

## Pudovkin: The Plastic Material

The scenario-writer must bear always in mind the fact that every sentence he writes must appear plastically upon the screen in some visible form. Consequently, it is not the words he writes that are important, but the externally expressed plastic images that he describes in these words. As a matter of fact, it is not so easy to find such plastic images. They must, before anything else, be clear and expressive. Anyone familiar with literary work can well represent to himself what is an expressive word, or an expressive style; he knows that there are such things as telling, expressive words, as vividly expressive word-constructions – sentences. Similarly, he knows that the involved, obscure style of an inexperienced writer, with a multitude of superfluous words, is the consequence of his inability to select and control them. What is here said of literary work is entirely applicable to the work of the scenarist, only the word is replaced by the plastic image. The scenarist must know how to find and to use plastic (externally expressive) material: that is to say, he must know how to discover and how to select, from the limitless mass of material provided by life and its observation, those forms and movements that shall most clearly and vividly express the whole content of his idea.

Let us quote certain illustrative examples.

In the film *Tol'able David* there is a sequence in which a new character – an escaped convict, a tramp – comes into the action. The type of a thorough scoundrel. The task of the scenarist was to give his characteristics. Let us analyse how it was done, by describing the series of following shots.

1. The tramp – a degenerate brute, his face overgrown with unshaven bristles – is about to enter a house, but stops, his attention caught by something.
2. Close-up of the face of the watching tramp.
3. Showing what he sees – a tiny, fluffy kitten asleep in the sun.
4. The tramp again. He raises a heavy stone with the transparent intention of using it to obliterate the sleeping little beast, and only the casual push of a fellow, just then carrying objects into the house, hinders him from carrying out his cruel intention.

In this little incident there is not one single explanatory title, and yet it is effective, clearly and vividly. Why? Because the plastic material has been correctly and suitably chosen. The sleeping kitten is a perfect expression of complete innocence and freedom from care, and thus the heavy stone in the hands of the huge man immediately becomes the symbol of absurd and senseless cruelty to the mind of the spectator who sees this scene. Thus the end is attained. The characterisation is achieved, and at the same time its abstract content wholly expressed, with the help of happily chosen plastic material.

Another example from the same film. The context of the incident is as follows: misfortune is come upon a family of peasants – the eldest son has been crippled by a blow with a stone; the father has died of a heart-attack; the youngest son (the hero of the film), still half a boy, knows who is responsible for all their ills – the tramp, who had treacherously attacked his brother. Again and again in the course of the picture the youngster seeks to be revenged upon the blackguard. The weapon of revenge – an old flint-lock. When the disabled brother is brought into the house, and the family, dazed with despair, is gathered round his bed, the boy, half crying, half gritting his teeth, secretly loads the flint-lock. The sudden death of the father and the supplications of the mother, clinging in despair to the feet of her son, restrain his outbreak. The boy remains the sole hope of the family. When, later, he again reaches secretly for the flint-lock and takes it from the wall, the voice of his mother, calling him to go and buy soap, compels him to hang the gun up again and run out to the store. Note with what mastery the old, clumsy-looking flint-lock is here employed. It is as if it incarnated the thirst for revenge that tortures the boy. Every time the hand reaches for the flint-lock the spectator knows what is passing in the mind of the hero. No titles, no explanations are necessary. Recall the scene of soap fetched for the mother just described. Hanging up the flint-lock and running to the store implies forgetfulness of self for the sake of another. This is a perfect characterisation, rendering on the one hand the naïve directness of the man still half a child, on the other his awakening sense of duty.

Another example, from the film *The Leather Pushers*. The incident is as follows. A man sitting at a table is waiting for his friend. He is smoking a cigarette, and in front of him on the table stand an ash-tray and a glass half-empty of liquid, both filled with an enormous number of cigarette ends. The spectator immediately visualises the great space of time the man has been waiting and, no less, the degree of excitement that has made him smoke nearly a hundred cigarettes.

From the examples quoted above it will be clear what is to be understood by the term: expressive plastic material. We have found here a kitten, a tramp, a stone, a flint-lock, some cigarette ends, and not one of these objects or persons was introduced by chance; each constitutes a visual image, requiring no explanation and yet carrying a clear and definite meaning.

Hence an important rule for the scenarist: in working out each incident he must carefully consider and select each visual image; he must remember that for each concept, each idea, there may be tens and hundreds of possible means of plastic expression, and that it is his task to select from amongst them the clearest and most vivid. Special attention, however, must be paid to the special part played in pictures by objects. Relationships between human beings are, for the most part, illuminated by conversations, by words; no one carries on conversation with objects, and that is why work with them, being expressed by visual action, is of special interest to the film technician, as we have just seen in these examples. Try to imagine to yourself anger, joy, confusion, sorrow, and so forth, expressed not in words and the gestures accompanying them, but in action connected with objects, and you will see how images saturated with plastic expression come into your mind. Work on plastic material is of the highest importance for the scenarist. In the process of it he learns to imagine to himself what he has written as it will appear upon the screen, and the knowledge thus acquired is essential for correct and fruitful work.

One must try to express one's concepts in clear and vivid visual images. Suppose it be a matter of the characterisation of some person of the action – this person must be placed in such conditions as will make him appear, by means of some action or movement, in the desired light (remember the tramp and the kitten). Suppose it be a matter of the representation of some event – those scenes must be assembled that most vividly emphasise visually the essence of the event represented.

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