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Beyond the Dynamic of Text and Film : [Literary] Fiction and Neo-Mimesis

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Panel: Fiction in the Age of Film

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Ruel JOHNSON

Beyond the Dynamic of Text and Film: [Literary] Fiction and Neo-Mimesis

Even as I acknowledge the possibility of extrapolating certain presumptions from the title of today's highly alliterative discussion topic, "fiction," within the context of the prompt, is a non-specific term and is used interchangeably with literature and storytelling, which brings about some confusion. Were I, for example, to seek to produce a film based on Tennyson's "Ulysses," would it fit into the presumed confines of this particular discourse? How does one distinguish between transmitting the narrative and emotive elements of a poetic text to film?

To solve this dilemma, I went to Borges, and his mini-treatise on the nature of literary fiction, "Parábola de Cervantes y de Quijote," in which he concludes: "Porque en el principio de la literatura está el mito, y asimismo en el fin." (Because in the beginning of literature is the myth, and also in its end.)

What we refer to as literary fiction is merely one of the fictive processes, the mythopoeia, through which we mediate and create existence—some others being religion, economics, nation, laws, self, and love. All existential activity is, in my mind, necessarily through fictive pathways, perpetually converging and bifurcating.

We can perhaps best approach the concept of literary fiction as self-conscious fictive invention, as opposed to sub-conscious. When we exchange U.S. dollars for some ostensibly less valuable currency, we engage in the subconscious fiction that one piece of paper is inherently multiple times the real value of another. When you use that money to buy my book of short stories, however, you know you are going to be reading fictions—it even says so on the cover.

I suppose the core challenge of this discussion surrounds the dynamics of "bridging the written word to cinematographic storytelling." We can have a great deal of discussion here on why good books don't necessarily make good films, but the key to that issue already lies with Plato—literary fiction, however sublime, is inherently a primarily diegetic art, while the best film is inherently mimetic. This is perhaps most apparent in the failure so far to produce a half-decent film from the prodigious textual output of Borges.

Today I want to put forward something that may seem counter-intuitive to the presumed gist of this panel: that is, discourses about the dynamic between literary texts and film as the ultimate medium for the perpetuation of fiction are becoming increasingly anachronistic.

During this residency, I am working on a trilogy of original science fiction screenplays. While I believe that film is the most powerful, and frankly profitable, core medium for this particular fiction project, I am also considering other types of media, from augmented reality to an MMPORG, and even a collection of short stories.

In essence, my engagement with literary fiction is merely the point of access in which I try to engage and analyze and make sense of all fictive processes, in order that I can arrive at some substantial truth and engage my audience in a collaborative effort to do so. Increasingly, therefore, when I seek to create a fiction, I consider the multiple formats in which it can be expressed. It is no longer an automatic

consideration of whether a core thesis should be treated as a short story, or a novel, or a play, or an audiovisual script, but also the possibilities (and challenges) of more interactive media.

My predecessors did not have the luxury of contemplating this, though their texts may not escape these processes. Shakespeare has been translated to the screen, since the first silent film made of his work in 1899, by such visionary directors as Zefferilli, Lurhman, and Kurosawa. And yet the most engaging production I've seen was done right here in Iowa two days ago, with amateurs playing various characters using screen-promoted dialogue and motion capture-controlled avatars.

I predict that with the technologically driven convergence of text, audiovisual media, motion capture and tactile technology innovation, strides in artificial intelligence, and the depreciating cost of communications and multimedia hardware, the discourse will really be about the dynamic between textual literary fiction and whatever word is invented to describe this convergence.

Let me therefore humbly suggest as a topic for the IWP 2020 Texts and Contexts series: "Fiction in the Age of Neo-Mimesis."