TITLE: "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You": Pop Culture Ekphrasis

DESCRIPTION: We easily recognize poems written about paintings or sculptures in museums as ekphrastic lyrics, but we don't as readily acknowledge poems that investigate reality television, pop music, and online communication as ekphrastic. In his essay "Ekphrasis and the Other" W.J.T. Mitchell argues ekphrastic works explore "representation as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone." But in ekphrastic poems written about pop culture artifacts, these positions are fluid and dynamic.

Our panelists discuss how pop culture ekphrasis disrupts the traditional gender and racial dynamics of the genre. Although a great deal has been written about how the work of art changes in the age of mechanical reproduction (and now in the age of digitization), not nearly as much attention has been devoted to how these changes alter the work of ekphrasis. This panel investigates the shifting nature and expanding definition of ekphrasis in contemporary poetry.

CATEGORY: Poetry Craft & Criticism

ORGANIZER: Eleanor Boudreau

MODERATOR: Dorsey Craft

PARTICIPANTS: Eleanor Boudreau, Tiana Clark, Dorsey Craft, & Alyssa Moore

SHORT BIOS:

Eleanor Boudreau is a poet. Her first book, *Earnest, Earnest?* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in *American Poetry Review, Tin House, Barrow Street, Waxwing, Willow Springs,* and other journals.

Tiana Clark is the author of two collections: *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, and *Equilibrium*, winner of the Frost Place chapbook competition. She teaches at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.

Dorsey Craft's debut collection, *Plunder* (Bauhan, 2020), won the 2019 May Sarton NH Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review, Gulf Coast, Massachusetts Review, Poetry Daily, Southern Indiana Review,* and elsewhere. She serves as Poetry Editor for Southeast Review.

Alyssa Moore is an editor, screenwriter, and visual poet who holds degrees from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she received fellowships and taught fiction and poetry, and Harvard University. Her work explores queerness, blackness, and digital intimacy.

EVENT ORDER:

CRAFT – INTRODUCTION & CRITICAL CONTEXT

I. Critical Introduction: Definitions of ekphrasis over time w/ brief close readings of each.

   a. Lessing & McCormick: distinct provinces of visual art and poetry; either genre adopting the characteristics of the other can cheapen the work; at best, art forms can be like

"equitable and friendly neighbors" who "on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which…the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege" (91).

    i. Briefly summarize Laocoon, beginnings of ekphrastic theory, Achilles' shield. Discuss gaps: gender, music, race, high and low art, digitization.

b. Greenberg in "Towards a New Laocoon": each age is witness to a "dominant art form" that forces all other art forms to attempt to incorporate its features and methods (24).

    i. Adversarial relationship between the arts—what does it mean? Do we still have it? What do we have instead?

c. W.J.T. Mitchell in "Ekphrasis and the Other": ekphrastic poetry is merely working through the jarring realization that painting and poetry are essentially the same, terming this process ekphrastic ambivalence: "The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation" (Mitchell 164).

    i. Mitchell's "Ekphrasis and the Other" gives us several useful tools with which to understand this genre.

        1. The triangle: the ekphrastic poet stands in the middle of the object (passive, often gendered female) being described and the listening subject who will be made to "see". Potentially discuss ableism in our conventional definitions.

        2. Ekphrasis "tends to unravel the conventional suturing of the image text and to expose the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire—representation as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (180). Central questions of panel: poets today are flipping around "classical" (re: male, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered) structures of ekphrasis. What is revealed about representation when these positions are re-imagined? What has changed and what has not?

        3. Ekphrastic indifference/fear/ambivalence, which Eleanor will discuss later. Do we have new emotional responses to ekphrasis now, when art objects are not silent, passive, visual? What would those responses look like?

d. Loizeaux in introduction to *20th Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*: "Otherness is not always 'rival,' even when it is alien" (16).

    i. Quotes Ntozake Shange: "I speak to these sculptures, wood prints, and paintings as I would to a friend over coffee or champagne" (15).

    ii. Discuss this move towards a less adversarial relationship between art forms and its correlation with movement away from the rigid, male poet/female art object structure.

II. Preface Panelists' Work & Ideas, plus additional examples of contemporary ekphrastic pieces expanding on existing definitions.

e. Brief close-reading of Tiana Clark's "BBHMM": The medium is song, the mode is digital and visual. Art object speaks back, can be viewed by anyone, is proliferated infinitely. The poem is facilitating dialogue between poet & musician, making space for shared experience, reaching towards relationship that exposes power of representation w/ regards to gender, race, capitalism.

    i. *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*: poems about music and plays by Black artists—continues collaborative relationship between arts, subverts traditional

       relationship & explicitly critiques power rather than implicit revelation of power structure. Takes ownership of desire/knowledge.

    f.   Brief close-reading of Alyssa Moore's "Black Rapunzel Broadcasting Live from America's Next"/"original communication." The ekphrastic object is the Internet itself. It is dynamic as opposed to silent; the text of the poem is not privileged but is instead part of a larger field of the screen (not page)—shares with video, Twitter, chat, time stamps above. Poem is open-ended, makes no definitive declarations about art object—relationships are implied, but the poem is critiquing power explicitly along valences of race and gender.

        i.   Possibly bring in The Cyborg Jillian Weise's work and read relationship between poet/machine in this context, considering ekphrasis.

    g.   Preface for Eleanor's thoughts on ekphrasis, "art in the age of mechanical reproduction."

    h.   More possible examples: Jessica Stark's *Savage Pageant* & comic poems ; Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* & what qualifies as popular culture; Cathy Park Hong's *Engine Empire* & the gurlesque.

III. Conclusions, panelists' bios.

CLARK – BREACHING THE BOUNDARY: POP CULUTRE AS A HOT PASTORAL MEDIUM IN EKPHRASTIC POETRY

I. Edward Hirsch suggests, "There is something transgressive in writing about the visual arts, in approaching the painter, the sculptor, or the photographer's work in words. A border is crossed, a boundary breached, as the writer enters into the spatial realm, traducing the abyss, violating the silent integrity of the pictorial."

    a.   I'm wanting to probe that fissure through the triangular relationship (between poet/poem, reader, and "image"/art) that W.J.T. Mitchell probes in "Ekphrasis and the Other." Talking about ekphrastic hope and fear through the entry points of persona and pop culture re: "desire and counter desire."

    b.   Time stamps and thinking about questions of legacy and mastery in poetics. Art as a means of survival and responding to the current time/ political landscape as mode and means of Black poetics and persistence.

    c.   I will pull from examples from my work and work from others that I think exemplifies these points.

MOORE – BEYOND LANGUAGE: META COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN POETS AND MEDIA

Some Grounding

A. Opening image of a meta object/ekphrastic text
       1. Likely a Current Affairs excerpt, but can change
       2. Context
B. A working definition of pop culture for the purposes of context
       As I see it:
            —> pop culture —> life—> life stuff —> tools —> fixtures

     —> Beyond art and art things to any object or entity that we touch
       so—> technology, video games, Instagram stories, blog posts, social media
   What, then, is the work of ekphrasis?
      —> a meta conversation
      —> a representation of how we are changed or of new identities
      — > collaboration between author and medium
      —> a continued transformation of the medium being reacted to
      —> Beyond language!
        —> Correlation between artists I personally know who are marginalized and
queer and the work attempts to capture aspects of that experience and/or was created
   in a time of intense pressure, when traditional "language" could not be accessed.

Exploration of ekphrastic/meta texts and objects

I. Ava Hoffman's *The Woman Factory* (Operating System 2020)
—> Capturing the ways we are changed by the media we interact with
—> Interrogates femininity, queerness, transness
—> Technology lens to understanding the self but also a critiquing of imposed and destructive gatekeeping

II. Nora Miller and Kelly Clare from "My Whole Life Right Now" in *Dead Alive*
https://deadalivemagazine.com/pieces/whole-life/right-now.html
—> Social media as an active/ever changing media
—> Prime location for experimentation
   Squishing self into different formats but also reaching back into the prescribed format to make it do more work, to say something different

—> Leaving language
   "poetics is so fucked that u leave language entirely and make language some kind of artifact that falls apart all over an image" - Nora Miller

III. One section from *Current Affairs and Others*
   —> Digital self representations

IV. A few summarizing thoughts
→ The role of visual poems, meta collaborations, and pop culture texts as objects that resist classification, categorization, prescribed uses, etc.
→ Role in shaping strong, dissenting poetic voices and aesthetics.

BOUDREAU – NOTES ON THE WORK OF EKPHRASIS IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION

I. Intro

A great deal has been written about how the work of art changes in the age of mechanical reproduction (and now in the age of digitization), but not nearly as much attention has been paid to how these changes alter the work of ekphrasis. So, I'd like to talk about that.

As Walter Benjamin observes, mechanical reproduction eliminates an artwork's aura, but increases access to the work, especially for the proletariat.

This is even more true in the age of digitization. And it is most true of pop culture artifacts, because — by definition — pop culture artifacts are mass produced or transmitted via mass media. They also tend to be hyper commercial. And, indeed, both Tiana Clark's "BBHMM" and Alyssa Moore's "Paywall" are explicitly interested in the commercial aspect of what they describe, in money.

In a traditional work of ekphrasis, W.J.T. Mitchell writes (and I quote): "The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who (if ekphrastic hope is fulfilled) will be made to 'see' the object" (164).

Mitchell later describes this relationship as a "*ménage à trois*" (164) — not because there is direct contact between the audience and the artwork — but because the poet shuttles between the two, expressing desire and offering favors.

BUT when the subject of a work of ekphrasis is a pop culture artifact, all of a sudden, the audience (or at least a much larger portion of the audience) has a relationship with the artwork outside of the poem. The contemporary audience no longer needs the poet to "see" the work. The poet is one of multiple points of connection, instead of the only line of access.

The *ménage à trois* is now a lot more complicated, or a lot more pleasurable, or both. Because the third party (the audience) is more involved.

When Dorsey and I first began talking about this panel, we were particularly interested in fluidity.

Our theory was that when the subject of an ekphrastic poem is a pop-culture artifact, the relationship between subject, author, and audience becomes less fixed and more dynamic *somehow* — all of a sudden, there's more conversation, but also more crosstalk and backtalk. Articulating that *somehow* was something we wanted the panel to do. (And I believe I've just offered one reason why this happens.)

At first glance, choosing a pop culture artifact that the audience is familiar with would seem to endanger the ekphrastic project by completely fulfilling what Mitchell labels "ekphrastic hope" (that the audience will be able to "see" the artwork) AND completely eliminating "ekphrastic fear" (that the audience will not be able to "see" the work).

This would seem to eliminate the clash of hope, fear, and indifference central to the ekphrastic project that Mitchell labels "ekphrastic ambivalence." But I don't believe this is what is happening.

My first book is structured by postcards that the speaker, Eleanor, writes to her on-again-off-again lover, Earnest. Each "Earnest Postcard" is two pages and consists of the front of the postcard (an image) and the back (Eleanor's message to Earnest). The images are there in the text. But questions remain about what exactly we are looking at. What is being represented and described in these poems — the object or the abject? This tension creates the ekphrastic ambivalence.

II. "Untitled While Listening to Drake" by Morgan Parker

Or, another example — In Morgan Parker's "Untitled While Listening to Drake," the speaker's interior monologue is paired with Drake's bossa nova beat sampling song "Hotline Bling":

  — Close reading of Parker's poem alongside Drake's song to demonstrate the presence of ekphrastic ambivalence in the poem, even when the reader is familiar with Drake

— Brief close reading of Clark's "BBHMM"

My point here is that images are slippery. They slip and slide — from a video, to a mental image, to words on a page, and back to a mental image. And modern technologies accelerate this movement.

This is yet another source of the fluidity we see in pop culture ekphrasis.

III. Streaming Images

So far, I have been speaking about mechanical reproduction and digital reproduction as if they are the same — and they do have similarities — but they are not the same.

For example, I didn't watch Drake's "Hotline Bling" or Rihanna's "BBHMM" on a tape or DVD. In both cases, I streamed the videos. (I watched the versions Vevo posted to YouTube.)

And as I watched, huge companies (what Mark Jarzombek calls "data deities") watched me watching, then used my data to increase their profits.

The images I saw and the sounds that accompanied them were created by computer code, by alphanumeric symbols — in other words, by text. This text describes the videos in a very literal sense.

My data was created and communicated in a similar way. This text describes me.

And I used text like this the create my "Earnest Postcards." I did not create them by writing on physical postcards. Instead, I used a software that is widely (and freely) available on the internet — LaTeX. Both the images and the "text" of the poems were created using a much longer series of alphanumeric symbols within a LaTeX template. So, the whole object/abject tension is complicated when you realize that, like the man they are addressed to (Earnest), the postcards are an illusion.

Compared to Benjamin's "cameraman," Mitchell writes, "the cyber artist operates simultaneously within a closer and a more distant relationship to the real" (321). Digital works are, at once, deeply penetrating and incredibly remote.

Digital works make more fluid the distinction between text and image.

And digital works offer us a new way to represent the impossibility of ekphrasis. But this impossibility is old. What we "see" in a work of ekphrasis is not a painting, or a video, or a postcard — it's an intricately constructed illusion.

Which brings me to Moore's "'Black Rapunzel Broadcasting Live from America's Next' / 'original communication.'" In this poem, the internet and digital communication become the site of ekphrastic investigation. And we can see this very clearly. In fact, the work appears to be a screenshot.

— Brief close reading of Moore's "'Black Rapunzel Broadcasting Live from America's Next' / 'original communication'" to demonstrate the presence of ekphrastic ambivalence in the image.

Moore's poem, I think, is asking us to consider something that is both visible and invisible — the multiformity of digital communication. **And the poem is a description that both stills and advances the epic narrative of the internet.**

IV. Conclusion

Dorsey, as our moderator, is being modest, but her work engages these issues, too, (e.g. "Ode to *Sex and the City*" and "The Pirate Anne Bonny Consults the GPS").

"Minds are media," as Mitchell observes, and "mental life . . . is mediated, and is embodied in the whole range of material media. . . . We think outloud, at the keyboard, with tools and images and sounds" (215).

Our current engagement with digital technologies makes this more apparent, but ekphrastic poets have always known this. **There is no such thing as an unmediated reality.**

Q & A: DIGITAL CHAT WITH AUDIENCE