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Writing for Cinema and Theatre

Writing for cinema and theatre is an incomplete act, in that the text—the script—is written to be performed and watched rather than read and interpreted by individual readers. It is true that language is the tool of the playwright or screenwriter, but for the text to be complete it needs other elements and other techniques which have nothing to do with language.

Films and plays are much easier for the public to deal with than a written text such as a novel or story. Films and plays amuse and entertain the audience and for that they are widely accepted. In addition, by means of the television screen, films—and to a lesser extent, plays— can be accessed by every home.

Movies offer screenwriters publicity and fame, while the theatre allows for the vital interaction with the audience, which is the lifeblood of the language—which brings the text to life. The idea of breaking the *fourth wall* is but an expression of the interaction of the text or dialogue with the stage. There has even been talk about breaking the fifth wall which exists between dialogue and monologue.

I have had four experiments in writing for the theatre:

1. *The Great King*, with the Palestinian director Sawsan Droza.
2. *Eyewitness*, with the director Hakem Masoud.
3. *The Kingdom of Chaos*, with the English director Filda Loid, in the Royal Court Theatre in London.
4. *The Last Hour*, where I worked with a Palestinian actor for two months, in the National Theatre in Jerusalem.

I have found out how much the actor can add to the text; I call this the flowing of warm blood in the arteries of the text.

On the stage, space has limits that cannot be ignored. It cannot fit your imagination or your armies. You, as a writer, are bound by the space where your characters are going to perform. Writing for cinema or theatre is a physical writing, visual. But in literature in general, there are other dimensions to the text which are not physical: aesthetic works and the text or language. Language is the tool of creation and is its wings to fly with in the sky of imagination. The spaces of the text are limitless.

In the language of novels and stories, form is more important than content because form contains the aesthetic elements. Writing for cinema and theatre doesn't use metaphor and simile. However, in novels, short stories, and poetry, the text has space, an open space, full of magic and metaphor and imagery.

I recall that many literary works have been reconceived into cinema and theatre more than once, but each time with a different vision, which means a different interpretation of the text. This is because the text can be interpreted in several ways.

After I left politics, through writing I became involved with cinema and participated in a scriptwriting workshop in 1991, which was organized by a famous Palestinian scriptwriter, Walid Siaf. He told me then that God is the best scriptwriter and he referred to the book of Yousif in the Koran. He asked me to write a script for the story as it was presented in the Koran. Of course, the film was not made, but it was my first attempt. Many years later, Yousif Shaheen an Egyptian film director, made a film of that story from the Koran. In 1999, I was asked to write a treatment for a film for an Italian company. Since it was my first time, I asked an experienced friend of mine how to do it. He answered in one sentence: "Write what the audience is going to see." I watched films that I had seen before and which were based on novels such as, *The English Patient*, *Papion*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *Gypsies are Rising to Heave*, *Returning to Hifa*, *Gone with the Wind*, *War and Peace*, and *Zorba the Greek*. I read the novels again so I could compare the difference between the novel as a text and the novel as a film. I realized that my friend was right, but I also realized how much is lost from the novel when it becomes a film.

Earlier I had discovered that the pleasure of reading a book is different from that of watching a film. The director of a film, through the use of the actors, camera, lights, and music, takes the readers' space. In the book, however, we create our own images. Writing for cinema reduces these aesthetics; we leave this to the director and actors. The writing of novels, short stories, and poetry is abstract, while the writing for the cinema and theatre is physical, which can be seen and not imagined.

I read Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code* and saw the film. In the adaptation many important details were lost. Again, the novel was more effective in presenting the details than was the film.

I read the story "Tshodra" by Maxim Gorki before it was made into a film in 1976. The film version of Rada was not the Rada I had imagined.

From my experience as a playwright, directors do not like the playwright to write in great detail. They prefer that the writer just write the dialogue and leave the other details to the director. Maybe this is why playwrights like to direct their own work, as did Shakespeare and Brecht.

Writing is the work of an individual, while theatre and cinema are the work of a collective. If a writer wrote a play or film for another director, he should give the director space to create his images and interpretations.

When somebody asks me whether I am a novelist, a film maker or visual artist, I remember a line from a poem of Al-Motanaby*: "Anxious as the wind is under me." I imagine the picture, the scene, and fly in that vast anxiety and the wind takes me. I know as a scriptwriter, that I am not able to write that scene, so I answer that I am a novelist more than anything else. I find myself in language, language that possesses and haunts me.

* Mutanabi, Abul Tayyeb al- (915-965), poet regarded by many as the greatest of the Arabic language. He primarily wrote panegyrics in a flowery, bombastic style marked by improbable metaphors. He influenced Arabic poetry until the 19th century and has been widely quoted. Al-Mutanabbi was the son of a water carrier who claimed noble and ancient southern Arabian descent. al-Mutanabbi received an education which owed to his poetic talent. When Shi'ite Qarmatians sacked Al-Kufah in 924, he joined them and lived among the Bedouin, learning their doctrines and Arabic. Claiming to be a prophet--hence the name al-Mutanabbi ("The Would-be Prophet")--he led a Qarmatian revolt in Syria in 932. After its suppression and two years' imprisonment, he recanted in 935 and became a wandering poet.

He began to write panegyrics in the tradition established by the poets Abu Tammam (d. 845) and al-Buhturi (d. 897). In 948 he attached himself to Sayf ad-Dawla, the Hamdanid poet-prince of northern Syria. During his association with Sayf ad-Dawlah, al-Mutanabbi wrote in praise of his patron panegyrics that rank as masterpieces of Arabic poetry. The latter part of this period was clouded with intrigues and jealousies that culminated in al-Mutanabbi's leaving Syria for Egypt, then ruled in name by the Ikhshidids. Al-Mutanabbi attached himself to the regent, the black eunuch Abu al-Misk Kafur, who had been born a slave. But he offended Kafur with scurrilous satirical poems and fled Egypt in 960. He lived in Shiraz, Iran, under the protection of the Adud ad-Dawlah until 965, when he returned to Iraq and was killed by bandits near Baghdad. Al-Mutanabbi's pride and arrogance set the tone for much of his verse, which is ornately rhetorical, yet crafted with consummate skill and artistry. He gave to the traditional qasida, or ode, a freer and more personal development, writing in what can be called a neoclassical style.