

American Literary Classics and Hollywood Films

S Ramaswamy

I am a film addict; not a film critic. In this article I would like to make a few comments from my personal experience of seeing Hollywood films for six decades. Also, I have lived in Hollywood, right off the Hollywood Boulevard in the heart of Hollywood walking about everyday on the star studded side walks where famous names are inscribed and within walking distance of the world famous Chinese Grauman's Theatre where the handprints and the footprints of great Hollywood actors and actresses who have "made the grade" have been immortalized on cement blocks with their autographs. I am saying this to establish my dubious credentials to talk about cinema.

Regarding my literary pretensions, I have taught American Literature for the post graduate students for four decades and thereby hangs my tale. What is attempted in this personal recollection not entirely in tranquility, is to bring the two art forms cinema and literature together.

The technical terminology that is needed in the two art forms is quite different. In the novel genre, E.M. Forster's *Aspects Of The Novel* may be remembered. The old type of novels are talked about in terms of plot, characters (Dynamic and Static) Dialogue or conversation, atmosphere and philosophy of life. The New Novel has its own brave new "isms". There are many types of novel like the Epistolary, Dramatic, Picaresque, Stream of consciousness, Existentialist etc. In drama, there is tragedy, comedy, and various theory originated plays like, the total Theatre (Austrian Arnold), The Absurd Theatre (Esslin), The Epic Theatre (Brecht), The Mirror Theatre (Priandello) etc. The Language of Films talks of Long Shot, Medium Shot, close-up, Freeze, Zoom, use of Multiple cameras placed at various levels, Table-top photography, Spot light, Moving crane camera, Aerial photography etc. To Mention some famous American 'literary' classics which have been made into films - Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1938). Sinclair Lewis's *Babbit* (1934), Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men* and *Grapes Of Wrath*, Hemingway's *The Old Man And The Sea*, Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*, Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*, Henry James's *The Turn Of The Screw*, "The Innocents" and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. In addition to these novels, drama classics like Neli Simon's *Barefoot In The Park*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, John Patrick's *The Tea-house Of The August Moon*, Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*. Tennessee Williams is a class by himself as almost all his plays have been filmed including, naturally the film - script *Baby Doll*. The most famous and the best actresses have competed with each other to act in a play by Williams. Some of them are Elizabeth Taylor, Arletty, Deborah Kerr, Geraldine Page, Vivien Leligh, Lurette Taylor, Ava Gardner, Jane Fonda, Claire Bloom, Belte Davis, Catherine Hepburn, Elizabeth Assley, Carol Baker, Gertrude Lawrence. Kim Hunter, Jessica Tamdy- the list is endless. There are just as many Hollywood male stars, the biggest of them who have acted against these female stars mentioned. The actresses have been given prominence because Williams's heroines are mostly "Southern belles". They are at the centre of the plays of Tennessee Williams.

In the analysis of the film what we are looking for, are the visuals because film is a visual medium. The camera is the most important factor. The photographer is the unseen artist, directed of course by the Director who is the interpreter. However, the audio part of it is equally important. The Sound goes with the sight. The background music can be very subtle, symbolic and suggestive of meaning. For example, the two kinds of music- the New Orleans jazz and the Varsouviana Polka are used as contrasts to indicate the very nature of the characters of Stanley Kowalsky and Blanche du Bois. The use of space and time creates the background and the atmosphere of the place. David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* is a good example. The Locale, Editing and Sound are another important aspects in a film noticeable particularly in spectaculars like *Mckenna's Gold*. The good old black and white photography can be very effectively used to create mystery, danger, menace etc. Example, *The Innocents*. The Director can bring his own particular genius as suspense films of Alfred 'Hitchcock'. Some of his Films in this category are *The Rear Window* (1953), *North By North West* (1959), *The Birds* (1963), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960) etc. (incidentally I had the pleasure of meeting Janet Leigh the Star of the film). Visualization is another aspect of cinema, for example - *Lawrence Of Arabia*. Jack Cardiff's Editing, in addition to directing the film, *The Girl On A Motorcycle* and sheer acting like Rex Harrison and Charlton Heston in *The Agony And The Ecstasy* (Again, I met both Harrison and Heston very briefly). Special effects, particularly in the Science edition films are quite extraordinary. For example, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, *The War of The Worlds*, *Star Wars* and *Space Odyssey*. These are some of the aspects we look for while watching a film. The literary aspect - dialogue - is often ignored as people get lost in the visuals. Here comes in the screen-play writer. Thus there is a bridge between literature and Films.

We may now look at two classics of American Literature made into films - one a novel and the other, a play. Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*, and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. First, a 'literary' analysis of the novel : its genesis, the plot or story, style, atmosphere, symbolism, the allegorical element, etc. The genesis was mentioned by Hemingway in an article on deep-sea fishing written for *Esquire* magazine. Here, he related that an old fisherman had been picked up by another boat sixty miles from land with a huge marlin lashed to the side of his skiff. Half the fish had been eaten away by the sharks, which the fisherman had stabbed and clubbed till he was exhausted. When his rescuers found him, suffering from hunger and thirst, he was crying and half out of his mind. It is from this material that a great Nobel prize winning novel came out. The greatness of the novel is that it has multiple layers of meaning and not what it appears to be on the surface - a simple tale. Hemingway's prose style is justly famous. The style of *The Old Man and The Sea* is typical of Hemingway. The Novel is a sustained and continuous performance in the realm of symbolism in which the crucifixion symbol is used. The novel is a double allegory of human life or of the crucifixion and the artist's struggle with his material. It is also the Nature of man's struggle with life. *The Old Man And The Sea* is beautifully written in a simple prose which, without straining for archaism, has flavours of cool dignity of the Authorised Version. But, there is a richly poetic conception. This is the challenging material out of which a magnificent film was made. Spencer Tracy, an Oscar winning star of Hollywood has given a superb performance as Santiago, the old fisherman. The film is as simple as the novel in its narration with just the three characters, the old man, the sea

and the huge fish which becomes almost a human adversary of the old man. The sea itself is alive with various moods and is representative of elemental nature. *The Old Man And The Sea* is an excellent example of a great American classic becoming a great Hollywood movie.

A Streetcar Named Desire is perhaps the greatest American play and it enjoyed phenomenal success both as a document of American dramatic literature as well as a film. The post Civil War in America resulted in an upheaval in the American South and the old aristocracy suffered tragic consequences. *The Streetcar* is the dramatic equivalent of the popular novel *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. I am mentioning this here because the central character in both historical documents was played by the same great actress, Vivien Leigh, Vivien though she was British, studied and portrayed the two American tragic heroines to perfection. The film of *Streetcar Named Desire* was directed by the great director Elia Kazan. He showed the romantic side of Blanche's tragedy - the decline and fall of a Southern belle. Even about her name, she says, "It is a French Name. *Bois* Means woods and *Blanche* means white, so the two together mean white woods. Like an orchard in spring" Vivien was one of the most wanted stars in Hollywood. The play *Streetcar* is not divided into acts but eleven scenes, Elia Kazan studied the work as a film director and in his production *Notebook*, analyses the play with each scene focusing Blanche-

1. Blanche comes to the last stop at the end of the line
2. Blanche tries to make a place for herself
3. Blanche breaks them apart, but when they come together, Blanche is more alone than ever.
4. Blanche, more desperate because more excluded, tries the direct attack and makes the enemy who will finish her
5. Blanche finds that she is being tracked down for the kill. She must work fast.
6. Blanche suddenly finds, suddenly makes for herself. the only possible, perfect man for her.
7. Blanche comes out of the happy bathroom to find that her own doom has caught up with her.
8. Blanche fights her last fight. Breaks down. Even Stella deserts her.
9. Blanche's last desperate attempt to save herself by telling the whole truth. THE TRUTH DOOMS HER.
10. Blanche escapes out of this world. She is brought back by Stanley and destroyed.
11. Blanche is disposed of.

This interpretation of Blanche by the director Elia Kazan was meticulously followed by the great actress, Vivien. She had a copy of the script of *Streetcar* for a year, kept reading and re-reading it to understand Blanche and her problems before she actually appeared in the film. She asked herself "What sort of voice did Blanche have? Soft and low, gentle and refined, until she is driven into a corner and in her terror and self-

defence turn shrill...much more difficult than blanche's accent (American, specifically Southern) was the variety of tone, pitch and timbre required for the shifting moods and emotions of the various scenes. The use of the hands, tilt of the head, line of the body and the movement of the feet all had to be worked out to complete the visual images of the character. She finally saw Blanche as a pitiful soul who was the unfortunate victim of loneliness.

What is attempted in this short article is to study Literature and see how it transforms itself into the visual art of the film, the twentieth century art form.

Works Cited

- Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Routledge, New York, London, 1990.
- Christian Metz : *Film Language : A Semiotics of the Cinema*. New York. Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Edward Murray : *The Cinematic Imagination : Writers and The Motion Pictures*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co., New York, 1972.
- Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen : *Film Theory and Criticism*. Oxford University Press, New York, London Toronto, 1974.
- James Monaco : *How to Read a Film*. Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1981.
- Lan Jarvie. *Philosophy of the Film : Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics*, Routledge and Degan Paul, New York and London. 1987.
- William Cadbury and Loland Poogne : *Film Criticism : A Counter Theory*. The Iowa State University Press, AMES 1982.