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Gogol's "The Overcoat" on the Russian Screen

Introduction

Over the course of Russian cinematic history, four directors have worked on three separate screen adaptations of Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat." "The Overcoat: A Film-Play in the Manner of Gogol [Shinel': Kino-poësa v manere Gogolia]," directed by Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, was released by Leningradkino Studio in 1926. "The Overcoat [Shinel']," directed by Aleksei Batalov, was released by Lenfilm Studio in 1959. Yuri Norstein's "The Overcoat [Shinel']" is an unfinished animated film upon which the director started work in 1981. Since the final film version is still in production, this article offers a comparative study of the first two films.

Rather than an "illustration" of the story, each of these adaptations is a dialogue with Gogol's story in two important eras of cultural production in Soviet Russia: the 1920s and the post-Thaw 1950s. Since I intend to compare how the story has been adapted from a diachronic perspective and to study intertextuality within and between the films, I will refer to Robert Stam's proposal in "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" (Naremore 54-76) and Linda Hutcheon's more recent ideas comparing adaptation to biology, in which she has argued that "adaptation is how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places" (177). To establish a perspective it seems useful to highlight the double framework within which these dialogues originated: on one hand, the tradition of the Russian literary screen adaptation (Ekransatistisa) and, as before, the literary theory and scholarly approaches to Gogol in the Soviet context.

First, adaptation (Ekransatistisa) emerged as a genre in the early years of Russian cinema and comprises a rich tradition exciting powerful influence in political and aesthetic contexts, a tradition that regards cinema as being an art in its own right. During the early years of the Soviet Union, directors had to devise their adaptations of nineteenth-century literary works in line with the reigning ideology. According to David Glinespie, two films setting a pattern that would be widely emulated were Vsevolod Pudovkin's Mother, based on Maxim Gorki's novel, and Kozintsev and Trauberg's version of Gogol's "The Overcoat" (15).

The other backdrop against which these films may be viewed is the critical reading of Gogol or, more specifically, interpretations of "The Overcoat" advanced since its original publication in 1842. As Julian Graffy illustrates in his great study Gogol's The Overcoat, Gogol's work has had an enduring influence on Russian culture, especially through its use of such formalist devices as the comic grotesque, or as social critique in a realistic, social interpretation. Perhaps few literary works permit so formally creative an adaptation into film as Gogol's "The Overcoat"; and few short stories could be simplified into a mere social allegory. Two principal factors enable such multiplicity of interpretations: first, films in the 1920s had to have a clear political message, as well as exhibit a certain degree of artistic experimentation; and second, critical interpretations of the classic during Stalin's era had to function on an ideological level and in accordance with Marxist orthodoxy.
and circus, in which (as in East Asian theatrical traditions) the body language of the actor was read as both meaningful and eloquent. The manifesto was written in the place they referred to as the Eccentricity (old Saint Petersburg). In their view, Gogol might be regarded as the most "eccentric" of writers. They staged a production of Gogol's *Marriage* in 1922, and this re-vision of Gogol is at the heart of their 1926 film adaptation of *The Overcoat*, which is described as being "in the manner of Gogol." In his introduction to the screenplay, Tynianov explained what he meant by Gogol's "manner":

The film story *The Overcoat* is not a film illustration of Gogol's famous story. Illustrating literature for the cinema is an arduous and inauspicious task, since the cinema has its own methods and devices, which are not the same as those of literature. The cinema can only try to reincarnate and reinterpret literary heroes and literary style in its own way. That is why we have before us not a Gogol tale, but a film tale *in the manner* of Gogol, where the story is made more complicated, and the hero is dramatized in a plane which is not given by Gogol, but which is as it were suggested by Gogol's manner. (Graffy 43)

The story is rewritten and complicated because the screenplay written by Tynianov combines two of Gogol's short stories and also gestures to other literary works in the Saint Petersburg canon—not only to Gogol, but also to Aleksandr Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* (seen in the shots of the statue and the echo of Evgenii's story), Dostoevsky's *Poor Folks* and *Notes from Underground*, and Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg*. Likewise, Kozintsev and Trauberg's directorial techniques in filming the script contribute to this sense of reinterpretation.

Although the film tends toward abstraction and nightmare, it is clearly structured in three acts, each signaled by music. Apart from the music, this *Overcoat* is a silent film. The first act introduces the character Akakii, the city, and the film's two plots: Akakii's disappointment in love and his desire to buy a new overcoat. The second act narrates his day with the new overcoat, depicted as a time of fulfillment or culmination, wherein the music plays an important diegetic role. The third act comprises the theft of the overcoat, and the death and burial of the hero.

The establishing shots of the film reveal its style and treatment of the story; they enact a long prologue telling the story of the young Akakii and his disappointment in love. This part of the story is from Gogol's "Nevsky Prospekt." Akakii had a vision of a girl in the street and could not reach out to her. This is

Gogol's description of the moment and mood:

He trembled all over and could not believe his eyes. No, it was the deceptive light of the street lamp which had thrown that trace of a smile upon her lips; no, his own imagination was mocking him. But he held his breath and everything before him was lost in a sort of mist: the pavement seemed to be moving under his feet, carriages drawn by trotting horses seemed to stand still, the bridge stretched out and seemed broken in the center, the houses were upside down, a sentry box seemed to be reeling toward him, and the sentry's halberd, and the girt letters of the signboard and the scissor painted on it, all seemed to be flashing across his very eyelash. (429)

Gogol's description is rendered cinematically as an expressionist scene. The establishing shots reveal a number of cinematic influences that are retained throughout the film. The most obvious expressionist device is the dim lighting. The cameraman Andrei Moskvin's use of light and shadow was inspired by Gogol. Jay Leyda was the first to note that this style was influenced by German Expressionism films, especially Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari [Kabinett des Dr. Caligari]*, 1921) and Friedrich Murnau (*The Last Man [Der letzte Mann]*, 1924) (2002). Although this argument has already been made (Poliwoda 198), the relationship is not unequivocally proven. Indeed, according to Kozintsev, "the composition in *The Overcoat* (...) was inspired not by German films, but by reality itself" ("The Cloak" 27), and Trauberg noted in an interview, "Moskvin's photographic style derives from Gogol's story *Nevsky Prospekt*" (29). These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and may even be read as complementary.

At times, the lighting combined with unconventional camera angles produces an unreal quality in inanimate objects such as the arcades, angels, and statues. This impression of unreality is heightened in the fragmentary images of Akakii's nightmares. However, Kozintsev and Trauberg's approach does not involve deliberate distortion. The establishing shots in Kozintsev and Trauberg's film reveal its expressionism style and lighting, but this expressionism is only one element introducing a grotesque strand into the tragic story. The grotesque may also be an effect of Gogol's language itself, the clash or contrast between the real and the absurd in the narrative, a language that has its cinematographic equivalent in, for example, the careful editing of alternate realist scenes or frames with others that
heghten the viewer's sense of unreality. This point has been the subject of considerable debate in discussions of FEKS's ideas regarding montage and is related to the notion of the grotesque in Gogol's art as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, Eichenbaum, and Tyutyanov. The views of the latter are examined in some detail here as he was responsible for the film's screenplay and his influence may be seen most clearly in the film.

As a critic, Tyutyanov emphasized parody as a key concept in literary works. In "Dostoevskii i Gogo [K teorii parodii]," published in Saint Petersburg in 1921, the relationship between Gogol's "The Overcoat" and Dostoievsky's Poor Folk is explored. Nevertheless, the production of grotesque effects through cinematic language would appear to be an issue of more pressing concern in the script for this film. Years later, Tyutyanov stated that among other sources for his script he considered Eichenbaum's well-known article, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made" (1919), in which Eichenbaum discussed the presence of the narrator as a kind of actor and how the grotesque was generated by the alternation of melodramatic and comic styles in "The Overcoat." In the 1920s, Gogol's grotesque was a key concept among scholars; for Tyutyanov, as a member of the Formalist school, the comic, the parody anticipated the grotesque in Gogol's narrative. Although the influence of his ideas is discernible in the screenplay, Tyutyanov's vision of Gogol's grotesque and the adaptation of Gogol's story directed by Kozintsev and Trauberg do not neatly overlap. For the film's directors, Gogol's art could not be reduced to a series of formal or narrative devices. Kozintsev expressed this deviation from the Formalist school as follows:

In 1919 Boris Mikhailovich Eichenbaum wrote an article called "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made." The very title had an air of challenge about it. Instead of general phrases about humanism, Eichenbaum revealed the fabric of literature: Language, skaz, intentional shift. The article is still being debated today: but where are the sorrowful eyes of Akaki Akakiievich? The suffering of the humble little man? It is wrong to reduce great art to "devices." The best definition of an object is, I feel, Tolstoy's "labyrinth of connections." (Beardow 10)

In light of this explanation, the grotesque in the film stems not from caricature or bizarre deformation, but from other elements. The grotesque effect is produced by four elements: first, the deconstruction of the city's mythical past; second, the serial montage; third, the fact that the story of Akaki is closer to tragedy than to comedy; and fourth, the contrast between the music and the story being told.

Along with Akaki himself, the city is a protagonist in the film. As in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, the fog-bound city is an unreal space suspended between reality and imagination. The exterior sequences show the unfortunate Akaki adrift in an enormous, inhuman city. The film is shot mainly (though not entirely) using detached camera angles. In the first act, Akaki watches an execution—a sequence of alternating shots of the victim and of Akaki, high-angle and low-angle over the statue of Peter I. In this sense, the film furthers the FEKS experiment in the deconstruction of imperial Petersburg and, in accordance with contemporary ideological considerations, depicts the city as a monumental prison. This is not the post-Revolutionary city—Petrograd—but the nineteenth-century city, St. Petersburg.

The classical theory of Soviet montage emerged in the 1920s. Kozintsev and Trauberg draw on Lev Kuleshov's legacy, but the montage in this film lacks the didactic symbolism of Pudovkin's or Eisenstein's experiments in montage. The montage attempts to create the "labyrinth of connections" cited by Kozintsev in The Overcoat these connections come from the mise-en-scène and the unexpected interactions between different shots. Although FEKS called for a form of montage that mirrored the choreography of a circus act, what the directors actually did was create an unexpected interaction between shots. Viktor Shklovsky argued that, for Kozintsev and Trauberg, montage "is based on the selection of memorable moments and on a new, non-automatic connection between them" (Taylor 148). This can be seen, for example, in the presence of a circus in the background to the party setting; in Akakii's tour of the monumental statues of the past (from ancient Egypt and Classical Rome) after the robbery; and in his agonizing dreams, in which the Important Person appears. This association underscores Akakii's solitude.

The music also heightens the grotesque effect in the film. The three acts of the film—

the introduction of Akaki, the purchase of a new overcoat, his decline and fall—are marked by music. In addition to other theatrical elements, the music was to evoke a music hall atmosphere in the FEKS approach to filmmaking. Two main sources of music are drawn on in this silent film: the early compositions of Shostakovich, who also composed an opera based on Gogol's The Nose at around the same time and with whom Kozintsev had had some contact; and jazz, which contrasts with the story shown in the most tragic images of Akakii's travails: his arrival at the party with his colleagues, and his desperate search for the overcoat before and after the theft.

The Overcoat was the first movie that FEKS filmed in a studio. The influence of expressionism may also have been reflected in the design of the stage set. The set designer, Yegevni Enei, developed a set inspired by Constructivistic and Cubist styles for the interior scenes, which later becomes a powerful setting for Akakii's agony. Kozintsev, an artist trained in painting, recounts their experience when they arrived at the Svardkino studio (Lenfilm Studios [Leningradkino] following nationalization in the 1920s):

When we came to work in the Soviet cinema, we found the Leningrad cinema factory full of historical pictures taken on a naïve naturalistic principle. All the generals, tsars, soldiers, etc., were shot primarily in order to emphasize the products of the costume department of which the factory was so proud. They shot the costumes, with the actors inside them. That was the basic attitude of the time. Now we wanted primarily to replace this parade of historical costumes across the surface of the film by a feeling of the epoch, in other words purposely to replace it with a general style, and not the naturalism of details. From the cameraman's viewpoint we were interested in obtaining an extremely pictorial photography. We wanted to get away as far as possible from the external form of the costume, we wanted to convey to the audience the atmosphere of epoch. ("A Child of Revolution" 103)

Critical reception of this work addressed Gogol's reputation as a "classic" writer. According to Tyutyanov, a number of critics accused him of perverting the classic
and demanded that he be denounced by the State (258). More striking, however, is the fact that this kind of artistic experimentation was possible in the 1920s but not thereafter. For Taylor, "in the 1920s Soviet film-makers had been able to portray reality as they saw it; in the 1930s they had to portray reality as the Party saw it. Reality as it really was yielded to reality as it ought to be, and that new reality was called 'socialist realism.'" (157). What Taylor points out about the changing nature of "reality" may be extrapolated to encompass the interpretation of the literary canon: the film adaptation was a device for re-reading the classic, creating a new canon for the masses in the mold of socialist realism.

**The Overcoat** [Shinel']

In 1959, following the centenary anniversary of Gogol’s death in 1952 and Stalin’s death in March 1953, a young actor named Alexei Batalov directed *The Overcoat* ['Shinel']. Nineteen fifty-nine was also the 150th anniversary of Gogol’s birth, and the year of Eichkhenbaum’s death. Eichkhenbaum and Gogol were the presiding influences on Batalov in his film. In order to consider the film within its political, historical, and social setting, its links with the Thaw and with then prevalent trends in Soviet cinema should be noted.

As an actor, Batalov took part in the most popular films of his day. He had a role in *The Big Family* [Bol’shaya sem’ia] (1954), directed by Iosif Kheifits, the first post-Stalin film to deal with notions of integrity, dignity, and trust. His other major roles as an actor include his work in *The Rumiantsev Case* [Delo Rumiantseva] (1955) and *My Dear Man* [Dorogi moi chelevek] (1958), both also directed by Iosif Kheifits; as well as in *The Cranes Are Flying* [Letia shumati] (1957), directed by Mikhail Kalatov. These films paid closer attention to individual human lives, an approach that had several consequences in cinematic terms. First of all, the directors began to shoot everyday life, and developed a new film style for such interiors. In Woll’s words:

> The camera became much less obtrusive and avoided the self-conscious acute angles made famous by Soviet masters of the 1920s; an inflected angle and a neutral middle distance proved more effective in revealing characters within their domestic environments, surrounded by the bric-a-brac of their lives.

(33)

In this light, Batalov’s *Overcoat* may be viewed on a number of levels as a film of the Thaw period. The movie, which sets out to reveal Akaki’s inner world, is filmed mainly through eye-level camera angles and was shot for the most part in interiors. Gogol’s story is told in the chronological order established by the author. The first scene shows Akaki’s baptism, and the camera hovers over the infant’s face, the mother, and the priest. After this sequence, we see Akaki as a poor old clerk bullied by everyone around him—first by his landlord, a new character introduced by Batalov, and later by Petrovich and his colleagues at work. In contrast, the 1926 version opens with exterior scenes—in the street; the 1959 version opens with scenes enacted in interior spaces, the frames focusing on the characters. There are few group shots, the scenes are structured in alternating perspectives, and each character is distinguished from the surrounding masses, individualized.

One of the defining features of the Thaw period was the recovery of individual character from the clutches of the collective through the exploration of themes associated with pre-Soviet tradition. Unpublished works by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Andrei Platonov were rediscovered during the Thaw, along with banned works by nineteenth-century writers including Dostoyevsky, and published after Stalin’s death. Batalov sought to trace a line of continuity from nineteenth-century Russia to the Thaw period. The shadow of Stalin’s era fell between. Batalov brought the work of Gogol and Dostoyevsky to the screen, but he was not alone. The principal film adaptations of Russian nineteenth-century literature were produced during and after the Thaw, Sergei Bondurov’s *Anna Karenina* (1962), being the most famous. In this context, Batalov’s version is more faithful to its literary source than Kozintsev and Trauberg’s film and shares the historical style of other Soviet adaptations of the time. However, it is also an exercise in remembering cultural roots after Stalin. In this regard, the film marks an attempt to return to revolutionary reflections on art. This explains the choice of Gogol’s "Overcoat," and the role of Eichkhenbaum, a critic from the ‘20s, in this film.

The screenplay for the film is credited to Leonid Solovyov and Gogol himself was a Soviet writer, a renowned novelist in his time. Both Batalov and Solovyov studied Eichkhenbaum’s script; the latter’s ideas regarding how Gogol’s narrative art functions in "The Overcoat" are reflected in the film’s characters and interpolated scenes. To Eichkhenbaum’s mind, skaz—a stylized oral narration—is at the heart of Gogol’s short story. The grotesque emerges from the contrast between the tragic and the comic in the narrative, through the accumulation of detail and the voice of the narrator, which mimics that of a clown:

> "The Overcoat" also contains another kind of declamation which makes an unexpected intrusion into the general punning style: the sentimental-melodramatic style: this is the famous “humane” passage, which has been so fortunate among Russian critics that from being a secondary artistic device it has become the “idea” of the entire story: "leave me alone, why are you insulting me?" (Eichkhenbaum 284)
Batalov's film emphasizes this melodramatic counterpoint to the comic. The scene involving the ticket, mentioned by Eichkhenbaum, is depicted, and the added scenes likewise underscore this approach. To further his insignificance and his humanity, the film has the poor civil servant deal with his debt problems by recourse to a moneylender another new character) and through work as a copyist for an old man who disappears without paying him; Akakii even considers selling his skeleton to the Academy. In addition to these new characters, Akakii is given a dog in the film, a loyal companion with which he speaks. The dog does not recognize Akakii when he comes home wearing his new overcoat, in marked contrast to Akakii's colleagues, who only recognize him when he is wearing it.

Batalov's purpose is to convey the theme of humanism in all its faces. In this regard, Turitsyn has compared the film to two previous versions: Kozintsev and Trauberg's film and The Overcoat [Il cappotto] (1952) directed by Alberto Lattuada in Italy. This issue is perhaps epitomized by the sentence "Leave me alone!" with which Akakii responds to his colleagues' joke; in his solitude the character is rendered more human in the viewer's eyes than he appears in Kozintsev and Trauberg's version. Throughout the film, Akakii evokes sorrow in the same way: he is poorer than the homeless person he sees begging on a street corner, and he is later robbed of his only possession, the overcoat.

Although Batalov endeavors to depict a nineteenth-century town, Leningrad is no longer the Saint Petersburg filmed by Trauberg and Kozintsev in the 1920s. The film is shot mainly in interiors, the omnipresent city portrayed by Kozintsev and Trauberg becomes a more hermetic place in Batalov's version. Kozintsev pointed out that in the time between the two Lenfilm productions the city itself "changed to the point of becoming unrecognizable" ("The Cloak" 25). In the 1959 film, Akakii walks along the Neva shore on his way to work; afraid of ruining his new overcoat, he puts it away when it begins to snow, and only puts it over his shoulders again when he arrives at the office. However, this St. Petersburg is not shown in its monumental character, but only in the narrow spaces of its streets and porticoes. In fact, the theft itself happens in a portico, rather than in an open space. Batalov directed the movie in the late 1950s, when the city had changed in many ways. During the Soviet period Saint Petersburg was renamed Leningrad and, in Joseph Brodsky's view, the town's interiors became more Dostoevskian than ever (89); but it was not just the climate of the Soviet era that had affected the inhabitants, the arts, and the city itself; Leningrad had gone through civil war, and then suffered the three-year siege during World War II.

Julian Graffy suggests that comparing Batalov's adaptation with the Kozintsev-Trauberg film may be of interest because both wrought changes in the original tale but "they all contributed to the evocation of the madness and danger that suffuse Gogol's Petersburg" (52). Probably, along with this evocation and with his fidelity to the story, Batalov's vision of the town is linked with the shadowy interiors of Petrovich and Akakii's rooms.

After the robbery, Akakii runs like a madman along dark, narrow streets until he reaches home—exposed, vulnerable, and hopeless. This sequence may be interpreted as the climax of tragic pathos. Akakii is played by Roland Bikov, who accentuates above all the character's insignificance, inhibition, and timidity. The end of the film takes liberties with Gogol's story and turns the rumor that circulates in the narrative into one of Akakii's nightmares. The police go to Akakii's home to arrest him because of a popular rumor identifying him as the overcoat thief, and find him sleeping next to a coffin. As his casket is carried to the cemetery, Akakii appears before the Important Person in his troika, like a vision of hell that brings Gogol's open-ended story to a neat close.

Conclusion
Revisiting Gogol's work at any of these historical junctures may enable an exploration of how adaptation presents the cultural emphases and preoccupations of its era, in the years immediately following the Revolution and during the Thaw. The first Overcoat was an experiment enacted in Revolutionary Petrograd: it also reflected what new Soviet art—cinema, in particular—and Soviet identities were supposed to be. Neither Kozintsev nor Trauberg forgot Gogol during their long artistic careers. In 1960, Trauberg directed a version of Gogol's Dead Souls [Myoryanye dushe] (1960); while directing Hamlet [Gambled] (1964) and King Lear [Koril Lir] (1971), Kozintsev planned a project titled Gogoliada, which was to be a recreation of Gogol's world. The city is the symbolistic city of Andre Biey's novels, "Sant Petersburg," but it is also the nineteenth-century imperial city of zarist oppression. Theorists of the Russian Formalist school and artists worked together in this film, experimenting with new language to an artistic purpose, with the pedagogical function of film as defined by Lenin also borne in mind: the film's montage, the camera angles, and the execution scene comprise a cinematic lesson on what had been overcome and left behind in the new Soviet system.

The two film versions discussed here have the following in common: the influence of Formalist thought on the development of the screenplay; and the view of Gogol as typifying nineteenth-century Russia, a pre-revolutionary Russian tradition. Kozintsev and Trauberg enacted this vision through their depiction of Saint Petersburg; Batalov did so through the significance he attributed to religion in Akakii's life, portraying
him as an orthodox Christian. However, in line with the cultural concerns prevalent during the Thaw period, Batalov emphasized the individual rather than the collective; while in certain shots of the city and the film's lighting, its aesthetic style shadowed that of Kozintsev and Trauberg's version. The 1959 film is less experimental cinematically: the montage rests on narrative premises, and has neither the symbolic nor the oniceric significance of the 1926 version. In the end, the two film versions share features of fundamental importance: the resounding echo of Gogol's voice, and the capacity of the narrative of the "The Overcoat" to shed new light on the historical moment of its cinematic (re)production.

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Notes

1 The Soviet interpretation of Gogol emphasized the social dimension of "The Overcoat," following a distortion of its first-nineteenth-century interpretation by Belinsky and his circle, for them Gogol's main purpose was to write a social critique in a realistic, social interpretation. Given that Gogol was not a Soviet author, it may be true that "Soviet literary critics have an entirely different set of criteria for judging a work of art than do non-Soviet writers, a utilitarian or functional approach to an author's work is required, an approach which defines the piece according to its socio-political use at a given time in history" (538-39).

2 It is interesting to note what Kozintsev pointed out about this work years later when considering the FEKS and the montage of the film: "So we tried to mount Marriage. I say 'tried' because the thing had no relation either to Gogol's play or to what one normally understands by mise en scène. The structure of the spectacle, an amalgam of circus, cabaret and cinema, was improvised and immediately modified as having already become old hat. We were haunted by all sorts of vague notions which were immediately supplanted by others, still more fantastic, still more imprecise" ("A Child of Revolution" 100).


4 The Thaw was a time of political and cultural relaxation after the death of Stalin in March 1953. The term is used here to refer to the period in Soviet cinema from 1954 to 1967, as outlined by Woll in her influential study, Real Image, Soviet Cinema and the Thaw.

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