

9-21-2005

Wandering Between the Novel and Film

Heng Liu

Panel: Writing for Two and Three Dimensions

Rights

Copyright © 2005 Heng Liu

Recommended Citation

Liu, Heng, "Wandering Between the Novel and Film" (2005). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 659.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/659

Liu Heng (China)

Wandering Between the Novel and Film

Due to the limitation of time and also of my thinking, I am not able to discuss our topic from more comprehensive perspectives. What I can do now is to draw from my restricted personal writing experience, and simply to tell you about my feelings and my puzzlement.

When I was enlisted in the army, I was only fifteen, having barely finished my second year of study in the secondary school. And I was almost a child and without much education. My literary experience came from a limited resource of books as well as an equally narrow resource of films. In the novel, I felt the charm of the artful arrangement of words that can touch the human soul, while in film, I was overwhelmed by the immediate and strong affective power of pictures. My literary dream was seduced from both sides. I made up stories from words, but I sometimes also recorded from my memory what I had seen in a film. I set out on my literary journey, using two legs. I was then hardly twenty.

I began to publish my creative works at twenty-three, and became known for my novels. I was recognized as one of the best novelists in China. Thereafter, film directors came to ask for my collaboration. I adapted my novels into film scripts. Thus, I established my reputation in the sphere of film and was recognized as one of the best screenwriters in China. I was then full of delight and believed that I had realized the double dream of my early youth. However, an obsessive perplexity began to take its root in my heart. I was then forty. Confucius teaches: "There is nothing that can puzzle a man when he is forty." But, I was deep in bewilderment.

I once believed that the artistic purpose that I was seeking in the novel could be attained in film. However, I quickly realized only when I am writing novels on my desk am I my only master; whereas when writing films I become a part of the whole procedure, an instrument or someone who provides sketches for the architect. When my artistic design is altered, distorted and mutilated, I am completely helpless and even have the feeling that the works of my heart's blood are gradually becoming irrelevant to me. What I seek in film has deserted me in film; this is my first puzzlement.

I once believed that the limitation of literary expression in the novel could be perfected by visual images in film. However, with the accumulation of writing experience, I find out that the limitation of visual expression is far more serious than the limitation of words. The chance of a mutual-perfection or reciprocal improvement between the two ways of expression is very slim. Once the film is finished, the imagination of its author becomes congealed on the cinematic pictures, almost without any room to extend continuously. When the words of a screenwriter are turned into pictures, words themselves become corpses, and the screen on which these pictures are shown serves as the grave and the tombstone underneath which these words are buried. I pursue the freedom of expression in screenwriting, only to find out that freedom is quietly buried in films. This is my second puzzlement.

I once believed that my thinking embodied in my screenwriting could reach more people and families whereas what was expressed in my novels could only influence a small group of people who are still reading novels. However, in writing my novels, I can indulge myself and let my thinking explore the extremes, without considering the feelings of readers. But what can I do in screenwriting? The investor cares about sales and profit; the issuing company only considers the current trend of the film industry and the taste of the audience; the director worries about the evaluating standards of film festivals and the infinite possibility of visual effect.... When all these factors find their ways into the film studio, where is the room for the idea of the screenwriter? I'm afraid you have to go to the rat's hole to find it out. I try to bring out my thinking in screenwriting, but my thoughts become fragmented in film. This is my third puzzlement.

I once believed that the royalty on my books wasn't the reason why I wrote novels, and also that money was not the purpose of writing for film. But when the payment for screenwriting is tens or even hundreds of times higher than what you will get for writing your novel, can I remain unstirred? I must confess that I am seduced by worldly desire. I seek after art in film, but film rewards me with money and kidnaps art. This is my fourth puzzlement.

I once believed... My puzzlements are too many, so I shall not let them take your precious time. What I want to say is: I am not going to give up what I have chosen as my cause despite all these puzzlements, for they are part of my life. In fact, what I really want to say is: I am unimportant and humble, and therefore my puzzlements are even more so. Whether I succeed or not, the sea of novel will still billow and swell without rest and the river of film will roll on endlessly. I am only a tiny drop of water in it. I once told an interviewer jokingly: "the novel is my wife, and film is my lover. Both make me feel it would be very difficult to give them up." Confucius teaches again: "A man should know his destiny when he is fifty." I am already fifty-one, and so I have decided to accept the arrangement of my destiny. With my wife on the left arm and my lover on the right arm, I am going to spend the rest of my life in these endless puzzlements. I cannot think up a more inviting end for my life than this one.

Allow me to express my deep thanks to every one of you! My lecture also ends here.

Translated from the Chinese by Hua Jiang