

A Compromise with Literature? Making Sense of Intertitles in the Silent Films of Alexander Dovzhenko

Intertitles in silent cinema are amongst the most neglected elements in research on silent film.¹ Due to the rapid development of film form at the beginning of this century titles have generally been viewed with reference to the "talkies." The film directors of the silent era were not, however, comparing intertitles to sound possibilities, as we do today, but only to the rich silent cinematic tradition available to them at that time. Similarly, the contemporary audience of silent cinema expected and appreciated what was technologically available to them.

This essay describes the use of intertitles in silent cinema of the 1920s and reviews the theoretical debates surrounding them. My discussion will be illustrated by way of examples from the silent films of Alexander Dovzhenko (1894-1956), the least known master of the Soviet montage tradition. Dovzhenko's silent Ukrainian trilogy, *Zvenyhora* (1928), *Arsenal* (1929) and *Zemlia* (Earth, 1930), is considered his best contribution to film aesthetics and often cited by critics as an example of "poetic cinema" (Montagu, Carynnyk). By comparing the aesthetic choices made by Dovzhenko with the prevailing film practices of his time, I will show how he conformed to them and to what degree he managed to depart from them. A discussion as to whether intertitles in Dovzhenko's films contribute in any sense to the notion of "poetic cinema" will follow. In this context I will show the difficulties contemporary audiences may have when confronting Dovzhenko's films for the first time.

For many, intertitles seem to be the most obvious literary element adopted by cinema in its early days. Since their inception, intertitles have been alternately labelled as a cinematic element and then as an anti-cinematic aspect. A Ukrainian theoretician, who was Dovzhenko's contemporary, wrote of film and literature: "Cinema has to humiliate itself and seek compromises. Intertitles constitute the

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1 There is no theory of intertitles developed in scholarly literature. The most insightful discussion of this problem can be found in Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson, as well as Salt. The most comprehensive discussion on the subject is available in Russian (Tsivian, chap. 6) and Polish (Hendrykowski, chaps. 1-2); see also van Wert and Chisholm.

first major compromise...." (Skrypnyk 1928, 20). Did intertitles indeed have a purely literary function and was cinema compromising?

THE ORIGIN OF INTERTITLES

Cinema was never silent. The viewing experience of early audiences was not diametrically different from what we experience today. Aural stimuli were always part of watching a film. In the early days of cinema, however, they were provided not by the filmmaker, but by film exhibitors. Musical accompaniment was only one of many aural stimuli to which early film audiences were subjected. Others included voice-over narration or the explanation of events by a "lecturer," dialogues read or improvised by actors behind the screen and other sound effects. The quality of music that accompanied film screenings also varied: inexpensive theatres offered piano accompaniment with their showings while the most expensive of the theatres provided full-size orchestras.

Language was a part of cinema as an audio-visual medium from the beginning. Except for the first five years, when films were very simple — they usually consisted of a single shot and did not require explanation — the spoken and later the written word has always been a part of film presentation. The voice of a "lecturer" and sometimes those of actors, were often heard during film screenings in the first decade of this century (see Gaudreault). Live voices were subsequently replaced by intertitles. The lecturer's and the actors' voices reappeared during the late 1920s when they were, however, recorded on the film strip and controlled by the filmmaker. In the Russian Empire the unique practice of "cinematic declamation" was developed. The live voice of an actor (who appeared in the film) read dialogues and was heard from behind the film screen (Tsivian 276-78).² Titles, thus, replaced spoken language in the multimedia presentation that cinema was in its early days.

Film viewing practices in Imperial Russia (and later in the Soviet Union) did not differ considerably from those elsewhere in the world. Except for minor local variations, the experience of silent films was parallel to that in Western countries.³ Local touches included the use of different instruments to accompany films in theatres. In Ukraine, for example, an accordion was often used in lieu of a piano. A trio of piano, cello and violin was also a common set-up. The type

2 According to Tsivian the role of the *kinodeklamator* differed from that of a lecturer in their relationship to the film diegesis. The lecturer was visible to the audience outside of the film screen, often illuminated by a small reading lamp. The *kinodeklamator* was hidden behind the screen and his voice was perceived by the audience as coming from within the film diegesis.

3 In this respect Japan offers an original approach. The Japanese film industry employed *benshi*, oral performers who played vocal parts and provided commentary to films. They were very popular and often became main attractions of the film presentation (see Bordwell 1988, 18-19; Burch).

of music played also depended on the tastes of particular audiences. On rare occasions musicians even played the musical requests of the audience for an additional fee (Landesman 39-40).

WHAT IS MISSING IN INTERTITLES TODAY?

The research into silent film intertitles is a vast area of study. As Iurii Tsivian has shown, a great number of issues need to be examined in order to arrive at a historical poetics or a theory of intertitles. The study of the graphic design of intertitles and their significance in the overall structure of films can only be undertaken with the original versions of films. The translation of titles into foreign languages results in alterations to the graphic design of the titles. Elaborate designs are often simplified or changed to suit the tastes of the new market or to save money. Early title cards, as they were known at the time, also served as copyright devices. The films were not copyrighted in their entirety but each scene had separate copyright. This allowed film companies to show programmes consisting of selected sequences from many films. In addition to the text, each title card bore the name of the production company. The practice was abandoned when films became longer and it did not exist during Dovzhenko's time.

Colour is another element to which Tsivian draws our attention. Prints of silent films in circulation today are black and white. In the 1910s and 1920s film prints were tinted, usually by hand, to give the audience a semblance of natural hues.⁴ This process has also affected intertitles. Many critics and theoreticians of the era argued that the best colours for intertitles were green or blue on black backgrounds, mainly because these combinations were thought to soothe the eyes. They allowed for the use of other colours only for special effects: preferred colours were red and yellow which were considered "expressive." Their use over long periods was discouraged to avoid fatigue of the eyes (Timoshenko 72).

The tradition of printing extradiegetic titles on black backgrounds has acquired a semiotic significance. For Tsivian it evolved because of the need to differentiate film intertitles from "printed pages." This process identified the two different media (Tsivian 287-88). While Tsivian's semiotic argument may very well be valid, the reason for reverse colours in film intertitles was probably more pragmatic. For a viewer seated in a dark movie theatre a white screen could be visually disturbing. Since the lettering in the longest of intertitles takes only a small portion of the entire screen area, the predominance of a white background would appear in high contrast to other shots in the film.

4 Another practice included different colour washes. Entire films or sequences thereof were subjected to a chemical process which replaced the black and white look for another colour, for example, sepia. While the films remained monochrome, the use of colours assigned to different sequences was aesthetically motivated and cued the audience to perceive sequences in a certain way.

EARLY THEORIES OF INTERTITLES

Intertitles have been often viewed by critics and theoreticians as a necessary evil, a substitute for sound stemming from a technological handicap. The critics, particularly within the post-formalist tradition, have overlooked the non-semantic functions which intertitles played in silent films. Such views, having originated in avant-garde circles, promoted "pure cinema" and often evaluated films based on the number of intertitles: the fewer the better. This was, however, not always the case. Generally speaking, intertitles were considered a part of a film's "language," and functioned in conjunction with visuals in the process of narration. Titles entered the narrative whenever the visual "language" could not adequately illustrate an element in a film or when an intertitle was the more economical option. For example, an ellipsis of twenty years would require extensive development in characterization and setting while a simple title such as "Twenty Years Later..." saved unnecessary expense and allowed the filmmaker to concentrate on the film's story. This method survived the sound revolution and is still widely used by filmmakers.

For Tsivian, the reception of cinema operates by two modes: the mode of "reading" an iconic text and the mode of reading words (285-87). The discussion on the primacy of one of these modes over the other has accompanied the development of intertitles throughout their history and has changed correspondingly with changes in the expected functions of intertitles. Along with these trends there has always been an avant-garde trend towards "pure cinema," which saw no need for titles whatsoever (see Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson 186). The avant-garde trend, though extant, reached its peak during the 1920s. Examples include the French avant-garde or the films by Dziga Vertov made in Russia and Ukraine (see Siney and van Wert).

How did Soviet theoreticians of the 1920s perceive intertitles? Formally inclined film theoreticians agreed that titles are an integral part of motion pictures rather than a foreign element to be avoided. According to Timoshenko, intertitles may be considered literary devices only to the degree to which a grammatically correct written phrase is "literary" (72). Pudovkin similarly argues that titles are only superfluous in the same way a whole scene can be superfluous (59).

These conclusions come from the belief shared by almost all theoreticians of the time that an *intertitle* is a *montage shot*. This understanding of intertitles had further implications. If an intertitle is a montage shot, as Timoshenko argued, it should have properties similar to those of a shot, such as length, rhythm, and tempo, expressed by the shot's content ("Fire!" [dynamic]; "In the morning..." [peaceful]). Timoshenko also draws parallels between letter size and camera distance. For example, a long shot would be equivalent to a longer sentence describing details and printed in small letters. Accordingly, close-ups would be paralleled by brief titles and printed in very large typeface so as to occupy the

entire frame (Timoshenko 71). The effectiveness of such titles was discovered quite early in the evolution of the form and was used extensively in propaganda films, commonly referred to as *agit-prop*.⁵

TYPES OF INTERTITLES

Extradiegetic titles — originating outside of the film diegesis⁶ — are generally classified according to their function as *expository titles* and *dialogue titles*. Pudovkin called them "continuity titles" and "spoken titles," respectively. In Skrypnyk's terminology (Skrypnyk 1928, 78) expository titles were labelled as "from the author." Voznesenskii identified them as "explanatory" (70). He also singled out a category of "thought titles" (*myslitel'naia nadpis'*) which for him were neither "explanatory" nor dialogue titles (70). In the Western tradition this type of titles has belonged to the category of expository titles. The other type of titles are *diegetic*, which often are referred to as "inserts" in Hollywood (Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson 188-89). These are written words which are part of the film's diegesis: they exist within the confines of film story and film space and may include letters written or received by a character, street names, newspaper headlines, posters and other written signs placed within the film's frame.

Expository Titles

In Russian and Ukrainian sources expository intertitles are often identified as "from the author." While the Western name is concerned with narrative function, the Russian name implies a much broader definition of the term. None of the Soviet theoreticians, however, provides a comprehensive definition as to what the term encompasses. It is generally understood that all intertitles which are not dialogue — do not represent the direct speech (or thought) of the characters — originate from the author. They may be part of the story and also part of the discourse, or, in formalist terminology, of the *fabula* and *syuzhet*, respectively. A recent study by Brad Chisholm offers a categorization of expository titles. Grounding his research in Chatman's distinction between story and discourse (see Chatman 1978 and 1990), and illustrating it with examples from D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, Chisholm distinguishes seven functional semantic categories

⁵ They were also used by the masters of the Soviet montage tradition, the best known example of which comes from *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*The Battleship Potemkin*). The title, "Brothers!" appears several times in large lettering. In van Wert's opinion "[the title] suggests an essentially cinematic sense of the printed word and of its filmic possibilities as a *visual* rather than as a kind of computerized readout with neutral data" (van Wert 103).

⁶ I consider titles, or more precisely, title cards, as physical objects which are extradiegetic, that is outside the space of the narrative world. For example, a dialogue is part of film diegesis but a dialogue title is not.

of expository intertitles. Four of Chisholm's categories are straight-forward: identifications; characterizations; spatio-temporal markers; and narrative summaries (clarifications of actions not shown but relevant to the narrative).

The next three categories, however, are not so clearly defined. A group of intertitles called "mediated thoughts/paraphrased dialogue," includes "reports of things the characters do *not* say, think, or do" (Chisholm 139). In most cases, these intertitles are already included in the category of "narrative summary." Similarly, the category of "commentary on story," which applies to the story and the diegetic world but which does not advance the plot, is part of characterization (though marked by a subjective narrator). The most problematic category in Chisholm's classification is "commentary on discourse" which applies to "the film medium itself and the very act of perceiving" (140). This category of titles is never essential to the comprehension of the narrative and unlike other categories does not preserve a semblance of objectivity. In other words, it depends on the degree of the narrator's reliability.

It is possible to reduce Chisholm's taxonomy to four broader categories. The differentiating criterion would be in the amount of information each category releases. My modified classification of expository intertitles would then be: identification and characterization; temporal markers; narrative summary; and free commentaries (by the film's implied narrator which do not advance the plot but have the rhetorical function of drawing attention to other titles or visual devices). Within each category various degrees of narrative knowledge would be permissible. As M. Carol Hamand demonstrated for the Hollywood prestige films of the late 1920s, titles differ in their "authority" to reveal information and in their potential to explain, interpret, and describe diegetic and extradiegetic events and states. Similar to varying degrees of omniscience in literary narratives, the "knowledge exhibited in the [intertitles] ranges from intimate details of the character's thoughts and emotions to a broad understanding of the fiction in the films as wholes and even to the world outside the fiction" (Hamand 237).

Dovzhenko's declining use of expository titles throughout his silent trilogy is reflective of a trend at the end of the silent period in cinema. A quantitative analysis of titles in his three films shows that *Zvenyhora* contains 84 titles including 20 non-dialogue titles,⁷ *Arsenal* — 122 titles with 20 expository, and *Zemlia* — 121 titles, none of which are expository. These figures may be misleading if one wants to establish Dovzhenko's reliance on the written word in the narrative process.

Despite the overall low number of intertitles, the film narrative in *Zvenyhora* relies more heavily on written words. Expository titles tend to be much longer

than those in *Arsenal* and they betray an overt literary character. Often written in full descriptive sentences, they take the form of an exposition similar to that found in nineteenth-century novels. Consider the title at the film's beginning which appears before the appearance of any visuals: "Soaked in blood, sealed in secrecy, shrouded in legend, treasures of the country have been buried for ages in Ukrainian soil."⁸ The descriptive language segmented with commas makes the sentence a long read for the viewer. The title also sets a certain visual rhythm which is matched by the shots that follow. An immobile long shot of Cossacks riding the horses is in slow motion. The horses and the Cossacks appear to flow slowly in space. The slow rhythm of the sentence established from the onset of the film seems to match the rhythm of objects moving within the frame. The next title is equally lengthy as if to prolong this slow beginning. Once again, in a style borrowed from novels, the title introduces the film's main character: "The centuries-old guardian, preserver of antiques, a moss-covered grandfather, watches now as he watched when Cossack robbers roamed the country 300 years-1000 years ago." This title is also followed by a long shot in slow motion which introduces the grandfather in front of a horse pulling a cart.

Such use of long expository titles at the beginning of *Zvenyhora* further testifies that Dovzhenko considered titles to be montage shots with shot properties. He intercuts shots filmed at long distances with long titles requiring attention to detail and lengthy reading times on behalf of the viewer. The slow reading of a title is then matched in speed and rhythm by shots in slow motion. This rather unusual method of beginning the film with slow motion shots marks the first part of the film as a dream. Through slow motion the viewer is cued to perceive the beginning of the film as something out of the ordinary. Although the film assumes a normal pace and speed after five shots, the viewer only learns that it was an extended dream sequence some 200 shots later when the grandfather wakes-up. Thus, the initial two expository titles, aside from their semantic function of identifying and characterizing, have the stylistic function of setting the mood and marking the rhythm for the dream sequence.

Throughout *Zvenyhora* and *Arsenal* expository titles are most often used to fulfil the semantic functions described above. Dovzhenko uses the titles to introduce new characters ("Grandfather had a grandson Pavlo") or objects ("The armoured car, Free Ukraine"). The titles also serve as temporal markers: for example, the workers waiting before a battle. Their ordeal is shown by titles indicating the number of hours that have passed and shots showing the unchanged expressions and poses of the workers. Titles stating simply "The twenty-fourth hour" and "The forty-eighth hour" are inserted at equal intervals among

7 This count does not include the story within a story as told by the grandfather. Although they function as expository titles for the grandfather's narrative, they remain dialogue titles for the film as a whole.

8 This and subsequent intertitles are transcribed from video copies of Dovzhenko's films available commercially in North America. Ukrainian names, which appear there in various translations and transliterations, have been changed to their original Ukrainian forms.

shots of the waiting workers. As a result of this rhythmic intercutting the viewer is not only informed of the passing of time but also is able to experience the monotonous character of the event.

Some expository titles seem to combine several semantic functions: in addition to indicating the passage of time, they may provide a narrative summary: "Centuries passed. People were born and died — trains passed over Ukrainian plains. But the hills and forests of Zvenyhora kept Grandfather's secret." Similar narrative summaries appear most often in *Zvenyhora*, a film whose plot spans over a thousand years of Ukrainian history. Generally speaking, the semantic function of Dovzhenko's expository titles does not differ from the norms accepted by filmmakers around the world in his time.

Hamand has suggested that expository titles might be further classified according to their origin. In her sample of Hollywood films from the 1920s she distinguishes two types of descriptive titles. Although all of them have sources outside the film worlds, they can be further divided into those "attributed to a source outside the fiction and those left unattributed" (Hamand 232). Only a relatively small number of titles with an attributed source were used — usually a passage from the Bible, with the origin stated at the bottom of the title card. Most often expository titles were left unattributed and their source unexplained.

The expository titles in Dovzhenko's trilogy are not attributed to any sources outside the fictional worlds of the films. Some of them, however, may have been attributed to sources by the audience during the viewing process. As a rule Dovzhenko uses phrases of clearly folkloric origin. Often, these phrases set a certain mood for the narration which allows it to unfold in the form of an oral tale. The beginning of *Arsenal* serves as the best example in which expository titles would have been easily anchored in a folk tale by the viewers. The intertitle "There was a mother who had three sons"⁹ precedes a shot of a peasant woman standing motionless in the middle of an empty house. This title unmistakably frames the film sequence as a fairy tale even though the setting is realistic. Apart from identifying the woman as the mother of sons, the title unambiguously suggests a fairy tale with a traditional happy ending. The folkloric number of three sons promises the viewer a tale centred on the sons, with the youngest one likely to conquer all obstacles in his way. But the sons are never introduced. The next title "There was a war" once again follows the fairy tale formula of setting time for the story. Several shots of military trenches with barbed wire and clouds of smoke over them illustrate that time. There are some soldiers in the trenches. Are they the woman's sons? We are never to learn that. In the several shots that follow we see a village street of women, cripples, and a policeman. The title then

reads "And mother had no sons" and thus brings an end to the story. This simple story — which has no plot relationship to the rest of the film and is narrated in eighteen shots including three expository titles — is identified by the audience as a kind of a fairy tale. The story has no happy ending; it serves as an introduction to a film about the revolution in Ukraine. Though sketch-like and simple, the folk form of the story raises the viewers' expectations and then disappoints with the abrupt non-formulaic ending. The story is aimed to shock the viewer just as war shocks. Dovzhenko accomplishes his goal through the compositional narrative device of expository titles rather than through the semantic means of disturbing frame content employed in *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1928).

It is also possible to detect the folk origin of some of the expository titles in *Zvenyhora*. The film's story is told by a narrator whose storytelling techniques and use of language imply a familiarity with folklore. The narrator often comments on the story in the form of proverbs or of text stylized as proverbs. Consider, for example, the title "Dogs are not fed when taken hunting. They build road when they are at war," which is best understood if translated as "You don't feed the dogs when you're going hunting ... and here they are, building a road when there's a war on."¹⁰ While the first part of the title is a proverb, the second part is an ironic comment on the lack of planning in the Russian Empire's war efforts. Though the folk source of the proverb is not identified in the intertitle, it was probably recognized as folkloric by contemporary viewers. By juxtaposing the proverb and commentary the narrator reveals himself as an insider into the folk ways of the people. He also introduces a certain poetic ambiguity through his metaphoric use of language. The title does not merely explain the story. Rather, it suggests interpretation. This aspect of intertitles was also recognized by Hollywood. A well written expository title, according to a title writer, "is connotative: it fills out the gaps in the pictures and suggests even more than it tells" (Clara De Lissa Berg, qtd. in Hamand 269).

The language of Dovzhenko's expository titles often does not belong to everyday usage. In Formalist terminology, the titles belong within the category of "poetic language."¹¹ While the distinction between "practical" and "poetic" language holds true for literature, it is of limited value for cinematic evaluation. Cinema did not possess everyday language for expository titles. Language adopted from literary prose (i.e., poetic language) became an accepted standard for expository titles, that is to say, for the everyday language of cinema. In this respect, the lack of expository titles in Dovzhenko's *Earth* can be seen as a

10 The Ukrainian original reads: "Ne todi sobak hoduiut', koly na poliuvannia idut' ... a vony dorohu prokladaiut', koly na viinu ity treba"; English translation by Marco Carynnyk, unpublished manuscript.

11 The Formalists distinguished between poetic language "where the sounds are valuable *per se*" and "practical" or informative language which is aesthetically neutral; see Erlich 73-74.

9 In Ukrainian this title reads "Oj bulo v materi try syny." The emphatic particle "Oj" suggests that it is a line from a folk song or a longer narrative epic poem, *duma*, performed by blind travelling musicians, *lirnyky* or *kobzari*.

poetic device. Conversely, the language in the expository titles in *Zveryhora* and *Arsenal* cannot be considered "poetic" as, more often than not, it remains in line with film practices of the time. In brief, expository titles in Dovzhenko's silent films do not have a single characteristic according to which they may be classified as "poetic."

Dialogue Titles

In the silent cinema of the 1920s the difference between dialogue and expository titles was stressed in two ways. Dialogue cards were distinguished typographically through the use of quotation marks and the addition of an intricate ornament to the first letter of the dialogue. Dialogue titles also differed in their placing within narrative. As a rule they were framed by a medium shot of a character speaking. This bracketing device did not exist for expository titles.

During the last years of silent cinema dialogue titles were the preferred mode of operation for both filmmakers and their audience. Anticipating the introduction of sound the filmmakers sought to reduce or eliminate expository titles altogether (Salt 160).¹² Dovzhenko's *Earth*, which contains only dialogue titles, best exemplifies this trend. The total reliance on dialogue titles in *Earth* can also be explained by the fact that in the initial stages of production *Earth* was to become the first Ukrainian sound film. Political intervention caused this decision to be changed and, ironically, the first Ukrainian sound film was made in Russian by Dziga Vertov.

There is no semantic feature in Dovzhenko's dialogue titles which sets them apart from other filmmakers' contributions. Yet, they present an interesting subject for study due to the manner in which they are employed. In all of Dovzhenko's films the dialogue titles tend to be short, language is used economically. The Grandfather's story in *Zveryhora* is an exception whereby dialogue titles take the form of expository titles in order to narrate a story within a story. Dovzhenko does not use a similar narrative device in any of his subsequent films.

Although dialogue titles are overwhelmingly present in Dovzhenko's silent films it would be difficult to speak of dialogues or conversations taking place. The dialogues in the films are limited to sporadic exchanges, fragments of conversations or speeches, chants of the crowd, or rhetorical questions, posed by the characters to the audience. Conversations in Dovzhenko's films never resemble those established by the classical Hollywood cinema.

Dovzhenko uses narrative strategies in which dialogue titles play an important role but are not crucial to the development of the plot. In the trilogy there is only

one scene which resembles in length a typical Hollywood film conversation: the talk between Vasyli and his father at the beginning of *Earth*. The similarity is greatest with respect to content: two people argue and present their individual points of view. The exchange develops as follows:

Vasyli: "Well, Pop, now we'll put an end to the rich farmers. And get tractors too."

Opanas: "But, [Vasyli], maybe you're forgetting — what's his name..."

Vasyli: "We'll get tractors and take earth away from them."

Opanas: "That's just what I say — maybe you're forgetting — what's his name..."

Opanas: "They can get along without you. No need to go."

Opanas: "Even as it is, the village is laughing."

Vasyli: "It's not the village that's laughing, Pop, it's the rich farmers, and the dopes."

Opanas: "So you think I'm a dope?"

Vasyli: "Not a dope, Daddy, but just getting old."

Although the conversation provides little insight beyond the subject of collectivization and "tractorization" of Ukrainian villages, the scene has theoretical significance for film scholars. Like many others in *Earth*, it challenges the viewer's assumptions about spacial clarity and completeness. There is no establishing shot and the viewer sees shots of Opanas alternating with shots of Vasyli. The men's positions in space and in relation to one other is ambiguous because the viewer only sees the backs of the men. According to Kopley, the graphic similarity of the men's backs is the dominant feature of the conversation as it underlines the commonality of the characters' class origin (36). This spacial ambiguity is only partially resolved:

We have too few cues — no eyelines, no overall orientation, no symmetrically oblique setups. Eventually, however, the men's heads turn slightly left or right, and we grasp gratefully at one cue. This proves consistent: Father and son are most likely standing side by side, not back to back. (Bordwell 1985, 118)

A traditional conversation is presented in an untraditional fashion. The content of the conversation fades as the viewer struggles to establish the spatial relationship between the two characters.

Arsenal may also serve as an example of a departure from the traditional use of dialogue titles. The fictional world of *Arsenal* contains unexpected fantastic elements created through the use of dialogue titles. Dovzhenko extends his use of folkloric devices by employing a common element found in fairy tales: speaking animals. Although in the story of *Arsenal* they remain in the background and do not assume human characteristics, Dovzhenko's horses express their opinions. The gift of speech — which the horses acquire through dialogue titles — is part of *Arsenal*'s fictional world and does not surprise anyone within the film's diegesis. In fact, a certain ambiguity is created this way. Like other dialogue titles, the animals' speech is set off through the inclusion of quotation marks.

12 The trend began in Hollywood in the late 1910s. European cinemas lagged behind by several years.

Unlike other dialogue titles within the film, however, they are italicized. Only one other title in *Arsenal* is highlighted in this fashion: Tymish's recollection of an answer given by him to an officer. Even if italic script marks a character's thoughts and not actual spoken words, this is not the impression of the average viewer. Italicized titles are too sporadic and too far apart to be distinguished. Thus, they were most likely perceived as spoken words and consequently came as a surprise to the viewer.

There is further evidence to suggest that the italicized dialogue was perceived as direct speech rather than as thought. In both instances when the horses "speak" (think) they address a character directly. At the beginning of the film an abused horse turns his head and points to the futility of his master's actions: "*You are wasting your blows on me, old man! I'm not what you need to strike at!*" This calm, logical and clever line, spoken by a horse, is the culmination of two simultaneous-action montage sequences: in one a desperate mother beats her hungry children and in the other an invalid beats a horse. Dovzhenko could very well have employed an alternative and more realistic choice to resolve the sequence: this same line could have been spoken by the abused children. In granting "speech" to the horse, Dovzhenko creates a stronger, more memorable scene which underlines the importance of the social commentary he is making.

This sudden turn to the fantastic not only resolves the sequence but also suggests the course the film will take. Ironically, the need for social revolution and revolt is first expressed by the horse. In a somewhat comic way Dovzhenko departs from the Marxist ideology traditionally presented by his Russian colleagues. The revolutionary activities in Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's films originate in the despair caused by poor economic conditions and in the education of workers by Marxist agents. While the former motivation is present in *Arsenal*, the latter is conspicuously absent. The need to strike is introduced as a natural process of self-realization. Nature in *Arsenal*, as represented in the talking horse, is being likened to ideological education. Revolutionary ideology in Dovzhenko's version becomes something obvious and natural that even horses "talk" about. It suggests that nature frequently governs Dovzhenko's fictional worlds.

In the second instance horses "speak" in reply to their masters. Pulling a cart to which a body of a dead soldier has been strapped, a group of galloping horses respond to the soldiers who are driving. This fast paced sequence, shot with a tracking camera, includes shots of the horses' legs, with their hoofs striking the frozen ground, and the steaming nostrils of the horses. While the sequence adds little in terms of the film's plot, it gives speed to the film. The soldiers are determined to deliver the dead soldier's body to his home village and call out to the horses: "Come on horses — our steeds of war!" and "Hasten to bury our comrade!" These two dialogue titles are followed by five titles representing the "responses" of the horses:

"Revolution!"

"We feel it in the air!"

"Yes, masters — we sense it!"

"We are flying with all the speed —"

"— of our twenty-four legs"

The speed and the rhythm of the sequence, punctuated by the titles, has little to do with the solemn funeral procession it represents. The soldiers deliver the body to a grave site where the soldier's mother stands alone and motionless by a freshly dug grave. The contrast established through the rhythm of the horseback procession and the static images of the mother set against the blackness of the mound of soil next to the grave are two opposing responses to death. Whereas the occasion is solemn and mournful for the woman, it is an everyday occurrence in the soldiers' lives. The "words" attributed to the horses are, in fact, the strongest and the most enthusiastic verbal support for the revolution in the entire film.

Like his expository titles Dovzhenko's dialogue titles differ markedly from one film to the next within the trilogy. These changes reflect Dovzhenko's increasingly strong understanding of the film medium and a crystallization of his ideas on cinema. While "*Zvenyhora* was a catalogue of all [his] creative abilities" (Dovzhenko 19), *Earth* is the film of a mature artist. This evolution manifests itself not only in the abandonment of expository titles in *Earth*, but also in a different functional understanding of the dialogue titles: an evolution from an auxiliary narrative role in *Zvenyhora* to a rhythmic "poetic" use of language in *Earth*, with *Arsenal* encompassing both approaches. It should be noted, however, that the two functions of language are present in all three films, though the dominant function shifts from film to film.

The poetic use of language, as defined by the Formalists, is independent from its practical usage, which serves merely as a means of communication. Leo Jakubinsky conceived poetic language as a separate linguistic system: "systems in which the practical purpose is in the background (although perhaps not entirely hidden) are conceivable; they exist and their linguistic patterns acquire independent value" (qtd. in Eichenbaum 108). Many dialogue titles in Dovzhenko's trilogy are used in such a poetic sense. Their communicative value is often nil; they seem to exist purely for their sonic and visual qualities. "The Revolution is in danger!" appears three times in *Zvenyhora*. Its communicative function is realized when it is first seen following a low-angle shot of an officer speaking. In the second instance the title is framed by a high-angle shot of a fight breaking out among soldiers in a crowd. This time the title acts as a warning and implies that the soldiers' behaviour may endanger the revolution. The line may be attributed to the officer in the scene even though the title is not explicitly linked to him. This same title is repeated for the third time some twenty shots later in the middle of a sequence to which it is seemingly unrelated. Thus, in the

viewer's mind, the title might be echoing the officer's speech, although, once again there is no visual cue to identify the speaker. This example shows how Dovzhenko moves from communication or practical use of a title to an abstract, poetic usage for which the title is not linked to a specific character but creates tension through its "sound."¹³

Examples of line repetition like the example cited above in *Zvenyhora* are present in all of Dovzhenko's films. Some lines are repeated as many as six times and are often enhanced by another avant-garde device — the use of various sizes of typefaces to draw attention to the graphic qualities of the printed word. The question "Aren't you going to carry us?" — posed to a train engineer in *Arsenal* three times — is printed in larger typeface each time it appears on the screen.¹⁴ While the content remains constant, the larger print signifies a raised tone of voice, the anger and impatience of the soldiers asking the question.

The same can be said about the splitting of the dialogue lines into several titles. *Earth* contains several such titles, the splitting of which brings attention to their syntax. "We'll / prosper / with tractors," "Did / you / kill / my [Vasy]?" and "But he / was walking / down the lane / and dancing" are divided by intercutting visuals which make viewers wait for the next portion of the line and force them to retain the previous phrases within their minds. The device is reminiscent of the technique of enjambement in poetry.

In general, the tendency of freeing the title use from its communication function, thereby allowing for more abstract, "poetic" usage, can be best understood by viewing titles as montage elements and analyzing them in relation to other visual elements within his films.

Montage Titles

The classification of extradiegetic titles into expository and dialogue titles is unsatisfactory in analyzing complex films like those from Dovzhenko's trilogy.

13 The poetic use of dialogue titles may be illustrated through comparison with the Soviet Futurist poetry of that time, particularly the works of Mayakovsky, whose influence on film technique is well documented (see, for example, Petric 25-48). The Futurist influence on Dovzhenko came from a more direct source — the Ukrainian Futurists. Mykhail' Semenko and Mykola Bazhan, with whom Dovzhenko was associated, strongly influenced the development of film industry in Ukraine. Elements borrowed from Futurist poetics in dialogue titles include the rhythmic repetitions of complete lines and the splitting of lines of dialogue into several intertitles so as to stress single words in a title. The Ukrainian Futurists' fascination with cinema was reflected in their experimental literary works which borrowed from formal cinematic devices, including intertitles; see, for example, Skrypnyk 1929, Lopatynskyi. For an overview of the Futurist movement in Ukraine, see Ihnytskyi.

14 The relationship between letter size and the sonic qualities of the titles was also promptly recognized by Hollywood: "many silent films have small letters to suggest whispers and large ones for shouts" (Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson 188).

"Intertitles are treated today, almost without exception, only on the basis of their content meaning" — complained a Ukrainian theoretician in 1928 (Skrypnyk 1928, 75). Little has changed since. The need for another category becomes patent, once titles are treated as montage shots. Accordingly, I have introduced a third category of titles which we may call *montage intertitles*. Their primary function is neither expository nor dialogue but, rather, determined by their relation to the montage shots which precede or follow them. Montage intertitles belong to a "fuzzy set" whose elements may as well belong to other sets such as those already described. This category encompasses titles whose main function is not overtly semantic but which function in the film as visuals.

The use of montage intertitles, while present in the classical Hollywood cinema, is most apparent in the avant-garde movements of the 1920s, particularly Soviet and French avant-garde cinemas. This category is useful in light of the montage theories dominant in the 1920s. Because film titles were viewed as *montage shots*, their properties were defined similarly to the properties of regular shots; as montage was considered the most important part of film making, Soviet filmmakers stopped treating intertitles as auxiliary elements. They used them instead as shots equivalent in form and content to other shots. Thus intertitles assumed significance as elements essential to the creation of the visual rhythm of the individual sequences and of the whole film.

Film theoreticians discovered the visual parameters of intertitles together with filmmakers. Voznesensky claims that beside their explanatory function, intertitles function as "visual pauses" in the viewing process. As an example, he cites his experimental film, *Slezy* (*Tears*, 1912), which did not contain any intertitles. Although the narrative could be followed without the inclusion of intertitles, Voznesenskii concluded that the audience was tired by the constant movement on screen and longed for visual breaks. He subsequently inserted titles which were not essential to the film's story but which provided the required pauses and purportedly improved the film (Voznesenskii 69).

Jean Epstein reaches a similar conclusion in 1924. Arguing against films without intertitles he writes:

Looking at a film completely without titles is undeniably depressing, for psychological reasons; the subtitle is first of all a rest for the eye, a punctuation mark for the mind... Isn't advertising a film as having no subtitles like praising Mallarmé's poems because they do not have punctuation? (qtd. in Sitney 102)¹⁵

15 We do not know enough about the viewing habits of early audiences to dismiss these claims. Modern TV viewing and commercials might be construed in a similar manner (though the motivational factors for the inclusion of commercials are obviously commercial rather than aesthetic). Certain viewing patterns are learned by audiences and produce certain expectations. An opposite tendency can be observed in recent changes to the presentation of news on TV in which static images or pauses on the screen are avoided: those reading the news walk or

Another use of *montage titles* creates certain visual patterns and thus establishes the required tempo and rhythm of a film. In *Earth*, when a tractor arrives in a village Dovzhenko repeats the same titles several times. The titles are simple and read: "It's coming!", "It's here!" and "Let'er fly!" They are even shorter in Ukrainian, consisting of a single word. The titles are repeated six, five, and three times respectively and, on one occasion, appear three times in a row. Intercut with the shots of groups of people rushing to see something, the titles do not convey new information or advance the film's plot. Rather, they create expectations and convey the excitement of the characters. All this occurs before the object of their excitement is shown in its full glory. The main function of these titles is neither expository nor dialogue. They are closely linked to the shots of the sequence and their function can be established as a part of the cluster of shots.

The scene of the crowd waiting for the tractor is intercut with a parallel scene in the local communist party office, the main theme of which is waiting. To match the rhythm of this scene with the one described above Dovzhenko uses dialogue titles as an element of montage. The party secretary talks on the phone and struggles over a bad connection. He repeats "I'm listening!" four times. Interestingly, the pace of these titles matches the tempo and rhythm set by the titles in the parallel tractor sequence. By using a structure parallel in form with the use of titles, Dovzhenko succeeds in controlling the tempo and the rhythm of this section of the film. The titles are rendered meaningless through repetition and their function in the communication process is merely *phatic* and predominantly compositional.

Diegetic (Epistolary) Titles

The epistolary form of diegetic titles was the most often used and most often abused form of diegetic titles. In the 1910s, critics already complained that characters in films did nothing but write letters. In the course of the decade letter-writing within films was turned into a cliché to be avoided by self-respecting film directors. A critic wrote in 1924: "The most popular, often bluntly employed and thus annoying method of expression on the screen is 'a letter'" (Voznesenskii 70).

There are several instances of Dovzhenko's use of letters in the triptych. However, Dovzhenko contravenes the cinematic tradition of letter-writing as instances of diegetic use of printed text. In Dovzhenko's fictional worlds, populated by peasants and workers, written words are not a means of

move, or the camera moves. This dynamic may also occur from changing backgrounds behind news anchors. This suggests that today constant movement guarantees undivided attention and that modern viewers do not need visual breaks as audiences some seventy years ago did.

communication. When letters appear, they are either being dictated to or read by intermediaries who have mastered the acts of reading and writing. They appear on the screen as dialogue titles rather than as letters. In this manner, Dovzhenko avoids cinematographic cliché, on the one hand, and achieves an interesting effect in characterization, on the other. The consistency of his approach suggests an intentional usage of the device throughout his films.

The only instance of a diegetic, handwritten letter (in *Arsenal*) also serves as a characterizing element. The letter is written by Tsar Nicholas II. Like the Tsar, who does not belong to the fictional world of workers and peasants, the letter that characterizes him is out of place in the new cinema that Dovzhenko sought to create. Furthermore, the context in which the Tsar's letter is used has additional significance for the social characterization in *Arsenal*. The act of writing and the text of the Tsar's letter appear in sharp contrast to two scenes following it. The scenes are not spatially related nor is the relationship among them clearly established. The episodes — a man beating his horse, a woman beating her children, and the Tsar writing a letter — take place in different locations and the characters involved never meet. In fact, it is their only appearance in the film. Why then would Dovzhenko include the three scenes at the beginning of *Arsenal*?

First of all, they are part of the narrative strategy of aborted film beginnings discussed above. Secondly, they are part of characterization which, however, cannot be understood or compared to the Hollywood or other Western traditions. The Tsar, the man and the woman are not individuals but representatives of their classes. Linked through an outdated cinematic cliché of pre-revolutionary cinema, the Tsar and his class are portrayed as narrow-minded and indifferent. The content of the letter: "Today I shot a crow — splendid weather" is in sharp contrast with the hopelessness and anger expressed by the man and the woman. While their feelings of despair result in the abuse of innocent children and animals, the Tsar's indifference and boredom become the subject of his writings. The Tsar and the peasants express their feelings in the manners best known to them: through writing and violence, respectively.

There is another example of letter writing in *Arsenal* that avoids the use of the diegetic written word which would have been a standard cinematic device of the time and which would have been expected by audiences. What effect does Dovzhenko achieve by departing from standard practices and by trying this new strategy? This question can be answered only through the examination of the letter's content in relation to the context in which it appears. The letter is part of a powerful pacifist message Dovzhenko's film tries to convey. The same text, with minor modifications, is repeated three times in the film in different contexts. The sentence assumes the function of a verbal leitmotif but its effect on the audience is not achieved through repetition but through contextual differences. Initially the question "Is it all right to kill officers and bourgeois in the streets

if I find any?" is asked during a political convention. An anonymous soldier in a back row shyly raises his hand, and when permitted, asks the question. The scene is filmed in a long shot. The soldier is one of many similarly dressed men in the audience and his face cannot be seen. The question is not answered by anyone at the presiding table. Reactions to the question are shown through a series of close-ups of people's faces. Their expressions range from uneasy, polite smiles from the men at the presiding table to laughter from the members of the audience. The question is perceived as out of context, irrelevant to the ongoing political debate, and most importantly, naive. The question reappears at the end of the film but its significance differs. The line is being dictated to a nurse by a dying soldier. There is no cue to indicate that it is the same soldier who asked the question previously. Although we see the soldier's head in close-up, facial features are indistinguishable because the soldier's head is bandaged. As in the first instance the question is posed by an unimportant character in the film's story, as part of a letter to be sent to the soldier's family. An archaic form of address in the written letter further defines the soldier's rural origins. By the time the dictation is over the soldier dies. The nurse writing the letter stands up and faces the camera. Speaking directly to the viewer the nurse reads the letter, which appears on the screen as two dialogue titles. It was unusual for a character to address the audience. Obviously, Dovzhenko wanted the viewer to relate directly to the difficult moral question posed by the dying soldier. When the nurse reads: "Before all of you I bow to the very ground!" "I ask you — all of you — is it all right to kill officers and bourgeois in the street if I find any?", the viewers have no doubt that the question is intended for them. The viewer thus becomes involved in the moral dilemma, which no longer seems naive. Dovzhenko demands that the viewer answer or at least consider the question. Had he opted for a traditional epistolary title this effect would have been lost.

Dovzhenko uses epistolary titles very carefully. They appear in his trilogy only once to characterize a social class associated with letter writing rather than to reveal content significant to plot development. Generally speaking, Dovzhenko prefers to show letters in a non-traditional fashion — as dialogue titles which thus possess greater expressive possibilities.

INTERTITLES WITHIN A FILM SEQUENCE

The typology of intertitles only partially describes their function within the film's narrative. The position of a title within a sequence (scene) and its relationship to a shot also play an important role in the development of film narratology and film poetics. At the beginning of this century, one or several expository titles were placed at the beginning of each scene. They explained what would follow. As a rule the scene consisted of a single shot. This placement of intertitles can be compared to chapter headings and sub-headings in nineteenth-century novels. Early use of such titles worked against cinematic dramaturgy. Often the content

of the shot was revealed and warnings about characters issued. Suspense was certainly not a priority.

With the introduction of dialogue intertitles the situation somewhat changed. Initially, these were also placed at the beginning or at the end of each scene, as the scene itself was considered indivisible. By the mid-1910s, dialogue titles were placed to match characters' lines. Lip movement of characters was an important cue for the appearance of dialogue titles. The accepted norm during the late 1920s was to frame dialogue titles by a medium shot of a character speaking. This bracketing device did not exist for expository titles. Instead they were commonly distinguished by fades and thus were separate from the diegetic world of the characters (Hamand 232).

Dovzhenko adheres to the norms of title placement in silent films of the late 1920s. His expository titles, often framed by dissolves or fades, are placed before the scene where they indicate the subject, place or time of the scene to follow or serve as a transition between two scenes. Dialogue titles are most often used by Dovzhenko in a way that leaves no doubt as to who speaks each line. The aforementioned repeated dialogue titles, for which speakers often originate from within a crowd, constitute an exception to this rule. The lip movement can be attributed to several characters in several shots and the dialogue title seems to highlight the most important statements. Unlike the "talkies," silent films were at liberty to translate only part of characters' speech into intertitles.

Although Dovzhenko's dialogue titles consistently follow a medium shot or a closeup of a speaker, they are not framed by them. Often, after the title Dovzhenko does not return to the speaker, but cuts to another speaker or chooses to show the silent reactions to a character's words. This technique, often combined with Dovzhenko's peculiar use of space, creates a certain narrative ambiguity. The conversation between Vasyly and Opanas cited above may serve as an example. A scene at the beginning of *Earth* illustrates this technique even better. It consists of a number of medium shots and closeups of people speaking. The shots of the speakers are appropriately followed by dialogue titles. Although the illusion (through camera angles and eye-lines) that the group surrounds a dying man lying on the ground is created, the spatial relationship among the characters is never revealed. Through dialogue titles the viewer is cued to believe that the characters share a common space and that they talk to one another. The viewers know who speaks, but they cannot be certain who is listening.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERTITLES WITHIN A FILM

As montage shots, titles had to follow the rules of montage and the film's dramatic structure. Pudovkin, for example, paid special attention to the distribution of titles within a film. He praised American films for their concentration of expository titles at the beginning and for the introduction of dialogue titles as the film's tempo increased. Towards the film's climax titles became less frequent

and were abandoned altogether at the climax, thus allowing for focus on the film's action and the achievement of a fast tempo (Pudovkin 62).¹⁶

Skrypyuk less frequently based his opinions on Hollywood style and believed that the distribution of titles within a film should follow the film's literary content, i.e., its story. Unlike Pudovkin, he did not see the necessity of structuring a film's story according to Hollywood formulae but also stressed a film's tempo as an element ultimately governing the use of intertitles.

Dovzhenko's silent films do not follow the Hollywood model of dramatic structure. With plots loosely structured around leading characters, Dovzhenko's films have an episodic structure and titles are designed to satisfy the narrative function of a given episode. Dovzhenko observes the general rule that fast sequences should not be interrupted by intertitles. Two sequences which have minimal relationships to the films' plots may serve as examples. The industrialization sequence from *Zvenyhora* attempts to prove that the real treasures of Ukraine are its resources and people and that the future belongs to technological progress. The sequence has no intertitles, no direct relationship to the plot of *Zvenyhora* and consists of a rhythmically edited progression of shots depicting factories, mines, construction sites, and machines at work. A similar fascination with machines appears in *Earth*, where a sequence shows the mechanized process of agricultural work culminating in bread baking. Again the movement of machine parts and of people and the lack of intertitles give the sequence its desired rhythm and speed. Although both sequences are fast paced they cannot be considered climactic for their respective films, since they are almost extradiegetic and hardly relate to the film plots.

Generally speaking, the distribution of intertitles throughout Dovzhenko's films does not follow a pre-set formula and is highly irregular. The presence or absence of intertitles is determined by the rhythm and tempo of a given sequence rather than the sequence's place in the structure of a film.

CONCLUSIONS

The identification of film intertitles as a purely literary element depriving cinema of its visual power needs to be revised. Intertitles came to cinema as a part of the audio-visual presentation cinema has always been. They replaced the human voice of a lecturer and actors and were replaced by the human voice during the sound era. In the meantime, however, intertitles acquired different cinematographic functions. It is necessary to view intertitles as a function of montage if one is to fully understand their intent and impact. The category of "montage titles" accounts for a wide range of titles that functioned well beyond their

literary semantic role and became an important factor in the development of film poetics.

Dovzhenko's use of intertitles in his silent films follows avant-garde rather than mainstream trends. His titles, especially dialogue and montage, go beyond the semantic aspect of written words and explore their visual and sonic possibilities. The contribution of intertitles to the notion of "poetic cinema" can be best understood in Formalist terms. By bringing attention to titles as devices in the rhythmic composition of films Dovzhenko contests their everyday, "practical" use.

In this sense, intertitles were a compromise with literature only in the hands of unimaginative film directors. For the creative, like Dovzhenko, they served as cinematographic material to be utilized in the synthetic art of motion pictures. Words, both written and spoken, have always been part of cinema. Intertitles deserve and require further study before we arrive at a poetics of silent film form.

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16 Pudovkin elaborates on a point made earlier by Timoshenko; cf. Timoshenko 72.

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After the Carnival: The Filmic Prosaics of *Schindler's List*

Geoffrey Hartman has a peculiar way of opening his condemnation of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. He grants in his first sentence that the film is "entirely successful" in conveying the terror of the Holocaust (127). That would seem a very high compliment for a film that aspires to documentary status. It develops, however, that Hartman's critique has less to do with this particular film than with the entire genre of cinematic realism as it confronts the Holocaust — or, indeed, as it might portray any traumatic subject matter.

Hartman finds an apt metaphor for realist representation in his own mortification at looking at a Nazi concentration camp through the rifle scope of the nefarious Amon Goethe. To peer through that scope is to observe Hell on earth as only a victimizer could witness it. The "better" a cinematic representation happens to be — which is to say, the more refined its "scope" — the greater one's sense of impotence or even complicity in the face of visual horror will be. Hartman considers it better to leave that horror to words than to pictures, and better still to poetic allusion or "indirect disclosure" (130) than to prosaic description. In a footnote he reveals his affinity for the French cultural revolt against realism that reaches back past the French *nouveau roman* to Mallarmé and Proust.

Thus we have a curious inverse logic: to the degree that Spielberg succeeds on a documentary or realist plane, he fails on the moral plane of Hartman's poetics. By giving visual voice to the unspeakable, Spielberg forces a sensitive viewer — a Yale deconstructionist, say — into the psychological retreat that Hartman calls, somewhat ironically, the "unreality effect" (134). We are given to believe that this is the viewer's only choice: to accept the world according to Amon Goethe, or go into denial. Raised to the level of professional criticism, that denial marks not only Hartman's response to *List*, but a great many less generous and insightful film reviews. Hartman, at least, gives the devil his directorial dues: Spielberg gets high marks as a realist. It is realism as such which flunks the test.

In disposing of realism, Hartman confesses that for him the key issue is one's affective choice between two equally sound but antithetical attitudes towards the representation of trauma. First there is the "Greek" view, which holds that a clear picture of what one fears can have enduring artistic value, and may even help to