

## 10. Floating pianos

Neal Cooper

I could now read the word “bal” above the entrance to the long semi-circular tin-roofed hut. My Russian was making progress. I wondered what this place could be used for under normal circumstances, an annual dinner and dance, the Christmas ball, prize day? There were traces of Christmas. Fir tree branches hung from wires suspended over the hall. There was some kind of decoration at one end with camouflage netting forming a grotto. It was an austere military space doing its best to look homely and festive. Outside the snow lay compacted in the alley ways and smoothed over what must have been hedges like icing sugar.

Only these were no normal circumstances for the Kostroma High Academy for Chemical Defence. Nor were they for me. I was a freelance, Paris-based English language teacher a long way off the beaten track. The person responsible for my being there was Nikita Mikhalkov, Oscar-winning director of the international success *Burnt by the Sun*.

I made my way through the lobby of the “ballroom”, past the bored-looking teenage conscript on guard, and quietly slipped into the hall. I could see my English student sitting at a small table with his afternoon tea in an incongruous silver teapot. A three-man film crew moved stealthily about recording the “master’s” every word and occasionally panning round to a semi-circle of uniformed actors about ten metres away to catch a spirited comment or demonstration. This was rehearsal for the twenty-odd actors hired to play junior officers in a Russian imperial military academy in 1895. They had been living there for three months already and looked slightly jaded, worn out by early morning gym and marching in the -19°C conditions. Their uniforms, black tunics and trousers with knee-length boots, crested astrakhan hats, heavy felt coats and odd conical felt bonnets for the bitterer mornings, all confectioned specially for the movie, were beginning to look equally tired. Yet in the presence of Mikhalkov the young men seemed alert and inspired.

The rehearsal moved into a more animated phase, with officer cadet-actors jumping to their feet to give their version of events. I was beginning to grasp what the purpose of the session was. From my reading of the script as dialogue coach, I knew they were working on a ballroom scene where no one dares set foot on the dance floor because pranksters have waxed it to a lethal shine. I began to understand

that the director was looking for a way of suggesting the slipperiness of the floor to the viewer. There were all sorts of suggestions. Occasionally one would capture the interest of the assembly. Their enthusiasm would begin to crescendo until an inherent flaw dawned on them and the idea was scrapped.

This went on for some time until somebody came up with an idea that seemed to stay the distance. Mikhalkov looked thrilled as the suggestion was tossed around. He acted more as a cushion deflecting the proposals to influence their trajectory, rather than dictating a particular course, and I couldn't help admiring the skill with which he led the group. An air of general satisfaction kicked in as the rehearsal drew to a close for that afternoon. As we all got into our warm coats before stepping out into the biting cold and snow, I went up to Nikita Sergyevitch - as he's known in Russia according to the convention whereby one carries one's father's name - and asked him what they had come up with. After the usual bear hug he confirmed they had been looking for a way to show how slippery the floor was. The idea was that a very slight girl from the finishing school attending the ball would bend down to tie her shoe and lean on a grand piano, sending it sailing across the dance floor to the amazement of the onlookers hugging the walls. I had already had discussions with Mikhalkov about scenes from his films, and each time I had had the same sensation. It was as if the result on film already hung there in mid air. Form and emotion mingled and I could sense the poetic craft of Mikhalkov in the making. Rather automatically I asked him if it was feasible to get a grand piano to uncannily waltz across a dance floor in a moment of suspended animation. He equally pragmatically said he'd call his art director in Moscow to ask him and that was that. The day's work with the cadets was done. In a while we'd be back in the Volga hotel getting ready for yet another typical Russian meal liberally washed down with Mikhalkov's own special brand of vodka.

The image of the grand piano sailing across the floor had a haunting quality about it. It would have strong power of suggestion rather than plain demonstrative significance. The flatly demonstrative is of little interest, whereas an image that arouses the imagination and gratifies subtle tastes is what makes a film artistic. This image reminded me of a shot from *Burnt by the sun* where the agitated Marroussia taps nervously on a glass, while all other sound is relegated to the background. This action, which denotes her profound, unspoken malaise, has the same evocative strength, especially when, after she stops tapping, another character as if contaminated by the ambient discomfort, takes up the beat.

Such silent exchanges between characters, or between the image and the viewer's mind, are just as intelligible as dialogue itself. So often in the English language classroom these subtler elements of cinematographic language are overlooked - unless teachers set objectives that target them. Trying to decode the complex oral messages sent by the characters in a scene is certainly a difficult task. What is more, by focusing on dialogue alone a wealth of other signs can be left by the wayside. The teacher who encourages this more global approach to comprehension of film may find that students are able to say exactly what is happening in a scene by simply observing and discussing the subtler elements of "mise-en-scene". What are we given to see, what are we given to hear, or feel? These are questions that open up a layered approach to working with film which goes beyond mere acoustic and linguistic decoding.

Mikhalkov one day showed me a fax sent by Julia Ormond, one of the stars appearing in the film. She plays the part of an American woman from Chicago who is in Russia to help a passionate inventor in his bid to sell the Russians a new-fangled tree-felling machine. In the director's notes on the characters, her character is described as striking, volatile, mercurial, impetuous, vulnerable, capricious, witty... and the list goes on. As Julia Ormond is British, she will need a dialogue coach for her Chicago accent, and this was the main subject of her fax. Stressing the importance of having a dialogue coach to produce a convincing Chicago accent, she claimed that sound was just as important as picture in a film. This was rather like preaching to the converted it seemed to me as I had already seen Mikhalkov working in great depth on the soundtrack of *Urga*, a film which won the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival. We were sitting in a post-production studio one evening as he worked on a reel or two of *Urga*, and I was struck by the attention given to every sound recorded on the set. It was like watching a conductor working through an opera score.

On another occasion, in Überlingen on the German side of Lake Constance, where we did some preparation work for his new film, I saw again this attention to sound detail. Wherever Mikhalkov goes, he always takes a mini HiFi system and a stock of CD's with him. His musical tastes vary from Rachmaninov, to jazz, to Mozart. On one occasion we were working on the kind of language used (by him in his notes) to describe character. In the background there was a recording of *The Marriage of Figaro*, an extract of which is performed by the officer cadets in the next film. As we spoke a particularly rousing ensemble started and suddenly Mikhalkov stopped in his tracks and stared into space. He went on to say this was

exactly the piece he needed for the station scene towards the end of the film when Andrey Tolstoy (main protagonist) is sent off to Siberia. In a few moments, the effect he was in the process of creating was again hanging there in mid-air. What was more stunning was the impression I had that the scene already existed as he described the crowds desperate to catch a glimpse of exiled loved ones, the train pulling out, a marching song sung by Tolstoy's friends as the protagonist himself breaks into a few bars of "Non piu andrai", and then the final musical climax. This choice of music came as a necessary counterpoint to the drama of the scene, heightening the poignancy of the character's exile. I felt I had witnessed a unique moment of creation and vision, the remarkable part being that the scene unfolded there before our minds' eyes in the middle of the hotel room.

In *Burnt by the Sun* music also plays a subtle yet vital role. Its composer, Artemiev, has worked with Mikhalkov for many years and the director is particularly attached to his style of musical composition. In *Burnt by the Sun* music is actually used quite sparingly. A scene will often end with a short snippet of music to carry us into the next scene, usually brief and charged with the power to bring up or enhance some emotion or other without labouring the point or getting sentimental. The effect is twofold: slick transition and emotional focus. As with opera, musical theme is used to highlight the significance of action as it affects the lives of the protagonists unfolding before us. Naturally, music has the power to quickly, subtly, yet powerfully evoke the undercurrents of the drama. Such use of music shows the same orchestral control as with the station scene above and confirms Julia Ormond's remarks about the equal importance of picture and sound.

The common thread running through the points made so far is preparation. Mikhalkov's preparation is astounding both in terms of quantity and detail. His notes on the characters of the film are highly informative and subtle portraits of human nature. He describes Jane (Julia Ormond) in the following terms:

If we can speak in musical terms, I would compare Jane to an everlasting waltz which every so often slips into a polka or a cancan.

Another character, Captain Mockin, who represents a sort of protective father figure for the cadets of the military school is described thus:

Captain Mockin is an officer with a difficult fate...

From phrases dropped here and there we learn that he was exiled to the Caucasus

for some offence and was wounded. Such notes are vital for the actors playing the parts. The actor playing Captain Mockin and myself were working on some scenes one day when he said something that particularly caught my interest. He was referring to the Stanislavski acting approach when he said that the actor must at all times know where his character has come from and where he is going. This of course meant within the time frame of the film itself, but also, within that of the character's existence. From the student's point of view, an important exercise is the work of piecing together the lives of the characters, as well as plotting the relationships between them as the film progresses.

Apart from the notes on the characters, there is also an impressive volume of director's notes, sequence by sequence. Mikhalkov divides this "book" into the following sections:

1. Content of the scene.
2. Conceptualization, Mood, Tone.
3. Camera movement and pacing, Time of day and light conditions, Costume.
4. Central focus, Essence, Projected effect, and
5. Potential Dangers.

Reading this document provides a crucial insight into the film and into the director's intentions and artistic purpose. As an English language teacher I was intrigued by the language used to describe the content of a scene compared to that used, say, to talk about mood. For example, take a scene from the film, namely the cadets' performance of the *Marriage of Figaro*. The content notes tell us:

The theatre. Tolstoy is singing Figaro. The house is full. McCracken, Radlov and Jane are sitting in the front row. Jane leans over to Radlov ... Jane whispers.

This seemed like the sort of description most students could grasp. Then if we take an example describing the mood we get something like:

Everything here should be very grand: the sparkling hall, the epaulettes, shirt fronts, diamonds, medals. Everything should be supercharged with a gala atmosphere and overall, the mood should be extremely full and festive.

As a reading exercise - or writing one for that matter - that is certainly more challenging than the action description. However, the main interest lies in teachers

working out an approach to “reading” and talking about film. We can talk about what happens, who goes where, does what etc, and we can also talk about an impression caused by lighting, mood, pace, editing, music etc. Nothing in a film is there by accident, and in a film by Nikita Mikhalkov this is doubly true. Let us not forget that he has often been likened to the great Russian short story writer and playwright Anton Chekov!

Working with Mikhalkov has been a unique opportunity to see how a great film director goes about the creative process. When you are with Mikhalkov, you are constantly invited to look, to see, to observe, to watch, to feel. He has a tremendous sense of irony and his way of seeing is such an important part of his work. One day I asked him what the actor’s most powerful weapon was. The eyes, he replied, and then added that he was not interested in showing a character weeping. Tears can be mimicked using glycerine, he said, but what is in the character’s eyes before the tears well up cannot be faked with special effects. This remark says a lot about Mikhalkov’s cinema. There are few explosions or shootings in his films. Poetry outweighs action in the popular sense. He invites us to see what is behind the seamless silver screen image.

One always tends to forget that film is the epitome of “willing suspension of disbelief”. As viewers, we therefore owe it to the film makers, actors, crews and producers to do our best to read what they put before us. As teachers we can develop activities that get students to focus on film in new ways instead of dividing classrooms into those who understood and those who did not. We can have our students watch out for even the subtlest signs and bring these observations into discussion and roleplay. And that necessarily means attempting to describe the effect a floating piano may have on us.

**Neal Cooper** graduated from Durham University in the UK with an honours degree in German. He’s been based in Paris since 1986, where he also studied voice at the National Conservatory of Music for two years. He’s been a teacher of English for professional people and a translator for over 11 years.