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The Cinematic Imagination

WRITERS AND THE MOTION PICTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Dramatists, Novelists, and the Motion Picture

I

On an April evening in 1896, Charles Frohman—one of the most important producers at that time for the American stage—witnessed a presentation of Edison's Vitascope for a Broadway theater audience. Afterward Frohman remarked: "That settles scenery. Painted trees that don't move, waves that get up a few feet and stay there, everything in scenery that we simulate on our stages will have to go. Now that art can make us believe that we see actual, living nature, the dead things of the stage must go."[1] For many people in the theater the newly invented motion picture, which seemed to present a world more "real" than the stage, had to be competed with on its own terms. Only by offering audiences the same visual satisfactions as the cinema, they argued, could the drama hope to remain relevant to a machine age.

Now, it is interesting to note that during the nineteenth century pictorial stage realism had advanced enormously in a way that clearly prepared audiences for the motion picture. As A. Nicholas Vardac has shown, the fade, the dissolve, the chase sequence, parallel editing, music to heighten emotional scenes, and other techniques associated with films were first seen in a crude form on the stage. The motion picture was developed, Vardac believes, in response to an overwhelming need in modern man for greater visual realism.[2] Whatever the explanation for the tendencies described by Vardac in much nineteenth-century theater, one thing

remains certain about the present period: the motion picture has worked a revolution not only in the drama but throughout the whole of our technological society. It is not surprising that Arnold Hauser, in *The Social History of Art*, refers to the years following the First World War as "The Film Age." Indeed, films are now so popular that they have taken possession of prime time on television, a medium which at one point seemed to threaten the very existence of the motion picture.

Is it cause for wonder, then, that playwrights have been influenced by the screen?

Nevertheless, drama critics have generally deplored the influence of film on theater—the reason being that they have viewed this influence as an entirely negative one. Similarly, film critics have argued that the motion picture falsifies its unique nature by imitating and adapting stage plays. But who listens to critics? The average play today looks as though it was written and staged for the cameras. In films such as *Cinderella* (1900), *Red Riding Hood* (1901) and *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), Georges Méliès began a theatrical tradition that has lasted down to the present. When the sound film appeared at the end of the twenties, playwrights descended in force on Hollywood, thus forging still stronger ties between stage and screen. Throughout the thirties, forties, fifties, and even sixties—in spite of all the ready clichés about the "new theater" and the "new cinema"—stage and screen continued to maintain their close artistic and financial alliance.

Can anything *good* be said about the influence of film on drama? No less a personage than Tolstoy apparently saw great possibilities not only in the film itself but also in its influence on playwriting. On one occasion the Russian master confessed:

> When I was writing *The Living Corpse* I tore my hair and chewed my fingers because I could not give enough scenes, enough pictures, because I could not pass rapidly enough from one event to another. The accursed stage was like a halter choking the throat of the dramatist; and I had to cut the life and the swing of the work according to the dimensions and requirements of the stage. I remember when I was told that some clever person had devised a scheme for a revolving stage, on which a number of scenes could be prepared in advance, I rejoiced like a child, and allowed myself to write ten scenes into my play. Even then I was afraid the play would be killed. . . But the films! They are wonderful! Drr! and a scene is ready! Drr! and we have another![3]

Since it is my belief that the influence of film on the stage is a more complex problem than is ordinarily allowed, I wish to devote the first part of this book to an examination of cinematic borrowings by representative playwrights. For the most part, I shall be concerned with four major questions: Under what conditions does the cinematic imagination function legitimately and fruitfully in the drama? Under what circumstances does the influence of the film impair what purports to be a *dramatic* presentation of experience? What normally happens to the film adaptation of a play that reveals filmic techniques? And, finally, is such a work generally more or less successful aesthetically than a noncinematic play that is translated into film?

II

Similar questions will be raised throughout the second part of the book. Historically, the cinematic imagination that Vardac has observed in nineteenth-century theater can also be seen in the development of the novel. D. W. Griffith claimed to have learned the technique of crosscutting from Dickens; Sergei Eisenstein, in "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today," also argued that the Victorian novelist's work reveals equivalents of the close-up, montage and shot composition.[4] The novels of Flaubert, Hardy and Conrad can also be said to have anticipated in part the "grammar of the film." Naturally, as the motion picture became the most popular art of the twentieth century, the visual bias apparent in so much nineteenth-century fiction was enormously increased in con-

temporary fiction. Montage, parallel editing, fast cutting, quick scene changes, sound transitions, the close-up, the dissolve, the superimposition—all began to be imitated on the novelist's page. And over the years literary critics, like their colleagues in the theater, generally bemoaned this influence of the movies on the novel.

As early as 1915, educators had already begun to regard the film as a serious threat to literature. They were starting to use an argument, based on the relative strength and weakness of each medium, that would be rehearsed again and again in the years ahead. In "The Relation of the Picture Play to Literature," for instance, Alfred M. Hitchcock (not to be confused with the famous film director) gloomily informed his fellow English teachers that the motion picture was here to stay. But in spite of its vast appeal, Hitchcock argued, the cinema cannot really compete with the novel. Whereas a writer like Hawthorne is able to analyze characters and ideas in depth, the film-maker is restricted to a picture in two dimensions. Nevertheless, Hitchcock added, the fact remains that students—from among whom are supposed to come the future Hawthornes of our literature—go to the movies about three times a week, and that each new class reads more poorly than the last. The distressed educator concluded:

> There are better ways of stocking the mind than by flashing before the eye a kaleidoscopic jumble of unrelated information. There is danger in any form of amusement or instruction which merely gluts the mind. The picture play—who is she, this doubly pied piper of the new century, this siren with a sore throat, this—this—ah, that Charles Lamb were present to tell you! Even now methinks I hear him shrieking from his grave, "D-d-damn her at a venture!"[5]

However, not all literary men—certainly not the younger ones who in 1915 were among those students witnessing three or more "picture plays" a week—were prepared to "damn" the movies. With James Joyce as a guide, a new breed of fiction writer would soon attempt to find out the extent to which Hawthorne's art

could accommodate the technique of the film without sacrificing its own unique powers. The history of the novel after 1922—the year *Ulysses* appeared—is to a large extent that of the development of a cinematic imagination in novelists and their frequently ambivalent attempt to come to grips with the "liveliest art" of the twentieth century.

SHORT SUBJECT

The motion picture is filmed theater; it is an extension of the literary art of the stage, with some limitations removed.

—George Bernard Shaw

The film is the language of images, and images do not speak.

—Luigi Pirandello

CHAPTER ONE

Stage and Screen—Some Basic Distinctions

Film and drama have a number of features in common: both are able to tell a story; both use actors and speech; both deal with the emotional and ethical problems that beset human beings; and both require form or structure. Once such generalizations are made, though, obvious differences between the two mediums—for example, in the *way* that the stage enacts a story, and in the *way* that action is projected on a screen—are also readily discernible. Not to recognize the differences as well as the similarities between stage and screen is to court theoretical and creative confusion.

On the stage a "scene" can be defined in two ways: 1) as an act division with no alteration of place or time; 2) as a still smaller segment of an act in which the stage is occupied by an unchanging number of performers, so that when the stage composition changes—in other words, when there is an entrance or exit—a new scene commences. It is in the latter sense that the scene remains the basic unit in the structure of a play.

Ordinarily drama depends on a slow but steadily ascending line of tension; restriction in the number of sets and compression in time tend to augment the concentration of interest. In its most extreme form this type of structure is called focused or closed drama, and it remains the furthest removed from the film story at its most cinematic. Specific examples of the type are Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Racine's *Phedre* and Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Even in panoramic or open drama—such as in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the form is loose and where there are many scenes

(in both senses)—the total structure of the play, though it bears a closer resemblance to film than the focused or closed form, is markedly different from a movie. Whether the playwright works in the tradition of focused drama or panoramic drama, almost invariably progression results from a series of dramatic confrontations building towards a crisis, climax, and conclusion.

It is otherwise with the film, where the basic unit is not the scene but the shot. Tempo in films varies greatly—from the fast cutting of Sergei Eisenstein and Alain Resnais, on the one hand, to the longer takes of Carl Dreyer, Jean Renoir and Michelangelo Antonioni, on the other; however, today the average shot probably stays on the screen about ten or twelve seconds. Since the filmmaker is able to show his subject from a number of different camera angles, and since he can easily shift his focus from one line of action to another, it would be foolish of him not to avail himself of such resources. A good screenplay, unlike a stage play, tends to find its unity, as John Howard Lawson has indicated, "less on the direct drive toward a goal and more on the theme."[1] Consequently, the structure of the film *seems* closer to life as it is ordinarily experienced than is the more stylized and conventionalized form of the average play. Except in rare instances (generally adaptations of epic novels like *Dr. Zhivago* and *War and Peace*) films—like life—do not stop the action for the sake of an intermission.

Unlike the dramatist, the film artist has complete control over space and time; that is, whereas the stage play unfolds in real space and time, the finished film projects a new space and time—one in which two places separated by three thousand miles and shot six months apart can be so edited that they appear on the screen as a single unbroken reality in the present. Continuity of space and time characterizes the stage play; discontinuity of space and time characterizes the motion picture. Because there is this radical difference between the two forms, stemming from physical properties of each, and because a play leaves less room for drastic alteration in structure than a novel, the difficulty of adapting plays into films remains very great.

The question of point of view is also relevant here. In Greek and Elizabethan drama, though events were mostly enacted in an objective fashion, the playwright was able to open up a subjective approach to character and idea through the use of a chorus or a soliloquy. The realistic theater of our own day is restricted to an objective viewpoint. Only by recourse to nonrepresentational techniques—such as the use of a narrator (*The Glass Menagerie, A View From the Bridge*) or expressionism (*The Emperor Jones, Death of a Salesman*)—can the playwright escape from the limitations of an unvarying point of view. It seems worth noting that at least three of the four plays just mentioned have been very much influenced by the movies. Even where the stage projects both objective and subjective viewpoints, however, the effect is different from that achieved on the screen. Jerzy Grotowski's work in the Polish Laboratory Theater has persuaded him that the theater can dispense with lighting, sound effects, make-up—it can even do without the stage itself—but that the one thing absolutely vital to it is the actor-spectator relationship. But note that this relationship differs radically from the experience one has in watching a motion picture. The fact that the theater involves live performances and that film involves performances projected from strips of celluloid constitutes a crucial distinction between the two forms of expression. In the theater the audience is generally riveted to a single angle of observation.* The movie director, though, can rapidly shift from objective to subjective—and to any number of subjective points of view—and in so doing seem to pull the audience directly inside the frame of his picture, giving the spectator the sense of experiencing an action from the viewpoint of a par-

* I say "generally" because at certain times in history theater has called for a change of playing space and a mobile audience. Recall in this connection the panoramic theater of the medieval period and some contemporary Happenings. Eisenstein had *Gas Masks* (1923) performed at the gasworks, the action moving from one floor to the next, and the audience trooping after it. This was Eisenstein's last play—for he rightly realized that the film could be much more flexible in regard to point of view and change of setting. After all, there are limits to how much even an audience composed of athletes can jump around!

ticipant. Identification of the viewer with the film character, then, can be much more intimate than the analogous situation in the theater.

Take, for example, the 1964 film version of Enid Bagnold's play *The Chalk Garden*. A child has been living with her grandmother, Mrs. St. Maugham, and the relationship between the two has become very close. One day the mother returns to claim her child again. When the bell rings, and as someone goes to open the door, the camera stays focused on the grandmother's worried face. Cut then to the empty hall before her, as she continues to wait and listen. Cut back again to Mrs. St. Maugham's troubled gaze. On the stage an approximation of this simple camera play could of course be achieved. For instance, the director might station the actress downstage in such a manner that the audience could watch her reaction to the events offstage. But the play director could not present a close-up of the grandmother's face, nor could he give the audience a glimpse of the empty hall—and the sense of the emotional barrenness which that shot symbolizes on the screen—from the perspective of the old woman.

Although the basic requirement in both drama and film is movement, they each move differently. On the stage—because of the limits imposed by point of view, time, place, and action—language is foremost in importance; on the screen—thanks to the camera's mobility—the image remains paramount. In a play there is verbal movement or fluidity; in a film there is visual movement or fluidity. This is not to say that there is no visual appeal in the theater, or that language has no place in a scenario; it is merely to affirm an order of priority. Long speeches in the theater can hold an audience spellbound; but long speeches on the screen nearly always bore the viewer, who "knows" (consciously or unconsciously) that words are being used where pictures would be much more appropriate. And if the words cannot be translated into pictures then it seems evident that the subject matter is essentially unsuitable for filming. No doubt, artists in both forms will attempt to refute these generalizations; and sometimes the results of their

experiments will prove interesting, perhaps even successful. In the main, however, the safest guide to success in the drama lies in the playwright's manipulation of language (no play of any depth can be written for the stage without language, for no amount of pantomime or ritual can take the place of Hamlet's soliloquy, or even a furious outburst by Big Daddy), while the key to high achievement in the cinema depends on an approach which forces the audience to look first and listen second.

Language that is thrilling in the theater generally strikes the movie viewer as artificial and hollow. The most impressive feature of *Othello*, which Orson Welles adapted in 1955, is the action that precedes the titles and the play proper. Welles shows the audience Desdemona's torchlight funeral procession, with alternating shots of the corpse, the evil Iago glaring inside his cage, and the marching soldiers chanting a dirge. The appeal here lies chiefly in the visual power of the scene, and to a lesser extent in the sound of the voices chanting. However, once the play itself begins on the screen, the clash between word and picture (or the conflict between Shakespeare and Welles) becomes painfully manifest. In order to maintain some semblance of visual dominance and fluidity, the director keeps his camera moving constantly—and most often pointlessly—in every conceivable direction. When Othello delivers his famous speech to the Senate, the audience strains to hear the magnificent language—not to stare at the back of the actor's head! In general, the more words are vital to the thrust and significance of a play, the less likely it is that the work will prove successful as a movie. "Even the so-called 'natural' stage dialogue is too inflated to appear natural on the screen," says Alexander Bakshy. "To be used at all it has to be stripped to the bone, reduced to the normal function of speech, which in nine cases out of ten is only a concomitant of action and not its source or substitute."[2]

If great language suffers when transferred to celluloid, bad dialogue fares even worse. This fact can be explained in part by the technique of the close-up: shoddy language sounds shoddier still

issuing from a mouth that stretches across a wide screen. Now it may be that if a director is skillful, and if the dialogue is generally kept subordinate to the picture, the close-up can occasionally "color the lines more subtly and richly than on the stage";[3] furthermore, the close-up can catch a significant grimace that might have been missed in the theater. Nevertheless, in most cases plays that are adapted into films—whether they are "opened up" or not—miss becoming screen classics because they remain too talky.

On the stage characters incline to be types and even symbols; on the screen characters tend to be more individualized and "realistic." One would think that a live performance would be more "real" than a performance projected mechanically on a screen, but generally just the reverse is true. While the playwright can present a "slice of life," such exercises in banality soon become boring; in order to compensate for the restrictions of his form, the dramatist must press language to the limits—an endeavor which results in various degrees of stylization. On the screen the "slice of life" is another thing. Because the film-maker can view his material from various angles, and because he can overcome the confinement of time and place which hobbles the playwright, "realism" seems more congenial to the screen than to the stage, where it takes an Ibsen to lift the mode to greatness. (And even in Ibsen there is more conventionalization of life than is at first apparent.) This is not to say that stylization is never successful in the movies. All art, to some extent, involves stylization. But when a film, such as *Citizen Kane*, makes use of stylization, it does so cinematically, or in conformity to the intrinsic nature of the medium. In short, filmic stylization is much different from theatrical stylization—as we shall see in the analysis of *Death of a Salesman* as a play and as a film. In a film adaptation, the intimacy the screen is capable of seems at odds with the more abstract and rigorous aesthetic distancing generally required by the stage.

Although the screen is more "realistic" than the theater, it does not follow that characters are more complex in a film than in a

play. Once again, just the opposite is the case. "One picture is worth a thousand words"—yes, provided that what the film-maker wants to "say" can be expressed in a picture. Actors are very important in the theater (which is one reason why most of them prefer the stage), but this is not the case in the movies—where the spectator sees not the performer in the flesh but a performance fragmented on film. "When Griffith began to take close-ups not only of his actor's faces but also of objects and other details of the scene," Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer point out, "he demonstrated that it was the 'shot' and not the actor which was the basic unit of expression of the motion picture."[4] The *scene*, not the actor, is the basic unit in a play; but Griffith and Mayer are correct in calling attention to a fundamental difference between film and drama. Because stage characterization tends toward the abstract, and because language is the playwright's chief way of "getting at" character, it follows that dramatic personages can be more intellectually and psychologically complex than film characters. Discussing the film version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Edward Albee says: "Whenever something occurs in the play on both an emotional and intellectual level, I find in the film that only the emotional aspect shows through. The intellectual underpinning isn't as clear. . . Quite often, and I suppose in most of my plays, people are doing things on two or three levels at the same time. From time to time in the movie of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I found that a level or two had vanished."[5]

What Albee says of his own work is applicable to other plays transferred to the screen. Not even the most sensitive and talented film maker can hope to equal the depth of character revelation possible in the work of a major dramatist—at least not without making a movie that does *not* move, one that seems wordy and static. "Film art can evoke profound emotion," Lawson observes, "but . . . less on psychological penetration than on the juxtaposition and flow of images."[6] And there are distinct limits to how much can be revealed about character through filmic images alone.