

Understanding the Novel through Popular Culture: Notes on Russian and Soviet (Avto)instsenirovka

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The objective of this brief discussion is to reflect on two questions posed by our conference in Bologna: one on terminology, the other on intersemiotic translation in theatre and performance studies. I shall here present some considerations on popular culture that will bring the discourse to the extra-textual level, shifting the focus from the 'production' phase (the methods of rewriting a novel and adapting it into a play) to the 'reception' phase, analysing the dynamics of interaction between high and lowbrow audiences.

I will start with a short overview of the origins of novel adaptation in Russia, then move to the 1920s and the role the Moscow Art Theatre played in developing the *instsenirovka* genre.

If we stick to the Russian National Corpus, the term did not appear frequently in literature until the early twentieth century. One of its first occurrences is related to the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre, and its well-known, often-discussed 1910 adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. A reviewer from «Novoe Vremia» traced the fine line between literary *instsenirovka* and plagiarism, noting that «the adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* at the Moscow Art Theatre led to a dispute with Dostoevsky's heirs regarding the author's copyright». Not by chance, the daily newspaper «Moskovskie otkliki» similarly raised the question of adaptation as imitation, an unauthorised copy, a work of art 'forgery': «One should never adapt a novel or a *povest'* into a play. [...] it is *an act against art*».

It is no coincidence either that the core of this discussion was the Stanislavsky and

Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre. In its early stages, the Moscow Art Theatre developed under the influence of a wider movement, the so-called 'Popular Enlightenment' (*narodnoe prosvetschenie*), a debate which raged from the 1890s to the October Revolution, the last period of the age Marshall Berman (1982) defined as 'Modernism of Underdevelopment', i.e. the economic and cultural underdevelopment of a nation which shows all its contradictions: on one side is the 'educated society' (1991) of liberal *intelligentsia* and industrial entrepreneurs, to which the Art Theatre founders belonged; on the other side are the newly urbanised masses, the emerging working class, involved in a process of cultural integration at its beginning (Transchel 2011; Mari 2018). It is specifically to these masses that the project of Popular Enlightenment – shared by Nemirovich-Danchenko especially in the first years of his activity – was addressed. *The Brothers Karamazov* represented the first attempt by the Moscow Art Theatre to adapt a novel to the stage. For the producer and playwright, this choice acquired a particular meaning: snatching auteur literature from theatrical amateurism. In a typewritten note from 1913-1914 he recalled:

The Brothers Karamazov marked a breakthrough, a critical step in the development of the theatre. It was not only an attempt to produce an *instsenirovka* of a novel. Our theatre didn't want to recur to ordinary and always unsuccessful *peredelki* (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1980: 234).

Some historical context brought by Konstantin Rudnicky clarify Nemirovich-Danchenko's thought:

The practice of adapting the prose, extremely common in Russian theatres, appeared both to Stanislavsky and Nemirovich a barbaric occupation, unworthy

of everyone who wants to approach their own art professionally and respect their national literature. The *perelitsovki* of *The Idiot*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Awakening*, put together in a rush by *craftsmen* like Viktor Krylov and Arbenin, transformed Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's novels into boulevard melodramas (Rudnicky 1990: 92).

It is worth focusing on this distinction, suggested by Rudnicky, between 'art' and 'craftsmanship'. Viktor Krylov was a tireless producer of comedies, tragedies, librettos and, indeed, *perelitsovki* of novels. His plays, which are of questionable literary value, describe an undiscovered world, one of peripheral and provincial scenes, off the beaten track of Imperial Theatres. Krylov's works, as Nikolay Arbenin and many other half-anonymous authors and 'craftsmen', achieved a considerable success in the so-called democratic theatres, created after the abolition of the Imperial Theatre Monopoly in 1882.

Among these works *Katyusha Maslova*, a play which recounted the sentimental story of seduction of an innocent lady, had a particularly bad reputation (which, by the way, was most certainly deserved). It spread in the provincial scene like a plague, made many entrepreneurs richer, still had very little to do with Tolstoy's novel (*ibidem*: 92).

Therefore, if *instsenirovki* was originally meant to be a practice of 'popularisation' (we could also call it 'vulgarisation' and even 'provincialisation') of high literature, the aim of the reform promoted by the Moscow Art Theatre was to protect the latter from the masses' bad taste. Skimming the repertoires of the peripheral theatres over the two decades preceding the Revolution, we find a large number of novels written for semi-illiterate audiences who were unfamiliar with the 'full' editions of literary works, except for short adaptations in popular song-books (e.g. cruel romances) or from attending public 'popular readings' (*narodnye chteniia*) that were widespread in the industrial suburbs and border villages (Brooks 1985; Agafonova 2019). Vvedensky People's House of Moscow, for example, offered an extensive list of adapted novels in the theatre's playbill. The Vasilievsky Island Theatre for Workers in Saint Petersburg – linked to the Moscow Art Theatre through its director Nikolay Popov, a disciple of Stanislavsky's – saw the dissemination of literary classics among the urban masses as a cultural

mission (Swift 2002: 71-72). Arguably, this search for emancipation was even stronger and richer with historical implications in those cities that were further from the two capitals. According to Richard Stites,

The classical music scene was dominated by gentry amateurs, and the provincial theatre by serfs and other lower- or middle-class elements. In one sense, serfdom and amateurism formed a vise that constricted the growth of strictly professional actors and musicians during the early nineteenth century. And yet, the enormous spread of serf and amateur performance and its audiences laid the foundations for the astonishing explosion of the arts after the emancipation of 1861 (Stites 2005: 7).

In a similar way, *instsenirovka* contributed to the birth of a new kind of author, who approached artistic creation as a 'craftsman', an amateur. Analysing the methods of spontaneous or primitive art, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) formulated the notion of poetic 'bricolage', i.e. the tendency to rely on a pre-constrained repertoire of texts, in our case high-literature ones, and give a naive, 'concise' reinterpretation of them. In other words, up-and-coming authors were appropriating cultural heritage, simplifying its contents, privileging its most immediate meanings, and showing very little respect for what Walter Benjamin (2002) would have called the *aura* (uniqueness) of a work of art.

But *instsenirovka* is also a practice that testifies to the appearance of a new kind of theatre spectator, characterised by a different aesthetic taste. Not by chance, Rudnicky wrote of the 'degradation' of the novel into third-rate literature. As a matter of fact, the most emotional passages were emphasised, and so were the devices that stimulated the imagery of the growing mass culture. It was in the 1910s, a decade inaugurated by the Moscow Art Theatre production of *The Brothers Karamazov*, that the *instsenirovka* genre became common also for the cinematograph, whose relationship with the source text was initially no different from the one of theatre (Zorkaya 1994). But if in popular theatres *instsenirovki* were often attempts by social and moral reformers to democratise high-literature and make its contents accessible to the people – their slogan was the so called *obschedostupnost'*, and the Art Theatre itself took its first steps in 1898-99 under the name of Obschedostupny teatr (easily accessible theatre)

– the cinematograph abandoned any educational and philanthropic ambition and fulfilled the profit needs of the new entertainment industry. In the mid-1910s Leonid Andreev polemically wrote in the journal «Pegaso» that:

In barely eight-ten years of existence, the Russian cinema has *devoured* all the authors which preceded it, it has swallowed the whole literature: Gogol', Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Goncharov and even Anatoly Kamensky. No ovens devour as much wood as the cinematograph. It is a bottomless hole where everything *disappears*.

Another article published by the journal «Kinemo» that reviewed a French transposition of Tolstoy's novel *The Awakening*, had the emblematic title 'Iskusstvo bez iskusstva' (Art without art) (Eds. Ivanova – Myl'nikova 2002: 36). Hence, a means of consumption, in which the uniqueness of the text, and with it its own author, 'disappeared': *instsenirovka* took on the meaning of 'profanation' – *poddelka* – to the eyes of the intellectual *élites*, an instrument to fight in the name of the authorship of literature.

It is for this reason, as well as for the undeniable appeal the new media had on some intellectuals, especially symbolists, who were fascinated by the rising forms of popular urban culture (Zorkaya 1974; Tsivian 1998: 149-153), that some authors started to get involved personally in the writing of scripts, thus creating the *avto-instsenirovka* genre, the auto-adaptation of the novel. In 1915, the journal «Sine-Fono» wrote of Andreev:

Despite being generally against theatrical and cinematographic adaptations, the writer believes that, in case of need, they should be made by the same author. That is why until now Andreev himself has rewritten the works that have been chosen for adaptation.

The case of Andrei Bely is also well documented: in the 1910s he began working on a film adaptation of his work *Petersburg*, and after that its theatrical adaptation, which was performed by Mikhail Chekhov at the Second Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre (Eds. Solov'eva - Smelyansky 2010: 90-96; Criveller 2020). Several other writers of the 1910s also experimented with auto-adaptation. In 1912 pioneering entrepreneur Aleksandr Khanzhonkov created within his production company a special literary and artistic section that included not only Andreev, but Aleksandr Kuprin, Fyodor Sologub, Arkady Averchenko, Nadezhda Teffi, and others

(Khanzhonkov 1937: 64-65; Eds. Kovalova - Tsivian 2011: 202). This continued until the closure of the Moscow studios in the spring of 1917.

After the Revolution, inevitably, everything radically changed. Despite its 'democratic' implications, the *instsenirovka* as a writing practice became one of the victims of the war against 'cultural heritage'. The Proletkul't, through networks of workers' clubs, devoted much effort to creating a 'proletarian' scenic art, able to overturn the historical link between literary text and theatrical event. New types of 'bricolage' were born, such as the 'literary montage' (*litmontazh*) or the 'living newspaper' (*zhivaya gazeta*). Everyday life substituted for literary classics as the main source of these heterogeneous (but still quite primitive and naïve in their ways) forms of expression, such as extracts taken from political speeches, historical facts, propaganda posters and, with some caution, folklore songs.

When the *instsenirovka* genre reappeared on the theatre scene around 1925, the cultural atmosphere was completely different. The decree 'On the Party's policy in the field of Artistic Literature' restored the position of the classics; the Proletkul't still formally existed, but it was significantly reduced and in practice banned from cultural life. The Soviet theatre operators, though, were still facing the same repertoire problem: while in those years Soviet prose already had a certain development, the 'new socialist drama' existed only in the official lexicon and in propaganda discourse. That is one of the reasons why the *instsenirovka* genre experienced a second flourishing in the mid-1920s. The Soviet theatre directors of that time had no choice but to turn to novelists because of the lack of dramaturgic material capable of meeting the tastes of the new spectators and, at the same time, of satisfying the increasingly strict ideological Party guidelines. However, compared to the first period (i.e. the pre-revolutionary one), there was a shift in perspective: if in its first phase the developing ground for the practice of *instsenirovka* was mainly the city, in the context of popular theatre and temperance reform (and, later, of the growing mass culture), then in the late 1920s the villages offered the largest test bench for this genre, meeting the pragmatic needs of the Cultural Revolution and peasant literacy campaigns.

Once again it was the Moscow Art Theatre that first saw the potential of *instsenirovka* in this



field. In 1925, by creating a special 'repertory-artistic committee' which included the young director Ilya Sudakov and the dramaturge and theatre critic Pavel Markov, it started a project of novel adaptations which involved the authors in the staging process. The most famous case is the one of Bulgakov, who handed to Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre *The days of the Turbins* in 1926, his auto-adaptation of *The White Guard* – a play whose difficult gestation has already been deeply analysed, just like the public debate it sparked, that involved Stalin as well (Lur'e - Serman 1965, Lur'e 1987; Smelyansky 1989).

I would like to note some minor examples that allow us to add some considerations about *instsenirovka* as a 'medium' between high and lowbrow culture.

Between 1925 and 1929 the Moscow Art Theatre staged a considerable amount of Soviet prose, from Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armoured Train 14-69* to Valentin Kataev's *The Embezzlers*. On the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, it was planned to host readings of newly published novels given by the authors themselves, among them Leonid Leonov, Boris Pil'nyak, Isaak Babel', and Evgeny Zamyatin (Prilepin 2012). These experiments achieved modest success with the 'educated' Muscovite audience: the Press underlined its improvised character, yet their intent was not to fulfil the expectations of the 'centre', but to contribute to the birth of a Revolutionary dramaturgy, mainly addressed to the 'periphery' of the country, as requested by the Party on the occasion of the XII Congress (1923). A consistent part of the repertoire was, in fact, chosen among the works of peasant or 'provincial' writers: Lidia Seifullina for example, a Siberian teacher who became famous for her novel *Virineia*, staged in October 1925 at the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, or the same Leonov, who started his career in the group of writers Trotsky called 'peasantifying' fellow-travellers.

Leonov, in particular, had his theatrical debut with the *instsenirovka* genre. In 1925 the Third Studio commissioned him to adapt his novel *The Badgers*, based on the conflict between city and country during the Civil War. This last production, just like *The Days of the Turbins*, had an unfortunate fate: rejected by the censorship as 'counter-revolutionary', it was soon removed from the repertoire. As for the *The Badgers*, the

critics provided us with some interesting data. «Novy zritel'», for instance, criticised the naively 'cinematographic' approach of the adaptation. The scenes were so divided and unconnected that they were put together and broken down in different orders during the two years of preparation of the *mise en scène*. «Zhizn' iskusstva», for its part, underlined the oleographic effect of the whole. The psychological profile of the characters was almost absent in comparison to the novels, and the flamboyant, sometimes grotesque acting of the troupe transformed the tragic narration of the Civil War into a *lubok*.

However, despite the controversies, the project of the Moscow Art Theatre paid off. At the beginning of the first Five-year plan there were different peasant or 'peasant-singing' writers who, following Leonov's steps, challenged themselves with the adaptations of their novels. Andrey Platonov, who in 1929 submitted to Gorky the manuscript of *Chevengur*, was invited by him to work together with the Moscow Art Theatre for the adaptation of the novel. This experience was the basis for the creation of Platonov's play *The Hurdy-Gurdy*. In other cases, it was the same theatres that made adaptations able to attract audiences from the villages. Mikhail Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*, for example, was rewritten and published in at least four different theatrical versions, plus a film adaptation, from 1931 to 1939. Fyodor Panfyorov's *Brusski*, another 'epic novel' on collectivisation from the same years, owed its popularity among the masses to its numerous stage reductions rather than to its chaotic original text, which, as it is well known, was torn apart by Gorky and raised a debate, which involved peasant readers as well, for its 'artificial' and 'emulative' language (Gorham 2003: 134-136; Toporov 2016).

By the end of the 1920s a new 'peasant' theatre of literary origins was born. These performances were often used in villages as first approaches or surrogates for the reading of source texts. Going through the scripts of these plays, we get a sort of inventory of the strategy of rewriting 'from below': the simplification of the set of characters and the plot, the tendency to break down the latter into single scenes of symbolic value, the adjustments of the landscape, and figurative elements – prevalent in Leonov and Sholokhov's novels – to the limited stagecraft and scenic resources of the peripheral

theatres. This shortage of means, combined with the peasants' taste for stylisation, often resulted in a primitive output of the play's visual elements (a process that, upon closer observation, had already started before the Revolution at the Polenov House of Theatre Education, with the concept of *uproschennaya stsena*, elaborated by the painter himself and his collaborators). It is also remarkable that in those years similar procedures were adopted in film adaptations. Walter Benjamin, who visited the USSR in 1928, provided valuable proof of the attempt to adapt literary content to popular language and thought categories:

The mode of mental reception of the peasant is basically different from that of the urban masses. It has become clear, for example, that the rural audience is incapable of following two simultaneous narrative strands of the kind seen countless times in film. They can follow only a single series of images that must unfold chronologically, like the verses of a street ballad. Having often noted that serious scenes provoke uproarious laughter and that funny scenes are greeted with straight faces or even genuine emotion, filmmakers have started to produce films directly for those traveling cinemas that occasionally penetrate even the remotest regions of Russia for the benefit of people who have seen neither towns nor modern means of transport. To expose such audiences to film and radio constitutes one of the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become (Benjamin 1999: 14).

The reviews of Leonov's *The Badgers*, mentioned above, highlighted the same tendency for a linear plot and for stylised forms. In the same way, the theatrical adaptation of Panfyorov's *Bruski* was labelled by the magazine «Novy zritel'» with the term *lubochnost'*, primitivism.

We could say that these texts went through a process of folklorisation in their passage from novels to theatrical plays. Revealingly, Leonov (1960: 385) considered the adaptation of *The Badgers* a collective work, as he maintained in an article that appeared on «Sovremenny teatr» in 1927, a collective work not only because it was created in cooperation with a specific acting company, namely the Art Theatre's, but also because it would undergo several changes, rewrites, cuts and additions, in order to meet the aesthetical taste of its 'users', just like folklore texts.


In conclusion, considering the way it developed in the USSR in the second half of the 1920s, the *instsenirovka* genre could be analysed from a

double perspective: as a practice of intersemiotic translation (between the novel and the scene), but also as an indicator of the reception of the novels that it derives from. This opens up a different field of research, less explored from an interdisciplinary point of view. Even if freed from its intra-textual implications, the process of translation doesn't lose its central position and perhaps, conversely, it gains even more relevance: not only as 'horizontal' translation between comparable languages, but as 'vertical' translation (i.e. originated by internal cultural gaps) between systems of thought, expression and taste.

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Periodicals

- «Kinemo»
- «Moskovskie otkliki»
- «Novoe Vremia»
- «Novy zritel'»
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- «Sovremenny teatr»
- «Zhizn' iskusstva»