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**Physical Elements in the Film  
“A Few Days in the Life of I.I. Oblomov”  
by N.S. Mikhalkov**

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*The present paper analyses physical elements in the film adaptation “A Few Days in the Life of I. I. Oblomov”, directed by N. Mikhalkov in 1979. Since the novel Oblomov by Goncharov is one code of “mono-code” medium, while the film is another, “multi-code” medium, we argue that film adaptation is a completely new artistic discourse. Finally, we analyse a series of relationships, such as those between Oblomov and Stoltz (friendship), Oblomov and Zakhar (one body), Oblomov and Olga (sexual relationship). All the mentioned relationships are represented through intensive visual body codes (tactile sensations), such as gestures, handshakes and kisses.*

*Keywords: Oblomov, gestures, film, film adaptation.*

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**A Few Days  
in the Life of I.I. Oblomov**

The two-part film *A Few Days in the Life of I.I. Oblomov* by N. Mikhalkov, made in 1979, limits the literary material it is based on right away, with its subtitle. The film is presented to the viewer as *based on the novel «Oblomov» by I.A. Goncharov*; it means that we deal not with a cinematized novel, but with a film «based» on the novel, which is not a rare phenomenon in the art of cinema, but a rule (see Sakirinsky 2004). Even the title does not match that of the novel by Goncharov. The movie is not called *Oblomov*, its title is *A Few Days in the Life of I.I. Oblomov*. These limitations («based on», «a few days») witness the cautiousness of the film director in the work with a well-known novel.

Presented as a number of fragments, the film does not qualify for wholeness; it is free to omit what was not considered «necessary», and to pick what was «necessary» in the director's subjective opinion. The film does not present the whole life of Oblomov, but only some fragments of it, so it does not equate itself with the novel, retaining the right to be «different».

If we speak of it as of cinematization (as Oxana Bulgakova does, see 2005), we consciously bind it to another piece, and this bond is quite strong. According to Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon 2006), on the economic and educational levels it is positive, as more people would watch the cinematization. Many popular novels have been transferred to the cinema screen, and the popularity of some books was boosted by the

cinema adaptation (see Bazin in Naremore 2000). The film by Nikita Mikhalkov places its bets on the same thing. It «educates» the viewer and at the same time it fits the well-known literature-centered orientation of Russian culture, as, «unlike the Western and American cinematographic traditions, Russian cinema originally catered literature and its genres, making references to the literature sources and therefore emphasizing its connection to it» (Burenina 2012, 376).

The first thing that appears after the main titles is the image of the well-known covers of the novel *Oblomov* (one of them is the series designed by A. Iakovlev, Exmo publishing house, Moscow, 2005), and the offscreen voice (A. Romashin) reads out some extracts from the novel explaining who Ilya Ilyitch Oblomov is. Oblomov is lying on the bed, and offscreen the famous phrases from the opening scene of the novel are read out ("in a flat <...> there was lying in bed a gentlemen Ilya Ilyitch Oblomov", Goncharov 2005: 25). The drawing of Oblomov is slowly transformed into video, i.e. the picture becomes a fiction film. Some elements of interpretation, or, better to say, retelling the novel (the text spoken in the film does not match that of the original novel), together with the offscreen voice appear several times throughout the film. This way the director retains the educational mission of the film, explaining the plot of the novel.

The gist of the film reflects «the Oblomovism, remarkable as a typical yet unique phenomenon in the '60s of the XIX century» (Sakirinsky 2004: 333). The book «History of country, history of cinema» writes about the possible inversion of meanings which matched the ideological and political tasks in the impervious Brezhnev era, meaning that the «Decrees of the Party made in the second half of the '70s forced the «artists of image and word» to impose high morality on the character of the Soviet people, to make their attitudes active and optimistic (ibid, 334). The

famous director played sailing close to the wind between the authorities and the people, within the triangle of the authorities, viewers and fashion (foreign fashion in particular). For this reason the film gained popularity and fame among the Soviet citizens. Let us add that the film was honoured several prestigious awards including some foreign ones<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays the film can be downloaded or watched online, and it is still a success and gets high rates from the viewers (see [http://moimirvideo.com/movioe\\_online](http://moimirvideo.com/movioe_online); <http://kinovidok.ru>; <http://kinofilms.tv>; <http://openhit.ru> and other web-sites).

In the present article we shall try to demonstrate some physical elements, first of all those that refer to the body of the main character Oblomov (Oleg Tabakov) and its relations with the bodies of the other characters, like Zakhar (Andrey Popov), Stoltz (Yuri Bogatyryov), Olga (Yelena Solovey) and mother (Yevgeniya Glushenko). At the same time it is required to consider that the physical aspects and gestures of the mid- XIX century when the novel was written and those of the second half of the XX century when the film was shot are different. Cinematography always adapts the text so that it corresponds to the requirements of time, i.e. modernizes it. On the other hand, the film deals with bodies modelled in art. Oxana Bulgakova in her book *Gesture Factory* (2005) devoted to gestures in cinema, speaks about the same thing: «The body of actors and the gestures they make are inscribed into the process of changing the cultural code of the society, where the manners, rituals, rhetorics and art are interconnected, modelling the «body of the epoch» with their mutual interference and amendments» (2005: 13).

We do not compare the main principles of text and film, but let us draw more attention to the way the film complements, reconceives or even clarifies the physical elements familiar to us from the book.

### Oblomov – Zakhar

Parallelism in the relations between characters both in the novel and in the film is very significant. The relations between all the characters can be interpreted this way. Besides the parallelism found between the characters we can notice the other types of it, for example, the oppositions «here» – «there», «countryside» – «city», «I/we» – «others» etc. The symmetry in the relationships described in *Oblomov* novel was also emphasized by Natalia Guz' when she wrote about the rhythmical pattern of the novel in her book *Artistic World of Novels by I.A. Goncharov* (2008). As Guz' claimed, «The rhythmical pattern is characterized by two peculiarities: repetitions and gradations almost on all the levels, and symmetry of the opposites. The latter is observed mostly in the system of character images: Stoltz – Oblomov, Olga – Agafia Matvievna, Anisia – Zakhar, which on the other level is equal to the symmetry of motives: motion – standstill, development – stagnation, new – old, work – idleness etc.» (2008: 181). Nedzvetsky writes about the direct and indirect relationships

between the characters of the novel, emphasizing those between male and female characters (see Nedzvetsky 2010).

Mikhalkov retains such parallels, or zigzag-like relations in his film. Besides the most familiar parallel-symmetry of Oblomov and Stoltz that we will study later, let us have a look at the symmetry of Oblomov-Zakhar, which plays a significant role in the film.

The relations between the lord and his valet is a topic that has been developed in literature numerous times. Let us recollect Don Quixote and Sancho Panza from the novel by Servantes, or, for example, Khlestakov and Osip from "The Government Inspector", the famous comedy by Gogol. Usually in such parallel character relations the characters develop in the opposite directions, so that one complements another. We know that in the novel by Goncharov Zakhar is very close to his lord, Oblomov. He is also "lazy, idle, passive, holds onto the habitual things and does not accept anything new, just like his lord..." (Guz' 2008: 182). The lazyness of Zakhar is visually emphasized in the film, when he never



Oblomov and Zakhar. Film frame

loses a moment to sit or lie down. His manner of moving is similar to that of his lord. In the first part of the film, Ilya Ilyitch is mostly lying, and if he walks, he moves very slowly, a little lame of one leg. Zakhar also walks slowly, scuffles, drops his tray, making a picture of real awkwardness. In the physical way, Zakhar looks like a part of Oblomov's body. To confirm this, let us recall one interesting scene when Ivan Alexievich rings the doorbell and the door is opened by Stoltz, who has little liking for him. Stoltz harshly says that the Oblomov is not at home, and to the question of Ivan Alexievich, "Why do we whisper then?", Stoltz answers: "Zakhar is sleeping".

Ilya Ilyitch and Zakhar are connected with a sort of *twins* relationship, and so they anticipate the relationships in the other pairs of characters (Nedzvetsky 2010: 63). The harmony of their relationship allows us analyse these two people as one character. This way Oblomov, addressing to Zakhar (especially during their row about the "others", or about the dust in the room), is actually talking to himself to remove scruples. On the other hand, Zakhar performs his lord's wishes. For example, late at night, Zakhar cooks some soup with meat and mushrooms for Ilya Ilyitch, secretly from Stoltz. It is interesting to remark that Oblomov and Zakhar exchange their places. In the first part of the film Zakhar wants to wake Ilya Ilyitch up, and he even allows himself shout at him, changing the tone of his voice and shifting to first-name terms: ("Get up, you, don't you hear me!") and asks the lord when they move to another flat. Throughout the scene Oblomov is lying, he does not want to get up, start working or even speak. When in the second part of the film Oblomov "wakes up" and he feels like getting up on time, Zakhar does not come to wake him up anymore. He even insists on his sleeping. Zakhar does not want to move to town, he even suggests selling the suitcase bought by Stoltz for Ilya Ilyitch's trip abroad. Zakhar, the

*alter ego* and even *corpus alterum* of Oblomov, knows better that the lord is not going anywhere. Their mutual understanding is also determined by their names. The name Ilya (from Hebrew Ilia, "power of god", "strength of the Lord") denotes the devotion to home and family which matches Oblomov who behaves this way. The name of his valet Zakhar (from Hebrew "memory of god", "god remembered", see Nedzvetsky) points at such strong sense of duty that in the end of the novel and the film Zakhar refuses to move away from the place where his lord is buried. The patronymic of Zakhar, Trofimych (Trofim from old greek "breadwinner") points at the eternal mutual dependence between the landlord (who is the *breadwinner* in this way) and his valet serving him and living at his expense (Nedzvetsky 2010: 65).

The close relationship between the lord and the valet began back in the childhood of Ilya Ilyitch, when Zakhar used to carry him in his hands; it continues in the period of adulthood of their lives. Zakhar tries to wake his lord up in a funny way, jumping near the sofa where Ilya Ilyitch is resting, clapping his hands and tickling his armpits and belly, as though he was a child. It is hard to say whether Oblomov is angry or not, but such childish kind of touches can be a game only between two people who are very close to each other. Playing in a close contact, making each other cry (the tears of Oblomov and Zakhar after their conversation about the «others») or laugh leads to a new part of the film, as in the middle of their game Stoltz appears.

### **Oblomov – Stoltz**

The physical opposition between Oblomov and his friend Stoltz is very evident. In the film the opposition of oblomovism and stoltzovism is demonstrated as the opposition of idleness and motion. Mikhalkov himself said that he wanted to approach the meaning of the novel from another

side, "not to speak of the dangers of oblomovism, but of the dangers, if I can say so, of stoltzevism, the pragmatism that excludes the spirituality in a human soul, devours it" (Mikhalkov 2011).

Within the physical code the opposition opens up not only on the well-known level of idleness and motion, but on the level of closeness and distance, and not only for the adult characters, but also for Ilyusha and Andrei when they were children.

The film begins without any announcements before the main title appears; it begins with the scene of little Ilya Ilyitch waking up (Andrei Razumovsky Jr.), happy to see his mother come back. He gets up fast, runs, shouts, laughs, asks his nanny about his mommy's arrival. He runs, but then he is stopped. The adult Oblomov, in the real beginning of the film i.e. after the main title and the narrator's introduction words, looks opposite to the little one: he is resting on his bed. Awake, he remains in bed. This lying body of Oblomov is opposed to the young running body of himself as a young boy. We see a similar scene while the adults are asleep (we can hear the snoring of the adults, taking a nap after lunch), when little Ilyusha Oblomov and Andriusha Stoltz (Oleg Kozlov) are playing. It is interesting that in the second part of the film the opposition is different: when Oblomov is running, little Ilyusha is sleeping. In Oblomov's dream, mother is carrying the sleeping body of little Andriusha, while adult Oblomov, suddenly in love with Olga Ilyinskaya, runs, breaks a bush that shuts out the view of Olga for him etc. This way the bodies of the child and the adult exchange their places, making the visual motives more interesting and lively.

The strongest opposition elements manifest themselves in the relationship between Oblomov and Stoltz. Oxana Bulgakova mentioned that as she analysed the opposition of the native and foreign "physical costume". "Mikhalkov revealed the old

opposition between Westerner and Slavophile, a false and a true character, through the distribution of physical activeness. The real Russian character is the one who is not trying to make the world better (the Western tendency that originates from the overestimation of the individual will) and does not try to subdue others. The ideal Russian character Oblomov (Oleg Tabakov) does not only refuse to act, but also to move. It is hard for him to walk; as he does, he limps and lumbers. He falls asleep even standing. His opponent, the Westerner Stoltz (Yuri Bogatyryov), walks in an unnaturally straight manner (with slightly tense shoulders and with an exaggeratedly straight back), plays with a hand gripper, and also brings a weird means of transport and equilibrium developer: a bicycle with extremely high wheels" (Bulgakova 2005: 282).

In such relations that underline the differences between the friends, Bulgakova interpretes their tardiness and velocity through the prism of body language and physical costume, emphasizing that "the Soviet body [in the '70s, *author's note*] is complemented with some "foreign" techniques to make the character more attractive" (ibid.: 280).

The closeness of the two friends who know each other from the early childhood, is revealed in the film through their physical closeness (embrace, friendly kisses, holding hands, games). Adult friends also embrace each other often. Oblomov does not allow anyone else touch his body or even come close. It is interesting to notice, that little Ilya touches his mother (kisses, physical touches, intimacy), while as an adult, Oblomov does not let it happen. When Alexiev comes to his flat and tries to shake hands with him, Oblomov says, "You've just come from the cold". The only person who is permitted to come close to Oblomov is his friend Stoltz. Touches and haptics in general (from Greek *haphe*, "sense of touch") are the most primitive means of communication (see Epštejn 2009). Close

relationships are revealed by haptics, i.e. with the senses of the skin as the largest organ of the human body. Touches are present in all kinds of emotional relations: friendship, love, motherhood, fatherhood, brotherhood etc.).

Friendly relationships of Oblomov and Stoltz are mostly visible in the spheres of main biological aspects: touching and eating<sup>2</sup>. In the film they are shown bathing at the steam house and having meal together.

Banya, the traditional Russian bathing house, is a place which connects countryside and city, or, better to say, urban and philistine lifestyle ("This is a real banya. It cannot be compared to any of those in Petersburg", says Stoltz), and also a place of naked bodies. In the banya the body is undressed, and so the soul opens up; so, the friends speak sincerely and honestly. In several bathing scenes their bodies are shown different to each other. Oblomov is sitting with one towel on his head and one around his hips, but his bare feet, hands and large belly are open. The fat and motionless body of Oblomov that reminds

of Buddha, is opposed to the body of energetic Stoltz, who is moving, whipping himself with switches and speaking fast. Moreover, the body of Stoltz is slim, strong, naked; only the genitals are covered with a small towel. The sitting body of Oblomov is explicitly opposed to the moving body of Stoltz who uses switches to improve the blood circulation, and then opens the door and runs into the snow, feeling happy of the contrast between the hot banya and the winter cold. Back in the banya, cheerful Stoltz hugs Oblomov, but he refrains. Oblomov does not want such merry, mobile life; after the strong embrace (which demonstrates that the comfort of physical touch can easily turn into discomfort) the friends start talking. Besides the opposition of idleness and dynamics, the two bodies are opposite in their "life philosophy". However, as the conversation gets deeper, the friends become closer. They hide their bodies under bath robes, the nakedness is covered, the skin is not seen; now the sitting men are talking, gradually getting spiritually close and understanding each other better.



Oblomov and Stoltz in the steamhouse. Film frame



Oblomov and Stoltz. Friendly meal at night. Film frame

Closeness and distance are also seen in the attitude to food, as it has been mentioned above. Once Oblomov woke up and secretly ate some soup with meat and mushrooms, which means that he ate what Stoltz had forbidden him to eat. Stoltz cares about Oblomov's health, does not allow him eat veal, greasy food, recommends him to consume more vegetables. The conflict and misunderstanding that occurred in the late hour, gradually turned into a friendly meal. Just like in the banya, where the initial opposition first alienates, then bonds the two friends, the food, that at first was the stumbling block, brings them together in the end. Stoltz asks Zakhar to bring one more plate and eats together with his friend.

It is interesting to notice, that the bond between Oblomov and Pshenitsina was also build by means of food (“Everything in Agafia Matvievna’s establishments smacked of an opulence and a domestic sufficiency [...]”, Goncharov 2005: 560). She cooks exactly what Oblomov wants, and her hands (mostly, her naked skin) that he watches from behind while she cooks or does

any other kind of domestic work are described as sexually attractive “...Oblomov, prone on his sofa, had watched her bare elbows flicker to and fro as she plied needle and thread” (ibid: 562); “Oblomov watched her elbows working and her back bending and then straightening up” (ibid: 371); “If the children failed to shut the door behind them, he would catch a glimpse of his landlady’s bare neck and her elbows and back, which were in constant motion” (ibid: 382).

In the film, the meal bonds Oblomov only with Stoltz, as Pshenitsina is not there, she is only mentioned. In the film she is a part of some distant future.

### **Oblomov – Olga**

Through the distance and closeness of bodies we can analyse the relationship between Oblomov and Olga. The first encounter and meeting of the two people happens off screen, behind the door of the Ilyinskys’ house. The still frame shows a door behind which we can hear some voices, the sound of falling glass

and laughter. The voice of Olga and the famous aria *Casta Diva* (though partially) are also heard behind the door. The acquaintance that happens off screen, turns into a close friendship and real physical contact in general. Walks, conversations, looks... All of it serves as a base for the intensive touch of two bodies. The bodies of the two people go apart (general shot) and come close (closeup): together with them, the camera moves. For example, the scene in the wood, when Olga is holding her hand on Oblomov's head, shows the moment when he is about to confess his love, and the viewer intrudes into the intimate sphere of the couple. The scene of the hand on the head, the touch and the haptics, which is always the reflection of mutual likeness, opens the moments of closeness between Olga and Ilya Ilyitch. It is worth mentioning that there is no branch of lilac in the film. The symbolic approach of the two people (and the two bodies) in the novel occurs in the metaphoric level, with the lilac, while the film reveals the physical contact in a more demonstrative way. The film shows its, illustrates it, and the viewer observes

the two bodies together: once in the wood (the scene of Olga's hand on Oblomov's head) and in the arbour (during thunderstorm). It is important to keep in mind that the law of cinematograph is to retain the "physical" part. Comparing text and film, Robert Stam used to speak of films as of something material. Whatever happens on the screen, it is something vulgarized, too open, and "physical reactions are more directly open in the cinema than in text" (in: Uvanović 2008: 275). Moreover, the film reconceives and plants the physical and emotional relations in a new aesthetical context, the context of the XX century, when the viewer is accustomed to naked bodies and open physical acts. The reader of the XIX century is different from the readers and viewers of the XX century when the film is shot.

The closeup of a hand or face makes a strong visual effect on the viewer. Olga's kissing Oblomov's fingers in the arbour during thunderstorm is the most explicit physical scene which is close to sexual contact, as the other elements unwind in the viewer's eyes (night, rain,



Oblomov and Olga in the arbour. Film frame



«wet night», arbour etc.). The crucial moment (the kiss in the novel and kissing fingers in the film) physically draws people to each other, but after that they fall apart again. They appear together, but they are with Stoltz both in the carriage and on the bicycle. There is no intimacy between them, as the distance between their bodies turned the relationship into friendship. In the carriage, Olga takes the reins from Stoltz's hands, while Oblomov is sitting on the back seat. Olga takes the reins in the truest sense of it, as she decides where to go, she creates her own future. Sitting on the back seat, Oblomov is just an observer in this joint ride.

#### **Physical code: closeness – distance**

All the relationships and physical codes in the film can be considered on the level of closeness – distance. The characters come together and then fall apart, they argue and then make it up again. The strongest bond in both physical and emotional understanding of this is

the bond between Ilya Ilyitch and his mother. True love and tenderness (good night kisses, tender words, joint prayers), experienced by Oblomov in reality and in his dreams, continue in the next generation (Kovtun 2008: P. 539-556). Little Andrei, Oblomov's son who lives with the Stoltzes, in the last film frame is running to his mother. The general shot showing the meadow and the river, separating the son from the mother, brings them together at the same time, as the last words uttered by Andriusha, "Mommy is here!" are very clear as the boy is running towards his mother. We cannot see her; however, we know that they meet soon. The first words of the child, little Ilya Ilyitch "Mommy is here!", uttered before the main title of the film, are also the last ones, but now they sound in the next generation, spoken by Andrei, the son of Oblomov. The past and the future cross in one point, the point of the real, true love for mother, and the two-part film completes its cyclic shape with the echo of these little boys' voices.



Olga on the bicycle. Film frame

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Prize of the National Board of Review, USA, for the best foreign film in the USA in 1981; Oxford's Golden Shield for Best Actor (Oleg Tabakov), Best Actress (Yelena Solovey) and Best Directing (Nikita Mikhalkov) in the year 1980. The film also won the First Prize of the International Week of Auteur Cinema in Benalmadena in the year 1982.

<sup>2</sup> According to Epštejn, food is also a kind of physical contact. Having a meal is first moderated by haptics (touch), then followed by the sense of taste.

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**Телесные элементы в фильме  
“Несколько дней из жизни И.И. Обломова”  
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*В статье мы проанализировали телесные элементы в экранизации «Несколько дней из жизни И.И. Обломова», режиссер Н. Михалков (1979 г.). Роман Гончарова «Обломов» является одним кодом («моно-код») средств массовой информации, а фильм – другим («мульти-код»). Мы утверждаем здесь, что экранизация совершенно новый художественный дискурс. Наконец, мы анализируем серию отношений, например, между Обломовым и Штольцем (дружба), Обломовым и Захаром (одно тело), и Обломовым и Ольгой (сексуальные отношения). Все упомянутые отношения представлены посредством интенсивного визуального кода тела (тактильные ощущения), такими как жесты, рукопожатия и поцелуи.*

*Ключевые слова: Обломов, жесты, фильм, экранизация.*

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