Louis Dudek

Literature and Film and Media Studies

Is there a relation?

Apparently under the shelter of the metaphor that they are also "languages," other media than those of words alone have become a familiar part of the stock-in-trade of the modern department of English in high school and university. To those who have venerated literature as high art, this development has often come as a double shock, questionable both in its logic and as to the integrity of its judgment. Louis Dudek, poet and teacher, holds that the idea of art is little understood and has been seriously undermined in our time, while he acknowledges the probability of the presence of art in unaccustomed places; and he defends the tradition of high achievement that has ever survived the onslaught of the great waves of reaction that characterize its history.

In many universities today courses in film studies and communications are being introduced as parts of an English department program or as an option within the English department. In some high schools a course in media studies or film viewing is already an alternative offered to replace literature in part, and the trend to further development in this direction is in the air. This raises the question of the place of media studies of this kind in the context of traditional literary study: what is the justification for such an encroachment, and what are its proper limits if it is a justifiable development?

One advantage in trying to answer such questions is that by doing so we are obliged again to define the nature of the discipline in which we are involved, the study of literature, in the new context of the present-day world. The radical claims of the new media force us toward a radical revision and redefinition of our own subject.

But first, some superficial views. The argument that today's youth is media-oriented — that "nobody reads or writes anymore" — that young people are for the most part watching TV and films, or listening to records, and that we must therefore meet them on their own ground and teach them how to "read" and in-

terpret this new visual-vocal world — this kind of nonsense is easily answered. In the centuries after the collapse of the Roman Empire, "no one could read or write anymore" either, but study — such as there was — did not turn to the art of juggling or wrestling. Eventually, King Alfred and the Venerable Bede began with the teaching of Latin and the rudiments of true learning. In our time, the majority of people were reading only newspapers and comic papers from the 1890's onward, but schools and universities did not think of studying newspapers rather than books. In fact, popular trash — even in books, in chapbooks and ballads — was always far more influential with the great majority than any books of value, but education has never turned to the popular arts — to bear-baiting and cock-fighting — for its subject matter. Why should it do so now?

The study of literature, as an educational subject, begins for us in ancient Rome, when the subject was Greek literature and the teachers were Greek slaves. The subject was at once somewhat remote and above the average reach. When modern education was re-established with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it was Latin and Latin literature that became the subject of study. In British public schools and universities, late into the nineteenth century, the study of Latin and Greek authors constituted the definition of formal education, and specifically of the study of literature.

It is only in recent times, from the late nineteenth century to the present, that the study of modern languages and literatures — literature in English for us — has become the subject. At long range, we can say that vernacular literatures emerged throughout Europe from the fourteenth century on, but that their status and claim to be studied as literature did not get established until five centuries later — despite the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns in the seventeenth century.

In other words, the modern language literatures had to get their value as literature accepted as against the high claims of Latin and Greek. They have succeeded in doing so. But this means that the study of literature is the study of high achievement. It is not an anthropological interest in the dabblings of whoever and whatever in their muddy "communications culture".

Not the study of failed poems

The argument for the media, then, turns on a complete change of direction in literary studies. It holds that the new media should be studied simply *because they are there* — that is, because they are an important aspect of our actual society. This is a sociological point of view; and I should say at once that I have no objection at all to social studies. The question is only whether sociological interests should replace the literary. Media studies as part of sociology, or anthropology, or political science — in the same way that church-going patterns, teen-age customs, reading habits in comic books or newspapers, and sports and

entertainments form part of social studies — are certainly of great interest and importance. But whether this importance has anything to do with the study of literature is the question here.

The view I take as an axiom is the assumption that Western culture has made since the Renaissance: namely, that literature is a very special and superb kind of writing, that it is an art-form, beyond being merely a means of communication or a kind of utility. This traditional position is fully developed and explained in R. G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* (1938). In essentials, I stand by Collingwood. It's not that this view doesn't present problems; it does, on every side, since literature is so deeply entangled with every other kind of human interest. But it is essential to hold to the concept of art, as the ultimate definition, no matter how far we must diverge from it in the actual work of teaching and of our own wide reading. It is good to remember the Primavera, the Sonatas and Partitas of Bach, the Odes of Keats, the prose of Flaubert and James Joyce, when the going gets tough on the rocky road of modern art and modern entertainments.

The study of literature, in short, is the study of the best novels, the best poems, the best plays. It is not the study of the best-sellers of the past or present, or of failed poems and plays. Its subject matter is the content of the old first-year survey course, extended and pursued in greater depth, the study of English literature from the *Canterbury Tales* to the novels of Saul Bellow. At its best, it is the study of masterpieces.

One reason why this view is more difficult to maintain in the face of modern culture is that the idea of art as such has been undermined by the artists themselves and by their critics. The causes for this development are complex, but they are central to the evolution of modernism in all the arts.

It would seem that cultural progression, or the movement of any process of civilization, follows a wave pattern that can be simply graphed as follows: there is a moment of renewal, when a new teaching, a new art principle, a new horizon of possibility is opened up; what follows is a great positive evolution and diversification of this new idea. Then the original principle is forgotten, or watered down, as its work is passed on to men who merely imitate the external forms of the movement, and maintain their own position of prestige by this imitation: the original word has now been vitiated and falsified. The next dynamic moment comes when the counterfeit is rejected by a new generation, and a renewal of some kind, or a new principle, is introduced. So the process goes on.

In this pattern, a great idea is never rejected for what it is in itself, but always for what it has become in its counterfeit forms. It was in this way that Catholicism was rejected by the Reformation. That Romanticism was rejected by the Moderns. That high art was rejected by the populists and "barbarians" of the 1960s. Those who teach literature, however, are caught in this tidal under-

tow, and therefore it is more difficult today to hold to the so-called *élitist* principle of "value as art" in teaching literature, and to resist the invasion from other media of communication which make their claim on mere sociological grounds.

It was the Asher Wertheimers of the nineteenth century (see the portrait by Sargent), and the upper bourgeoisie in general — who made the Ballet Russe, the Grand Opera, the Art Galleries and the Sunday Afternoon Concerts their particular possession for purposes of "conspicuous consumption," as depicted in the films of Bunuel — that destroyed the validity of "high art" as a conception. Hence the difficulty of teaching past literature in the face of modern art movements and mass media democracy.

However, neither religion, nor Romanticism, nor art, is extinct. Only their counterfeits have been demolished.

The art of our times

Where, then, is the true succession? Where is the art that is valid for our time? It may not be in the usual places where we might hope to find it. It may be in the design of industrial products, occasionally. It may be in the letters to the editor, in the newspaper. (The political issue of Quebec has resulted in a good deal of political writing that is of great interest, as literature — passionate writing based on principle and deep conviction — that ought to be collected.) It may be in the repertoire of great films.

As an addict film-goer from early childhood, I would be an idiot or a liar if I did not admit that some of the films I can remember, especially in the post-World War II period, have claims as serious works of art, equal to any novel or poem. A course, or part of a course, which included Fellini's "La Strada" and "8-1/2," Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane," Chaplin's "Limelight" and other Chaplin films, Cocteau's "Blood of a Poet," Bergman's "Wild Strawberries," Bunuel's "The Exterminating Angel," and Tony Richardson's "A Taste of Honey" — or any one of these — as objects of study would not be far removed from the study of literature or inconsistent with it. This should be part of our interest, as great drama is. But that is not the sense in which film studies are now being introduced; they are not presented as a repertoire of great films, but merely as a medium and its characteristics.

Also there is no reason why film should not be used, even on an amateur level, as the medium in a classroom project, to heighten and explore the visual correlatives of poetry, or fiction, or drama. Filmed poems can be an educational tool, just as much as dramatic recitations can be. But here they do not replace literature, they support and serve it. (That is, if literature can serve films, by providing plots, then films can serve literature by serving as exploratory tools.) In fact, there are many valuable ways in which film and the sound media can support work in literature: by preserving valuable lectures, by preserving a record of

literary personalities, by bringing a background of information visually into the classroom.

However, literature is still literature, and there is a good deal of it already stashed away in the library. What should be studied, and how it should be studied, turns on the question of educated values, the kind of judgment — of the form and substance of human productions — that is continuous from the days of ancient Egypt to the present (and perhaps much earlier than ancient Egypt). If one is awake to this range of human achievement, then one can discriminate even among the barbarous sounds of the present, the rock-and-roll, the prime-time TV, the advertising, the faddish books, the popular films, the radio noise and the pornographic magazines, for something of interest. There may be little of interest. Entire areas may be wiped out, beyond redemption. The popular media have a very fast-changing, stampeding kind of history built into their constitution; and film studies, which have just come into the universities as a subject, find themselves in the predicament that their subject matter (the medium itself) is disintegrating under their eyes — into brutal violence and explicit sex acts on the screen, performed for an audience of teenagers — just when the experts were trying to institute a serious study of film techniques and to teach proper methods of film interpretation.

This is the everlasting story of popular entertainments. Since they are creatures of fashion rather than of lasting human concerns, they lose their audience in double-quick time when the fashions change: the Music Halls find themselves empty, dilapidated, abandoned, the gladiatorial fights become more brutal, the bear-baitings mercenary, the jugglers crude and inept, the melodramas hangovers from another age. McLuhan makes his prophecies, but a hundred years later people ask what he was talking about. TV? What was that? (Footnote here.)

So mass media studies now confront the literature of the past. And literature itself totters as it reconstructs itself upon the ruins of Romantic bourgeois art, an art which this century has violently rejected, yet to which it must constantly return for a redefinition of itself. However, there is no great cause for despair. The principle of art is perennial. And the various new programs — film and communications and so on — do little harm while they are in serious hands, or while there is a strong momentum in the arts to set them off. Actually, they open the mind of the traditional scholar to the turbulent atmosphere of the present. They may help us to adjust to the new definitions of art — as life process, as action and expression, as research into perception and knowledge — and they may sometimes be the only record we have of these ephemera. The condition of literature is today more often a problem, a question, than it is a static or traditional order. It may well be that film and the media of communication, by their challenge and contrast to the traditional studies, will show us how to think through some of our present problems.