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### Different Paths for Writing

When I was a little child I used to watch TV one or two times a week. When I grew a little older, I used to watch TV every day several times a day. You know, when you are a child television is one of the most beautiful ways of catching reality. As a matter of fact, television is a marvellous way to understand things.

Once upon a time, an intellectual called Marshall Mac Luhan considered all kinds of human expression, all human devices, as suitable media for getting in touch with one another.

Marshall Mac Luhan was born in Canada. He became a teacher of English literature in the United States of America. He had taught literature for several years, notably studying metaphors and all kinds of rhetorical features in the English language. One day, Marshall woke up with a new idea. The day before he had been watching TV for hours. The master Mac Luhan discovered a new land, the land of media.

It is easy to get lost in the middle of this “forest of symbols,” as the great French poet, Charles Baudelaire termed. It is possible that at the time you listen to this speech you are wondering what this has to do with writing—which relationship between mass media and literature is being shown.

Most people would say that TV has nothing to do with writing. But all the tales, all the short stories, all the human plots around the world concern each other. When you know the facts you know the relationships between various media. The first man in the world, the first man called Adam meets the first woman called Eve. That seems to be the first point of our history, at least in a symbolical sense. For our parents, Adam and Eve, the most important thing in Paradise was the word. The word, since the beginning, was the most powerful tool for the human being. The word symbolizes *both* sin and salvation.

At this point all of you could be wondering what the moral of this essay is. Well, I will tell you what the moral is. There are not words that are without at least one meaning. Every word has meaning: the idea of creation, the idea of being a wholly new thing for all the earth. But that does not mean that all the ideas related to a word are visual.

The world is an amazing stage. You and she and he and I, all of us are the main characters of a huge comedy. It is not “The Divine Comedy” by the famous Italian genius Dante Alighieri. It is a real comedy, our comedy, the comedy which we play every day, each moment of our lives, always in different ways.

I will tell you the ways that it is possible to write about our human lives, about our own human comedy.

Narrative, poetry, essays, movie scripts writing for theatre, are all forms of creative writing.

Essentially writing is a technology that produces different aesthetical objects. But although each one takes place in one medium in one case the written language, the grammar, the orthography, the syntax, and, in an elemental level, the alphabet, are the substance and the end of the creative travel. In other cases, written language is only the beginning of the journey, a long travel to reach a totally different goal.

To make a clear outline: there are, at least, two ways to write. One of them is literature, that is: written narrative (in contrast with visual narrative), poetry, and essay.

Among these three genres, poetry and essays exist exclusively as works of writing. They don't exist without language.

For instance, we can read this beautiful and well known poem by Silvia Plath (from the book "Ariel"<sup>1</sup>):

The title is "Death & Co" :

*"Two, of course there are two.  
It seems perfectly natural now-  
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded  
And balled, like Blake's,  
Who exhibits*

*The birthmarks that are his trademarks-  
The scald scar of water,  
The nude  
Verdigris of the condor.  
I am red meat. His beak*

*Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.  
He tells me how badly I photograph.  
He tells me how sweet  
The babies look in their hospital  
Icebox, a simple*

*Frill at the neck,  
Then the flutings of their Ionian  
Death-gowns,  
Then two little feet.  
He does not smile or smoke.*

*The other does that,*

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<sup>1</sup> Faber and Faber, London, Great Britain, 1987. Pages 38 and 39.

*His hair long and plausible.*

*Bastard*

*Masturbating a glitter*

*He wants to be loved.*

*I do not stir.*

*The frost makes a flower,*

*The dew makes a star,*

*The dead bell*

*The dead bell.*

*Somebody's done for."*

This piece of writing is not narrative. It does not have a line of time. The poem says a lot, but its meaning is impossible to translate into narrative, into movies, into visual language. The poem transmits a special feeling, a beautiful, terrible and suggestive atmosphere. But it is not possible to reduce it to images, it is not possible to reduce or convert it into a movie without losing content. Its kind of language is not transferable to a different system of signs like—let's say cinema for example.

Marshall Mac Luhan said, "The medium is the message." Then, if you change the medium, you change at least a part of the message. Something similar happens with the essay. I invite you to consider the following quotation by the famous American thinker Charles Sanders Peirce. It was written for "Popular Science Monthly,"<sup>2</sup> under the title, "How to make our ideas clear":

*"A clear idea is defined as one which is so apprehended that it will be recognized wherever it is met with, and so that no other will be mistaken for it. If it fails in this clearness, it is said to be obscure."*

The meaning of this quotation is very clear. In addition, the whole sentence seems to be just a matter of common sense. Anyone could say it, no need to be a philosopher or a thinker. Nothing complicated or hidden could be found in it. However, it is impossible to transfer the pure content of this sentence to images, to movies. It is not a narrative sentence or phrase. It is a reflexive one.

Narrative could be considered both as a genre of literature as well as of film.

In short stories, novels and movies, narrative is a genre. The narrative genre has several characteristics. First of all, one of the themes is time: narrative means a line of time, a fictional time in the place of real time. This item can be found in literature and in film. The second characteristic is the use of the characters: protagonist and antagonist, secondary characters and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> Number 12 (January 1878) Pages 286 and 302.

But there is a huge difference between narrative literature and film. They have totally different semiotic systems. They work with different types of signs: the linguistic sign and the visual or audio-visual sign.

In literature narrative is a special kind of virtual reality. The basis is the written language, the grammar, the alphabet. But in film the real system is made of images, in film you have to think in visual terms.

Written words are in this case only a plan, a map, an outline to build the movie through images and sounds.

Let's look at a brief scene from the famous film "Reservoir Dogs," written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. The third scene of this movie is brief and strong enough to show an awareness of what it is to write while thinking in visual terms, to write while thinking in images. In this case, the words are only tools to build the visual narrative and visual atmosphere that the author wants:

3 INT. GETAWAY CAR (MOVING) - DAY

*The Somebody screaming is Mr. Orange. He lies in the backseat. He's been SHOT in the stomach. BLOOD covers both him and the backseat.*

*Mr. White is the Somebody Else. He's behind the wheel of the getaway car. He's easily doing 80 mph, dodging in and out of traffic. Though he's driving for his life, he keeps talking to his wounded passenger in the backseat.*

*They are the only two in the car.*

MR. WHITE

*Hey, just cancel that shit right now! You're hurt. You're hurt really fucking bad, but you ain't dying.*

MR. ORANGE

*(crying)*

*All this blood is scaring the shit outta me. I'm gonna die, I know it.*

MR. WHITE

*Oh excuse me, I didn't realize you had a degree in medicine. Are you a doctor? Are you a doctor? Answer me please, are you a doctor?*

MR. ORANGE

*No, I'm not!*

MR. WRITE

*Abbbb, so you admit you don't know what you're talking about. So if you're through giving me your amateur opinion, lie back and listen to the news. I'm taking you back to the rendezvous, Joe's gonna get you a doctor, the doctor's gonna fix you up, and you're gonna be okay. Now say it: you're gonna be okay. Say it: you're gonna be okay!*

*Mr. Orange doesn't respond. Mr. White starts pounding on the steering wheel.*

MR. WHITE

*Say-the-goddamn-words: you're gonna be okay!*

MR. ORANGE

*I'm okay.*

MR. WHITE

*(softly)*

*Correct.*

On the other hand, there are a lot of examples of pieces of literature that are untranslatable into movies.

For instance, I invite you to listen the beginning of Poe's tale called "The Murders in the Rue Morgue":

*"Those special powers of the mind called the analytical are not easy to explain. We can see only their results. We know about them, among other things, that they always give their owner the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man delights in action that calls his body into use, so the man of analytical mind delights in taking a problem to pieces. He gets pleasure from even the smallest act that needs his skill. He likes any kind of problem, and in finding the answer to each he shows a degree of sharpness which appears to go beyond the usual power of the human mind. His results, though brought about by the most careful method, seem instead to have been pulled right out of the air."*

It is obvious that the whole tale, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" could be translated into an image code. As a matter of fact, this text has been adapted to cinema. The tale refers to specific actions that could be brought into cinema. But the first part of the tale, the introduction, is untranslatable. It is a kind of specifically literary product. You only can read it. You can imagine it. But you can not put it point by point into images.

You can introduce in the movie a voice with a kind of alive narrator saying the same words, but that is not the same thing. You actually cannot translate the spirit of the paragraph into images.

These examples show the huge gap between film and narrative literature.

When writing for cinema you have to think in visual acts.

But when you are writing narrative literature you can dream in the inner language among the words, you don't have to refer to a particular scene, you can leave this world and fly over other worlds, worlds made by words. And this sentence is not only a play on words.

There are works that are easy to be translated into cinematographic language.

If we take the following piece of the masterpiece called "The Old Man and the Sea", by the Nobel laureate, Ernest Hemingway, we can see how easily it sets the literary images in visual scenes:

*"The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hand had the deep-creased scar from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert."*

As a matter of fact, there is a play of words in literature. You can create a whole new and different world, a virtual and arbitrary world, a new world with words.

If writing for film or for drama, or if you are just working in front of an empty page, you have to remember only one thing: the mind has no borders; the mind is the matter with which you have to work.