Although the world of films differs from the world of the theatre most particularly by its character, flexibility, ubiquity and general vitality, it is sometimes necessary to renounce these very values and adopt those which, by virtue of stark scenic stylisation, facilitate the intensity of lofty tragedy and make for dramatic tension.

Etienne Souriau

FILMED THEATRE

In the first stage of their history, the significance of films lay in their documentary nature; since the camera recorded true, actual happenings, it was thought that the films neither were nor should be an art form. Those who wished to use the medium to convey an artistic message believed it indispensable to rely on the theatre in order to accomplish this. The first to do so was Georges Méliès, who was, among other things, the owner of the illusionist theatre Robert Houdin; he simply stationed the camera in front of the stage and merely recorded the action taking place there, without changing camera angles or having the camera travel closer to the stage. Thus was born, in the earliest stage of cinematography, "filmed theatre" (théâtre filmé), in which the films became a servant, so to speak, of another art form. By way of gratitude for the humble role, this genre of films was given the name of "art film" (film d'art), i.e. the films acquired the attributes of an art form only when used in the service of the theatre! In the U.S., the films were immediately christened "photo-play", so firmly was it believed that the new medium was solely a technical extension of the theatre.

"Art film" is a filmed theatrical pantomime in which well-known

theatre actors incarnate for the camera (without a word being spoken) the characters they have played on stage. At the times of silent films, this genre was best developed in France and Italy, thanks of course to the long tradition of the theatre in those two countries. The first "art film" to be produced was L'assassinat du duc de Guise (The Assassination of the Duke of Guise), directed by Charles Le Bargy and André Calmette. The famous Sarah Bernhardt played in several such films (filmed plays) which retain all the pathos of gesture and facial expression, notably La dame aux camélias (1812), Queen Elisabeth (1912), and Adrienne Lecouvreur (1913). Seen as "art films" were also works of Corneille, Racine, Dante, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Goethe, Molière and others, as well as dramatised Biblical scenes, particularly those concerning the life of Christ.[1] Today, we find them pathetic and naïve, but it

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1) Biblical passages were used as a basis for first film spectacles; the latter may also be considered as first "art films", the only difference being that theatrical scenes in them were staged in the form of monumental exterior or studio sets. Acting and directing were however theatrical.

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must be borne in mind that they contributed a great deal to the development of the cinema, for they first brought great theatrical actors onto the screen and first treated serious subject matter, far superior to the trivial plots on which screenplays had been based previously. As the film language developed, "filmed theatre" was forced to retreat before the possibilities and impact of montage dynamics and the means of expression peculiar to the motion picture. Thus it became necessary to adapt for the screen a play intended to be filmed. Remaining silent, such a play gained in dynamics when filmed, but also lost some of its basic means of expression. Psychology of characters, for instance, is an oustand-

ing case in point: revealed on stage mainly through dialogues, it now became translated into action. Soon the tide turned, and struggle began against the domination of theatre in the film; the struggle led to action dramaturgy and dynamic montage, subjects to be discussed later in this work.[2)]

[2)] France's Louis Deluc passionately advocated American action movies of the 20's, as against the static and theatrical "art films"; similarly, novel theories of montage were developed by Dziga Vertov and the circle of the LEF magazine in their struggle against the theatric parlour melodrama prevailing in the abundant film production of pre-Revolution Russia.

With the introduction of the sound in the motion pictures, principles of "filmed theatre" were reasserted, and increasingly so. The actor could now be heard, and the camera was, together with the microphone, for the most part stationary and placed in front of the set (which, although built in the studio, did not differ greatly from the stage!) mechanically recording the action in front of it. The changes from long shots to close-ups to middle-distance shots did not make much of a difference, since the overall dramaturgic structure of the screenplay remained essentially theatrical and static - and so were the characters, who expressed themselves chiefly in dialogues and monologues. As a film theoretician put it, the motion picture babbled too much in those early "talking days" and consequently disregarded its essential visual aspect![3)]

[3)] Fearing the inordinate garrulousness of sound motion pictures, film theoreticians of the 30's as a rule fell back on the silent-movie theories and insisted solely on the visual impact of the motion picture based on dynamic harmonisation and metaphorical link-

ing of individual shots.

In terms of internal structure, a screenplay is highly similar to a play, since it favours dynamic plots and revelation of characters through action and direct, true-to-life dialogue; nevertheless, it differs from a play, primarily because a screenplay breaks, to a great extent, the unities of place and time and is increasingly breaking the unity of action as well. In screening plays, therefore, the main problem is that of breaking the three unities in a manner suitable for the film medium. The device most often resorted to for this purpose is transference of action from one place to another, insertion of off-scene events, and - if practicable - translation of the characters' stories into images. Combining several plays by Eugene O'Neill, John Ford made Long Voyage Home (1940), probably his most accomplished film, one in which the theatrical ingredient can only be sensed in the fine, psychologically nuanced dialogues.[4] We

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In Long Voyage Home, Ford achieved the psychological differentiation of the characters using the classically cinematic manner: close-ups accentuating facial expressions of inner experiences and the play of face and eyes compensating for the left-out parts of dialogues.

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must remark, however, that this does not in fact solve the essential problem, for a film can well remain essentially theatrical regardless of all the freedom with which limits imposed by the theatre medium are broken. Conversely, we ascertained that Wyler's Heiress (1949), a film based on a play (which in turn was based on Henry James's novel Washington Square), has a truly cinematic impact, although the director did not diverge much from the play; for he used camera movements to