

THE POETICS OF FILM: *Five Poets on the Influence & Impact of Cinema*

EVENT DESCRIPTION

Whether seen as adults or children, for pleasure or research, films can be as formative for a writer as any literary text. They can shape our aesthetics, our relationship with language, and can provide a sense of lineage. They can awaken our civic consciousness, and help us to see and be seen. In this panel, five poets will explore how the cinematic world has informed their poetic one, how films have inspired their craft, identity, and passion for the cross-pollination of artistic mediums.

EVENT CATEGORY

Poetry Craft & Criticism

MODERATOR & PANELIST

CHRISTOPHER KONDRICH is the author of *Valuing* (University of Georgia Press, 2019), a winner of the National Poetry Series and a finalist for The Believer Book Award, as well as *Contrapuntal* (Free Verse Editions, 2013). His poetry and essays appear in such venues as the Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *The Believer*, *Conjunctions*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*. He teaches creative writing at George Washington University and in the low-residency MFA program at Eastern Oregon University.

PANELISTS

CHASE BERGGRUN is a trans woman poet and the author of *R E D* (Birds, LLC, 2018). Her poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Nation*, *Poetry Magazine*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in New York City, where she works as a literary assistant to the poet Gerald Stern.

JERICHO BROWN is author of *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and he is the winner of the Whiting Award. Brown's first book, *Please* (New Issues 2008), won the American Book Award. His second book, *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014), won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. He is the director of the Creative Writing Program and a professor at Emory University.

SARA ELIZA JOHNSON is the author of *Bone Map*, which won the National Poetry Series and was published by Milkweed Editions in 2014, and *Vapor*, which will be published by Milkweed Editions in 2022. Her work has been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and the Academy of American Poets *Poem-A-Day* series. She is the recipient of numerous honors, including a NEA fellowship, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, and currently teaches at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

SALLY WEN MAO is the author of *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books, 2014) and *Oculus*, published by Graywolf Press and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Poetry. Her work has won a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Pushcart Prize and an Amy Award from Poets & Writers. She was the 2015-2016 Singapore Creative Writing Residency Writer-in-Residence, a 2016-2017 Cullman Center Fellow at the New York Public Library, and the 2017-

2018 Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Washington at the George Washington University. Currently she is the 2021 Shearing Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute in Las Vegas.

MODERATOR OPENING REMARKS

Hello, my name is Christopher Kondrich and welcome to THE POETICS OF FILM: *Five Poets on the Influence & Impact of Cinema*. On behalf of fellow panelists Chase Berggrun, Jericho Brown, Sara Eliza Johnson, and Sally Wen Mao, I want to thank you for tuning in.

The inspiration for this panel came when I read Jericho Brown's essay on the trailblazing documentary filmmaker Marlon Riggs (which we will be reading from today) titled "Marlon Riggs, Ancestor" and published in *The Current*, the Criterion Collection's online magazine covering film culture and criticism. With his celebration of Riggs's work and exploration of its significance in the context of the legacies of violence against and erasure of Black and queer lives, the essay was a reminder of how film has been central to the artistry and identity of many poets, how film has been integral to articulating what is at stake in the work, and how film has helped manifest, challenge, and shape what ends up on the page.

The panel today will explore all this, as well as how film has provided a sense of community and representation, a creative spark, a distillation of one's poetics, a talisman, a vessel, how film can refine or enhance what one thinks a poem might be or do. In addition to the documentary work of Marlon Riggs, panelists will speak to a broad range of films, filmmakers, and genres, including horror, the films of Lee Chang-dong, and cinematic adaptations of *Dracula*.

In the other of appearance, here is a brief description of our panelists. CHASE BERGGRUN is a trans woman poet and the author of *R E D* (Birds, LLC, 2018). Her poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Nation*, *Poetry Magazine*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in New York City, where she works as a literary assistant to the poet Gerald Stern. JERICHO BROWN is author of *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, as well as *The New Testament* and *Please*. Aside from the Pulitzer, his many honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. He directs the Creative Writing Program at Emory University. SARA ELIZA JOHNSON is the author of *Bone Map*, which won the National Poetry Series and was published by Milkweed Editions in 2014, and *Vapor*, which will be published by Milkweed Editions in 2022. She is the recipient of numerous honors, including a NEA fellowship, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, and she currently teaches at the University of Alaska–Fairbanks. CHRISTOPHER KONDRICH is the author of *Valuing* (University of Georgia Press, 2019), a winner of the National Poetry Series and a finalist for The Believer Book Award, as well as *Contrapuntal* (Free Verse Editions, 2013). His other honors include a MacDowell fellowship and the Iowa Review Award. Finally, SALLY WEN MAO is the author of *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books, 2014) and *Oculus*, published by Graywolf Press and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Poetry. Her has been a Cullman Center Fellow at the New York Public Library, and the Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Washington at the George Washington University. Currently she is a Shearing Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute in Las Vegas.

Here, now is CHASE BERGGRUN.

PANELIST READINGS

CHASE BERGGRUN

Hello, Internet, AWP, Chris, Sara, Jericho, and Sally. Super happy to be here and to participate in this really cool conversation on film and poetics. I'm going to be discussing Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, its cinematic adaptations, and their influence on my own work.

My book, *R E D*, published by Birds LLC in 2018, is a full length erasure of Bram Stoker's Victorian horror *Dracula*. Each of the 27 poems in the book, corresponding to *Dracula*'s 27 chapters, is composed exclusively of language sourced sequentially from the novel: no words were changed, added, or otherwise manipulated; they were only deleted and lineated on the page into a more recognizable poetic shape.

R E D is an original story, unrelated to *Dracula*, of violence, sexual abuse, power dynamics, vengeance, and feminist rage, and wrestles with the complexities of gender, transition, and monsterhood. It features an unnamed narrator, who contends with both herself and her abusive husband over the course of the book, ending in a climactic scene of revenge and resolution.

When I started the project around 2015 I'd been studying erasure and erasing texts for a long time, and I'd been searching for the right text to work with. I've always loved vampires: they fascinate and arouse and compel me in a personal and visceral way. My first year of grad school I found a copy of *Dracula* on the dollar book shelf outside the Strand and it instantly captivated and enraged me, and became a subject of obsession: I wrote poem after poem about it, but nothing was working, so I started to think about using the text itself to reckon with its author. My first tries were tentative, confused, and uninteresting.

At the time, I'd been reading Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette*, an incredibly cinematic book of poems with a definitive beginning and end—really, a lyric poem inside a tight narrative structure, a blending that appealed to my sensibilities; and I had just watched Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre*, an homage to the original FW Murnau silent film, and all of these artworks were floating around in my brain when I decided to abandon the first erasures and start again. My narrator's voice presented itself almost immediately. The story happened in real time, as I went about the process of erasing the 27 chapters of the book.

While writing *R E D*, I also was researching the book it was excavated out of—and I discovered that *Dracula Studies* is a whole robust subset of academic inquiry. A little bit about the history of the book:

Published in 1987, the novel was received warmly by critics, but financially unrewarding to its author, and only became popular after his death. One vehicle of this posthumous popularity was actually a lawsuit: In 1922, German Expressionist filmmaker F W Murnau released his silent film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, a low-budget adaptation of *Dracula* with German names and a German setting that loosely follows the plot of the novel. Prana Films had not secured the rights to adapt *Dracula*, and the author's widow Florence Stoker sued Prana for copyright

infringement, as proceeds from *Dracula* and adaptations of the book had been her primary source of money since her husband's death.

In an essay on the *Nosferatu* affair, Olivia Rutigliano writes: quote

“Florence Stoker’s unrelenting, seven-year crusade began with a lawsuit, but Prana-Film soon declared bankruptcy, possibly to attempt to circumvent paying up. In 1924, the German court ruled against Prana-Film. The following year, she mandated that copies of Murnau’s film be ripped from their canisters and destroyed. Her wish was granted in July of that same year; the German courts sent agents to hunt down and eradicate copies and negatives of *Nosferatu*.” end quote

The film survived, however, remaining in circulation and preserved by a few, becoming one of the first “cult” films by necessity, and introducing for the first time what are now central aspects of vampire mythology—for example, the vampire’s mortal vulnerability to sunlight (as opposed to Count Dracula’s mere weakening during the day).

The publicity of the trial and the interest in the subversive, bootleg showings of *Nosferatu* boosted Dracula’s profile, but also pushed Florence to establish copyright on adaptations over which she could maintain creative control. This resulted in the first authorized theatre production rights to Dracula being sold to Hamilton Deane, whose successful play starred Bela Lugosi, who eventually portrayed the titular character in the Universal Studios film *Dracula* in 1931 and rocketed the story toward fame.

All this is to say: it was film (and the peculiarities of copyright law) that turned Dracula from a relatively unremarkable corpse to an undead behemoth that remains with us today, constantly being adapted, updated, revised, and reconsidered.

Erasing Dracula always felt to me like a slightly insane and inadvisable project—a long, arduous process of sifting through more than 160,000 words into what became a manuscript of 5,750. I decided that as I was working on the book, I was going to quote “watch every vampire movie” an equally insane and impossible commitment. Obviously, this plan failed—but I did, in fact, watch quite a lot of them. Because, as it turns out, there are a truly stupid amount of vampire flicks.

Since its publication, Dracula has been adapted to film, television, and video games over 700 times, perhaps far more. Dracula and its characters have been made into musicals, board games, trading cards, theme park rides, operas, plays, ballets, animated features, musicals, comic books, radio shows, et cetera ad nauseam. As much as I’ve seen, read, listened to, and played, I could never approach finishing all of it. I did, however, tackle most of the major film adaptations, which predictably range from the gorgeous and sublime to the tacky and shlocky to the downright unwatchable.

Of course, I started with Bela Lugosi’s iconic and accented 1931 performance. There’s the 1958 Hammer Horror *Dracula* starring Christopher Lee as a sexy brooding Count, the first in a series of 8. One of my absolute favorites, the 1992 *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, starring Gary Oldman as Dracula, Keanu Reeves as Harker, Winona Ryder as Mina, Anthony Hopkins as Van Helsing, and fucking Tom Waits as Renfield. You should watch this

movie for the spectacular outfits alone. It's truly incredible and often very weird and by and large brilliantly acted with the exception of pre-Matrix era Keanu making the incredibly stupid decision to affect an impressively terrible English accent.

An adaptation of an adaptation, Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom Der Nacht* was a significant influence on *R E D*. It's also one of the most beautiful and moving movies I have ever seen. It's a rather slow, deliberate film, featuring a good many moody long takes of landscapes or close-ups on faces and the lighting and the shadow-work throughout is almost another character in the film.

The character of Lucy, played by Isabelle Adjani, is a wild departure from the women in Stoker's *Dracula*. She is self-driven, stubborn, brilliant, composed—contrasted with the men in the film, who are weak and ignorant, and refuse to consider her advice at every turn. Herzog's Lucy showed me how one might successfully turn Stoker's work toward writing a character who does indeed have agency, a self-determined and empowered woman, able to make decisions for herself, able to determine and create the conditions of her own life.

Herzog's take on Dracula lit a fire in me—and once I'd seen the movie, I started to see clearly how I might dig into Stoker's language and reconstruct a narrative that counters the patriarchal condescension, coercion, and dismissal of women that pervades the text.

Watching all these films made me think about why exactly it is that *Dracula* has been adapted to cinema so very many times since its publication in 1897, and my theory is, beyond the obvious attraction and popular captivation with vampires, that the narrative structure of *Dracula* is particularly suited to adaptation. The events of the book contribute to a ramping up of tension and dread—an introduction of the vampire in a spooky castle, mysterious events and deaths told of through interviews and news clippings, then the organization of an intrepid team, a montage of planning, an international hunt, and a final confrontation. The novel is a snowball moving toward a brick wall—it's naturally translatable into a compelling and attention-concerned visual format. Hell, it's even narrated: the epistolary form of the novel becomes voiceover exposition in almost every *Dracula* adaptation I've seen to some degree or another.

The cinematic structure of *Dracula*'s 27 chapters informed and constrained the structure of my erasure poems much more than I had anticipated. Without even intending to, the poems began to take on the pace, the arc, the urgency of *Dracula*, almost in parallel. Particularly vivid scenes from the novel offered their language to new and equally vivid moments in the poems, but in markedly different contexts (for example, a moment in Chapter 15 of *Dracula*, wherein Van Helsing holds a candle over the coffin containing Lucy Westenra's vampiric corpse, lent in part language to the first three lines of Chapter 15 in *RED*: “I was surprised when unconsciously I imagined / the way his sperm dropped in white patches / which congealed as it touched my body.”

For all its flaws, *Dracula* remains a massive tree in the grove of pop culture, growing new branches literally by the day. Swimming amongst its various iterations while creating a new story from the inside out was a fascinating and exciting process—one that very literally took place during my own transition—and what is gender if not an adaptation, with more or less faithfulness, of a preexisting script? The films I watched alongside the writing of *R E D* excited

and enlarged my idea of the vampire and the limitless potential within the constraint of the various tropes, rules, and popular conceptions of that monster, and monsterhood in general.

JERICHO BROWN

This panelist read from his essay “Marlon Riggs, Ancestor,” which can be read in its entirety on *The Current*, the Criterion Collection’s online magazine: [LINK TO ARTICLE](#)

SARA ELIZA JOHNSON

For this panelist’s reading, please see the last seven pages of this document.

CHRISTOPHER KONDRICH

Is there a more profound betrayal than to be betrayed by God, to feel that God has betrayed you personally despite your devotion?

In *Secret Sunshine*, written and directed by Lee Chang-dong, Shin-ae, a single mother whose husband died before the film opens, whose son Jun is kidnapped, held for ransom, and found dead by a riverbank, decides she must visit her son’s killer in prison to deliver the news of her forgiveness, as well as the news of God’s love, a love she has found, or has convinced herself that she has found, in the wake of her son’s death. Expecting to find him in need of her forgiveness, she learns that God has already done so.

“God reached out to a sinner like me,” her son’s killer explains, completely at peace. “He made me kneel to repent my sins. And God has absolved me of them.”

“God has forgiven your sins?” she asks, barely able to speak. Within Shin-ae’s question is the realization that God has betrayed her, that she has been deprived of her one opportunity to regain a sense of meaning and purpose in her life, as well as the incredulousness that someone who committed such a heinous act could be forgiven so easily.

When a few church members gather at her home to pray for her, they offer little except platitudes. “Times like this are a test of your faith,” the reverend offers. While the reverend is praying, she asks, at first to herself, “How could God do that to me?” Then, to everyone in the room, “Why? Why?” she asks again. This second *why* erupts from her. It is loud, ragged, pained. She uses it to flay the stunned silence of those present, to rip the fabric of their religious doctrine, its facile logic desperately torn.

~

In an interview with Dennis Lim for *Film Comment*, Lee Chang-dong explained that the question of what cinema is for is one he asks himself “all the time, as if I’m a filmmaker who’s just starting his career.” Several years ago, while watching *Secret Sunshine* for the first time, I asked myself the

same question, though from the perspective of a parent already wracked with anxiety about the health and safety of his child. What is a film for when it depicts what we fear most? Why would I subject myself to this, I thought, which was then followed by the question why would I not?

I believed then, as I do now, that art must show us what we would rather not see, tell us what we'd rather not hear. If this was what I truly believed, rather than what I simply told myself I did, why would I turn away? I've also come to believe that art should explore *why* we'd rather not see or hear certain things. It wasn't that I simply did not want to see violence befall a child, it was that I did not want to entertain the thought that my daughter was mortal.

I have difficulty believing in God, and often do not. Nevertheless, how could God do this to me—make my child mortal? How could he when what is seemingly immortal is cruelty and short-sightedness, corporate profits and opportunism, an economic system that fetishes unrelenting growth? The question, which *Secret Sunshine* prompted me to ask, compels me to write. “In short,” as Allen Grossman writes in his essay “My Caedmon, “the speaker in the poem is moved to begin speaking by the failure of God to make sense.”

~

The mortality of the living world is evident in ways that we know, have known, and will know, mortal in ways seen and unseen. It is mortal in ways that weigh most on communities who are economically disadvantaged and historically marginalized. The living world is mortal in ways that a powerful few have convinced us that we are all equally responsible for.

In her interview with *Between the Covers* host David Naimon, Jorie Graham equates the living world with a dying beloved: “you might leave them before they leave you. You might turn your back on them because the grief of losing them is too great.” Poetry, she explains, has the capacity to awaken grief for the living world, “to awaken the ability to go to the place, the wound, the grief and not turn one’s back on it.”

When I heard Graham’s interview, I thought about the ways *Secret Sunshine* awakened grief in me—grief for Jun, of course, but also for Shin-ae. How she bangs her fists on the pews of a church. How she lashes out against those who care for her. How, while a congregation is listening to a preacher extol the virtues of being a dutiful servant of God, she finds the sound system behind the stage, inserts a CD that she has shoplifted, and blasts a song whose opening lines are “Lies! Lies! Love is a lie. Smiling is a lie. They’re all lies.” The song is loud enough to drown out the preacher’s sermon, loud enough to get the attention of God. These are the actions of someone with no one left to lose.

I take the grief *Secret Sunshine* awakens in me to the page—indeed, we might consider the page the bedside of the living world, following the scenario Graham describes—where I write poems for a manuscript called *Tread Upon*, poems that address a blade of grass as though it were a person, someone who Shin-ae loves as much as Jun, as much as I love my child. There, I speak to it about the constant threat of being cut or burned or tilled, and how such trauma “gets inside the grammar / of what makes you grass.” Because of the way Shin-ae expresses her feelings of betrayal, as though God were someone who betrayed her personally, who should have known how much she was going to suffer, it became important to me that I addressed the grass in a

similar manner, that the grass not be omnipresent, but singular, individual, that I address it as though it were a person, like my daughter, a person who I love more than myself.

And, it also became important that, on the page, at the bedside of the living world, I ponder “the difference / between a person and a blade of grass, / which matters more and to whom, / and whether a person having more matter / matters at all.” I write this not because I actually believe that a person and a blade of grass are equivalent, but because I want to be open to the possibility that they might be. Would being open to such a possibility alter how I live? Would feeling the violence done to the natural world with the same pain and sympathy as the violence done to a person alter how human society lives?

Perhaps not, but cultivating this capacity might alter the ways in which I assign significance to what Western society has taught me is insignificant—that which I tread upon as I walk. It might help me to topple the hierarchy I, as a human, have placed myself atop so that person, plant, and creature are level, and I do not prize or privilege my species over all others.

SALLY WEN MAO

When the iconic Hollywood actress Anna May Wong arrived in Shanghai in February 1936 aboard the S. S. President Hoover, thousands of fans greeted her alongside reporters and her brother, James. At the time, Shanghai was experiencing a period of intense growth and cosmopolitanism: It was near the tail end of its "Golden Age"—while the West was experiencing a Great Depression, Shanghai was abuzz with glamour, art, and intrigue, even as the threat of civil war and foreign invasion loomed.

To the disappointment of the local Shanghai press, the 31-year-old Anna May Wong didn't speak any Mandarin. She was the first Asian-American internationally renowned movie star, born and raised in Los Angeles as a second-generation Chinese American of Taishanese descent. Though Anna May Wong's whole film career in both America and Europe pushed her to "represent" China, she had never been to China before. She intended her visit to be geared toward education—to learn Mandarin and study the Chinese theater. According to one interview, Wong wanted to "find out if [her] interpretations of China were truly Chinese." This trip was documented in a limited series and filmed by the prominent newscaster Newsreel Wong, who stayed at Anna's side during her whole visit. Wong also wrote and published a series of six columns about her trip, published in the *New York Herald Tribune*.

In July 2018, some 82 years later, I arrived in Shanghai, flying into the Pudong Airport from Washington Dulles. I was the same age as Anna May when she first visited Shanghai, and for the first time in my adult life I was going to live in China—my parents and I had emigrated from Wuhan to Boston when I was five. My mother was born in Shanghai in 1961, in the Jing'an neighborhood near the temple, and like me, she moved away at the age of five, not to America, but to the Hubei countryside. Though she has never returned since she left, my mother's origins still made me feel like I had roots in Shanghai. That was comforting.

For the next six months, I was going to live at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel, an artist's residency right on the intersection of East Nanjing Road and the Bund—the beautiful strip of

riverside buildings whose heritage architecture has been preserved from the time of the International Settlement. From the rooftop of my hotel, one could view the Huangpu River, across it the glittering Pudong—the glowing Oriental Pearl Tower, the Jin Mao Tower, the Shanghai Tower so often covered in fog. In the evenings, the Bund glowed gold—I would walk outside, lost in the endless throngs of visitors from all over the world, in disbelief that I was there.

The Swatch Art Peace Hotel used to be the Palace Hotel, and, for a period of time, it was the South Building of the Peace Hotel. In the first week of my residency, I visited the next-door Fairmount Peace Hotel, which in Anna May Wong's day used to be called the Cathay Hotel, founded by the most famous hotelier in Asia at the time, Sir Victor Sassoon. To Sassoon's chagrin, in 1936 Anna May Wong stayed not at the Cathay but the newly opened Park Hotel, the other bookend on Nanjing Road, closer to the People's Square.

In the small upstairs museum at the Peace Hotel, I found silver from the 1930s, porcelain plates, robes, and photos of people who have stopped by the Peace Hotel over the years—Bill and Hillary Clinton, the Obamas, Charlie Chaplin, Edward Snow. Inside one of their display cases was a black-and-white photo of Anna May Wong. The caption read that she starred in *Shanghai Express* with Marlene Dietrich in 1932.

Four years after that film came out, Anna May Wong arrived in Shanghai, and after truly seeing for herself the reality of China, she changed her public image permanently. It was a move that was risky, in the racist American Hollywood machine: She stopped taking on non-Chinese roles, resolving to take only sympathetic roles.

* * *

For many Chinese-Americans, or people belonging to a Chinese diaspora, China can be a paradox: at once close, and at once far away. To some Chinese-Americans, it is hard to know whether visiting China is an arrival or a return. And in 1936, a time when the Chinese Exclusion Acts were still written into the laws of the United States, it was even more complicated for Anna May Wong. To be caught between two worlds, one of which rejected the other, how could one negotiate identity? In Wong's account of her visit to China, she declared, "I am going to a strange country, and yet, in a way, I am going home. I have never seen China, but somehow I have always known it...Chinese in the United States suffer from a lifelong homesickness, and this somehow is communicated to their children, even though the children know nothing about their ancestral homeland."

Watching the footage of her trip, I sensed a fretfulness that was familiar to me. Even if she described a "lifelong homesickness" for China, Anna May Wong stood out on those streets—and she looked at times bewildered, at times full of wonder. That disorientation—her eyes darting everywhere, her brisk stroll, her glances—mirrored the distinct feeling I had living in Shanghai, walking everywhere in a daze. It's true that in 80-plus years, this city has experienced one of the most dramatic transformations in history, but Shanghai still represents the same thing in our time and in Anna May's time: a city whose rapid change, cosmopolitanism, and development epitomizes Chinese modernity. According to historian Karen J. Leong, "Wong's bewilderment at the modernity manifested by 'the East'—the factories and pollution of Tokyo, Kyoto, and

Shanghai, the cosmopolitanism of the cities and sophistication of their inhabitants—demonstrates how American orientalism could not imagine China's confronting the same issues of urbanization and industrialization as the United States."

Chinese reporters, critics, and officials treated Anna May Wong with a mixture of interest and disdain. They decried the roles she had to play—in particular, the shame she caused the country playing evil stock characters in Hollywood that cast China in a mocking light. According to Anna May's account of a reception in the Department of Cinematography in Nanjing hosted by the Kuomintang government, the Chinese officials "all took turns berating [her] for the roles [she] had played." Yet, it was also clear that Anna May Wong had a reverence for China, a desire to understand it, to fully connect and engage, using her newfound knowledge to cement her future as an actress who will portray the *real* China. It was more than just a personal longing—she was visiting for career-related purposes.

In Shanghai, I found myself tracing Anna May's footsteps—I visited the Park Hotel where she stayed, sliding through its rotating doors the way she did in video footage day after day, smiling at the camera. Each time she exited the hotel, Anna May wore a gorgeous qipao.

Sartorially, Wong's lack of belonging across America and China compelled her to assert a new identity for herself. In the footage from her initial journey to Shanghai on a boat, Anna May draped herself in a luxurious fur coat and donned a black wool hat. On the street, she wore a long qipao and black leather gloves, with a fox fur draped around her. In this same outfit, she visited the Yuyuan Gardens, walking through a portal that I've walked through myself when I visited. She was a tourist, essentially—but in a sense, she was also observing the street scenes of Shanghai, taking on the role of a female flaneur and participating in its urban life with her movements and her style of dress. If Anna May Wong's film roles expressed a series of stereotypes, a set of tragedies, or a lack of agency, then fashion has always been Anna May Wong's assertion of her identity, her sense of connection to her culture, and consequently, her agency.

Poetry, Trauma, and the Aesthetics of Horror / Sara Eliza Johnson

I'm going to focus my talk today on horror cinema, because it's the genre of cinema that has influenced my work most profoundly, but I hope that even if you aren't a horror fan, you'll find something to take away from it.

I've loved horror films since I was a kid. But it was only after I started working on an essay collection about my relationship with horror and horror films, and their relationship to my own traumatic memories, that I realized how much cinema has also influenced my poetry practice. I've now come to terms with the fact that what I'm writing, is, to some extent, "horror poetry."

I find myself gravitating towards horror for inspiration in my poetry writing, in addition to my nonfiction writing, not just because of its thematic resonances, but also because that resonance is often tied up in the visual viscerality of horror. The thematic heart of horror is trauma, so it only makes sense that I gravitated back to it. And the primary metaphorical language of horror cinema is the visceral moving image. The movement of the image is important because it facilitates the metaphorical transformation.

And this has been integral for me. As I've started to work with trauma in my poetry more consciously, the primary language of my poetry has become the visceral moving image. In sum, watching so much horror led to a symbiotic relationship between my work and the horror film that I believe shows the potential for horror cinema as a lens when "writing trauma," which I think shows the potential for greater relationships between poetry and film more broadly.

A cinematic scene is orchestrated in a way that is useful for poets to study if they want their poems to have complex and dynamic movement on the page, to switch perspectives or angles, to work through shifts in psychology. For example, in a slasher scene, you might take on multiple roles in the scene based on the camera's view, moving from both perpetrator to victim and observer perspectives. In a body horror scene, such as a Cronenberg scene, you might enter the inside of the body, then move back out. Cinema often also works with montage and floating fragments, which is useful for poetry (or, at least, has been for mine).

So—I'll read from some poetry from my upcoming book *Vapor*, which, unlike the essay project I mentioned, has no direct engagement with horror cinema per se, but nonetheless has been shaped by it in both conscious and subconscious ways. And I would encourage you to explore how the films you watch and rewatch have influenced your work similarly.

It took me some time to understand this development in my own work. I didn't realize how often I was writing about bodies being torn apart, reconstituted, torn apart again, and annihilated, or how often wounds became the central point of emotional and metaphorical pressure in my poems. An important note here is that my book doesn't deal with bodily annihilation in itself, but the sensation of annihilation that trauma can engender for a person. And my quest was to create that sensation,

not only engage with a concept, and this is one realm in which horror cinema has helped me.

I'll read a few poems as examples. The first is based on a nightmare I had, called "Parable of the Unclean Spirit":

PARABLE OF THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT

You can't remember what they did to you. Your loneliness isn't welcome here, you know, but still you walk the dream-lit village, looking for someone gentle. There must be an animal trapped under your shirt, you think, because little claws scratch against your chest, and you throb there, but you're afraid to look because looking means remembering. You ask a man passing on the road to lift your shirt and check, and he retches at what he sees, says the flesh there overflows, as if grinding its own meat, that strips of skin curl away from the wound like rot mushrooms growing on a tree, and he can't help you, you make him sick, he says, he has to go now, so you wander some more, until you reach the gate, which is the end of who you could have been, the end of the dream of your body made full with starmilk, propelled by a heart of sea anemone. You'll be hungry forever if you stay here, trying to hide your secret mouth from all this light. Before you can cross the gate into that dark valley, you must look at yourself. You can think of other words for red: crimson, cherry, scarlet. But there's no other name for blood, no name for a shame like this, its hiss of pain when you press your finger to it, the sweet stain it leaves on your fingertip. You just have to taste it.

Nightmares aren't quite as clear in their presentation as this poem would suggest. They're often hazier and less focused, you forget parts or they don't have a clear narrative. This was a poem for which I consulted horror films to work on imaginative access. I wanted to recreate the fantastical experience of pain that was central to the dream, and it was difficult to access it by memory alone. The chestburster scene in *Alien* was one of several productive moments here.

The next poem I'll read is called "Nebula." As a reminder, nebulae are formed by exploding supernovas.

Nebula

The anemone of your dream
blooms inside the vacuum
of black wind,

floats in radial symmetry, a remnant
of horror
uprooted from its reef.

You float

without your body, though it lingers
like a signature
of your body, of the swell and implosion

of your matter,

you a wave that reversed, curled into itself
but never
closed its loop, like sand whorling

in the desert, in that memory of violence

you still can't erase,

even now

the scorpion's tail there rippling the sand
of your mind
and the man or something in that shape
asking if you're all right

and you nodding yes

as he presses his hand against your neck,
between your thighs,

as the sun pulses through your palms,
through your chest

and how you burned open then
for your world
at its end, how your tongue

turned to blood, and your skin melted pink,

your cry for someone, or something,

heard across space,

like the vibrations of distant stars
instruments had once translated into sounds

for us to hear and know

it was not too late

to be alive

though it was.

This is a poem that started out more abstractly. The first draft felt quite flat because it was mired in the concept only, in the feeling of floating dissociated in space, without any juxtapositional movement. The final version of the poem works with the experience of transformation more fully, by leaning into the viscerality of the metaphor in the moment of transformation, which is ecstatic. I used similar scenes in horror to fuel my imagination in revision. I especially love Cronenberg, who turns body horror into an ecstatic or even Sublime experience, and he is present here. Formally speaking, I also used indentation to create a greater sensation of movement on the page, a formal choice we make as poets that I think is latently cinematic, like camera lenses sweeping, panning, zooming. And I worked more with cinematic montage and fragmentation in the revision, juxtaposing present and past time so that the present moment of the poem—which is the after effect of the trauma—came to more acutely echo the past moments that led to the event, which were violent and painful. Complex movement here was key to turning the poem from flat to dynamic, and I learned that complex movement from film.

The last poem I'll read is "Pyroclast." If you don't know, a pyroclastic cloud happens during a volcanic eruption and can move up to 450 mph with temperatures up to 1,830 °F.

Pyroclast

When my body blew open

the shadowglass cloud

galloped through me, glittered

my blood to boil. Pain stretched
through its own opening,
wheezing but alive, slick

with my insides: a newborn foal
I nursed on my own milk
and licked dry after rain,

fed parts of me I could survive
without—a finger, a tooth,
the end of my tongue—

but still it tried to climb back
inside, reverse as a breath,
a scream, and still every cell

in me was a cupful
of poison dividing itself
until at its cry my skin

parted for the animal,
and, exhausted, I let it come
home. A heart can beat

outside a body. So can a wound.

Nights, it climbs out of me
to run with its kin,

trailing my blood across fields,
which yields bruises
of larkspur cows eat and die

and though I hide from it
I am relieved when it returns to sleep
in me, when I wake to feel it

breathing through my lungs
like a pool in a cave
that ripples without wind.

Here, I wanted to show a devastating event and a forever aftermath, which gets internalized in the body as a kind of visceral memory. In addition to *Dante's Peak*—as ridiculous as that sounds—the fantastical horror imagery here comes from a slew of films that deal with pregnancy, parasites, animal familiars, and body horror transformations, all Frankensteined together into an experience that accurately reflects my experience of trauma in poetic form. *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Witch*, *Slither*, *The Thing*, and *Alien* are just some of the influences. It's a primary example of how and why horror cinema has become a point of reference for accessing emotional pain imaginatively and translating it onto a page.

So: it turns out that horror cinema and its visceral language—a language with a highly complicated sense of movement—is great for working through the problem of the body. Or I suppose I should say: the problem of my body, which I struggled to express without this particular language at my disposal, which I learned in part from the horror film.

Overall, horror or not, the multimodal complexity of film has been immensely helpful for me for thinking through the dynamic movement of the poem's "bodily" presence on the page, and in helping me develop the materiality of poetic language, which has been essential for me when trying to develop emotional and psychological intensity in my poetry.