

THE NEW
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BRADLEY A. GORSKI

Box 6.4 Literature in Film

The tension between literature and film fascinated early Soviet filmmakers. Dziga Vertov spurned written screenplays in pursuit of a complete separation from the language of theatre and literature. Sergei Eisenstein, on the other hand, developed his montage theory in constant dialogue with classic Russian literature. In one essay, Eisenstein shows how Aleksandr Pushkin's *Poltava* (*Poltava*, 1829) intercuts lines that can be read as wide shots with others he sees as close-ups to produce a powerful effect. Montage, for Eisenstein, became a way to bring literariness to the screen.

In the postwar era, a new generation of filmmakers used literature to question the narrative and realist underpinnings of cinema. Marlen Khutsiev's *I Am Twenty* (*Mne dvadtsat' let*, 1965), for instance, features a public poetry reading, during which the camera lingers on the inspired expressions on the protagonists' faces. The scene does little to move the plot but becomes one of the film's emotional centres. In Georgii Daneliia's *I Walk around Moscow* (*Ia shagaiu po Moskvu*, 1964), a central scene – added after censors objected to the film's general plotlessness – recites Anton Chekhov's maxim that if a gun appears in one act, it should go off in the next, while the film itself flies in the face of such dictates. Filmmakers of the era saw their work as more lyrical than narrative, perhaps none more so than Andrei Tarkovskii, who connected scenes and images through feeling and association, rather than cause and effect. One of his most personal films, *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975), interlaces vivid dreamlike vignettes with his own father's poetry read by the director offscreen. This emphasis on lyric over narrative can be understood as a subtle rejection of the dictates of Socialist Realism in film. At the end of the Soviet era, Kira Muratova connected the failure of realist aesthetics more broadly to the decay of Soviet society itself. Her bleak *Asthenic Syndrome* (*Astenicheskii sindrom*, 1989) begins as three old women chant: 'In my childhood, in my early youth, I thought it was enough for everyone to read Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi and everyone would understand absolutely everything. And everyone would become kind and intelligent.' The camera then turns to the main character wailing at her husband's grave and more scenes of existential distress.

Nevertheless, it has been precisely the Realist novel that has provided the most direct connection between literature and film. As Yuri Tsivian has argued, Realist literature broadly construed provided the source texts and narrative expectations for much of early cinema.

Box 6.4 Literature beyond Literature

In the Brezhnev era a resurgence of Realist adaptations, prominently featuring Tolstoi's work, effectively sacralised a national canon of classic literature. Aleksandr Zarkhi's *Anna Karenina* (1967), for instance, opens with a long shot of the novel's famous first line, complete with pre-revolutionary orthography and an illuminated dropped capital letter. By framing 'All happy families . . .' as visually analogous to scripture, this film literalises the reverent undertones implicit in many late Soviet adaptations of classical literature.

In the last Soviet decades, another mode of literary adaptation appeared, represented by some of Nikita Mikhalkov's early directorial work. Instead of presenting faithful, scene-by-scene screen versions of classic literature, such films crack open the finished literary text to freely develop its elements and recombine them with other sources. In the first post-Soviet decade, this tendency developed into more radical deconstructions of classic literature, made primarily for the festival circuit by a new generation of young directors, such as Valerii Todorovskii's *Katia Izmailova* (*Podmoskovnye vechera*, 1994, inspired by Nikolai Leskov's 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk'), Sergei Gazarov's *Inspector* (*Revizor*, 1996), and Iurii Grymov's *Mu-Mu* (*Mu-Mu*, 1998).

By the early 2000s, many literary adaptations had moved to the small screen where the mini-series format accommodated scrupulous reconstructions of big novels. Vladimir Bortko's *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 2005) and Gleb Panfilov's *The First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*, 2006), for instance, at once sacralised their source texts, and – as Irina Kaspe has argued – flattened them, downplaying humour and turning sharply anti-Stalinist novels into nostalgia films meant for mass audiences. As the Putin era has progressed, many literary adaptations have taken on populist and nationalist overtones, paving the way for occupation and war. Perhaps best exemplified by Fedor Bondarchuk's brutal *Stalingrad* (*Stalingrad*, 2013), such films plunder the canon for stories and visions capable of fuelling today's militant ideology.

Despite its frequent co-optation by political power, the ongoing relationship between literature and film is an ever-developing mediation between the verbal and the visual, the lyrical and the narrative. Literature in film connects canons to new media, classics to new audiences, allowing for – indeed often forcing – the constant re-examination and reinvention of both artistic forms.

Bradley A. Gorski