

STAGE AND SCREEN

ADAPTATION THEORY FROM 1916 TO 2000

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Theater versus Film: An Historical Introduction

In 1918, the Russian symbolist poet Alexander Blok wrote to a friend:

I have nothing new now ready for the screen but I have more than once thought of writing for it: I always feel, however, that this will have to find a new technique for itself. In my opinion cinema has nothing in common with theatre, is not attached to it, does not compete with it, nor can they destroy each other; those once fashionable discussions on "cinema and theatre" seem quite unreal to me. I have long loved the cinema just as it was.¹

Why, almost a century later, are those "once fashionable discussions" of film and theater still going on so vigorously that it seems desirable, once again, to gather some of the best and most representative of them into a book? Over the 115 years or so that constitute the brief but spectacular history of the movies, every major film critic, scholar, or theorist—and a number from literature and drama as well—has considered the relationship between cinema and theater. And the subject is far from exhausted; indeed, over the months that this volume was in preparation, a number of new treatments of the subject appeared and had to be included in the comprehensive bibliography.

This topic has proved to be so crucial and seemingly inexhaustible for a number of reasons. One is that, though it has often been treated in rather abstract terms, the relationship of film and theater is by no means of merely theoretical interest. Ever since the day when the stage actor and writer D. W. Griffith walked over to the Edison studios in the Bronx and took a "temporary" job performing in the movies, actors, directors, and writers have found it important to be able to move freely between the stage, the film set, and the television studio. No theater-trained actor can step before the camera for the first time without taking into serious question the relationship and the differences between film and theater. The question is similarly crucial for the dramatist commissioned to turn his stage play into a shooting script, for the television

actor who has landed a job in summer stock, and for the theater director who is offered a chance to make his first movie.

Another reason the subject of theater versus film is still alive is that, as Blok hoped, film "found a new technique for itself," and, far from destroying each other, film and theater have continued to evolve and develop each in its own way—sometimes diverging, sometimes converging, but always exercising a powerful, mutual influence upon each other. As they have mutated and evolved at the sometimes dizzying rate that characterized twentieth-century art and continues to characterize the twenty-first—arts' "tradition of the new"—it has been continually necessary to reconsider and reformulate critical descriptions of the relationship between film and theater. A comparison of the two written in the 1920s, for example, when film was mute and when the chief dramatic model was (and still is) the well-made play, must have seemed quaintly irrelevant in an age in which the cinema was an auditory as well as a visual experience, and in which the theatergoer was less likely to find himself a voyeur peeping into a drawing room than a participant in a ritual, a ceremony, or an encounter-group session—even the victim of a visual, aural, and sometimes personal assault.

Historically, each stage in the development of the film has raised new questions and has brought about fresh resolutions in the relationship of cinema to theater. The history of primitive film, from the mid-1890s to about 1915, for instance, was marked by the gradual conquest of the theatrical audience and by the rapid development of a cinematic style clearly different from that of the theatrical production. A. Nicholas Vardac, for one, has voluminously documented the theatrical situation at the time the movies were born and the way in which the theater created a "climate of acceptance" for them. The theater of the late nineteenth century, both in Europe and America, was in reality two theaters. On the one hand, there was the flourishing but tiny serious art theater, represented by the Théâtre Libre in Paris, the Freie Bühne in Berlin, J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London, and the Moscow Art Theatre, producing the established "classic" drama of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Racine, and the works of the late nineteenth-century masters Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, as well as the new social drama of such playwrights as Shaw and Brieux. On the other hand, there was the vast theater of commodity entertainment that reached out from the cities to even the smallest villages with vaudeville, light (romantic) comedy, and melodrama.

The popular drama of the period was marked by an extreme rejection of realism in content and by an equally extreme insistence upon it in presentation. A domestic drama might deal with stereotyped characters and platitudinous themes and come to a sentimental conclusion, but it was placed on stage with minutely detailed, "cup-and-saucer" realism. A melodrama, for its part, might consist of pure escapism or wish-fulfillment, but the details of its fantasizing were given the most literal, concrete reality on the stage. The masters of this "pictorial realism" were Henry Irving, Steele MacKaye, and David Belasco, in

whose theaters ships could sink, locomotives could collide, and battles could be fought with breathtaking spectacle. As W. S. Gilbert wryly observed,

Every play that contains a house on fire, a sinking steamer, a railway accident, and a dance in a casino, will (if it is liberally placed on the stage) succeed in spite of itself. In point of fact, nothing could wreck such a piece but careful written dialogue and strict attention to probability.²

The movies took over this popular realist aesthetic almost immediately, and it was soon clear that they could easily surpass the theater in spectacular, life-like effects. One of the first productions for the Edison Kinetoscope, for example, was "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots," an 1895 filmstrip by William Heiss inspired by a well-known stage treatment of the subject. Thanks to his ability to manipulate reality by stopping the camera, substituting a dummy, and starting to film again, Heiss was able to show the executioner's axe actually falling on Mary's neck and her head rolling off the block. The initial reaction of the theater to such cinematic feats was to try to mount even more extraordinary spectacles, such as those in the turn-of-the-century plays *Ben Hur*, *The Light That Failed*, and *Judith of Bethulia*. But the battle was lost before it was begun, and the theater had been forced to move in other directions even before D. W. Griffith's epic films of 1915–16, *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, signaled the cinema's triumph in the field of spectacle-for-the-masses.

As film succeeded the theater as the chief supplier of such commodity entertainment, it captured the vast popular audience that the theater had once commanded. In Europe, the shift was accelerated by the theater's wartime difficulties (the shortage of male actors, for just one example) just as imported American movies were becoming popular. The years 1915 to 1920 were marked by the wholesale conversion of legitimate theaters to movie houses, as the cinema expanded into a multimillion-dollar industry. The result, for the theater, was a radical shift in the size and importance of the "two theaters." After 1920, the popular theater went into decline, while the art theater began to increase, and sustain, its prestige and influence with a comparatively small elite audience.

During the years that films were capturing the theater's mass audience, they were developing a body of techniques more and more divergent from that of the theater. The earliest filmmakers, though, used film strictly as a medium, to record either "found" real events or staged events. In staged films, the camera remained fixed at what would have been third-row center, actors entered and exited from the sides or the rear of a continuously visible space, and the action was arranged horizontally at the same time as it was pointed at the camera-as-audience. Every film student recalls the excitement, in watching a well-selected survey of early cinema, of seeing the compressed development of a genuinely filmic idiom out of such static beginnings. From the filmed stage fantasies of Georges Méliès and the passive recordings of reality of the Lumière brothers

through the innovations of Edwin S. Porter—shifts in the position of the camera, free manipulation of space and time, creation of a scene through the combination of a number of shots—to D. W. Griffith's refinement and consolidation of a full vocabulary of types of shots and of editing, lighting, and acting techniques, the movies within a decade and a half became an autonomous art, not merely a novelty or a medium for the display of theatrical material.

As the movies "liberated" themselves from the stage, however, the theater itself was rapidly evolving, often in ways influenced by the cinema. The presence of the movies was continually felt throughout the vigorous theatrical experimentation of the 1920s. On the one hand, the theater was seeking a new area of activity that the cinema—potentially, the most literally representational or documentally "real" of the arts—could not usurp; on the other hand, the theater frequently tried to explore ways of imitating and incorporating the fantastic or visionary capability of film form. Throughout Europe, the dramatic avant-garde repeatedly expressed admiration for the film's dreamlike fluidity, its power to convey interior states of mind, as well as for its possibilities as a truly proletarian and anti-bourgeois art. Particularly in France, the surrealist theatrical experiments of such writers as André Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, and Antonin Artaud were perhaps better suited to the screen than to the stage, assaulting as they did the theater's traditional objectivity or exteriority and its bondage to continuous time and space. And a number of surrealists did indeed move from the theater to the cinema, most notably Jean Cocteau.

In Germany, film was one element among many of the influences that led to the development of dramatic expressionism (or vice versa), as German cinema and theater freely borrowed from each other during the 1920s. The debt to the stage, as well as to painting, of such pictures as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* has often been noted, and, to cite only one example, the characteristic roving spotlight of the expressionist stage was an obvious attempt to control audience attention in the manner of a movie director. The attempts of the Bauhaus group to create a nonrepresentational, manifestly manufactured "total theater" themselves involved the incorporation of film into the ultimate theatrical experience, as did the production experiments of F. T. Marinetti's "Futurist Variety Theater" in Italy. The impact of film on the work of Bertolt Brecht, the most notable figure in the German theater of the 1920s, has never been fully explored, but it may have been a major influence on the cool, detached style, direct presentation of character, and episodic plotting of this playwright's epic theater—itself an enormous influence on both theater directors and filmmakers to come.

In Russia, where V. I. Lenin had declared in 1919 that "of all the arts, the cinema is the most important for us," the 1920s were filled with vigorous experimentation in film and theater, both separately and in combination. The productions of the Moscow Art Theatre were filmed, and the director Vsevolod Meyerhold called for a new theater in which live and filmed scenes would be combined. The most famous product of this ferment, of course, is

Sergei Eisenstein, whose entry into film was a logical step after his stage productions of 1923 had moved far in the direction of the realism and spatial as well as temporal flexibility of the screen. "The cart dropped to pieces and its driver dropped into the cinema," as he wrote in the essay "Through Theatre to Cinema."³ It is sometimes forgotten, however, that Eisenstein never abandoned his stage work, and his theater and film directing continued to influence each other throughout his life.

The lively, worldwide exploration in the 1920s of new forms in both the cinema and the theater, together with their borrowings from each other, left a permanent mark on these two arts. Their relationship, however, was again abruptly changed in 1926–7 with the introduction of the sound film. The ultimate effect of this innovation was to complete the displacement of the theater as a major purveyor of popular entertainment and to make the movie the dominant mass performance art for the next twenty years. Ironically, the initial effect, though, was to cancel out much of the film's hard-won stylistic autonomy and to bring about a marked "re-theatricalization" of the cinema. In 1928 and 1929, playwrights, stage directors, and stage actors were imported en masse to teach the movies how to talk. Their theatrical orientation, plus the new technical problems presented by fixed microphones and cameras, using cumbersome "blimps" or aged-in soundproof housing, resulted in a string of static, photographed stagelike musicals and revues, "all-talking and all-singing" though they may have been. The history of cinema in the 1930s was thus the history of the recovery of the technical mastery of the silent film, through the work of the best directors of this period: Ernst Lubitsch, King Vidor, René Clair, Jean Renoir, Rouben Mamoulian, John Ford, and many others, in the United States as well as abroad.

The movies' prosperous twenty years between 1930 and 1950 came to an end through two forces: the postwar court rulings that broke up the American corporate chains of studio-owned movie theaters, and the coming of television. The movies' response to television's challenge for the mass audience was remarkably similar to that of the popular theater of half a century before, when the movies had been the challenger: it first tried to retain its audience through spectacle and gimmickry—3-D, Cinemascope, new color processes—but it finally accepted defeat, collaborating with the new medium and, at the same time, beginning to build new, minority audiences of its own.

The result of this revolution was to place film in yet another relationship to theater, both sociologically and artistically. The cinema was not "re-theatricalized" as it was after the sound revolution of the 1920s: on the contrary, it tended to guard its integrity as film even more jealously. But economic and technological developments forced it onto a path more parallel to that of the theater than ever before. Like the theater, film maintained its connections with popular entertainment, but like the theater of the 1920s, it saw a sudden expansion and increased importance in its minority audience. The result was a gain in some

respects for the cinema, because, for the first time in its history, serious ideas and feelings were as likely to find artistic expression in film as in drama.

The creators of drama beginning in 1950—Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genêt, John Osborne, and Harold Pinter—were simultaneously equaled in stature and achievement by the creators of film—Ingmar Bergmann, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, and Stanley Kubrick. The richness, complexity, and subtlety of the best films of this period probably resulted from the fact that serious filmmakers, like serious dramatists, no longer had to please everybody but could find an appropriate minority audience for their work. This might have continued to be the case, except that today almost nothing in the recent theater—which, under threat not only from film in its various formats but also the internet and cable-cum-satellite television, has become prohibitively expensive and, therefore, artistically unadventurous—is nearly so good as some of the films of the new Iranians; of the so-called Fifth and Sixth Generations in China; of the Europeans Aki Kaurismäki, Michael Haneke, Laurent Cantet, Nanni Moretti, Mike Leigh, and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne; of the Asians Jun Ichikawa, Kim Ki-duk, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hong Sang-soo; of the New Romanian Cinema; and of the following Americans: Neil LaBute, David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch, Victor Nuñez, and Todd Solondz.



Of Mice and Men (dir. Lewis Milestone, 1939)

Still, the theoretical interrelationships of film and theater continue to be as complex as their historical ones, and indeed the historical development of each art and their reciprocal influence have made theoretical comparisons difficult and short-lived. All the more so since we seem to be moving toward a reign of the mixed medium, or the adaptation, in which the notion of the unity of a work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed. In the case of the films made of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, for example, the interdisciplinary critic of the year 2050 would find not a novella out of which a play and at least two movies had been made, but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, as it were, all of them equal in the critic's eyes. The "work" would then be only an ideal point at the top of this figure, which itself is an ideal construct. And the chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more than the chronological precedence of one twin over the other is a genealogical one. Even more so in the case of a work like *Cabaret*, which began as fiction by Christopher Isherwood in 1946, then was transformed into a "straight" play (titled, of all things, *I Am a Camera*), a musical one, and finally a film version; or in the case of August Stindberg's *Miss Julie*, which was first a play, then a television movie and a wide-screen film, as well as finally a ballet, an opera, and a modern-dance piece.



Cabaret (dir. Bob Fosse, 1972)

Here is something Wallace Stevens once wrote on a related subject:

It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality.⁴

For drama and theater the task is to determine what that reality is, what has changed in it and what hasn't; the imagination will take care of itself, on stage as well as on screen. For drama, all I can say is that such a reality does not consist of any one of these terms in isolation or combination: revival, musical, or reverse adaptation (from film); discrimination, patriarchy, or hegemony (collectively making up the Theater of Guilt, in Robert Brustein's words). And for film, that reality consists of one word for the time being: technology.

That is to say, when I look to the future and envision hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of homes with large, wide-screen televisions and surround-sound theaters, I wonder who will go to the multiplexes of today, which themselves made obsolete the movie palaces and drive-ins of yesteryear. I believe that in a short time most films will be viewed on DVD at home (with a movie title like *Home Alone* thereby taking on new meaning), or in their original format only in museums by solitary film scholars, and that the multiplex will become the nearly exclusive province of teenagers trying to get out of the house—not necessarily to see a movie—a trend, of course, that has already begun.

If I am right, and films become an overwhelmingly private experience, shared by small groups in living rooms, what might then become of theater? Will the experimental theater groups of the future perform in our living rooms, or will the desire for human contact and communality, together with a concern for the social fabric, drive us back to more traditional theaters? Alternatively, will 3-D IMAX be replaced by holographic film, creating three-dimensional worlds into which we can walk, until we eventually "holographize" old movies (just as we colorize them now) and offer audience members a chance to sit down with Rick in *Casablanca*, have a drink, and then say, "Play it again, Sam"?

Whatever the case, more critical attention has been devoted over the years to the differences between film and theater, even though the gross similarities between the two should be obvious. Both are performance arts that ordinarily (until the advent of "home-entertainment systems") involve an audience gathering at a prescribed time in a theater to witness a scheduled event (like dance and live music, and unlike painting, sculpture, and novels). Both, traditionally at least, are narrative (they tell stories) and mimetic (they represent life). Furthermore, as we have seen, both are poised on a borderline between entertainment and art. Indeed, both suffer when they move too far from this line: the highest artistic achievement in either form seems to require deep roots in popular convention.

Here now is a list of the differences between these two media, with a number of them naturally open to exception or qualification:

Characteristics of Film

1. A two-dimensional, permanent visual record of a performance.
2. Discontinuous, "smaller" acting aimed at the camera lens; can employ amateur actors.
3. No immediate or physical interrelationship between the actors and the audience.
4. Has a narrator: the camera.
5. Relatively passive audience for whom the camera chooses what will be seen.
6. A visual art primarily, but also a dramatic art that enacts stories (with words once the sound era begins) and a narrative art that tells those stories through the mediation of the camera.
7. A collaborative art, with the director ultimately in control.
8. A total work of art, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*.
9. Reducible to DVD, videotape, television, and so on.
10. Can be a solitary experience, especially if you are watching a film alone at home.
11. The most popular art form of the twentieth century and beyond.
12. Can dispense with overt conflicts, climaxes, and even plots; indeed, can be almost completely nontheatrical or nondramatic.
13. The particle belonging to the cinema is "then" rather than "therefore"; in other words, the cinema gives primacy to succession more than it does to causality.
14. Deals with the relationship of people not only to other people, but also to things and places.
15. The camera can provide the viewer with multiple visual perspectives, through different shots.
16. Intermissions are rare, and scenes changes (as well as costume, make-up, and lighting changes) are accomplished swiftly and easily through cuts or editing. Space is, therefore, manipulable and time is flexible.
17. The film script is not an independent artwork and cannot be read by itself fruitfully, nor can its words be "performed" as a play's words could be; a screenplay is a preparatory sketch for a future art work, a fully realized cinematic experience.
18. Usually concentrates on action per se, even when this action is "interior" or psychological; characters are often makers of their own destinies in the present.

Characteristics of Theater

1. A three-dimensional, ephemeral performance of events.
2. Continuous, "big" acting aimed at a live audience; does not employ amateur actors.

3. Immediate relationship between the actors and the audience, both of whom are physically present in the same space at the same time.
4. Except in rare cases, has no narrator.
5. Relatively active audience that must choose for itself where to look or what to see; what the audience sees is unmediated by a camera.
6. A verbal art primarily, but it also has a visual component (through costumes, sets, lights, choreography, and action itself).
7. A collaborative art, with the actor finally in control on the stage.
8. A total work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but not quite to the extent that film is.
9. Irreducible: to have theater, you must have living actors performing before a real audience in a more or less demarcated space.
10. A group experience, as it occurs in a theatrical auditorium of one kind or another.
11. The most popular art form of the nineteenth century and before.
12. Its essence consists of human beings in conflict with each other or themselves.
13. The conjunction belonging to the theater is "therefore" rather than "then"; in other words, the theater gives primacy to causality more than it does to succession.
14. Deals with the relationship between people.
15. There is only one "shot": the full picture of the stage.
16. Intermissions are common, and scene changes (as well as costume, make-up, and lighting changes) can be slow and laborious. Space is, therefore, less manipulable and time is less flexible.
17. The dramatic text is an independent artwork that can be read *or* performed.
18. Usually dramatizes the *consequences* of action; characters are often victims of their pasts.

The many contrasts between film and theater listed above may be grouped along the old Aristotelian lines of creator, audience, and thing created. The question of who is the creator of a play or film has engaged a number of commentators: in drama it is the playwright, in film it is the director, we are told, at least by the once fashionable *auteur* film critics. And yet the proposition is far from conclusive. The supremacy of the playwright is an idea promulgated by literary critics, but if we regard drama in terms of performance, rather than text, the playwright assumes a role of *primus inter pares* with director and actors. On the other hand, the excesses of *auteur* criticism led to a sometimes absurd overvaluation of the director's role in filmmaking: a director may occasionally make a good movie out of a bad script, but this is probably rarer than the more extreme *auteur* critics would have had us believe.

In twentieth-century film and theater, the traditional authorial distinctions were further blurred by an increasing emphasis upon the screenplay as a literary form (as in the work of Pinter and Alain Robbe-Grillet), and by the rise of

something like *auteur* directors in the theater (as exemplified by Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Chaikin). The latter tried not only to "author" their own texts through "concept" productions of other authors' plays, but also tried to overcome the theater's spatial limitations. These directors did this by using an existing environment that was as close to reality as possible, or by designing such an environment so that it enveloped the audience and thereby not only erased any distinction between viewing space and playing area, but also freed the spectators from static positioning or a single point of vision.

The contrast between film and theater in audience and audience experience, as opposed to author and creative experience, is also a recurring subject in criticism. The idea that appears occasionally in early criticism—that the movie audience is a mass audience, while the theater audience is an elite, minority group—is, as we have seen, a function of particular social and economic conditions and has nothing to do with the inherent properties of the two arts. Marshall McLuhan's judgment in the 1960s that live theater is a "cooler medium" than cinema—that is, that it requires more active participation from its audience—was anticipated many times in film criticism. The ordinary circumstances of theatergoing make it a comparatively public event and discourage the dreamlike passivity which has been described as the film experience. In the theater, the audience gathers in a group and waits for curtain time, the auditorium is more brightly lit during the performance than a movie house is, and absorption in the drama is periodically broken by intermissions and scene changes. During the performance itself, the audience member must willingly suspend disbelief, since even the most realistic production requires the acceptance of a number of obvious conventions, and he must actively participate in choosing what to look at, since the entire stage is ordinarily continuously in view.

The traditional movie audience, by contrast, is atomized, entering the theater singly or in small groups and at any point during the film. Isolated in the darkness and staring at a screen much more commanding in size and brightness than the theater stage, the moviegoer is much more likely to surrender control of his consciousness. Moreover, it is comparatively easy to suspend disbelief, since he is in the presence of a relatively exact representation of reality and is asked to make a minimal number of choices as to where to look, for he can see only what the filmmaker shows him. The moviegoer is relieved of even the minimal tension that invariably accompanies performances by actors, with the continual possibility of human error—blown lines, missed entrances, and other misadventures. Indeed, the filmic medium has become so lifelike that (in a reversal of what purportedly occurred at the initial screening of Auguste and Louis Lumière's *Arrival of the Paris Express*), when the first footage of the attack on the World Trade Center was shown on television—captured from a myriad of angles by any number of personal video cameras, then aired by

the news media again and again—it was virtually indistinguishable from what Hollywood studios could have manufactured digitally for any number of disaster movies.

There is still a great deal of truth in the above, often-repeated observations, but perhaps less now than in an age when the movies were frankly escapist entertainment and the theater was dominated by the realistic style. The cinema no more than other serious art forms seeks merely to suck us up into mindless, wish-fulfilling fantasies. The Brechtian revolution reached the screen as well as the stage, and films are still full of the distancing devices, implicit along with explicit, that characterized motion pictures in the 1960s, from the openly metacinematic devices of *Tom Jones* or *Persona* to the cool, terse, anything-but-fantasizing tone of Godard's movies. At the same time, the 1960s, much theater—especially that ultimately derived from Artaud—sought to achieve the kind of visceral, irrational involvement sometimes associated with the moviegoer's experience. The goal was hardly cool, detached observation in such productions as Peter Brook's *Marat/Sade* and anything by the Living Theatre or the Polish Laboratory Theatre.

More numerous than studies of creator or audience, however, have been those of the object itself: the film and the play. Some critics have made an initial contrast that even denies that they are comparable, since a film is literally an object and theater is an event. But surely the essential film is not the celluloid in the can (any more than a play is pages in a book), but rather the showing of the film—a performance event also. There are, of course, a number of sharp contrasts between theater and film as performance, as described earlier: theater is three-dimensional, while film is two-dimensional; in the theater we see a performance being created as we watch it, but in film we never quite forget that we are seeing a record of a performance that has taken place in the past; actors' performances vary from night to night in the theater, whereas they are fixed in film; performance and role are generally distinct in the theater, unlike in film, where they are generally synonymous.

This may be a paradox, but in the age of technical miracles, of the annihilation of time and space, of technologized existence, if you will, an existence in which immediacy no longer has the simple meaning it once had and in which the line between a thing or a being and its image or reproduction has been nearly obliterated—in such an age the theater's very "live-ness" may be what so often makes it seem to be less fully alive. Moreover, although theater is inherently more lifelike because it occurs live and in three dimensions, the presence of three-dimensional actors in a theater—a non-real or artificial space—may actually undercut a production's resemblance to life at the same time that the actors increase its live-ness.

Of the many other contrasts between the cinema and the theater, we may concentrate now on the three areas that have stimulated most discussion—time,

space, and structure—beginning with the temporal element. One of the most liberating insights in the early development of cinematic technique was that the film need not be bound to the theater's use of continuous and sequential time. On the stage, an actor crossing a room has to cross it step by step; on the screen, he can come in at the door and immediately be at the other side of the room. The cinema thus has great flexibility in eliding time, presenting simultaneous action, leaping back and forth among past, present, and future, and repeating moments over and over. This flexibility is generally represented as a strength of film, which of course it is, but the theater's ways of representing time are not, therefore, a weakness.

The theater, in the first place, is not so inflexible in its representation of time as is sometimes implied: in *Agamemnon*, for instance, Aeschylus uses a temporal ellipsis in representing the time between the fall of Troy and the arrival of Agamemnon's army; Shakespeare often uses a flexible "stage time" that compresses, lengthens, or otherwise distorts "real time"; and modern plays frequently use time as fluidly as film does. The second half of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, for example, begins at the same point in time as the first half, and Jean-Claude van Itallie wrote a number of dramas that play games with instantaneous action, repetitions, time loops, and other temporal distortions. In the second place, the theater's more characteristic representation of time as a steady, sequential unfolding is one of its great strengths, as the Greeks and Ibsen had shown us in the past, and as such twentieth-century plays as Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Pinter's *Homecoming* demonstrated once again.

The contrast between the theatrical and cinematic representation of space is much like the contrast in the representation of time. Theater is confined to a continuous use of space (though the stage space may constitute a figurative treatment of real space, just as stage time may constitute a figurative treatment of real time). Film can treat space as flexibly and fluidly as it can treat time, moving freely back and forth over any spatial expanse. The sharpest contrast, however, is in the spatial relationship of the spectator to the action. In the theater, the spectator ordinarily is fixed in one position, viewing the action from a constant position and point of view. In the cinema, the viewer, though he remains physically in his seat, is perceptually constantly changing his perspective courtesy of the camera—moving in toward the action, moving back from it, seeing it from the position of one of the characters, or even from a position impossible in real experience (as in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, when we see the crew's mutiny from high above the vessel).

Again, however, the fact that the cinema's use of space is a great strength does not mean that the theater's use of it is a weakness. The surest sign of the clichéd mind in filmmaking is a feeling of obligation to "open up" plays spatially, when they become films and a conviction that this process proves superiority,

that a play really comes into its own when it is filmed. We can really go to Italy in Franco Zeffirelli's film of *Romeo and Juliet*, so for some people this picture automatically supersedes stage-bound theatrical productions. We can dissolve and cross-fade more easily in the 1951 movie of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, therefore the theater proves yet again just a tryout place for later perfect consummation on screen—despite, in this case, the theater's superior ability to suggest the childishness of Willy's sons (by having the adult actors of Biff and Happy play their boyhood selves) and the momentousness of Willy's adultery (by having it occur, not on location in Boston, but on the forestage—right in the Lomans' living room, as it were). And we can go outside in Mike Nichols' film of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, so once more the theater is shown up as cribbed or confined, if not superficially realistic, even though the claustrophobic nature of George and Martha's single-set living room on the stage is part of the point of this long night's journey into day. Stage space is thus invariably metaphorical, even when it is most "realistic"—as in the case of Albee's play—and one of the great strengths of drama is precisely its power to change a confined space with deep emotional meaning.



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (dir. Mike Nichols, 1966)

The trouble here is a confusion in aesthetic logic, an assumption that we are comparing apples and apples when we are really comparing apple and pears. Fundamentally, film takes the audience to the event, shifting the audience continually; theater takes the event to the audience, shifting it never. Just as the beauty of poetry often lies in tensions between the free flight of language and the molding capacity of form, so the beauty of drama often lies in tensions

between imagination and theatrical exigency. To assume that the cinema's extension of a play's action is automatically an improvement is to change the subject: from the way in which theater builds upwards, folding one event upon another in almost perceptible vertical form, to the way in which film progresses horizontally. Figuratively speaking, theater works predominantly by building higher and higher in one place; film, despite the literally vertical progress of planes in the image, works predominantly in a lateral series of places. In this way, action in the cinema is more of a journey in the present than a confrontation based on the past (the usual form of tragedy in drama): the one is filled with possibility or promise, the other with suspense or foreboding. By its very form, it can then be said, film reflects for spectators in the twenty-first century the belief that the world is a place in which a person can leave the past behind and create his or her own future—hence one of the reasons the cinema took such a foothold, so early, in the history of the United States.

"Opening up" a play may be desirable, but it must be part of a total rethinking of the way the space is to be used in the new medium. It can be successful when the filmmaker knows clearly what he is doing and treats his film as a new work from a common source, as Richard Lester did in his admirable film of Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack*. But most adaptors seem to think that any banal set of film gimmicks constitutes a liberation for which the poor cramped play ought to be grateful. One film that respects its dramatic source almost completely and is nevertheless cinematic is *The Little Foxes*. Lillian Hellman's 1939 play underwent nearly no adaptation in William Wyler's film: for instance, there are no exterior scenes of dramatic action in the film—precisely the kind of scene that most directors would have deemed necessary in order to introduce a little "cinema" into this intractable theatrical mass.

Film may offer greater visual possibilities, then, but they are not always necessary, and those possibilities do not prevent some of the most exciting and popular theater from itself being highly visual. From the late 1980s and the 1990s, consider Bill Irwin's "new vaudeville" pieces *Largely New York* and *Fool Moon*, productions that were virtually silent. What of similarly nonverbal productions such as Blue Man Group's *Tubes* and De La Guardia's *Villa Villa*? And, as early as 1971, Robert Wilson was creating the three-hour speechless epic *Deafman Glance*, which combined a theater of silence with one of images not unlike that of silent experimental film. It is precisely by choosing to overcome the limitations of their chosen medium that these artists have achieved success, for what greater thrill can there be than to see an art form transcend the boundaries which we have become accustomed to assigning to it?

Or to see an artist do so, for that matter. Think only of Julie Taymor's predominantly visual theatrical productions, *The Lion King* and *The Green Bird*, and of her highly literate films *Titus* and *Frida*. And consider that Neil LaBute makes predominantly verbal films like *In the Company of Men* and *Your*

Friends and Neighbors at the same time as he fills the stage with arresting, even aggressive physical images in such plays as *Bash* and *The Shape of Things*. The list of such artists could be extended as far back as Ingmar Bergman and forward to David Mamet, who continues to write and direct for the screen as well as the stage. And what should not be omitted are the "rehearsal" films, or "filmed theater," made by people like Louis Malle (*Vanya on 42nd Street*), Denys Arcand (*Jesus of Montreal*), and Jacques Rivette (*Paris Belongs to Us* and *L'Amour Fou*).



Vanya on 42nd Street (dir. Louis Malle, 1994)

Closely related to the use of space and time is the question of structure in cinema and theater. The film's freedom from the theatrical constraints of continuous time and space makes the shot the fundamental unit of cinematic structure. The shot is thus comparable, not to the theatrical scene, as is sometimes said, but to the theatrical "beat"—the introduction and resolution of a conflict of wills that constitutes the minimal unit of drama. Theatrical scenes are built up out of these minimal units, even as cinematic scenes are built up out of a series of shots. The comparison cannot be pushed further, though, since shots are defined by visual considerations—distance, point of view, movement—whereas beats are defined psychologically, as "units of conflict." Hence at the most elementary level, film is "seeing" while drama is "interacting."

The intermediate structures of drama—the patterns that organize larger units such as scenes and acts—are generally public or private rituals: trials, weddings, funerals, arrivals, departures, confrontations, conversations, and

the like. It is the nature of the rituals employed in these intermediate structures that largely defines dramatic style, from the public and ceremonial style of the Greeks to the closeted and domestic style of the modern realists. The intermediate structures of film are ordinarily much looser and less ritualistic than those of drama: they tend to organize material along perceptual lines, as the eye would perceive it, rather than along the lines of formal human interaction. When a film nonetheless has a theatrical flavor, like Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, this is because it makes heavy use of the kinds of intermediate structures found in drama.

A similar contrast between the natural structures of film and drama appears to exist for the larger units, as well. Perhaps because of the cinema's much closer ties to surface reality—the appearance of things—it often seems that a film begins in the concrete and moves toward an organizing idea, while a play begins with an idea and moves toward its concrete embodiment. Whether or not this is literally true, it does seem that the greatest drama tends in its largest patterns toward the mythic and the archetypal, whereas even the greatest films cannot move very far from the welter of immediate reality without appearing "stagy" or "literary." Thus the essence of many fine, complex plays can often be suggested in a short summary of their basic action, but the essence of a good movie can rarely be captured so synoptically.

As for the best material on the subject of cinema versus theater, a fair portion of it follows in its complete form. But the difficulty in selecting the contents of this collection has been in choosing from a vast amount, since, so closely have drama and film been intertwined, almost everything that has been written on the movies touches, at least implicitly, on the theatrical comparison. Perhaps the best indication that a collection of essays on the subject of film and theater is worthwhile at this point in time is the certainty that, before long, it will require updating. The subject is very much alive because film and theater are so much alive, and it is well to pause and survey the terrain behind as we prepare to try to understand the new forms and relationships of theater and film that seem certain to appear in the years to come.

NOTES

1. Blok quoted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), p. 130.
2. Gilbert quoted in J. O. Bailey, ed., *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Odyssey, 1960), p. 7.
3. Eisenstein quoted on p. 121 of "Through Theatre to Cinema," in James Hurt, ed., *Focus on Film and Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 116–29.
4. Wallace Stevens, p. 656 of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in his *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), pp. 643–65.