"If the theatre stands thus for mankind, the cinema stands for the individual."

In this comparison of drama and film, written not long after the coming of sound, Allardyce Nicoll, then professor of the history of drama at Yale, speaks up firmly for accepting the conventions of the stage—its essential nature as a bold, imaginative, poetic, or spectacular illusion. Like Walter Kerr in our own day, he declares that "the realistic theatre" has lost its strength; we must reject naturalism, "the cheap and ugly simian chatter of familiar conversation."

Evidently the film has more to do than take over this latter function, for he suggests that realism in the film has unrestricted scope and therefore expands our imagination—in visual imagery, in Disney cartoon form. Nicoll does not try to include in his theory the epic sense of crowd and of history found in documentary films from Potemkin to The True Glory. The essential thing, he says, is to become aware that in the dramatic realm, "absolutely counter to what would have been our first answer," stage characters are types, speaking lines that challenge mankind, whereas we "impute greater power of individual life to the figures we see on the screen."

When we witness a film, do we anticipate something we should not expect from a stage performance, and, if so, what effect does this upon our appreciation of film acting? At first, we might be tempted to dismiss such a query or to answer it easily and glibly. There is no essential difference, we might

say, save in so far as we expect greater variety and movement on the screen than we do on the stage; and for
acting, that, we might reply, is obviously the same as stage
acting although perhaps more stabilised in type form. Do
we not see Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke, Ernest
Thesiger, Elizabeth Bergner now in the theatre, now in the
cinema? To consider further, we might say, were simply to
indulge in useless and uncalled-for speculation.

Nevertheless, the question does demand just a trifle more
of investigation. Some few years ago a British producing
company made a film of Bernard Shaw’s Arms and the
Man. This film, after a few exciting shots depicting the dark
streets of a Balkan town, the frenzied flight of the miserable
fugitives and the clambering of Bluntschli onto Raina’s
window terrace, settled down to provide what was
fundamentally a screen picture of the written drama. The
dialogue was shortened, no doubt, but the shots proceeded
more or less along the dramatic lines established by Shaw,
and nothing was introduced which he had not originally
conceived in preparing his material for the stage. The result
was that no more dismal film has ever been shown to the
public. On the stage Arms and the Man is witty,
provocative, incisively stimulating; its characters have a
breath of genuine theatrical life; it moves, it breathes, it has
vital energy. In the screen version all that life has fled, and,
strangest thing of all, those characters—Bluntschli, Raina,
Sergius—who are so exciting on the boards, looked to the
audience like a set of wooden dummies, hopelessly
patterned. Performed by a third-rate amateur cast their life-
blood does not so ebb from them, yet here, interpreted by a
group of distinguished professionals, they wilted and
died—died, too, in such forms that we could never have
credited them with ever having had a spark of reality. Was
there any basic reason for this failure?

THE CAMERA’S TRUTH

The basic reason seems to be simply this—that practically
all effectively drawn stage characters are types and that in
the cinema we demand individualisation, or else that we
recognise stage figures as types and impute greater power
of independent life to the figures we see on the screen. This
judgment, running so absolutely counter to what would have
been our first answer to the original question posited, may seem grossly distorted, but perhaps some further consideration will demonstrate its plausibility. When we go to the theatre, we expect theatre and nothing else. We know that the building we enter is a playhouse; that behind the lowered curtain actors are making ready, dressing themselves in strange garments and transforming their natural features; that the figures we later see on the boards are never living persons of king and bishop and clown, but merely men pretending for a brief space of time to be like these figures. Dramatic illusion is never (or so rarely as to be negligible) the illusion of reality: it is always imaginative illusion, the illusion of a period of make-believe. All the time we watch Hamlet’s throes of agony we know that the character Hamlet is being impersonated by a man who presently will walk out of the stage-door in ordinary clothes and an autograph-signing smile on his face. True, volumes have been written on famous dramatic characters—Greek, Elizabethan English and modern Norwegian—and these volumes might well seem to give the lie to such assumptions. Have not Shakespeare's characters seemed so real to a few observers that we have on our shelves books specifically concerned with the girlhood of his heroines—a girlhood the dramas themselves denied us?

These studies, however, should not distract us from the essential truth that the greatest playwrights have always aimed at presenting human personality in bold theatrical terms. Hamlet seizes on us, not because he is an individual, not because in him Shakespeare has delineated a particular prince of Denmark, but because in Hamlet there are bits of all men; he is a composite character whose lineaments are determined by dramatic necessity, and through that he lives. Fundamentally, the truly vital theatre deals in stock figures. Like a child's box of bricks, the stage's material is limited; it is the possibilities in arrangement that are well-nigh inexhaustible. Audiences thrill to see new situations born of fresh sociological conditions, but the figures set before them in significant plays are conventionally fixed and familiar. Of RomEOS there are many, and of Othello's legion. Character on the stage is restricted and stereotyped and the persons who play upon the boards are governed, not by the strangely perplexing processes of life but by the established terms of stage practice. Bluntschli represents half a hundred similar rationalists; the idealism of thou-
sands is incorporated in Sergius; and Raina is an eternal stage type of the perplexing feminine. The theatre is populated, not by real individuals whose boyhood or girlhood may legitimately be traced, but by heroes and villains sprung full-bodied from Jove's brain, by clowns and pantaloons whose youth is unknown and whose future matters not after the curtain's fall.

In the cinema we demand something different. Probably we carry into the picture-house prejudices deeply ingrained in our beings. The statement that "the camera cannot lie" has been disproved by millions of flattering portraits and by dozens of spiritualistic pictures which purport to depict fairies but which mostly turn out to be faintly disguised pictures of ballet-dancers or replicas of figures in advertisements of night-lights. Yet in our heart of hearts we credit the truth of that statement. A picture, a piece of sculpture, a stage-play—these we know were created by man; we have watched the scenery being carried in back stage and we know we shall see the actors, turned into themselves again, bowing at the conclusion of the performance. In every way the "falsity" of a theatrical production is borne in upon us, so that we are prepared to demand nothing save a theatrical truth. For the films, however, our orientation is vastly different. Several periodicals, it is true, have endeavored to let us into the secret of the moving-picture industry and a few favored spectators have been permitted to make the rounds of the studios; but for ninety per cent of the audience the actual methods employed in the preparation of a film remain far off and dimly realised.

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. . .

That most of the films so far produced have not made us use
of the peculiar methods inherent in the cinematic approach need not blind us to the fact that here is an instrument capable of expressing through combined visual and vocal means something of that analytical searching of the spirit which has formed the pursuit of modern poets and novelists. Not, of course, that in this analytic and realistic method are to be enclosed the entire boundaries of the cinema. The film has the power of giving an impression of actuality and it can thrill us by its penetrating truth to life: but it may, if we desire, call into existence the strangest of visionary worlds and make these too seem real. The enchanted forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will always on the stage prove a thing of lath and canvas and paint; an enchanted forest in the film might truly seem haunted by a thousand fears and supernatural imaginings. This imaginary world, indeed, is one that our public has cried for and demanded, and our only regret may be that the producers, lacking vision, have compromised and in compromising have descended to banalities. Taking their sets of characters, they thrust these, willy-nilly, into scenes of ornate splendour, exercising their inventiveness, not to create the truly fanciful but to fashion the exaggeratedly and hyperbolically absurd. Hotels more sumptuous than the Waldorf-Astoria or the Ritz; liners outvying the pretentions of the *Normandie*, speed that sets Malcolm Campbell to shame; melodies inappropriately rich—these have crowded in on us again and yet again. Many spectators are becoming irritated and bored with scenes of this sort, for mere exaggeration of life's luxuries is not creative artistically....

When the history of the stage since the beginning of the nineteenth century comes to be written with that impartiality which only the viewpoint of distant time can provide, it will most certainly be deemed that the characteristic development of these hundred-odd years is the growth of realism and the attempted substitution of naturalistic illusion in place of a conventional and imaginative illusion. In the course of this development stands forth Ibsen as the outstanding pioneer and master. At the same time, this impartial survey may also deride that within the realistic method lie the seeds of disruption. It may be recognised that, while Ibsen was a genius of profound significance, for the drama Ibsenism proved a curse upon the stage. The whole realistic movement which strove to impose the conditions of real life upon the theatre may
have served a salutary purpose for a time, but its vitality was but shortlived and, after the first excitement which attended the witnessing on the stage of things no one had dreamt of putting there had waned, its force and inspiring power was dissipated. Even if we leave the cinema out of the account, we must observe that the realistic theatre in our own days has lost its strength. No doubt, through familiarity and tradition, plays in this style still prove popular and, popular success being the first requirement demanded of dramatic art, we must be careful to avoid wholesale condemnation; *Tobacco Road* and *Dead End* are things worthy of our esteem, definite contributions to the theatre of our day. But the continuing appearance and success of naturalistic plays should not confuse the main issue, which is the question whether such naturalistic plays are likely in the immediate future to maintain the stage in that position we should all wish it to occupy. Facing this question fairly, we observe immediately that plays written in these terms are less likely to hold the attention of audiences over a period of years than are others written in a different style; because bound to particular conditions in time and place, they seem inevitably destined to be forgotten or if not forgotten, to lose their only valuable connotations. Even the dramas of Ibsen, instinct with a greater imaginative power than many works by his contemporaries and successors, do not possess, after the brief passing of forty years, the same vital significance they held for audiences of the eighties and nineties. If we seek for and desire a theatre which shall possess qualities likely to live over generations, unquestionably we must decide that the naturalistic play, made popular towards the close of the nineteenth century and still remaining in our midst, is not calculated to fulfil our highest wishes.

Of much greater importance, even, is the question of what position this naturalistic play occupies in its relations to the cinema. At the moment it still retains its popularity, but, we may ask, because of cinematic competition, is it not likely to fail gradually in its immediate appeal? The film has such a hold over the world of reality, can achieve expression vitally in terms of ordinary life, that the realistic play must surely come to seem trivial, false and inconsequential. The truth is, of course, that naturalism on the stage must alw be limited and insincere. Thousands have gone to *The Children's Hour* and come away fondly believing that what they
have seen is life; they have not realised that here too the familiar stock figures, the type characterisations, of the theatre have been presented before them in modified forms. From this the drama cannot escape; little possibility is there of its delving deeply into the recesses of the individual spirit. That is a realm reserved for cinematic exploitation, and, as the film more and more explores this territory, does it not seem probable that theatre audiences will become weary of watching shows which, although professing to be "lifelike," actually are bound by the restrictions of the stage? Pursuing this path, the theatre truly seems doomed to inevitable destruction. Whether in its attempt to reproduce reality and give the illusion of actual events or whether in its pretence towards subtlety in character-drawing, the stage is aiming at things alien to its spirit, things which so much more easily may be accomplished in the film that their exploitation on the stage gives only an impression of vain effort.

Is, then, the theatre, as some have opined, truly dying? Must it succumb to the rivalry of the cinema? The answer to that question depends on what the theatre does within the next ten or twenty years. If it pursues naturalism further, unquestionably little hope will remain; but if it recognises to the full the conditions of its own being and utilises those qualities it, and it alone, possesses, the very thought of rivalry may disappear. Quite clearly, the true hope of the theatre lies in a rediscovery of convention, in a deliberate throwing-over of all thoughts concerning naturalistic illusion and in an enhancing of that universalising power which so closely belongs to the dramatic form when rightly exercised. By doing these things, the theatre has achieved greatness and distinction in the past. We admire the playhouses of Periclean Athens and Elizabethan England; in both a basis was found in frank acceptance of the stage spectacle as a thing of pretence, with no attempt made to reproduce the outer forms of everyday life. Conventionalism ruled in both, and consequently out of both would spring a vital expression, with manifestations capable of appealing not merely to the age in which they originated but to future generations also. Precisely because Aeschylus and Shakespeare did not try to copy life, because they presented their themes in highly conventional forms, their works have the quality of being independent of time and place. Their characters were more than photographic copies of
known originals; their plots took no account of the terms of actuality; and their language soared on poetic wings. To this again must we come if our theatre is to be a vitally arresting force. So long as the stage is bound by the fetters of realism, so long as we judge theatrical characters by reference to individuals with whom we are acquainted, there is no possibility of preparing dialogue which shall rise above the term of common existence.

From our playwrights, therefore, we must seek for a new foundation. No doubt many journeymen will continue to pen for the day and the hour alone, but of these there have always been legion; what we may desire is that the dramatists of higher effort and broader ideal do not follow the journeyman's way. Boldly must they turn from efforts to delineate in subtle and intimate manner the psychological states of individual men and women, recognising that in the wider sphere the drama has its genuine home. The cheap and ugly simian chatter of familiar conversation must give way to the ringing tones of a poetic utterance, not removed far off from our comprehension, but bearing a manifest relationship to our current speech. . . .

Established on these terms native to its very existence, and consequently far removed from the ways of the film, the theatre need have no fear that its hold over men's minds will diminish and fail. It will maintain a position essentially its own to which other arts may not aspire.

THE WAY OF THE FILM

For the film are reserved things essentially distinct. Possibility of confusion between the two has entered in only because the, playhouse has not been true to itself. To the cinema is given a sphere, where the subjective and objective approaches are combined, where individualisation takes the place of type characterisation, where reality may faithfully be imitated and where the utterly fantastic equally is granted a home, where Walt Disney's animated flowers and flames exist alongside the figures of men and women who may seem more real than the figures of the stage, where a visual imagery in moving forms may thrill and awaken an age whose ears, while still alert to listen to poetic speech based on or in tune with the common language of the day, has forgotten to be
moved by the tones of an earlier dramatic verse. Within this field lies the possibility of an artistic expression equally powerful as that of the stage, though essentially distinct from that. The distinction is determined by the audience reactions to the one and to the other. In the theatre the spectators are confronted by characters which, if successfully delineated, always possess a quality which renders them greater than separate individuals. When Clifford Odets declares that by the time he came to write his first play, *Awake and Sing!* he understood dearly that his interest was not in the presentation of an individual's problems, but in those of a whole class. In other words, the task was to find a theatrical form with which to express the mass as hero—

he is doing no more than indicate that he has the mind and approach of a dramatist. All the well-known figures created in tragedy and comedy since the days of Aristophanes and Aeschylus have presented in this way the lineaments of universal humanity. If the theatre stands thus for mankind, the cinema, because of the willingness on the part of spectators to accept as the image of truth the moving forms cast on the screen, stands for the individual. It is related to the modern novel in the same respect that the older novel was related to the stage. Impressionistic and expressionistic settings may serve for the theatre—even may we occasionally fall back on plain curtains without completely losing the interest of our audiences; the cinema can take no such road, for, unless in frankly artificially created films (such as the Walt Disney cartoon), we cling to our preconceived beliefs and clamour for the three-dimensional, the exact and the authentic. In a stage play such as *Yellow Jack* we are prepared to accept a frankly formal background, because we know that the actors are actors merely; but for the treatment of similar material in *The Prisoner of Shark's Island* and *The Story of Pasteur* cinematic authenticity is demanded. At first glance, we might aver that, because of this, the film had fewer opportunities for artistic expression than the stage; but further consideration will demonstrate that the restrictions are amply compensated for by an added scope. Our illusion in the picture-house is certainly less "imaginative" than the illusion which attends us in the theatre, but it has the advantage of giving increased
appreciation of things which are outside nature. Through this the purely visionary becomes almost tangible and the impossible assumes shapes easy of comprehension and belief. This sense of reality lies at the foundation of the film, yet real time and real space are banished; the world we move in may be thus removed from the world ordinarily about us; and symbols may find a place alongside common objects of little no importance. If we apply the theory of "psychological distance" to theatre and film we realise the force of each. For any kind of aesthetic appreciation this distance is always demanded; before we can hope to feel the artistic qualities of any form we must be able to set ourselves away from it, to experience that stimulus its contemplation creates and at the same time have no call to put the reactions to that stimulus into play. This distance obviously may be of varying degrees; sometimes it is reduced, sometimes it provides a vast gulf between the observer and the art object. Furthermore the variation may be of two kinds—variation between one art and another, and variation between forms within the sphere of a single art. Music is further removed from reality than sculpture, but in music there may be an approach towards commonly heard sounds and in sculpture abstract shapes may take the place of familiar forms realistically delineated. Determination of the proper and legitimate approach will come from a consideration of the sense of distance between the observer and the object; the masterpieces in any art will necessarily be based on an adaptation to the particular requirements of their own peculiar medium of expression.

Applying this principle to theatre and cinema, we will recognise that whereas there is a strong sense of reality in audience reactions to the film, yet always there is the fact that the pictures on the screen are two-dimensional images and hence removed a stage from actual contact with the spectators. What may happen if successful three-dimensional projection is introduced we cannot tell; at present we are concerned with a flat screen picture. This gulf between the audience and the events presented to them will permit a much greater use of realism than the stage may legitimately employ. The presence of flesh-and-blood actors in the theatre means that it is comparatively easy to break the illusion proper to the theatre and in doing so to shatter the mood at which any performance ought to aim. This statement may appear to run counter to
others made above, but there is no essential contradiction involved. The fact remains that, when living person is set before acting person—actor before spectator—a certain deliberate conventionalising is demanded of the former if the aesthetic impression is not to be lost, whereas in the film, in which immediately a measure of distance is imposed between image and spectator, greater approaches to real forms may be perceived, even although these have to exist alongside impossibilities and fantastic symbols far removed from the world around us. This is the paradox of cinematic art.

Herein lies the true filmic realm and to these things the cinema, if it also is to be true to itself, must tend, just as towards the universalising and towards conventionalism must stand the theatre if it is to find a secure place among us. Fortunately the signs of the age are propitious; experiments in poetic drama and production of films utilising at least a few of the significant methods basically associated with cinematic arts give us authority for believing that within the next decade such will discover firmer and surer foothold and therefore more arresting control over their material. Both stage and cinema have their particular and peculiar functions; their houses may stand side by side, not in rivalling enmity, but in that friendly rivalry which is one of the compelling forces in the wider realm of artistic achievement.