

A vintage black camera sits on top of two old, worn books. The top book is 'The Last of the Mohicans' by James Fenimore Cooper, illustrated by N.C. Wyeth. The bottom book is 'Scribners'. The background is a dark, textured surface.

LITERATURE & CINEMA:
FROM WORDS TO VR/AR

with Jim Soto

“The study of literature casts light on the meanings in the film, and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature.”

-Ronald Perrier, From Fiction to Film

The fact that since the creation of the Academy Awards over **three-fourths** of all Best Picture Films have gone to films that are adaptations of literary works adds relevance to Perrier’s statement.



Since the dawn of time, our ancestors have been storytellers. The evening gatherings around the fire were later replaced by wandering troubadour presentations, that were then replaced by the establishment of theaters and opera houses, that have been replaced by our contemporary cineplexes and OLED TVs.

CINEMA – What is it?

Cinema or *Filmmaking* is the process of making a film. Filmmaking involves a number of discrete stages including an initial story, idea, or commission, through scriptwriting, casting, shooting, editing, and screening the finished product before an audience that may result in a film release and exhibition. Filmmaking takes place in many places around the world in a range of economic, social, and political contexts, and using a variety of technologies and techniques. Typically, it involves many people, and can take from a few months to several years to complete.



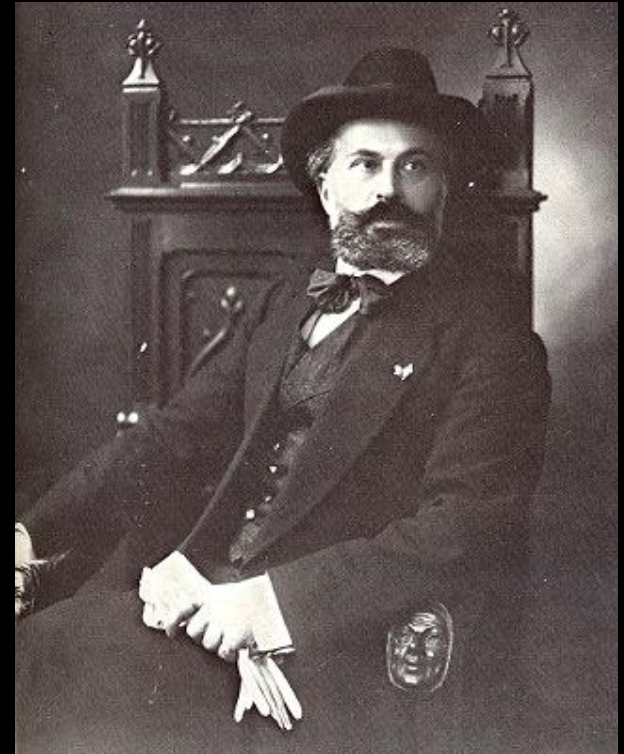
In fact, Cinema, in its relatively short lifespan, has replaced written texts to become the **premiere narrative medium** in our culture.

In addition to the many narrative forms we find in literature, other arts such as painting and music have been found to be story telling mediums. The ancient West African bardic tradition of Jaliyaa storytelling was an art form that included the **singing** of epic and heroic poems. In the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo presented the biblical account of creation through **painting**.



The Seventh Art

When films first came out, theorist Ricciotto Canudo called cinema the "seventh art." Describing it as the *synthesis* of **spatial arts** such as architecture, sculpture, and painting with **temporal arts** like music, poetry, and dance, Canudo said film combined aspects of all of them to form a seventh art (*Manifesto of Seven Arts*).



Literature and cinema are **narrative arts**, and consequently, a pretext to tell stories. It is obvious that the literary and the cinematographic languages are two different and specific systems of communication, although they share structures and have convergence zones. The first one uses **words** and the second one **images & sounds**, but the goal is the same: the told story, which comes out of the language to turn into a source of emotions and of feelings.





The cinematization of literature is so prevalent & universal one could well ask: where would cinema be without the written word? From George Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune* in 1902 to the recent release of Andy Muschietti's *IT* the relationship between cinema and literature remains closely intertwined. It has been a successful relationship that remains to this day as indivisible as it is fruitful.

Cinema as Literature?

Over half century ago, the French film critic André Bazin asked if the cinema could survive without the twin crutches of literature and theatre. Cinematic history in the over half century since Bazin has answered – no!



The literature of antiquity has provided endless inspiration for cinematic epics. **The Bible** has spawned such films as *David & Bathsheba* (1951), *King David* (1985), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) among others. The story of Moses was memorably filmed by Cecil B. DeMille as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), a film that was an amalgam of several novels that were themselves based on the written word of the Hebrew Prophet himself.



The works of the ancient Greek authors have been, and continue to be, cinematized. There was in recent years Wolfgang Peterson's film *Troy* (2004) that adapted the Homeric classic *Iliad*. The legend of doomed lovers Orpheus and Eurydice was also given the modern carnival treatment in Brazil by Marcel Camus' *Orfeu Negro* (1959).



Then we have the never-ending rehashings of Jane Austen's works and the constant modernizing of William Shakespeare's inexhaustible *opera*. No doubt, the prestige of the preceding literature with its ready-to-hand audience of admirers is what the cinematized versions seek to take advantage of.



More recent and unconventional fare include film adaptations such as: Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969), Nolan's *Memento* (2000), and Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985).



Literature provides raw material which is already tested: stories which work and are popular, as well as offering the 'respectability' conferred by the notion of 'literature' in itself, as well as the prestige of certain writers.

It could be argued that one of cinema's most important and necessary functions is to bring with purpose adaptations of literature to the screen; and it has been this practice that has made cinema such a powerful art form, producing some of the most enduring and rewarding works of art of the last century.





When compared with the 500 year history of printing-press culture, and the thousand year histories of manuscript cultures; the hundred year history of film seems very brief. And yet, despite the relative newness of cinema, moving images have soon become the main vector of narrative in our culture.



John Harrington explains, "*While other art forms have taken centuries to develop, the span of a single lifetime has witnessed the birth and maturity of film. It seems axiomatic (obvious) that such rapid development has occurred because of, not in spite of, the contributions of other art forms*".

Understanding film requires we understand the way literary expression has informed, extended, shaped, and limited it. Likewise, 20th & 21st centuries literature reveal the influence of the cinema in its structures and styles, themes and motifs, and philosophical preoccupations. Cinema and literature have influenced one another.



Are Literature/Cinema Ready for the VR Treatment?

Mika Johnson, a lecturer at Prague Film School and his team at Goethe-Institut (GI) in Prague, have begun adapting Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Students at Prague's Austrian Grammar School take turns at chattering about **how it feels** to be Gregor Samsa, the main character, when he becomes an insect.



Thorough participation in a high-end VR based experience hinges entirely on **immersion**, which is triggered initially through the audience having to don gear that firstly reduces their ability to engage in their actual physical space in standard ways (their vision and hearing being “co-opted” into a VR space).



The leap of faith the audience needs to make to establish a valid *"suspension of disbelief"* is already set in motion by the fact a user is entirely aware from the moment they don a VR Headset that their body is in essence hijacked by the experience (haptically, kinetically), as opposed to a more removed projection into a story space via more traditional forms like reading or watching movies.



The possibility of VR / AR, as playing a role in the future of cinema, results intriguing. Big-name directors have all rushed to try their hands at this new film-making format. VR could have a future in the film industry. Will it follow the path of 3D films – an explosive rise followed by a slow loss of relevance – or will it become the go-to film format in the years to come?



Whatever the future holds, we can conclude that the cinematization of literature is wide-ranged and all-inclusive. Literature was present at cinema's birth and has served both as midwife and nanny to the newcomer art and literature loyally continues to this day to be cinema's fountainhead of inspiration.



Assessment

1. What ratio of Academy award winning movies are literary adaptations?
2. Where was the original story telling place in ancient times?
3. According to Ricciotto Canudo cinema is the synthesis of which arts?
4. What is the answer to French film critic André Bazin's famous question?
5. Using a Venn diagram compare and contrast literature and cinema.
6. In your opinion, why is cinema the preferred narrative vector nowadays?

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