# "The Dioramic Imagination"

for John Colligan (1955-2008)

When I first saw the trailer for the feature film "Welcome to Marwen" (2018) I was intrigued – and also dubious. A movie about dolls and Nazis, with CGI and live-action combined together? Director Robert Zemeckis is known to be a great innovator in cinematic technique and technology, but this one looked like it might be over the top, and the critics seemed to agree. "Welcome to Marwen" got a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 31%, and the reviewer for The New York Times said it was as if a Wes Anderson movie had gotten stuck inside a Tim Burton movie, with the actors thinking they were in a TV sitcom. But then I heard that an earlier documentary, called "Marwencol", about the same artist the feature was based on, was supposed to be good. I saw "Marwencol" on Netflix, and found it utterly compelling. It sent me back to the feature film, where my intrigue now turned to rapture. "Welcome to Marwen", I thought, was utterly original, inspired, inspiring – unforgettable. Even before I left the theater I had started to experience that excited, fluttery feeling in my solar plexus that signals the effect of true poetry upon my system. (When asked to define poetry, Emily Dickinson said, "If I feel

physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." For me, it's all in the solar plexus.) I recognized the sensation from when I'd read Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens in graduate school; and, before that, the time my cousin John (may he rest in peace) took me to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan to see an exhibit on Joseph Cornell – an event I've never forgotten. I felt I'd entered a place of intense enchantment, wonder and charm. In the case of Wordsworth (The Prelude) and Stevens (Notes toward a Supreme Fiction), I didn't fully understand what I was reading; I only knew I had to have more of it. In all these experiences, it was as though I'd suddenly become aware of a region inside of me, located just south of my breastbone, that had never been touched in quite this way before, and now was craving a continual reapplication of the stimulus. I could feel my mind opening up and drinking it in – whatever it was. The elixir of the imagination, maybe. Keats' famous poetic description of his introduction to Homer through Chapman's translation is a good expression of the kind of imaginative excitement I was undergoing: "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken…." No doubt there is also an intellectual component to this sensation, when it occurs – the mind feels like it is straining its bounds –

but it is, for me, primarily a visceral experience. Something has set my engine going -- a switch turned on inside, my inner receiver tuned to a specific frequency I didn’t even know was there before. I have the sense (following Keats) that a new territory, a new field of interest has come into view, and must be investigated, by me, right now. There is something impelling me onwards – an attraction and a stimulus both, a push-pull of the imagination that mostly bypasses the intellect, but is unmistakably of the intellect as well. (For who, after all, is a more intellectual poet than Stevens? And Cornell’s exquisite and elusive constructions also appeal strongly -- if only indirectly -- to the intellect. The painter Robert Motherwell said of him, “His true parallels are not to be found among the painters and sculptors, but among our best poets.”) The intellectual appeal of these world-builders – and others of their ilk, like Proust, Mann, and the Hesse of The Glass Bead Game -- lies, I think, in their ability to stimulate an intense curiosity and hunger. They provoke the desire to know much more of their worlds.

I was feeling this desire with the Marwen material. I say “Marwen material” because while the movies had set me off, it was more the idea, or ideas, behind the movies that

were now propelling me forward in hard pursuit of the world of the dolls; and I also had the feeling that these ideas were somehow connected with Stevens' poems, and Cornell's boxes.

Perhaps a little more background on the dolls and their world is in order. In April of 2000, a 30-year-old amateur sketch artist named Mark Hogancamp, who sometimes liked to wear women's clothing – he had a special thing for women's shoes, of which he had collected over 200 pairs – got severely beaten up by five hoodlums outside a bar in Kingston, NY. (One of his assailants was sporting a Nazi tattoo.) He lay in a coma for nine days, and then spent another 40 in the hospital, where he got reconstructive surgery on his face. Hogancamp's memory was permanently impaired, and his hands shook so badly he could no longer draw the World War II battle scenes that had earlier inspired his sketches. But his artistic imagination was left intact, so he turned to dolls – Barbie dolls and World War II action figures – to express what he wanted to say. In the yard of his trailer home in Kingston, Hogancamp built and populated the miniature Belgian village of Marwencol (the name a fusion of his and those of two women, Wendy and Colleen, that he knew).

This 1940's-vintage doll-world was as complete as he could make it, with a miniature and exquisitely-detailed bar, church, post office, US Army jeeps and motorcycles (some with sidecars), and even a central town square with a working miniature fountain – all done in 1/6 scale. The village was inhabited by dolls representing the local women, and the American GIs stationed around the village. Periodically, Hogancamp would stage German raids on Marwencol, and the Barbies and GIs – fully armed -- would combine forces to defeat the Nazi dolls. (In these battles, things could get quite gory.) Hogancamp customized all his dolls to look different, using model paint and doll clothing, and then mounted scenes in and about the village and local countryside and photographed them. The scenes and photographs were set up in painstaking detail, and always of high quality. Hogancamp's work eventually came to the attention of David Naugle, the editor of an arts and culture journal, Esopus, and he was subsequently given a show of his own at a gallery in Greenwich village. Hogancamp became something of a celebrity in the art world -- and something of a hero as well.

But what gives the Marwen material its depth and resonance is not really what you can see on any screen,

large or small. Nor is it the technical or aesthetic achievements of Zemeckis, or the documentary filmmaker, Jeff Malmberg, or even Hogancamp himself – captivating though all of these are. It is the way Hogancamp's imagination has animated and inhabited his world. A number of the men and women he knew in Kingston have become the doll-characters of his imagination. He recreated himself as "Hoagie", an Army Air Corps fighter pilot who was shot down and crash-landed outside Marwencol, and was rescued from the Germans and taken in by a band of local women – one of whom, "Anna", he fell in love with. (Her original was a neighbor of Hogancamp's, Colleen – married, with children -- who lived across the street, and with whom Hogancamp was hopelessly in love.) And the vicious beating that changed his life was in turn transformed into the ongoing story of Hoagie's personal feud with the Nazis. (Though much of his memory was permanently erased, Hogancamp never forgot the brute with the Nazi tattoo.)
The Zemeckis movie is especially ingenious in the way it juxtaposes the live-action people in Hogancamp's real life with the CGI-animated dolls of his fantasy world. (The doll-figure of Hoagie bears an "uncanny-valley" resemblance to Steve Carrell playing Hogancamp.)

But, as I say, it’s not really the Marwencol movies themselves that have gotten my solar plexus going. It’s more what the movies have set off in my mind: the idea of an alternative world – historical yet fictional, miniature yet entire and, in its own way, infinite – contiguous to our own, yet also clearly demarcated and separate. The kind of world you might experience, say, in a diorama. It’s the idea of the Dioramic Imagination that has been let loose, and is fluttering around inside of me.

Yet to say that the Dioramic Imigination has been “let loose” is an oxymoron, since the Dioramic Imagination actually thrives (indeed relies) on constraint: on a miniature tableau of figures and scenes usually (but not always, as in the case of Marwencol) bounded by walls on three sides, and a glass partition -- or simply an opening -- on the fourth. But as is also the case with poetry, it is precisely the limits of the art form – in poetry, the constraints of poetic form (meter, rhyme, or, lacking these, the natural rhythms of language); in dioramas, the constraints of a severely bounded physical space – that unleash the imagination, in both the artist and the audience. You might even call a poem a kind of box of language, wherein an entire world in miniature is represented; or conversely, you could see a diorama as a

box that serves as a poem in graphic form – a frozen snapshot set free to move into, and inside of, the viewer's imagination.

Or maybe it's the other way round, and it's the viewer who is called to move into the world of the diorama. When I was a kid, and my grandmother – on those trips I made to New York with my parents – would take me to the American Museum of Natural History, I used to wonder what it would be like to actually be transported into the worlds inside the dioramas – into specific locations, at specific times of year, as labeled on the frames below the windows of the magic boxes: "The Canadian Rockies, in June"; "The Adirondacks, in October". The specifics of the settings were for some reason particularly pleasing and comforting to me, as were the timeless, suspended worlds captured by the artistry of the dioramatists: the representation of a total world in itself, perfect and unchanging. Sterile, too, I suppose: frozen in space and time, and static, and hermetically sealed. (Not to mention full of dead and stuffed animals.) But I could ignore the deathliness of the environments in favor of their evocativeness: they were closely based, after all, on real-world settings, studied and recreated by naturalists and artists whose job it was to bring us into another world – a world within a world

(within a world, as it happened): the world of the diorama, within the world of the museum, within the world of New York City: a trifecta of transport. The transport was the main thing; but almost as important – and really part of the transport, when I come to think of it -- was the awareness of simultaneity, of being at once in the museum, in New York, and also somewhere else: inside the perfectly imagined and achieved world of the diorama. Transport and immanence: the wonder of somehow being here and elsewhere, at the same time.

Such separate little worlds have always had a strong appeal to me, ever since I discovered the pleasures of the stereoscopic Viewmaster as a young child. (Cornell, it turns out, had an antique stereoscope as well – not as compact as the Viewmaster, but working on the same principle.) This toy seemed to hold out the offer of a tangible new world, just beyond the reach of my fingertips. I remember, in particular, a series of "Alice in Wonderland" slides in which, when you popped the circular slides into the viewer and pushed down the lever, seemingly three-dimensional models of Alice and her whimsical friends, in various settings, were tantalizingly laid out before your eyes. These settings seemed so real that I could not believe they were not somehow physically present

inside the Viewmaster. How could I not touch and enter their world, when I could see it so clearly in three dimensions, right in front of me? It was as if I had walked through the fourth wall of a diorama, and were suddenly present inside the display case. The world I had crossed over into – not unlike Alice herself moving through the looking-glass – was complete, perfect, self-contained: contiguous with my familiar reality, yet utterly other: a world existing right alongside, but distinctly apart from, my everyday world.

This double awareness, of both transport and security, was no doubt part of the curious feeling of comfort I received from the dioramas at the AMNH. And the possibility that I could return, in my mind, to the memory of the dioramas, was like the knowledge that I had available to me, whenever I wanted, at the touch of a lever, the perfect and unchanging and continually and mysteriously fetching alternative world of the Viewmaster. It was something both here and there. And therein lay its fascination, and the mysterious sense of reassurance that it conveyed. Reassurance of what? The reassurance, I think, of escape-and-return. The transport was both reliable and temporary -- not unlike the experience of

Disneyland, another scene of my childhood imagination, and itself a sort of giant, living diorama.

For this reason, perhaps, I think what I loved more than anything else in Disneyland – not only as a child, but also today – was Main Street, and the dioramic pleasures of its 5/8 scale (which I read or heard somewhere is the secret of its appeal). The world of Main Street was miniaturized – but not too much: just a little more than halfway, which was enough to make it tantalizing, and yet at the same time conceivably habitable, or almost. It was like walking into a diorama of the past -- exactly as its creators and designers had imagined, no doubt – and being surrounded with the aura and atmosphere of another time. (And the "old-time" piano music broadcast throughout Main Street enhanced the effect.) Of course it was totally contrived and artificial – as my parents, who were progressively anti-Disney, would see fit to remind me. And so my pleasure in Main Street was always somewhat diluted by my sense, imbibed from my parents, that I probably shouldn't be enjoying it as much as I was. Yet I couldn't help it. Who could?

Main Street, and the Viewmaster, and the dioramas at the AMNH all spoke to a longing in my mind (and gut) for a complete and miniature and self-contained alternative

habitat that I could enter into. Places that were encapsulated and enclosed, safe and protected – parallel worlds that were contiguous to, but also separate from, my everyday reality. They spoke to me of an environment of order and containment, shelter but also escape, that I found deeply appealing. They were saturated with the atmospherics of another time and place.

The dividing up of my experience, as a child, into separate, self-contained but adjacent compartments was perhaps a precursor to what is now my (admittedly weird) taste for dividing up my life into constituent "periods", which itself is an aspect of a larger (and perhaps even weirder) tendency to indulge in what I have come to call "biographization" – the seeing of my life as if through the eyes of a future biographer, to whom has been entrusted the task of giving structure and meaning to my life. And what the biographer does, it seems to me, is not dissimilar to the art of the dioramatist, in this sense: the biographer shrinks the life of her subject so it can fit into a kind of box – the box of a narrative – and attempts thereby to see and portray it as a whole: a kind of temporal diorama, if you will. This process of miniaturization and containment causes much to be lost, of course – just as a photograph, in stopping and isolating a moment in the life

of the subject, causes that life to be removed from its natural context and continuum. But in the hands of an artist like Cornell, or Stevens, or Proust, there is life -- the life of thought and feeling and imagination -- injected into what otherwise might have been a sterile box. The Dioramic Imagination apprehends the world in miniature, and seizes and preserves its wholeness, the sense of its entirety, through this transformation.

Old photographs, too – and, in a way, the sense of the past itself – may be seen as a kind of diorama. I am thinking of the old photographs and etchings that were so dear to Cornell, and formed such an important part of his art. To look at old photographs, for me at least, is to want to inhabit them, to enter into that world as one might want to do with a Viewmaster or diorama. The light of the world in old photographs is different: hazy, muted, diluted, separated from us by the "thick" air of time and history. Of course we know there must have been brilliantly clear, pellucid, luiminous days in the past – "New England June days," I like to think of them as; but it never seems that way in old black-and-white photographs. There always seems to be a kind of light, faint scrim laid down between you and the objects, which you cannot quite penetrate. No doubt this has also to do with the

techniques of photography back then – the time of exposure, the quality and speed of the film, etc. But more importantly, it's something about their aura and atmosphere, the ways the imagination recuperates and transforms experience in old photographs, and creates a world within a world (within a world), that makes them dioramic. Memory and imagination are transformative – and also preservative. They preserve our pictures of things, both real and ideal, and at the same time bring us somewhere else, and invite us to bide a wee. Amid the here and now, they bring us also to the there and then, and lead us to inhabit, impossibly, that contiguous place.

Memory "dioramatizes" the past, in the sense that it "boxes" it and transports you back into it. St. Augustine knew this, even though he did not have photographic technology at his disposal. Then again, he didn't need it.

> All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory. In my memory are sky and earth and sea, ready at hand along with all the things that I have ever been able to perceive in them and have not forgotten. And in my memory too I meet myself – I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was when I did it…. From the same store I can weave into the past endless new likenesses of things either experienced by me or believed on the strength of things experienced; and from these again I can picture actions and events and hopes for the future; and upon them all I can meditate as if they were present….

The "court of memory" that Augustine so beautifully evokes here is a sublime instance of the Dioramic Imagination, and hints at that "infinite" quality I touched on earlier, in discussing the Marwen material. The Dioramic Imagination combines the immanent with the transcendent – the here and now with the then and there – in a way that makes these sublimities seem to be accessible, tangible, graspable.

You may reply that the diorama is a homely, humble art form, and as such seems highly unlikely as a container for the sublime. Yet that's the very paradox that makes the Dioramic Imagination come alive. It's in the act of containment – of being "boxed" – that the imagination is let loose. It seeks the safe haven of an enclosed, protective, secure and fictive world, where it is free to roam, and from which it can then return to its familiar, unbounded -- and much unsafer -- natural reality. The older I get, the realer hell becomes, and the more I am in need of that contiguous, safer fictional place accessible through the Dioramic Imagination. To love dioramas is another way of loving one's childhood, and wanting to hold onto the source of that love, futile as that impulse may be. To partake of the Dioramic Imagination is to see the things one loves once again through the liminal plate-glass window, or through the Viewmaster – or even from the inside

of a poem.  It is to inhabit a protected space of the imagination, bordering on – yet clearly demarcated from – our everyday world.  But entering the Dioramic Imagination is always a bittersweet experience, perhaps because we know -- even (or especially) in our child's heart -- that leaving it is so inevitable, and so imminent.