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This is excellent work, perhaps the most impressive I've gotten on this film. The argument is well organized and the evidence is in detail and presented so that the reader is

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

is selected and most beautifully to your conclusions. My own ultimate feeling is that the play is better read than seen on either stage or screen. I admired the film, though and characters lost some of their nightmareish power when they were put in front of me rather than in my head. Don't know what you can make of that!

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" is, to my mind, the first outstanding example of a major work of fiction being captured more effectively by the film medium than the one for which it was originally intended. This, along with its shattering of every written rule of Hollywood propriety, makes it one of the most monumental films ever produced by American artists.

"Virginia Woolf" improved upon Edward Albee's undeniably arresting play. What was on stage little more than a loud clash of badly orchestrated symbols has become, on the screen, a drama of character and characters- a story about people who, you are surprised to discover, you genuinely care about and sympathize with as damned and suffering human beings.

All the credit for this improvement should not be given to Ernest Lehman, Mike Nichols, Richard Burton, and Elizabeth Taylor; its producer-screen writer, director, and star performers. Although much of it does go to them, some of the credit must be given to the movie medium itself. One of the cliches of critics is that a film should never be merely a photographed stage play, that its capacity for large scale action and easy movement through time and space must never be thwarted.

But the truth is that film is a marvelously flexible medium, with an unparalleled ability to probe deeply as well as to range widely. It can reveal, as stage never can, the emotional overtones of a twitch, or a grunt, or a glint in the eye. More importantly, films can draw you into an essentially claustrophobic setting and make you suffer in a way that the stage, which keeps its audience at a distance, never can. It is this power that Nichols and Lehman exploit here to its utmost limits.

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" is an "honest, corrosive film of great power and final poignancy," said Life magazine. Lehman's screen play differs very little from Albee's original work, which deals with an all night drinking bout and the savage conversations which occur during it between two college professors and their wives. The central conflict occurs between George and Martha (Taylor and Burton), who use the younger couple (Sandy Dennis and George Segal), as well as each other, while playing their brutally damaging "games." The major theme involved is concerned with ~~Edward~~ Albee's startling concepts about illusion and reality. The origin of the title is probably due to the fact that Virginia Woolf herself dealt with this subject in her fiction.

Martha, as her husband says, is the "original game girl," and, out of resignation, self-contempt, or the realization that she is punishing herself more than she is him, George plays along with her games all night long. The younger couple's marriage is wracked with the same self-deception and mutual exploitation. Nick's determination to stay is motivated by opportunism, both sexual and professional. With dawn comes, certainly not peace, but at least the faint beginning of self-knowledge and some hope of future mutual co-operation.

The quality of some of the personal secrets with which the games are concerned is not particularly interesting or even believable, but the basic situation definitely is. All of us have spent tricky, dangerous, potentially devastating evenings like this one, and it is Albee's artful intensification

of the processes and perils of self-revelation under pressure that gives his work substance and value.

"Virginia Woolf"'s intended audience, then, is anyone who is guilty of deceiving himself about the nature of himself and the world around him, and this is true of everyone to some extent. Albee's know-thyself plea for confronting reality is meant for everyone, but unfortunately everyone is not capable of understanding his play. Lehman cut most of the obscure references from the original play, and the film's presentation of its theme is more simplified and direct, but it still does not get through to the masses, whose main interest seems to be in the sensational Burton-Taylor duo and the well-publicized abundance of obscenity in the movie's dialogue.

Some of the phrases are rather shocking as they spurt from enormous mouths seen in close-ups on the large screen. According to a Life count, "Virginia Woolf" contains "eleven 'Goddamns,' seven 'bastards,' five 'sons of bitches,' and such assorted graphic phrases as 'screw you' and 'up yours.'" Words are ^{the} essential weapons with which the film's four people violently and drunkenly deal with one another.

European films have been boldly dealing with sex and breaking taboos for a long time. But with "Woolf," the American movie industry enters an era where there are virtually no restrictions at all on dialogue. This is as it should be. The language in "Woolf" is essential to the fabric; it reveals who the people are and how they live.

The really outrageous denunciations of "Woolf" presuppose that there are clearly definable things that an artist cannot say or

portray without giving unforgivable offense to pious ears. This idea is not in the mainstream of the contemporary theological or artistic tradition, and it is grossly unfair to apply it to the art of film.

The moral impact of an art form depends, not on its subject matter, but on how soundly and coherently the artistic vision transcends the subject matter. In an age inundated with mass entertainment of no artistry or transcendence, we can no longer afford the luxury of clinging to the pious myth that it is possible to pass instant moral judgement on artistic expression without knowing anything about it. And many of "Virginia Woolf"'s critics do not indeed know anything about its artistic expression.

The Catholic Legion of Decency, which condemned "The Pawnbroker" only a year ago, did not ask for a single cut in "Virginia Woolf," and found it "morally unobjectionable" in its ratings. One Catholic censor is on record as saying, "There is something being said here (in "Woolf") which is quite valid and, in its own terms, very moral. The picture got the Motion Picture Association of America's stamp of approval, too, after one of the most heated controversies ever. It is apparent that something very important happened to the motion picture industry with its approval of "Virginia Woolf." The film was clearly a test case, and the decision which was reached about it, allowing its specific sexual scenes and raw, obscene language, on grounds of valid artistic expression, has set a precedent of tremendous importance to the future of film in America.

Why is it that a play which was intended for production on the stage succeeds so remarkably on the screen? What are "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"'s filmic characteristics, and why do these characteristics lend themselves more appropriately for expression by the film medium than by that of the theater? There seems to be little doubt in the minds of "Woolf"'s reviewers that the movie is more effective than the play, that it gets its theme across more effectively.

In spite of all the talk in "Woolf," Mike Nichols makes his film move- not only because it wanders ^{OUT} of the one room set of the play, but also because of Nichols' skillfull use of the camera. Of course, much of the credit is deserved by Haskell Wexler for his stunning black and white photography, the outdoor scenes of which were shot at Smith College, but, *as stated earlier,* the film medium itself should perhaps receive much of the credit.

On screen, "Virginia Woolf" has a reality, a depth, and a humanity that were not present on stage. There the actors were merely mouthpieces for Albee's clever savagery. Here they are characters who appear to have a life beyond that which is expressed in the course of the drama. One can imagine their past and speculate on their future. Most important, the undercurrent of rough affection that George and Martha communicate to each other serves as a poignant counterpoint to their ripping, slashing battles.

When, toward the end, Martha confesses that, despite her indiscretions, despite her cruelty, the only man she can possibly love is George, one suffers an awesome moment of terror and

tenderness compounded. It is much too good, too completely realized a piece of work to be credited to Liz Taylor's director. She fully deserves all the praise which she will inevitably receive. But more about the excellent performances later.

The play, which ran around three hours, was cut to a movie that runs slightly over two, and little has been lost and a lot gained in the cutting. An in-depth look at the many subtle differences between the film and play versions of "Virginia Woolf" will be profitable both in terms of explaining the film's appropriateness of medium in this particular case, and also in understanding the fundamental differences between the two mediums of artistic expression involved.

One of the most immediately striking differences between the screen and stage versions of the play is the use ^{of} sets other than the single living room. Lehman has conceived these settings so brilliantly that they seem to intensify the viewer's experience. The use of the outdoors is particularly effective, as a result of both its effectiveness in getting the author's message across, and its beautiful rendering by cameraman Wexler. In a crucial scene, that of George telling Nick the story of the boy who killed his parents accidentally, the outdoors is used to great advantage. The opening shot of this sequence, what would have been the opening of Act Two on stage, is marvelous. It is a long shot of George taken from Nick's position on the steps of the house. George is seated on a rope swing extending from a huge tree smoking a cigarette, and smoke swirls ~~around~~ can be seen rising into the eerie light of

the early morning hours. The mood of quiet intensity with which George will tell his story has been set. The telling of it^{self} is done in two close-up shots of great length of George framed by the dark bark of the huge tree he is leaning against. The great size of the tree seems to reflect the importance of the "bergin" story, yet it's dominance in the frame also seems to say that the man beneath it is but a infinitesimal speck of the universe's dust, that his problems are for only him to face, drawing on the great strength of nature. The static position of the camera is forgotten as George's strange story is unravelled. Other instances of outdoor setting used very effectively are at the opening of the film and at the beginning of the play's third act, when Martha wanders over the campus in search of George. It does indeed seem more fitting that George be missing amongst the huge dark trees of the campus than in his own house.

Another of Lehman's fine additional settings is the car, in and around which are said many important things. The most striking use of the car is as a symbol of Martha's rage, and George's desperation. One of the most startling cuts in the film is from the living room to the car screeching wildly around a corner, a perfect symbol ^{of} ~~for~~ the growing wild desperation in George. When, after much cruel game playing by Martha and whining by Honey, George is ordered to stop the car, a quick cut is made to George's foot stomping on the brake, in close-up. This image and its accompanying wild screech jolt the viewer and prepare him for the unbridled violence to come in the road house.

Even if you're aware of it, it strangely intensifies the effect.

The road house where the two couples stop to "dance" is yet another instance of imaginative variation on the play. This variation is, of course, necessary in film, which can, and must, move through time and space with a fluidity impossible on stage. After the playing of "Get the Guests" accomplishes its cruel end, George and Martha declare "total war" on each other after several startling revelations are made to the viewer. This scene takes place outside the roadside bar, where striking use is made of the parking lot lights. The framing of the raging actors with the glaring lights here is superb. As George and Martha stalk back and forth, hurling obscenities and horrifying insults at each other, the glare of the lights which passes from one side of the screen to another, and is sometimes momentarily hidden behind their heads in close-up, injects the nightmarish quality of the scene into the offended eye of the viewer.

In addition to the campus, car, and road house, Lehman used other rooms of the house as well as the living room. The opening scene in the kitchen is quite effective, establishing Martha's vulgarity by having her talk while chewing on a piece of chicken, another Lehman addition. At times the camera follows the characters around the house and at others cuts quickly from one room to another.

The screen play cut much that was said in the play without changing the essential flavor of Albee's work. So as not to lose those viewers who would never have gone to see the play, Lehman cut many of George's pedantic allusions. Examples are:

"Dylan Thomas," "Parnassus," "ambaphid," "Sacre du Printemps," "methodology," "pragmatic accomadation," "Illyria," "Gomorraah," "abstruse," and "recondite." Even though the raw flavor of the dialogue was preserved, as it had to be, many obscene expressions were left out of the screenplay, or at least changed to something not quite as blatant. Expressions such as "right ball," "prick," "personal screwing machine," were left out; "Jesus Christ"'s were changed to "Goddamn"'s; and Martha's "screw you," which was hurled at George, but, as a result of a marvelous cut, ^{an accidental} became a greeting for the guests, is changed to "Goddamn you." Such changes ~~could have been~~ made by Lehman in anticipation of the charges of indecency which he ultimately encountered, but were probably simply a matter of personal taste to him, since they made no real change in the movie.

Many other minor changes and cuts in dialogue were made in the screenplay. Many of these were not of great importance, and their omission simply shortened a powerful film and cut some of the needless distractions which might ^{have} confused the viewer. No references are made to the difference in age between George and Martha, to George's once having been head of the history department during the War, or to Honey's uneasiness concerning dirty words. An interesting addition to the film is the fleeting insinuation of George's homosexuality made when he puts his arm around Nick on the couch, talking of a generation of "divine young men," but it becomes apparent that this is but another of his little games designed to "get the guest."

Albee's third act of "Virginia Woolf" was changed a bit more than the others. George's taunts and accusations about Martha's incestuous feelings for her father, the college president, have been cut. The strong application of litany and mystery that almost spoiled the third act of the play is made much briefer and less emphatic, now seeming to be entirely in keeping. In their adaptation, Lehman and Nichols tend to emphasize Albee's artful intensification of the processes and perils of self-revelation under pressure. This glosses over, as quickly as possible, that weak and rather sophomoric philosophizing that Albee emphasizes in the end of the play. This is still present in the film, but less significantly; less jarring, is the letdown than it was in stage version.

Another important change in the move from stage to screen is that what was Martha's play has become George's movie. In contrast to Arthur Hill's frayed, acid Broadway George, Richard Burton's is a haggard man, tortured and depleted by the cruelty he must inflict and receive as he and Martha flash from one savage game to the next, because that is the way things go with them. In contrast to the play, the movement of the film belongs more to George than to the others, and what little sympathy we can muster goes to him.

One of the most serious criticisms voiced against the film version of "Virginia Woolf" was that of Henry Hewes in the Saturday Review. It was his contention that the film suffered from a "cinematographic failure to co-ordinate aural and visual dramatically. Concentration shifted from where our ears would have it go to where our eye leads us." What Hewes does not

is
 seem to comprehend^{is} the superiority of the film medium in dealing with realistic situations. Allardyce Nicoll, to pit one critic against another, has said that "the realistic theater has lost its strength; we must reject naturalism, the cheap and ugly simian chatter of familiar conversation." If the conversation of "Virginia Woolf" is not "cheap and ugly," then what is? "The conventions of the stage," are, according to Nicoll, "its essential nature as a bold, imaginative, poetic, or spectacular illusion." Yet it is illusion that "Virginia Woolf" seeks to destroy, and illusion will never be destroyed by illusion. It can be destroyed, however, by film, whose most powerful tool is realism, whose actors are not the types that appear on stage, but real people whose faults can capture our sympathy and interest.

Since the film version of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" seems more effective in getting across Albee's message, some time should be spent on the individual components which blend together in defining the cinematographic approach. Film is a composite art, and its effectiveness in particular instances can be seen as the sum total of its various parts.

It has already been said that Haskell Wexler's photography is magnificent. His use of shadow in black and white is of particular importance since these colors seem to bring to life Albee's all-important distinction between reality and illusion. The glaring lights inject truth into George and Martha's encounter in the road house parking lot; their grim reality forces them to "snap" out of their fantasy world. A neon sign flashes

off and on just to the side of George's head as he speaks one of the most openly hopeless lines of the movie, "I don't believe you...There is no moment any more...when we could come together." During the wild fight which builds from this remark, George threatens, "Be careful Martha...I'll rip you to pieces." Her reply, in which her bedraggled face is seen against a black background is "You aren't man enough... You haven't got the guts." The shadows which play within their bedroom window state the fact of adultery to George's and the viewers eyes, but tastefully. The many shots which capture the illusionistic quality of the night form a superb counterpoint to its grim reality. Nick and Honey are completely shattered by George's cruel exposure of her hysterical pregnancy, but afterwards they are picked up by Martha on a road whose lighting came straight from "Hamlet." The play of the moon's weird light along the bushes as Martha goes in search of George and the play of shadows on Nick's face as he tells George the darkest secrets of his marriage are further examples of Wexler's imaginative use of light and dark, of reality and illusion. Perhaps the most striking example of this can be seen in the film's opening feet, though. The opening shot of the moon and clouds, coupled with the beautifully poignant score by Alex North, capture the viewer immediately, introducing him quietly, uneasily to the violence that follows.

Wexler also uses cinematic trick photography to great advantage. The dissolve from George and Martha to the fallen leaves of the campus, also at the beginning before a word is spoken, is a wonderfully sad summary of the long years of

their marriage and its ultimate timelessness. Zoom is used perfectly in the scene where Martha tells the story of her boxing match with George. The camera follows him slowly through the house while she tells the story he cannot stand to hear. He reaches for a gun in a closet as a swinging lightbulb plays weirdly on his face. Returning to the living room to play his sadistic trick on both the three people there and those in the audience, he points the gun at Martha and the cut is to Honey. The camera zooms into her face to catch the stark fear written all over it- a perfect use of a device which is often misused because of its seemingly dramatic effect. Used here, it is frighteningly dramatic.

Haskell also masters the use of focus. The foreground is out of focus when Nick gazes at George on the swing from the porch. This serves not only to direct the viewer's attention to the marvelous image of George and the strange fog which engulfs him, but also reminds one that Nick is stinking drunk. In the film's final shots, the growing light outside, seen through a window in back of Martha and George, becomes more apparent as the camera gets closer to them, ultimately fixing itself in extreme close-up of their clasped hands, framed against the outdoor background, which is out of focus. They have come a step closer to reality, but it has been a long night's journey for them, one which they will have to make many more times before they can see themselves and their world clearly.

Wesley Haskell's final outstanding ability with the camera is seen in the framing of his shots. His sense of balance is

nearly always perfect. The extremely suggestive dancing scene is handled excellently. As Nick and Martha frug, their sex act in motion is framed between the heads of their wife and husband, providing a blatantly powerful reminder to the viewer of just exactly what is going on here. In another of the dance shots, the camera is on Nick, but Martha's presence is emphasized by her flailing arm in the upper corner of the screen. The tricky shot used in watching them leave the bar, taken through the round window of the next room, is also effective, bridging a gap where George and Martha by necessity must keep their barbed tongues in check.

The camera itself becomes jerky during scenes of great violence, thus contributing to their effect. This, of course, is the work of editor Sam Osteen and, ultimately, director Nichols. The camera actually rocks while George attempts to strangle Martha, and it, too, takes steps as George walks toward the house on two ~~occasions~~. The editing is excellent; it makes the film move. "The foundation of film art is editing," as Pudovkin has said, and in "Virginia Woolf" it is of tremendous importance, due to the special nature of the material. It is on drawing the audience into the claustrophobic settings of the film and making ~~them~~ suffer, as the characters do themselves, that Nichols has put the emphasis. The editing has relieved much of the burden of sustaining the film from the dialogue, accomplishing this end in a number of ways.

The screen image has been freed from ^{the} dialogue. The camera then plays on faces other than those of the speaker, and, as

a result, injects more meaning into the speaker's words by capturing another's reaction to it. The reactions of Honey and Nick to things that Martha and George say and do are of particular importance in shaping the audience's views because their reactions, at least initially, are what ours would be if we were suddenly thrown into this absurd world of "fun and games." The cut is to Nick's face when Martha screams "WHADD'YA WANT?" at the top of her lungs from upstairs. A Lehman addition to the screen play works beautifully soon afterwards when George asks Nick if he has any kids and the immediate cut is to Honey, who has heard the question as she was coming down the stairs. Her dazed hurt expression alerts the viewer to her later admission that she does not want any children, a result of her husband's lack of interest and affection and her own insecurity stemming from the "puffed up" condition that led to her marriage.

When people are at their angriest the cutting gets the quickest. After Martha has made insinuations to Nick about his being impotent, and on top of it has begun to order him around, he reaches the boiling point, and the cut to him screaming "STOP THAT!" explodes onto the screen. But series of quick cuts are made many times when the argument has not yet reached its highest peak to indicate the back-and-forth type fight which is typical of children. This occurs when Martha and George bicker over the color of their "son's" eyes, or when George begins spouting Latin while at the same time Martha is telling an idealized version of their son's story.

Objects are used as effectively as faces in the cutting; they too are expressive, adding to the dialogue. The speedy flash of flame with which Nick lights Martha's cigarette after George has refused to, George's breaking of the liquor bottle after being attacked by Martha, the pouring of liquor into Nick's glass by George, and the shot of the car wheels screeching ^{after} ~~George's~~ ^{George's} wife has mentioned "bergin," are all quick cuts, taken in extreme close-up. The images the objects present are striking in their impact.

Editing is also effective in bridging what few gaps in time and space are necessary in the film. The instance where George and Martha are brought from bedroom to living room through cutting to a close-up of George pouring a drink in the living room is perfect. The symmetry of the jump through space is completed masterfully when Martha repeats the same question downstairs that she had asked upstairs, the second time in the past tense, "Why didn't you want to kiss me?" While the image on the screen is Martha wandering over the dark campus looking for George, Nick's voice is heard. One still has the idea that she is out in the middle of nowhere, but an abrupt cut to Nick sitting on the well lit porch a few feet later bridges the imagined gap in space rather startlingly.

The music, composed and directed by Alex North, is hauntingly beautiful. It has a lyrical quality which often helps smooth over the horror of what has occurred between its appearances, rather than to put them in their place. It is sweet, sad, and melancholy, featuring an excellent guitar player who usually

states the theme. It comes to the front during the film's major transitional stages, which were the act breaks on stage. Further use occurs during those rare occasions when the characters fall silent, especially when they are alone. It is some of the finest theme music I have ever heard; it really got to me. M.A. Merrick's sound is generally excellent. Good use is made of off-screen sounds juxtaposed with screen image. Particularly striking was Martha's drunken, witchy laugh which rose from a long-shot just after the title had appeared on the screen.

The acting was superb. It was, in my opinion, the best of both Elizabeth Taylor's and Richard Burton's careers. Taylor changed her light, girlish voice into a reedy, coarse contralto for her role as Martha, and the effect was excellent. Burton's was the command performance, however. He used his special gift for angry naturalism to a perfect end. He was perfectly cast, full of sneering, searing, simpering life. Sandy Dennis was great as well- a perfect Honey. It was not what she did, but what she was- a queasy, dazed, "funny bunny" whose every note was a linker. It is possible that she made her role just a touch more attractive, less pathetic, than it should have been, however. Nick, played by George Segal, was adequate. He was to be hated, and he was, more than anyone else. Mike Nichols' film direction debut was amazing, coming on the heels of his Broadway infallibility. He simply could not do anything wrong.

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" cost Warner Brothers seven and a half million dollars to produce. It is the most expensive black and white, non-spectacle film ever produced. Is the film worth it? The conclusions reached in this paper say it is.

"Virginia Woolf"'s revolutionary characteristics have been examined. It has been proven that its subject is filmic, and that the film overshadows the play. "Virginia Woolf" uses the language of film, the language of the real world. It builds its tremendously powerful total effect by a composition of visual details which were skillfully selected and welded together by creative editing. As a result, its purpose was brilliantly accomplished and its intended audience was delightfully surprised with its affirmation of the powers of cinematic art. The subject matter of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" and the way in which it has been artistically expressed, creating a total experience for its viewers, give great cause for optimism in considering the future of film in the United States. Edward Albee wept after seeing his play brought to life on the screen. Maybe we should weep, too- for joy.