] Aniline dyes are synthetic organic compounds used to stain biological samples in order to make cell structures more visible when studied through a microscope. They come in a range of colours, from deep saturated primaries to subtle hues. Margaret Tait was medically trained, and was familiar with aniline dyes and their use in the laboratory.

^[3] Joss Winn, "Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait", (MA diss., University of East Anglia, 2002). For Winn's technical report on the artwork for *Painted Eightsome* and another hand-painted film by Margaret Tait, *John MacFadyen* (*Scottish Screen Archive*, 4445), both of which are contained on the same roll, see pdf 24 - 26 (University of Lincoln, 2004), accessed 11 January 2011, <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/2004/> Also available, *Joss Winn*, 2009, accessed 14 May 2014, <http://tait.josswinn.org/tag/london/>

^[4] Ali Smith, "Foreword", (2011), in *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings*, ed. Sarah Neely (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), p. xiii.

^[5] *Ibid*, p. xiv.

^[6] Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 126.

^[7] In the context of this essay, I intend 'consciousness' to mean our awareness of various mental processes such as thinking and speaking, and also the rational aspects of our being. I refer to 'unconsciousness' as the mental processes which are generally 'hidden' from the conscious mind, and the bio-physiological processes of the corporeal body. The unconscious may be accessed in the recollection of dreams and is evident

in the 'gaps between' consciousness, such as 'slips of the tongue'.

^[8] Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Séan Hand and Léon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

^[9] Robin Nelson, "Modes of Practice-as-Research Knowledge and Their Place in the Academy", in *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, ed. Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw and Angela Piccini (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 112 - 130; and Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

^[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking and Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 93.

^[11] Winn, "Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait", 25. Tait used a Kodak black and white Comopt (optical) print of the music recording, as a single roll.

^[12] *Scottish Screen Archive*, "Full record for 'PAINTED EIGHTSOME'", reference number 4444, accessed 14 May 2014, <http://ssa.nls.uk/film.cfm?fid=4444>

^[13] Ibid.

^[14] Sarah Neely and Alan Riach, "Demons in the Machine: Experimental Film, Poetry and Modernism in Twentieth Century Scotland", in *Scottish Cinema Now*, ed. Jonathan Murray, Fidelma Farley and Rod Stoneman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 1-19.

^[15] Ibid, p. 3.

^[16] Ibid, p. 6.

^[17] *Luxonline*, "Margaret Tait", (2005) accessed 14 May 2014, http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/margaret_tait/

^[18] Ali Smith, "The Margaret Tait Years", in *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader*, ed. Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook (London: LUX, 2004), p. 26.

^[19] *Scottish Screen Archive* "Full record for 'COLOUR POEMS'", reference number 3697, accessed 14 May 2014, <http://ssa.nls.uk/film/3697>

^[20] Todd and Cook, ed., *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader*, p. 161.

^[21] Winn, “Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait”, p. 14. Joss Winn quotes Tait as saying that this title contains nine short films.

^[22] *Scottish Screen Archive* “Full record for ‘COLOUR POEMS’”, 3697.

^[23] Peter Todd, “Margaret Tait”, January 2004, in *Luxonline*, 5, accessed 14 May 2014,
[http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/margaret_tait/essay\(5\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/margaret_tait/essay(5).html)

^[24] Ibid.

^[25] Ibid.

^[26] Julia Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy”, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 210 – 236.

^[27] Ibid, p. 225.

^[28] Todd, “Margaret Tait”, p. 5.

^[29] Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (Boston and London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1977), pp. 145 – 146.

^[30] Winn, “Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait”, pp. 24 – 26.

^[31] Ibid. The original source is Mike Leggett, *The Autonomous Film-Maker. Margaret Tait: Films and Poems 1951 – 76* (unpublished article, 1979).

^[32] Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001), pp. 141.

^[33] Ibid, pp. 52 – 56. For more detail on the development of Lye’s first engagement with film, and his initial “fiddly scratches”, please see the chapter on kinetic theatre.

^[34] Winn, “Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait”, pp. 10 and 19.

^[35] Todd, “Margaret Tait”, p. 3. Shortly before her death, Tait suggested McLaren’s direct animation *Fiddle-de-Dee* (1947), in which he painted onto clear film stock, for inclusion in a programme about animation in film. McLaren broke new ground with this work, and largely ignored the lines to the top and bottom of the frames, although there are some

animation sequences created frame-by-frame.

^[36] Winn, “Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait”, p. 9. The original source is Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, 2001, p. 145.

^[37] Ibid.

^[38] The beat punctuates sections of 12 frames, which last for half a second.

^[39] The running time of *Painted Eightsome* is 6 minutes 16 seconds at the customary cinema projection speed of 24 frames per second; this is equivalent to 376 seconds, or 9024 individual ‘picture’ frames.

^[40] The opening lines to Tait’s poem “Seeing’s Believing and Believing’s Seeing”, dated 7 November 1958, reprinted in *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings*, ed. Sarah Neely, 2012, p. 109.

^[41] Winn, “Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait”, p. 7. Winn quotes from Hollander’s unpublished autobiography.

^[42] Ali Smith, 2005, “Margaret Tait: 2. Where I Am Is Here”, *Luxonline*, accessed 14 May 2014, [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/tours/margaret_tait\(2\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/tours/margaret_tait(2).html)

^[43] The edge along which the soundtrack runs is termed the ‘S side’ or ‘sound side’ of the filmstrip; the opposite, right hand edge is the ‘P side’, or ‘picture side’.

^[44] Neely, ed., *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings*, 2012, pp. 50 – 51. From “Cave Drawing of the Water of the Earth and Sea”, published in Tait’s collection *origins and elements*, 1959.

^[45] Ibid, p. 113. From “That’s Them off on Their Spring Forays”, published in *The Orkney Herald*, 13 January 1959.

^[46] Ibid, p. 85. From “The Scale of Things”, published in *The Hen and the Bees*, 1960.

^[47] Ibid, pp. 49 – 55. From “Cave Drawing of the Water of the Earth and Sea”, published in Tait’s collection *origins and elements*, 1959.

^[48] Ibid, p. 122. Tait’s unpublished poem “Winter Solstice”.

^[49] Ibid, p. 88. Poem dated March/April 1958, originally published in *The Hen and the Bees*, 1960.

^[50]

Scottish Screen Archive, "Full record for 'PAINTED EIGHTSOME'", reference number 4444, accessed 14 May 2014, <http://ssa.nls.uk/film/4444>

^[51] Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language", in Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Séan Hand and Léon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89 - 136.

^[52] Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection", trans. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

^[53] Winn, "Preserving the Hand-Painted Films of Margaret Tait", p. 22.

^[54] The aniline dyes used by Tait are soluble in water and alcohol. It is possible to clean up the film artwork to some extent, but even gentle rubbing with a dry cloth will remove some of the surface material and density of the dyes.

^[55] Julia Kristeva, "The Impudence of Uttering: The Mother Tongue", trans. Anne Marsella, in *Julia Kristeva*, 2010, accessed: 11 July 2014, <http://www.kristeva.fr/impudence.html> Originally published as "L'impudence d'énoncer: la langue maternelle", in Julia Kristeva, *La Haine et le Pardon* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), pp. 393 - 410. Published in English, trans. Patrícia Viera and Michael Marder, in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 97 no. 4. (New York, NY: Guildford Press, 2010), pp. 679 - 694.

^[56] Sarah Neely, "Introduction", in Sarah Neely, ed. *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings*, 2012, pp. 17 and 18.

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