

**Montage Techniques in the Novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by A. Döblin
and the Film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (the Director – R. W. Fassbinder)**

Montage is a narrative technique that was not invented by cinema. Thus, the Russian directors S. Eisenstein and M. Romm analyzed montage techniques in the Russian literature of the 19th century, for instance, in A. Pushkin's works. Most of contemporary dictionaries of literary terms offer their definitions of the literary montage, for example: "... das Zusammenfügen, das unverbundene Nebeneinanderstellen von sprachlichen, formal wie inhaltlich unterschiedlichen Texten und Textteilen oft heterogener Herkunft" ("... bringing together texts and text parts that are different in terms of style, form and content and often have different origins")¹. At the same time, it is cinema in which montage has become the key narrative tool. So it seems useful to compare the narrative techniques of montage in the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by A. Döblin and its screen adaptation of the same name made by R. W. Fassbinder. This comparison will contribute to the description of the montage narrative technique in the novel, and thus will lead to some conclusions on the genre particularities of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that is a montage novel, according to a number of investigators².

Analyzing montage in literature, I address cinematic notions. Both the novel and the film may be compared from the viewpoint of the kinds of montage which prevail in them, keeping in mind the peculiarities of both literary and cinematic narratives.

There are a lot of montage classifications. In most of them the consecutive, chronological, montage is considered the basic montage type³. The consecutive montage is the main narrative technique of the film *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. To be able to apply the terms "narrative" and "narration" both to literature and film, we address the broadest interpretation of them. This is the principle formulated, for instance, by Y. Lotman in his book *Dialogue with Screen*: "the consecutive unfolding of episodes connected by some structural principle constitutes the fabric of narration"⁴. The same interpretation is given in *Handbook of Narratology* (the article *Narration in Film*): "the most solid narrative link between verbal and visual representation is sequentiality"⁵.

The consecutive montage plays an essential role in the novel, too. But though the plot of the novel is rich in events, the most characteristic kind of montage which is employed is the montage in D. Vertov's style: in the style of his well-known experimental film *Man with a Movie Camera*. This is not surprising if you take into account A. Döblin's own views: his philosophy of nature and his views on the epic work⁶.

Döblin's philosophy of nature rejects the cult of an individual. There is a certain elemental force which all things are drawn to. All things in nature exist in two forms: simple, elemental, and differentiated, the second one tending to disintegration. There is no permanence in nature; all things in the world exist assimilating with each other. So man also desires to get rid of her or his personality, and strives for anonymity, and the major phenomena which accompany such desires are death, pain, and love (sexuality). In accordance with Döblin's philosophical views, man should be depicted in the "flow of life" and as its part.

This is also illustrated by the structure of Döblin's works. The montage technique in his novels, first of all in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, in which it is used most consistently, shows a correlation of the narration in an epic work with life. The compositional principle is to be "epic apposition". The story in the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* originates as if contrary to the author-creator's⁷ intentions. Newspaper fragments, medicine instructions, anonymous citizens' stories are cut together creating the effect of the "flow of life" which Döblin wrote about. The transition between montage fragments is not commented on. So the narrator's functions are ambiguous in the novel. On the one hand, sometimes the narrator assumes the "auctorial" character (F. Stanzel's term) and reveals his omniscience. For instance, in book 2 there is a paragraph starting with: "Und was Frau Minna anlangt, die Schwester der Ida, so geht es ihr gut..."⁸. In most cases he admonishes Franz Biberkopf, the main hero, especially in books four – nine. The narrator's voice becomes the voice of Franz's conscience, and generally the voice of conscience. But on the other hand, the narrator does not help the reader comprehend the transition between the montage segments. Additional efforts are required from the reader to make the reception successful. The narrator's, or, to be more precise, the author-creator's will is only manifested in *the way* montage segments collide with each other. Thus, the narrator's omniscience becomes in fact equal to the film director's omniscience.

These peculiarities of montage in the novel are manifested not only at the level of episodes but also at the level of phrases. The effect of *Man with a Movie Camera* is expressed in the narration in

the form of discourses' blending and in the phenomenon of "two-voiceness" (M.M. Bakhtin's term)⁹. Most statements that do not belong to any character and thus are ascribed to the narrator could possibly be uttered by some hero. For instance, in book 5 Reinhold is described by utterances that belong both to the narrator and Franz Biberkopf, because they are not given in the form of direct speech, but their style points to Biberkopf's manner of speaking.

But the same effect can be produced only metaphorically in cinema due to its mode of presentation, and this will be connected with the content and not with the form. Thus, it may be said that Death speaks through the heroes' mouths in the epilogue. But this is only a metaphor. There are moments when the voice-over pronounces words which belong to Franz Biberkopf. But on the whole, "two-voiceness" is eliminated in the film. The words belong either to the voice-over or to a hero. This refers not only to the potential remarks of heroes. The texts which are cut together without the narrator's comments in the novel may be read aloud by the film heroes: newspaper articles, shop-signs and advertisements.

Thus, staying with Lina, Franz is reading aloud the medicine instruction that was a montage segment in the novel¹⁰, in the first episode of the film. The montage forms typical of the novel, i.e. the collision of heroes' utterances, parables, stories about anonymous people, newspaper articles and encyclopedic information become less complicated, or, in other words, are adequately conveyed in the film.

For instance, the parable about Job is retold in the novel in the form of a dialogue between Job and the unknown voice, book 4¹¹. This parable is retold by Franz and his neighbour Baumann in the film, episode 4. Franz pronounces Job's words, which permits the audience to associate him with Job more directly.

There are a lot of other examples of how "two-voiceness" is lost in the film. For instance, Franz is reading a journal in book 2. Then an article is quoted which probably belongs to this journal, but no explanation is given by the narrator¹². Franz reads aloud this article to Lina in episode 2 of the film, and it becomes clear that the article is really included in this journal.

There are descriptions of city life¹³ at the beginning of book 5. One of them is found in the newspaper and is read aloud by Bauman in episode 4 of the film. There is a drinking-song embedded into the narrative in book 5¹⁴, and it is sung by Franz and other visitors of the beerhouse, which is most natural, in the film (episode 6). Reinhold ironically reiterates the text of an advertisement in the same scene of the film: "Wrigley P.R. Kaubonbons bewirken gute Zähne,

frischen Atem, bessere Verdauung” that is also embedded into the narrative in book 5¹⁵. This is also an example of how montage segments of the book assume new connotations, being turned into utterances of particular characters in the film.

A symbolic decision on how to present a paragraph on the whore of Babylon¹⁶ is found in the film. Each time Franz passes the Red-light street, he is met by a pander who tells him about the whore of Babylon (episode 7). This happens several times in the film.

An interesting example can be found in the epilogue of the film. In book 9 of the novel Franz is talked to by Death. Death’s statements are produced by Franz’s friends and acquaintances, Baumann, Reinhold, Eva and Herbert, in the movie. This is not the loss of “two-voiceness”, but the evidence of a specific mode of cinematic presentation. It is more productive to represent Death through heroes’ dialogues in the film and not to make an actor or actress play it.

A reverse side of these differences between the narration in the novel and in the film is the changes in the system of characters. Thus, Franz Biberkopf pronounces biblical texts and interprets them (the parable about Job). He reads aloud the phrase about Jerusalem: “Ich will Jerusalem zum Steinhäufen und zur Wohnung der Schakale machen und will die Städte Judas wüste machen, daß niemand drinnen wohnen soll”¹⁷. He also pronounces the formula “Es ist ein Schnitter, der heißt Tod, hat Gewalt vom großen Gott”, that was originally uttered by the narrator and that shows Franz’s intuition. Franz becomes a more intellectual hero than he is in the novel. Reinhold becomes a more infernal personality due to the remarks ascribed to him in the epilogue.

The borders between characters are blurred in the novel, and this is manifested first of all in the blurred speech borders – in “two-voiced” statements. Meanwhile, each statement is ascribed to only one certain hero in the film. Thus, the spheres of the viewer’s and the reader’s interpretation are quite different. The viewer’s interpretations belong to the field of psychology; the viewer interprets the heroes’ acts, speech, behavior and gestures. The author-creator’s position has nothing to deal with psychology. Döblin criticizes “psychological novels”. The narrator of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* seems to eliminate himself and does not comment on the heroes’ psychology. But the main thing that prevents the reader from shaping the idea of the heroes’ personalities is the blur of speech borders between them. Before identifying personal traits of the heroes, the reader needs to interpret the text of the novel. Fassbinder’s screen version seems to be such an interpretation. Thus, the viewer’s idea of the film characters is clearer and more definite than the idea of the heroes of novel that the reader forms.

But a more documental image of the city is created in the novel, though all the city descriptions are saved in the heroes' speech, the voice-over's comments and the titles¹⁸.

The narration in the novel is often lost in the blur of montage segments describing the city, and the plot is then less obvious as well. The montage segments which describe Berlin are smoothly included into the film narration, and the plot is less ambiguous. But the film also depicts the "flow of life" by a specifically cinematic means – by a means of vertical montage¹⁹. For instance, you can see Franz's actions, listen to the music in the background and to the shopkeeper's story about Franz's neighbours in episode 4. The scene of Ida's beating is repeated in the film several times, accompanied by various comments on city life uttered by the voice-over. This allows the audience to feel the loneliness of man and human fate's anonymity – but at the same time its special importance, as it is part of this big city's life. The reiteration of the phrase "Es ist ein Schnitter, der heißt Tod" creates the atmosphere of waiting for a catastrophe which is inevitable.

The film employs textual insertions – separate frames – which are read aloud by the voice-over. But while it is natural for literature to have an explicit (overt) narrator, it is not typical of cinema. Cinema is devoid of the narrator's figure²⁰. So both the voice-over's remarks and textual insertions do not only involve the audience in the story, but also make one sense the weakness of heroes and their subordination to certain unified laws of life. As Y. Lotman states, "the unseen voice sounds more authoritative"²¹.

It is characteristic that both book nine of the novel and the epilogue of the film employ most expressive narrative means both of literary and filmic nature. Dialogues, indirect speech and montage descriptions of the city are combined in the novel, and most important symbols are mentioned. The film employs the possibilities of vertical montage, the expectations related to the off-screen space, visual effects, the voice-over and textual insertions.

Let me draw some conclusions. The image of the "flow of life" in the space of the city is created in the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with the help of the montage technique, the principle of which resembles the principle of D. Vertov's montage. The montage technique is also employed at the level of phrases. Separate phrases are cut together by the narrator without comments on who pronounces them, so the effect of "two-voiceness" is created. This renders the feeling of anonymity which is life itself in Döblin's philosophy of nature, and blurs the borders between the characters' personalities.

At the same time, there are more fixed borders between the characters of the film due to

unambiguous remarks. Franz Biberkopf is an existential hero more definitely in the film than in the novel, and Reinhold is a more demonic hero, though the motives behind his acts become more complex in the film. The image of the “flow of life” is created by specifically cinematic means in the film which are, in particular, various kinds of vertical montage, including textual insertions combined with the voice-over.

While the technique of vertical montage dominates the film narration, the author-creator’s main intention is not to tell a story about the hero, but to portrait him in the “flow of life”. So the key montage techniques in the novel are both the consecutive montage and the montage in *Man with a Movie Camera* style. The narration of the film seems to be more conventional (with the exception of the epilogue); the novel is rich in non-narrative elements. Thus, the reception of the film plot is easier compared to the reception of the novel plot. On the other hand, the viewer has fewer possibilities of interpretation than the reader.

A supposition may be made that Döblin’s novel differs, on the one hand, from the film, and on the other, from any other novel which employs the consecutive montage technique by shifting the focus from narrativity. Though the novel has the subtitle *The Story about Franz Biberkopf*, the feeling is created that the plot of the novel appears as an indirect result of observing the big city life. As if each time the camera (‘cinema eye’, using D. Vertov’s notion) catches sight of the same hero: Franz Biberkopf. Meanwhile, Biberkopf feels an anonymous part of the city up to the last pages of the novel.

This seems to agree with Döblin’s philosophical views: this desire for anonymity; and that is why the atmosphere of ‘narrative chaos’ may be sensed (another author of a montage novel, John Dos Passos, was accused of this kind of “chaos”). It seems to reflect this ‘anonymity’. But to strive for it, a man has first to realize what his own self and his individuality, which he desires to get rid of, really are. This is why Franz makes such a long way: in order to realize that he is truly part, but not part of an anonymous mass. He is one of many people who bear responsibility for their lives, and the larger their number is, the stronger they are. It is clear now that Franz’s story is crucial for the narrative structure of the novel. Though the narrator often becomes “covert” to draw the reader’s attention not to the story, but to life “as it is”, he hands over his functions to the heroes at the same time (an investigator of A. Döblin’s novels calls this phenomenon “ostranenie”, defamiliarization, of the narrator’s functions²²). Reminding the reader that man is part of the “flow of life”, the heroes’ phrases merge into the narrator’s discourse, or, to be more exact, the two

voices, of the narrator and the hero, start to sound together instead of one. But the composition of episodes and the titles of chapters and their parts point to the special attention that the narrator pays to one particular hero – to Franz Biberkopf.

Thus, the narrative peculiarities of the novel reflect the ambivalence of an individual destiny and the “flow of life” that is one of the major topics in the novel (which is, probably, a particular feature of the montage novel). This topic is also expressed at the level of narrative peculiarities in R. W. Fassbinder’s film (see the examples of vertical montage), but narrative devices correlating with this theme are more varied in the novel. So the concluding statement that Franz feels part of the nation sounds natural in the novel, while the same statement in the film seems to be the director’s homage to the text of the novel that played a decisive role in his life.

¹ Gfrereis H. (Hrsg.). *Literatur (metzler kompakt)*, Stuttgart, Weimar 2005. S. 105.

² Keller O. *Döblins Montageroman als Epos der Moderne*, München 1980. Kiesel H. *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne*, München 2004.

³ Martin M. *Le Langage cinématographique*, Paris 1955. Sokolov A. *Montazh: televidenie, kino, video*, part 1, Moskva 2000. Schmidt J. *Narration in Film // Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin – New York 2009. Pp. 212–227.

⁴ Lotman Y., Tsivyan Y. *Dialog s ekranom*, Tallinn 1994. P. 159.

⁵ Schmidt J. *Narration in Film // Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin – New York 2009. P. 212.

⁶ Kort W. *Alfred Döblin*, New York 1974.

⁷ From now on, M.M. Bakhtin’s terms relating to the problem of the author are used. Bakhtin M.M. *Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoy deyatelnosti // Bakhtin M.M. Sobranie sochineniy*, volume 1, Moskva 2003. Pp. 69 – 263.

⁸ Döblin A. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, München 2009. S. 103.

⁹ From now on, M.M. Bakhtin’s terms “two-voiceness” and “two-voiced” are used. Bakhtin M.M. *Problemi poetiki Dostoevskogo*, Moskva 1963. Pp. 242 – 273.

¹⁰ Döblin A. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, München 2009. S. 36 – 37.

¹¹ *Op.cit.* S. 143 – 146.

¹² *Op.cit.* S. 75 – 76.

¹³ *Op.cit.* S. 166.

¹⁴ *Op.cit.* S. 194.

¹⁵ *Op.cit.* S. 195.

¹⁶ *Op.cit.* S. 237.

¹⁷ *Op.cit.* S. 270.

¹⁸ The big city life is an important topic in the montage novel. It is not surprising that some researchers viewed D. Dos Passos’s and A. Döblin’s montage novels as ‘big city novels’. For example: Gelfant B.H. *The American City Novel*, Norman: the University of Oklahoma Press 1954. Bernatskaya V.I. *Eksperiment v amerikanskoy proze 20 godov XX v.*: Ph.D. dissertation, Moskva 1976.

¹⁹ Eisenstein S.M. *Montazh*, Moskva 1998.

²⁰ Schmidt J. *Narration in Film // Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin – New York 2009. Pp. 219–222.

²¹ Lotman Y., Tsivyan Y. *Dialog s ekranom*, Tallinn 1994. P. 145.

²² Kotelevskaya V.V. *Povestvovatel'naya struktura romanov A. Dyoblina*: Ph.D. dissertation, Rostov-on-Don 2002.

Bibliography

Primary Literature

1. Döblin A. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, München 2009.

Film

1. Fassbinder R.W. *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, BR Deutschland 1980.

Secondary Literature

1. Bakhtin M.M. *Problemi poetiki Dostoevskogo*, Moskva 1963.
2. Bakhtin M.M. *Sobranie sochineniy*, volume 1, Moskva 2003.
3. Bernatskaya V.I. *Eksperiment v amerikanskoj proze 20 godov XX v.*: Ph.D. dissertation, Moskva 1976.
4. Eisenstein S.M. *Montazh*, Moskva 1998.
5. Gelfant B.H. *The American City Novel*, Norman: the University of Oklahoma Press 1954.
6. Gfrereis H. (Hrsg.). *Literatur (metzler kompakt)*, Stuttgart, Weimar 2005.
7. *Handbook of Narratology* / Edited by Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid, Jörg Schönert, Berlin – New York 2009.
8. Hurst M. *Erzählsituationen in Literatur und Film. Ein Modell zur vergleichenden Analyse von literarischen Texten und filmischen Adaptionen*, Tübingen 1996.
9. Keller O. *Döblins Montageroman als Epos der Moderne*, München 1980.
10. Kiesel H. *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne*, München 2004.
11. Kort W. *Alfred Döblin*, New York 1974.
12. Kotelevskaya V.V. *Povestvovatel'naya struktura romanov A. Dyoblina*: Ph.D. dissertation, Rostov-on-Don 2002.
13. Lotman Y., Tsivyan Y. *Dialog s ekranom*, Tallinn 1994.
14. Martin M. *Le Langage cinématographique*, Paris 1955.
15. Paech J. *Literatur und Film*, Stuttgart 1988.
16. Prangel M. *Materialien zu Alfred Döblin "Berlin Alexanderplatz"*, Frankfurt am Main 1975.
17. Sokolov A. *Montazh: televidenie, kino, video*, part 1, Moskva 2000.