It’s natural today to speak of “audio and visual aids” to teaching, for we still think of the book as norm, of other media as incidental. We also think of the new media—press, radio, movies, TV—as MASS MEDIA & think of the book as an individualistic form.

Individualistic because it isolated the reader in silence & helped create the Western “I.” Yet it was the first product of mass production.

With it everybody could have the same books. It was impossible in medieval times for different students, different institutions, to have copies of the same book. Manuscripts, commentaries, were dictated. Students memorized.

Instruction was almost entirely oral, done in groups. Solitary study was reserved for the advanced scholar. The first printed books were “visual aids” to oral instruction.

Before the printing press, the young learned by listening, watching, doing. So, until recently, our own rural children learned the language & skills of their elders. Learning took place outside the classroom. Only those aiming at professional careers went to school at all.

Today in our cities, most learning occurs outside the classroom. The sheer quantity of information conveyed by press-mags-film-TV-radio far exceeds the quantity of information conveyed by school instruction & texts. This challenge has destroyed the monopoly of the book as a teaching aid & cracked the very walls of the classroom, so suddenly, we’re confused, baffled.

In this violently upsetting social situation, many teachers naturally view the offerings of the new media as entertainment, rather than education. But this view carries no conviction to the student.

Find a classic which wasn’t first regarded as light entertainment. Nearly all vernacular works were so regarded until the 19th century.

Many movies are obviously handled with a degree of insight & maturity at least equal to the level permitted in today’s textbooks. Olivier’s Henry V & Richard III assemble a wealth of scholarly & artistic skill which reveal Shakespeare at a very high level, yet in a way easy for the young to enjoy.

The movie is to dramatic representation what the book was to the manuscript. It makes available to many & at many times & places what otherwise would be restricted to a few at few times & places. The movie, like the book, is a ditto device. TV shows to 50,000,000 simultaneously. Some feel that the value of experiencing a book is diminished by being extended to many minds. This notion is always implicit in the phrases “mass media,” “mass entertainment”—useless phrases obscuring the fact THAT English itself is a mass medium.

Today we’re beginning to realize that the new media aren’t just mechanical gimmicks.
for creating worlds of illusion,  
but new languages  
with new & unique powers of expression.  
Historically, the resources of English have been shaped & expressed in constantly new & changing ways.  
The printing press changed, not only the quantity of writing, but the character of language & the relations between author & public. Radio, film, TV pushed written English towards the spontaneous shifts & freedom of the spoken idiom. They aided us in the recovery of intense awareness of facial language & bodily gesture. If these “mass media” should serve only to weaken or corrupt previously achieved levels of verbal & pictorial culture, it won’t be because there’s anything inherently wrong with them. It will be because we’ve failed to master them as new languages in time to assimilate them to our total cultural heritage. These new developments, under quiet analytic survey, point to a basic strategy of culture for the classroom. When the printed book first appeared, it threatened the oral procedures of teaching, and created the classroom as we now know it. Instead of making his own text, his own dictionary, his own grammar, the student started out with these tools. He could study, not one, but several languages. Today these new media threaten, instead of merely reinforce, the procedures of this traditional classroom. It’s customary to answer this threat with denunciations of the unfortunate character & effect of movies & TV, just as the comicbook was feared & scorned & rejected from the classroom. Its good and bad features in form & content, when carefully set beside other kinds of art & narrative, could have become a major asset to the teacher. Where student interest is already intensely focused is the natural point at which to be in the elucidation of other problems & interests. The educational task is not only to provide basic tools of perception, but to develop judgment & discrimination with ordinary social experience. Few students ever acquire skill in analysis of newspapers. Fewer have any ability to discuss a movie intelligently. To be articulate & discriminating about ordinary affairs & information is the mark of an educated man. It’s misleading to suppose there’s any difference between education & entertainment. This distinction merely relieves people of the responsibility of looking into the matter. It’s like setting up a distinction between didactic & lyric poetry on the ground that one teaches, the other pleases. However, it’s always been true that whatever pleases teaches more effectively.