

There is a lack of respect toward the screenwriting craft.

When a committee of the Council of People's Commissars was passing a copyright law and the paragraph on screenplays was being discussed, my neighbor, a female legal adviser astonished by my concern at screenwriters being ranked lower than writers in the discussion, sympathetically told me, "Why fret over screenplays? That's just hackwork!"

She is wrong, for one must not treat screenplays this way.

She is right, for one is forced to treat screenplays this way.

Idealistic aesthetics, with its cult of irrationalism and inspiration, which lives on to this day in art, is likewise alive in cinema. It is thought that a person with no formal training can write a screenplay and direct a film through the power of talent and inspiration. That is why any lucky ignoramus can be assigned a production (one cannot become a cameraman simply knowing how to make rotation movements with one's hand, as a cameraman is required to have knowledge of the apparatus). That is why it is thought that anyone can write a screenplay.

For a year I appealed in the film press against screenwriting contests which encourage the worst kind of dilettantism, and I doubt that the movie big shots were convinced of the harmfulness of nationwide contests.

Any one of these dilettante screenwriters in his work ends up strongly accentuating the conventional nature of screenplay production. His screenplay typically repeats readily available narrative schemes: for adventure, *The Red Imps* [*Krasny 'e dyavolyata*; Ivane Perestiani, 1923] and *Ukraziya* [Pyotr Chardynin, 1925]; for detective story, *Miss Mend* [Fyodor Otsep, 1926]; for heroic story, *Mother* [*Mat'*; Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926]; for everyday life challenges, *Bed and Sofa* [*Tretya meshchanskaya* or *Lyubov vtroem*; Abram Room, 1927]; for history, *Poet i tsar* [Vladimir Gardin and Yevgeni Chervyakov, 1927].

At the same time:

The screenwriter is ashamed to admit the source he is using.

A screenwriter brought me a four-episode screenplay which began with the kidnapping of two millionaires and the revolutionary committee's meeting room rotating on its axis. When asked what films he had seen at the theater, he replied, "None." However, afterward he confessed to having seen *Miss Mend*.

It is apparent that the potboiler screenwriter is afraid to commit a crime against plot conventions (for instance, to lose an effective rape, chase, or a fainting fit), yet allows any kind of violence against the material.

A screenwriter¹ from the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine brought me a screenplay tattooed with the approval of his provincial literary committee. It was a most inconceivable story about the economic counterrevolution.

Honorable workers would lure traitors out of meetings; disguise themselves as said traitors; and after five minutes, sit down to hold a meeting in their place.

Honorable women workers, trapped in an abandoned mine and awakened by the predictable rats, demolish the wall with a log and succeed in capturing the counterrevolutionary.

The costume of the factory owner (whose name, of course, is Rockefeller) is described thus—"under his frock-coat there is an ironed shirt."

Rockefeller's pastime in London: lying on a couch "in a recumbent position," telling ladies in ball gowns and gentlemen in tailcoats about his adventures in Bolshevik land. Next: "a lady sits at the grand piano to play a dance. Drunken revelry begins."

Here, what is emblematic is not the naiveté which, like the naiveté of the medieval icon painter, ascribes to the foreign scene features, clothing, and behaviors belonging to an environment familiar to the author, but the fact that this liberal treatment of the authenticity of the material has taken root in consciousness.

In a Chinese screenplay people from Hankou ride on horseback to Tibet through Mongolia.

In a screenplay from the Caucasus, in Khevsureti there is a cheese-making factory and the *khevsur*² gathers workers by striking a bell with his sword.

All of this is pure fantasy.

The material is ignored in the screenplay.

People trade in potboilers.

Nowadays, the sore point for Soviet filmmaking is not the preponderance of monopolist screenwriters but that of potboiler specialists.³ That is why there is such a demand for belletrists (carriers of the fundamentals of plot-driven stories). For instance, Lavrenev,⁴ whom all the film factories long for, is good precisely at storytelling. Interest in journalists, who are the mediums of the material, is much less pronounced.

The film success of A. Zorich is probably due to the fact that he is the most belletristic feuilleton writer.⁵

This craving for hacks and potboiler specialists is detrimental and reactionary—chase them out of filmmaking.

The potboiler specialist works with a set of stage situations. He lays them out like *solitaire*. He is sparing with new ideas. He is generous with combinations. A newly invented or found stage situation, having been tested in different plot combinations and in different character stereotypes, provides a dozen new narratives for the factories to stage.

The effectiveness of the new character (*cinemask*) and the effectiveness of the situation (*mise-en-scène*) are essential to the plot-minded writer; the setting, the historical era, the everyday living environment, working relationships which connect the characters, have an auxiliary, conditional nature.

The material in contemporary screenplays adapts to the story, it fits on it like a glove on a hand, and if the glove bursts, too bad for the glove.

A common occurrence in cinema—the trade in screenplays with changing setting.

"We are sending you a screenplay based on Romanian life. If necessary, it can be reworked freely to fit Georgian life."

For the potboiler specialist the material of what is being filmed—with its curiosities, authenticity, everyday-life (and thus, ultimately, also industry production) concreteness— is in competition with the story. The potboiler specialist mutilates the material consciously so that it doesn't affect the plot.

I observed the classic potboiler specialist. He was making a screenplay out of a destitute man and a proud girl, making up a story line out of thin air and only afterward concerning himself with the place and time of action. The screenplay for Tbilisi⁶ was called "The Destitute One from the Veriiskij Bridge,"⁷ and a donkey or a buffalo was brought into the film to give it local color.

For VUFKU,⁸ it would be possible to call the screenplay "The Pauper from the Dnieper Bridge,"⁹ and instead of the donkey bring in a small retinue consisting of oxen and a coachman.

For Sovkino, "The Pauper from the Zamoskvorechye¹⁰ Bridge"¹¹ with wood sledges and bearded men in sheepskin coats would be suitable.

For Uzbekkino—"The Pauper from the Bridge across the Irrigation Channel,"¹² plus a camel and a camel rider in a robe, etc.

As early as the fall of 1925 I wrote in *Kino-Arch* (now *Kinofront*) an article titled "Screenwriting Voracity,"¹³ where I denounced the superficial and dogmatic attitude toward the everyday life material shown in film. I compared this grabbing of interesting pieces of reality, instead of working on these pieces with care and showing them in their entirety, with predatory gold prospectors' approach toward gold deposits, which they contaminate and spoil instead of sifting gold.

In our pictures, and especially in foreign ones, they often use steamship locales (deck, lounge, deck cabin, the ship's hold) for the run-of-the-mill scenes of potboiler films. And yet the steamship is interesting and expressive both technically and socially. The steamship has not yet been the hero of a screenplay.

I attempted to make a detailed demonstration of a Leviathan ocean steamship in the screenplay entitled "Five Minutes."¹⁴

The collision of the material with the story (with the advantage being given to the material), was the aim of my screenwriting effort on revolutionary Chinese themes (with S. M. Eisenstein directing). The Chinese material is, in and of itself, so distinctive and new that any intensification of the narrative aspect could divert viewer attention, preventing the viewer from examining China. Here, for the first time, the notion that the thematic material and the plot are inversely related to each other was crystallized. Where the center of gravity is transferred onto the narrative (the detective story, the adventure novella), setting and everyday life are not necessary; or rather, what is necessary is not so much the setting itself as a suggestion of setting through a number of familiar objects serving as a springboard for plot development. On the other hand, a "setting" taken with a measure of topicality, an everyday life incident, a socially significant and concretely dated event, can work without a narrative—and this would be newsreel.

For instance, we have a weakening of the plot due to the strengthening of the detail of everyday life often given outside of any connection with the story line in the works of Beck-Nazarov,¹⁵ whose objects are sharp with their folklore and ethnographic detail but still not sufficiently freed from the usual plot-driven narrative which frequently prevents the viewer from scrutinizing the necessary everyday life detail.

Eisenstein's *The General Line (Old and New; 1929)*, with its construction of the narrative on the basis of the huge factual material about agriculture and contemporary tendencies, comes closer to the necessary type of industry production film.

In connection with the work at Georgia's Goskinprom, further advancement toward an industry production screenplay was planned. The standard Goskinprom picture is absolutely plot driven, constructed on the basis of conventional Oriental material. In it, Transcaucasia is operatic. Now, when it is clear that there is a strong viewer demand for facts, the standard Goskinprom picture yields nothing about Georgia. More than that, it gives an inaccurate exotic impression of a living Soviet state with an interesting contemporary culture.

The characters of a standard picture are capable of loving, being jealous, killing, jumping, taking vengeance, mocking, punishing, and for the consolation of the Repertoire Committee, organizing uprisings in a vacuum.

What do these people do, what do they produce, on what do they subsist, how is their day organized—nobody knows.

The question arises, how to show today's Transcaucasian? Two paths have been outlined—newsreel and industry production film. But the newsreel, this most difficult type of cinema work, was neglected; it was being produced by directors who were not even assigned children's pictures, [that is,] the most inexperienced ones. There was a risk of killing the production appetite of all production groups with bad newsreel.

As a transitional compromise form, I suggested the "industry production screenplay," [that is] a screenplay wherein the narrative is placed in service of the material.

The screenwriter must become a researcher. The country spread out into a number of industry production sectors which are subject to study and demonstration.

The industry production sectors determined the material and all the narrative situations.

There is sheep breeding—it covers defined regions, differentiates times of year in a way specific to the industry, determines the clothing, gait, and habits of the people involved in it, as well as typical conflicts and the means for their resolution.

There is silkworm breeding, viticulture, tea business, corn growing, timber industry, etc.

It is important that industry production conflicts became the cornerstones of narrative conflicts. Then the breakdown of a machine or the obstruction of a mine or the new method of dyeing carpets will not accompany the story line but define a new method of dyeing carpets; it will not accompany the story line but define a new type of human interrelations.

I was bringing the following into common use: "In the old Goskinprom love was stronger than economics, in the new Goskinprom economics must become stronger than love."

The very technique of execution of the industry production screenplay is different from that of the potboiler screenplay. The screenwriter first finds the necessary sector of the industry and determines a number of characteristic production situations but does not connect them in a plot. The material, having been studied as

required, will suggest which of the possible stories and conflicts found in it will be necessary to place at the skeletal base of the screenplay so that the meat of the facts speaks in the most expressive possible manner.

The conflict of the old way of life, often that of the Middle Ages and even the Stone Age, with the industrializing influence of the Soviet leadership can become as central in today's filmmaking as, for instance, the conflict between love and hate in art, which has been a defining feature for a long period.

A dangerous pseudoindustry production screenplay is the standard potboiler set "against the background" of production.

Example: *Ukhaby* [Abram Room, 1927], where the glass factory is tacked on for decoration.

Industry processes do not need to be removed from the narrative like bagels from a string. We only have in front of us that which is called an industry production screenplay when, due to the breakdown of some wheel or the construction of a canal, or the adoption of some new, improved processing method, an atmosphere is created wherein established marriages can fall apart, incredible human combinations can form, and blood can be shed, wherein it is no longer possible to take out these industry-related moments from the screenplay without causing systematic damage to all of it. Otherwise, it is all some petty love affair set against any arbitrary background: against the background of tobacco, grapes, cattle breeding, etc., and these love affairs are played out not by workers or people with a connection to the given sector of the industry but by conventional theatrical figurines, rented from opera dressing rooms.

Pierre Hamp,¹⁶ with his series of industry-related novels, is one of the teachers of industry production screenwriting.

The material demands its place. The screenwriter of "The Pauper from the Veriiskij Bridge" already sensed the turnabout with his keen instinct. He travels to factories and offers—do you want a screenplay on sugar, peat, accordions, or samovars?

The product and its manufacture are beginning to command human passions in cinema as well.

The notion of an industry production screenplay is a cinematic reflection of that same notion of the priority of fact and social journalism so characteristic of the literature which takes the most active position of today's moment.

The industry production screenplay is a Marxist and dialectically correct screenplay.

The industry production screenplay, preserving for some time the plot while giving it less importance, will ultimately and inevitably transform into a compositionally correct and effective newsreel-type screenplay.

- Soviet Union, 1928

Footnotes

1. In Russian, *scenarist-makhnovets*.

2. A Georgian living along the northern and southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus Mountains.

3. The original term has ironic undertones.

4. Boris Andreyevich (1891-1959), Soviet writer and playwright.

5. A. Zorich is the pen name of Vasilij Timofeevich Lokot (1899-1937), Soviet writer and screenwriter.
6. The original text mentions Tiflis, the city's name until 1936.
7. In Russian, "Nishchij s Verijskogo Mosta."
8. Vseukrains'ke fotokinoupravlinnia, the All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration.
9. In Russian, "Nishchij s dneprovskogo Mosta."
10. A district of Moscow.
11. In Russian, "Nishchij s zamoskvoretskogo Mosta."
12. In Russian, "Nishchij s mosta cherez ar y'k."
13. "Stsenarnoe mishchnichestvo."
14. "Pyat minut."
15. Ambartsum Ivanovich (1892-1965), Armenian screenwriter, actor, and director.
16. Pen name of Henri Bourrillon (1876-1962), French writer concerned with the life of the working class.