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| Textual Features of the Russian Screenplay |

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TEXTUAL FEATURES OF THE RUSSIAN SCREENPLAY

This paper examines the value of Russian screenplays (both adapted and original) as verbal texts, and how they relate to other text types.

Key words: *screenplay, pre-text, after-text, development, textual features, interpretation*

Сценарий как текст

В статье рассматриваются российские сценарии (адаптированные и оригинальные) как вербальные тексты в их отношении к другим типам текста.

Ключевые слова: *сценарий, претекст, пост-текст, развитие действия, текстуальность, интерпретация*

Russian text has witnessed the concept of cinema journey from *Cinéma* to *kinukha* (the flicks), from *illusion theatres* to ‘collective illusion’ (a term coined by Merab Mamardashvili), and has been described and referred to as ‘electric daydream’ (Alexander Blok), ‘something worse than a nightmare’ (Vladimir Makanin), ‘communal product of cultural savages’ (Kornei Chukovsky), and ‘*Cinema: My Life*’ (Yuri Levitansky). The screenplay has been defined in Russian scholarship in widely varying ways — from viewing it as a new type of literature (a new *genre* for some scholars) to denying it the status of a literary text altogether. Some treat it as a type of drama and refer to it as *cinematic drama*.

In 1929, Sergei Eisenstein wrote: “A screenplay is a code.”¹ It is my opinion that this code is yet to be truly unraveled for. Despite an immense variety of texts being dissected by linguists, these scholars have not yet properly addressed the screenplay as a literary medium. Russian scholars have largely ignored screenplays, viewing them as little more than pre-texts for films. This is especially surprising when we consider the fact that such well-known Russian authors as Leonid Andreyev, Isaak Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Tolstoy, Yuri Tynyanov, Evgeni Shvarts, Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Nabokov and scores of others have been involved in writing film scripts.

The gap caused by the dearth of linguistic scholarship on film scripts has been filled with stereotypical opinions concerning their textual features. Screenplays were supposed to be concise, entirely

“visual” and, therefore, purportedly devoid of any reflective passages or expressions of uncertainty. However, if we look at screenplays without any preconceived ideas, we’ll discover ample evidence to the contrary: film scripts frequently use various kinds of repetitions and a whole assortment of means to express uncertainty. Obviously, not everything in a screenplay is intended to translate onto the screen; for example:

Mother was different, not the young woman I remember from my childhood. Yes, she is my mother, but she is older — the way I am used to seeing her now, in my adulthood, when we occasionally meet. <...> Then she called the boy but he wouldn’t obey, and she was not angry at him for it. I was trying to catch her glance, and when she turned I saw her eyes, she was looking at the children with such overpowering eagerness to save and protect that I had to look down. I remembered that look in her eyes. I wanted to run out to her and mumble something sweet and tender, ask for forgiveness, bury my face in her wet hands, feel like a child again, when everything is yet to come, when anything is possible...

(*The Mirror*, 1975; Wrs: Andrey Tarkovsky, Aleksandr Misharin, Dir: Andrey Tarkovsky)

To further quote Sergei Eisenstein:

“<...> We do not accept any shackles in visual representation of facts.

<...> The screenplay sets the emotional atmosphere. The director provides his visual solution.

¹ Eisenstein, Sergei *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, Moscow: Iskusstvo. 1964. P. 46.



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*And the scriptwriter is free to choose his own language.
The more fully his intent is expressed, the more perfect will
be its verbal representation.*

And thus more specifically literary.

<...> The scriptwriter puts: 'Deathly silence'.

*The director uses: Still close-ups. The battleship's bow
pitching silently and darkly. The St. Andrew's flag unfurled.
Perhaps a dolphin leaping. And low-flying seagulls"².*

Russian screenplays contain terms related to the field of cinema, film quotes, cinematic perceptive frames, cinematographic imagery and allusions. These are texts with montage-driven composition technique, where the visual images are represented dynamically through various, primarily compositional and syntactic means. Steven Price of the University of Bangor, Wales writes: "To understand fully how screenplays operate we have to understand their syntactic organization"³. Clearly, he meant the macro- and micro-structure of screenplay. "The structure of scenes and the arrangement of their components"⁴ come about through the aesthetic effect of word choices and word combinations used to represent a dynamic situation of observation.

Cinema has altered the very way we perceive the world. Cinematic frames have imprinted themselves on the minds of authors and readers/viewers, forming the basis of the filmic repertoire of Russian text. Engaging the reader in a complex simulation of reality, screenplay witnesses that the cinematic metaphor of life still has untapped potential.

Underlying the cinematic metaphor of life is the perception of reality through the prism of cinema. Contemporary Russian female authors such as Tatyana Tolstaya, Galina Shcherbakova, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, and Dina Rubina accept this model of reality and provide its vindication. This attitude is occasioned by a feature of female writing that is defined as "metaphysics of care", which makes Russian female prose "a literature of the positive". Meanwhile, in works of such exponents of cinematic prose as Vladimir Makanin and Viktor Pelevin, cinematic metaphor became a mark of the bygone Soviet era.

The first Russian screenplay appears in 1908. Its emergence was determined by a number of deep cultural factors, such as the presence of cinematic elements in classic Russian literature, syncretism in art, and a growing role of pre-texts (draft versions, preliminary notes, etc.).

Syntactic and compositional features of screenplays are already clearly evident in drafts of Dostoyevsky's novels⁵. At first sight, this observation may seem far-fetched since Dostoyevsky is traditionally regarded as un-cinematic. However, his works are profoundly marked by this trend towards syncretism in 19th-century Russian art, bringing together elements of epic and drama. The script-like quality of Dostoyevsky's art is manifest in his readiness to reinterpret and, inevitably, reshape his text. In his drafts and early versions not intended for publication, the author is completely unrestrained, which is evident in vocabulary and grammar, and finds its reflection in punctuation and graphic style. A screenwriter thinks in scenes,

which is exactly what we encounter in Dostoyevsky's preparatory notes for his novels:

*General to St. Petersburg. Son about General and Beauty.
(Piqued).*

*Son and Uncle at General's: "No idiot at all". Uncle
surprised. "Bring him along".*

To General's. Preparations. Wants to appear an idiot.

*General's Reception. Uncle surprised. Scenes afterwards
etc.*

(Draft notes for The Idiot)

Obviously, it would be an oversimplification to maintain that Dostoyevsky's novels are stricto sensu built on script sketches. Nonetheless, we can speak about the script-like quality of his writing, which is evident in the compositional and syntactic organization of his novels. It's clear that the Russian society of the time, the literary scene and the author himself were not yet prepared to use this kind of structuring for the final version of a literary text. It was not before the next stage in the literary process that the aesthetics of pre-text became prominent, which was occasioned in no small degree by a change in the nature of the relationship between author and reader/viewer. Unlike any other textual structure, a screenplay is not merely capable but is designed to "stimulate another narrator who starts to follow it."⁶

The aesthetic potential of pre-text was further developed in Osip Mandelstam's prose. A new feature in Mandelstam's approach to text, which set him apart from his contemporaries, was the principle of *underexpression*. Even an audible musical text is presented by Mandelstam as a visual progression; this technique is very similar to a screenplay:

*Big-headed children. Starlings. The Prince's carriage being
unhitched. Chess players running out of coffee shops, waving
chess queens and pawns.*

*Now tortoises, stretching out their tender necks, compete in
racing, — this is Handel.*

(Egyptian Stamp)

The new philosophy of text greatly contributed to an understanding of screenplay as literature in its own right, rather than a mere by-product.

In the first third of the 20th century, Russian literature and cinema gravitated towards each other. Just as cinema needed the support of the "senior" art, literature viewed cinema as an expression of the zeitgeist. Writers of various literary stripes embraced montage and analytical writing techniques. The pre-existence of these literary forms, which were not perceived as something unique by early-20th-century readers, was one of the reasons for the rapid development of screenwriting in Russia.

Russian screenplay first emerged in the process of adaptation of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky's works. At this point, it shows traces of interpretation strategies in its structure, and is complicated by a "memory" of the original text and the need to transpose it into a new genre.

² Ibid P. 47.

³ Price S. *The Screenplay. Authorship, Theory and Criticism*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. P. 131

⁴ Eisenstein, Sergei Selected Works, Vol. 2, Moscow: Iskusstvo. 1964. P. 55.

⁵ Rodina, T. *Dostoyevsky: Narration and Drama*, Moscow: Nauka. 1984.

⁶ Prieto A. *Narrative Work // Semiotics*, Moscow: Raduga, 1983. P. 388.



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Interpretation, however, presupposes change in its object, while absence of change is a sign of a mere duplication. Grigori Kozintsev, a well-known Russian film director (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*), once wrote about screen adaptations: “The more it is alike, the worse it is <...> what you need is not to transfer it (as is) but to prolong its life in a different age, in a different cultural world”⁷.

For a variety of reasons, in Russia the adapted screenplay chronologically preceded the development of original scripts. Classic literature, familiar to viewers, allowed directors to produce their texts with large story gaps, as a montage of citations. A 1909 screen version of *Dead Souls* had a running time of 8 minutes, an adaptation of *The Idiot* (1910), 22 minutes⁸.

Present-day approaches to screen adaptations are certainly different not only from the early Russian screen versions of *Father Sergius* and *Demons*, but also from cinematic interpretations of the 1950s-1980s (*War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment* and others). One of the latest examples of a successful adaptation of a literary classic is *Anna Karenina* (2009, written and directed by Sergei Solovyov).

Despite all the shortcomings of the famous Russian cinematic version of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1967, Academy Award 1969), its scriptwriters, S. Bondarchuk and V. Solovyov, proposed not a simple adaptation but an artistic interpretation of a highly complex text, with much better results than in other screen versions of Tolstoy’s novel. The montage thinking of the writers is not at odds with Tolstoy’s poetics, with its unity and conflict of opposites. Indeed, the screenplay of Bondarchuk and Solovyov presents the results of their reflection on the epic novel in a montage-driven way. This enables the writers to craft condensed images of war and peace, to bring together multiple story lines within limited text space, and to orchestrate the voices of author, characters and reader/viewer into an ensemble. These are the screenplay’s closing lines:

We see nameless and lead characters: Pierre, Nikolay Rostov, Drubetskoy, Natasha, at various, best moments of their lives, springtime and summertime countryside, woods, earth through the clouds. The imagery is accompanied with Pierre’s words (“If only I were somebody else...”), we hear Nikolay Rostov shouting happily (“And hurrah for the whole world!”), and the author’s voice (“And I say, let us all take one another’s hand, all of us who believe in goodness...”), the words merge in with music.

(S. Bondarchuk, V. Solovyov. *Screenplay of War and Peace*)

Early Russian screenplays served as pre-texts for readers/viewers before seeing the film, and as a synopsis in the process of viewing. As cinematographic art progressed, screenplay functions evolved: cinematic text developed into a literary complex which now includes script query, screenplay (the *pre-text* proper), shooting script, editing script, and various after-texts: post-production scripts, comic-book and literary spin-offs (authorized or unauthorized).

Let us quote Aleksandr Sokurov’s opinion, from one of his interviews, on the interrelation between screenplay and shooting script: “Basically, what you need from a screenplay is emotional support, a great number of inner spiritual events borne out of human relationships. Essentially, it’s concentrated emotion, where you have plenty of everything, of salt and pepper. And vinegar. A screenplay is that spicy, complex thing, very elusive, always tending to fall apart, to melt away. <...> I don’t feel threatened that the process will get out of hand. The shooting script is the next step in getting back to the concept”⁹.

Russian literary screenplay quickly developed from a compressed primitive text into elaborate works in a variety of genres. Let us mention some of the stages in this process: *numbered script*, *ironclad script*, *emotional*, *intellectual screenplay*. In the latter half of the 20th century, screenwriting became the main occupation of many authors, among them Emil Braginsky, Anatoly Grebnev, Rustam Ibragimbekov, Gennadi Shpalikov, Evgeni Grigoryev, Viktor Merezhko, Aleksandr Mindadze, Yuri Arabov, and others.

With nearly a century of history behind it, Russian screenplay is still in the process of becoming, melting together its constituent elements of epic, lyric and drama. As Moisei Kagan argues, screenplay has evolved from “senior” literary genres but, while preserving some of its genetic features, it has diverged from those and now constitutes an entirely *different* text type¹⁰.

Screenplay genres are complicated frames with slots composed of genre features of literature, cinema, circus, variety and other art forms. A screenplay can be written as a novella, as a novel, as a comedy, but not all of their respective slots will be present or developed in a screenplay. For instance, a parallel story line, while important in a *novel*, may be just briefly alluded to in a *cinematic novel*.

Today’s screenplay is not a marginal literary genre but a new and evolving type of literature. Thus, synchronous analysis makes evident its unique compositional and syntactic organization. Only genetically does it bear resemblance to the structure of epic or drama, which are not tailored for the semiotic system of cinema.

Among the central features of screenplay are actualization of the dynamic and focus on representing the observed / non-observed. An early Russian term for screenplay was *dvigopis’* (motion-script).

The proportion of the observed and the audible, their balance and quality are dependent on text type. If drama is dominated by the audible, screenplay emphasizes the observed. Its text, as opposed to traditional epic, is entirely (rather than selectively, at the level of sentence or fragment) geared towards presenting the audio-visual dynamic, which obviously does not preclude the presence of abstract information.

In this respect, differences between Mikhail Bulgakov’s approaches to adapting Gogol’s *Dead Souls* for the stage and for the screen may provide an insightful example. The subject of Bulgakov and Gogol, Bulgakov as a “translator” of Gogol, has a long tradition in theatrical, biographical and literary studies¹¹. Bulgakov’s intentions in his cinematic interpretation include references to plot line, underlying story, style, genre and literary type of the original work (for interpretative intentions, see Eco 2006). As an example of

⁷ Kozintsev G. *Time and Conscience*, Moscow—Leningrad: Kino. 1981. P. 139.

⁸ Kruchechnikov N. *Screenplays and Screenwriters of Pre-Revolutionary Cinema*, Moscow: Izdatelstvo MGU. 1971.

⁹ Sokurov, Aleksandr ‘*Do what only you can do*’, *Iskusstvo kino*. 1996. 8, August. P. 56.

¹⁰ Kagan M. *The Morphology of Art*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo. 1972.

¹¹ Chudakova M. *Life of Bulgakov*, Moscow: Kniga. 1988.



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modern-day dialogue with Gogol's text, we could cite Larisa Petrushevskaya's work on her screenplay of *The Overcoat*, an animated film directed by Yuri Norshtein. What the screenplays of Bulgakov and Petrushevskaya have in common is their understanding of Gogol's text as a 'self-evolving system, capable of asking questions and answering those that arise today'¹², as well as their conceptual depth and quality of execution.

Screenplay is not a reflection of the polyphony of cinematic text. Rather, it provides a musical score for its composition. It contains things that will translate into cinematic text directly as well as those that will "die away" in it, being represented only implicitly. The "musical parts" of all the various "instruments" cannot be treated at the same level of elaboration: the characters' dialogue is fully fleshed out, while portraits or interiors are often just briefly sketched; there are hardly any references to colours, and only certain sequences of musical score are noted or, sometimes, briefly described.

Moreover, we encounter a certain imbalance between cinema's technological capabilities and their reflection in screenplays. The challenge of representing audiovisual editing demands genuine creativity from screenwriters and is resolved on very rare occasions (such as in Konchalovsky and Tarkovsky's screenplay of *Andrei Rublev*). Ever more sophisticated cinematic colour-rendering technology has not yet brought about the development of any colour notation for screenplays.

Screenplay is more receptive to novelty than any other text type, which bolsters its capability to influence literary works in other genres. Adding to this effect is the practice of publishing screenplays, securing them a readership.

Many Russian authors have tried their hand at writing for the big screen: Vasily Aksyonov, Fridrikh Gorenstein, Galina Shcherbakova, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Vladimir Sorokin, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Dina Rubina and others). Borders between traditional literary genres and screenplay have become more permeable than in early or mid-20th century. Plays for theatre and cinema by such authors as Alexander Volodin, Emil Braginsky, Eldar Ryazanov and Grigori Gorin show signs of syncretism.

Throughout the 20th century, cinematic art was increasingly projecting itself onto literature. Contemporary man lives in a "cinematic" space and time, his perception of the world is mediated by the big screen. Screen became a meta-image of 20th-century art, the age of cinema has altered linguistic competences of contemporary reader, with an impact at the pragmatic level as well. Cinematic imagery and allusions, imitations of editing techniques, close-ins and screen projection are evident in the writings of Veniamin Kaverin, Anatoly Mariengof, Vladimir Nabokov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vasily Shukshin, Vladimir Makanin, Tatyana Tolstaya, Viktor Pelevin, Mikhail Kurayev, Sergei Dovlatov, in the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Igor Severyanin, Andrei Voznesensky, Yuri Levitansky and many others. Not everything in literature that has been presumptively ascribed to cinematic influence is indeed validly attributable to it), but cinema has had an undeniable role in the emergence of so called "quick prose", with its rapid succession of montage-driven scenes

and emphasis on visual detail, as well as in greater mobility of perspective in literature¹³.

However, by the end of the 20th century, Russian authors came to understand the ideological power of clichés and memes generated by film-makers and audiences exposed to cinematographic products. These writers are strangers to the joy of visual perception of Ivan Bunin, Andrei Bely, Boris Zaytsev or Vladimir Nabokov. In Russian literature of the 1990s, the cinematic metaphor of life, which had been relevant for the Soviet generation of the 1960s, was increasingly questioned.

Screenwriting, and cinema in general, have influenced the emergence of so called *after-texts* (various writings based on existing films, such as Boris Akunin's "textual films"), "cinematic literature" which, while not intended to be made into a film, imitates cinematographic imagery (Vladimir Vysotsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn), and screenplay imitations (Marina Palei).

Many of Vasily Shukshin's cinematic novellas took their final form as after-texts of films. Alexander Solzhenitsyn developed a special graphic notation which he used not only in screenplays but also in his cinematic texts:

The '=' sign denotes a cut, a sudden change of shot. In all other cases every shot is supposed to follow smoothly from the previous one, as in panning. Notes at the left side of the page refer to the music score or any other sound track.

(August 1914)

Below is an example from his novel *August 1914* (chapter 25) illustrating the use of this graphic notation:

s c r e e n

The windmill is burning!

The mill has caught fire! <...>

The hilltop shudders! Infernal blasts, everything is shaking and shuddering!

— and therefore silently

burns the mill! it is not destroyed by shells but is completely in the grip of fire <...>

= Now the entire mill is burning! In flames!! The whole building!

Being a form of sophisticated literary play, such works presuppose a reader who is prepared through prior exposure to modern cinema as well as literature.

"Screenplay imitations" is the self-described genre of *Long Distance, or Slavic Accent*, a book by Marina Palei. This work presents a new type of narration: neither the old-school film-in-a-text, nor a screenplay proper. It contains the potentiality of shifting from a screenplay imitation towards a film, which is conceived at times as imaginary, at other times as entirely real.

The development of Russian screenplay has contributed to the aesthetic vindication of pre-text and, to some extent, after-text. What once lay hidden under the surface of tragedy novel has come to light, evolving into one of the stylistic highlights of contemporary Russian literature.

¹² Lotman Y. On Art, St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo. 2003. P. 226.

¹³ Richardson R. Literature and Film, Bloomington-London: Indiana University Press. 1969.

