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## Cinema and Theatre: The Intermeshed Art Forms

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### Article

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *This paper aims to analyse the similarities and the differences between theatre and cinema, and examine the interplay between them as intermeshed art forms, tracing the lines at which both the forms merged. It also sought to analyse their aesthetic borrowings, similarities in their adaptations, and the present challenges faced by both cinema and theatre.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *Books on films and theatre were consulted for writing this article. Alongside, earlier researches on the related topics were read to get different perspectives of the researchers' views. Four pathways were chosen to analyse the intermeshing of the two art forms: aestheticism, adaptation, contemporary intermeshing, and present challenges.*

**Outcome:** *It has been found that both cinema and theatre are travelling on the same path with different mediums in the context of performance, narration, and representation.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *It will not be wrong to say that theatre is the root and cinema is the tree that emerged from it. Once cinema arrived in its entirety, it brought changes to theatre by lending technology to the theatrical form. Modern theatre now incorporates cinematic techniques such as projections and soundscapes. Ultimately, both mediums share a common goal, i.e. to evoke emotions in its audience by narrating stories that reverberate across time and place. It has been suggested that future research on this area should focus on the use of digital technology like augmented reality and virtual reality in both the art forms; their present use and future prospects.*

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Cinema and theatre are similar art forms that are different in their methods of presentation. Theatre laid the foundation of character development and storytelling whereas cinema adopted the theatrical techniques with the addition of visual effects. Although theatre and cinema have been continuously influencing and enriching each other, they are distinct in every possible manner “each giving rise to its own standards of judgment and canons of form” (Sontag, 1966, p. 24). Among the many differences between the two art forms, one major difference remains that theatre is rooted in the performance of actors on stage in the presence of live audience whereas cinema projects recorded performances on a screen.

The earliest known plays were written around the fifth century B.C. when festivals were celebrated to honour the Greek god, Dionysus, who was believed to be the god of wine and fertility. Theatre then came to be associated with tragedy as a major genre written to arouse pity and fear among the audience. This idea of tragedy was given by Aristotle, in his book *The Poetics*, when he defined tragedy as an imitation. In the words of Lehmann, “If one thinks of theatre as drama and as imitation, then action presents itself automatically as the actual object and kernel of this imitation. And before the emergence of film indeed no artistic practice other than theatre could so plausibly monopolize this dimension: the mimetic imitation of human action represented by real actors” (p. 36). Actors of theatre are expected to be trained and do many rehearsals before the actual staging of their play so that they don’t make a mistake on the stage because of the live performances. In cinema, actors are indeed trained and do a lot of practice before hand but they have an advantage over the former because if they make a mistake they get chance(s) to rectify it. Their final performance is the display of their best acting skills. It indeed is also true that the actors who are trained in theatre bring depth of performance on the big screen.

Cinema emerged in the late nineteenth century with its practitioners drawing heavily from theatre. They borrowed not only the technicalities in acting and directing but also stagecraft, narration, and performance. With the passage of time, the relationship became reciprocal: cinema helped in the development of modern theatre, influencing stage design, pacing, soundscape,

etc. The present article tries to find out the intersections between the two art forms and at what point do they merge in order to be supportive of each other.

From the Greek tragedies of Sophocles to Shakespearean drama and beyond, theatre has existed for centuries with its roots in storytelling, narration, and cultural expression. The book *Theatre: A Very Short Introduction* narrates how various forms of theatre have been enjoyed by the audience (Carlson, 2014); beginning with tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy. In appearance, theatre took many forms such as thrust stage, proscenium arch, arena, amphitheatre, black box, etc. Theatre's different forms by performance included puppetry, mime, documentary theatre, physical theatre, and improvisation theatre. The basic purpose of theatre is to bring stories to life through enacting on stage in front of live audience by engaging them emotionally with the narrative performance.

Cinema, in contrast, is a recent addition to the methods of storytelling that emerged as the most powerful medium. The advent of cinema can be said to be in 1891 with the Edison Company Inventing Kinetoscope in which one person at a time could see moving images (AVSHC, 2020). In the December of 1895, **Lumière** brothers invented the cinematograph and held the first paid public screening of their films in Paris. As time progressed, cinema added colours and sounds to the moving images. "The advent of sound ... gave rise to the so-called 'Golden Age of Hollywood'" (AVSHC, 2020).

Early cinema bore striking resemblances to theatrical performances, such as static cameras recorded staged scenes, actors exaggerated their depiction of emotions, and sets were reminiscent of painted backdrops used on stage. The contemporary view of cinema is that it is "regarded as advancing from theatrical stasis to cinematic fluidity, from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and immediacy. But this view is far too simple" (Sontag, p.24). The first generation of filmmakers often came from theatrical backgrounds. For instance, D.W. Griffith, a towering American film maker, pursued his career in theatre before transitioning to cinema. He became famous for his "innovative storytelling and technical advancements" (Alverson, 2023) while early film stars like Sarah Bernhardt transitioned directly from theatre. The proscenium-style framing of

early films also mirrored the theatre stage, presenting audiences with a fixed perspective.

Film aestheticism emerged through its development with editing, colour, sound, and cinematography. Some critics believe that film aesthetics is related to history and culture specifically as remarked, “The aesthetic dimension of a film never exists apart from how it is conceptualized, how it is socially practised, how it is received; it never exists floating free of historical and cultural particularity” (Hill & Gibson, 1998, p. 9). This stands true, but pure aesthetics of film making lies in its manner of storytelling, setting of mood and tone, and creating emotional impact on its audience by stimulating their perceptive senses through compelling acting.

One of the most significant intersections between cinema and theatre lies in acting. Theatre traditionally focused on articulation and physical expressiveness to reach live audiences, while cinema, with its close-ups, emphasized on naturalism. This difference has become blurred as actors trained for both mediums, like Meryl Streep and Ian McKellen illustrate the fluidity of performance across stage and screen. A major difference in acting on stage and in movies depend on the level of freedom granted to the actors. Whereas theatre actors enjoy more freedom due to the director’s final focus being onto the larger sense of direction and not in the scene-to-scene adjustments, cinema actors’ performance is totally under director’s control who watches every scene and calls for retakes if he/she doesn’t find the acting, camera angle, etc. up to the mark.

Cinema and theatre both rely on structured narratives, such as Freytag pyramid which composes of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Filmmakers and playwrights employ various techniques to make the plot of their stories interesting and compelling to the audience, such as employing parallel plots, circular narratives, *in media res*, linear narratives, and non-linear narratives.

Stage design and cinematography rely on lighting, framing, and atmosphere to create mood. These visual elements give the overall appearance to a film or theatre’s production. Theatrical stage is designed in such a manner that it is visible for the audience seated on all the sides and is prepared keeping in mind its

durability so that it can be reconfigured as and when needed. A film's set is designed to be viewed from different angles including close-ups, which makes its designing a complex task. Multiple film sets can be built for just one movie depending upon the budget and the need of the story. Production designers are much needed in all the film industries. One such designer is Adam Stockhausen, who made his way into the film industry by providing services to directors like Steven Spielberg and Steve McQueen. Another example is of Soutra Gilmour, who is a British set designer known for her work on the London stage.

Adaptation means transformation of story from one medium to another. It is about retaining the core of the original while changing its medium. One of the major challenges faced by the adapters is to live up to the expectations of the audience who have read or seen the story in another medium. Theatre has long been the food on which cinema pecked for nourishment; making it widely famous in return. Canonical works like *Hamlet*, *Les Miserables*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *My Fair Lady*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *The Sound of Music* among many others were adapted from books to stage and from stage to films. But this is not one-sided as films, too, have been adapted by theatrical productions. Some examples of such adaptations include *Billy Elliot: The Musical*, *Waitress*, *Hairspray*, *The Graduate*, and *Once*.

Audience is sometimes mutual for cinema and theatre, though most of the times they are a different lot of people with different tastes. Theatregoers, in the past, were associated with class and they valued the sense of liveliness in stage performances whereas cinephiles were believed to be people of average taste who appreciated the audio-visual techniques alongside praising the aura of a cinema hall. Hence, adaptations from plays to films and vice-versa played an important role in bridging the gap between the two forms as also in reaching out to the audiences as specific viewers of any one form.

The convergence of cinema and theatre is not merely historical; it continues to the twenty-first century. Where live theatre is filmed and streamed, cinematic techniques are integrated into stage productions. Actors transition fluidly between these two mediums, sharing their experiences and expertise. A single story can now be developed for all the platforms in order to reach a wider

audience and increase the viewership. Different platforms have given avenues for the craftsmen to share their work and derive profit from whichever means possible. Along with this, both the mediums have actively incorporated the critical approaches like feminism, postcolonialism, ecocriticism, in their works that were prevalent in the earlier times as well but were not so predominantly depicted or mentioned as correctly opined that “Writers since ages, knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly, intensely or just through a passing thought, have been mentioning and depicting their environmental surroundings” (Shamim, 2024). Just like the environmental awareness, other consciousness also persisted, which came to the forefront in both theatre and cinema in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

Audience also finds means to participate in theatre and film’s narrative and voice their opinion about the work. For instance, YouTube has become a powerful medium to share one’s opinions and beliefs about a particular work. Once a movie or theatrical performance is released, it could be easily found that the YouTube channels of arts connoisseurs flood in to review the work, trying to give their honest opinions about it.

Despite their interconnectedness, cinema and theatre face a lot of challenges. These challenges range from different performance styles, different mediums used to make performances entertaining, facing the pressure of live audience for theatre performers and replicating the same emotional consistency in every film promotion done by the actors. In theatre, performers are so involved into the emotions of the story while giving their performance on stage that they can do it all at one go with the same emotional mind set, but the movie actors have to constantly be in and out of that emotional state and yet have to deliver impeccable acting every time. Theatre performers have to be ready and available for acting out the same story on all the stages where it has been decided to be performed. Film actors have to perform for recording but their job doesn’t end here as they have to promote it in different places at times for months at a stretch to make it known to public. Henceforth, it is not a bed of roses for performing for any medium. Similarly, both the art forms face innumerable challenges in their production techniques as well that included stage designing, use of props, etc.

Cinema often overshadows theatre with its vast audience reach with theatres mostly remaining confined to specific stages, places, and audiences. Authenticity and authorship is also always questioned in the adaptation of works from one medium to the other. All these challenges are maintained as both the mediums try to assert their uniqueness while borrowing from the other.

Cinema and theatre are deeply intermeshed traditions that continue to shape each another. They share as many similarities as they have differences. Their major difference lies in actors' freedom of performance that differs widely in theatre and cinema. Another difference is that theatre is rooted in physical expressiveness whereas cinema digs into naturalism through close-up shots. Such differences make both the art forms unique and give them the reason to exist as separate art forms. Similarities include making use of Freytag pyramid to define the narrative structure of the plays and movies. Adaptations of works from one medium to the other help theatre and films further in exchange of forms and representation techniques. Therefore, cinema and theatre should be understood as partners in the nature of performance, narration, and representation. In the future, immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are likely to expand possibilities for both the art forms. Hence, future research should focus on the digital technology used in the past and the present in both the art forms as well as its future prospects.



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