

STORIES WITHOUT WORDS

It seems obvious. Actors work on stage and screen, so there can't be much difference between plays and films. But whether you think about it from the point of view of the audience, the author or the critic, there are more differences than similarities.

A lot used to be made of the fact that cinema, like theatre, was a shared experience, everyone sitting in a big hall with a screen at one end instead of a stage. But now that we can do it at home or in the office or on the train, watching a film is more like reading a book. We can even use the same mobile device for both of them.

But watching a film was always more like reading a book than watching a play, even in the big hall. Neither a film nor a book ever changes. The pictures on the screen and the words on the page are the same every time you look at them. For a while, the screens got bigger, now they're getting smaller, and the experience of watching is becoming more intimate, a relationship between you and the story-teller, rather than you and the performers. In the cinema, that was always just a glamorous illusion, not the mundane reality that it is in the theatre.

It was no accident that some film-makers chose to call themselves *auteurs*, authors rather than playwrights. The medium gave them all the technical and stylistic opportunities that a writer of fiction enjoys in crafting a story – adopting a narrative voice, deciding on the angle from which a scene is to be observed, changing the point of view from one character to another. None of these techniques is available to the dramatist. Short stories have always been a favourite starting point for film makers, rarely for playwrights. Stories switch from close up to long shot and from one location to another, just like films.

Films were always seen as a threat to the theatre, but the real threat was to the short story. Theatre is still going strong, but has anyone noticed how the rise of cinema coincided with the decline of the short story? It was the magazines that closed, not the theatres.

Theatre fought back (though it didn't really need to) by trying to make plays more like films. Design budgets increased steadily to the point where the prologue to *Henry V* could be cut. 'Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?' Yes! No need for your thoughts to deck our kings, we've decked them for you.

Now that the existential threat is receding (if it was ever there) theatre can go back to its roots. All Shakespeare had was a 'wooden O' and that's all any play needs to work its own kind of magic. It is and should be, as Prospero puts it, an insubstantial pageant.

Films are stories without words. The only words are the dialogue, which in films is always kept to a minimum. The story is told, not in words, but in pictures.

Each medium has its own language and needs a critical language that respects the conventions. Aristotle identified three kinds of poetry: lyric, epic and dramatic. By poetry he meant literature, not just verse. His three categories are still the best ways we have of thinking about what writers do and how they use words to create an imaginative response to the world we live in.

The lyric mode is one in which words are used to express a feeling or recreate a state of mind. The epic mode is one in which words are used to tell a story. The dramatic mode is one in which words are used in the form of dialogue to explore conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Dramatic still carries the same meaning for us, but lyric and epic would be better understood as poetic and narrative.

The critical language most appropriate to film, most relevant to the way in which it is experienced by audiences and to the range of techniques available to the film-maker, is not dramatic but epic. Some films have elements of the lyric and the dramatic, as do some poems of the dramatic and the narrative and some plays of the narrative and the lyric, but in essence films are epic.

They do epic well in the modern sense of the word. Hollywood soon found its way from *Birth of a Nation* via *Ben Hur* to *Star Wars*. European *auteurs*, perhaps for lack of money (which always works to the benefit of art) went on doing epic in the old sense. All art forms need to rediscover themselves from time to time, to look back beyond the immediate past to older and purer forms (as the Modernists did at the beginning of the last century) in search of the new. This might be such a time, when smaller screens take film-makers back to their origins in stories without words and an age of austerity takes playwrights back to theirs in the 'wooden O' of the imagination.

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