

**SCREEN WRITING IN MULTILINGUAL EUROPE**

*The future of language diversity in European Cinema*

**A Keynote Address**

by

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for

**The European Commission**

**LANGUAGES THROUGH LENSES**  
**Screenings & Workshop**

**PRIX EUROPA, BERLIN**  
**19<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

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## ***Introduction***

*Vielen Dank der Europäischen Kommission für diese Einladung, der Stadt und dem Land Berlin für das herzliche Willkommen...*

I note that Europe's most widely spoken mother tongue and the host language on this happy occasion is one of the few major languages not interpreted, which can only mean that all Germans are by now bi-lingual English speakers or that the linguistic generosity of this country surpasses even its hospitality. But in any event I must shift here and now to my own first language with a few multi-lingual excursions later on.

Your short films that we saw last night were of a terrific standard, so congratulations to all of you, not just the eventual winners. Faced with the next generation of Europe's filmmakers, many of you working in minority languages, I'm forcefully reminded of this continent's remarkable linguistic diversity and can only wish it a vibrant future.

I suppose my main qualification for standing here is a long career as screenplay writer working in various languages across Europe; as a polyglot script consultant for several film festivals and markets; and as a lecturer at film academies and universities across Europe including my department of *Germanistik* at the University of Cambridge.

Through my company Scenario Films Ltd I also run the multi-lingual film training programme BABYLON aimed at European film authors and producers of diasporic origins (*issus de la migration/mit Migrationshintergrund*) [www.babylon-film.eu](http://www.babylon-film.eu)

## ***Babylon***

Europe is a continent of ethnic and cultural pluralism born of many waves of migration, but filmmakers of Europe's varied minorities rarely have the chance to communicate across national let alone linguistic barriers. BABYLON is an audiovisual programme designed to fill this gap, a European space in which minority filmmakers can speak to each other and to the widest international audience, providing access and inclusion.



The experience of reaching the mythical “Babylon”, a metropolis of competing languages, interests and traditions, is repeated across Europe in different forms and between different communities.

The stories may vary from country to country and from one community to another, but their origins lie in similar experiences of being uprooted and resettled, of generational divisions and difficult rites of passage, of aspirations and alienations that tell us more about our wider societies through the oblique gaze of the newcomer, without whom our complex Europe is now inconceivable.

Many of these stories provide the strongest films now available, an often untapped inspiration to be liberated. Through a discovery of shared experience BABYLON celebrates Europe’s linguistic and cultural diversity, a motor for European integration, an affirmation of solidarity between filmmakers across the Continent.



### *Screenplay and Language*

International script development has been monopolized in recent years by “gurus” selling their “methods”, often with great harm. How many producers have come away from one-day performances apparently inspired, applied certain “rules” to their writers and been bitterly disappointed that the magic hasn’t worked?

Creating a multi-cultural Europe is not an easy task. Beware of easy answers. For any creative producer faced with developing a film project, especially in multi-lingual co-production, comes the first hard truth: behind every screenplay is a screenplay writer. However you try to finesse or manipulate the process, you can’t deal with the one without a relationship with the other. To get a script, you have to get a writer. With a writer, you engage in a linguistic exchange. You have to talk. And above all, you have to listen.

Language has been at the heart of the western dramatic tradition since its inception in ancient Greece and drama at its best has always balanced the inevitability of conflict with the struggle to communicate – one thinks of Racine’s moments of lucidity in the midst of madness. The creative process undertaken by the dramatist, who struggles to express the roots of conflict through character individuation, resembles in many respects the mental gymnastics of the polyglot.

## *Drama and Polyglossia*

I think I speak for most screenplay writers when I say that dramatic art requires the splitting of the self into several different identities, the projection of certain facets of the author (both real and imagined) into separate characters with discernable identities and unique voices.

This axiom might equally be applied to the willed schizophrenia of the polyglot who splits the brain into separate functions in order to retrieve the correct linguistic signals for any given situation. Language is central to the creative process, in both cases.

Perhaps because of this essential imbalance, this dangerous departure from one's apparent persona, dramatic writers are not entirely rational creatures. They cannot afford to be. Without access to the unconscious mind, nothing happens and stasis (i.e. boredom) ensues.

So working with writers is an elusive, delicate balancing act.

On the one hand rational, analytical, structural.

On the other hand, intuitive, temperamental... and dangerous.

No writer can write without liberating inner energy, a power to live realities beyond one's everyday existence. Let us call it a dark side, the side of Cain, the first murderer.

A writer's first task is to raise the savage Cain trapped inside the civilized Abel. To let the imagination live in the fullest possible sense. Then structure follows.

## *Liberating the Dark Side*

Speaking another language can be a means to discovering this dark side by circumventing the unconscious (and conscious!) censorship we impose on ourselves in our daily existence, the sense of decency and civility essential for daily co-existence that makes Europe such a pleasant place to live but leaves its creative output strangely drained of life.

Using a foreign language - a medium not one's own - may assist in the liberating of this dark side and I would point to such famous polyglots as Becket, Nabokov and Conrad (all of whom wrote in a language other than their mother tongue) to suggest that the most startling and shocking truths can be best located and mediated by the polyglot.

Speaking (as opposed to writing in) another language additionally requires a performative gift that is not unrelated to acting, as well as an acceleration of mental processes that resembles the projecting of a separate identity.

Are we more, or less, ourselves when speaking another language?

Are polyglots simply good actors, compulsive exhibitionists? Or are they genuinely more complex beings? Or just fatally flawed in their self-confidence, permanently impelled to rediscover themselves by splitting their linguistic atoms...

The very question has a kind of indecency about it, as if the inner existence of the polyglot were the last taboo in our society, at best a spiritual promiscuity best left unstated and at worst a recrudescence of shamanism in well-ordered societies accustomed to dedicated interpreters well hidden in their darkened booths.

I'm not sure that Europe has yet understood let alone tapped the fabulous creative resources buried deep in its linguistic make-up, but whatever the truth here, language and drama appear to be inseparable.

Conversely, my secret fear (while we're on this subject) is that the appropriation of the English language as the European *lingua franca* not only drains my own mother tongue of its richness and specificity but leads to a loss of energy, diversity and authenticity in other languages that threatens the output of our audiovisual sector.

### ***The many languages of European film***

The great strength of Europe is its variety of cultures: the strange tales it has to tell, the pockets of experience to reveal, and the different film voices it can employ.

The weakness of Europe lies in its misunderstanding of the concept of Genre, and its consequent, partly deliberate and partly unconscious contempt for an audience. This forms the pendant to my argument and I'll return to it in a moment.

It is often said that linguistic diversity divides us, and splits the European film market, but I'm not convinced that this need be the case. Language also provides the power of our particularity, the germ that makes a film unique.

Through the differentiation of our experience as well as through its commonalty we can make an impact on the international scene. Chinese or Korean films are not confined to their own markets, though few other countries understand those languages, so why should a film shot in Estonian be any less approachable?

What makes a great film and what makes that film travel? Is it really the language that it is shot in? Or rather: the presence of a great story, the echo of a memorable myth?

### ***Language and Myth***

Film can score big successes even in minority languages, especially when constructed on sound dramaturgical principles, as I'll illustrate from some recent examples:

***Festen/The Celebration***, the first Dogme Film shot in the Danish language under precisely stipulated conditions on a tight budget, tells the story of a family reunion that

uncovers a disgraceful secret. The unimpeachable, much respected father figure who sexually abused his own children is publicly accused by his returning adult son who conquers his own fears to face him down, thereby restoring some degree of natural justice to a corrupt and mendacious world. Shot in a self-consciously docu-realist style verging at times on the expressionist, this is far from the 'based on a true story' fare unearthed for voyeuristic thrills. *Festen* achieves the status of Greek tragedy firstly in its dramatically heightened tone and secondly in echoing half-forgotten mythical motifs that themselves are based upon deeply occulted unconscious anxieties of which Sigmund Freud wrote so extensively, here the father's fear of procreation and the son's fear of castration by the father. You may remember that in Greek mythology the odious Titan tyrant Cronos, fearful of usurpation by his children, devours each of his offspring till his despairing wife hands him a stone swathed in cloth in place of her last-born, Zeus, who is thus rescued and returns many years later as a fully grown adult to take revenge, cuts open his father's stomach and liberates his siblings to form the new dynasty of Olympians. A disturbing tale, one might think, that *Festen* eerily echoes. Great screen stories very often play with precisely such buried fears found in all corners of our European mythological heritage. Family strife is one of the greatest sources of all drama and *Festen* brilliantly taps into it.

***Grbavica/Esme's Secret*** Again, we find the word 'secret' buried in the surrogate title of this film (an example of how withheld information can be betrayed in translation) a story of post-traumatic recovery in post-siege Sarajevo that explores the lurch of the city towards disillusioned criminality, counterpointed with the uncovering of a lie that is poisoning a most intimate relationship. Again, the story is based on one of the most powerful interpersonal axes – the mother-daughter relationship - and the outcome reveals a betrayal of trust by the older generation, a betrayal less grave perhaps and more understandable than in *Festen* but nonetheless symptomatic of moral cowardice and fear of rejection. I will not push the point too far, but the set-up reminds me of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia bound for her sacrificial altar.

***Sorstalansag/Fateless*** was shot in Hungarian and is one of the most achingly accounts of the Holocaust told at last from the victims' point of view, a corrective to so many films that pay the perpetrator unconscious (or sometimes deliberate) homage through inappropriate screen time. The Holocaust was the most traumatic event to have scarred our continent's psyche and European film is playing a vital role in unearthing its hideous progression and traumatic legacy, an example of how film can deal with the past in terms that brings it close, not exactly healing but at least confronting.

Every project has its own dramaturgy. No norm can be imposed. Especially not in a European film market struggling to discover its multiple identities in nation and region. We all have different stories to tell, and different ways of telling them.

### ***The Language of Dramaturgy – Terms of Art***

There is no question that certain terms of art are useful, even indispensable, for the understanding of dramatic form – arc, trajectory, crisis, character, identification, to name just a few - and the screen writer must be effortlessly conversant with these ideas, understanding not just their meaning but their weight, their relevance to any

given story and their usefulness to the script's onward progress. Though Europe's dramatic traditions diverge in many respects, their terms of art are curiously consistent. Thus the notion that characters must be changed by their story, whether inwardly or outwardly, to create any satisfying drama, is expressed and discussed in practice throughout the European film development world via the terms: character arc or trajectory, *tragitto* or *percorso*, *trajet* or *parcours*, *Charakterbogen* or *Entwicklungskurve*.

The preferred delivery of this dramaturgical imperative may be subject to wildly different requirements (and its need sometimes contested) but the terms themselves are fixed like granite milestones in dramaturgical discourse continent-wide.

## ***Language and Screen Dialogue***

The French classical theatre tradition has never lost its grip on French cinema, and French film characters are generally expected to express themselves well, at times eloquently, or when upset or angry through the well-formed *tirade*, both entertaining and self-revealing through their use of language, and this applies I believe as much to the modern *film de banlieue* with its cast of street rebels as it does to films set in the rarified art world, such as *Un Coeur en Hiver*, in which silence can be relied upon to express alienation if only by refusing convention.

How different is the English tradition: evasive, elliptical, socially repressed and psychologically inhibited, expressing characters often self-deceptive or self-disguising. While English dialogue is often held up as a model of brevity, our over-reliance on irony, double negative and subtext can prove self-defeating and frustrating, the striving for psychological layering ending in a frustrating shallowness of texture.

While sometimes mawkish and condescending, North American English dialogue generally embraces a robust affirmation of character that has more in common with the blend of Jewish, Italian and German traditions from which Hollywood emerged: emotional, direct, appealing, summarizing, protagonist-fixated, explicitly self-discovering and self-revealing. In developing my three Italian films based on biblical characters, I was fascinated by the extent to which the 'confession' still dominates dialogue within the catholic world view. Character arcs were very largely determined by the cornerstones of religious dramaturgy: covert sin, dangerous hubris, fall from grace, punishment, penance, atonement and redemption, an Aristotelian liturgy dating no doubt from the mysteries of Eleusis and Athenian tragedy that Hollywood has made its own to enormous effect, even in completely secular indeed culinary films, but which European dramaturgy tends to eschew through a sense of decorum not always proper to the dramatic act.

Meanwhile German dialogue is generally cautious, expository, action-bound, impervious to irony, rarely leaving a gap between speech and intention, a carapace in which the character is perfectly wrapped and a source of underlying strength to the narrative (eg *Das Leben der Anderen*/The Lives of Others), but suffering limitations in its nervousness about humour as a sign of inconsistent characterization, contradiction or bad taste.

## *The Screenplay Writer Speaking to the Public*

Making a film is a collaborative, expensive act. The writer is in on the ground floor but the elevator stops for passengers at every stage, each passenger with something to say about the script. How can one listen to them all without losing the thread?

Endless practical constraints must be acknowledged while nurturing the voice attempting to speak: budgets, investors, censors, employers, each with his or her own language.

Many writers write to a brief, to a commission. How does inspiration co-exist with authority? What is Maecenas paying for? And what degree of editorial control should he get in return?

Unlike most creative artists the writer has no medium - no clay, no bronze, no oils or water colours, not even actors. The writer writes in his own blood. Perspective comes hard. This makes the writer vulnerable and easily destroyed, especially by a false or reckless authority figure.

The screenplay writer is no longer the protected wallflower, if ever he was; not a poet, to be permitted his garret and his lonely art; not a fascinatingly remote and inexplicable demonic force whose inner workings will be revealed only once his immaculate conception bursts with overwhelming, self-evident justification upon an unsuspecting audience; instead, a very public person, intending to tell stories that will be narrated before an audience gathered for that purpose and prepared to put in the time to listen, to be seduced, to be convinced.

It is not entirely illogical to expect a screenplay writer to be able to entertain potentially interested parties with a well-turned thumbnail account of “the story”. It’s the least that a paying producer desperate to hook the money-men can expect of an equally hungry but sometimes uselessly tongue-tied writer. Cain must be raised not just on the page but in the soul, and this soul must sometimes be bared in public, however distasteful or embarrassing this might be.

An ability to pitch in public, and at least in English as well as one’s mother tongue, has become an absolute expectation of the filmmaker, both writer and director. This recourse to the spoken word delivers what writers most need: an audience.

Normally writers must be their own first audience. The ability to project from one’s inner world to the audience beyond the screen can elude even the best screenplay writers, unlike most of their theatre counterparts. Constant self-interrogation is required: “what am I meant to feel here?”, “have I really understood?”, “aren’t you just speaking to yourself?!”

After all, the writer is in search of an audience. No? Ah... then why should an audience be interested?

Back comes the time-honoured response: I'm taking no short cuts, making no compromises, I'm writing this the way I see it and the audience must make of it what it will.

Poor producer. Wasted cash. Lost project.

### *Language and Tradition*

Cinema does not reward the native, untaught genius bursting fully formed from nowhere and redefining the art with one, fell, first film. Many highly awarded first films have proved also to be last films. Cinema is a shared experience and shared experience creates a tradition. Cinema is a highly sculpted, unspontaneous, cunningly crafted, brilliantly decorated artifice in which a composite team of highly varied talents collaborate to a single end, with the shared purpose of reaching an audience.

Audience. And never forget it. Once the writer forgets the audience, the writer is talking to himself. And who will hear? The film is lost!

So how should a writer "consider the audience"? Does this "consideration" imply a dreaded sycophancy, as if s/he is inwardly saying "they'll like this bit" or "I'll have them rolling in the aisles here"?

Again, this suspicion is the naïve rebellion of a writer who cannot hear her own words being listened to. A writer does not just write. A writer listens to her words being heard.

A writer is capable of being her own first audience. A writer should know where the audience is expected to be in relation to the action as the story goes along.

With no sense of this self-discipline, a writer is simply an after-dinner speaker who fails to observe the response of his audience and doesn't know when to stop.

But...I hear you say... the film writer has no audience. There's no one there. And trying to imagine an audience involves the writer in endless second-guessing which will ruin her invention. How can you Raise Cain if you're constantly thinking about "how it'll play"?

Fair point. To be guarded against. But that delicate balancing act, that willed and wilful schizophrenia, is precisely the task of the screenplay writer. To be entirely inside herself and entirely inside the darkened cinema with her audience simultaneously.

## *The Language of Craft & Technique*

This involves firstly the inner appropriation and digestion of craft and technique in ways that were self-evident to say painters of the renaissance or composers of the baroque. If you had to reflect on your means of creativity while exercising them, you may have failed to connect with your audience. Expertise liberates and facilitates spontaneity. A pretty paradox.

Nothing can replace an easy familiarity with your fundamental medium. In our case, this means not musical notation or oil or watercolours but words on the page designed to prepare a production.

It involves secondly an awareness of where the audience is likely to stand in relation to the film, a sharing with the audience of previous cinema-going experience.

Every film writer was once a filmgoer and usually continues to be so. But how often have we worked with would-be screenplay writers who seem to erase every film they've ever seen the minute they sit down to write their own, as if it's dishonest to acknowledge any precedent let alone debt. This fake amnesia is dangerous and mendacious. You cannot forget every film you've seen, for they have shaped and formed your creative awareness, as they have your audience's, and they've probably contributed greatly to your desire to write.

Debts persist, whether one denies them or not, so they must be acknowledged. If you've forgotten them, the audience sure as hell will not. Your debts will stare you in the face the minute your film starts playing.

Whether we like it or not, cinema is an art form already shaped and defined by tradition. In its many different forms and expressions, tradition can be continued, defied or mocked; it can be inverted, subverted and transgressed; but to behave as though tradition did not exist is ignorant and it renders a writer laughable.

It is hard (I know this as a writer myself) to absorb one's viewing however passionate, however critical, into one's personal creative output. There is something laming, hurtful, inhibiting about it, like a pebble in one's trainers. But that jab in the Achilles heel is an excellent reminder of one's weaknesses and a warning of worse to come.

Once this exercise in humility is accomplished, it is possible to think of offensive words like "genre" in slightly more charitable ways. Perhaps "genre" isn't just the straitjacket we think it is. Perhaps "genre" as a concept is actually the writer's friend.

If European film is to overcome the many obstacles in its path, it must face up to what the Americans do right and where/how they succeed, not in order to imitate them but to devise our own models appropriate to our own experience and audience.

I sense that the profound mistrust of genre amongst independent European filmmakers is based on an equally profound misunderstanding of what the term implies.

## *Genre as Lingua Franca*

“Genre film” is often used – indiscriminately and wrongly – as a synonym for B-Movie, a term used loosely in the industry especially by distributors, sales agents and marketers (as well as by academics) to denote a film based on a well-established and by definition well-loved model that enjoys a popular following and delivers a relatively guaranteed audience, the readiest examples being Horror, Western, Comedy, War, Action/Adventure, Crime.

But the analysis of “film genre” - of how genre functions as a presence in screen dramaturgy - goes well beyond any narrow concern with “genre film”. Even an auteur, even the most surreal and anarchic like Bunuel, has some concept of genre while fashioning his output, because genre at its simplest defines the space in which communication between filmmaker and audience takes place.

The term has a respectable pedigree, since Aristotle discerned three dramatic genres in 4<sup>th</sup> century Greece: Tragedy, Comedy and Epic; his observations on the relationship between plot and character are the first known attempt to define dramaturgy as appropriate to genre and they were respected by Shakespeare’s editors, who published his plays under the entirely cognate terms Tragedy, Comedy and History.

At its simplest “genre” implies an awareness of the audience through shared tradition, a tradition in which the author and the audience both partake, a fertilizing concept that instills, changes and shapes the creative process by throwing it into a dynamic relationship with the audience from the writing to the screening.

It helps guide the audience’s response through text, music and performance, a living, organic, transfigurative presence that shifts and metamorphoses as the story progresses, allowing the audience to enter into the narrative and to exercise an illusory influence on its outcome via classic mechanisms of identification.

The workings of “genre” involve and implicate the viewer in interpretation of the narrative through the optic of received tradition.

Genre is a kind of yeast, that leavens the dough.

Genre is a means for the author to unlock, release, recruit, subvert and collude with the audience, like a shout from the stage at a rock concert: *Know what I mean?* And the shout echoes back from the amphitheatre: *Yes we do!!*

Genre denotes a convention that links the speaker with the hearer and establishes that communication is taking place as intended, a systematic exchange sometimes called “the generic contract”.

As a representation of myth, genre functions as an anxiety-reducing device, to explain conflict and inevitability along acceptable lines via the reinforcement of tradition, and therefore you could indeed say that it is a conservative force in the creative process.

But before the independent writer runs screaming into full denial mode and insists on *Raising Cain* all on his own without any reference to all this, let's try and work out how to *recruit* rather than *refuse* the unavoidable.

Genre stares one in the face from every cinema poster. "What is it like?" is the first question (possibly after "who's in it?") of the conventional cinema goer including – let's be honest – almost all film practitioners bar the most intellectual and esoteric, and the word genre usually holds the clue to "what it's like". You can't get away from it.

Posters and ad campaigns are carefully crafted to lure the audience with graphic hints of what they might be in store for. They offer a sales contract, based on references the cinema goer will understand from prior experience, in other words on genre. A generic contract. Woe betide you if you disappoint, if you substitute another genre for the one on offer, if you fail to deliver on contract.

Academic discourse on genre generally assumes that the concept functions as a straitjacket on the author, constraining creativity, confining the imagination with purely commercial or attention-seeking considerations.

Let us put in a plea for genre as a creative impulse. Genre implies constraint and restraint, but also focus, self-discipline, economy of means. Genre stops writers wandering off the point. Genre is arguably a liberating principle, in that it gives the author some sense of contact with her audience through the act of writing.

This contact is all the more vital in that a film script, unlike a stage play, is rarely subjected to the cleansing fire of rehearsal by actors who must eventually face an audience, actors who will tell you long before the First Night "sorry guv, this doesn't work, it won't play".

No one knows how a film will play, not the writer, not the director, least of all the actors who frequently have no idea of the overall creative schema. The only way of anticipating an audience reaction (i.e. of trying to ensure that what one wishes to say is what the audience will hear) involves the matching of one's output, however original, against the likely response of an audience conditioned by received tradition, if only as a way of circumventing studio bosses fearful of anything that might be "original" and the investor who notoriously exclaimed "If it's art, I'm out!"

However if you deliver only the genre and nothing more, your fate is sealed. Boredom, refusal, yawn. We are not convinced, we've seen it all before. A modern audience demands its generic expectations to be challenged as well as confirmed. It wishes to be surprised, confounded, amused. Genre thus functions not just as a convention or a contract, it is also a dare, a jest, even a threat. How far can the author go before the contract is broken? How much can the audience take?

The use of genre as game sees the author playing cat and mouse with the willing audience in a conspiracy to know, but not to know. Ironies are created through the juxtaposition of existing reference with the author's manipulation of it, anywhere from gentle restatement through mockery to total inversion. You were expecting "this" but I'm giving you "this". The audience must trust that the deception won't go too far but will be hooked by the guessing game.

## ***Europe's Old and New Screen Languages***

The construction of an independent and multi-lingual European film industry is something to be tenaciously fought for, though a successful film market will by definition create a sense of genre through the fact of repetition and the emergence of a tradition, one might say re-emergence of a long-lost tradition, in that Europe was the birthplace of every genre of note except the Western!

For example Horror is generally agreed to date from *Das Cabinet des Doktor Caligari* (1919), *Der Golem* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1921), succeeded by a second wave in Hollywood: *Dracula* (1930) and *Frankenstein* (1931).

There is nothing un-European about genre. But can we still do it? Are there new genres to be found, is Europe even interested?

The history of the film industry in this continent has been marked by almost fatal ruptures and disjunctions. Language, culture, warfare, prejudice, indifference, all have prevented the emergence of a cohesive European tradition, different from a mono-cultural tradition that few would want.

But let us be clear that the huge, unified and till recently monoglot market of the USA historically has facilitated mass production, and this in turn has fostered regular cinema going which in turn creates generic expectation. The Behemoth must be fed!

## ***The Future of European Film***

However a European Hollywood is not the way forward and English as sole *lingua franca* must be resisted to preserve the cultural diversity of the continent. But that does not absolve us from the need to broaden our audiences and render the art film circuit less dependent on state subsidy often perceived as elitist and arbitrary.

Certainly, genre can be abused as a “button-pusher”, a means of recruiting the audience's allegiance on the cheap by offering them a surrogate experience that they know, and you know, will work, emotion rung from them by easy means in favour of characters you wouldn't give the time of day on the street, not because they are too evil but because they're too superficial.

But genre can also transcend linguistic barriers, open new perspectives on old themes, liberating an audience and refreshing imaginative roots that the one-off, permanently singular art house movie with its presumed immaculate originality cannot reach.

Gareth Jones, October 2008  
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