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Fear, Failure, Films, and Literature

Imagine two writers:

One is a writer of long sentences, full of commas and parentheses. A writer of stories that take place not in the real world, but not in an entirely imaginary one; stories that confuse the reader, leaving much space for the unexplained. This writer is interested in the uncertainty of things (and knowledge), in the nature of the impossible. To the reader, his characters may seem angry, but it's just that life is not always on their side. Everything in his stories is dreamlike, darkened by shadows, or twisted with irony. He is afraid of dialogue, so his dialogues are masters of mimicking paragraphs of exposition. He is a fiction writer.

The other is a writer of short lines and closely situated full stops. His characters walk streets found on any map of Sofia. They are people of action, but few words. Some of these words are witty, and usually it is the bad guys who say them. The good guy's words are slower, for they carry the Burden of Message on their polysyllabic backs. This writer produces almost exclusively dialogue. And nothing is mysterious or open to more than one interpretation. He is a screenwriter.

I am fairly sure you have already realized that the two writers are in fact one, and that he and I are the same person. I started as a fiction writer, but I've also written and co-written episodes for a successful crime TV series in Bulgaria. Two years ago, during a radio interview in Plovdiv, the host asked me if writing screenplays interferes with writing stories. I replied with a quick "yes," which was followed by the confession that I try to keep the two separate out of fear that one (screenwriting, of course) might contaminate the other and reduce its "magic" to a mere machine for conveying clichés and jokes.

To me, writing in both genres seemed dramatic back then. And it still does. My main experience with screenwriting is in a genre I don't know much about. It also is a career path that started suddenly: Vanya Shtereva, a wonderful Bulgarian writer and rock musician, asked me if I wanted to learn to write for TV with her. My "yes" was not immediate this time. I was scared. But I decided to try. My first episode was abysmal. I had mixed the characters' voices; I had been too playful (most of these scenes have been mercifully deleted from all the first draft files). Luckily, they wanted me back for the next season, and last year I was even nominated for Best Screenplay for an Episode. But the sense that I was not doing it right, that the writer in me was trying to trip the screenwriter at the beginning of his journey, remained.

And remains now, more than a year and a half after the last episode I wrote. I still feel that I am not good at writing suspense. Many of the stories I write are psychological dramas, so writing suspense and pure dialogue for screenplays is difficult for me. Having a sense for drama, especially when one writes for film, is very important, so I feel that I should step slowly and carefully.

Overall, I would like to be able to stop thinking about how the process of writing in another genre is different from writing fiction, but my work as a fiction writer is vastly different from my work as a screenwriter. And I know that this is not a game, and that even if it were, no one is pressing me to play it, but I see that we have reached a new level. I cannot say, out of desire for comfort, that literature has always been and will forever be a better and more adequate reflection of the human experience. That it is an art whose manifestations—words, sentences, paragraphs—are sacred and no one should strip them of

their specific beauty by turning them into images, scenes, sequences. Yet, literature and film have at least two things in common: the empty space of the page and the screen, and the full imagination of the artist—and that is more than enough. Fear and failure, I guess, are the eternal companions of every writer. The feeling that you are betraying yourself every time you change one pair of shoes for the other, however, should not be.

So, I will end this piece with the simple gesture of pointing in the direction where I believe all the terrors, challenges, and beautiful possibilities lie.

Imagine a writer: