

PICASSO'S LIE AND COLERIDGE'S SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies... I would like to know if anyone has ever seen a natural work of art. Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art we express our conception of what nature is not.

Picasso approved this statement made in Spanish to Marius de Zayas, before it was translated and published as Picasso Speaks in The Arts. New York, May 1923.



Pablo Picasso (1942) *Tête de taureau* (Bull's Head). Bicycle seat and handlebars. Musée Picasso, Paris

PROVOCATION QUESTIONS

- Is it a Bull's Head?
- Is it an old bicycle seat welded to some junk handlebars?
- Can you ride it?
- Did making it require art training or fine motor skill?
- Could any of us make it just as well?
- Is it beautiful or otherwise aesthetically interesting?
- How much money would it make at auction if it were sold today?
- What would an indigenous person from the rainforest have to say about it?
- Is it a case of the map not being the territory, or just some strange, new kind of territory?
- Is it original? Does that matter?

...a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria*. 1817, Chapter XIV.

The novelist has some advantages. His stage sets are built out of black marks on white paper. On the page, a cast of a hundred is as cheap as a cast of two. For the stage, the adaptor must reduce the personnel, for practical as well as artistic reasons. Cut down the number of characters and you must adapt the story, reorganize events so that one person stands in for another. It takes skill to manage that shift so you are still telling the truth – though not the literal truth...

The screenwriter knows his director can populate a city, or whistle up a mob using computer-generated imagery. The playwright's mob is too meagre to be scary. His battle scene suffers because he only has four combatants and some clattery shields.

It's tough if your story ends in a battle. But then, look at the climax of Richard III. No one forgets Richard yelling out his big offer: 'My kingdom for a horse.' But no-one is going to bring him a horse, because the real and chilling end to his story has already happened in the tent on the eve of battle, when the souls of the dead gather to tell him that the game's up.

**Hilary Mantel: Adaptation. Reith Lecture.
BBC Radio 4: July 7, 2017.**

The story-maker... makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.

— **J. R. R. Tolkien (1939)** *On Fairy-Stories*.

WARM UP QUESTION

- **What is "breaking the 4th wall" in the theatre? How does this notion relate to "Shakespearean asides" and "mockumentaries"?**

KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

- **If everything Shakespeare wrote was a lie—every word is fiction after all—how is it possible that he is able to evoke profound truth about the human predicament?**
- **To what extent does it make sense to talk about Truth in the arts?**
- **In order to understand the past what are the relative merits of historical fiction and academic history?**