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Fiction in the Age of Film

Mariano Tenconi Blanco

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Mariano TENCONI BLANCO

Fiction in the Age of Film

First of all, I hope I don't disappoint you. The title of this panel promises "Fiction in the Age of Film," and we all know how seductive the life of a writer can be on the one hand—and on the other, how seductive films can be. However, I'm going to talk about something very old, something that may not interest anyone: I'm going to talk about theater. And the first thing I will say may disappoint you as well. Theater, at least the kind that I consider valuable, has absolutely nothing to do with cinema.

The first difference I want to point out between theater and cinema is the relationship they have to "what's real"—written like this, in scare quotes. Cinema can account for what is real. It happens in Iowa, it is filmed here in Iowa. But not in theater. In theater it's always "as if"—that is to say, it's always figurative. So in a play, the actors *say* it happens in Iowa, and the stage includes some horrible artificial grass. If you want to establish a one-to-one relationship with reality, like in cinema, what happens is that the thing feels naïve. So theater must necessarily make up a new reality for itself. In Spanish we use the word *verosímil*. Something that is *verosímil* is true inside the world of the play, but it's not real. For example, Superman flying isn't real, but if they tell me he comes from another planet, I'd say: "Ok, I believe you." That's *verosímil*.

The second difference between the two genres is the relationship they have with plot. Here in the United States, there are many books by gurus who say they know how the perfect movie plot should go. Luckily, writers like Paul Thomas Anderson, the Coen brothers, Kauffmann, and others, also Americans, have contradicted them. No matter what, in cinema what's important is what happens: the plot. In theater, it's not, for the same reason I mentioned earlier: the plot does not make it *verosímil*. And I like plays with a plot, plays in which things happen. I'm not a fan of post-dramatic theater, or those snobby plays where nobody understands what's going on. But although I like plays with a plot, I know the plot is not important. What's important, again, are the possibilities that the dramatic construction provides for the development of a new world, one that will somehow influence the real world. I believe this is how the process goes—it is not the world that defines fiction, it is fiction that modifies the world. It's enough to see how advertisements invent models of misogynous, homophobic, and heteronormative worlds, and how people go and repeat them. It is fiction that modifies reality.

To continue: I talked about the relationship of these two genres with reality, and with plot. Now I will refer briefly to language, to what is written. In cinema, language is usually the means by which the plot is developed, and, in general, the more artificial the characters' speech, the worse it is. In theater, it's the opposite. The more fake the language, the better the play. And the more natural the language, the worse the play becomes. That's why I believe that writing for theater is much more related to poetry than to cinema. Because it is language that is written to be said, because it consists in taking language and removing its capacity for use—using it "wrong," let's say, for its sound rather than for its communicative meaning. Of course, rules exist in theater, and writing plays is not writing poetry, but I do think it's much closer to poetry than to cinema.

Therefore, in conclusion, what I think is most important—and the reason why I love this old art of theater—is that even with cinema, television, YouTube, 3D, and Netflix, nothing can replace theater. That's the simple message I wanted to give you today, on this ordinary afternoon. Because theater can build a reality that has nothing to do with the reality of the world, it builds a reality that is complex,

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artificial, metaphoric, excessive, fake, and stupid. But in the end, it stands as a counter-reality, a reality that is against everything we don't like about the world, against everything we want to do over again, though we may not know how.