

Science-fiction UPC Award 2003

Conference, 26/11/2003

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Open Literature

The Lensmakers

Once upon a time, there was a city with a guild of lensmakers. They prided themselves on making lenses and mirrors which, when properly arrayed and focused in dark tubes, could bring planets and distant mountains and tiny creatures into clear view. People in faraway places paid high prices for these lenses, because without them they had never really understood the universe they lived in.

But it happened that, for the pleasure of it, some members of the guild began to etch tiny designs around the margins of their lenses. These began merely as trademarks, colophons, logos — devices to certify that a lens was made by this particular lensmaker, and was not a counterfeit.

These edge-etchings did no harm to the primary function of the lenses, because people only used the center of the lens to see with. But as time passed, the lensmakers began to make more elaborate and decorative colophons, and buyers began to collect lenses, not for their usefulness as telescopes and microscopes to magnify the real world, but for the beauty of the etchings themselves.

Until the day came when the whole face of the lens was covered with etchings, beautiful and intricate designs that excited the admiration of the connoisseurs, and the highest prices were paid for the most elaborate work. No one even noticed that the lensmakers hardly bothered to shape the glass into lenses anymore. It was easier to work in flat glass, or in the surfaces of prisms.

And anyone who dared to complain that it was no longer possible to look through the telescopes or microscopes and see anything at all was scorned as a philistine. How childish, how naive to think that the lensmaker's art should be limited by the requirement of clarity! The beauty was in the style of the artist's etching, not in the raw function of the lens as a tool.

And so people who needed telescopes and microscopes in order to do work in the real world had to stop buying the fine lenses of the members of the guild, and made do with the simple lenses ground by lensmakers who had not forgotten the reason why their work was worth doing in the first place.

The Exclusivist Aesthetic

It is one of the ironies of our age that the artists who most loudly proclaim their concern for the economic and political plight of the common people almost invariably create art that treats the common people with contempt.

The art of the twentieth century was marked — no, it was crippled — by an antiaesthetic movement spanning all the arts. No longer was there any desire to create art that would bring pleasure or catharsis or even comprehension to the larger community.

Instead, in painting, sculpture, music, poetry, dance, and fiction, there was a conscious rejection of any kind of conversation between artist and community on the basis of equality. Art that the audience could understand was ignored, disdained, or actively attacked.



At first, this movement sometimes gave us works of surpassing power from artists who could have created great art within the existing tradition but found new inspiration in bursting those old boundaries. One thinks of Stravinsky, Picasso, Isadora Duncan; the rule-breaking plays of Chekhov and Ibsen; the brutal wartime realism of Wilfred Owen's poetry or the fiction of Erich Maria Remarque.

These artists, while defying some expectations, still delivered their part of the fundamental bargain between artist and community: Those who experienced their art received a dose of beauty and truth that gave meaning, purpose, or validation to the experiences of life.

The Permanent “Revolution”

Ironically, however, this movement — let's call it Exclusivism, though it went by many names in the various arts — coincided with another novelty: The teaching of contemporary art and literature in the universities. The ideas and values of Exclusivism, instead of being the fashion of the day, to be swept away in a few years, were seized upon as the theoretic basis of the teaching of all literature and art in the universities.

What should have been shouted into the wind of fashion was instead carved into academic stone, where it takes a great deal more time and effort to wear it away.

In every new artistic revolution, the critics who define the meaning of the revolution (and often the critics are also the artists) speak of the revolution as if it were the final resolution of all questions and dilemmas in that art. Often it is these commentators who invent a revolution by finding common terms to link the work of artists who had no intention of being part of any kind of movement; sometimes, the artists themselves form a group that deliberately carry out a program in defiance of the old order.

This sort of absolutism usually does no harm in the long run, because a generation later, another group of artists will come along who will see the aging revolution as yet another set of stultifying rules that must be broken in order to bring the art to a new, higher, and final resolution. Thus the rococo is replaced by the plain, the classical by the romantic, the romantic by the realistic, and on and on, each new generation of artists finding ways to cast off the shackles of the past in order to change or reflect the world as they experience it.

But the vast publishing mill of academia cast a smokescreen that concealed the next literary revolution. As a result, generations of students have been taught that the fashions of Exclusivism are absolute truths, and the works of art produced according to those doctrines remain as idols before which we must all respectfully bow.

Art Is the Air That Communities Breathe

Art is a vital part of every community — even the community of scientists or engineers or programmers. We human beings are inevitably strangers to each other, and even to ourselves. You may think that you know your mother — know her so well that you can finish any sentence that she begins. And then she will say something that completely surprises you, and you realize that familiar as she is, you did not really know her at all.

We don't even know ourselves. We all come to moments of epiphany when we suddenly realize the real reason we did some action in the past. Even though at the time we did it, we thought we understood our own motives, over the passage of time we come to realize that we did not know ourselves then at all; which implies that we don't know ourselves now, either.

The utter loneliness and inexplicability of human life would be unbearable, if it were not for all the people around us and the flood of experiences that continue to pour in on us. Despite our ignorance of other people's motives, our guesses at why people do the things they do allow us to predict the outcomes of our choices well enough to make it through the day. We muddle through.

What artists do is give us moments of surpassing clarity, to provide resolution to the suspensions of life, to give us a sense that instead of randomness and triviality, there is instead



meaning and importance in at least some experiences. All who have experienced powerful and meaningful art have a memory in common; it makes us one. And the more people in a community who can be included in the art, the more closely it can bind us together.

Great art comes to us like a great gasp of air when we did not even realize we were suffocating.

The artists of Exclusivism have too often succeeded in creating art that is truly meaningless to the general public. They have taught ordinary people that if they enjoy a novel, it must be escapist trash; if they enjoy a poem, it must be doggerel; if they enjoy a work of art, it must be “mere illustration”; if they enjoy music, it must be mere pop; in short, anything they actually love and embrace, anything that satisfies their hunger for meaning and purpose, cannot be art, cannot be literature.

And when these ordinary people attempt to experience that which the elitists call Art and Literature, they do so with a resigned knowledge that it will be boring, ugly, meaningless, annoying, and endlessly repetitive, virtually identical to everything else that purports to be art. Because it has no meaning, it has no particularity. It is all mixed together as Art Soup.

If all the truth and beauty, all the ideas that make sense of the world around them, are encrypted, and you have to attend classes at a university in order to learn the code, then for most people, it is not art at all. Besides, when you do decode it, the message is always the same: We who can interpret this code are the smart people; we are the people who matter; everyone else’s life is empty; the unencrypted life is not worth living.

The People Hunger for Art

No wonder, with that attitude, most people today regard High Art as something above them, something that is not part of their lives.

But the people will have their art, regardless of the theories of the elitists.

If “serious” paintings no longer speak to them, they will get their art from posters, album covers, book jackets.

If “serious” music gives them a headache, they’ll buy albums of movie theme music.

If “serious” poems are incomprehensible and irrelevant and devoid of rhyme and rhythm, they’ll find their incantatory verses in rap, in rock and roll, in country songs.

Even those students who have come to the university specifically in order to learn how to become one of the artistic elite learned their love of art from the popular, not the elitist.

Nobody first loved drawing because of a slab of abstract squares on canvas — they loved it because of drawings that captured recognizable shapes of real things on paper.

Nobody first loved music because of cacophonous or antimelodic modern composers — they loved it because their family sang together or they loved what they heard on the radio.

Nobody first loved fiction because of novels with language so lofty you can’t tell what is happening or why you should care; they came to love fiction because of stories that made them want to stay awake to hear the ending.

Nobody first loved poetry because of verses that are so obscure you have to have a road map to find the metaphors; they came to love verse that sang, that had music, that was fun to say and, above all, verse that meant something on first reading.

Thus it is that students who came to love an art because of the public, open version of that art — because of art that reached out to and helped bind together a community that included even children — come to the traditional university to be trained to disdain the very art that they first loved, and to embrace elitism.

Every Community Is Entitled to Its Art

My objection to this is not that the art of the academic elite is without merit. They are as entitled to their art as any other community.

What I object to is their claim that their art is, by its very nature, better than the arts that remain open to common people; I reject their attitude that even the most inept, repetitive, and formulaic examples of elitist art are somehow intrinsically more important, more serious, than even the best work of the best popular artists.

Every community evolves its own standards of what makes some art better than others. Those critical principles are not revealed to professors like commandments given to Moses on the mountain. They grow out of the public conversation between artists and the community to which they offer their work.

There is a progression in every person's life between the art they embrace as children, when they are naive and inexperienced, and the art they embrace as adults, when they have a more mature understanding of the world and more experience of art.

But the academic-artistic elite is wrong in making the claim, as they so often do, that theirs is the most mature and sophisticated art, and that all who prefer more popular forms are childish in their tastes.

I can more easily believe the opposite. It is children — specifically young adolescents

— who insist on forming clubs whose sole purpose is to exclude other children from membership. We're "cool," say these children, because we're better than the "uncool" people; and we know who the uncool people are, because they're the ones who don't think and act and talk and dress like us.

How much elitist art is more about excluding people than actually doing the work that art is supposed to do? How much of academic training in the arts is about persuading students to despise that which they used to love, not because there is anything wrong with it, but solely as a test of their worthiness to belong to the elite?

How many talented young artists have been cut off from their natural audience because the elitists taught them to create art that cannot be understood unless you pay a professor to explain it?

Science Fiction as Literary Revolution

I am a member of the academic elite in literature — I have a university degree; I have read the theories and understand them; I can speak the language of the academic literary elite.

But when I have stories to tell, I find my art is best served by writing within the genres that provide me with the best readers and with the most useful tools.

I am not interested in writing fiction to please the members of a club whose sole purpose in reading is to decide whether or not to admire the writer. I want to write fiction for an audience of people who hunger for stories to give shape and meaning to their lives — readers who are willing to let fiction change who they are and how they understand the world, rather than readers who read a tale primarily to judge the manner of its telling.

And to write clearly about human nature, human societies, the purpose of living, and the means of achieving happiness, I find that more often than not, the genre of speculative fiction — that is, science fiction and fantasy — provides me with the best tools to tell such tales.

It is my firm belief that the literary revolution that came immediately after Exclusivism was science fiction — and we won.



While academic literary fiction spends its time giving each other prizes and eating wine and cheese at receptions, science fiction writers captured the imagination of the world and transformed the way human beings thought about the universe and everything in it.

We came up with words for things that didn't exist, we created extravagant non-realities that shed brilliant light on the real world, and we did it without the slightest help or interference from academia. Our fiction flows to our audience without mediation — no one has to teach you how to read what we write.

But this does not happen because science fiction is easier to write or easier to read. In fact, it is obscure fiction that is easy to write. Since the audience begins by knowing nothing, and learns only what the author tells them about the story, to achieve obscurity you need do nothing more difficult than to write badly.

Science fiction, however, is by nature more difficult. The reader must process two simultaneous streams of information. On the surface, they are discovering the characters and linear events of the story, just as with any other kind of fiction. But underneath, they are also processing and revising their vision of the world, learning, clue by clue, how the rules of the fictional universe differ from the real world. There are some readers who simply cannot handle the mental process — it merely confuses them. That is part of the reason why the readers of science fiction are, on average, more intelligent than the average readers of other genres.

And yet our literature has been intensely examined critically — by readers and volunteer critics who communicated with each other through fanzines and newsletters and now on the internet. Within our genre there have been revolutions and generations, transformations and reinventions that make academic-literary fiction look glacial in its lack of movement.

And when the history of Western Literature in the Twentieth Century is written a hundred years from now, Exclusivism will have its place, but by the 1950s and 1960s the only story that will really matter is what happened outside the universities, in the despised novels and magazines and stories that captured the imagination of a new generation and changed their conception of the world.

Art that is certified by traditional academia is by definition the establishment, no matter how academia insists that it still harbors the revolution. Remember how long the octogenarian rulers of Soviet Russia proclaimed themselves to be the Revolution, and anyone who opposed them were counter-revolutionaries. But that is self-deception. Revolutionary ideas are not taught at universities. You don't get tenure by being revolutionary. You get tenure on a faculty by behaving in precisely the manner that the existing faculty approves of. Revolutions are already over by the time they reach the traditional universities.

But the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya is not a traditional university. Perhaps because you exist in the midst of a community that is struggling to keep its language and literature alive, and certainly because your mission is the study of ideas that must survive being tested in the real world, you are not bound by the same rules as traditional academia. That is why you feel no contradiction in celebrating the literary genre of science fiction. Old dead revolutions have no appeal in a place that looks to the future.

The Rejection of Elitism

Eventually even the most desperate elitists will notice that their revolution is dead. That is why in the next fifty years, you will see a transformation in the literature that is taught in the universities. New professors will come along who refuse to deny the art they loved when they were still a part of the public. They will insist on teaching their students to appreciate books and stories that changed their lives, and not the books and stories that changed the lives of their academic fathers or grandfathers or great-grandfathers. And a revolution too long postponed is all the more radical in its effects. You who hunger for beauty and truth in art, seize it where you find it. Praise the art you love. Art is not archaeology. It is constantly recreated in each new generation, and no art is great unless it is embraced by a great and living audience.



Shakespeare's plays had to speak first to the groundlings, the common people of London, before they could ever speak to other peoples and later generations.

The art you love is the art you will teach your children to love, and when your children become professors, they will teach the art you gave them.

Art has its roots, always and forever, in the hunger and the hope of ordinary people.

My heart is with those whose yearning is to create art for ordinary people, art that needs no mediation, art that can be received without training other than the training that comes to every human being simply by being alive.

My heart is with poets and storytellers who want to write stories that can be read aloud to illiterates and still be understood and loved.

The art of fiction and poetry does not exist in the text on the page. The text is the tool we create to allow our stories and poems to be received by people we will never meet. They will use the text to help them create the art in the only place where it is ever truly alive: The mind and memory of the reader.

That is why I believe that you who read my work in Spanish and Catalá are not receiving a poor imitation of my stories. If I succeeded in writing them clearly in English, and if the translators have succeeded in telling the same tale clearly in Spanish, then you will receive what matters most about my story as surely as two different astronomers, viewing Mars from different places on Earth, are nevertheless viewing the same red planet.

Public literature that is open to all is not simpler or easier to create than arcane, highly encoded academic fiction. It is far more difficult to write a story that is at once truthful, important, and clear than to write one which, because it is obscure, does not have to be either truthful or important to be admired.

Obscurity can be achieved with a handful of mud on a car's windshield. Clarity cannot be achieved without purity, polish, design, and strength.

Here Is My Manifesto of Open Literature

When you read a work of mine, I promise to include within it every bit of information you need in order to understand it. If there is something you don't understand without a separate explanation, that isn't a virtue in my work, it's a flaw.

At the same time, I will never compromise the truthfulness of my work in order to try for popularity. When I decide what happens and why it happens in a story of mine, I will do it on the basis of what seems right and true to me, and not with some imagined idea of what the audience wants their stories to contain. Integrity in storytelling comes from the content of the story, not from obedience to the doctrines of an artistic or academic elite.

The goal of open literature is not to sell more copies or to be admired. The goal is to tell stories that are important and, at some level, true, as clearly as possible. It is likely that many of my stories, when clearly told, will still find only a small audience willing to receive them. But the audience will not be small because I deliberately excluded people. I will have written, as best I could, a story that welcomes every reader or hearer who might believe in and care about the events of the tale.

Open literature never loses track of the idea of storytelling as a spoken art. Good writing is writing that can be read aloud smoothly, be heard with pleasure, and be understood, at some level, on first hearing. Language and stories exist in communities of speakers; writing merely allows us to spread our stories to readers whom we could never meet in person to tell the tale aloud. Our writings, then, are the troubadours we send out to sing our songs.



The goal of writing is not to lock the door against the barbarians, but rather to unlock all doors, fling them wide, and welcome all strangers inside the walls of our civilization. Literature does not need a high wall or a border guard, it needs a thousand doors and windows open to the light and air, through which all human beings who wish to enter may freely pass.