

Osip Brik

I

The question 'What precisely constitutes a script?' is currently a subject of debate. What is it? An autonomous literary work, or merely the translation into film language of a pre-existent literary work (novel, story, play), or is it purely and simply a memorandum to the director indicating the sequence of scenes and episodes?

The argument is far from academic. The response given to this question will determine the kinds of measures taken to provide the film studio with a sufficient number of suitable scripts. It will determine the kind of measures taken to train a sufficient number of qualified script writers. And it will also determine the way the director/script writer relationship shapes itself in their combined work on the making of a film.

Undoubtedly there is a tendency among film workers to exaggerate the specific qualities of the art of cinema. There is a tendency to declare the group of film workers a closed caste reigning over the secrets of cinematic expertise. There is a tendency to make it as difficult as possible for the uninitiated to break into this caste. Hence the mistrust of theatre directors who go into film work. And hence the attempts to present the film script as an autonomous literary work.

But there is also a reverse tendency widespread among people insufficiently familiar with the specific nature of the art of cinema. They tend to see the film strip as some kind of transmitting device, like the gramophone recording. They feel there is no need for a 'special repertoire for the gramophone'. For them the question is wholly and simply one of successfully transferring existing literary and musical works onto the record. Not only that, they greet with open disbelief people who talk of some specifically cinematic repertoire and insist that cinema cannot do without special film scripts whose writing has taken full account of the specific features of the art of cinema. They feel they are being deceived, taken for a ride, that advantage is being taken of their lack of familiarity with film work.

What are the practical consequences of the bias in each case? The bias towards *specificity* leads to the production of crude and superficial scripts crammed with cinematic trick effects, visual jokes and all those film clichés which the script writer remembers from his own past viewing. Scripts of this kind can contribute nothing to resolving the most complex ideological and thematic problems which confront Soviet cinematography. Films made from such scripts are out-of-date before they reach the screen. And the heads of the film studios are quite right when they put up a fight

But the opposite bias is no less dangerous – that is, the bias towards discounting *specificity*. The cinema is not a gramophone. It is not the mechanical transmitter of a pre-existent art work. The cinema is an independent art with its own means of expression and its own methods of representation. There is such a thing as illustrative drawing; nevertheless, no one would dream of denying the independent existence of fine art. Any visual object can be transferred with all its accompanying noises, but this does not in any way justify the claim that the role of cinematography ends there. There can be no doubt that the genuinely cinematic work cannot be produced without a script which makes full use of all the means special to the cinema. A film which is made as some kind of record of a theatrical performance or as the cinematic illustration of a work of literature will inevitably slip across the screen as a pale, dry shadow of the genuine art work which exists somewhere outside the screen. Such films impoverish cinematic art and cineastes are right in protesting against the subordinate and transmitting role to which that art is condemned by those who ignore its specificity.

Where does the error lie? In the fact that the script is not an independent literary work, nor some kind of literary manual for the adaptation of a novel or story for the screen, it is not a literary work at all. A script is the outline of a future film, set out in words. It would be odd for instance to ascribe an architectural plan sketched out in water colours to the products of fine art. Although there have been architects who drew their projects with particular care on the assumption that their pictures would make a good impression on a client poorly-versed in questions of construction. Just as there are script writers who lavish particular attention on the elaboration of the literary texture of their scripts and clearly stake something on 'the magic of the word'. But such architects and script writers are not among the best of their profession.

The script is written in words. But this in no way makes the script a literary work, let alone an autonomous one. The script is a system of cinematic images and devices calculated to make the author or authors' artistic project open out on the screen in the forms of cinematic art. The fact that we do not have any means other than words with which to plan the future film is in no sense intrinsic to the script; rather, it is a defect. In some cases an expressive photograph can give a fuller idea of the future than long pages of flowery literary script. Scripts are written for the people who will be making the film. An understanding of the film envisaged has to be conveyed to them by all the means available and for this purpose, literary language is far from the only or the most appropriate means.

Clearly, someone who is unfamiliar with the system of means of expression characteristic of the cinema, or whose knowledge is

confined to a poor assortment of cinematic trick effects and clichés, is not going to produce an adequate script. Who writes the script is not important – he may be a writer, a playwright, a professional script writer or a clerical worker in the film studio; what is important is that in working on the script he should understand what it is he is working on and what he is writing for. All those different claims which have alternately staked everything on the writer, the ‘classics’, the script writer, or any chance passer-by, are therefore quite irrelevant. The only real stake that can be made is on the profound study of the cinematic means of expression.

II

Writing a script means constructing a project for a future film. But the means of expression of the cinema are numerous. Piling up these means in an unsystematic way is to be avoided; certain of them should play a leading role while the rest are used in a secondary way as and when they are required. Otherwise the film will not emerge as an organic work of art but as a series of unrelated cinematic trick effects and film sketches.

Soviet cinema still has many of these formless, naively assembled films. They are usually described as ‘good in patches, but unsuccessful as a whole’.

When an architect draws a project for a building, he knows precisely what that building is going to be – a house, a factory, a theatre, or a triumphal arch. It would never enter his head to plan just a building in general. Whereas our script writers quite often write undefined scripts without pausing for a moment to consider the kind of film in view. Many of our directors are equally prone to this error.

The question of film categories is one of the most fundamental questions of film production. Like any other system of production, the cinema cannot work productively without first precisely defining its range and establishing its type of production.

The kinds of film possible are numerous. And the more precisely this is defined, the clearer the script writer and director are about the kind of film they are working on, the more easily they will find the necessary means of expression and the more organic and successful their film will be.

‘Making a film with Moskvín, Il’insky, or Khokhlova’ is a formula which has been much decried here. It was felt that this sort of orientation towards the actor lowered the ideological and thematic significance of the film. But this is not so. An orientation towards a particular actor does not pre-determine a film’s ideological and thematic concerns, but delimits the specific set of means of expression which the film makers will bring into operation in the realisation of their film. Undervaluing the film actor as a key means of expression has led to the impoverishment of

the art of film acting; as a result Soviet cinema has produced no major film actors and has failed to enrich itself with a new supply of the means of expression provided by film acting.

And for example, the landscape film is a perfectly legitimate genre. There can be no objection to a film which bases itself on a maximum exploitation of the specific features of landscape filming appearing on the Soviet screen. There is nothing ideologically or thematically prejudicial to our cinema in that. Mikhail Kaufman's unjustly neglected work *Spring* (1929) might serve as an example here.

Sound film brings great diversity to the kinds of film possible. But while it enriches the cinema with new means of expression, the sound track at the same time increases still further the danger of an unsystematic and eclectic use of those means of expression. Following the maxim that 'variety is the spice of life' our film workers often cram everything possible into the film, oblivious of the total lack of form in the resulting product. It might be thought that defining the kind of film worked on too rigidly will lead to the stereotype and the standardised product. But this is a groundless fear.

The possible combinations of means of expression are so wide-ranging that the stereotype and stagnation need not be feared. The classification of films according to type is not aimed at standardising them in the commodity sense; rather it should serve as an artistic restraint imposed by the film makers themselves.

An economy of means is an essential condition for the fully-realised art work. A script is the outline of a future film. The basis of that outline is the author's cinematic intention which can be of the most varied kind:

- it is possible to conceive of a film which would give the film actor an opportunity to reveal the full range of his acting skills;
- it is possible to conceive of a film which will present a particular area of our socialist construction in the most forceful way;
- it is possible to show on the screen hitherto unknown countries, peoples and ways of life;
- the emotional riches of music could be utilised to produce a film-symphony, a film opera, or a film-operetta;
- one could make a film which used the means of expression offered by children, animals, birds, insects and household articles.

Film projects can be extremely diverse. All of them are valid as particular film types. The only important thing is to establish precisely the kind of film - that is, the film type - being envisaged and to subordinate one's creative imagination to that task.

III

The theory of Soviet script writing has still to be written. The

problems confronting the Soviet script writer are too wide and too unlike what the script writers of bourgeois cinema have to deal with. But Soviet film workers have a rich practical experience acquired over sixteen years' work in the cinema and it would be inexcusable if that experience were not taken account of and recorded. As we have said, a script is the outline of a future film. We see the finished films and we cease to be interested in their outlines. The realised object thrusts the process of its construction out of our consciousness. The script drops into the wastepaper basket and ceases to exist even as an archive document; the rare enthusiasts of the art of script writing are obliged to study from the finished film.

But, as we said, the script is not a work of literature. Even if the type-written sheets which we call the script were to be preserved, they would hardly suffice as a basis for recording the total process of the script writer's creative work.

The relevant aspects are not just what the script writer commits to paper, or what the film preserves of his original intentions, but the sum total of ideas and innovations which he expended in the course of his work on the projected film.

What the development and growth of Soviet cinematic skills requires is not the script writer's notes, but the total experience of his work on the ideological, thematic and aesthetic problems confronting the Soviet cinema.

In such a perspective, the process of work on the script is far more important than the finished script. It is essential that we ask our film writers to recollect and record their working experience before it is too late. It is essential that we persuade script writers to present a detailed reasoning of their work as a whole, together with the finished script. It is essential that we preserve all the agendas and minutes of script conferences.

Only a systematic preliminary collation of concrete experience will provide us with comprehensive material on which to construct a theory of Soviet film writing. As a start, I will give a brief account of how I wrote my script for *The Heir to Genghis-khan*.*

IV

I ran into Comrade Novokshonov at the Writers' Club. I knew that he had been to the Far East during the Civil War and that he could no doubt recall a store of interesting facts and incidents.

I put the question to him. He thought for a moment and then said:

' There was an incident of the kind. The English occupational forces captured a Mongolian lad who had fought with our partisans. When they searched him they found an amulet on him containing

* Directed by V Pudovkin, 1948.

100 an inscription in Mongolian to the effect that its possessor was the heir to Genghis-khan. The English wanted to blow the thing up into a whole affair and proclaim the lad Emperor of Mongolia. But it seems nothing came of it.'

I shook his hand and said: 'Thanks, that's a splendid theme for a script.' Novokshonov gave me a guarded look and said: 'Yes of course. I'm writing a story about it. If you do turn it into a script, you should say that its "from a story by Novokshonov"'.* I agreed of course, but Novokshonov never did write the story.

When I began work on transforming the episode recounted to me into a script I first established what the basic idea of the projected film should be. I formulated it as follows: the occupational forces cook up a political bluff, speculating on the nationalist feelings of the local population, so as to strengthen their hold over the occupied country. But the affair comes unstuck because the local population and the subject of the bluff himself, loathe the invaders and ally themselves with the Red partisans who bring them real, not sham, liberation.

The entire narrative line of the script emerged in response to this formulation. First, I needed to show the relationship of the Mongolian population and particularly the central figure – the young Mongolian – to the invaders. I had to present a typical confrontation. To achieve this I chose a ruse widespread in trading practice – the crude cheating of the natives by enlightened European merchants, buying up valuable raw materials for next to nothing.

The first episode of the script thus crystallised itself: it showed how the young Mongolian goes into town to sell a silver fox fur, reckoning to get a good price for it: how an English merchant wants to cheat him; and how he loses control and lunges at the Englishman with his knife.

The clash was thus achieved. I then had to develop the reaction of the invaders. 'A white man's blood has been spilt.' The insult had to be brutally avenged. The invaders demanded that the criminal be surrendered to them but he was concealed and helped to escape.

In its further development the narrative had to link the Mongolian with the Red partisans. I had to find an extremely simple and expressive episode which would allow the sympathies of the young Mongolian to be revealed. To this end I made the young Mongolian the chance witness of a skirmish between a brigade of partisans and a brigade of invaders.

* Novokshonov did in fact write the story, under the title 'The Heir to Genghis-khan', but shortly after its completion in 1937 he was arrested, and the work could not be published until much later. It first appeared in 1965 in the second issue of the literary almanac *Angora*.

Quite near him on the edge of a ravine a partisan and an English officer are engaged in hand to hand combat. The partisan is on the point of being killed. At that point, the Mongolian, for whom the sight of the English officer is already closely associated with theft, deceit and violence, flings himself into the fray and helps the partisan to throw the officer into the ravine.

This incident established the tie between the Mongolian and the Red partisans. But it had to be further strengthened. I therefore introduced an episode in which the Mongolian is present at a dying partisan leaders' farewell to his men. The profound grief of the partisans and the calm words of the dying man in which the word 'Moscow' is frequently heard, makes a strong impression on the Mongolian and lends emotional force to his ties with the partisan force.

This episode closes the first half of the script. Its purpose was to present the structure of the social forces involved (invaders, Mongolians, Red partisans) and a 'personal background' of the main character. The development of the central episode in the script begins with the capture of the young Mongolian by the invaders.

At this point strong dramatic tension was essential in order to underline as sharply as possible the idea of the bluff which flashed into the minds of the imperialist intriguers. The action had to be developed in such a way that the discovery of the amulet with the inscription disrupted the natural flow of events and the carrying out of the bluff would meet with serious external obstacles.

With this in mind, I unfolded the narrative in the following way: The Mongolian is taken prisoner, interrogated, and in the course of questioning it emerges that he is a Red; he is therefore condemned to be shot. An English soldier leads him out to be executed. But the soldier is unwilling to shoot down the Mongolian. He tells him to run but the Mongolian doesn't understand him. He just stands there smiling. The soldier is held back by a sense of military duty and cannot bring himself to free the Mongolian. He shouts at him, shoves him, and when the latter at last realises what it's all about and runs, the soldier screws up his eyes and fires after him.

This whole scene is essential firstly in order to differentiate between the occupying force and show that the active bearers of imperialism are the officers, not the rank and file soldiers; and secondly, to heighten the dramatic turn of fate which takes the Mongolian from the firing squad to the throne.

Parallel to this execution scene runs the deciphering of the inscription found among the Mongolian's belongings. The idea of the political bluff grows clearer as the deciphering progresses and by the end of the reading, which coincides with the shot fired by the soldier, it has become a firm decision. The end of the episode flows naturally from this: 'Bring back the Mongolian'. The task

102 is willingly fulfilled by the same soldier who fired after the Mongolian. He finds the Mongolian wounded and bleeding, is relieved that he is still alive and can be revived and rescued.

After this the task of the narrative was to present the realisation of the bluff. The Mongolian is brought to an operating table, his wounds are cleaned and patched, he is treated and put back on his feet. He is looked after, fed well, dressed ceremoniously and an effort is made to win him over. But the Mongolian is on his guard. He doesn't understand what is going on and doesn't trust them. The situation thus produced needs to be emphasised. Its particular significance has to be revealed through some small, characteristic episode. To this end I brought into the script a confrontation between the Mongolian and that same merchant who robbed him of the silver fox fur and whom he had stabbed with his knife.

The merchant comes to command headquarters. He brings his fiancée a splendid silver fox fur. She puts it on and accompanies the merchant to a soirée held in honour of the future Mongolian emperor. The Mongolian sees the fur on the lovely lady's neck. He stretches out his hand and seizes the fur as his own property. A scandal breaks out. The merchant demands to be avenged for the insult, but this time the politics are different. The merchant is led aside, reasoned with and given to understand that there are important political considerations at stake.

The bluff continues. Preparations are made for the Mongolian to be triumphantly proclaimed emperor. Obviously something has to occur at this point to reveal the invaders in their true colours and explode the cunningly invented plot like a soap bubble.

This 'something' I made an episode which is extremely common practice in military occupation, and which repeated an earlier episode featuring the main character: another shooting of a Mongolian prisoner. The denouement scene was constructed as follows in the script: the Mongolian is ceremoniously prepared for the grand appearance. At the same time a struggling Mongolian is dragged out of a cellar to be led before the firing squad. He breaks free and runs up the staircase. He bursts into the room where the ritual of proclaiming the Mongolian emperor is being conducted. Brutal gunmen follow on his heels and shoot down the condemned Mongolian in front of the whole assembly.

An eruption follows. The future Mongolian emperor tears off his luxurious robes, flings himself on the officers and attacks everything and everything with wild and ferocious rage.

The soap bubble is burst. The bluff has failed. The story is ended. The final scenes of the script were originally different to the ones we see in Pudovkin's film. I wanted to show Moscow at the end. I therefore suggested that the film should close with the Mongolian escaping from the invaders, leaping onto a horse and galloping westwards. As he gallops the landscape changes – the

Urals, the Volga, and finally through the mist, in the distance, the outline of a great city. And as the outlines become increasingly sharp, when the whole audience has realised that that city is Moscow, so the film is over. Pudovkin preferred a different ending. He wanted to carry to its utmost limits the destruction wrought among the invaders by the Mongolian. Pudovkin turned the finale into a symbolic storm which sweeps away all taint of occupation, including people and tin cans. 103

I find Pudovkin's ending a bit cheap, and a little too 'cinematic'; it provokes the impression of a staged effect. I feel that Red Moscow would have been a far more credible final symbol than an artificial storm.

Translated by Diana Matias