

# *The Moment of the Novel and the Rise of Film Culture*

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THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE of the decades after the Second World War is often stereotyped as a backwater—a time of cold-war confrontation, political and sexual repression, suburban retrenchment, rampant consumerism, and cultural conservatism. We still see those years through the prism of the political upheavals and cultural experiments of the 1960s. Yet the literary generation that emerged during that period cast a long shadow over the second half of the twentieth century. This is self-evident for novelists like Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, and for poets like Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, but it is also true for critics like Lionel Trilling and other New York intellectuals. Their minds were formed by the artistic innovations of the twenties and the economic struggles of the thirties, but their influence was greatest during those first years of the cold war. By 1965, when Trilling published the last of his three main collections of essays, the revolutions of the sixties were beginning to fracture that quarrelsome band of intellectuals, as they divided much of the nation. The consensus he had articulated fifteen years earlier in *The Liberal Imagination* was breaking up, yet it remained part of the fabric of postwar culture. One key feature of that consensus was a bedrock trust in the large cultural significance of the novel and a widespread concern about whether it would survive.

Though great and important novels continue to be written, and occasionally become conversation pieces, there's no exact equivalent today to the faith and hope invested in the novel during the postwar years. Yet the novel was also widely seen as an endangered literary form. Critics and sociologists of the fifties were preoccupied with the effects of mass culture and commercial entertainment on traditional culture, and this concern parallels the current alarm about the impact of new media on literary culture—an impact, it is feared, that

imperils the very survival of the book. The postwar debate over the novel in many ways foreshadowed the current anxiety about the future of culture in an electronic world.

The pivotal role accorded to the novel went back almost a century to Flaubert and Henry James, yet the novel somehow became central to Trilling's political argument in *The Liberal Imagination*. The job of criticism, said Trilling in the preface, is to complicate our sense of the world, to resist sweeping ideologies and managerial solutions—as he put it, “to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty.” By liberalism he meant the whole progressive cast of mind from the turn of the century to the radicalism of the 1930s. The antidote to what he saw as the progressive commitment to social engineering, its mechanical conception of human needs, he argued, is literature, especially the novel, which he celebrated for its intricate investigations of the self, its dense underbrush of emotions, the “hum and buzz” of its social information, and its power of “moral realism.” The novel, Trilling said, has been “the most effective agent of the moral imagination. . . . It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety.” As such, the novel undermines our “moral righteousness,” grounded in abstract visions of social improvement. This was an odd case for Trilling to make in 1950, when the radical movements of the thirties had long since been left behind, but it became gospel for the decade that followed.

If Trilling's faith in the novel was partly an argument against the reductive views of the ideological left, the faith of others was a response to the scale of collective carnage witnessed in the war, the terrifying spectacle of inhumanity. For Mailer the death camps and the bomb had introduced scarily anonymous forms of death, massive and impersonal. The novel, on the other hand, ministered to a nostalgia for individuality, even heroism; it promised a more complex sense of the irrational depths of the psyche, which the war had luridly exposed. It offered the world a matchless understanding of both intimate and social relationships—of sex and love as well as class and

manners. This idea of the novel as the most delicate and expansive form of human representation had been put forward initially by novelists themselves, not critics. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the novel was a popular form that enjoyed no high cultural standing. With its catch-all content, serviceable prose, piquant characters, and relentless emphasis on what happens next, it was the upstart of the arts, the wild child, rowdy, undisciplined, and crowd pleasing. Far from being a vehicle of the moral imagination, it was widely seen as morally questionable, not only for the behavior of its characters, such as Defoe's Moll Flanders, but for its outright deceptions. Novels offered an invitation to self-indulgence, daydreaming. Abused by puritans and literalists for telling lies, early fictions masked themselves as authentic documents by real people. On the other hand, novels aiming directly at moral improvement were dismissed as mere women's reading, along with most romances. In 1856 George Eliot wrote a withering indictment, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," attacking such novels as romantic fantasies sugarcoated with ersatz learning and social color. Even Dickens, whom we now compare to Shakespeare for the volcanic vitality of his language and characters, could be belittled as a popular entertainer trafficking in melodrama and caricature.

Such criticism was rooted less in moral disapproval—Dickens was nothing if not a moralist—than in more refined notions of form and a demand for greater fidelity to real life, values best expressed in the letters of Flaubert and the essays and prefaces of Henry James. The James revival was crucial to the literary life of the postwar decades. Trilling's contribution was a far-reaching comparison of James and Dreiser, followed by essays on two neglected James novels, *The Princess Casamassima* and *The Bostonians*. There were also two resonant book-length studies by his Columbia colleagues Quentin Anderson and F. W. Dupee. We think of James as a formalist who resisted the knockabout methods of earlier novelists, instead upholding rigorous adherence to a narrative point of view, yet his frequent discussions of fiction can be boiled down to one leading principle: openness to experience. (This is also a key theme in his best fiction,

including *The Portrait of a Lady*, “The Beast in the Jungle,” and *The Ambassadors*.) Writing to students at the Deerfield Summer School who had invited him to speak about the art of the novel, James urged them to “do something with the great art and the great form; do something with life. Any point of view is interesting that is a direct impression of life.” They needed “to consider life directly and closely....It is infinitely large, various and comprehensive.”

That last phrase feeds into the postwar polemics pitting the novel against the lure and simplifications of ideology; Trilling simply echoed it in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*. D. H. Lawrence developed the same argument in the essays on fiction he wrote in the 1920s, especially “Why the Novel Matters” and “Morality and the Novel.” Many know the passage where he calls the novel “the one bright book of life,” but few recall its surprisingly Jamesian context. In both essays Lawrence is inveighing against writers who manipulate characters to press home their own outlook. “The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered,” he says. “Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality.” Insisting that “nothing is important but life,” he declares that “being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog.” The postwar cult of the novel came directly out of this vision of fiction as a holistic grasp of human experience.

Many postwar novelists shared this idealization of the novel. They celebrated it as an open form exploring fugitive emotions and intimate relationships. James Baldwin looked to James to inoculate himself against the racially inflected protest writing he saw in Richard Wright and Chester Himes. Ralph Ellison turned to modernists like Joyce for their experimental techniques, the way they deployed style itself, or multiple styles, as vehicles of vision. Still others, like Norman Mailer, wrestled endlessly with the great figures in American fiction between the wars, especially Hemingway, but in Mailer’s case

also naturalists like Dos Passos, Farrell, and Steinbeck. Alongside the revival of James, the postwar period saw the belated canonization of three major novelists of the twenties, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, who had long since completed their most important work. Is there another literary generation that struggled more openly with its predecessors? Mailer grappled with Hemingway throughout his career, as Baldwin kept returning to James. Social novelists like Cheever, O'Hara, and Richard Yates looked back to Fitzgerald, and all these writers were haunted by the specter of the modernist generation with its landmark achievements, which threatened to make their own work seem minor, futile, or derivative.

Competition with these precursors propelled their outsized ambitions as they reached for the brass ring of the Great American Novel. Where many English writers seemed content with a steady productivity, an expanding shelf of workmanlike fiction, Americans dreamed of some definitive work that would light up the national consciousness—*An American Tragedy*, *An American Dream*, *The Making of Americans*, *American Pastoral*. This exalted goal may explain why Ellison, who had come so close to it with *Invisible Man*, could never finish his second novel, or why Mailer in the 1950s projected an eight-volume novel around the dream of a frustrated man, a Leopold Bloom figure, imagining the exploits of a mythical hero “who would travel the world through many worlds, through pleasure, business, communism, church, working class, crime, homosexuality, and mysticism.” The residue of this dream can be found in *The Deer Park* and in his flamboyant miscellany of 1959, *Advertisements for Myself*, from which this description comes. There Mailer rescued two radically different stories from the ruins of the projected novel, “The Man Who Studied Yoga” and “The Time of Her Time.” But he embedded them in a raft of confessional prose that pointed to the scale of his plans and the depth of his failure. This singular collection is at once a monument to the cult of the novel and a document of its breakdown. The grail-like pursuit of the ultimate novel went hand in hand with ominous rumors of the death of the novel, a perennial theme in the postwar years. Writers worried they had arrived too

late; the banquet years were over, and only some crumbs were left on the table.

This fear can be gauged by many vehement assertions to the contrary. Two books appeared with the same anxious title, *The Living Novel*. The first, in 1947, was a collection of sparkling essays by the English man of letters V. S. Pritchett, going back to the beginnings of English fiction with Defoe and Fielding. His vibrant readings were meant to show they were still living works, at least for him, but these evocations said little about the current state of the novel. Ten years later, Granville Hicks edited a symposium of young contemporary writers attesting to the viability of their craft against formidable odds, especially the mass media. In Hicks's afterword, "The Enemies of the Novel," he indicted the "distractions" of the media in terms that could be applied to the Internet today, though he is referring mainly to radio.

Technology has opened the whole world to us, and has laid the problem of every part of it on our doorstep. Inattention becomes indispensable to survival. Like the housewife who keeps the radio on all day, we have to learn to hear only what we want to hear. But the danger is that we shall lose, or perhaps never acquire, the ability to pay attention to anything, to listen fully, with all our being.

In the same year, in an essay called "The Triumph of the Fact," Dwight Macdonald bemoaned "the depressing quantity of newspapers and magazines visible on any large newsstand" and argued that with so much information available, skimming had replaced deep reading; a deluge of journalistic fact had swamped the literary imagination. We have learned to read mechanically, he says—like a Mark IV calculator, an early form of the computer—ingesting a wide array of information. We don't have time "to bring the slow, cumbersome depths into play, to ruminate, speculate, reflect, wonder, *experience* what the eye flits over." This makes our reading "coarse, shallow, passive, and unoriginal." These are the very terms current critics use to

castigate online reading as a form of skimming and information gathering, broad in its reach, shallow in its grasp.

For Hicks the enemy of the novel is *distraction*, a fracturing or scattering of attention, that works against the concentration required for the reading of fiction.

Fewer and fewer individuals are both able and willing to pay attention to any work of art, and this is happening at a time when the serious novel is demanding more and more effort on the part of its readers....The novel has been shaped in our age by writers—Joyce, Proust, Mann, Faulkner—who demanded nothing less of their readers than full attention.

While all art is in some sense demanding—yes, attention must be paid—only the legacy of modernism makes this degree of engagement the precondition for major art, which, after all, can be ingratiating as well as exacting. Think of the American Songbook or the indigenous American musical. Behind the bruited death of the novel is a nostalgic quest for the serious yet popular novel, the work that once united masses and classes, keeping a large public mesmerized while working its own subtle wonders. Avid readers once lined up at the New York dock to get an early look at the new installment of a Dickens serial. But the modern figures Hicks invoked had helped sunder the art novel from the broader appeal of the popular novel. There was a fear that the novel was essentially a nineteenth-century form, refined into hard work by the early modernists. At stake was less the death of the novel than the loss of its audience, which by then was flocking to the movies to get the pleasures it had enjoyed in fiction, narrative color and drive, combined with a new visual immediacy. “To read a group of novels is these days a depressing experience,” wrote Leslie Fiedler, always the provocateur. “After the fourth or fifth, I find myself beginning to think of ‘The Novel,’ and I feel a desperate desire to sneak out to a movie.” Later, in an essay called “The End of the Novel,” Fiedler wondered whether “the reigning narrative art of the not-so-distant future may well be one appropriate to a post-literate culture.” He could not “conceive a human situation in which

stories are not somehow told," but they might not "continue much longer to be entrusted to print and bound between hard covers."

We can track the idealization of the novel and the fear that its readers are slipping away in essay collections by ambitious young novelists like Mailer and Gore Vidal, books like Mailer's groundbreaking *Advertisements*, his later *Cannibals and Christians*, and Vidal's collected essays of 1972, *Homage to Daniel Shays*. From *Esquire* Mailer reprints sensationally combative pieces that take on his contemporaries to clear a path for his own work. On the first page of *Advertisements* he declares his ambition "to settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time," yet he also testifies to his failure to do so. In the spirit of male competition—no women intrude—Mailer accuses his fellow novelists of cowardice or weak ambition; they aim too low, or else they settle into a groove and repeat themselves. Bellow, Salinger, and Baldwin—none of them seems genuinely cutting-edge, mapping new ground. Vidal in his fiction is "imprisoned in the recessive nuances of narcissistic explorations which do not go deep enough into himself, and so end as gestures and postures." To Mailer, his good friend is at his best in his essays—a judgment few would quarrel with today—and "he has the first requirement of an interesting writer—one cannot predict his direction." This restless quality he shares with Mailer, who, instead of trading on the success of his first book, had brought out two edgy novels that failed to find a large or receptive audience.

By the time Mailer published *Cannibals and Christians* in 1966, the leading note was bravado in the face of rejection. The prewar generation has passed from the scene and since the war, he says, "no writer succeeded in doing the single great work which would clarify a nation's vision of itself." At a low ebb of his reputation in the face of lethal attacks on *An American Dream*, Mailer is unconsciously preparing himself to take on that task—not in fiction but in a non-fiction novel, *The Armies of the Night*. Like other fiction writers who turned to journalism or memoir, including James Baldwin and Mary McCarthy, Mailer had been doing his best work as an essayist, an indication if not of the death of the novel then of its weak yet still



honorific cultural position. Like other writers of his generation, Mailer would claim the mantle of the novel for a new form of reportage.

Realistic fiction, he argues, “had never caught up with the rate of change in American life, indeed it had fallen further and further behind.” Nor is it equal to the horrors of impersonal extermination brought forth by deadly new forms of technology. Taking the measure of his contemporaries, he praises writers no longer precisely writing novels but something hard to fit into any category. “At his best,” he says of Kerouac, “his love of language has an ecstatic flux. To judge his worth it is better to forget about him as a novelist and see him instead as an action painter or a bard,” a teller of tales. In a remarkable passage, he characterizes Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* as “a book of pieces and fragments, notes and nightmarish anecdotes” written with the raw bile of “graffiti found on men’s room walls.” “It is prose written in bone, etched by acid, it is prose of harsh truth, the virulence of the criminal who never found his stone walls and so settles down on the walls of the john, it is the language of hatred unencumbered by guilt, hesitation, scruple, or complexity.” Inspired by Céline and Genet, this prose had begun to infiltrate Mailer’s own language, as seen in the very cadence of this evocation. Its hallucinatory intensity, sick humor, and moral shock had already influenced Mailer as he wrote *An American Dream*.

Vidal too was beginning to earn his spurs outside of fiction. His urbane and mocking essays resemble Mailer’s in that they are as much about him as about his subject. With what Mailer called his “brave and cultivated wit,” Vidal built up a persona that became his best, perhaps his only, character. The emergence of this nonfiction voice furnishes evidence of the novel’s sagging authority. Recent memoirs by the talented daughters of James Jones and William Styron document the strong but embattled trust in salvation through art those men shared with Mailer and Vidal, Baldwin and Kerouac, Bellow and Malamud. Vidal’s essays, like Mailer’s, idealize the novel yet mourn its decline, not because it’s not ambitious enough, as Mailer maintained, or because it hasn’t kept up with the times, or because the extremities of the war and the cold war had overtaken it, but

simply because the paying customers had moved on. Vidal had tried to use the novel to change the world, first with his openly gay novel, *The City and the Pillar*, in 1948, later with a series of political novels beginning with *Washington, D.C.* That early novel, he felt, had gotten him blacklisted by prim reviewers, so he turned to writing television plays instead. The later novels, though sardonic and politically provocative, were aimed more at the best-seller list, as if to track the audience to where it had fled. But where readers had really landed, he felt, was at the movies, like the easily bored Leslie Fiedler.

Starting from the awkward first essay, written in 1953, Vidal wonders whether the novel, partly under the pressure of film, had lost the general reader by abandoning naturalism and burrowing into the deeper layers of consciousness, where the camera could not follow but, as he saw it, neither could most readers. D. H. Lawrence had already made the same dire point about the elaborate inwardness of Proust; he questioned whether it did not mark the end of the novel as we knew it. This imagined death of the novel is a recurrent trope going back to the early days of the novel itself. In his essay on the “mythical method” of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot said flatly that “the novel ended with Flaubert and James,” though soon afterward he congratulated Fitzgerald on bringing something new to the American novel.

Each essay that follows in Vidal’s collection revisits the end of the novel in more sweeping terms, even as they add new inflections to the Vidal persona. Finally, in a 1967 piece on the French New Novel, he grandly sums it up.

The matter of fiction seems to be closed. Reading skills—as the educationalists say—continue to decline with each new generation. Novel reading is not a pastime of the young now being educated, nor, for that matter, is it a preoccupation of any but a very few of those who came of age in the last warm years of linear type’s hegemony.

His peroration lifts him to new rhetorical heights:

Our lovely vulgar and most human art is at an end, if not the end. Yet that is no reason not to want to practice it, or even to read it. In any case, like priests who have forgotten the meaning of the prayers they chant, we shall go on for quite a long time talking of books and writing books, pretending all the while not to notice that the church is empty and the parishioners have gone elsewhere to attend other gods, perhaps in silence or with new words.

In a subsequent essay—a pen-portrait of himself—Vidal waxes nostalgic about the literary scene of the 1940s, when he and his friends were the latest thing, “when the novel was very much alive, not yet displaced at the vulgar level by movies, at the highest by film.” Trying to occupy some middle ground combining serious intent with popular appeal, he saw himself being outflanked at both ends.

Is this really what happened? Had film jumped in where novels feared to tread, or was this simply the sour view from middle age, warm with youthful recollection, when the literary life seemed more innocent, and “it looked as if we were going to have a most marvelous time in all the arts”? Now he anticipated only a celebrity culture in which “novels command neither interest nor affection but writers do, particularly the colorful ones who have made powerful legends of themselves.” He was determined to flourish in this new order, with its relentless focus on personality and notoriety, and he deployed his good looks and waspish wit to become a recognizable talk-show figure and interview subject. (He once said that one should never turn down a chance to have sex or appear on television, and he said it on television.) In a patrician tone of world-weary sophistication, he cultivated a bemused exasperation at the spectacle of human folly. Before this persona took hold, Vidal had decamped for Hollywood, enjoying greater success there than novelists like Fitzgerald in the 1930s. While never a major screenwriter, he wrote or doctored movie scripts with the same solid craft he brought to historical fiction, live television drama, and the Broadway theater. This professionalism set him apart from Mailer, whose ventures into filmmaking were personal, improvised, and completely uncommercial.

How did it happen that movies displaced novels at both the high and low end at a time when novels still enjoyed immense prestige? Independent publishers had not yet been diluted by mergers or taken over by conglomerates, powerful book clubs bestrode middlebrow culture and promoted new titles, bookstores prospered and book review sections, bolstered by generous advertising, were featured in newspapers and magazines. The promotional power of Hollywood studios was certainly much greater than anything in publishing. There were movie theaters in every town and neighborhood; movie attendance peaked in 1946, before there were televisions in every home. Yet these were also difficult times for movie studios. The Justice Department forced them to give up monopolistic control of theater chains. The House Un-American Activities Committee hearings and the purge of leftists created a climate of fear that narrowed the pool of talent and serious subjects. The vogue of film noir reflected the undercurrent of anxiety, even hysteria, of the early cold war years, while competition from television pushed studios in the opposite direction, toward technical upgrades ranging from lavish color and widescreen to 3-D. But this roiling instability in itself explains nothing.

Movies and novels are more closely allied than any other cultural forms. The ways stories are told in films, through cutting and editing, with the camera (like any author) in control of the point of view, is more akin to fiction than to live theater, which relies heavily on longer scenes, extensive dialogue, elaborate but artificial sets, and a fixed angle of vision. While there are more stylized ways to make movies, storytelling has been as essential to film as to fiction, though the two forms do not always share common ground. It's hard to compress a full novel into the running time of a movie, especially a serious novel, yet films have at times improved on their originals. Fiction has provided an endless source of material for the film industry, including peerless works like John Ford's adaptation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Some of the linkage can be traced to the rich elaboration of individual characters in both realistic fiction and classic movies. The

arrival of sound in 1927 made possible not only a heightened realism, bolstered by talent imported from the theater, but also a cult of star personalities. This star chemistry dominated Hollywood cinema and developed independently in France, Germany, Italy, and Japan around actors as different as Jean Gabin, Marlene Dietrich, Emil Jannings, and Vittorio De Sica. In her seminal 1948 study of the aesthetics of film and fiction, *The Age of the American Novel*, the French critic Claude-Edmonde Magny compared these stars, who tend to project their recognizable traits into each role, to novelistic characters who break free of their surroundings and become mythical types. "The figures of Becky Sharp, Sam Weller, or Mr. Pickwick continue to be sharp and gripping even after we have forgotten the circumstances of their lives." Magny designates empathy as the vital center of both movies and novels: our ability, in the darkened space of the movie theater or the dream space of the novel, to step out of ourselves and identify with a fictional figure, often a character larger than life.

The seductive power of narrative, heightened by this leap of identification, accounts for striking parallels between the history of fiction and of film. Though it took off as a business enterprise and always remained a collective product, film too began outside official culture as popular amusement directed to the unwashed, often urban immigrants who knew little English. Its key techniques—cutting, editing, close-ups—were developed early. Yet its recognition as an art form was slow and laborious, partly because it became suspiciously popular but also because, like photography, it seemed little more than a mechanical reproduction of the given, a low-grade form of mimesis. Film arrived just as the creative advances of modernism were separating fiction, poetry, painting, and music from their most accessible nineteenth-century devices and hence from much of their popular following. Modernism itself was in part a reaction against the new mass culture, its commercialism, ease of consumption and lazy construction, its crowd-pleasing reliance on plotting and characterization.

As a technical achievement, film is a completely modern medium. Magny's book argues that its methods, including visual detail,

montage, and ellipsis, helped wean modern fiction from wordy, circumstantial storytelling, authorial commentary, and psychological analysis, toward more stark, hard-boiled forms of writing. It fostered a terse objectivity, even beyond Flaubert, that embeds meaning in action and visual description, in what people do rather than what they are said to be thinking. Her examples of this new cinematic fiction included Dos Passos and Hemingway, but also such unlikely bedfellows as Dashiell Hammett, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. Yet by and large, filmmakers were pouring old wine into new bottles, reclaiming the well-made story for a new medium, pulling in the mass audience that advanced fiction was leaving behind.

Thanks to the Depression, the reckoning was postponed until after the war. Under the pressure of social crisis, literature slipped back toward a reassuring or muckraking realism, a throwback to more conventional storytelling. Initially an avant-garde writer publishing in little magazines, Hemingway never again wrote a book as spare as *In Our Time* or *The Sun Also Rises*. Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* is much more filled out, more fully furnished, than *The Great Gatsby*. Faulkner never challenged the conventions of narrative more sharply than in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Even Steinbeck, supported by a stipend from his father, gained few readers with his early books before finding huge success with *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. The conditions of the Depression demanded that close social observation take precedence over creative experimentation, and one result was what Magny calls "cross-fertilization." Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Nathanael West could live and work in Hollywood while movies and novels could cross-pollinate each other, despite their rivalry and mutual mistrust. This was when the genres of popular fiction, such as westerns, crime stories, science fiction, and Gothic horror established themselves as perennial film genres, thanks to their intrinsic power as myth but also to the studios' industrial need to churn out pre-sold product.

The pressure of movies on the reading and writing of novels was not inevitable, nor was it necessarily harmful. New cultural forms and channels of communication do not invariably supplant what

precedes them, though they often alter their direction. The epic poem and the verse drama died when their social basis disappeared and their outlook lost contemporary meaning. They could not be reinvigorated, only weakly imitated. That seems to have happened to westerns today, now that we're so far removed from frontier individualism, though the current conflict over gun control suggests that the right to carry a gun and to use it, at least in self-defense, remains a touchstone of American male identity. Nevertheless, by the 1950s, the subtly revisionist westerns of John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Anthony Mann seriously complicated the violent themes of the genre. On the other hand, the invention of photography did not kill off painting but deflected it away from portraiture and realistic landscape, toward impressionism and abstraction. To many people's surprise, television did not dispatch radio but displaced many forms of radio that still thrived when I was a child, such as drama, especially soap opera. Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion* is a deliberate throwback to the abandoned "variety" show of old-time radio, complete with hokey sound effects.

The declining position of the novel can in part be attributed to the strong impact of visual imagery, and the visceral power of performance, which paradoxically can be stronger on screen than on the stage. Literacy is a challenge: reading can be arduous; movies pull us right in. It would be a stretch to lay the blame entirely at the door of the modernist project since most novelists, including the modernists themselves, grew more traditional after the 1920s. There were few Joyces and Becketts who held their own ground, especially in the United States, and such intransigent artists found their own loyal readerships, often in academe. Eventually, this academic sponsorship went on to nurture the postmodern novel, works by Pynchon, DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, so layered and self-conscious that it further widened the gap between fiction and the general audience. But even the retrenchment from modernism to realism after the war created its own problems, since it helped narrow the scope of fiction from wide social canvases and breathtaking formal ambitions to the more limited sphere of private life,

personal relations, thinly disguised autobiography, and unbridled introspection.

The audience for fiction made a comeback when sexual inhibitions were overturned. Writers like John Updike and Philip Roth had their first best-sellers when they tackled sex explicitly in *Couples* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, as Baldwin had done with *Another Country*. They had started out as art novelists, progeny of Henry James, but the 1960s gave them a much broader following. Yet with sex, too, the movies had an advantage; they could be as direct, as frank as the waning censorship would allow. With the arrival of wave upon wave of foreign films, movies had become a recognized art form, less of an outpost of popular culture—a position that fell increasingly to television. Like serious fiction, film moved onto a narrower terrain, becoming a niche culture once it was refined into a recognized art. Such a shift, though it shrank the audience, could also be liberating, a license to experiment and to be more creative. The work of Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Buñuel, Kurosawa, Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer, and many others ushered in one of film's periodic golden ages, which many of us imagined would last forever. The foreign filmmakers' work revived the experimental élan of 1920s filmmaking, those early avant-garde movements in France, Germany, and the Soviet Union; and this New Wave influenced American directors like Altman, Scorsese, and Penn. Moviemaking went through its second modernist turn, becoming the province of the insurgent young, who wanted something darker and more daring than Hollywood could supply.

The contraction of both fiction and film, the decline of their popular appeal, was in part an outgrowth of the extravagant hopes that had been invested in them. The dream that the novel could serve as "the one bright book of life," as expansive and various as life itself, had in some ways been fulfilled by the tradition of humanist cinema from Chaplin, Vigo, and Renoir to the classic Hollywood cinema of Capra, Lubitsch, Ford, McCarey, and Wyler. The neorealism of De Sica and Rossellini would help engender the best films of Satyajit Ray and John Cassavetes. Like good novels, these movies were made with unerring, often heartbreaking empathy, a profound



respect for the mysteries of human experience. They felt their way into real and complicated people without foreclosing them as good or evil, seeing them instead as creatures with mixed motives who never lose their ability to surprise us.

The pinched, often desperate years of the Depression and the war had created a profound longing for a fuller life, and this found expression in the narrative bounty and sheer human density of novels as well as movies. To critics like Trilling this openness to experience carried a political meaning as a counterweight to the ideologies spawned by the Depression. This makes it all the more surprising that he and his friends, with only a few exceptions, didn't take movies seriously, even when they grew addicted to them.

For young people, this fertile cultural ground became a theater of new possibilities. In the 1950s they dreamed of becoming knock-out novelists, kings of the hill. By the 1960s such energies were dispersed as the young threw themselves into political protest, dreamed of making movies or becoming Bob Dylan. This was the moment of what Susan Sontag later called "cinophilia," which made deep inroads in a literary culture whose crown jewel was the novel. But even as the literary life was shrinking, an astonishing range of novels continued to be written, reviewed, and sometimes read. Creative writing programs exploded; it looked as though writers might one day outnumber readers. Just as the first English novelists—Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett—were strikingly unlike each other, the very notion of the novel continues to cover a vast territory today, from spy novels and romance novels to growing-up stories and metafiction, to say nothing of the novelistic techniques infusing nonfiction.

In the closing pages of his essay "Art and Fortune," Trilling frets about the large artistic claims that now weighed upon the novel. "The novel was better off when it was more humbly conceived than it is now," he says, when it seemed to unfold as fortuitously as life itself. "The novel achieves its best effects of art often when it has no concern with them." The very cult of the novel, along with a certain awe before the achievements of earlier generations, may have helped

undo it. "The overvaluation of love is the beginning of the end of love," he says. "The overvaluation of art is the beginning of the end of art." Instead, Trilling muses, perhaps "the headlong, profuse, often careless quality of the novel, though no doubt wasteful, is an aspect of its bold and immediate grasp upon life." The old concern about mass culture and the death of the novel seems like a mild rehearsal for today's anxieties about the death of the book and the fate of print and publishing. The forms of distraction, the demands on our attention, have increased exponentially, have perhaps even changed the configuration of the human mind, yet novels and films, like storytelling itself, have so far survived the digital wave. In their range of characters and situations, their psychological acumen, their loving attention to manners and morals, both novels and films became the modern heirs to that profligate human abundance we celebrate in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Cervantes. We still need stories to illuminate our condition, however they may come our way.

Mainstream culture's current fixation on superhero films and TV series can be traced back to this golden age — specifically to the summer of 1986, 30 years ago. The superhero comics of the 1970s and 1980s had already worked hard to convince the public that stories about private detectives wearing capes and masks could be more serious than a portly Adam West dressed up as Batman might have suggested. The X-Men scripts written by Chris Claremont emphasised the growing pains of the troubled cast of misfits; John Byrne's clean, eye-catching artwork brought Hollywood glamour to the pages of The Fantastic Four. But two mini-series published by DC Comics raised the medium to the level of literature, and they both hit newsstands and comic shops within weeks of each other. The Moment of Truth is the seventh novel by Jude Watson in the Star Wars Jedi Quest book series. To fulfill their duties to the Republic, a Jedi must remain focused, and not be distracted by personal conflicts. The tense Master-Padawan relationship between Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker puts this resolve to the test. The normally headstrong Anakin is plagued by feelings of doubt and guilt for not preventing the death of a Jedi Council member. Obi-Wan has his reservations, seeing himself as a less