

On creating a modern retelling of Don Quixote By Benjamin Robison

Working title: ~~Tracing Quixote~~ **Quixote Dreaming**

Abstract:

Tracing) Quixote (Dreaming

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An exploration of multivalent perspectives

“Perhaps the world we live in is simply Quixote Dreaming...”

Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* will serve as the content, form and structure for a multimedia stage production that is anthem like, epic in scale but with the intimacy and immediacy of chamber music and miniatures. It will contain sweeping vistas, cups and bowls, Goya sketches, McKay illustrations, Kentridge animations, Mehretu paintings, poverty, wealth, oppression, suppression, revolution, expansion, laughter, critique, wonder, insanity, violence and redemption. It will be swift and reflective and vain and virtuosic. *Don Quixote* is a book with many scales. It reads like a series of short, ironic children’s stories but in its architecture, attachment to ideas and ideals, and its generosity it finds grandeur. The main narrative resides inside the mind of Don Quixote. Less important is the question, when will he meet Dulcinea, than how does his imagination affect reality and when will the imaginative world he has constructed come crashing down.¹ Our purpose is to create the imaginative conditions through the use of multiple media so that the audience may create a life. This conceptual space *between* the media is the vital element of our production. In order to achieve this ephemeral end, we must consider the concepts and ideas that are contained in *Don Quixote* and find how they resonate with our modern world-view.

Quixote Dreaming considers our multimedia history so that we may forge a new set of mythically charged environments. Don Quixote serves as a vital point of convergence and emergence in the quest for an immersive art as we transition into an information driven global environment. Written on the cusp of and itself driving a new self-aware society, Quixote offers us a perspective on perspective. Like Klee’s angel, we look back to move forward.

Quixote Dreaming will explore how Don Quixote progresses through his world, how we perceive him progressing through our world and how we progress through our world at the intersection of ideas and materials. This exploration is based on the tracing.

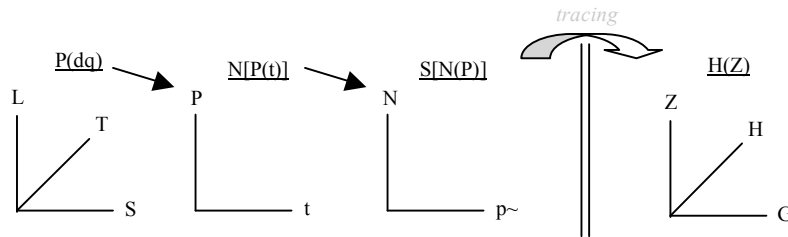
A tracing: a ghostlike copy that propels multiple reinterpretations.

The formal structure of *Quixote Dreaming* will rest on the interaction between two conceptual layers – the object and the hyperobject (drawing from the idea of a hypercube being a three dimensional representation of a four dimensional cube) where tracing is the operator. The first object is the portrait. The portrait is a straightforward presentation of Don Quixote in a time and place. The hyperportrait breaks the limits of time and space and contains both our mediated

¹ Glover, D.

perception of that portrait and the extension to our global environment that is now affecting us all consciously and unconsciously. The second object is the narrative, which adds the dimension of time to the portrait. The hypernarrative will consider rate-of-change or acceleration as an artistic construct and look at revolution (both politically and in space) as a metaphor for the creative moment. The third and final object is the sonnet – the measured and structured expression of the poetic. The hypersonnet will offer the compelling artistic gesture that brings meaning to the multitude of information and narrative both inside and outside Don Quixote’s story. We grapple with each of these objects and their extensions to reassert a measure of understanding and influence through artistic meditation over an intensely mediated world experience (however quixotic that goal may be) and therefore a basis for freedom and joy.

The dimensions of the portrait are light (image), sound (music) and text (poem); the dimensions of the narrative are the portrait and time; the dimensions of the sonnet are the narrative and perception (philosophy, religion and psychology). The dimensions of hyper[z] (where z=portrait, narrative or sonnet) are then z, history and geography. This can be more easily visualized:



The basic motion between the two layers of concept will be based on a double helix/whirlwind where staging and concepts will be brought into ever more intense and interspersed relationships creating immense emotional and intellectual energy. This whirling theme will express itself in the physical staging, the structure of the narrative, the sound, the changing point of views, the use of time and geography.

On the production:

“What is sought...is the following: given a fact – a man, a book, a picture, a landscape, an error, a sorrow – to carry it by the shortest route to its fullest significance.”²

Quixote Dreaming will be produced in three formats: As a live multimedia stage show, as a 30 minute children’s short and as a creative adaptation of the show for film. We will also produce weblogs, educational programming and several accompanying CDs. Our work will be *playful*. It will exude playfulness in exposing the trappings of illusion while investing those illusions with reality. Every element of the production should be playful individually and in its interaction with the others. “The category of the comic is connected with *folly* in the highest and lowest sense of that word. Play, however is not foolish. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly.”³

Our production will attempt to retain the simple and direct storytelling of the original while substituting multiple media for length in an attempt to capture and relay both the stunning narrative play, the constantly shifting points of view, the ironic parody of literary genre and the realistically nuanced descriptions of daily life in the renaissance. We will slip back and forth between being the makers of illusion and exposing that illusion. We will spiral like a Dali

² Unamuno

³ Bloom

whirlwind⁴ around meaning through our story and criticism as a modern creative act. We reflect on Don Quixote through multiple media to create a reflective musical-visual image that is focused at the center of our audience's heart and mind

We confront the challenge of being original when retelling a historic work. Like Borges finds in *Pierre Minard*⁵, if one is to retell Don Quixote, the most difficult task is to remain oneself and still write the original. Cervantes offers the solution to this with modernist self-awareness and eloquent complexity. His narrators are aware they are reading or translating. His characters are readers and in the second volume most have read the first. The point of view is constantly and effortlessly shifting and objective truth is constantly called into question. Through the use of multiple screens and an extremely broad range of musical, visual and literary styles we can encompass these formal currents and resurrect Don Quixote to provide an ideal mirror for self-reflection.

Our form will be that of the rambling story with a unique conceptual overlay that combines with the narrative in a whirlwind/double-helix structure. "The ironic dissolution of form is the intimate pitfall of every technique that seeks to combine the humorous with the realistic."⁶ However, in this story, the honest and loving friendship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza will be both the formal and emotional keystone. Their friendship is canonic and the organic canon will serve as a model and underlying conceptual core for the stage production.⁷

When our modern Don Q dreams, he dreams of knights and damsels in distress and of the original Don Quixote. Our Don Q dreams he is Don Quixote – a knight. His insanity is at once more pronounced and subtle. When he wakes, he takes his music to the streets to bring joy and wonder to those who do not remember how to listen.

While Don Q and Sancho spiral around each other exchanging ideas and feelings, the two linear narratives taking place in 16 century Spain and 21st Century US will likewise spiral around each other, exchanging metaphor and allegory.

We will reset the concept into the American Southwest in a detailed narrative of our hero's exploits traveling from New Mexico whose arid plains are much like the barren plains of Montiel, to New Orleans, our Barcelona, where Don Quixote is finally defeated by the former Knight of the Mirrors. A landscape of mirage and carcass, of stark power and mythic energy will serve as backdrop to the conversations between Don Quixote and Sancho and act as an allegorical landscape for the death of modern genres as well as a magical birthing ground for ideals and mythic potential.

This potential will explode into multiple narratives in the hypernarrative taking place in Northern and Western Africa, Spain and the United States tying together strands of oppression and suppression as well as powerful historic and geographic vectors that influence our world today.

Unamuno states "It cannot be said that Don Quixote is the child of Cervantes; for if Cervantes was his father, his mother was the country and people in which he lived and from which Cervantes derived his being; and Don Quixote has much more of his mother about him than his

⁴ Dali often portrayed Don Quixote as a whirlwind by creating his form with quick spirals of his pen.

⁵ Borges

⁶ Grant, 25 (Bloom)

⁷ Bloom

father.”⁸ This being the case, the Southwest is then a sister to the Spanish country, from her Spanish colonial history to her topography and environment; she resonates with similar themes. Our Quixote will have three modern parents; the history and living influence of *Don Quixote* as father, the American people and southern landscape as mother, and the advance of technology, science and criticism as surrogates.

The Southwest, with its deserts and high plateau is a land of mirage. It offers little lushness but an amazingly fertile world for the imagination. The mind creates in the void; and here Don Q can imagine and the physical landscape will receive his imaginings and offer up poignant, searing responses. Death feels closer in the Southwest and this too is important for Don Q. He is on an inevitable journey to dissolution. His own death is the final realization of his ideals and leads to his immortality.⁹

Our stage set will utilize fourteen video channels at various heights above and below the narrators featuring drawings, rotoscopes, animations, archived images and films, stop-motion animations, puppetry and live video mixes.¹⁰ This will take place inside three wire and glass sets. The sets are abstract to allow for both the acceptance of musicians as narrators and the constant transformation of the physical context. It will suggest a New Orleans nightclub and an open roadway. On another level, the set is literally an outline to allow for useful camera approaches from 360 degrees and playfulness entering and exiting the set as well as various possibilities for apparent changes in scale, which will emphasize the multi-layered nature of *Don Quixote*.

The multimedia stage performance will feature Downbeat Magazine’s 5-time Best Trombonist of the Year, Ray Anderson, New Orleans tubist Bob Stewart and internationally renowned percussionist Pheeroan akLaff along with a string quartet, bass and oboe. Additionally, the production will utilize recorded and live surround sound to fully immerse our audience and allow us to reset live themes in a variety of musical and sonic contexts. Lastly, a vocal narrator will play a number of spoken rolls and provide poetic counterpoint to the film and music.

Don Q and Sancho will primarily speak in a New Orleans jazz milieu – the world of his imagination featuring Ellington, Armstrong, King Oliver, Jelly Roll, and Bechet among many others. The world that he alternately competes with and is humored by will feature an extremely broad range of musical and aesthetic genre, presented both as transcriptions and as surround sound mixes, to paint as detailed a sonic picture as possible while bringing the advances in film sound production to the avant guard stage. Reality will be presented in both representational and abstracted soundscapes.

The strings will in general act as a musical Greek chorus; representing scenes, creating atmosphere and bearing witness but individual members will emerge as secondary characters to explore the unique imaginative landscapes created by Don Q.

We hope to engage some of the world’s great visual artists to work in conjunction with a film crew and computer graphics team to create the unique and immersive visual environment and we plan to engage a noted architect to design the stage set.

⁸ Gasset

⁹ Unamuno

¹⁰ See stage set drawings.

As a meditation on media, our stage production will critique our various media and from this, another layer of humor and interest will emerge. The subtle blend of image and sound, of lighting and multiple video channels, of narration and animation will add to an immersive environment that will lure the audience into our illusion. At the same time, we will make obvious the mechanisms of our work through Goddard-like angularity, impertinent interruptions and unlikely juxtapositions. Like Cervantes's exposition on printing, translating and authorship, our piece will place multimedia itself up for musical, visual and narrative commentary. As it skewers our media drenched society it will underline the importance of culture and art to interpret and synthesize the contemporary world. Don Q will constantly change the narrative position from the musicians to the actor, to the film screens, to the story behind or within the film screen. As in the original's playful critique of chivalric literature, we will twist narrative to produce a state of vertigo with in relation to musical clichés and tropes. The silences, the things unspoken by Don Quixote, the ambiguous, all lead to a greater sense of reality. Finally, Don Q must only exist in the mind of the audience, the final illusion that leads to his survival. Each of our media provides a partial reflection, imitation, or perspective that together intimate a vanishing point in our audience's consciousness.

Behind the production:

“Through many words he creates a life.”¹¹

Don Quixote is both actor and playwright in his own existence. “He was a hero made real as only the finest art achieves reality. And this in a book whose very problem is reality, a book which calls in question the existence of knights and the sanity of an obscure man who insisted that he could be one.”¹² Insane Quixote achieves the fame and glory of his dreams, not only in his own world but also in ours. During his magical journey, his vortex of a personality draws other characters and readers both inside and outside of his book to a deeper understanding of reality. “Don Quixote is neither a madman or a fool, but someone who plays at being a knight-errant. Play is a voluntary activity, unlike madness and foolishness.”¹³

Don Quixote, the man, cries out to be understood. His insanity asks the reader to consider how “reading” affects us and to contemplate the deluge of images and sounds that we inhabit. We urgently need to confront the reality we are creating: one that is manifesting itself as an outgrowth of our unconscious consumption. Only through thoughtful scrutiny of this postmodern palimpsest of a universe, full to overflowing with pervasive images and sounds that are taking such firm control of our lives, can we regain a measure of autonomy and freedom – of expression, of implication through metaphor, of spiritual motion. Cervantes offers us Don Quixote and Sancho Panza to reflect back the world we live in and as they converse and take on each others traits, as Don Quixote becomes abstracted from himself and as Sancho becomes the torch bearer for idealism in spite of himself, they rise beyond the covers of their book to offer a critique of our sense of reality and the power this “reality” has over our life and actions.

“Consistently duplicitous, Cervantes often scorns the belief in the idea while celebrating Don Quixote’s idealism.”¹⁴ *Don Quixote* offers the director its simultaneous idealism and realism. Quixote is an idealistic fictional character in a distinctly realistic book that in turn is full of literary genre pieces and flat characters that are sometimes mere sketches. Don Q himself believes implicitly in the romance novels that he reads and thus carries their logic and importance to us as he continues to grow in stature and influence as a real character. “The fact is that what is related in the books of chivalry has reality in the imagination of Don Quixote, who, in his turn enjoys an unquestionable existence. So that, although the realistic novel was born in opposition to the so-called novel of fantasy, it carries adventure enclosed within its body.”¹⁵ And “It is pure spirit disguised as fantasy that sustains Don Quixote. That carries his moral dignity unscathed out of each and every humiliation.”¹⁶

“The fact that the imagined or symbolic reality exist side-by side and simultaneously with mundane reality give the book an odd flickering quality, a lightness and airiness that resists univocal interpretation.”¹⁷ This quality leads one to reflect on our mediated reality. “If we examine more closely our ordinary notion of reality, perhaps we should find that we do not consider real what actually happens, but a certain manner of happening that is familiar to us. In this vague sense, then, the real is not so much what is seen as foreseen; not so much what we see

¹¹ Ortega y Gasset

¹² Glover

¹³ Bloom

¹⁴ Glover

¹⁵ Unamuno, 137

¹⁶ Thomas Mann, 20

¹⁷ Glover, 20

as what we know.”¹⁸ “Reality” is a vanishing point on the horizon. There is always the filter of our perception and Don Quixote makes that filter utterly apparent. “Culture is memories and promises, an irreversible past, a dreamed future. But reality is a simple and frightening “being there.” It is a presence, a deposit, an inertia. It is materiality.”¹⁹ *Don Quixote* exists in the middle ground between the two and thus offers a point of reference for the investigation of either, constantly questioning what is real and quick to call into question the veracity of statements by Quixote or his narrators.

Further, *Don Quixote* meditates on itself, on books in general and on the effect they have on our lives. A retelling offers the opportunity to similarly reflect on the state of multimedia art and its relationship to our current condition. A serious retelling of *Don Quixote* could only take place today as a multimedia piece. If there is a curse on a film version of *Don Quixote*, it is not a physical one. It is on the monocular focus of film, which alone is not suitable to evoke Cid Hamete’s pen back into action. Cervantes has been waiting for a unique set of circumstances like his own: an advanced society, critical, lacking focus and ideals, self-indulgent yet hyperactive, introspective yet lacking empathy and a medium or set of media to convey in a new relevant form this critical book. Only multimedia offers a rich enough perceptual mirror to reflect the contemporary world through the eyes of Quixote. Only an audience that reads, listens - to music and words, looks, imagines, and wonders about the connections between the media streams will be able to reflect upon a completely immersive and engaging mediated reality. “As a meditation on the logical interplay of text, truth, fiction and meaning, and on the book as a constructed artifice, *Don Quixote* is an unmatched fictional commentary on mediated reality.”²⁰ In multimedia, individual medias as truth are critiqued and then tell stories as collaborators.

Dialog and commentary are the key components of *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote cannot stop changing and needs to talk it out. “That is the purpose of his frequently irascible but always finally loving conversations with the faithful Sancho... Bound by the order of the play, they are also united by the endless further humanization they bring about in each other.”²¹ “The criticism, the banter, is not an unessential ornament of *Quixote*, but rather the very texture of the genre, perhaps of all realism.”²² Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are each other’s ideal conversationalist; they change by listening to each other. “Their relationship is canonical and changes, in part, the subsequent nature of the canon.”²³ Quixote and Sancho’s friendship is the unique key to Cervante’s novel and the humor that emotionally frees us to take on the deeper intellectual aspects of the novel.

‘Yes, some of your good sense is bound to stick on to me,’ Sancho replied. ‘Soil that left to itself would be poor and sterile gives good yields when you manure it and you till it. ‘What I’m trying to say is that being with you is the manure that’s been spread over the barren soil of my poor wits, and the tilling is all this time I’ve been with you, serving you, so I’m hoping to give wonderful yields that won’t be unworthy to be piled up beside the paths of good breeding that you’ve trodden over this feeble understanding of mine.’²⁴

¹⁸ Bloom, 148

¹⁹ Grant (Bloom)

²⁰ Unamuno. (As such, it may be fully realized as the center of a new mythology. – ed.)

²¹ Bloom, 159

²² Unamuno, 147

²³ Bloom, 148

²⁴ Cervantes (Rutherford, p.558)

Don Quixote and Sancho are both good listeners and clearly their words affect each other. “Where Quixote and Sancho meet is in a certain kind of animation, the spiritedness of their conversations. As they talk, and often debate vigorously, they enlarge the field of each other’s thoughts. No thought on either side goes unchecked or un-critiqued. By mainly courteous disagreement, most courteous when most sharply in conflict, they gradually establish an area of free play, where thoughts are set free for us the readers to ponder. Hidden in [the] exchange is the bond between the two, who beneath the surface enjoy the intimacy of equality. A loving but quarrelsome duo, Sancho and the Don are united by more than their mutual affection and their authentic respect for each other. At their best, they are companions in the order of play, a sphere with its own rules and its own vision of reality.”²⁵

The relationship between the intellectual and cultural landscape of the early twenty-first century and the early twentieth is similar in many ways to the relationship between the Renaissance and the medieval world of Don Quixote’s imaginings. A general misgiving about divine influence in daily lives (Black Plague becomes endless war, terrorist threats, AIDS, global warming, natural disasters) leads to a resurgent interest in life rather than afterlife.²⁶ Realists rule the day with backlash from extreme fanaticism with various religious colorations. Against this cruel background, Don Quixote emerges as an individual idealistic hero. He believes his vision can help the world and save it from mundane materialism, wrenching poverty and ignorance.

“A hero is one who wants to be himself.” Therefore, “the root of heroic action may be found, then in a real act of will-” “that paradoxical object which begins in reality and ends in the ideal, since one only wants what is not-is the tragic theme.”²⁷ The essence of quixotism is that Don Quixote replaces “the lies feigning events which would conform to the vulgar life of appearances...with the higher truths of his faith, based on profound and fundamental life.” Quixote’s spiritual evolution spirals in a helix with his physical tribulations and a complimentary shadow of criticism but the blood coursing through the book is its revelation and celebration of heroic individuality. In our current age of “individualism” this heroic quality takes the form of individual assessment and responsibility in the midst of massive profit driven information overload.

“Don Quixote and Cervantes evolve toward a new type of literary dialectic, one that alternates in proclaiming both the potencies and the variety of the narrative in its relation to real events.”²⁸ Don Quixote is a literary construct and he knows it, especially in the second part. Both Don Quixote and Sancho take their literary history seriously and manage to retain their freedom in spite of the readers that begin to curate their world. Paradoxically enough, the reader must move beyond the character to get to one of the beauties of the book. Cervantes’ goal to attack the chivalric romance form is achieved by describing “realities” that we accept but that are in fact genre created by writers. Cervantes moves us from the dichotomy of real versus imagination to individuality versus genre.

In addition to the variety of narrators and points of view, Cervante’s offers us Quixote’s enchanters who are his patch for the gap between theory and reality. “The enchanters make us into unusually active readers.”²⁹ They ask the audience to constantly reevaluate whether Don Quixote is delusional or insane or simply an actor, knowingly playing a part. And Don Quixote and Sancho have the quality of the enchanters themselves. As Don Quixote moves beyond his

²⁵ Bloom, 148

²⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance>

²⁷ Unamuno, 152

²⁸ Bloom

²⁹ Bloom

own book and time he begins to influence the future. He becomes more real with each passing year. And magically, this reality relies on the fact that Don Quixote's spirit remains ideal and therefore to an extent undefined. This quality enables it to reflect back our media and expose their individual limits.

Unamuno tells us "we must always let ourselves be guided by the peerless Dulcinea, who is the star leading us to the eternity of effort." And like Dulcinea, *Don Quixote* leads its readers and adapters to become themselves Don Quixote. We tilt at the ideal of this immense book in a breathless attempt to achieve the unachievable – to create a life that resonates through history and reveals the creative process for all to see. And he offers further advise, "The best way for an artist to attain a vision of the sublime hidalgo is to submerge his meditative soul in the quixotic soul."³⁰ We will not dissect or psychoanalyze Don Quixote or *Don Quixote*. We will merely create a new media space where Quixote might see fit to appear and ride on to further adventures. He will surely see the need.

There are a number of important vectors in *Don Quixote*. There is the arc of self-consciousness from minimal in part one to a complete realization and acceptance of his insanity leading to his death in the final chapters. There is the repetitive appearance of characters and themes that ties together passages at a distance. There is the physical cycle Don Quixote makes from his home three times. And there is the multitude of narrative and point-of-view cycles throughout the work.

Ortega states "the work of art will not surrender to one who goes straight up to it." Like our genome whose intent is wrapped into a helix, *Don Quixote* spirals toward a life. Its motion disorients us leading to a narrative vertigo where truth loses meaning and a multivalent construct is presented in the context of a rambling yet directed story as a living being. Don Quixote explodes above and beyond the boundaries of his book.³¹ Beyond its wordy attempt at taking on idealism while becoming caught up in it as well. Beyond his space and time. And we become caught in the whirlwind of meaning that is Don Quixote and spiral toward truth.

³⁰ Unamuno, 344

³¹ Like Hamlet. (Bloom)