

## Stephanie Young on Live Film Narration

*The following is the text of a talk I gave at Wayne State University on November 13, 2009, hosted by the Regions of Practice: Poetics Across Languages series, and the Film Studies Program. The talk, a conversational introduction to forms of live film narration, also attempted to open up some folds of submerged social histories in contemporary poetry communities. I began that day with a reading of "The Image Record" from Picture Palace (performance mix with google navigation and stills from Fay Grim) and, following the talk, performed my narration of the last scene from Vive l'Amour.*

*During the talk I showed excerpts from videotaped film narration performances by Jennifer Nellis, Dennis Somera, Roxi Power Hamilton and Amanda Davidson.*

*In this version, I've attempted to represent those performance clips in language.<sup>1</sup>*

*I've also included the related reading list I handed out at the talk/performance, which points towards a more expansive body of knowledge than this brief introduction could address.*

*In Detroit, I had the good fortune of presenting this work at Wayne State's Welcome Center auditorium, a kind of heaven for AV needs and film viewing. "Welcome Center" says it all regarding that visit; I'm grateful to Barrett Watten for the invitation, and the opportunity it provided to consider my positionality in these formal and social architectures. I'm especially grateful for the generative conversation in Detroit following the talk.*

I want to talk briefly today about my encounter with live film narration in the context of contemporary poetry communities, and the historical forms often referenced as initiating figures and influences, in the hopes of contextualizing and complicating these things. There's not enough time to account for the myriad related practices and issues, and another poet or artist might instead discuss the relationships live film narration has, might have, with sampling, appropriation, found footage and cut-up films by Craig Baldwin, Abigail Child, Bruce Conner and others, poets theater, digital poetics, voiceover, translation, global media, piracy, subtitling and dubbing. I've compiled a list of some related reading and links, in no way exhaustive, but intended to open up or point towards

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<sup>1</sup> As most of these performance clips aren't publicly available at this time, I've included (with their permission) contact information for the writers whose performances I showed in Detroit and write through here. They may be contacted directly with any questions or if you're interested in seeing a full performance clip. The exception is Dennis Somera; one version of his version of *West Side Story*, "WEST.siDEsTroy", can be found on YouTube, and I've included that link with his contact info. The performance clip of Somera that I showed in Detroit, and write from here, is a different event and recording from that which appears on YouTube. Somera's performances often shift from one appearance to the next.

some of these relationships.

To immediately muddy things, I want to begin with a trailer, a viral video shown at the beginning of a live film narration evening at Poets Theater in San Francisco several years ago:

### *Shining*

**Voiceover: Meet Jack Torrence.** Jack Nicholson sitting in office

*I'm outlining a new writing project*

looks up from typewriter, “zany” look on face

**He's a writer looking for inspiration.**

In hotel. Quickly scrolling shot of typewriter/typing.

*lots of ideas, no good ones*

we know it says “all work and no play makes jack a dull boy” but shot moves too quickly to read this;

**Meet Danny, he's a kid looking for a dad.**

Danny Lloyd eating breakfast, talking finger drawing in crayon on bedroom door, sitting with Shelly Duvall eating toast in kitchen

*there's hardly anybody to play with around here*

**Jack just can't finish his book.** office, literary agent, wide tie, brown suit

*I don't want to sound melodramatic, but there's no way to make it economically feasible*

Jack shaking arms, “angry”, walking down hall, holding glass of scotch,

*here's to five miserable months*

kitchen, knocking containers off shelf, Danny in hall on three wheeler

**But now .. sometimes,  
what we need the most,  
is just around the corner**

room 237, looks over shoulder hand on door handle, peeks through doorway, sees Jack sitting on bed white out, stillness, shivering cymbal then the guitar highway shot, mountains driving in sunshine

***Salsbury Hill* begins**

*I'm your new foster father* Jack coming through doorway, Duvall opens door

*I'd do anything*

I've been wondering if my comments should precede or follow my performance. Of course, these notes are a kind of performance. I'm a poet, not a critic or film scholar. Contemporary performers of live film narration sometimes take on, parodically and otherwise, the role of lecturer. In the history of practices situated at the intersection of international media distribution, translation, and reception during the silent film era, lecturers appear before narrators. They traveled with magic lantern shows in the 1800s, in Europe, the U.S. and Asia, and were also sometimes called “explainers.” In some places,

the use of intertitles accommodated the lecturer or explainer's role, rendering them redundant, while in other places, live narration and translation practices emerged alongside intertitles. *Pyônsa*, the Korean term for live film narration, is a combination of *pyôn* (eloquence) and *sa* (learned person). *Benshi*, used most often in discussions of Japanese narration, translates roughly as "speaker" or "orator." *Benshi* was adopted and renamed *benzi* in Taiwan.

What seems clear is that live film narration, interpretation and translation appeared internationally during the silent film era in multiple forms, but scholarship in English has focused primarily on the ways these practices became an integral component of film viewing experience in Asia. Most English scholarship is recent, since the 1990s, and focuses on Japan, and, to a lesser degree, Korea, where Japanese occupation both furthered the practice of live film narration and repressed Korean performers who nevertheless found ways to speak against Japanese imperialism through the form. I've seen references to narration practices in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, France, Germany, Canada and the southern U.S. and west coast, but nothing that goes very far beyond pointing toward these locations as sites of practice.

Given this variance in research, documentation and subsequent visibility across different cultural locations, it's impossible to know, in any comprehensive way, how international live film narrators worked with and between the screen and audiences. What *is* known is that *benshi* and *pyônsa* moved fluidly between a remarkably various register of narrative modes. In the early days of silent film, they explained the principles of film technology itself. They sang, voiced dialogue, explained references to literature or other films, translated some intertitles while ignoring others, provided details, motivation or background for characters, and made asides or jokes which detoured a film's official or original meaning. Every performance was distinct, and one performer's version of a movie might be entirely different from another. In Korea the possibilities for loose translation of intertitles provided opportunity to speak against the Japanese occupation in a cultural context where dissent was otherwise and at all turns suppressed; one *pyônsa* "famously used the galley slaves' revolt in Ben Hur as a metaphor for the Korean Independence struggle." (Maliangkay)

Given this power to mediate between the increasingly imported image and the audience, and in combination with their celebrity, which superseded that of any particular actor or director (theaters regularly billed the *benshi* or *pyônsa* instead of a particular film), it's not surprising that the Japanese government instituted a licensing program with certification tests *benshi* and *pyônsa* had to pass in order to continue working. 750 *benshi* were registered and working in Tokyo in 1920. In Korea, 25 *pyônsa* worked during the Japanese occupation; a greater number of *benshi* worked in Korea at the same time, but it's unclear how many. It seems more than likely the Japanese licensing system served to restrict the *pyônsa*, as was the case with Japanese repression of all aspects of Korean culture and language during the occupation.

In Japan, some ambivalence and argument surrounded the *benshi*'s role. Did they have a responsibility to educate and moralize their audiences? Was their centrality holding Japan

back from development of a national cinema in relationship to western and global cinema production and technique? The *benshi* were also seen as useful to the government for controlling the meaning of foreign films. Their survival into the 1930s is usually credited to celebrity and unionization. Still, the introduction of synchronous sound and voiced dialogue in the late 1920s signaled the rapid decline and end of live film narration in Japan and Korea.

Walter Lew's poem "The Pyônsa's Complaint" dramatizes the situation of silent film narrators everywhere in the late 1930s, which was bleak. Akira Kurosawa's brother, a famous *benshi*, committed suicide when a 1932 strike against the talkies failed. The *pyônsa* in Lew's poem laments the loss of his livelihood and local celebrity to western stars, organized in the poem around the figure of Greta Garbo, and describes audiences who yell during an early talkie, urging the projectionist to turn the sound off and replace it with a live narrator, "But soon people liked / A void between / Themselves and the screen / Where I used to sit." Lew's poem is one component of a long multi-media performance practice including *The Movieteller*, Parts 1 and 2, which fuses live film narration, films, slides, dance and music to perform a history of the *pyônsa*, and first premiered in LA in the 1980s and early 90s.

Currently, a very few *benshi* continued to tour internationally; Midori Sawato is one of the most famous. Konrad Steiner, bay area filmmaker and curator, saw Sawato perform in San Francisco in 2002 and immediately began thinking about the possibilities of poets working in the form. (Steiner's work already included collaboration with poets on various film projects.) Beginning in 2003, he has curated, produced and performed in several group shows a year, mostly in the Bay Area but also in Los Angeles, New York and Portland, often in collaboration and co-production with writers in those cities. Steiner initially framed these shows as "Neo Benshi", a term that quickly caught on. At the same time, Walter Lew was a visiting professor at Mills College from 2005-07. While at Mills, Lew introduced MFA in creative writing students to live film narration. Several of Lew's students have performed in shows curated by both Steiner and Lew, and it's mostly through conversation with them that I became aware of Lew's critique of the term "Neo Benshi."

References to Lew's critique can be found in a few scattered posts online. Linh Dinh, writing on the Poetry Foundation's blog, quotes Lew's discomfort with the term because it "exoticizes and orientalizes...a method that had to be widespread during the silent film era." I've also heard (but not seen any written reference to) discomfort expressed around a perceived valorization of Japanese forms evidenced in the term "neo-benshi"; that such a term might replicate Japanese imperialism by failing to render visible live film narrators in other locations, particularly in occupied Korea. Lew instead uses "movietelling" to refer to all contemporary live film narration, and my understanding is that this is intended as a more international framework, which might point towards multiple historical locations and influences without claiming direct lineage to any one.

Steiner's curatorial notes for group shows have increasingly named an international set of influences, including the figure of the *pyônsa*, along with contemporary performances

such as Guy Maddin's 2006 silent film, *Brand Upon the Brain*, which tours with a narrator, orchestra and foley team, and *El Automovil Gris*, a 1919 silent film re-animated and inscribed by Mexican theater company Teatro De Ciertos Habitantes. He's also focused on the DIY nature of live film narration, heckling and other more social, less aestheticized forms, and employed new titles for group shows, including "The New Talkies" and "Cinema Cabaret." It would seem that these shifts in contextualization and naming reflect a response to Lew's critique, although it's somewhat difficult to trace since the arguments themselves are almost entirely invisible at the level of print or public conversation. (A post at Jeremy James Thompson's blog around Steiner's use of the word "filmtelling" v. "movietelling" operates as a sort of proxy for these larger arguments and probably comes closest to outlining them, although much remains unclear.)

Lew also continues to work within a framework of poetry and film that isn't culturally specific in the way it announces itself; in 2008 he curated a show in New York with the collective shadoWord, billed as a "cinepoetry and performance extravaganza."

In a post at the SFMoma blog *Open Space* titled "Neo-Benshi", Kevin Killian reports on live film narration performances in the Bay Area. Killian frames the contention surrounding contemporary film narration around race: "some people are annoyed that a largely Caucasian group of poets and artists are coopting a specifically Asian cultural mode." It's impossible to know who these anonymous some people are, but such annoyance is in direct conflict with the work Lew and Steiner have each done, in various ways, to open up a history of international practice, unsettling a western story that privileges and often essentializes Asian forms. The critique around race, and questions surrounding the availability of culturally specific forms, remains the most invisible of these arguments, and hence perhaps the most anxious.

These arguments are part of what I love about this performance practice: how difficult it is to speak of, how many names and histories one must voice in order to begin, and never fully account for all the intersections. Its resistance to my ways of knowing. A kind of wild interdisciplinary-ness that problematizes all sorts of categories.

Full disclosure: I've worked in these forms extensively, and collaborated with Steiner and others. When referring to this work in the notes for my book *Picture Palace*, I chose the somewhat abstract "performances constructed alongside film" in part to refuse the terms of a hazy argument that I felt might enroll my work in one or another group, while refusing the work of the other. Some of these anxieties show up even in the naming and publicity for this event today—my desire has been to name as many practices as possible, and to point towards performers in multiple historic and cultural locations, rather than valorizing one local interpretive practice over another, but it's tricky, as something like a local, or set of locals, has been the site of my thinking and making. Where we make is never neutral.

In a bio note for one of her performances, Jennifer Nellis locates her performance practice in childhood play: "Long before Jennifer Nellis was aware of benshi, she spent many late nights in Ohio watching Nickat-Nite re-contextualizing domestic life of the

1950s with the help of her brothers.” (Indeed, I’ve found it difficult to talk about this form without someone invariably asking about *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.) In the following clip she negotiates the constraints and tropes of television, from its shorter duration to particular uses of sound. Her performance is marked by several long pauses, gaps, and silences; integral to the visual and narrative suspense of the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode she’s working with and against. These silences are punctuated by the soundtrack, which occasionally cuts back in and operates, in reverse, as a pause or cut in Nellis’s re-contextualization. These momentary appearances of the soundtrack return us to the materials of the “original”, aired October 5, 1958, which Nellis re-imagines as Tristan Tzara quite literally pregnant with a new movement:

Someone in the audience coughs.

Jen stands at a music stand, beneath a paper lantern and string of Christmas or white twinkly lights. The door creaks open onscreen. It makes a creepy sound.

*Hans had a hunch that Tristan was soon to hatch the new movement. He entered the birthing room.*

The sound cuts in again, screech (like an instrumental intake of breath) then ta-da, da-da-da-DA!

That’s the best I can do, I keep trying to transcribe the teevee musical sound gesture for suspense. To write down the sound. I can’t even figure out what kind of instrument(s) produce the sound. Strings? Followed by horns? If you were here, I would hum-sing it for you. If you were in the audience at the time this was recorded, or watching this clip in the welcome center auditorium, or on your laptop as I am now, you would—hear it.

A figure on the bed, in the foreground, raises an expressive hand, like, wait! Jen immediately confuses the hand’s gender; it’s held in the air to better allow Tzara’s nail polish to dry. (laughter) *It’s...Pink Jubilee*. Conversation ensues between Hans, in his hat and work clothes, and Tristan with sheets pulled up to his chest. Hans would like to look more closely at the nail polish? Just don’t touch. *It’s still drying*. Tzara is uncomfortable. *It feels like I could poo*. (laughter) An enema is offered. Tristan’s accent becomes increasingly southern. He’s imperious and elegant, Jen’s vocalization draws each line out, in its full extension, and you can hear the body’s tension, its predicament, shuttling between necessary verbal interaction and a great desire not to jostle the body in pain, not even with speech.

Sometimes it is like this when I have cramps.  
Just don’t touch.

*I feel like I could burst*. Hans is impatient and annoyed but begins to “get it.” *You really ARE in labor*. He wants to know where the manifesto is. *You can’t just write one in minutes*. Tzara explains that it’s not written yet. *It’s still in my*

*stomach* (laughter—on clip, and in welcome center), *lying there asleep*. Hans, incredulous laughter/*huh* vocalization, increasingly bewildered, maybe even beginning to get worried. *Do you mean to tell me there's a movement in your stomach RIGHT NOW?*

That repetition of the word *movement* throughout. The offer of an enema. I begin to think Hans' incredulity here is less about gender, the shock of a male body pregnant, than it is about the mysterious alchemical transformation of shit into procreation. No wonder Hans is envious: no small thing, rendering shit into art history.

This scene is blowing his mind. It's unbelievable. Tristan smiles, weak, sly and conspiratorial. There is some conversation about Dada. The world needs something new. *I mean, it's 1958, and the venom of the masses is on the rise. They...love to be insulted.* Hans scratches his neck. *Hmm, that's deep...* (pause) (laughter) *... for someone who wears nail polish.* The sound cuts back in as Hans leaves the room, the floor creaks as he goes in and out of doors, Jen doesn't speak until he returns with a butter knife. Sharp intake of breath. *What's that for!* Hans explains that he's going to perform a caesarean. *Nooo!* (pause) (laughter) *Don't be a fool. No wonder you were never a leader.* A doctor is suggested. *Good old Dr. Dali.* The call is placed, and the sound cuts back in for its jangly ring. Hans leans against the wall by the phone. *Salvador. Hey, it's Hans. Hans Arp.* (laughter) *I'm over at Tristan's place* (laughter) *and he thinks he's giving birth to another movement.* (laughter laughter laughter) Cut to the figure on the other end of the line, looking remarkably like Salvador Dali, moustache and all. (laughter laughter)

*Wait til Breton hears.*

Discussion and notes around contemporary live film narration often trends towards the form's subversive possibilities. As a form of writing critical reading, film narration opens enormous areas of potential in the classroom. Jennifer Nellis has used it extensively in composition classes, and Dennis Somera recently taught a workshop at Kearney Street in San Francisco, which he announced as follows: □

In this workshop, participants will have the chance to recontextualize or balance their own narratives with an altered poetic language and inject it where a film's "realism" might not have originally allowed. Reinscribing a story/narration/poem on a film is in turn taking back some of the control, the autonomy, the voice—a subversive, if not revolutionary art as action. The act of movietelling/film narration is taking what has been forced upon us through popular culture ... bringing more interactivity to an art form that typically has its interaction limited to suspension of disbelief or a one-way bridge (spoon-)feeding into the audience.

Here's an excerpt from Dennis's re-telling of *West Side Story* as the story of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, the clip opens mid-phrase:

The Jets spring as a group onto the teeter totters rising side, Dennis is singing  
*the Jets are in gear*

pause, and the teeters totter forward in a single action: *our cylinders are clickin /  
the shots are all fear / cause every a-mer-i-can's a drowsy chicken.*

the group springs from one position to the next, *better run / better hide*

more like

*better* (then a sound like tires screeching in a hard turn, or putting the brakes on,  
something in Dennis's voice a vehicle running into the "r")

*better* (brake hard) **R** *un / better hide*

Better *un*. Better tires screeching. Better tires screeching, *r, un, hide*.

A sartorial dream, the Jets stride through a fenced urban yard onto the sidewalk,  
all vest and muscle. Sweater vests. Dirty faces, lemony yellow cropped jackets.  
They're moving in choreographed clumps and geometric dance formations, like  
cheerleaders, I almost expect them to do a pyramid.

*We're hanging a sign / Vieques is forbidden*

Moving down the sidewalk. One leaps forward with a quick roll of the fists.  
(laughter) *Here come the Jets, JETS!* They're gonna bomb every last one. *Every  
last buggin one*, rhymes with *ever-lovin*, turns into a **SCREEEEEEEECH**.

The camera stands still as the Jets dance forward, shoulders first into the frame  
then peeling off one by one, disappearing off screen, into action, the  
**SCREEEEEEEECH** gets higher and harder to take, it accelerates and then Dennis  
turns hard, back into the Hollywood dance number. The last Jet enters the frame,  
blonde, tousled, blue-eyed, the word fits into his mouth perfectly, the end-of-the-  
number, almost like jazz hands, low, satisfied,

*yeah*.

(laughter)

Cut to a high school dance scene, the dark gym or set. Dennis whispering *heil heil  
heil*. Maria and Tony, the star-post-colonial crossed lovers framed in light as  
dancers circle slowly, one arm up. What dance is this? The beginnings of  
laughter, Dennis whispers a little louder, a little faster, *heil heil heil heil*, as  
laughter on the clip, and in the Welcome Center, swells, verges on the hysterical.

Cut to a shot of Dennis at the music stand, close to the microphone, looking intent

and serious.

More hysterical laughter.

The couple gazes. The dancers speed up, or is that Dennis, making them go faster? *heil, heil, heil*, becomes

*hei hei hei*

becomes panting

as they lean in for a kiss. Lights up and Maria's brother tears into the scene, pulls her away. *Get away from her, North American!* Turns to Maria. *Can't you see he just wants to strafe you?* It's all happening so quickly. Thus far we've only watched one minute and eighteen seconds of this performance. The play is quick and fast and slippery; *PR Girl* for *Practice Range*, Tony stammers almost mutely, you can hear the unsaid "but," *she's m-m-mine*. The group circles, Jet-in-a-mustard-yellow-suit tries to calm everyone down: *Boys, boys, my Wednesday's a doozy of a Thanksgiving pageant, to give this awesome context.*

When I first attempted to select a movie, turn the sound off and re-write it, I had no idea what I was doing, or what might be possible. This is one of the first entirely inspiring pieces I saw. Here's Roxi Power Hamilton reprising her queering of *Rebel Without a Cause*, first performed in 2003. This recording is from a 2005 performance at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts:

The paper lantern. Roxi's long hair. Silence.

*Daddy you do not do, you do not do*  
(tenderly)

and there he is, called up  
coming through the door in an apron                      *Psst! Jimbo—your closet's a mess.*

(cluster of *Mommie Dearest* references)  
(laughter laughter)

a fireside chat. A bedside chat with one's aproned daddy. Asking for advice.

*suppose you had to do something—you had to go some place—and you had to do this thing*

If one could describe James Dean's voice one could say something about what Roxi is doing here. It's low, and slow, and part of the words seem to get stuck on the back of the tongue and then roll forward.

*and you knew it was very dangerous—and, and it was a matter of honor, and you had to prove it, what would you do?*

Dean bundled in the creamy sheets. The quality of tossing and turning, but also “languid” comes to mind

His daddy’s having a hard time taking him seriously.  
*Are you trying to be some kind of straight 50s man?*

*No, n- what would you do?*

*Well I certainly wouldn’t mumble about it like Marlon Brando.*

The sheet pulled back reveals Dean’s bloodstained shirt.

The sharp intake of breath.

Daddy’s shock and concern  
Daddy’s face, hovering above the floral apron

Dean leans back on his elbows,  
unconcerned and maybe even a little proud.

*What.* (laughter)

A single word (again) fit into the mouth, insolent, as if dropped there, abandoned by the screenwriter, rediscovered now and plunked back into place, into the mouth.

*What.*

*The wire hangers were bad enough (laughter)  
but I’ll never get these stains out! What kind of trouble are you in?*

Here it comes—I never get over it, and realize only after watching this again and again, what the form, in Roxi’s body, in its precise relationship to lip synch, is saying. It’s not just one word, it’s every word, fitting the shape of the mouth that speaks it onscreen, because this is the script that was always already there, Roxi is making it visible:

*The kind I was telling you about. Gender trouble.*

(pause)

*if you’re asking me to perform normative masculinity  
(laughter) for you Jimbo, no way.*

(laughter laughter)

(cluster of sexual trivia re: James Dean)

*Well I'm with Rock.  
Gender's not like a stain, you can't just shout it out*

Daddy goes to clean the wound

explosive *OW* as the torso, shirt halfway up, recoils

(cluster of poetry jokes and references, including:  
beat poets,  
list poems,  
Lawrence Ferlinghetti,

*what poem would help me be a man?*

*hmmm maybe Howl?*

epic poems  
Don Juan, pronunciation of,  
Byron,

shirt halfway over head, shouting  
*DON JUAN! WANT AN EPIC!  
I NEED ONE NOW!*

*you little narcissist*

Projective verse,  
and the Gallery Six reading.)

*but if romantic poetry's so important to you...*

Daddy begins to read the epic aloud

*Ech, iambic pentameter*

Dean's left the room, down the stairs, on his way out the door.

*I don't need a Daddy in a dress.  
5 of the most famous men in Hollywood have sucked my cock.*

(laughter)

There's cake, a knife, a slice of cake. He's out the door. Daddy pursues him,  
stands in the doorframe, calls out after him—

There's a joke about having one's cock and eating it, too.

There's rhyme.

*Daddy, Daddy you bastard I'm through*  
(with the quality of wailing, or throwing one's voice)

As with historical and contemporary practices, such as living room VHS-viewing parties in Hungary in the 1980s and 90s of pirated foreign movies and TV with live narration by a community member, poetic live film narration is a local form. Highly aware of its audience, performers often comment on poetic history, production and social relations. This is Amanda Davidson's re-write of several scenes from *Firestarter*, taking on gender, aesthetics and the MFA industry:

Again mid-phrase, again paper globe, again Christmas or white twinkly lights,  
again music stand, again poets theater in Timken Hall.

*Bang, blam. Flames.*

*Slammed into the pink interior.* Amanda's voice moving quickly now along with the tiny child figure of an irate Drew Barrymore wrapped in a pink bathrobe, tied tightly at the waist, strides through the apartment opening windows behind which walls and partitions appear, *silky curtains parting to reveal military grade hymens*, she tries the door, another dark wall upon which to beat one's useless fists, adult-ish hair shaking, slams the door, *terror of entrapment*, reviews some ways of thinking about language as administered on SAT tests, terrible multi-tasking prodigy marches to the couch, *petty poop stain of the bourgeoisie*, makes the hot chocolate left by *my wardens* boil with her eyes. It's feelings that are boiling over, in the hot chocolate in a mug, which is a doll *I hated my doll's guts but I named it anyway: Coco Volcano.*

*I was a criminal girl now, which meant I could name things.*

Cut to Barrymore in a blue suit, electrodes taped to her head, bodies in metallic suits move around the glassed-in room, machines, scene of the covert MFA program she's enrolled in. Drew looks sad. *Daddy would be sad.* The omniscient narrator is here too, he's been watching all along—*probably even when I pooped on the couch. Had he wrung the very turd from my bowel?* The grammarmatic gramatron says PROBE and BODY in blue digital letters. Things are picking up, SAT constructions are of no use, *I sensed a membrane straining between levels of consciousness*, hair blown back, further ignition of food, face acting, WHOA, the flames fly. Glandular thoughts. Charlie Sheen revealed as the omniscient narrator: *Back off you jack-off!* More boiling, the bathtub ignites, *god could I use a hot bath, after pulling the curtain on that old wizard*, yes why IS there a bath tub in this scene? But anyways more flames and boiling, more hair blown again and again back, *bet's on*, the scene ends with an accelerating list: *immersion, drowning, baptism, bewitching, resurrection, submergence*

I feel myself teetering on the edge of an endless list of similarity and difference, thinking about the gap between historical forms and poetic interventions a hundred years after the emergence of the cinema. We know what rushes in to fill that void between screen and viewer, so eloquently named in Lew's poem, and are intimately familiar, at a cellular level, with the dominance of the image in constructing everything from nation and gender to race and class. Where a *benshi* or *pyônsa* complicatedly worked both against and with the cultural opacity of foreign films they narrated, and the images of modernity and consumption presented there, often usefully mining misunderstandings and the unfamiliar, the performer in the U.S. who illegally rips a commercial DVD file, edits the images and re-writes scene is working hard to re-open voids in a space of totalizing cultural narratives. And they're also working hard to open up the sticky interchange between stories. The phrase "talking back" to the movies has been used but I prefer thinking through something like a cyborg mating of surfaces as it shows up in Bhanu Kapil's writing. These cultural narratives are part of what construct and tell us into being from the outside, all the way in. One thing live film narration allows is a radical inhabitation of stories, to be inside a shape as a way of deforming what can't be extricated.

Still, it's difficult to de-familiarize viewers or activate distancing effects in a cultural moment where, I noticed recently, a commercial for Novaring (a form of monthly birth control) features a group of women watching and interpreting a commercial for the product being advertised.

The practice has been one, for me, of intense collaboration and time commitment. Most of the contemporary poets I know who have done live film narration tend to work from a script, memorized if they want some freedom to engage the scene physically. And most tend to work for a long time generating scripts that carefully note each cut or mark the time to keep track; painstakingly "fitting" words into a character's mouth. Once behind the microphone, one holds on and hopes for the best, to keep up with the film and timing. I imagine the *benshi* or *pyônsa*'s consummate skill as a comfort with wobbling—most silent-era film narrators only saw a movie a few times before narrating it in its entirety.

I recently encountered descriptions of the *benshi* and *pyônsa* working in collaboration with the projectionist to slow down or speed up a film, so as to give them more or less time to speak. A buzzer on the podium, or a bell, was used to signal the projectionist, but the projectionist was also a producer of meaning, and might decide independently of the narrator to vary the speed in emphasizing the effect of a scene. The Japanese term for this coordination between narrator and projectionist, *kokyû awase*, translates as "breathing in unison."

It's an apt metaphor for the intersection of embodiment and disruption, in contemporary practice, at both the moment of performance and in the preparatory work of cutting and editing a mass-produced cultural object. Contemporary narrators also play with timing, slowing down the film or pausing it entirely, to allow more time for speech (both Dennis Somera and Roxi Power Hamilton pause the film and speak over the still, in different

sections of the pieces I showed excerpts from.) Digital reproduction is what enables this work, but also what limits its variation in live performance. (An exception would be the almost hour-long improvisation Steve Benson recently performed at Artists' Television Access, to films collaged by Steiner.) The performance object is usually scripted and finally quite static, but dynamic in its embodied deployment. The other thing that shows up in the negative space of the clips I've shown today is the way in which the performances are nearly impossible to reproduce, as visual records, and *Picture Palace* is one example of various attempts to reproduce these performance in print media, failing to greater and lesser degrees.

Which seems like a good enough segue to my narration of the final scene from Tsai Ming Liang's *Vive l'amour*, with an epigraph from *Charade*. *Vive l'amour* is a curious film in the context of this larger discussion; Tsai Ming Liang is a Taiwanese director whose early and middle films feature long stretches of silence. They're not at all silent films, but dialogue can be sparse, especially the case in *Vive l'Amour*. What might a white woman in the U.S. voice, or not, through these silences?

In contrast, "The Image Record" uses stills from *Fay Grim*, rather than a continuous scene, and operates according to a slightly different logic. My arrival at those materials was mostly a product of chance, and came to be meaningful where the material facts of a life encounter the timing of Netflix.

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Da Benshi Code: <http://benshi.org/>

Kino21: [www.kino21.org](http://www.kino21.org)

Dan Hoy (*Sinlechuga (video) vs. Edie Sedgwick (music) and Found A/V Poems*):

<http://www.sinlechuga.com/sedgwick.html>

Brian Kim Stefans: [www.arras.net](http://www.arras.net)

shadoWord: [www.myspace.com/shadoword](http://www.myspace.com/shadoword)

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“WEst.siDEsTroy”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9NrbBkN7GU>