Having collided again and again against an opacity of vision that literally arises from the lack of ‘seen’ drama we, as teachers/pedagogues have time and again resorted to the easiest ‘visualization’ method possible, and found it to be the best alternative (not substitute) to performance in the pedagogic situation. This calls for a little more exploration in terms of theory, practise and the aesthetics involved, apart from other contextual factors that come into operation. A lot has been said to prove the schism that exists between live theatre and film / television performance: that the natural affinity of this medium is with the narrative art of the novel / epic rather than the drama / theatre. The film reaches the audience only after active ‘tampering’ with *mise-en-scene* by the omniscient director, through the eyes of the cinematographer and severely ‘mutilated’ by the editor. The audience-actor interaction and its dynamic life is lost, and so is the immediacy of the stage. On the other hand, theatrical performance would consist of the explosively there, presence before one’s eyes. The ‘vibe’ as it is called colloquially, works wonders if the audience-actor communication gets ignited. Again, there is no predictability about the play – the moment the actor happens to sneeze, the play will change beyond correction.

Bernard F. Dukore shows that there are advantages to the situation wherein drama/film provide helpful alternatives, and says that the affinities are seen to far outweigh the distinctions, and that all major living playwrights
have written for the medium, not having remained exclusively attached to theatre. Adaptations, and televised versions of major dramatic works are a genre on their own. Pinter, Beckett, Albee, Shepard, Stoppard, Mamet et al. have written for both media.

Indeed, nowadays the living theatre is not a part of many people's lives. For them, plays are among the different types of productions they watch on television or see at the cinema. To millions, Shakespeare is what they read as home-work and see, by courtesy of the BBC, on television.... Usually the public's perception of a non televised stage play, if the public perceives it at all, is through its movie version.... A fact of contemporary life.

The film-like theatre of Brecht with its use of short montage-like scenes, and even film itself shows us affinities, while the 'Ibsenite' theatre seems to oppose the performance on film, resist it as film theorists have been quick to point out. A stage direction cannot bring a real forest unto the theatre, while a film director can shoot the episode 'on locale'; a stage production cannot have a 'close-up' but it can have a spotlight, killing all other lights. Similarly, numerous other affinities and distinctions may be pointed out between the two media without actually coming to any conclusion. A conclusion, however, is hardly our intention – it is to see how best we are able to use film to satisfy our visual hunger, and supplement our understanding of the text. Bernard F. Dukore has some interesting affinities to point out – film
screenplays (citing Pinter’s *The Proust Screenplay*) can also be read like drama playscripts, although customarily not done. One merely has to acquaint oneself with film jargon (eg. C.U. for close up etc.) like one does with drama (aside, solliloqui etc.). While language is often cited as the theatrical medium – non-verbal images as its film counterpart – we may easily substitute the one for the other (the film has its dialogue, the theatre too has its movements, stage properties and so on) Both media are collaborative artworks and the question of the author’s / director’s / actor’s hegemony are all relative as the case may be. Overtly it would seem that the authorial control of the dramatist is greater, but we should also remember stage history and the existence of several revised playscripts as per audience taste / director’s interpretation.

Martin Esslin, the same author / director / critic, who popularized the theatre of the Absurd in its nomenclature, and put Albee down as its American representative, makes use of semiotic theory to trace drama on both the stage and on the screen. Drama, he says, is multimedia – including both film and television in its scope – “the most hybrid ... or the most complete synthesis of all the arts....” As we have pointed out earlier, purists of film theory insist on the total distinction of this “seventh art”, particularly from the theatre. *Sui generis* this cannot be denied. But the common ground they share is also tremendous. Film theorists align themselves with the epic / narrative: the quality of the novel rather than the drama “ ... this division has become somewhat of anachronism and inhibits clear critical thinking about the very considerable number of essential and fundamental aspects that the dramatic media have in common.” Film does have its own distinct language of
montage, of editing, travelling, panning shots, zooming, the close up and so on. But there is also a neglect in the area of the actually spoken dialogue, the actors, designers, sets, costumes and the rest – the dichotomy between mise-en-scene and film direction (that decides which bit or fragment of the mise-en-scene is to be filmed). Likewise, live theatre, for its part, has refused to assimilate film aesthetics that would seek to marginalize its potency. Film critics and theorists like André Bazin have, however, recognized the underlying category of the dramatic which is perhaps the very raison de être of film making, which it could re-energize –

... the rebirth of dramatic forms that had practically disappeared such as the farce and the commedia dell’ Arte. Certain dramatic situations, certain techniques that had degenerated in the course of time, found again, in the cinema, first the sociological nourishment they needed to survive and, better still, the conditions favourable to an expansive use of their aesthetic, which the theatre had kept congenitally atrophied.  

Thus, Martin Esslin too, argues for essentially the same platform for film and drama.

The exclusive concentration on stage drama, and in particular on the written texts of plays in the drama department of Universities seem to me a relic of the past, when the live theatre really was, for century after century, the sole medium of transmission for drama. 

... similarly film departments of colleges and universities and practical film schools tend to neglect many of the basic dramatic elements of the cinema...
The views of the critics who seek to discriminate between the cinema and dramatic art forms, along with the views of Albee — and he is articulate on the subject — will show us the different side of the picture which must be taken into account for a balanced understanding of the dialectic which seems now to have shifted somewhat from that between text-performance to text-film, given the abject lack of live performance not only for Indian students, but for all viewership, worldwide.

Benjamin Bennett, whose arguments on the other dialectic (that between text-performance) we have closely followed, points out that cinema lies midway:

... between drama and literature, in the vicinity of the narrative ... cinematic images, by being mere images — not the real people and things, however disguised, that appear on the live stage — have something closer to the mental or dream quality that we suppose also characterizes the more or less eidetic effects of verbal narration in the mind of the reader.8

He shows that in cinema, the performance is 'identical' with the work, whereas in drama, we recognize that the performance we see is only one of many (questionable) interpretations of the work. This stand could be somewhat untenable — there could be many versions of the same film too — only performance, unlike film, can not be retrieved like film. Once over, the same act can not be replicated / re-seen. As Bennett says, Estragon cannot eat the same carrot twice in a live performance. Cinema can not even begin to
emulate the paradox of live theatre in that sense. — "performance in a theatre contributes to constituting the very object (the work) of which it is an interpretation." We mentally detach the performance as interpretation, from the work — and any flaw in acting / directing is then seen as a flaw of the interpretation, not the work. But seen on film, the flaw is of the work: these are some compoundedly paradoxical phenomena that arise.

... It remains generally true, for us, that we experience the reading of a novel or the viewing of a film as a direct reception of the work itself, whereas at the performance of a play, our experience is that of coming to grips with an interpretation of the work.

While all of this may be disputed, Bennett makes it apparent that he is only concerned with discriminating the boundary effects between the genres as he focuses on the ontological flaw of the dramatic text. Perhaps another area which could be seen to be the most important zone of discrimination is the audience-actor relationship which may never be duplicated on screen / film. The ready examples of the Theatre of Cruelty — Artaud’s experiments and those of Edward Albee’s are available to us to illustrate this marked difference between the film and the theatre. Beginning with *Box-Mao-Box*, onwards to *Seascape, Counting the Ways, The Lady from Dubuque* and finally *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, we are aware of Albee’s attempts at ‘drawing blood,’ at ending the role of the viewer as voyeur and drawing him into the performance of a participant much in the manner of Pirandello who would draw his audience into the vortex of the performance as it were, and take them into
confidence. Self-confessedly, Albee draws inspiration from the theatre of Artaud. This manner of audience-actor interaction, we know, is impossible anywhere else but in the theatrical performance, as already examined in a previous chapter. Albee himself makes no bones about his reservations on the modern:

Of course I do not think a film has the same impact as a play. I think subconsciously everybody knows that film is an unreal experience. Though not if you compare it with television, of course. But anyone who's ever been to the theatre, even street theatre, knows that's where the real thing is.¹¹

Well aware, however, of the deficiencies of the situation, Albee admits,

American playwrights are relying more and more on Europe for an audience ... We do not have a theatre culture in the United States. Its depressing for a playwright to find that his work is not reviewed intelligently in his own country and that audiences don't understand it ... ¹²

He too, laments the fact that this lack of theatre-literacy is unavailable in the States, where the people would rather sit at home and watch television, or at best make the effort to see performance not on theatre but on the film screen. Films are categorically rejected as 'synthetic'—"Its synthetic, fundamentally. Its also a synthetic experience. One knows that its jerry-built, and put together, and one is safe in everything one experiences during the course of it. Its George Orwell time...."¹³
Yet, one of the most successful films of recent times was *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* played by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. It remains till date, the most well known Albee play. Doubtlessly a runaway success on stage too, over time, the film version seems to have etched itself on the consciousness and memories of the audience (The charisma of its lead actors contributed not in little measure to its popularity). Under Albee’s eyes, the director edited out portions of the playscript as he deemed fit, and even Albee had to admire the end result. A wary Albee commented,

The commercial success of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* means that its probably been seen by more people than have ever seen all of my plays produced all around the world, or will for a hundred years. Its nice to reach a large audience, but that always reminds me of what kind of information is reaching an audience that large all the time. We are a film and television culture, not a theatre culture. And film and television misinform.14

Looking at the most celebrated play of the 1960s both in its stage and film versions would perhaps yield some significant results. Produced by Warner Brothers who acquired the rights to make the film from Albee, directed by Mike Nichols and the screenplay adapted by Ernest Lehman, the movie got underway. Both visual and verbal textures were sought to be balanced by Lehman who made relatively few changes, working through seven drafts of screenplay until it went on the floors. Principally, four considerations were kept in mind: (a) Should there be greater clarity? (b) Less
talk, more action? (c) Should it be opened up? (d) Should the profanity be edited out? Subtle, and perhaps effective changes were made finally. The several drafts / changes show the amount of tension that must have surfaced during the making of the film. Several changes were deleted by Lehman who preferred to retain the original ambiguity of the text. “The film as Nichols saw it, then was more a restaging than a rethinking”16 of the play. Jack Warner had little patience for ‘theatrical stasis’ that was demanded by Albee’s play and asked Lehman to include plenty of movement of all people throughout, and cinematic immediacy. It was, however, Nichols’s influence that finally let the faithfulness to the play remain, exploiting the verbal conflicts that also could be made into exciting cinema. He was also responsible for the ultimate removal of the bedroom scene between Martha and Nick which had, in some drafts, explicit details.

As to the problem of setting, a screenplay writer, to ‘open up’ the play, usual increases the number of sets. Theorist Erwin Panofsky, however, holds that “opening up” is both natural and desirable in a medium known for its movement of space: “approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the controlled locomotion and focusing of the camera and through the cutting and editing of the various shots.”17 This complements the film’s “dynamization of space”. Now, Lehman opened up the play, but he also gave due respect to Albee’s concept of dramatic space — the sense of dreadful enclosure, stasis and claustrophobia that the one drawing room set helped foster. Lehman restricted the movement within one house and its periphery.
Albee refused to alter the language to eliminate the profanity, which would have led to the film not getting the Production Code Administration (PCA) seal without which distributorship would be unforthcoming. So, twenty citations of “Goddamn”; about fifteen of “Jesus Christ”; six of “bastard”; over six of “son of a bitch”; “right ball”; “my scrotum”; “ass” and the like were recommended for deletion. Lehman either just edited the words or substituted them with “gah damn”; “for cry sake”; “Hop the Hostess” for “Hump the Hostess.” It was a difficult situation, because the controversial dialogue was necessary – for George and Martha, the profanity does not wound, does not even command attention – only shows how desperate the gulf in communication has become. Had the play been filmed as a play like Richard Burton’s Hamlet (1964), the PCA could have been bypassed but the cinematic treatment led to the problems. In the end, however, in an auteurial victory, Mike Nichols had his way with minimum changes in dialogue. Rather than keeping the crowds away, the effect of the language was reverse – it also sold tickets along with serving aesthetic purposes. The film grossed the third highest returns in 1966, and Life magazine noted that Lehman and Nichols actually improved upon Edward Albee’s ‘seriously flawed’ but undeniably arresting play. Lehman noted how the producer-director-author tensions along with those of the personal ones of Taylor and Burton (“two of the mightiest stars of the world”) must have seeped into the film in a concentrated form, actually enhancing the end result. Who’s Afraid Virginia Woolf? remains one of the best examples of the play into film exercise –
It could have roamed the campus, peered into the bedroom, thrown open the closet door and laundered the dialogue. But it did none of these. Despite the differing artistic and commercial concerns of Lehman, Nichols and Warner, the sensitively written film-script ultimately respected the original source material yet provided the blueprint necessary for completion of a well received film.19

Though Albee remained sceptical over the medium *per se*, he did appreciate the film version of his play. The only other Albee play to be filmed was *A Delicate Balance* which was also highly appreciated. A great many more of his plays, we contend, would benefit from a film production, enrich its performance value and resonance. *Tiny Alice* for example, the one play that has never ceased to confound critics and audiences with its obscurities could actually derive hermeneutic benefit from a genre crossover. The multiplicity of echoing sets - the model-within-the-model-within-the-model *ad infinitum* could be truly energized through a camera zooming out of one, then the next, and so on. Plays like *The Death of Bessie Smith* with its emphasis on coloured skin, and *Seascape* with its sea lizards as characters, could greatly compensate through film what might be missed in the mere reading of the text. *Box-Mao-Box* is another text that desperately requires visual explication or the play remains altogether obscure - mere verbiage when the stage directions themselves keep pointing in the direction of material on stage. But obviously, the treatment of such a play must also be in the same manner, an avant garde statement in film - not catering to story-seeking, narrative-hunting audiences
of the mainstream commercial variety—we know that such a genre of filmmaking exists.

All the negativism about film notwithstanding, Albee once related an interesting episode regarding his experience teaching a semester at a city college in New York City in an open admission program, where he found that none of his students had either heard of drama, or of the theatre—and he was to teach a survey course of twentieth century drama.

... It occurred to me there was only one possible way to do it: Get all the films of plays that I could and all the TV videotapes of drama that I possibly could and teach it as if it were a film course. And there were only two of my plays that could fit into that sort of category—both Virginia Woolf? And A Delicate Balance. And I chose A Delicate Balance because I thought it was a better film, a better representation of the play. I think that’s a very useful way to teach students about drama: Show it to them from film; then get them to read it; then get them to see it on stage.  

It goes to prove one point at least, that though the livedness of theatre may never be totally emulated by another medium, the fact remains that most audiences seem to be going further and further away from the theatre, more drawn to the immediately available television and film genres that also, without doubt partake of dramatic material and practice. This seems to be a phenomenon gripping the world, and dramatic pedagogy therefore may no longer live in an ivory tower, removed from the ground realities of the situation. Drama as ceremony, as a ritual, as a community affair is no longer
available to all and sundry, but visual pleasure must be had nevertheless, as Laura Mulvey has shown in her book - “... visibility and pleasure are inextricably linked in the Western configuration of the unconscious....”

Being necessarily removed so many times from the contents of our subject, we crave to fill up the holes, the gaps by performance, the spectacle, the *mise-en-scene*. Film / television could well be a panacea for our problems.

Notes


7. Esslin, *The Field of Drama* 34.

9. Ibid. 67.

10. Ibid. 68.


12. Ibid. 109.


16. Ibid. 456.


