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### **A Trajectory of Billboard Poetry in America: From “Burma-Shave”-Roadside Advertisement to “Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri”<sup>1</sup>**

This essay applies a Cultural Studies-approach to the multi-faceted relationship between poetry and advertisement as it emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States and as it became visible on billboards by the roadside. Somewhat paradoxically, public poetry in advertising appeared all across the United States (predominantly along highways in rural areas) around the time that much of modernist American poetry was being declared a highly elitist and urban centric affair in the orbit of new criticism-scholarship at universities. My first case study addresses the iconic Burma-Shave Billboard Poetry Campaign (1929-1963) and its long-lasting influence on American (popular) culture – in literature, music, visual art. Prior to this campaign as well as on the heels of it, billboards and billboard poetry were taken up to a minor extent in poetry circles and literary criticism (where they continued to be mostly viewed with disdain) and to a larger extent by conceptual artists who used billboard aesthetics, slogans, and short (poetic) texts in installations mimicking and critiquing consumer culture. One of the most aesthetically innovative recent ‘returns’ of billboard poetry, however, is the one employed intra-diegetically in the Hollywood film “Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri” (2017), my second case study. Here, the writing on the billboard-walls make those aspects explicit that have been submerged in the earlier rhymes by the roadside: While the playful, optimistic lines of advertisement imply, time and again, a happy white middle-class American family with a sober and well-shaved patriarch behind the wheel and thus gloss over the disavowed underside of mobility, the film makes the latent manifest and points to systemic /

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structural violence, such as a pervasive American rape ‘culture’ which is linked to the car and the mobility it offers. The film uses the billboard and its inscription as foil and as catalyst to address and to protest this and other forms of violence and thus presents an activist intervention in order to ask for more than merely poetic justice.

*Keywords: Burma-Shave, billboard, rural America, conceptual art, advertisement, Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri, consumer culture*

## 1. Introduction

A vaguely promotional quality is inherent in much of American cultural production. Either because it implicitly or explicitly promotes America and aspects of “Americanness” and the “American way of life” (in the much-contested logic of American exceptionalism) and / or because it is, for better or worse, generated by and embedded in the dynamics of the marketplace geared toward commodification. American poetry is no exception here, in fact “[a]dvertising and poetry share a secret affinity, so much so that advertising is often held up as an example of what poetry becomes when rendered entirely mercenary.”<sup>2</sup> Based on formal similarities, advertising slogans can be – and have been – read as poetry in the widest sense – and vice versa. And yet, the marketplace is also part of the public sphere, and the (mass)circulation and advertisement of poetic texts have also found appraisal among critics as part of processes of democratizing access to cultural productions in a consumer society. Poetry has been and still is the focus of scholarship that has put the idea of reading as consumption *and* as a social (rather than as a solitary) practice at its center and that has re-evaluated public space as a site for the advertising and the dissemination of poetic texts of different kinds.<sup>3</sup>

The billboard clearly is such a space where poetry and advertising can come together in complicated and problematic ways, and it can be viewed in the light of both, as the place of advertising and, perhaps less obviously, as the site of public poetry. As such, it begs the question how the very medium of mass consumer culture and the icon of PR-work in the early days of affluent society can be the place of poetic articulation. How does the public display of poetry on billboards by the roadside alter the way we engage with poetic texts and (other)

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<sup>2</sup> Bernes (2017: 40).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Long’s argument for the priority of social rather than solitary reading (2003: 27-28). Mike Chasar’s (2012) “Everyday Reading” and Joan Shelley Rubin’s (2007) “Songs of Ourselves” have revisited the role of poetry in American public life in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In her work on “micropoetry” and some of its political implications, Maria Damon (2011: 125) draws on Nancy Fraser’s (1990) notion of “counter-publics” to re-address the cultural work of poetry in America.

consumer goods? How do their seemingly random places as sites of enunciation (often merely transitional non-places, so to speak) matter? And how is all of this represented in other media and analyzed in scholarship?

The history of the billboard in the US dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and to its function as a display of advertisement in the entertainment industry (circus and vaudeville), announcing and promoting upcoming shows. It achieved its iconic status in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it became “almost a piece of architecture.”<sup>4</sup> The emergence of American car culture and the building of the US Interstate Highway System made it the ubiquitous form of advertising across the country. It created new attention regimes for the American driver and was specifically geared toward promotional entertainment during long-distance car travel. Billboards supposedly brightened up monotonous landscapes and sparsely settled areas in rural America – and they did so with messages mostly suggestive of consumption. Often, these messages came in a serial fashion and these serial installments added up to a narrative, a rhyme, a poem.<sup>5</sup>

During the rise of the billboard, there was a tendency in the US to champion American poetry, especially in its distinctly high modernist variations, as the highest form of verbal art among freshly established and elitist new criticism-scholars and to define it in a hierarchical contradistinction to popular or mass culture.<sup>6</sup> Within this framework, ‘billboard poetry’ must appear as somewhat of an oxymoron if not a ‘desacralization.’ However, this (canonical) angle excludes the multitudinous poetic production at the time and thus overlooks much of the poetry (in its widest sense) of the age, including the poetic repertoires in popular and mass culture in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their ongoing relevance that recent literary histories<sup>7</sup> have claimed. It is these literary histories that I am drawing on in this essay and that I seek to extend when reading a contemporary example of billboard poetry. Thus, first of all, a turn toward ‘billboard poetry’ sidelines institutionalized formalistic elite criticism and its mid-century moment of domination, and it also turns away from firmly entrenched, though somewhat stereotypical discourses of decline and cultural pessimism when it comes to the artistic in popular registers. Rather, it follows the work of Sianne Ngai and others reiterating “the loss of the antithesis between the work of art and the commodity

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<sup>4</sup> Corn (1999: 211).

<sup>5</sup> For a historical overview of US billboard culture, see Catherine Gudis’s “Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape” (2004) and for the beginnings of “outdoor advertising” more specifically, see Frank Presbrey (1929: 497-511).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the classical textbook of new criticism’s approach to poetry, Brooks and Warren’s “Understanding Poetry” (1938). Looking back, Mark Morrisson and others have pointed to the “narrowing” of the canon of American poetry in the heyday of new criticism with its formalist approach in the name of an “American literary nationalism” (Morrisson 2005: 31, 14).

<sup>7</sup> Chasar (2012); Rubin (2007).

form,”<sup>8</sup> itself a theme in modern art, in an otherwise “hyperaestheticized post-war society of the United States.”<sup>9</sup> Pushing back somewhat against Marjorie Perloff’s 2006 MLA presidential address, which called for a return to the study of literature and poetry in a more established sense, scholars have further reconceptualized poetry as “not just an aesthetic act, but a site of and for social and aesthetic activities”<sup>10</sup> that cannot be isolated and do not exist apart from processes of commodification. Second, ‘billboard poetry’ redirects our gaze in yet another way as it may privilege a rural over an urban setting. In that sense, I am advocating to move beyond what J. Halberstam, in a different context, has diagnosed as the “metronormativity” of aesthetic and literary discourses that are generated and positioned in the urban and metropolitan centers of the nation.<sup>11</sup> Instead, studying “billboard poetry” resonates with the tenets of a critical regionalist approach.<sup>12</sup> And third, the reading of ‘billboard poetry’ demands an engagement with poetry in a cultural studies-framework. I am here following the authors and editors of the volume “Poetry and Cultural Studies” and Maria Damon’s programmatic claim to study what she calls “micropoetries” – “verbal art that flies under the radar of the acknowledged ‘poetic.’”<sup>13</sup> ‘Billboard poetry’ certainly belongs in that realm as well since it questions prescriptive ideas of what a poem ‘is’ and starts from its most rudimentary description as a “thing made of rhythm and language.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it also makes note of the materiality of the poem’s medium (not being paper, but a signboard or a wall) and the role this plays in reception processes.

In what follows, I briefly examine the history of ‘billboard poetry’ and indicate a few exemplary cases of its wavering affiliations with advertisement, art, and politics. After acknowledging voices of cultural pessimism in a modern(ist) discourse on poetry in the US as the backdrop for my own argument, this essay goes on to unfold several instances of ‘billboard poetry’ – from poetry used in roadside-advertisement (the most prominent and most often revisited billboard poetry-campaign has been the “Burma-Shave”-promotion of shaving cream) and its lasting legacy to the use of a billboard aesthetics in modern and text-based conceptual art and, lastly, to an appropriation of the genre billboard poetry for political purposes in the film “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri” (2017). Here, the poetics and politics of the billboard unfold as a powerful intervention into the lives of the people in a small-town community and points to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ngai (2012: 17).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Bean / Chasar (2011: 5).

<sup>11</sup> Halberstam (2005: 36-37).

<sup>12</sup> Herr (1996); Powell (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Damon / Livingston (2009: 12).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Smith’s definition of poetry in the 2005-“PMLA” special issue on poetry, qtd. in Damon / Livingston (2009: 3).

function of poetry as protest. In concluding, I suggest that an examination of poetry in unexpected places can help us promote not only the elasticity of generic definitions along with a broad sense of what poetry is but also come to an appreciation of micropoetry's (daily) cultural work, past and present.

Clearly, the interdependence of art and advertisement has often been addressed as an impending danger of cultural decline in the vein of cultural pessimism when both are viewed as largely irreconcilable – contrary to what we know from a myriad of cultural practices that have performed and still are performing what Herbert Gans has called “cultural straddling”<sup>15</sup> and contrary to what Andreas Huyssen<sup>16</sup> has announced as the hallmark of postmodernism – the overcoming of “the Great Divide” between high and mass culture. The billboard has certainly been dubbed a prime example for the negative impact of consumer culture on public life. Advertisement, often symbolized in billboard ads, seemed to be the very opposite of art and self-described artistic, highbrow poetry, and a stark contrast between them has been claimed many times.<sup>17</sup> A case in point is offered by American poet Charles Olson:

By ear, he sd.  
But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,  
that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen  
when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?

when even our bird, my roofs,  
cannot be heard

when even you, when sound itself is neoned in?<sup>18</sup>

Olson's Whitmanesque lines clearly suggest commercial culture and alienating commodification to be opposed to and even a threat to artistic creativity and authentic expression. What “matters” and “will last” is contrasted with the superficial spectacle of the “billboards.” The spray-gun pairs a sense of violence and violation with the process of shallow writing – even writing as vandalism in the vein of graffiti art. The billboard is considered the epitome of a mindless, vulgar culture that alienates “my people” (Americans, his readers, supposedly) and prevents them from hearing at all, let alone perceive the nuances in nature and the sound of birds. Similarly, Marjorie Perloff has used the expression of the “billboard discourse” for the ways in which she sees language instrumentalized in a capitalist consumer mode.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gans (1974: 136).

<sup>16</sup> Huyssen (1986: viii-x).

<sup>17</sup> Taking an exception to such claims of opposition, for instance, is poet Frank O'Hara of the “New York School of Poets” whose “Lunch Poems” (1964) explicitly and even enthusiastically engage with advertisement, branding, and commodity aesthetics. Bernes (2017: 40-46).

<sup>18</sup> “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You” (Olson 1983: 6).

<sup>19</sup> Perloff (1992: 129).

On a lighter note, humorist Ogden Nash has captured the contrast manifested in billboards on the roadside against art / nature. Punning on Joyce Kilmer's iconic and hugely popular 1913-poem "Trees" and its first two lines "I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree,"<sup>20</sup> Nash rhymes:

I think that I shall never see  
a billboard lovely as a tree.  
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,  
I'll never see a tree at all.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Kilmer's nature poem addresses the nature-culture divide and problematizes the power and the limits of representation, Nash's version removes the self-consciousness and self-reflectiveness of the speaker and contrasts the billboard (emblematic of mass culture on the road) with the tree (as a shorthand to refer to a romantic / pastoral scenery during travel). For Nash, the billboard represents a mundane item proliferated to such an intent that the forest of signboards, quite literally, obstructs the view while driving.<sup>22</sup>

Against Olson's, Perloff's, and Nash's pronounced skepticism and disdain for the popular in consumer culture as lacking sophistication (embodied in the billboard-format), the studies by Chasar, Rubin, Damon, and others have revisited popular poetry, including the lines on billboards, along with the materiality that it is made of and part of. Chasar suggests to closely examine "poetry's intersections with commercial America"<sup>23</sup> and to develop an alternative approach to the elitist and sniffish diagnosis, as it were, that "proximity to certain aspects of the marketplace" renders poetry "to be inadequate and intellectually unsatisfying."<sup>24</sup> Rather, billboards and poems on billboards reveal the ways in which a majority of Americans have taken to the road and to art as part of an unfolding infrastructure of mobility and consumption and how they engage in poetry as a shared social and cultural practice – even if this poetry may come with strings (and walls) attached and is used to arouse desires that do not qualify as intellectual or aesthetically refined.

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<sup>20</sup> Kilmer's (1913) popular but also often ridiculed and parodied poem was suggested 78 times in the course of Robert Pinsky's (1997) "Favorite Poem Project" but did not become part of the anthology in the end, cf. Rubin (2007: 336-339, 387).

<sup>21</sup> Nash (1932).

<sup>22</sup> With this criticism Ogden Nash was not alone. A powerful initiative, led by the then first lady of the United States, Lady Bird Johnson, pushed and eventually helped pass the so-called "Highway Beautification Act" (1965), i.e. "An Act to provide for scenic development and road beautification of the Federal-aid highway systems." Johnson campaigned against billboards and junkyards and for flowers and benches by the roadside.

<sup>23</sup> Chasar (2012: 13).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

## 2. Billboard Poetry I: The Case of “Burma-Shave”-Advertisement Poetry (1929-1963)

Among those companies and corporations which have used billboard poetry as part of their advertising scheme, one certainly stands out: the Burma-Vita Company from Minneapolis. In the United States, the Burma-Shave-Poetry has become and still is a household name. It is a phenomenon of Americana, however, that is virtually unknown abroad. Burma-Shave, a shaving cream and a liniment supposedly with ingredients brought in all the way from Burma (and, according to family lore, based on a secret recipe from “an old sea captain”<sup>25</sup>), hence the name, was produced and marketed by the family-owned Burma-Vita Company. After only modest success in the beginning, company owner Clinton Odell introduced a new marketing strategy (based on an idea by Allan Odell, the sales manager and C. Odell’s son): short poems on billboards that were displayed with increasing success on the roadside in most of the United States from 1926 until 1963 (when the company was sold and the campaign was discontinued). In Rowsome’s account, “[i]t all started in 1927, during the early years of America’s romance with the automobile and the open road [...] all the way to 1963 when the powerful lure of television and radio advertising finally forced Burma-Shave off the road.”<sup>26</sup> The billboards were fitted to be 40 inches long and 12 inches high.<sup>27</sup> Each billboard contained one line of a poem in capital letters and thus they (usually six in a row) were displayed in serial fashion one after the other. To read the entire poem, one had to drive by a set of billboards. The roadside billboards were deployed in predominantly rural regions. Almost seven thousand sets (or forty thousand individual signs) would be installed between Maine and Texas at any given time, with twenty to twenty-five new poems to be installed regularly to replace older ones.<sup>28</sup> “By 1935,” Gudis writes, “the company had 42.000 signs dotting the landscape, and had captured the public imagination.”<sup>29</sup> From all of those signs or rather sets of signs, many have survived in museums and historical societies (the Smithsonian Museum of American History houses one); a few have gone back up again as nostalgic relics to the past, and even new ones have been created in Burma-Shave-style. All the verses of all the billboards have been collected by Frank Rowsome in “The Verse by the Side of the Road,” and Garrison Keillor includes a few in his poetry anthology “Good Poems for Hard Times,”<sup>30</sup> not giving any author’s name but labelling them “traditional.”

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<sup>25</sup> Rowsome (1965: 10).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>27</sup> Gudis describes them slightly smaller as 36 by 10 inches. Cf. Gudis (2004: 77).

<sup>28</sup> Rowsome (1965: 38).

<sup>29</sup> Gudis (2004: 77).

<sup>30</sup> Keillor (2005). It seems that Keillor has made those up himself.

The Burma-Shave-campaign accompanied American drivers through several decades, through the Depression years, World War II on the home front, change and restoration of gender regimes, debates about racial segregation and desegregation, increasing economic prosperity of the middle-class in a new corporate culture, and, of course, the further rise of American car culture in tandem with suburbanization. Some of these developments were referenced directly in the Burma-Shave micropoems, others were addressed sideways, yet others were ignored. In a time when African Americans and other minorities could not by a long shot enjoy the mobility or infrastructure of travel and leisure, white middle-class Americans did, the prototypical consumer driving on American roads was – without further reflection – imagined as white, male (sometimes female), and heterosexual.

With its increasing popularity, a dialogic quality was introduced to the poetry-campaign, and it became more and more participatory – within the confinement of the message to be conveyed: readers / consumers would respond to the lines by the roadside, sending in comments and suggestions. Picking up on those poetic talents and energies of their customers, the company initiated competitions and rhyming contests to ask Americans to contribute their verses for the billboards. At one point, the company received 65,000 responses from customers.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in a highly controlled setting shaped by the company's agenda and gatekeeping, the campaign was not only a communication of 'one to many' but one of 'many to many.' Many a memoir recalls childhood experiences of driving by the Burma-Shave-signs playing family games in the car, and autotourist travel narratives would also make frequent mention of it.<sup>32</sup> Mike Chasar's work contextualizes the billboard poetry within a larger cultural trend that reveals the ubiquity of poetry in the lives of Americans in large parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

[...] Americans living in the first half of the century [...] lived in a world saturated by poetry of all types and sizes, ranging from clever, two-line advertising jingles to full-length collections [...]. Poetry appeared in books, daily newspapers, and magazines. It was preserved in scrapbooks and photograph and autograph albums, and it was included in classroom readers, comic books, song books, farmers' almanacs, church services, civic events, citizenship handbooks, nature field guides, propaganda, and in a wide variety of advertising media. It was on the radio, *billboards*, broadsides, drug store window and trolley card placards, Chautauqua circuits, picket lines, wax cylinder and other recording formats, magic lantern slides, and stereoview cards. And it decorated many ephemeral, commemorative, value-added, and / or commercial goods, ranging from postcards to greeting cards, calling cards, playing cards, business cards, bookmarks, matchbooks, posters and wall hangings, stickers, calendars, event tickets, notepads, menus, fans, trivets, thermometers, milk bottles, pinup girly posters, bird-food and breath-mint

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<sup>31</sup> Gudis (2004: 78).

<sup>32</sup> Vossler (1997).

tins, packages for drafting tools, candy boxes, souvenir plates, handkerchiefs, pillows, and table runners.<sup>33</sup>

Mike Chasar's enumerations reveal quite an excessive presence of popular poetry in American culture that existed in consumer culture – apart from an aesthetic avant-garde art and apart from institutional spheres of higher learning. Rather, it highlights the everyday pleasures of rhyming and language play, of a kitschy, often sentimental quotidian poetics, and of the cultivation of a particular kind of poetic surplus value residing in the poetic packaging and display of consumer goods. There is no single interpretation or overarching narrative to make sense of the Burma-Shave poetry-phenomenon and the success of what Jonathan Culler calls this kind of “bastardized form”<sup>34</sup> of the lyric. Overall, the campaign played on various notions of progress and modernity about its product guaranteeing new physical comforts to the customer, as this early straightforward example demonstrates: “A Shave / That’s Real / No Cuts to Heal / A Soothing / Velvet After-Feel / Burma-Shave.”<sup>35</sup> Or: “Tho Tough / And Rough / From Wind and Wave / Your Cheek Grows / Sleek / with / Burma-Shave.”<sup>36</sup> Looking more closely at the poems and their presentation by the road, a few trends and developments can be identified over time. First, the micropoems by the roadside picked up on the serial quality and form audiences would already be familiar with from other contexts and media (such as journals and literary magazines). They would find this seriality of the six signs in a row making up one poem not only intelligible but also pleasurable. Second, at the same time, the poems demanded only a beginner’s literacy as the letters were large and capitalized and the language was rather simple. In fact, the poems at times read as if straight out of a primer. Chasar points out that they had been used that way on family outings.<sup>37</sup> The American primer has often been addressed regarding its formative ideological function. Most famously, the opening of Toni Morrison’s novel “The Bluest Eye” (1970) reveals the normative power of such texts that cannot possibly be innocent or free from ideological content.<sup>38</sup> It is in light of this function that the Burma-Shave poems seem to have been extremely effective in ‘naturalizing’ a particular habit and way of life, thereby producing and stabilizing, time and again, consumer identification with heteronormative, middle-class norms. Third, the spatial practice of the billboard poems generates a visual regime as it was only in driving by in a car that the text would become intelligible (mostly, the roads did not have a sidewalk / pavement) in the rural and less peopled land-

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<sup>33</sup> Chasar (2012: 4-5, my emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> Culler (2008: 205).

<sup>35</sup> Rowsome (1965: 76).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Bill Vossler qtd. in Chasar (2012: 133).

<sup>38</sup> Morrison (1970/2004: 3-4). The company would even publish Burma-Shave-Jingle Books for Children. Cf. Rowsome (1965).

scapes of the nation.<sup>39</sup> The campaign is intimately connected to automobility as part of processes of consumption – of the billboards and the products they advertise. At the same time, for drivers it was hard to overlook or escape the micropoems literally lining their path. Fourth, the micropoems started out with clear reference to the product and the process of shaving: the shaving cream that needed no brush, saved time, and stood for progress, modernity, and a better time management for those who were active in corporate America. Many early poems pun on the similarity of ‘shaving’ and ‘saving’ – saving time mostly.<sup>40</sup> As the campaign continues, the billboard poems become more self-reflexive<sup>41</sup> and more detached from the product they advertise. In fact, a whole range of poems center on the topic of traffic education (see Figure 1 and 2), and it is in these lines that the disciplining function of the billboards becomes most obvious and most explicit. However, with the explicit advice for (male) drivers (not to drive too fast, not to drive drunk, etc.), the ads not only disconnected from the benefits of their product, which is only mentioned at the end of each poem, they also blurred the lines between traffic signs proper and advertising space creating some sort of overarching educational cosmos by the roadside. Fifth, the entertainment value of the billboard poems certainly was their humor and their tongue-in-cheek commentary on matters of every-day life modelled on the style of funny papers and slapstick film.<sup>42</sup> Partially ironic, partially silly, partially self-reflexive, and always with a punchline, they offer an optimistic view of the manageability of modern life sharing and affirming “structures of feeling” of success in a capitalist system<sup>43</sup> along with “moments of oppressive optimism in normal national culture,”<sup>44</sup> i.e. making light of the prize that was to be paid for this success. The ads reveal “what kinds of domination are being imagined as forms of social good”<sup>45</sup> in the shape of seemingly small and unimportant instances of mass communication that turn into “sites of intense ideological coding and negotiation as well as aesthetic activity or innovation.”<sup>46</sup> Sixth, with increasing sophistication, the poems would also offer intertextual references – to classical

<sup>39</sup> The billboard campaign shares the widening of consumer spaces beyond the urban centers with other forms of corporate ‘outreach,’ such as the mail-order catalogue.

<sup>40</sup> For instance: “Every shaver / Now can snore / Six more minutes / Than before / By using / Burma-Shave” (1929, qtd. in Rowsome 1965: 72).

Or: “Shaving brushes / You’ll soon see ’em / On the shelf / In some / Museum / Burma-Shave” (1930, qtd. in Rowsome 1965: 73).

<sup>41</sup> For instance: “Our fortune / Is your / Shaven face / It’s our best / Advertising space / Burma-Shave” (1953 and again 1963, qtd. in Rowsome 1965: 114).

<sup>42</sup> Gudis (2004: 78).

<sup>43</sup> Williams (1977: 128-135).

<sup>44</sup> Berlant (1997: 13).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Chasar (2012: 16).

American poetry (Longfellow), to classic tales and stories (Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle"), to forms of vernacular culture (even Spirituals: "My Job is / Keeping faces clean / And nobody knows / De stubble / I've Seen"<sup>47</sup>), to biblical stories (in single instances even scandalizing their audience, for instance with this one: "The whale / Put Jonah / Down the hatch / But coughed him up / Because he scratched / Burma-Shave"), and to other aphoristic lines (such as those of Benjamin Franklin, "Early to bed / Early to rise / [...]"). These references often were in bad taste; yet, they revealed that such simple advertisements could rely on its readers to understand these allusions as part of a national cultural archive and can also be read as selectively iconoclastic, mildly probing cultural taboos. Seventh, the role of women deserves special mention. Most of the time, men are interpellated by the Burma-Shave poems to adjust their behavior (mostly in terms of shaving) to be and to remain attractive for wives and girlfriends.<sup>48</sup> Smooth male skin was marketed as attractive as no woman wanted to go out with a 'porcupine.' This seemingly women-friendly point of view turns out to be another affirmation of the traditional notion of women's civilizing influence on men. It can be credited to women actually participating in the campaign and contributing rhymes and poems and to the company's secretary, Fidelity M. Dearlove, who for more than thirty years seems to have been keeping track of the incoming suggestions and the outgoing signs.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, it refers to the changing cultural significance of beards and mustaches in American history. The poems of the Burma-Shave campaign pick up on a paradigm shift that saw the decline of the "patriarchal beard" still in fashion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of a new masculine ideal in corporate culture, a "white collar manhood"<sup>50</sup> that was incompatible with an unshaven face or facial hair. Instead, the beardless face was being encoded as suggestive of positive attributes such as sociability and reliability and those were attributed to corporate team players (as well as team players in sports as a new athleticism had emerged). While bearded men were now seen as overtly individualistic, wild, unpredictable, and somewhat excessive in their rugged masculinity, beardless men were considered to embody "youthfulness, energy and uniformity."<sup>51</sup> Overall, the scholarship on the cultural history of male facial hair in the US in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century points to a bit of an overlap in the concern of women and the concern of corpo-

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<sup>47</sup> This rhyme makes light of one of the most powerful indictments of the experience of slavery, a song, which has been recorded by Marian Anderson and, most famously, by Mahalia Jackson. Turning "trouble" (the suffering in slavery) into "stubble" suggests a profound insensitivity and callous ignorance on the part of the rhyming subject.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance: "He Had the Ring / He Had the Flat / But She Felt His Chin / And That / Was That / Burma-Shave" [Rowsome (1965: 79)]. Or: "Dewhiskered / Kisses / Defrost / the / Misses / Burma-Shave" (Ibid., 81).

<sup>49</sup> Rowsome (1965: 38).

<sup>50</sup> Oldstone-Moore (2011: 51); Kimmel (1996).

<sup>51</sup> Oldstone-Moore (2011: 52).

rations to get rid of idiosyncratic patriarchs (as evidenced by full and largely undisciplined beards) and this also shows in some of the Burma-Shave poems.



Figure 1: Public Domain, Photo: Ken Koehler.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=686507> [22.07.2020].



Figure 2: With permission from Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution;

[https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1313589](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1313589) [22.07.2020].<sup>52</sup>

### 3. Literary Intertextuality and the Afterlives of Burma-Shave Billboard Poems in Popular Culture

Even though I have earlier reconstructed a rather sharp dichotomy between high modernist American poetry and popular public poetry for the sake of argument, transitions and hybridization between both can be and have been observed. On the one hand, some Burma-Shave billboards engaged in literary intertextuality

<sup>52</sup> The optical arrangement is somewhat misleading here as the poem would originally have been displayed on several billboards in a serial fashion.

referencing classical Americans poems. A case in point is this text: “Hardly a driver / Is now alive / Who passed / On hills / At 75 / Burma-Shave” which presents a pun on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1860) and its first lines where 75 refers to the year 1775 and not to the speed of a car.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, some modernist poets also engaged with Burma-Shave slogans or at least found them memorable. As Chasar points out, even Gertrude Stein notes down her interest and fascination.<sup>54</sup> Chasar quotes her from “Everybody’s Autobiography”:

And it was there I first saw the shaving advertisements that delighted me one little piece on one board and further on two more words and then further on two more words a whole lively poem.<sup>55</sup>

In “Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934,” Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice have even found that “[a]mong her papers is a copy of Number Five of the Burma-Shave Jingle Book with eighteen jingles.”<sup>56</sup> Given Stein’s own use, mimicry, and appropriation of the language of advertisement in “Tender Buttons” (1914), it is hardly surprising that she would show interest in the Burma-Shave jingles.

The afterlives of the iconic Burma-Shave Poetry are manifold, and one can follow around its remnants and frequent references to it – in literature, film, and music. A few exemplary cases will be singled out here:

First, Tom Waits recorded a song title “Burma-Shave” on his 1977-album “Foreign Affairs.” In this song, he picks up on the Orientalist quality of the name of the product and its exoticizing ring. The lyrics evoke “Burma Shave” as some kind of mystical place rendering explicit a misreading that disconnects the name from the brand and the product. Waits sings of a male protagonist being “on [his] way to Burma-Shave,” of a woman wanting to take her “chances out in Burma-Shave,” and of a fatal car accident both have at the end of the song leaving them dead “this side of Burma-Shave.” The ballad-like song puns on the traffic education poems by the company as it narrates reckless driving (“knees up on the glove compartment”) and risky maneuvers (“pass that car if you’re so brave”) eventually leading to the car wreck. It is the undoing of all the disciplining effort in a kind of loosely counterpunal reading of the ads. The disconnect between signifier and signified which detaches “Burma-Shave” from the brand and the product it seeks to sell (shaving cream) and re-imagines “Burma-Shave” as fairy-tale territory may have added to the success and the iconicity of the campaign, even if in the end it could not lastingly secure the economic survival

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<sup>53</sup> This is not the only poem playing on Longfellow’s classic. Another one (that easily could be mistaken for a contemporary text) is: “The Midnight Ride / of Paul / For beer / Led to a / Warmer Hemisphere / Burma-Shave” (Rowsome 1965: 104).

<sup>54</sup> Chasar (2012: 123, 133).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-226.

<sup>56</sup> Dydo / Rice (2003: 618).

of the company. In Waits's song, "Burma Shave" acquires a mysterious quality and evokes a road sign indicating direction or the name of the next town. Driving along any route one would be reminded of this special "place" without ever getting there. This perpetual delay in getting to "Burma Shave" is dramatized as producing a mythic dimension and a utopian sense of place. Waits may also have been familiar with the appearance of "Burma-Shave" billboards in the film "Bonnie and Clyde" that appeared ten years earlier.

Second, in fact, several films have used the "Burma-Shave"-signs to authenticate their setting. In "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967) the Burma Shave-billboards appear very briefly and fleetingly when the protagonists make one of their escapes after a robbery (in minute 54, viewers glimpse: "Feel your face / Burma-Shave"). They are barely legible but clearly recognizable because of their shape and color.<sup>57</sup> As an authenticating device, they place the setting of the film in the 1930s (Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were killed on May 23, 1934). The film narrates their spree of robberies and killings in the Depression era – a series of violent transgressions against norms and laws of which traffic violations seem to be the least problematic. Next to merely displaying the Burma-Shave signs as a historical background for the action, some films refer to the actual poems. For instance, "A River Runs through It" (1992), set in Montana, has a group of adolescent male characters recite a Burma Shave-poem in order to mock one of the protagonists. The scene clearly relies on the audience's familiarity with the advertisement.

Third, as a homage to the advertising campaign, the underground tunnel and transfer corridor from 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to the Times Square subway station in New York City today displays Norman B. Colp's poem "The Commuter's Lament / A Close Shave" (1991). The short poem is modelled on the "Burma Shave"-micropoems:

Overslept. So tired.  
If late, Get fired.  
Why bother?  
Why the pain?  
Just go home.  
Do it again.<sup>58</sup>

Contrary to the original road signs, the seriality of the poem is adapted here to the pace of pedestrians walking by – or rather passing under it. Colp's title presents a pun on the double meaning of the "close shave" in literal and metaphorical terms and suggests a sense of resignation and repetitiveness of the mundane everyday routine the commuter has to manage and to endure. Colp's lines imi-

<sup>57</sup> Readable is: "feel your face / Burma-Shave." This may add up to "If Honey Shuns / Your Fond Embrace / Don't Shoot the Milkman / Feel Your Face / Burma-Shave." It is a rhyme we find in Keillor's (2005) anthology but that is not listed in Rowsome's (1965) collection.

<sup>58</sup> For more information and images, see: [https://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/Artwork:\\_The\\_Commuter's\\_Lament-A\\_Close\\_Shave\\_\(Norman\\_B.\\_Colp\)](https://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/Artwork:_The_Commuter's_Lament-A_Close_Shave_(Norman_B._Colp)) [02.06.2020]; Colp (1991).

tate the Burma Shave-style of rhyming without actually infusing the poem with the “cruel optimism”<sup>59</sup> of its predecessors. Having the poem underground at a place where the world-famous billboards are shining above ground at Times Square may be seen as quite an irony. The intersections of popular poetry and avant-garde aesthetics reveal themselves also in broad daylight and in a broader view on the fate of the billboard in American art production.

#### *4. Billboard Poetry II: Advertisement and Avant-Garde Aesthetics in Visual Art*

Early on, billboards and billboard poetry were taken up by visual artists and became an influence on and a presence in conceptual art: At least since the 1920s artists had been experimenting with what Wanda Corn analyzes as “billboard aesthetics.”<sup>60</sup> For the purpose of this essay, I can only briefly indicate the range of such artistic endeavors in order to show that the unadorned Burma-Shave campaign flourished in a context in which the large and lighted billboard and its advertising style were also entering and even shaping avant-garde aesthetics. Corn identifies a sophisticated kind of “billboard cubism,”<sup>61</sup> namely

a style that [...] brings together cubo-futurist compositional devices and the bluntness, scale, modern typography, and legibility of 1920s posters and billboards. Billboard cubism self-consciously fused the high principles of modernism with the lowbrow practice of street usage.<sup>62</sup>

Corn finds this style embodied in the works of Charles Demuth (1883-1935) and she singles out his painting “I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold” (1928), a work dedicated to William Carlos Williams, whose poem “The Great Figure” had inspired it<sup>63</sup>. For Demuth and his peers, the billboard stood for the modern, American style:

For a short while in the 1920s, not only Demuth but a much wider circle of American avant-garde writers and artists became students of, and apologists for, the billboard and advertising arts, seeing in them, as in the skyscraper, jazz, and Broadway lights, a national expression.<sup>64</sup>

Its modernity was seen as anti-sentimental, cool, and – viewed through the eyes of European visitors / artists – as uniquely American. However, soon the notion that “billboards were unquestionably the enemy of art”<sup>65</sup> became dominant. It is evidenced in prototypical fashion in the billboard in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel “The Great Gatsby” (first published in 1925), where the big and piercing eyes of

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<sup>59</sup> This concept is Lauren Berlant’s and elaborated in her study of the same title.

<sup>60</sup> Corn (1999: 209).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Gudis (2004: 84).

<sup>64</sup> Corn (1999: 210).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 212.

Doctor T.J. Eckleburg gaze out from a fading billboard ad at those coming through the valley of ashes.<sup>66</sup>

The work of Demuth and others coincided with the beginning of the Burma-Shave campaign and drew on similar available cultural forms and media of communication for different purposes; other artists have picked up on the legacy of billboard aesthetics and billboard micropoems long after the Burma Shave specimen had disappeared from the roadside. Billboard aesthetics and poetry have remained a presence in community work, photography, film, and art projects, while billboard advertisement proper went into decline, particularly in rural areas of America. With the emergence of urban pop art, of course, billboard aesthetics have been used affirmatively regarding the role of advertisement, commodity aesthetics, and visual art, most famously by Andy Warhol or Ed Ruscha offering new perspectives on mass culture, even crediting it, in Warhol's case with "utopian potentiality."<sup>67</sup> Billboard poetry has been at the center of much conceptual and neo-conceptual artwork since the 1970s and 80s with a base in metropolitan regions, Los Angeles and New York City. Jenny Holzer, whose work comes to mind here as both exemplary and exceptional, has since the 1970s engaged in text-based public art projects relating to popular and mass culture. Holzer's installation art or story art addresses oppression and violence, power and abuse, women and feminism. Holzer displayed the line "Protect Me From What I Want" in 1982 in huge illuminated letters on Times Square and suggested for it to be read as a critique of the rhetoric and power of advertising and consumer culture, ironically undercutting the logic of desire leading to wish fulfillment – and satisfaction – in the imagined consumer's world. Holzer works with this kind of double-voiced discourse in her "Truisms" (1977-1979), in "Inflammatory Essays" (1979-1982), in "The Living Series" (1980-1982), in "Laments" (1988-1989), and in many of her other installations. Her use of micropoems on billboards resonates with earlier advertising campaigns, including the Burma Shave-campaign, I want to suggest. Holzer, in fact, has referred to the "roadside garbage" of billboards as a point of departure for her work. Her texts frequently make use of imperatives and deal in "mock clichés"<sup>68</sup> on the verge of seeming parodistic, but not quite: "I want them [the lines] to be accessible, but not so

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<sup>66</sup> Fitzgerald (1925/2004: 23-24). In his classic dystopian novel "Fahrenheit 451" (first published in 1953), Ray Bradbury would later describe the development billboards underwent in the future (not counting on the invention of the internet): "Have you seen the two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country beyond town? Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long? But cars started rushing by so quickly they had to stretch the advertising out so it would last" (Bradbury 1996: 8-9). Another critical billboard-theme is at the center of the Hollywood film "It Should Happen to You" (1954), in which Gladys Glover, craving fame, rents a billboard space just to display her name.

<sup>67</sup> Muñoz (2009: 7).

<sup>68</sup> Graevenitz (1993: 230).

easy that you throw them away after a second or two.”<sup>69</sup> Hence, the somewhat paradoxical status of Holzer’s texts may seem to waver between “dark meditations about the human condition,”<sup>70</sup> dark humor, cynicism, and deliberate senselessness or absurdity, yet they still struggle for a more sophisticated meaning and a political impact. As a subversion or “infiltration of public life,”<sup>71</sup> her installations use existing structures (such as scoreboards) and formulas “mixed with advertisement, or sports results or news”<sup>72</sup> to call attention to the ways in which corporations, politicians, and all of us in everyday communication use language in standardized and objectified / thingified and potentially oppressive ways. Katrin Ströbel concedes that at times „[e]rst durch ihren Inhalt, der konträr zu den Heilsverkündungen der Werbewelt steht, offenbaren die Texte ihren konsum- oder gesellschaftskritischen Charakter und lassen Schlüsse auf ihre eigentliche Herkunft zu“<sup>73</sup>. This was particularly true, when, early on, Holzer would plaster her work anonymously and without any indication of it being ‘art’ in New York City-subway stations and other similarly crowded places.

Conceptual billboard art-cum-poetry from a range of artists has found recognition in exhibitions such as the 1999 “Billboard Art on the Road” at the MASS MoCA (which included Holzer’s work) and art shows such as the 2010 “How Many Billboards” in Los Angeles. The latter awkwardly proclaims to celebrate “the conquest of art over billboards,”<sup>74</sup> if only momentarily, and refers to the project as “misappropriating its medium.”<sup>75</sup> One may well ask: Can the medium be severed and fully emancipated from the message? From which position of authority and with what kind of engagement is the selective nobilitation of billboards as art conducted? And where does this dichotomy leave practices of hybridization and works that deliberately cross over distinct taste cultures? Few would draw the line between art and commerce as strictly as the opening lines from the 2010 exhibition catalogue nowadays. Marjorie Perloff has voiced a different kind of skepticism toward attempts to work against the practices and the sign language of consumerism on a conceptual level. Singling out the work of artist Barbara Kruger, who also works with text and design in her artwork, she warns that “the deconstruction of billboard discourse is subject to its own simplifications,”<sup>76</sup> espe-

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<sup>69</sup> Holzer qtd. in von Graevenitz (1993: 231).

<sup>70</sup> Glueck (1989: 42).

<sup>71</sup> Ströbel (2013: 148).

<sup>72</sup> Holzer in an interview, see Domesle (1998: 197).

<sup>73</sup> Ströbel (2013: 149).

<sup>74</sup> Noever / Meyer (2010: 6).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Perloff (1992: 192).

cially when it is hard to distinguish one from the other and “the alleged deconstruction of the stereotype [...] seems just as stereotypical as its object.”<sup>77</sup>

This brief excursus on billboard art provides yet another critical context for billboard poetry, one that engages with mass cultural phenomena at a distance. It is an art of the metropolis, well-received in international art shows around the world. At the same time, it suggests the billboard to be the site of protest and political intervention and hence it serves as a kind of intertext connecting the advertisement form to the lyrical and the political. In my next case study, I will return to representations of the original practice, i.e. to the space of roadside advertisement in rural America as depicted in a recent Hollywood film, yet I will also examine the potential of public protest and political activism the film addresses.

### 5. *Billboard Poetry III: Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*

In the award-winning 2017 film “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri” we encounter a different kind of legacy of billboard advertising-cum-poetry. It returns us to the original site of billboard poetry – along some old country road hardly anyone uses anymore and with three old billboards standing like “tombstones”<sup>78</sup> by the roadside.

As the film starts, three dilapidated billboards come into view (Figure 3). They are shot in a foggy and, by association, depressing atmosphere, and it is obvious that they have not been used in a long time. The viewer can glimpse remnants of what had been advertised earlier: a baby’s face (from an earlier advertisement for diapers) is still discernable as well as a poster attempting to spark touristic interest in the town one is about to enter: Ebbing, Missouri. These initial shots preemptively deconstruct any notion of the stereotypically American optimism against all odds (what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism”) and the way it harks back to sentimental family values (the baby) and the narrative of family travel connected to the earlier history of the billboard (the family road trip) by highlighting a setting that seems anything but prosperous, cozy, and picturesque.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>78</sup> McDonagh (2017: 3).



*Figure 3: The opening sequence of the film introduces the billboards in a state of disrepair and neglect cast in a foggy atmosphere. As the screenplay has it: “Whatever advert was on it is long since faded and torn” (McDonaugh 3).*

This road running by the billboards is the road to Mildred Hayes’s house and, as we will learn later, the crime scene where her daughter, Angela Hayes, was brutally raped and killed seven months ago<sup>79</sup> when hitching a ride home. Mildred, driving by the billboard ruins, decides to rent them for her own personal message. At the Ebbing Advertising Company, she inquires: “What’s the law on what you can and cannot say on a billboard?” and adds: “I suppose you can’t say nothing defamatory, and you can’t say “fuck,” “piss” or “cunt.” Is that right?” And she concludes that her text will not get her in trouble then (she could not be more wrong). The three posters she orders and that are put up on the billboards a few days later read:

Raped While Dying  
And Still No Arrests?  
How Come, Chief Willoughby?<sup>80</sup>

It is around these three lines, a Haiku-like poem in fact, that the rest of the film unfolds. Mildred Hayes produces a scandal as she engages in public shaming of the police chief (who is dying of pancreatic cancer) and the billboards become an issue of public attention and contention with considerable repercussions. So, first, Mildred, in fact, seems to be able to activate and tap into an (older) attention regime that once had made billboards successful advertisement media and sites of public poetry, and she receives threats and much pushback. On a formal level, Mildred’s poetic accusation comes in serial installments adding up to what Maria Damon calls a micropoem. It begins with the description of a brutal crime (without giving up the name of the victim), goes on to indict the failure of police

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>80</sup> McDonagh (2017: 5, 6, 8). When the billboards with those lines first come into view, it is in reverse order creating suspense. Later, the film repeatedly, almost excessively, shows them in the order placed here, adding the lines up visually to constitute a short poem. See also figure 4.

procedure, and culminates in a final accusatory question. Posing her question to Willoughby, Mildred's lines call into question not only the competence but also the interest of the local police force in solving the case. Chief Willoughby visits her and reproaches her: "I don't think those billboards is very fair"<sup>81</sup> indicating that he is doing everything he can to catch Angela's murderer. He also tells her of his own medical condition to get her sympathy, which she, at this point, withholds. Father Montgomery visits her as well and lets her know that "the town is dead set against these billboards of yours."<sup>82</sup> She is threatened by a customer who comes by her workplace, a gift shop selling souvenirs from Missouri, and who insinuates that he perhaps has raped and killed her daughter. Even her ex-husband Charlie, with whom she has a history of domestic violence, growls: "And what the fuck's going on with these fucking billboards, Mildred?"<sup>83</sup> To which Mildred calmly replies: "I guess I wanted certain people's minds kept on certain people's jobs, is all. I hadn't heard a word from 'em in seven goddam months, but I tell ya this, I heard an awful lot from 'em since I put those billboards up."<sup>84</sup> "Them" is not only Chief Willoughby, but also refers to other members of the Ebbing police force, such as his assistant Dixon, a racist who, as local gossip has it, was once accused of torturing an African American suspect and who is prone to violence and to loss of temper.

Second, the billboards not only trigger verbal reactions but physical ones as well. Racism and discrimination are as much part of life in Ebbing as are domestic violence, rape, and homophobia; in fact, violence seems to be simmering just below the surface at all times. Dixon severely injures Red at the advertising company for renting the billboards to Mildred in the first place. The local dentist attacks Mildred with his drill. Even if the billboard explicitly addresses one person in particular, the entire town of Ebbing finds itself interpellated and takes sides. Only her colleague / boss Denise at the "Missouri Charms Gift Shop" supports her – and is temporarily arrested on a minor drug charge as a form of punishment for her loyalty. Perhaps not surprisingly, her colleague is an African American woman who seems to have had her own share of arbitrary encounters with the Ebbing police force. Set in Missouri, the film at various points obviously references the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and the "Black Lives Matter"-protests and protest-signs, more specifically. The billboards in the film acknowledge not primarily the nexus of art and consumer culture (as seems to be the focus of much conceptual art), rather they point to the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

nexus of the spaces of consumer culture and its new usage for political protest and activism.<sup>85</sup>

Overnight, Mildred Hayes turns into ‘a counter-public of one’ in Ebbing, Missouri. In town, she becomes stigmatized as “the billboard lady,”<sup>86</sup> stubborn and unforgiving. Thus, third, Mildred literally creates a space for her mourning she attends to. Rather than relenting and taking the billboard lines down, Mildred decorates the billboard grounds with flower bouquets, as if adorning a grave or a memorial, a memorial to her daughter and her brutal and senseless killing for the whole town to see. In an awkwardly pastoral scene, a fawn appears and briefly lingers at Mildred’s side as she arranges the pots on a beautiful sunny day.<sup>87</sup> It looks up at the billboards as if also wondering about the state of the investigation and then it disappears. Mildred talks to the fawn half-jokingly in a soft and kind way, a way she never talks to any human being in the entire film. In an act of arson, the billboards are lightened up one night,<sup>88</sup> and as they burn, they almost look like burning crosses in lynchings, another cruel Southern legacy the film refers to in passing. Even as Mildred and Robert, her son, happen to drive by and attempt to extinguish the flames, they cannot preserve the posters. The “burnt-out, blackened billboards”<sup>89</sup> look even more like uncanny ruins. Critics of the film have commented on a missed opportunity as the film fails to spell out the intersections of various forms of violence more fully.

Chief Willoughby dies halfway through the film (taking his own life before the cancer does) and leaves three personal letters for his wife as well as for Mildred and Dixon.<sup>90</sup> He had previously paid anonymously for another month of rent for Mildred’s billboards (knowing that his suicide will be partially blamed on her and the accusation on the billboards) and so she puts them back up after they have been burned down. Willoughby even in absentia seems to care for the people of Ebbing, and the film sets him up as one of the “good white people”<sup>91</sup> in a way that appears to be a little overdone. His successor is African American chief of police Abercrombie, and he fires Dixon for his abuse of office on his first day at work. A kind of conversion we are hard-pressed to believe at the end of the film puts Dixon in league with Mildred and her search for her daughter’s murderer thus offering a highly sentimentalized conversion and closure that

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<sup>85</sup> More could be said about forms of billboard activism outdoors (such as the Billboard Liberation front) and in social media or about “matrix activism” (Ardizzoni) more generally, yet, this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>86</sup> McDonagh (2017: 39).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>90</sup> The three letters mirror the three billboards. They are read out by Willoughby’s voice in the off and also affirm the power of texts as both testimony and call to action.

<sup>91</sup> Sullivan (2014).

comes with a number of dubious assumptions in tow that in turn mitigate its indictment of violence and people turning a blind eye.<sup>92</sup>

In terms of plot, it has to be noted that the film is driven forward entirely by the lines on the billboards and the reactions that billboard-poem elicits. Hence, fourth, the billboards serve as a catalyst of sorts and trigger all kinds of new interactions among the inhabitants of Ebbing – more of the harmful kind, yet also some indicating a better understanding of interpersonal differences and shared concerns. One of the stories behind the billboards, as it were, is Mildred’s own sense of guilt regarding her daughter’s rape and murder. We learn that after a particularly painful domestic fight, she had refused to let Angela use her car or to give her money for a cab. Angela stormed out of the house screaming “I hope I get raped on the way” to which Mildred retorted, still angry: “I hope you get raped on the way too.”<sup>93</sup> They will not see each other again. Mildred’s billboard poem, thus, is also a way to externalize her own guilt and to partly atone for it. It is her attempt to make up for her own failure to care.



*Figure 4: The display of the three billboards is striking in terms of color effect and choice of wording. It clearly shows their aesthetic play on both, the older form of roadside-advertisement and the more recent practices of conceptual art.*

Fifth, on a formal level, the billboards in the film have to be read in the light of the history of the billboard in American culture and need to be contextualized in the larger narrative of billboard aesthetics I have sketched above. They clearly evoke the roadside advertisement of a by-gone era. As repurposed postindustrial

<sup>92</sup> Abdurraqib (2017). Dixon (whose name echoes “Dixie”, a nickname for the old South) is somehow redeemed in the logic of the film due to a particular sacrificial deed: he lets himself get beaten up badly in a bar in order to procure DNA-evidence from a suspect – all the while “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” is playing loudly confirming Dixon’s transformation, it seems, turning him almost into a kind of martyr for the just cause.

<sup>93</sup> McDonagh (2017: 33).

ruins, as it were, and relics of an earlier and supposedly brighter phase of US consumer culture (i.e., in the hey-day of Burma-Shave advertising), they are reminders of the economic downfall of the region while at the same time suggesting that not everything in the past had been that ‘great’ anyway since violence has a long history in America. The sad state of the billboards at the beginning of the film also echoes the dysfunctional state of social relations in Ebbing (and perhaps elsewhere in America), characterized by violence and neglect, racism and misogyny. In some ways, the billboards bring to the fore, it seems, everything that is wrong in Ebbing, Missouri, reaching way beyond Angela’s murder and its circumstances and the questionable police work around it. This is the scandal of the billboards, a scandal with a political dimension. It is somewhat ironic that Mildred is at first belittled for renting the billboards on a road where supposedly nobody drives by anymore, only to find that obviously people go by there all the time, if only to see the billboards, which even receive local media attention. Mildred’s billboards thus become the spectacle of Ebbing, Missouri.

The film came out as the “#MeToo”-movement gained traction and it was in this context that it was originally viewed. Frances McDormand, who stars as Mildred Hayes, was awarded an “Oscar for Best Female Actress” for her performance in the film. Upon receiving it, she spoke out in criticism of the film industry and its treatment of women, on and off the screen. “#MeToo” (and the investigations against Harvey Weinstein) quickly became the discursive framework within which the film was interpreted, with little room for the consideration of the billboard politics and poetics in problematizing questions of representation, retribution, and justice. Yet, sixth, the film not only resonates with ongoing violence against and discrimination of women in contemporary America, it also revisits such instances in the past. Clearly, the family as a site of violence and neglect and the car as an intimate site of power abuse also make us reconsider the subtext of earlier billboard advertising. “Three Billboards,” on one level, speaks back to the playful Burma-Shave poetry in insisting that by producing an image of the family-friendly father and corporate man it has disavowed the violence of patriarchal car culture and rape culture all along: Traffic violations are not the most pertinent problem. The representation of the Ebbing rape and murder sever the ties between the imagery of the car culture and family values and reveal the car culture’s complicity with rape culture and other systemic forms of violence. Rereading the Burma Shave-poems with Mildred’s poem in mind produces an uncanny lacuna of sorts.

Visually, the billboards speak in the sign language of conceptual art rather than advertisements in the film. It does not take much to see resemblances between some of Holzer’s installations and the design of Mildred’s lines (Figure 4). The optics of the billboards are striking for their departure from all conventions of the missing people billboards and other forms of search orders that could have provided a model for Mildred’s project. The billboards do not display a photo of the victim, for one thing, nor do they claim authorship or authority:

they don't deal in imperatives at all and simply pose questions – to an individual addressee. Hence, the criticism is not merely self-reflexive language play, it has a very concrete object: the local police chief. In fact, Mildred's lines reconfigure the nature of the speech act on a billboard. "What's the law on what you can and cannot say on a billboard?" may be the crucial question after all.

In sum, the "three billboards" break with the tendency to generic abstraction of both, the Burma Shave poetry ads projecting the cliched fantasy of the All-American family (husband and wife) and much of conceptual text-based art mimicking in order to deconstruct and critique hegemonic discourses of gender, family, and sexuality. Lastly, "Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri" is a powerful mediation on American billboard culture and representations of pain and grief and calls for heeding the writing on the wall, so to speak. In the film, the billboards are also, it seems, a didactic tool, and the pedagogical impetus of the film appears at times a bit heavy-handed. Mildred's crusade against injustice in one particular case (and by implication many others are addressed) echoes with the periodic debates in US society about systemic racism and misogyny and about the urgent need of reforming institutions of the state, such as the police, in order to battle these problems. At one point, Chief Willoughby tells his sidekick: "Looks like we got a war on our hands." Yet, Mildred's 'declaration of war' through her billboards is a non-violent wake-up call to the civil society of Ebbing, Missouri. When it comes to the murder of her daughter, Mildred, it seems, is finally prepared to take matters into her own hands in "the strange saga of the three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri."<sup>94</sup>

In her work at the Venice Biennale in 1990, Holzer, whose work I have read earlier as a kind of intertext linking consumer culture, poetry, and activism, produced a text on black marble on the floor in the American pavilion bespeaking the willingness to kill if something would happen to her child. Her "Venice Text" on mother and child is a work about her feelings and thoughts – a kind of primal anxiety or fear – following the birth of her daughter.<sup>95</sup> Holzer evokes a kind of archaic "revenge fantasy,"<sup>96</sup> a fantasy that we see enacted in Mildred Hayes's quest in "Three Billboards."

In August 2020, in an instance of life imitating art, i.e. the kind of billboard protest art McDonagh's film displays, "O, The Oprah Magazine" commissioned 26 billboards in the city of Louisville, Kentucky, asking for arrests to be made in the case of the killing of Breonna Taylor by police officers on March 13, 2020 (cf. Wise). The number 26 symbolizes Taylor's age: one billboard for every year she was alive. The billboard artwork is part of the Black Lives Matter protests across the country.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>95</sup> Holzer (1990).

<sup>96</sup> Graevenitz (1993: 225).

## 6. Conclusion

Billboard poetry in America has an archive of its own, found not only in libraries but also on the roadside, in museums, in photography, and in film, and a cultural studies-perspective can shed light on its history and ongoing relevance in cultural practices and representations. This essay has sketched a trajectory of public poetry on billboards – from Burma Shave-poetry advertisement to the Hollywood film “Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri” – and established a critical relation of a culture-specific intertextuality and intermediality among different kinds of billboard poetics since the 1920s, including conceptual text-based art. Billboards appear in different contexts and serve different functions: from advertisement to cultural critique to political activism and protest. They appear as road-signs and as “tombstones,”<sup>97</sup> as memorials and as playful entertainment, and they are the site of public poetry. In processes of critical cross-mapping, the various cultural functions and symbolisms, also those at odds with each other, become legible.

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<sup>97</sup> McDonagh (2017: 3).

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