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

Russian text has witnessed the concept of cinema journey from cinémathèque to kinokhudo (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, Isaac 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."
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’.

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 Shecherbakova, 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:


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.
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.1

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 minutes.2

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.”3

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 type.4

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 studies.5 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

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2 Kruchechnikov N. Screenplays and Screenwriters of Pre-Revolutionary Cinema, Moscow: Izdatelstvo MGU. 1971.
modern-day dialogue with Gogol’s text, we could cite Larisa Petru-
shevskaya’s work on her screenplay of The Overcoat, an animated
film directed by Yuri Norshtein. What the screenplays of Bulgak-
ov 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
death 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 “mus-
cical 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 Rub-
liev). Ever more sophisticated cinematic colour-rendering technol-
ogy has not yet brought about the development of any colour nota-
tion for screenplays.

Screenplay is more receptive to novelty than any other text type,
which bolsters its capability to influence literary works in other gen-
res. 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 Shcher-
bakova, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Vladimir Sorokin, Lyudmila Petru-
shevskaya, 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 pro-
jecting itself onto literature. Contemporary man lives in a “cinemat-
ic” space and time, this 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 read-
er, 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 Shuk-
shin, Vladimir Makanin, Tatyana Tolstaya, Viktor Pelevin, Mikhail
Kurayev, Sergey Dovlatov, in the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky,
Igor Severjanin, Andrei Voznesensky, Yuri Leviantsky and many
others. Not everything in literature that has been presumptively as-
cribed 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 per-
spective in literature13.

However, by the end of the 20th century, Russian authors came
to understand the ideological power of clichés and memes generat-
ed by film-makers and audiences exposed to cinematographic prod-
ucts. These writers are strangers to the joy of visual perception of
Ivan Bunin, Andrei Bely, Boris Zaytsev or Vladimir Nabokov. In Rus-


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