DRAMA/THEATRE AND FILM: THE DYNAMICS OF EXCHANGE

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Ever since Edwin S. Porter created the first story-telling film, *The Great Train Robbery*, in 1903, there has been a tendency to compare film with literature. The earliest books written on film technique, for example, *The Art of the Moving Picture* by Vachel Lindsay (1915), or *The Photoplay* by Hugo Muensterberg (1916), contained such comparisons but interestingly enough, none of these early critical books ever stressed upon the ultimate truth about the nature of film art -- the fact that film is purely an independent medium, differing from literature not only in its method of expressing concepts, but also in the construction of its rhythms and forms. The film derives its power from the visual representation of concepts and secures its characteristic form and rhythm by the purely filmic process of editing; literature is a method of manipulating words and sentences in a manner designed to stir the thoughts and emotions of the reader. It is high time that the confusion between these two arts, which has actually existed ever since the origin of the film, be eliminated once and for all. In asserting this, it is needless to add that this does not mean we disparage the art of literature: literature, especially drama, hardly needs any defense here; but it should be pointed out that the most important attributes of the film -- namely, its uniqueness, its independence, and the purely filmic modes of expression and form which this uniqueness and independence render possible be highlighted. Among the various genres of literature, the drama/theatre suffers maximum from this comparative study, probably because people define both of them as performing arts. This article therefore attempts at a comparison of the film and drama/theatre to see how far this dynamics of exchange is relevant.

I: The Film and Drama

As mentioned earlier, right from its inception, there has been a tendency to regard the film as essentially a form of drama. As early as 1914, M. Mounet Sullet, a French actor, noted for his literary taste and theatrical diction and gesticulation, attempted to perform Sophocles’ *Oedipus* before the silent movie cameras. Even before the outbreak of World War I, the leading actresses of the European stage – Mme. Réjane, Eleonora Duse, and Sarah Bernhardt – appeared in silent film versions of the roles that had made them famous. Plays by Ibsen, Tolstoy, Strindberg, and Hauptmann – not to mention such classic dramatists as Sophocles, Seneca, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Molière – were all produced in the form of silent pictures.

The desire to make photographed transcripts of stage plays, curiously enough, persists to this very day; it is reflected by various versions of Shakespeare, ranging from *The Taming of the Shrew* (1929) with Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935) with Mickey Rooney and James Cagney to *As You Like It* (1936) with Elizabeth Bergner to *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) with Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard to *Henry V* (1946) and *Hamlet* (1948) with Laurence Olivier to *Macbeth* (1950) with Orson Welles, to Celestino Coronado’s version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1984) to Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1991) to Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996); by the efforts of Hollywood
to bring to the screen such notable Broadway plays as *Anna Christie* (1930), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), *Winterset* (1937), *Yellow Jacket* (1938), *They Knew What They Wanted* (1940), *The Little Foxes* (1941), *The Heiress* (1949), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1949), *The Magnificent Yankee* (1950), and *Born Yesterday* (1950); and by European productions of such plays as Chekhov’s *The Bear* (1934), Maxim Gorki’s *The Lower Depths* (1937), Leo Tolstoy’s *The Living Corpse* (1940), Pirandello’s *Henry IV* (1946), and Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* (1948).

Today, however, it is recognized by the leading scholars, critics, and film artists in virtually all countries that this desire to bring to the screen the most important plays of the present and former epochs is based upon a fundamentally erroneous premise. No film can attain to the maximum power and artistic development if it adheres to the form of a play. For the film and the drama are essentially dissimilar arts. Their aesthetic and technical bases differ profoundly. To clarify the difference between these two arts, however, it is necessary to consider briefly the theoretical basis of the drama.

Considered more from the point of view of the playwright or a literary point of view, the basis of the drama lies in what is technically known as the *sustained dramatic situation*. To create such a situation, to develop it, to intensify the spectator’s anxiety as to its outcome, and to make its conclusion seem inevitable and overwhelming – this is the central problem of the drama. For instance, when King Creon and Antigone argue and argue over the question in Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, whether the law of the state is the highest law or the law of conscience, the suspense of the spectator increases constantly. Who will win the argument? Will King Creon condemn Antigone to death, or will she establish her contention and demonstrate her innocence? This argument, the body of the play, can be technically defined as *sustained dramatic situation*. To create such a situation, to develop it, to intensify the spectator’s anxiety as to its outcome, and to make its conclusion seem inevitable and overwhelming – this is the central problem of the drama.

Now it is almost indisputable that the central problem of the film is not to create a sustained dramatic situation – not to culminate in a protracted verbal argument— but to create mood, rhythm, emotional intensity, and thematic development through a flow of visual images. The basic requirement of the film and the drama, therefore differ completely. This point, indeed, is axiomatic; and yet producers have persistently ignored it in their efforts to manufacture movie versions of stage plays. The principles of *dramaturgy* spring from the necessity of creating a sustained dramatic illusion, whereas the methods and techniques of *cinematography* spring from the necessity of maintaining a flow of visual images. It follows in logic (and is certainly true in fact) that the problems of cinematography cannot be solved by utilizing devices belonging to the realm of dramaturgy, while the riddles of the drama cannot be answered by cinematography. In this sense, the film and the drama are essentially dissimilar arts. While limitations of time, place, and circumstance are characteristic of the drama in all ages, such a principle, clearly does not apply to the film. On the contrary, there is not an action, not a scene, not a single circumstance that could not be brought within the range of the camera; and the film indeed, is likely to be most impressive in those incidents which could not be presented in the drama. A movie director, for example, wishing to portray the story of Antigone, would not necessarily observe the limitations of Sophocles’ play. He would begin in all probability by showing the death of Polyneices on the battlefield and the posting
of King Creon’s order forbidding his burial; next would be shown the corpse lying alone and neglected, unmourned and unburied, while Antigone darkly formulates her resolution to disobey the king’s order; next would be depicted the moonless night on which she buries her brother, her arrest, her confinement in prison to await the king’s pleasure; and finally her trial, which would be but a small part of the film, and her subsequent execution – or if it’s a Hollywood production, a miraculous last minute rescue and a fade-out kiss. Also, events, which in the drama would be depicted verbally by the technique of exposition, would be presented to the audience in a film by means of a series of visual images.

Again, unlike in the cinema, the dramatist who is required by the rules of his craft to eliminate most of the anterior and posterior action, confronts the problem of assembling his protagonists within the relatively limited space in which the situations are unfolded. The Greek dramatists adopted a magical solution for this problem by resorting to the services of Pan, the messenger of the gods. Whenever a distant person had to be brought into the drama, Pan would appear and announce that he was coming; and lo behold! The character announced would arrive, take his part in the action, and depart. Modern playwrights have striven for a more realistic solution to this problem through entrances and exits and have utilized a variety of methods by which to assemble their characters plausibly. In the film, however, the problem of entrances and exits hardly ever exists. If two lovers in a room crowded with people wishes to be alone, they would simply leave and go elsewhere – to the nearest park bench, perhaps, to an ice-cream parlour, or to a cocktail lounge. Nothing could illustrate more clearly the gulf that separates the film and the drama.

II: The Film and the Theatre/Stage

Until now the drama was discussed solely from the point of view of the playwright – that is, from the literary point of view. The drama, however, is only partly literature. It is also theatre or stagecraft. It is the physical limitations of the stage that compel the dramatist to adopt the form of a sustained dramatic situation and to concern himself with such intricacies as the elimination of anterior and posterior action, the exposition, and the entrances and the exits of his characters. A play designed merely to be read as literature (the so-called “closet” drama), need not observe these limitations. In the theatre, the actors and the stage director are interpretative artists, who can function only when they have the creative ideas of a dramatist to perform. In the film, however, the director creates his visual concepts as independently as the dramatist: he is a creative – not an interpretative – artist; for it is the director who is responsible for the final visual form of a film. Also, as with the difference between a painter and a sculptor, the film director and the stage director work with different materials.

Another formidable fact that has to be kept in mind while analyzing the differences between the movies and the theatre is that the stage director absolutely must have a stage – or its equivalent. The stage may be in any shape or form – rectangular and raised above the audience and surrounded by a proscenium arch as in the conventional theatre; or round and located in a pit below the spectators and enclosed by tiers of seats as in a Greek amphitheatre. It may also be bare and unadorned as in the Elizabethan theatre, or it may be the cluttered with pageantry as in the Grosses Schauspielhaus, Max Reinhardt’s experimental theatre that was located in Berlin under the Weimar Republic. Whatever it might be, the stage is therefore absolutely essential because the stage director uses it as an artistic medium. He divides it into
playing areas, and he knows that an action performed in one area will have a different emotional effect if played in another. Each area has its own tone in the emotional scale, or as it is sometimes called, its own “attention value.” The film director, on the other hand, does not need a stage; he does not even require artificially constructed sets. He can use reality as a set and to him, in a sense never contemplated by Shakespeare; the world is literally a stage. He can take the camera into the streets of cities and penetrate the most distant reaches of nature. Notable instances of films made in their natural settings are James Cruze’s *The Covered Wagon* (1923), taken on location in the midst of the prairies; Erich Von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1923), “shot” in the streets of San Francisco and in Death Valley; F.R. Murnau’s *Tabu* (1931), photographed on the island of Bora-Bora in the South pacific; and Roberto Rossellini’s *Germany, Year Zero* (1946), produced amid the debris and wreckage of war-torn and bomb-shattered Berlin.

Apart from these considerations and distinctions it is to be noted that the three problems of filming a play are: (a) realizing the verbal text in a succession of sights and sounds (both words and other sounds), (b) converting theatrical décor into cinematic décor, and (c) converting a dramatic work into an “epic” (i.e. narrated) work. The length of the original play does not cause the same structural problems as the length of a novel, since a play and a film are already about the same length. It is possible to film a play by setting the camera up in the appropriate indoor and outdoor settings and staging the entire verbal text, from beginning to end, for the observing lens. However, the attempts to make precisely this kind of cinematic recording (pejoratively called “canned theatre”) have been unsuccessful, striking their viewers as dull, static, lifeless, and boring, conveying neither the vibrancy and intimacy of living theatre nor the energy of true cinema.

The reasons for the feebleness of these dramatic transcriptions, according to Gerald Mast, remain quite mysterious. The art historian Erwin Panofsky, who argued that one of the cinema’s essential powers was the “dynamization of space,” found that such “canned” plays were insufficiently dynamized and space itself was as immobile in the film as it would be in the theatre. The Soviet theorist Sergei Eisenstein argued similarly; such films were not constructed cinematically, by editing the different pieces of celluloid, the different shots (which, by implication, means the different pieces of space) to establish meaning. The French film critic and theorist André Bazin, however, argued differently. He maintained that the core of a play, its verbal text, was written to be presented in a certain stylized setting, within a certain architecture, while films take place within the world, within nature itself. To stage a dramatic text within the real world would either diminish the words (for there was no reason for such stylized speech to exist in the real world) or diminish the world (for there is no reason that the world should agree to serve as the supporting player for a dramatic text).

Most filmed versions of plays have recognized these theoretical differences in a very practical way by “opening up” the stage work. This is done in effect, either by dropping certain scenes into interesting varied visual settings where the stage version should not go or by interrupting the flow of dialogue scenes with essentially nonverbal ones in which the characters go for a walk in the park, a drive in the car, a dance in the disco, and so forth. Unfortunately, such films frequently give the impression of being what Gerald Mast describes as “artistic layer cakes – chunks of dramatic dialogue separated by segments of cinematic
As opposed to alternating theatrical (indoor) and cinematic (outdoor) spaces, the cinema’s task in adapting a play (or in constructing any film narrative) is to charge all its space and spaces with meaning. While space in the theatre can indeed be meaningful, the meaning tends to be a single and stable metaphor that remains constant for the entirety of the stage performance. But in its shifting spaces, and its shifting camera positions within these spaces, the cinema can endow every element in every space (walls, windows, furniture, objects, shapes, colours, patterns of light) with significant relations to the characters, action, and themes of the film. According to the orthodoxies of film history, the cinema did not successfully separate itself from theatrical assumptions until D.W. Griffith discovered and developed the procedures and principles of editing between 1908 and 1915. The years preceding 1908 are seen as a “dark age” when poor filmmakers went about the erroneous business of slavishly recording whole scenes in long single shots. What these primitive directors were discovering, however, between 1898 and 1908 was precisely the way to make the individual spaces as communicative and as meaningful as possible, a technique that Griffith brought to perfection simultaneously with his innovations of editing.

The ultimate solution to the problem of filming plays is the creation of a seamless weave of verbal and visual styles that, through editing, narrative construction, and décor, renders the dramatic work into the “epic” (i.e. narrated mode). Jean Renoir, for example, constructed his film version of Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* (1936) as the narrative of two major figures (the baron, who falls into the lower depths, and the thief, who climbs out of it – passing each other along the way) rather than as Gorky’s whole dramatized society of fallen types. By alternating between Gorky’s imprisoning indoor theatrical space and the open cinematic space of the outdoors, Renoir added his own visual metaphor and thematic vision to Gorky’s claustrophobic play – a contrast between the openness, freedom, and naturalness of the unfettered human spirit outside society and society’s architecture as opposed to the restrictive tyrannies of civilized, bourgeois, materialistic society. But Akira Kurosawa filmed the same work (1957) by retaining the social microcosm, by retaining a large proportion of the dramatic text (which Renoir did not), and by keeping the action mercilessly enclosed in its indoor claustrophobic setting. Instead of “opening up” the play, Kurosawa deliberately closed it down, preserving claustrophobia as one of the film’s metaphors. In confining his camera to the enclosed setting, shooting the various social groupings from different visual perspectives, Kurosawa converted his camera into an invisible narrator who became one more member of the microcosm, unseen and unnamed. This conversion of narrative focus converted the viewing audience itself into inside rather than outside observers of the social microcosm.

This brings us to another area of discussion related to the artistic merit of films. It is a pity that even today, many critics consider the film to be a poorer cousin among all the other art forms, especially literature. We all agree with the fact that until recently, there has been a cultural difference between those who have taken their primary cultural pleasure from reading and those who have taken their primary cultural pleasure from films. The earliest audiences for films either did not or could not read. Throughout the decades of the motion picture’s greatest popularity – the first five of the twentieth century – those who regularly went to films tended to be less educated and less affluent than those who spent their time with novels, or at plays, concerts, operas, and ballets, or in art galleries and museums. The artistic values of those more educated and more affluent people necessarily tended to be imposed on films in
any comparisons between film and the other arts, for only the educated and affluent people wrote or read or cared about such issues. In the 1960's, the conversion of the educated and affluent to a recognition of the legitimacy and importance of motion pictures as an art was accomplished, ironically not by the conversion of the educated and the affluent to the values of the old moviegoers but by the conversion of the movies to the values of the educated and the affluent.

Gerald Mast identifies three values and assumptions that lay beneath this point of view. First, a respect for the integrity, perhaps even the sanctity, of the original literary text. A film adaptation of an important literary work has an obligation to be faithful to the spirit (or even, the letter) of the original text and, at the same time, to be a cogent and unified work in its own terms. But what if the urge to adapt a work faithfully conflicts with the urge to make a whole and cogent work in its own terms? This naturally gives voice to a seminal query plaguing adaptations from one art form to another. If form and content are inextricably wedded in the greatest and densest works of literary art, how can one preserve the identical content in a new form? Akira Kurowawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), thought by many to be one of the finest film adaptations of a Shakespearean text (preserving the spirit of *Macbeth* yet a stirring work in its own terms), does not preserve a single line of Shakespeare’s play; whereas Roman Polanski’s film of *Macbeth* (1971), thought by many to be a terrible distortion of Shakespeare, probably contains a higher percentage of Shakespeare’s verse than any other film adaptation (as opposed to recorded performance) of a Shakespearean play. The question therefore arises -- how can a film be simultaneously most and least faithful, considering the fact that most films distorted, shrunk, or enfeebled the power of the original literary material?

This kind of questioning is itself faulty, a stepchild attitude that most literary critics adopt towards the filmic medium. So along with many other critics, Gerald Mast raises a valid point. Does one apply such criteria of distortion of original material when comparing Shakespeare’s *Othello* with Giuseppe Verdi’s *Otello*? Or, more to the point for literary scholars, does one condemn Shakespeare or Chaucer for their alterations of their source materials, for their hammering the original Boccaccio story or Holinshed chronicle into the form they needed for their own particular concern in that particular narrative? Although some critics have called the filming of a literary work an “adaptation” others call it “translation.” Both these terms imply (and indeed demand) a respect for the original text as “the fixed foot of a compass around which the film version must revolve.” If one terms the film work an “interpretation” of the original text (as Verdi’s *Otello* is an operatic interpretation of Shakespeare’s play or as Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is a dramatic interpretation of Holinshed’s history), the burden for artists becomes the wholeness and integrity of their artistic interpretations, not their loyalty to the original. Mention also must be made of a third group of critics who support the artistic liberties taken by the film director and calls them “trancreations.”

Further, critics who claim that a film violates the integrity of the original material can only mean that the film violates either their own interpretations of the original or the general consensus regarding the interpretation of the original work. Seen in this manner, the critical problem is not of two competing works of art (film versus literary text) but of two competing
interpretations (the critic’s and the filmmaker’s) of the same work of art. While the critical interpretation owes its loyalty to the original work, the artistic interpretation becomes an original work in its own right. Closely related to this point of view is also the tendency to prefer the reflective, the contemplative, and the intellectual aesthetic pleasures to the more passionate, intensely sensual, and stimulating ones. When Verdi makes an opera of *Othello*, he takes something out – words—and puts something else in – music. The elimination of words reduces intellectual ironies and subtleties, psychological shading and detail – indeed the very stuff that makes Shakespeare’s *Othello* Shakespeare’s *Othello*. In place of these internalized subtleties, Verdi substitutes a passionate vocal and orchestrated score that attempts to concretize and externalize intense human feeling, asking its listeners not to savour its subtleties and ambiguities but to feel its immensities and intensities.

In a similar manner, evaluated from the other point of view, any filmed version of a literary work takes something out – words—and puts something else in – sights and sounds. These direct, physical appeals to the two senses make the cinema an even more intensely physical experience than opera, pushing the work even farther from the intellectual richness of verbal subtlety. They attempt to convey an intensely sensuous metaphor for the experience of an event rather than an ironic or reflective understanding of its significance. The pervasive aim of certain films in the last few decades, with their use of the immensely wide screen and their overwhelming, multi-channel stereophonic sound tracks, serves as good examples of these deviations. Because literary pleasure is a much quieter, more solitary and contemplative one, those who devote their lives to it and its study might find any diminution of that pleasure and the substitution of another an inherent debasement. It therefore tends to produce a preference for contemplatively ironic films as opposed to aggressively passionate ones.

III: The Case of Adaptations

A discussion of the adaptations of plays to screen obviously focuses our attention upon William Shakespeare. Beginning right from the days of cinematographic history, when more than 400 silent film adaptations were made, the interest in adapting Shakespeare on the screen continued over each decade and remains unabated even in present times. Till date, it is difficult to give the exact number of adaptations that have been made, and the number is increasing almost every year. Most motion-picture production groups have presented some of Shakespeare’s works in a way that makes it easier for people to understand them. In fact, over the last few years, the onrush of new adaptations in mainstream commercial productions shows that the film industry is interested in returning Shakespeare’s work to the masses. Earlier, mainstream and big-budget motion picture studios had traditionally been very reluctant to try and film the works of Shakespeare, believing them to be too difficult and hard for the audiences to appreciate. A new group of movies based on the Bard’s work are now being produced, hoping to reverse that trend.

It would not be overemphasizing to state that the history of the adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays for the screen is also the history of the adaptation of the screen to Shakespeare’s plays. We can categorize all kinds of Shakespearean adaptations and cinematic canons into roughly two broad groups, namely, those that adhere to the text and those, which do not. Even a casual glance at the rather impressive but assorted list is sufficient
to convince us of the prismatic range the twentieth century directors brought to their treatment of Shakespeare’s plays. Each director seems intent on portraying his own special, and sometimes idiosyncratic response to Shakespeare thus heightening the multi-faceted richness of the dramatist’s imaginative world. The second category of adaptations belongs to the numerous films that have taken Shakespeare’s stories and done whatever they wanted with them. Sometimes the director offers an entirely subjective interpretation of Shakespeare but at other times, only the Bard’s name suffices and what is produced is remotely connected with the original play.

While critics smirk on the merits of these adaptations relative to their justification, filmmakers as well as the fare-getters welcome the refreshing change from the cliché Hollywood formulas to verified story telling inherent in every classical Shakespearean tale. In 1992, *Sight and Sound* published a retrospective discussion of the cinematic canon which included top ten film lists of each decade from 1952 through 1992, the 1992 list having been compiled from the votes of one hundred international film critics and directors. Interestingly, not one Shakespearean cinematic adaptation ranked among the top ten in any decade’s list (“Top Ten Lists”). While it would appear to be virtually indisputable that Shakespeare’s work holds a high, if not the prime, position in a Western literary canon, to the point where we take for granted the equation of his work with cultural respectability, such is not the case when it is adapted to film. Indeed, it seems as if the story of Shakespeare on film is the antithesis to that of Shakespeare in literature. What interests us is therefore the fact that despite the ostensible “failures” of Shakespeare on screen, adaptations of various kinds are still regularly filmed – in fact the most filmed of any author. A look at the eleven adaptations of *Hamlet* (excluding the two short silent film versions) serves as a case in point.

Coming to the cinematic adaptation of works of twentieth century dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill, Bernard Shaw, Arthur Miller, and many others, the situation becomes even more interesting. In each case we witness either a dichotomy or a love-hate attitude towards the film medium that differs individually from dramatist to dramatist. As a case in point, I would like to illustrate the totally opposite attitudes towards the cinema that were expressed by Bernard Shaw and Eugene O’Neill. Bernard Shaw’s dramatic career was more or less chronologically parallel to the discovery and the rise of the motion pictures. Considering the debt that early cinema owed to the theatrical adaptations, it is interesting to note that not only was Shaw very much aware of this new art form of the cinema, he was intimately connected in several ways with the film adaptation of his work, maintaining a strict vigil as to how his plays were represented on the silver screen. Unlike O’Neill, who preferred to dissociate himself from the cinematic world except for financial gains, Shaw basically believed that there was no difference between the stage and the screen, except that resources of the screen were enormously large. This association is not only attributed to his friendship with the Hungarian film producer Gabriel Pascal, but can be substantiated with the number of additional scenes he wrote for the film versions of some of his own plays, for “nobody could cut the dialogue and write the new scenes except myself” – a confession though made to Theresa Helburn in relation to his *Saint Joan* script applies to his works in general.
An interesting aspect of Shaw’s relationship with the film world remains the fact that though he was immensely interested in the possibilities of the infant medium, he at the same time kept on expressing a strange aversion towards Hollywood and its cliché-ridden productions. So to Arthur Cox he wrote in September 1947:

The present domination of Hollywood over the enormous influence of screen pictures on the mind of the world is to me deplorable; it is creating a barbarous sock-in-the-jaw morality on the whole world from which Ireland must be rescued.  

In 1933, when Kenneth MacGowan, the story editor and associate producer at RKO Studios in Hollywood was negotiating with Shaw for rights to several of his plays, the dramatist was not very enthusiastic and opined that “in spite of the promising work done by Arliss in the serious screening of the plays, as such I don’t believe that Hollywood is within ten years of tackling my stuff.” Yet, the specific capability of the cinema to disorient as well as mesmerize its viewers left its marks on the dramatist too. The same person who had told Siegfried Trebitch that “these accursed films are complicating life beyond endurance” had also to admit its influence. Marjorie Deans narrates an interesting as well as informative incident related to the filming of *Caesar and Cleopatra*:

When Bernard Shaw came to Denham to watch the filming of the meeting between Caesar and Cleopatra on the paws of the Sphinx, he stood for a long time in silence, gazing up at the huge crouching image against its background of starry sky; and his expression, though always critical, reflected also the realization of a fifty-year-old dream.

“What scope! What limitless possibilities!” he said afterwards. “When I look back on my work as a young man with my colleagues in the theatre, it seems to me we were like children playing with wretched makeshift toys. Here you have the whole world to play with!”

This exuberance was of course not entirely Shavian. As early as 1936, the critic Allardyce Nicoll found the situation equally intriguing and proclaimed:

The strange paradox, then, results: - that although the cinema introduces improbabilities and things beyond nature at which any theatrical director would blench and murmur soft nothings to the air, the filmic material is treated by the audience with far greater respect (in its relation to life) than the material of the stage. Our conceptions of life in Chicago gangsterdom and in distant China are all colored by films we have seen. What we have witnessed on the screen becomes the real for us. In moments of sanity, maybe, we confess that of course we do not believe this or that, but under the spell again, we credit the truth of these pictures even as, for all our professed superiority, we credit the truth of newspaper paragraphs….

When we come to Eugene O’Neill, the exchange between the cinema and drama becomes more interesting for the fact that though he “disliked everything about Hollywood in general,” O’Neill dramatic techniques bear close affinity with the filmic medium. His ceaseless experiments and attempts to incorporate modern ideas and notions about life and dramatic art involved use of symbolic figures, masks, interior monologues, split personalities, choruses, scenic effects, rhythms and schematizations – all closely related to the celluloid medium. Yet, talking to his friends, he liked to refer to Hollywood as “the City of Dreadful Nonsense.” We are also familiar with the anecdote of how one producer had offered to let O’Neill name his own price if he would write a scenario for Jean Harlow and O’Neill replied with a telegram consisting of the word “no” repeated twenty times. Later, he gave a more reasoned view of his attitude:
I have never been in Hollywood or Los Angeles. This doesn’t mean that I have any prejudice against pictures. It merely means that the screen has never interested me as a medium. So why work at something which doesn’t interest me when I have always worked on my hands which does interest me and has always paid me well? It is as simple as that – commonsense – although some people seem to regard it as mad – even inexcusable – eccentricity.  

In spite of O’Neill’s declaration that the film people were “scared to touch my stuff,” it seems quite surprising that his plays have been a continuing source for film adaptation, beginning right from the 1923 adaptation of Anna Christie which critics now mostly remember for the wrong reasons – that of a Greta Garbo vehicle. The film medium has distinct advantages in the creation of atmosphere and expressive settings, and the most effective of the O’Neill works on the screen recreate his dramatic milieu in striking cinematic form. In his dramatization of Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, he used disconnected scenes very similar to the montage techniques used in films and had George Jean Nathan call it a more moving picture than a drama:

Under the recent delusion that he made a dramatization of Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, what Eugene O’Neill actually made was a moving picture. What drama lies in the poem, he extracted, and in its place put a series of cut-backs and fade-outs that needed only a few additional scenes showing the Bride running through a daisy field, the Third Wedding Guest standing in dedication beside a high waterfall and the Ancient Mariner silhouetted at the close against the evening sky to convert the whole thing into a film of the popular order.  

That the forceful themes of the plays attracted noted film directors and were transformed into equally powerful films proves at least one point – the effectiveness of adapted works certainly does not lie in the mere fidelity to the original either in outline or in essence. Besides the nine films made directly from the original plays, the two remakes of Ah! Wilderness and Anna Christie emphasize the fact that the directors definitely found in O’Neill’s work material which moved away from the well established conventions and were able to destroy the stereotypes.

In conclusion we can say that though the history of the cinema is more than a hundred years old, the dynamics of exchange between drama/theatre and film remains all-pervasive even today. Here we can reiterate Susan Sontag’s view that we should not regard movies as advancing from “theatrical stasis to cinematic fluidity, from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and immediacy.” Of course this kind of a view would be too simple and would also underestimate the capabilities of a successful dramatic production. What we can say is that the affinity between the drama and the film is there and along with all its advantages and disadvantages, will continue for many more decades to come. For scholars and critics interested in the interrelation of the arts, this is what is important. Moreover, since the style of many dramatists often obfuscates a clear understanding of their works, studying them “cinematically” or “filmically” would prove a new method for elucidating and appreciating their complex styles.
Notes and References


5 Gerald Mast, “Literature and Film” p. 291.

6 Perhaps the best demonstration of the way that cinematic narrative imbues space with meaning and then uses that meaning to convey the narrative is V.F. Perkins’ *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1972. Perkins makes this meaningful use of space, rather than editing, the essence of cinema narrative art. Gerald Mast, on the other hand, in his book *A Short History of the Movies* has been guilty of disseminating this orthodoxy, an error that he tried to remedy in the third edition of the book. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981.)


9 Ibid.p.800

10 Ibid. p.333.


14 Ibid. p.235.
