

Reflective versus reflexive novels in modernity

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John Fowles was one of the most cerebral and interesting novelists of the 20th century. Some of his work is much overblown and borders on the pretension, but I have tremendous patience and give a lot of room for somebody trying hard to reach greater intellectual heights, especially when they succeed at times.

There are many things to learn and quote from the novels of Fowles, but I found a passage that he wrote about novels to be humorous, interesting and true. In *Mantissa*, a literature professor is trapped in a sort of holodeck room with a beautiful woman who we learn is the Muse Erato, and probably all a figment of his imagination. She acts and speaks like a simpleton, but often gets the better of the protagonist. In this exchange she asks about the role of humor in the novel. He is exasperated, since he thinks the answer is completely obvious, but he responds anyway.

Here is the passage. I will make a few more comments after.

Begin passage

She speaks in a very small voice. 'May I ask you something?'

He stands, and picks up the tie from the back of the chair.

'Of course.'

'I can't quite understand, if there's a place for humour in ordinary life, why there can't be also one in the novel. I thought it was meant to reflect life.'

He leaves the tie hanging untied round his neck, and puts his hands on his hips.

'Oh God. I honestly don't know where to begin with you.' He bends forward slightly. 'The reflective novel is sixty years dead, Erato. What do you think modernism was about? Let alone post-modernism. Even the dumbest students know it's a *reflexive* medium now, not a reflective one....'

End of passage

So very true. And yet, it is fine. The novel cannot compete with modern film when it goes head to head with it on the reflective front. Film can pack much more reflective narrative much more efficiently than a novel can. However, a film cannot have the reflexive capacity of novel without becoming deathly stultifying. Good writers can do with the novel what no other medium can, and construct a powerful piece of art.

The problem is that as one gets older it sometimes becomes harder and harder for some to believe that that twenty-eight year old MFA graduate, who is now a semi-employed waiter in New York City trying to make it, can say anything new and insightful that the reader hasn't already experienced or understood. Many people when they reach full adulthood grow tired of reflexive literature mostly out of arrogance that their own thoughts are more profound than the writer's. If they read fiction at all, they would much rather read a crime story or an adventure story that puts them in crazy scenarios in life that they would never be in. Pay the writer to expend the effort to make up the story for you, that's what they want. That is fine, but don't give up on literature. Scientists working with cold facts need an infusion of humanity beyond their daily lives. It is good for the soul, especially when reading the masters. John Fowles is one of those masters.

Reference

John Fowles. *Mantissa*. London: Triad Grafton Books, 1982.