the craft of fictional art.

by Raphäel de Vietri

Abstract

The processes and products of art and craft are often considered distinct. Yet in the opinion of some artists and critics, such as writer Dylan Thomas, the view of art and craft as different kinds of activities warrants reviewing. For Thomas, who speaks of writing as his 'craft and sullen art', a work of art depends upon the artist's craftsmanship. This paper evaluates the merit of this belief within the cadre of fiction film and literature. It is divided into three parts and begins, in Part I, by developing a notional framework of the art/craft divide. It finds that processes and products of fictional works occupy a peculiar equidistant nexus between the two disciplines. Parts II and III then take an analytic approach to defining exactly in what sense fictional worlds are 'crafted'. Part II outlines some of the artist's theoretical considerations when crafting a representational world. These include the general nature of representation in literature and film as well as the specific issues of fictional representation. Part III examines five important formal devices (style, point of view, plot and narrative structure, and context/setting) used by artists to craft representational worlds in fiction.

Part I: Of art and craft

The relationship between art and craft is not mutually exclusive nor is it necessarily bound. The two should be thought of as interdependent to some degree; craft being a necessary component to most art processes whilst also being able to exist in isolation from art. Different art media require more or less craftsmanship then others, and genres within each media might also differ in their reliance on crafting. Figure 1[i] illustrates this visually by placing various different media of art on a linear spectrum. Those media

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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closer to the left of the spectrum are forms of art whose creative stages rely less heavily on a process of crafting and more heavily on pure aesthetic or conceptual considerations. Meanwhile those media to the far right of the spectrum would be classed more accurately as crafts with aesthetic considerations being of secondary importance in the creative process.

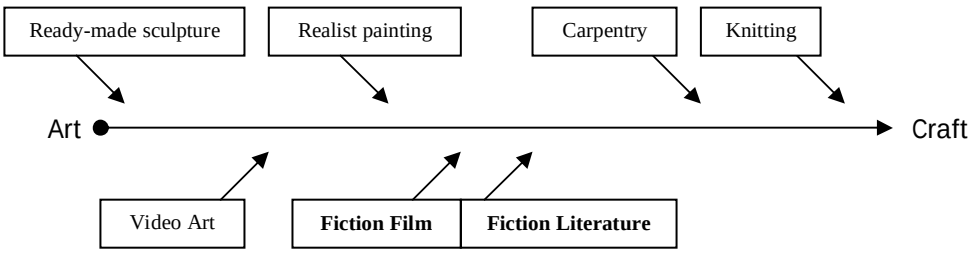

Figure 1: *Spectrum of interdependence of some arts on craft*

Figure 2 illustrates a generalised ordering of the spectrum of ideals valued to varying extents by arts and crafts. Pure crafts such as carpentry, knitting and cuisine value features such as functionality, due process and skill. However, the concept of an 'art object' or 'work of art' encompasses more profound aesthetic aspects which go far beyond those of craftsmanship. Unlike an object of craft, a work of art is not a material object, though art often comes forth into the world through material objects. Iris Murdoch clearly articulated this characteristic of art:

> All art objects are 'performed' or imagined first by the artist and then by his clients, and these imaginative and intellectual activities or experiences may be said to be the point or essence of art.[ii]

In other words, fundamental to the concept of 'work of art' is the idea of 'sustained experienced mental synthesis'.[iii]

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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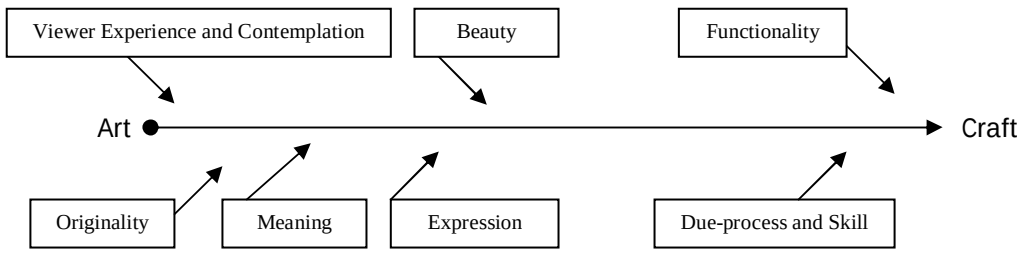

Figure 2: *Spectrum of some ideals of art and craft*

With fictional film and literature one encounters a fascinating nexus where art and craft meet somewhere in the mid-ground of the two disciplines. The craftsmanship of the writer or film-maker is essential to the success of the final work of art, while not being so dominant as to make a book or a film an object of craft. Artists of film and literature have as their primary objective a creation of sustained experiential appeal. Their task is to compose images or words such that they draw their viewers or readers into a representational world, enticing them into an ontological plane that exists somewhere between waking-life and dreaming-life, within which they are permitted to forget their ordinary selves and enter into a mental space that is at once familiar and extraordinary. It is the creative process behind these fictional worlds that demands high craftsmanship. In order to arrive at the final 'work of art'—from concept and design, to construction and production—much skill, effort and technique must be invested by the artist.

Part II: Representation and fictional worlds

Writers of fiction create a fictional representational world into which they draw their audiences. Representation in literature and film is a contested notion.[iv] Fundamental to an audience experiencing sustained mental engagement with a work of fiction is the audience's prior ability to understand to some extent what kind of thing they are in front of and what it expects of them. When reading a work of literature or watching a film the encounter between art object and audience requires a complex of cognitive capacities,

both emotional and intellectual, in which developed imaginative faculty plays a key role.[v]

At a most basic level, the audience might take the artist's work of 'representation' to be mimetic. That is, they might understand the key element of the artist's craft to be his/her effort to hold a mirror up to nature, to replicate the way things really are. Yet artists of fiction aim for more than a prefect re-rendering of the ordinary world; something must be extraordinary for the audience to want to engage in it. In their representational worlds they alter or uncover a particular facet of the 'real world'—twisting it, intensifying it, inversing it or replacing it. They create an expression of a possible world which is different to the audience's experience but still corresponds to the facts as they really are. This 'correspondence' is the initial key element that induces the audience's interest in the representational world. The artist's commitment to correspondence will contribute to the work's verisimilitude, its appearance of being true or real. Implausibility in representational fiction results from an artist ignoring the need for correspondence or leaving unexplained gaps when the audience's belief in correspondence needs to be willingly suspended. What is successful about Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books (1865 and 1872), for example, is the fact that although most of the laws of physics, and even logic, are overturned in Wonderland, the artist's technical prowess diverts attention from this and allows the reader to hold Alice and her adventures alive in their minds for the duration of the books. Furthermore, it is made clear from the start that it is one of the marks of Wonderland that the natural scientific laws do not apply. We are, by contrast, much less inclined to suspend disbelief when the representations lack consistency within themselves. An implausible dramatic production might, for example, have a character leave by the front door and re-enter from the drawing room.[vi]

On the means of representation, literature and film differ but are fundamentally the same. With both media the artist is using a system of signs to convey meaning. A novel is a collection of words, each denoting a tiny portion of reality, synthesised together to make language—a 'real' sense. With a film the audience experiences a more transparent

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
www.harbingerjournal.tk

and unmediated viewing—as if it were just a patch cut from reality and pasted onto the screen. Film theorist André Bazin remarks that this realism is a striking ontological characteristic of film:

> No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.[vii]

From this point of view, a film artist deals with a craft very different to that of a writer. Relative to the inherent realism of film images, it is more difficult for writers to detach their words from the marked mediation of their own consciousness. The distinctive nature of film, according to Bazin, is that to the viewer it does not appear to be a *re*presentation of objects, but to rather a direct and immediate *presentation* of objects.[viii]

The craftsmanship of the filmmaker lies in his/her ability to shoot and edit imagery that feels authentic. The filmmaker's instrument is the camera. Central to the craft is his/her ability to manipulate it. The film's advantage is that audiences engage in the work by looking at images; 'seeing is believing' as the saying goes. Writers have to be more skilled in the composition of images in order to convince the reader's mind. They do not have the advantage of apparent documentary value. A novel depends on the novelist's articulacy—his/her fluency in grammar, broadness of vocabulary and eloquence in verse. Despite their apparent dissimilarity, both media rely on sign value to bring meaning from the outside world into the representational world. It is elementary to the artists' success that they are proficient with their medium so that they might fully exploit its sign value.

Part III: Devices for crafting fictional worlds

One only has to open a glossary of literary terms to see that writers and film-makers have an abundance of devices at their disposal with which to craft their fictional worlds. It is not the aim of this paper to detail all of these devices nor to ignore the fact that some are medium-specific. In this section I cover five of the more philosophically

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
www.harbingerjournal.tk

interesting elements that both literary and filmic craftsman might consider when building their fictional worlds: style, point of view, plot and narrative structure, character, and context/setting.

Style

The notion of style plays an important role in most artistic disciplines: architecture, visual art and dance, for example, as well as film and literature.[ix] The criticism, history and theory of fiction make reference to a wide range of style types, which may be embraced and individuated by the artist depending on the ultimate purpose of their work. *Individual style* (e.g. Hitchcock's style, le Carré's style) is distinguished from *genre style* (eg. fantasy, science fiction, horror) which in turn is distinguished from various forms of general *historical style* (e.g. Fin de Siècle literature) and *universal style* (e.g. classicism, naturalism, realism).[x] Style is opposed to substance in that the latter refers to *what* is being communicated, whilst the former refers to *how* it is being communicated.

Although it has not always been the case, filmmakers can 'bombard' the senses with audio and visual clues to a work's style, which in turn affects the audience's mood. Stylistic attributes have bearing on the determination of the audience's interpretation of symbolic and expressive features within the world. Meaning, purpose and significance, as well as the audience's overall evaluation of the created world depend largely on knowledge and experience of the style category to which it belongs. A James Bond film might be espionage genre *par excellence* but it would fail miserably as a piece of 20th Century social or moral commentary. Other external factors impact on the conveyance of style in a work. For one, the means and context of production of the work informs the audience's interpretation of its style. A live performance of *Othello*, for example, gives a different feeling than a mass produced film production. The audience has a sense of capturing a fleeting world that exists momentarily between the confines of the stage—never again will that exact world be relived. Also, the artist must consider the context in which s/he wishes to engage with the audience. The *lieu* in which the audience engages in a fictional world is important—a large dark cinema detaches the audience and gives

them a sense of collective experience, whereas if the artist prefers a more intimate connection with this audience s/he might express the world in the form of a novel.

Point of view

Point of view in fiction is, as the phrase suggests, the position from which the story is presented. Here 'position' is psychological as well as physical and linguistic. The majority of texts will be written and/or filmed using one of the following points of view:

- First Person: A method that establishes the identity of the character who is telling the story, and tells only that which the narrator can experience. The discreet use of the pronoun 'I' gives the reader a more intimate sense of relationship or, at best, identification with the narrator.[xi]

- Third Person Limited: The writer limits himself to presenting the observations plus the feelings, emotions, and ideas of a single character. The narrator grammatically refers to his/her subjects as 'he' or 'she'.[xii]

- Third Person Omniscient: The writer is free to present as subjective the sensations and ideas of any or all of the characters.

It is conventional for a text to be presented in one of these narrative points of view but not all texts stay faithful to this convention.[xiii] Sometimes manipulation of the narrative voice can become an effective tool in crafting the fictional world. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, for example demonstrates a sort of 'narrative intelligence' in the way the author manipulates the narrative voice of the text. The reader understands that the narrative framework of the text is based on the moments of the narrator's drowning, during which he both sees and narrates his life. Because of this construction of the narrator as a kind of semi-ethereal being, the author is presented with an opportunity to break free from conventional structural restraints of narrative voice and is able to construct a world in which the narrator can shift and change his point of view, sometimes even within the same paragraph, in order to adopt the most appropriate voice

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
www.harbingerjournal.tk

for the situation his character is in. Within the first three pages of *Cloudstreet* the narrator changes verb form and pronoun grouping three times: he refers to himself as '*us* by the river', '*they*' who are 'sprawling and drinking', '*he*' who 'hears nothing but the water' and '*you*' who 'can't help but worry for them'.[xiv] This acute use of narrative voice demonstrates that manipulation of point of view can powerfully influence how the reader or viewer derives meaning from the text—in this particular case allowing the reader to better understand the transitory and ethereal nature of the narrator's world.

Plot

Films and novels do not generally try to detail every happening that occurs between two given points in time. In order to hold the audience's attention the author or screen writer must employ a plot and suitable narrative structure so that the material gives an intelligible continuity without being mundane. The story is usually structured chronologically and made up of distinguishable parts or scenes which represent important events within the fictional world. Different approaches to the formalities of plot have been adapted over the ages. Aristotle, for example, found it necessary that a story have a beginning, middle and end. Millett, a 1950's literary critic stipulated 'the essentials of plot are exposition, development, turning point, climax, and denouement, and every fully developed plot has all these elements.' [xv]

Post-modern fiction, by contrast, is often characterised by a deconstruction of linear time and logical sequence. The post-modern approach to plot can add to the interest of a fictional world by creating a universe which subverts space/time boundaries. It can also, on the other hand, lead to a causally disrupted plot, lacking in coherence. [xvi] Other theorists identify narrative as the source of moral value in a text, but then not all stories have a moral to speak of. [xvii] In any case, however flexible one wants to be about the formalities of plot, it remains an essential skeleton to other elements of representational worlds in fiction.

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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Character

Character is the primary substance of fiction.[xviii] The reputation of the artist rests on his/her ability to craft plump and lucid descriptions of fictional beings and to 'walk' with them through the narrative of their world. If after many years one remembers anything about the author's fictional world it will be its characters. Yet Hamlet, Sherlock Holmes, Alice and Toto the dog are talked about by critics and ordinary readers as if they were extant empirical beings. More accurately, they are non-actual but indeed well-individuated entities existing in worlds different from ours, and such descriptions of them do not actually denote in our world.

The method by which characters are created, notes Millett, are adapted directly from those by which persons in real life come to know other persons.[xix] The author might start with a 'physical' description of character's appearance and expressions, then move to an *exposé* of the character's 'history', details of the character's romances, and so on. More than being just interesting, characters must be outstanding.

Having a combination of recognizable human traits is not unusually enough to create engaging fiction: 'Great literature is great because its characters are great.' [xx] For fiction to elevate to 'great literature' its characters must come to represent something extraordinarily tragic, triumphant, brave, immoral, imaginative—something that beckons the reader's fascination. It is rare that fiction succeeds on strength of plot alone, although it should be noted that an otherwise well-crafted work with entirely mundane characters sometimes proves a peculiar relief to readers. Also, a character in a fictional world does not necessarily have to be human. A landscape or building or other object can be bestowed *being* by the creator and take on a persona. There does however, seem to be a need for some element of a persona in order for a world to be comprehensible or complete—an anthropomorphic bias it may be, but it is required none the less.

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
www.harbingerjournal.tk

Context

Finally, fundamental to any fictional world is setting or context. There are minimal essentials in treating setting—for a believable fiction to be created all narratives and characters for example, must exist at some point in time and space. [xxi] Characters must be 'placed' in a physical, social and familial setting which fits the historical period they purportedly belong to. Harper Lee quickly establishes a 'place' in which to set her story in the opening few pages of *To Kill A Mockingbird*:

> Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it… Somehow, it was hotter then; a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade… Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon…[xxii]

Here the narrator's description of the heat in Maycomb County functions as a means of introducing the town itself, the era and local peculiarities of the town, as well as its people and their social customs. In treating setting the artist must also consider its familiarity to the audience. If the setting is likely to be familiar then perhaps a reference of two to some iconic images of that place is all that will be needed to evoke a vivid setting.

Conclusion

Dylan was, it seems, correct in believing that as far as fiction is concerned, the art is just as much a craft. Mastering the craft requires skills to construct a harmonious montage of technical devices, as well as the ability to understand and exploit the conceptual sensitivities involved in the representation of ontologically unusual worlds. The craft of fictional art is complex. Fiction can not take form, as some other types of art can, purely on the artist's aesthetic efforts. Its elements enlist both the notional and technical aptitude of the artist. Everybody creates fictional worlds everyday—whether they are dreaming or day-dreaming, lying or wishing—they are, in their own minds experiencing a fictional world. This is no craft, only human imagination. The craft lies in turning these fictional worlds into representational art works. Choosing the medium, manipulating its signs, deliberating over point of view, fleshing out character, and so

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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on—these elements are essential to the process of crafting imagination into the art of fiction.

Notes

[i] It should be noted that the orderings on both figure 1 and figure 2 are fluid and are not intended to be exhaustive.

[ii] Murdoch, I., 'Concepts of Unity. Art', in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin Books: London, 1992, p2.

[iii] *Ibid*, p3.
[iv] See for example 'Representation in Art' (Part Four of *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, Joseph Margolis (Ed.), Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1987) which presents a number of different writers' views on the idea of representation.

[v] Ashford, S., 'Philosophy, Literature and Film: Worlds within worlds' (lecture notes - unpublished), University of Western Australia, 2006.
[vi] Lyas, C., 'Representation in Literature', in A. Sukla (ed.) *Art and Representation: Contributions to contemporary aesthetics*, Praeger: London, 2001, p177.

[viii] Brazin, A., *What is Cinema?*, vol 1, tans. Hugh Gray, University of California Press: Berkley, 1967. As cited by Wartenberg, T. E., 'Film and Representation', in A. Sukla (ed.) *Art and Representation: Contributions to contemporary aesthetics*, Praeger: London, 2001, p. 211.

[ix] Wartenberg, T. E., 'Film and Representation', in A. Sukla (ed.) *Art and Representation: Contributions to contemporary aesthetics*, Praeger: London, 2001, p. 213.

[x] Meskin, A., 'Style', in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics 2nd ed.*, B. Gaut & D. M. Lopes (eds.), Routledge: London, 2002, p.489.

[xi] *Ibid*, p489.

[xii] Millett, F. B., *Reading Fiction*, Harper & Brothers: New York, 1950, p15.

[xiii] *Ibid*, p.17.

[xiv] In his more in-depth discussion on this area Gary Disher mentions many more types of 'point of view', see Disher, G., *Writing Fiction*, Allen & Unwin, 2001.

[xv] Winton, T., *Cloudstreet*, Penguin: New York, 1991, pp1-3.

[xvi] Millett, F. B., *Reading Fiction*, Harper & Brothers: New York, 1950, p30.

[xvii] Burgass, C., 'A Brief Story of Postmodern Plot', in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction 3rd ed.*, M. J. Hoffman & P. D. Murphy (eds.), Duke University Press: London, 2005.

[xviii] Livingston, P., 'Narrative', in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics 2nd ed.*, B. Gaut & D. M. Lopes (eds.), Routledge: London, 2002.

[xix] Aristotle was not inclined to agree, he treated character as subservient to dramatic action or narrative.

[xx] Millett, F. B., *Reading Fiction*, Harper & Brothers: New York, 1950, p45.

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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[xxi] Gass, W. H., 'The Concept of Character in Fiction', in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction 3rd ed.*, M. J. Hoffman & P. D. Murphy (eds.), Duke University Press: London, 2005.

[xxii] Millett, F. B., *Reading Fiction*, Harper & Brothers: New York, 1950.

[xxiii] Lee, H., *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Arrow Books: London, 1960, p5.

first published in *Harbinger Journal* Feb 2007
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