Chapter Four

Russia and the Golden Age of Soyuzmultfilm

The function of cinematic arts in Soviet Russia was to be instructive and shape the perceptions of Soviet citizens to experience their lives under communism as joyful in their successes and noble in their struggles. In December of 1934, a group of filmmakers expressed their willingness to embrace their imposed artistic mission in a letter to Stalin: “We work in different ways, we work with different methods and in different genres, but we are all inspired with a general desire to express better the ideas that inspire the best part of mankind, the ideas of Marx and Lenin, the ideas of the brilliant Leader of the most outstanding and revolutionary Party: Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin”.84 Boris Shumyatsky, head of the USSR’s film industry in the 1930s,85 further remarked on the socio-political function of cinema: “Neither the Revolution nor the defence of our socialist fatherland are a tragedy for the proletariat. We have always gone into battle, and we shall go into battle again in the future singing, and at times, laughing ... . The victorious class wants to laugh with joy. That is its right, and Soviet cinema must provide the audience with this joyful Soviet laughter”.86

Filmmakers in the USSR had multiple layers of local, regional, and republic bureaucracy to navigate in order to produce and exhibit their films. To ensure Soviet films promoted party ideology, a staff of “Instructors” from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC/CPSU) oversaw and approved cinematic content. This responsibility was first delegated to its Department of Agitation and Propaganda, and then after 1960 to the Department of Culture.87 The Printing Commission would evaluate films to determine the number of prints that would be created, and also decide if a film would be printed in color or black-and-white, regardless of whether or not the motion picture was originally filmed in color.88

Another government division called the Main Administration for Kinofikatsiya (no direct translation) and Distribution controlled distribution and exhibition of films in the USSR. With proper authorization, state-sponsored films were screened at state-run theatres and mobile projection units that traveled to sparsely populated areas.89

Of particular interest to the communist regime was the indoctrination of its youth. The government combined several small animation studios to create one large production studio with the objective to create animated films for children and youth audiences.90 The newly collectivized studio, called Soyuzmultfilm, was established in 1936 in Moscow and became the Soviet Union’s premier state-controlled animation studio. At its peak, Soyuzmultfilm employed up to 700 animators, and released an average of 20 films each year.91 The early days of Soyuzmultfilm included a substantial amount of pro-Soviet and anti-Capitalist propaganda, though following World War II animation artists delved into the relatively peaceful world of children’s fairytales.92

Walt Disney Productions set the worldwide standard of excellence for cel animation techniques in the early part of the 20th century. The Soviet Film Commission had sent a representative to Hollywood to learn about the techniques used at Disney animation studios, and Soyuzmultfilm was set up modeling the Disney style, utilizing their assembly line, cel animation method. Soviet animators who had developed their craft independently using puppets or paper cutouts had to learn a new way of working.93 After many years of operation, production techniques for animators at Soyuzmultfilm broadened as the studio added a puppet division in 1954 that later also included cutout animation.94

The beautifully illustrated backgrounds and special attention to realistic detail in Disney animations were much admired and this realistic aesthetic was consistent with the Soviet mandate for Socialist Realism, a style of realistic art that celebrates socialist ideology.95

Josef Stalin, Maksim Gorki and others devised the term as a suitable name for an intrinsically Soviet art that was designed to be easily understandable by citizens and promoted the ideology of the socialist party. In 1934 the first conference of the Union of Writers, Socialist Realism was declared the definitive Soviet artistic method. Art was to relate great optimism, with all things associated with the Bolshevik Revolution portrayed as unambiguously good and promising a glorious future.96 This prescription for optimistic and realistic representations became the aesthetic standard for animated films at Soyuzmultfilm.

The Brumberg sisters, Valentina (1899–1975) and Zinaida (1900–1983)

In 1945, Soyuzmultfilm released the first feature-length cel-animated film from Russia, entitled Propavshaya gramota (The Lost Letter, also translated as The Disappeared Letter or The Missing Diploma). Based on the 1831 Russian literary classic by Nikolai Gogol entitled The Lost Letter: A Tale by the Sexton of the N\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Church, the animated adaptation was written and directed by two sisters, Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg.97

The Brumberg sisters were both graduates of the Higher Art and Technical Studios and participated in the First Experimental Cartoon Workshop at the State College of Film in Moscow in 1924. They were in the vanguard of creating some of the first Soviet sound and color cartoons.98

Born one year apart, the Brumberg sisters were lifelong professional partners who directed over 40 animated films together in careers that spanned five decades. The Brumbergs’ last animated film was released in 1974, one year before Valentina’s death at the age of 76. The younger sister, Zinaida, lived on another eight years but produced no further animated productions after the death of her sister.99

Cultural Context: Women in Animation

It is worth noting the professional success and leadership that these two women achieved in Russia, while in comparison female animation directors were not to be found in major American studios during the early part of the twentieth century. A 1939 letter to an aspiring female animator from Walt Disney Productions states that studio’s position rather plainly: “Women do not do any of the creative work in connection with preparing the cartoons for the screen, as that work is performed entirely by young men. For this reason girls are not considered for the training school”.100

In the early days of the Disney studio, women were relegated solely to the Inking and Painting Department. Opportunities for women at Disney studio were slow to improve, though by 1956 a relevant advance was seen when Elizabeth Case Zwicker was hired to animate the birds who befriend Aurora in Sleeping Beauty for $32–$35 per week.101

This is not to say that women played little to no creative role in U.S. animation. Lillian Friedman was promoted to Head Animator at Fleischer Studios in 1933, creating Popeye and Betty Boop cartoons.102 And Faith Hubley, wife of famous animator John Hubley, established an independent animation studio with her husband in 1955 where they created award winning commercial and independent animated films. Faith continued to work independently after her husband’s death in 1977.103

The Brumberg sisters enjoyed a unique position for women in animation that is not widely recognized in the West. Unfortunately, even today detailed information about these talented and prolific animators is difficult to obtain outside of Russia. The great body of their creative work, however, speaks for itself.

Figure 4.1. Propavshaya Gramota (The Lost Letter), Dir. Zinaida Brumberg, Valentina Brumberg, Lamis Bredis, Soyuzmultfilm, 1945.

Propavshaya Gramota (The Lost Letter) 1945, 43 minutes

Using Disney-standard cel animation, The Lost Letter demonstrates the artists’ talents with realistically illustrated backgrounds and engaging, expressive characters. Substantial use of landscape illustrations with zooms and pans was an economical way to extend screen time in animation while providing an opportunity to infuse the story with appropriate national affinity. The film dwells on a romantic view of the country’s landscape, providing a sense of national pride for Russian citizens. The narrator sets just such a mood in the opening scene of The Lost Letter:

How intoxicating, how majestic is a summer day in Little Russia!” (Little Russia was a phrase used to indicate the large, fertile area in the south-western corner of USSR known as Ukraine.) “How luxuriously warm are those hours when midday glitters in stillness and swelter, and the boundless blue ocean, reclining like a voluptuous dome over the earth, seems to be slumbering, all drowned in languor, enveloping and embracing the resplendent earth in its celestial hold. How sensuous and tranquil is Little Russia’s summer!

With such splendor did sparkle one of the searing days of August, when a regimental scribe of the time, Goloputsek, sent for a Cossack to be brought before him. You are hereby charged, by the Hetman himself to deliver this letter to the Tsarina!104

The Lost Letter is a story of a Ukrainian man who is sent on a journey to deliver a letter to the Tsarina. On his long journey from Ukraine to Moscow on horseback, he befriends a fellow Cossack. As they travel together, the messenger’s new friend confides that he had sold his soul to the devil and asks the messenger to stay awake during the night to watch over him. As the Cossack sleeps, the messenger, too, starts to nod off. Then a demon steals the messenger’s horse and his hat, which holds the letter to the Tsarina. The messenger pursues the demon into hell where he encounters all sorts of witches and strange creatures. He eventually retrieves his horse and hat, escapes hell, and successfully delivers the letter.

The 1945 release date of this film is particularly impressive due to studio disruptions from World War II. In October 1941, German troops advanced perilously close to Moscow and Soyuzmultfilm animators evacuated until May–June 1943 to Samarkand, an ancient city in Uzbekistan far south of Moscow and east of the Caspian Sea, safely away from the war front.105 During this time, very little production took place. When animators returned to Moscow, it took some time to re-establish their normal work routine.106 The author has no resource on the details of the production schedule or reception of Russia’s first full length, cel-animated film, but one can imagine that this cinematic pleasure was gratefully received by war weary citizens.

Animation Craft: Traditional Cel Animation

In order to better appreciate the challenges that the Brumberg sisters experienced creating a feature-length animated film while simultaneously re-instituting their production routine in Moscow, it may be useful here to briefly describe the how early drawn animation developed into the more elaborate process of cel animation.

In early drawn animation, pioneer animators such as Émile Cohl and Winsor McCay drew hundreds to thousands of pages of outlined figures with progressive changes in character position using black ink on white paper. Each drawing was photographed using one or two frames of film, and apparent motion was achieved as a print of the developed film was projected at 16 frames per second (early standard frame rate). Each incremental movement required a new complete drawing, so backgrounds were either non-existent or kept to a minimum to economize on the amount of drawing needed for each film frame.107

Figure 4.2. Fantasmagorie, Dir. Émile Cohl, 1908. This film is considered by many historians to be the first fully-animated film ever made. Drawn using black ink on white paper, Cohl’s animations were shown as negative film image.108

Figure 4.3. Gertie the Dinosaur, Dir. Winsor McCay, 1914. In the first Gertie film, each drawing required tracing of the background from one sheet to the next.

Figure 4.4. Gertie on Tour, Dir. Winsor McCay, 1921. By 1921, Winsor McCay adopted the use of cel animation which allowed a single, more detailed background illustration to be overlaid by a series of celluloid sheets with drawn character movement.

To eliminate the need for retracing backgrounds for each frame of movement, early animators developed a method to separate characters from backgrounds and established an industry-standard protocol. In traditional cel animation, original character sketches are created on semi-transparent drawing paper, then traced onto the clear celluloid sheets (cels) with ink. Cel outlines are then painted in on the reverse side to provide greater detail and substance to the characters. Once the cels are complete, they are photographed over background illustrations on an animation stand. This technique allows for not only more robust characters, but also much greater sophistication in background illustrations since the background only needs to be rendered once for reuse in an entire scene of animated action.109

Figure 4.5. Traditional Cel Animation Stand. Illustration by Jacquelyn Fitzgerald.

The protocol for traditionally drawn cel animation involves the use of registration holes at the top or bottom edges of the drawing sheets and cels that secure artwork to pegs built into the drawing tables and animations stands. These pegs maintain proper alignment between cels and background illustrations.

To offer more sophisticated action, animators can use additional layers of cels to separate movement of primary characters from secondary movements or characters in the background. Added cels can also be used to isolate the more lively parts of a character, such as eyes, mouth, or hair. However, because the transparent cels have a small optical density that affects the overall clarity and color intensity of images underneath, animators typically limit cel layers to a maximum of four. Even if some sections of an animation require only two or three layers to achieve desired movement, animators would need to include blank cels so layer density remains consistent throughout the film for even color and clarity.110

As animation craft has grown into a complex, labor-intensive process involving animators, background painters, camera operators, voice talent, musicians, etc., the role of the animation director has evolved to choreograph the operation. Directors lead their team to develop ideas in storyboard conferences, and oversee all aspects the production process to integrate their story into a cohesive whole.111 As animation directors, the Brumberg sisters had to orchestrate the creative adaptation Gogol’s story to a visual, time-based medium under scrutiny of the government, work out the logistics of gathering all necessary artistic resources including supplies and manpower during wartime, and lead the detailed oversight of production to bring their artistic vision to the screen.

Ivan Ivanov-Vano (1900–1987)

A contemporary of the Brumberg sisters, Ivan Ivanov-Vano graduated from the Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops in 1923, co-directed some animated films with the Brumbergs in 1930s & 1940s, and taught for many years at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in the department of animated films.112 Ivanov-Vano directed 40 animated films over his long career and was considered the “patriarch” of Soviet animation.113 His stunningly beautiful artistic achievements and his influence on the following generation of animators fully support that reputation.

Ivanov-Vano was one of the original founders of the International Animation Film Association (ASIFA), established in 1960 in Annecy France, which currently has active chapters worldwide. The goal of the organization is to promote cultural understanding through the art of animation.114 Raoul Servais, ASIFA president from 1988–1993 describes the refreshingly unique nature of the organization during the Cold War in the ASIFA 50th Anniversary publication: “In the difficult years of the Cold War, people in international meetings would fear, insult and threaten one another; there never was such behaviour within our organization, quite the contrary: many friendships grew in spite of iron curtains”.115 The powerful bonds of friendship and community thatwere developed across national borders with the mutual interest in promoting animation art among these leading animators are truly commendable.

Snegurochka (The Snow Maiden) 1952, 69 minutes

Ivanov-Vano’s 1952 film, The Snow Maiden is based on a Russian folk tale that was written as a musical drama in 1832 by Aleksandr Ostrovsky. Russian composer Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov created the opera of the same name in 1881, whose music is incorporated in Ivanov-Vano’s animated film.116

The story is of a young and beautiful snow maiden, daughter of King Winter and Spring Fairy, having come of age at 16 goes to live among humans as an adopted daughter to a childless couple. King Winter cautions her to avoid a young man she has admired from afar, warning that he will melt her heart and be the death of her. Her heart stays cold on meeting him, but the snow maiden eventually gives her heart to another young man, setting her heart afire, and she vanishes.

The film shows advanced mastery of technique as it celebrates the beauty of the Russian landscape with its skillfully composed scenes. Smooth rippling of water demonstrates the use of a multiplane animation stand that allows for isolated visual effects, and the animated light reflections on snow, ice, and stained-glass windows add exceptional brilliance to several scenes. The soft edges on the Snow Maiden’s fur lined coat and hat was also a notable innovation of the time.117

Animation Craft: Full animation and the Multiplane Animation Stand

Full animation has an aesthetic objective to create animations with great attention to detail and subtle fluidity of movement. Walt Disney set the standard of this aesthetic in his continuous striving for excellence in animation art. In full animation, each drawing of a character movement is photographed with one or two film frames and projected at 24 frames per second (standard U.S. film frame rate since sound film). Reusing cels for repetitive movements such as character walking is kept to a minimum to allow animators to fine-tune gestures and proportions of characters as they move through the three-dimensional space of their animated world.118

To further improve the illusion of depth in cel animation, animators created the multiplane animation stand. The specific configurations for the multiplane animation stand vary by designer, though they share an ability to adjust the position of each layer independently to achieve greater dimensionality in portrayal of cinematic dolly and tracking shots. A more realistic 3D effect is created when, in a suggested camera motion, more distant elements of a background move at a slower rate than near objects. The multiplane animation stand also allows individual layers to incorporate various visual effects such as ripples on water (achieved by placing rippled glass over a layer), backlighting layers, or rear projection.

Figure 4.6. Multiplane Animation Stand. Illustration by Jacquelyn Fitzgerald.

Dvenadcat” Mesyatsev (The Twelve Brothers-Months or Twelve Months) 1956, 56 minutes

Samuel Marshak created the play, The Twelve Brothers-Months in 1943 in an expanded retelling of Slovak and Czech folk tales along the same motif.119 Ivanov-Vano directed the animation of this embellished version of the folk tale in his delightful 1956 film.

In the dead of winter, a young girl is sent out into the forest by her abusive stepmother and step-sister to find snowdrops, as their young and impetuous queen has decreed that whoever brings her these early spring flowers before dawn of the New Year shall receive a basket of gold. Out in the forest on New Year’s Eve, the girl meets the Twelve Brother-Months, brothers who represent each month of the year. When the girl explains her hopeless quest, brother April grants her wish and produces a small area of springtime in the forest where she can collect her snowdrops. Not satisfied with the remarkable presentation of spring blooms, the girl’s greedy family, their queen, and courtiers follow the girl back into the woods. Those in pursuit learn a lesson in humility while the young girl is rewarded for her kindness and good nature.

The Twelve Brother-Months is a beautiful example of Soyuzmultfilm’s emulation of Disney style. The opening scene is very much like that of the opening of Disney’s Bambi with a slow move into the forest using the multiplane animation stand to part the trees, though the Russian forest is blanketed in snow. And, like Bambi, the first character appearance is a bird who watches over the on-goings in the woods. Rabbits and squirrels sing and dance in the forest before the introduction of the main character of the young girl. At this stage, the regional folk tale takes over the narrative.

An elderly soldier out collecting a New Year’s tree for the queen comes across the young girl in the forest and shares his tale that on the eve of the New Year, one has a chance to meet with “The Twelve Months” and see winter, spring, summer, and fall all at once. The legend turns out to be true as the girl later finds the campfire of the Twelve Brother-Months in the frigid, dark night and they help her on her quest for snowdrops.

This fanciful folk tale offers moral instruction consistent with Soviet ideology as royalty is depicted in an unflattering exhibition of hubris and greed, while the hardworking, modest young girl is rewarded for her virtue. With its superb production value, beautiful artwork, and endearing story, this is film well worth seeing.

Vremena Goda (The Seasons) 1969, 9 minutes

Ivanov-Vano wrote and directed The Seasons in 1969, working with his younger protégé, Yuri Norstein as Animator/Assistant Director. The film was produced in the Puppet Studio division of Soyuzmultfilm and was created using three-dimensional sets with miniature dolls, twigs, and cutout layers of hills, trees and villages, with some elements made from Russian lace. This lyrical visual enchantment follows a couple traveling through the seasons on horseback and horse-drawn sleigh, set to music with three pieces from the piano composition by Tchaikovsky entitled The Seasons.120 The multiple layers of visual elements provide a dreamlike romanticism to this lovely short film.

Animation Craft: Stop-motion Animation

An easily accessible way to create animations, stop-motion animation involves filming three-dimensional (3D) objects one frame at a time with incremental changes to achieve the illusion of independent movement. Early experiments with cinematic storytelling involved various combinations of live-action photography and photographing objects at each stage of movement (stop-motion). English-born American animator, J. Stuart Blackton animated household items in his 1907 film, Haunted Hotel121 and Russian-born Ladislaw Starevicz animated insects in miniature sets in his 1912 film The Cameraman’s Revenge.122 Stop-motion animators can use all sorts of objects; household items, people (a type of stop-motion animation know as pixilation), puppets, and clay characters among them.

In the early part of the 20th Century, animation cels were expensive and hard to obtain in Europe.123 Independent animators in Europe developed a tradition using objects such as toys, puppets, and clay models to create their animated stories.124

Secha Pri Kerzhence (The Battle of Kerzhenets) 1971, 10 minutes

Ivanov-Vano wrote and directed The Battle of Kerzhenets in 1971, which is based on a traditional opera with the music of Rimsky-Korsakov.125 This film tells the story of Russia’s 13th century victorious resistance against Tartar invaders near the Kerzhenets river. Yuri Norstein was in charge of all technical aspects of this production, which was shot in 70 mm film, and received credit as co-director.126

Cutout animation was used with imagery of Russian icons and Fresco art from the 14–16th centuries combined with music from Rimsky Korsakov’s opera The Tale of the Invisible City Kitezh.127 The two-dimensional images were filmed not only on a flat surface perpendicular to the camera, but also at various angles creating three-dimensional space in a curious juxtaposition of dimensionality with discernibly flat imagery. This innovative production won several awards, including Grand Prize at the Zagreb Animation Festival in 1972.128

Animation Craft: Paper Cutout Animation

Cutout animation involves photographing two-dimensional (2D) images, cut to the shape of an object, that are then moved incrementally over a background. The images can be cut out from photographs, black paper cut into silhouette shapes, or illustrated and cut out, then manipulated and photographed on an animation stand. The pieces generally need to be on heavy paper stock to avoid curling, and once the cutout shapes are created they can be used over the course of the animated film. Cutout animation is typically less labor intensive than other types of animation techniques and can range from very simplistic to exceptionally intricate as in The Battle of Kerzhenets.

Lev Atamanov (1905–1981)

Lev Atamanov studied film under the famous film director Lev Kuleshov in the 1920s and became one of Russia’s leading animators. He directed many beautifully crafted children films at Soyuzmultfilm and is probably best known for his 1957 animated film, The Snow Queen. Atamanov’s productions include adaptations of fairy tales from Russia, Armenia, China, India and Denmark.129

Alen”kij Cvetochek (The Scarlet Flower or The Little Red Flower) 1952, 42 minutes

Atamonov’s 42-minute production of The Scarlet Flower is a based on the short story of the same name by Sergei Aksakov.130 The story is one of a number of European fairy tales that essentially tells the story of Beauty and the Beast, popularized by the 1991 Disney animated production. A young maiden takes the place of her imprisoned father in a far-off castle, and through growing affection for her captor, releases him from a magical spell that has turned him into a beast.

Like other Soyuzmultfilm productions from the 1950s, The Scarlet Flower showcases sophisticated use of visual effects and beautifully illustrated traditional Russian costumes and architecture. Soyuzmultfilm animators fully embraced socialist realism with characteristically heavily use of rotoscoping, filming live-action motions of people enacting the scenes that were then traced by animators to capture realistic movement. The over use of this technique can limit the expressiveness of animated characters, though since Walt Disney used the technique in his animated features, this became industry standard at Soyuzmultfilm.

Animation Craft: Rotoscoping

As a young American magazine illustrator enchanted with early animation, Max Fleischer invented a device to help improve animations to look more smooth and lifelike. He called the invention the Rotoscope and filed a patent for it in 1915. To test his invention, Max dressed his younger brother, Dave, in a clown suit and filmed him dancing. After the film was developed, he ran the film through a projector and projected one frame at a time onto a flat piece of glass. By putting a piece of paper on the opposite side of the glass, Max could trace each film frame and capture the movements of his brother. At 16 frames per second (the standard film rate at that time), Max traced 2,600 images. Then, he put new unexposed film in the camera and photographed each of the drawings at one film frame per drawing. The resulting short film transformed the look of animated cartoons forever.131

Figure 4.7. The Rotoscope allowed animators to trace each frame of a live-action scene to render lifelike movements to their drawn character animations.

With the help of established animator J.R. Bray, Out of the Inkwell cartoon series was created, and in 1919 their first cartoon was released starring Koko the Clown (with movement achieved by rotoscope of brother Dave in the clown suit).132 Audiences and critics loved it. A New York Times critic offered a rave review: “After a deluge of pen-and-ink ‘comedies’ in which the figures move with mechanical jerks with little or no wit to guide them, it is a treat to watch the smooth motion of Mr. Fleisher’s figure and enjoy the cleverness that animates it”.133

Zolotaya Antilopa (The Golden Antelope) 1954, 32 minutes

In this film adaptation of an Indian folktale, an orphaned boy saves the Golden Antelope from the Raja (king or ruler) and his hunters. The Raja later captures the boy and the antelope comes to rescue him. The antelope, who can kick her hooves to create gold coins, grants the Raja’s wish for gold, and when it becomes too much, the Raja loses all his gold and is abandoned by his servants.

In keeping with the edicts of socialist realism, Atamanov created this film with rich, detailed backgrounds of a dense jungle filled with exotic animals, and an opulent palace of carved stone, luxurious tapestries and polished floors. The deep greens of the jungle are offset by skies of rich blue or gold. The characters’ movements are clearly rotoscoped, which supports the visual realism of this story filled with magic. These realistically illustrated characters wear traditional Indian dress, and jewels on the Raja’s turban flash with light. The animated visual effect of the light dancing on the Raja’s jeweled turban adds extra detail that contributes to the overall brilliance of this lavish animated film.

Figure 4.8. Koko the Clown in Out of the Inkwell: Modeling, Dir. Dave Fleischer, 1921.

Klyuch (The Key) 1961, 58 minutes

The Key tells the story of a newborn boy who is given a gift by three fairies of a magical ball of yarn that will lead him to the door of happiness. The boy’s parents are delighted with the gift, but not his grandfather. The grandfather offers a box full of tools to the child. When the boy’s mother happily says that her young son will never have to study or work, Granddad worries that ready-made happiness will make a loafer of his young grandchild. As the boy grows, he ventures to the land of happiness, but finds the door locked. Using the tools his grandfather gave him, he fashions a key to unlock the door. But the boy, having learned the value of hard work and family, prefers to return home. The film closes with family and friends united in their parting message to the audience: “Happiness is when a person is learned, is skillful, and uses all his gifts to help others”.

The Key, considered to be among the best works of Lev Atamonov, is a 58-minute modern satirical fairy tale and a bold stylistic departure from the socialist realism aesthetic that had so long been the standard in Russia.134 In this film, character depictions are highly stylized and have more exaggerated and expressive movements than the rotoscoped characters of earlier days.

Three years after the death of Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev denounced the crimes and repressions of the Stalin era in his 1956 speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. There followed a cultural “thaw” where censorship in the arts eased and animators were able to move beyond their prescribed formulas.135 Soviet animators branched out from fairy tale genres to narratives set in a contemporary world, and to satirical films for adult audiences.136 In addition to shifting themes, graphic styles also began to change in Soviet animation. In the spring of 1956, Ivan Ivanov-Vano and Lev Atamanov were able to attend the first festival dedicated exclusively to animation, the International Congress of Animation in Cannes, France (which lead to the establishment of ASIFA – Association International du Film d’Animation). These leading animation directors of Soyuzmultfilm were exposed to many new and innovative animation techniques and were eager to embrace the modern graphic style of limited animation.137

After seeing contemporary animation techniques at the 1956 animation festival in Cannes, Atamanov made a major stylistic shift to embrace limited animation in his approach to directing The Key. In keeping with the minimalist aesthetic of limited animation, backgrounds in the film are reduced to simply sketched essentials.

Animation Craft: Character movement

While rotoscoping allows for realistic character representation in form and movement, the resulting animation tends to lack in expressive quality. It is certainly important for animators to analyze character movement in real-life settings to study how figures navigate through space and how facial expressions relate emotion. However, with limited animation characters are typically drawn in less than realistic form and require their own unique way to shift their weight and exhibit intent.

As animated characters express emotion primarily through their physical performance, when their movements are simplified and exaggerated for emphasis, the essence of character emotion is more clearly relayed. This sort of embellished animation acting relies on strong key poses that must hold long enough for the audience to absorb a particular gesture, and deliberate timing of movement creates dramatic impact.138

In the final scene of The Key, the characters overtly articulate the moral of their story, and gather to face the audience with their message explaining the meaning of happiness. This frontal presentation, or frontality, where characters face toward viewers in a direct address is an approach known as “breaking the fourth wall”. Not often used in animation, this narrative device breaks down the imaginary wall that separates theatrical or cinematic actor/characters from their audience, and in this case reinforces the didactic function of Soviet animation.

Animation Craft: Limited Animation

Former Disney animators who joined the Army’s First Motion Picture Unit (FMPU) during World War II were tasked with creating animated training films for the military with very small budgets and plenty of creative freedom (see Chapter 1). With freedom to innovate, they developed a more modern style for animation using minimal backgrounds and characters that no longer adhered to Disney’s rounded realism, but were more angular and simplified.139

Interestingly, the graphic style associated with limited animation was inspired, at least in part, by Russian animator Ivan Ivanov-Vano. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright brought a film print of Ivanov-Vano’s 1934 film, The Tale of Czar Durandai, to Disney studios in 1939, and upon screening the film, animators who later went on to FMPU and United Productions of America (UPA) were impressed with its bold graphic style.140

American innovators of limited animation established the production company of UPA, and went on to make very popular animated films with plots involving human characters rather than humanized animals.141 Common methods to create greater production efficiency in limited animation are to use animation cycles (reusing cels for repetitive motions), shooting three or more frames of film per cel, and applying camera movements over relatively static scenes.142 When the demand for animated content grew with the popularity of television following World War II, limited animation suited the small budgets and fast production demands of serialized TV cartoons, and its simplified graphic style worked well for the small screens.143

Fyodor Khitruk (1917–2012)

Fyodor Khitruk studied at Stuttgart Arts and Crafts College in Germany and later at an art college in Moscow. He joined Soyuzmultfilm Studio in 1937 and worked as an animator on over 200 Soyuzmultfilm productions144 including Brumbergs’ Night Before Christmas (1951), Atamanov’s The Scarlet Flower (1952), The Snow Queen (1957), The Key (1961), Ivanov-Vano’s The Twelve Months (1956) and Adventures of Burantino (1959).145 Khitruk made his directorial debut in 1962 with The Story of a Crime, which brought him worldwide acclaim. Though he only directed 15 films in his long career,146 Khitruk earned his status as a legend in the world of animation through his brilliance in visual storytelling and animation craft.

Istoriya Odnogo Prestupleniya (The Story of a Crime) 1962, 20 minutes

Khitruk’s directorial debut, The Story of a Crime, marked a new genre of animation for adult audiences at the Soyuzmultfilm Studio. The film focuses on overcrowded living conditions and noise pollution that triggers an act of violence. After a sleepless night in a noisy high-rise apartment, a middle-aged man bludgeons two women with a frying pan in his apartment courtyard. Though this film was cleared for production, communist party loyalists were not happy with the film as they considered this satire on contemporary urban living as a criticism of the government housing policy.147

The Story of a Crime was created using a collage of cutout patterns for people’s clothing, cutout newsprint for commuter newspapers, and backgrounds of simply sketched outlines and blocks of color. Residing in a series of colored boxes, the compartmentalized world of the main character underscores the confined nature of his existence, and the simplified characters have angular rather than rounded features in keeping with the aesthetic of limited animation.

The static detailed patterns of people’s clothing add an interesting complexity to the visual design while accentuating the flatness and stylization of the cutout shapes of the characters.

Vinni-Puh (Winnie-the-Pooh) 1969, 11 minutes

Khitruk later adapted Winnie-the-Pooh stories by English author A. A. Milne, originally written in the 1920s. Milne’s storybooks and Disney animated adaptations are widely popular in western countries, though Khitruk’s lesser known Vinni-Puh (Winnie-the-Pooh) in 1969, Vinni-Puh Idet v Gosti (Winnie-the-Pooh Goes to Visit) in 1971, and Vinni-Puh I Den” Zabot (Winnie-the-Pooh and the Day of Concern) in 1972 have their own unique appeal.

In Khitruk’s animated Winnie-the-Pooh cartoons, background illustrations are distinctly child-like with primitively drawn landscapes of bright, richly saturated crayon colors on a white background. Khitruk describes his experience making these films in an interview in the documentary film Magia Russica: “(Winnie-the-Pooh) was an organic theme for me. I wanted to dive by myself into this mysterious kingdom, the mysterious, naïve and wise kingdom of childhood”.148 Khitruk’s world of Winnie-the-Pooh seems a familiar, safe, and magnificent space of a child’s imagination.

Roman A. Kachanov (1921–1993)

Roman Kachanov directed 27 cartoons at Soyuzmultfilm in both cel animation and in the Stop Motion Division. He was an animator on Ivanov-Vano’s The Snow Maiden, Atamonov’s The Golden Antelope, and an assistant director and animator on Atamonov’s The Scarlet Flower.149

Kachanov is most noted for co-writing and directing a series of four short stop-motion animated film for children that became an award-winning series starring Cheburashka, a small, brown-furred creature with large round ears, a tall, green crocodile named Gena, and an elderly lady prankster, Shapolklyak. The films are based on the popular children’s book Crocodile Gena and his Friends, written by Eduard Uspensky in 1966. The characters of Cheburashka and Gena are kind-hearted and long for acceptance and friendship, while Shapolklyak with her pet rat enjoy playing tricks on Gena and Cheburashka.

The approximately 20-minute films Gena The Crocodile (1969), Cheburaska (1971), Shapolklyak (1971), and the 10-minute film, Cheburaska Goes to School (1983) are much beloved classics in Russia and have more recently become very popular in Japan. Cheburashka cartoons screened in Japan in 2001 and 2002, where they gained a widely popular following. Cheburaska t-shirts and merchandise have become part of Japanese popular culture.150

Krokodil Gena (Crocodile Gena) 1969, 21 minutes

In his first Cheburashka film, Kachanov introduces the characters that were soon to become cultural icons. Cheburashka is a small furry animal unknown to science who comes to a Russian city in an orange crate. Crocodile Gena is a lonely crocodile who works in the zoo by day and goes home to a lonely house at night. Gena puts up posters “Young Crocodile seeks friends” and meets Cheburashka and others. Undaunted by the antics of Shapolklyak, they decide to build a house for people with no friends so they will not be lonely any more. Many creatures come to help, and they become friends during construction. So, they decide to give the house to a kindergarten where Cheburashka wants to work as a toy for the children.

Cheburashka 1971, 20 minutes

In the second film, Cheburashka and Crocodile Gena want to join a group of boy scouts who are building a birdhouse, but they are turned away. Cheburashka and Gena decide to build a playground for some young children who have no safe place to play. Then, after helping collect scrap metal for the boy scouts, the boys invite Cheburashka and Gena to join their team.

Both Chebursashka and Gena express universal themes of innocence and wanting to be included, and Cheburashka’s small stature and big brown eyes evoke the sympathies of a young child. Their antagonist, Shapolklyak, offers comic relief and a sense of mischief to the stories.

Kachanov’s colleague, Yuri Norstein who worked as an animator on Kachanov’s The Mitten and Cheburashka reflected on the appeal of Kachanov’s animated films: “(Roman Kachanov) knew one rule very well: to find sad notes in happy scenes and, on the contrary, to put a smile in sad scenes. You see, it’s a rule, it’s dialectic, it immediately makes everything three-dimensional and expressive”.151

The lovable Cheburashka character has been wildly popular across the Soviet Union since its film debut in 1969. In 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Cheburashka earned the honored title of official mascot of Russia’s Olympic Team in his original brown fur. In the Turin Winter Olympic Games two years later, Cheburaska again represented the Russian team-this time with white fur. In the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, a red-haired Cheburashka symbolized the Russian team. And in 2010, at the Vancouver Winter Olympics, Cheburaska turned blue.152

Yuri Norstein (1941–)

Yuri Norstein grew up in Moscow and at age18 joined a two-year vocational animation course at Soyuzmultfilm and was then hired as an animator.153 Like many Soyuzmultfilm directors, Norstein trained as an animator for several years at the studio in both the drawn and puppet animation sections, fine-tuning his craft as he went along. As a director, Norstein’s most highly acclaimed works are Hedgehog in the Fog and Tale of Tales, both having won multiple awards and both voted as the Best Animated Film of All Time.154

Animation Craft: Norstein’s Technique

Norstein uses a unique combination of cel and cutout animation, layering multiple levels of artwork in his custom-built multiplane animation stand. Most cel animation is limited to up to four transparent layers above a flat background illustration,155 though Norstein disregards that standard to create backgrounds that are alive with texture and translucent depth. The backgrounds alone in Norstein’s films are often composed of several layers of cut-out pieces on glass planes, each with particular lighting or diffusion effects to construct the desired atmosphere. Norstein explains that just the house in Tale of Tales is made of about ten layers.156

Norstein’s character and background elements are drawn on sheets of clear acetate then cut into small pieces for cutout animation. Francesca Yarbusova, Norstein’s art director and wife, draws the design sketches for his productions and also creates the cutout elements that are used in his films. Clear borders of acetate are retained beyond the drawn portion of each cutout to give the impression of fully illustrated animation, and the thin side edges of the cutouts must be painted black to avoid light reflections. Norstein directs the creative vision for the overall productions and is in charge of animating the pieces under the camera.

To allow the creative latitude he wanted for his productions, Norstein and his camera operator Alexander Zhukovsky developed a customized multiplane animation stand that enables numerous layers to be added. In addition, the rostrum camera can move vertically, horizontally, and pivot the angle to bring a subtlety of depth and movement to Norstein’s animations with unprecedented fluidity.157

Ezhik v Tuman (Hedgehog in the Fog) 1975, 10 minutes

Hedgehog in the Fog is based on a children’s story by Sergei Kozlov. In the story, a small hedgehog goes to visit his friend the bear cub for a starlight picnic. Along the way, the hedgehog timidly wanders through a foggy field to come upon a horse, owl, dog, and other creatures.158

Creatures appear and disappear through the blanket of mist, startling the small hedgehog as he tries to make his way to the familiar comfort of his friend. The audience recognizes the feeling of traveling along an uncertain path that leads to unexpected encounters, pitfalls, and surprises that are both frightening and fascinating. This portrayal of a short detour of the hedgehog’s evening routine taps into our omnipresent anxiety and fear of the unknown. The appeal of this film comes from the vulnerability the small hedgehog experiences as he explores the mysteries of the fog-shrouded field. The story of the hedgehog relates the story of the human condition.

Skazka Skazok (Tale of Tales) 1979, 29 minutes

Tale of Tales is best viewed as a poem of sorts. The 29-minute film wanders through an intertwining series of Norstein’s earliest memories, memories of men going off to war, winter, fresh green apples, and the lullaby The Little Grey Wolf Will Come commonly sung to young children in Russia.

The Little Grey Wolf is a prominent character in the film, and the lullaby that inspired it reads as follows:

Baby baby rock-a-bye

On the edge you mustn’t lie

Or the little grey wolf will come

And will nip you on the tum

Tug you off into the wood

Underneath the willow-root159

Tale of Tales can be a challenge to those who strive to grasp a clear narrative, though the images presented are strikingly evocative. The film exhibits impressions that have remained in Norstein’s consciousness since early childhood.

Norstein’s initial proposal to Goskino for permission to develop the film, originally entitled The Little Grey Wolf Will Come, effectively describes its essence:

This is to be a film about memory.

Do you remember how long the days were when you were a child?

Each day stood alone and we lived for that day – tomorrow would be there for tomorrow’s pleasures.

All truths were simple, everything new amazed us, and friendship and comradeship stood above all else.160

Tale of Tales was originally titled The Little Grey Wolf Will Come and the Soyuzmultfilm artistic council offered great praise when it was finished. But Goskino, the government department that had controlled all aspects of cinema since 1922, was not happy with its ambiguous meaning and instructed Norstein to make significant changes. He refused to re-edit the film and organized a screening to help raise support, though the standoff did not end. Meanwhile, the jury for the State Prize for animated films that year had not been apprised of the controversy over Norstein’s latest film, and awarded him the State Prize. As a face-saving measure for the authorities, it was agreed that Norstein would compromise somewhat and change the film title to Tale of Tales, so the film was then released for distribution.161

Vyacheslav Kotenochkin (1927–2000)

Vyacheslav Kotenochkin joined Soyuzmultfilm in 1947 as an animator and began directing animated films in 1962. He is most well-known for his work in directing the popular cartoon series Just You Wait!162

Nu, Pogodi! (Just You Wait!) series 1969–1993

Just You Wait! was originally scripted by humorists Alexander Kurlyandsky, Arkady Jhait and Felix Kamov, and the first prototype episode in 1969 was directed by Gennady Sokolskly. The popularity of the first episode led to the production of the series, and several animation directors at Soyuzmultfilm turned down the project because of its seemingly trivial and unsophisticated cartoon gags. Vyacheslav Kotenochkin took on the challenge to great success, creating a cartoon series that became among the most popular in Russia.163

With each episode lasting approximately 10 minutes, the program features a dimwitted wolf in perpetual chase of a clever and resourceful rabbit, always ending with the wolf shouting “Nu, pogodi!” (“Just you wait!”). Just You Wait features characters from traditional Russian folklore, a Wolf (called “Volk”), depicted as a hooligan and smoker who tries to catch the Hare (called “Zayats”), the hero. The series is often compared to famous American cartoon duos, Tom & Jerry and The Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote.164

Sixteen episodes were produced between 1969–1983, and another two episodes filmed in 1993.165 In 2005 and 2006, two new episodes were created, directed by Vyacheslav Kotencochkin’s son, Aleksey Kotencochkin. In 2013, Aleksey was preparing a full-length 3-D animated production of Nu, Pogodi!166

The original cartoons feature popular Russian/contemporary songs from the time the particular episodes were made, so the score changes over time following the trends of popular music. The traditional cel animation features brightly colored scenes and smiling, mischievous characters who conduct their chase through everyday settings of Russian urban and suburban life, nostalgically reflecting the reality of the era from which they came.167