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### **Depicting the Trickster: Soviet Animation and Russian Folktales**

Cartoons are the first introduction to folklore for many children. That is certainly true for Russian folktales that were often adapted for animated films. From the 1930s to the 1980s the Soviet animation industry produced over thirty cartoons based on Russian folktales and *byliny* and many more based on folklore of non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. This process involved the significant creative efforts of writers and directors to edit original stories, sometimes conjoining several plots into one film, making them more suitable for visual adaptation and often incorporating a Soviet treatment of folklore. The characters went through several stages, from comparatively straightforward transformations in some early films, to didactic Socialist Realist versions in the late Stalin era to artistic, to masterpieces of the stagnation decades, when folklore-based cartoons fused modernity and tradition or obtained “doublespeak” allusions typical for the art of the time.

From the 1950s to the 1970 the world of the Soviet people changed, and this change was reflected in cinema and animation. The witty trickster-fool made a comeback as one of the main characters of the folklore-inspired animated films. In the Stalin era this character was often artificially limited to cheating social antagonists and defeating foreign enemies. In late Soviet animation, with its continuing modernization, the fool returned to his individuality in his quest towards personal happiness. This approach restored the origins of the trickster and returned to the ideals of private life, and the phenomenon of inner emigration that replaced the enthusiasm of the Thaw.

## Appeal of the Trickster

The trickster is one of the most appealing characters for animation. The trickster creates comic situations, brings innovation, and is often associated with satirizing norms and customs (Cherniavskaia, 435). The Russian trickster is the fool (*durak*). The fool in Russian medieval culture was a clever revealer of truth, eccentric in clothing, speech, and behavior (Likhachiov, 350-351).

There are several types of characters that have the trickster's features in Russian folktales: the animal trickster (usually the fox), the soldier, and the fool. This essay will discuss how Soviet animation turned to Russian folklore motifs and how the figure trickster was treated in Soviet animation of the 1950s-1970s, specifically concentrating on the fool (Emelya and Ivan-Durak). Two popular films by prominent Soviet directors will be discussed, *In a Certain Kingdom* (1957) by Ivan Ivanov-Vano and *The Flying Ship* (1979) by Garry Bardin. How did animation aimed mostly at children in Soviet closed society treat the folktale environment and, in particular, this ambivalent and chaotic character? How did it change from the early post-Stalin years to the period of the late Stagnation?

In Russian culture, the trickster figure blends several characters that were historically connected: the Holy fool (*iurodivyi*), the Harlequin/Wandering Minstrel (*skomorokh*), and the Outlaw (e.g. the thief, Cossack, or the peddler, *ofenya*). In peasant communities all of them were aliens. They were seen with both fear and respect. In folktales this trickster is usually called the fool (*durak*). The fool is often called Ivan/Ivanushka/Ivashko; sometimes Emelya. In most stories he is the third son of humble peasant parents or a widow's son. Occasionally he is presented as the youngest son of the Tsar, Ivan-Tsarevich, a merchant's son, or a human of animal descent,

such as Ivan Medvedko. The fool is distinct in his clothes, speech, appearance, actions, and the unusual results of his adventures. The fool is often introduced as an unlikely hero: his parents and/or brother humiliate him; he is lazy, untidy and often has a problem with alcohol abuse. The fool spends his days lying on a stove (Emelya, Ivan the Fool). Unlike his brothers, the fool is a bachelor. He has not passed his initiation yet, and he is often seen as a child and acts like one. He is the only one who has a name; his brothers and parents are usually nameless. The fool does not fit into the social order and sometimes leaves the village or is even expelled. The fool manages to outsmart and enrage people; he acts oddly, often treating orders in a literal manner. Outside of human society, in the primeval environment of the wild forest or by the water, the fool is challenged and successfully accomplishes more than his normal brothers (Siniavskii, 17). His weird behavior helps him both to get in touch with otherworldly creatures (devils, Baba Yaga, talking animals) and often to outsmart them. His social status is marginal until the end of the story when he obtains riches, family, and sometimes power.

The trickster became one of the most beloved characters of Russian literature: Ostap Bender and Benya Krik to name a few. In children's literature, the figure of the Trickster became very popular: Buratino, Neznaika, Emelya, Ivan Tsarevich. The trickster is probably one of the most appealing characters for animated media. Soviet animated tricksters include Emelya, Ivan Durak, Karlsson, Shapokliak. One of the earliest Soviet animated films, *Ice Arena (Katok)*, features a trickster – a boy who manages to avoid paying the ice skate entrance fee, outsmart the fat NEPman, and win the race.

### **Folklore in Animation**

Russian animation (also known as “*multiplikatsiia*”) dates back to 1912 when Wladyslaw Starewicz produced his first stop-motion film featuring trickster figure of the Cameraman, *The Cameraman’s Revenge (Mest’ kinematograficheskogo operatora)*. His second short, *The Dragonfly and the Ant (Strekoza i muravei)*, 1913 based on Ivan Krylov’s fable, bridged the strong connection between literary works and animation that became so characteristic of Russian cartoons. After the October Revolution, the famous avant-garde director of *Kino Glaz* and *Kino Pravda*, Dziga Vertov, employed animation principles for some of his propaganda reels, and in 1924 produced the first Soviet animation, *Soviet Toys (Sovetskie igrushki)* aimed at greedy NEPmen and the clergy. In the 1920s, Soviet animators, together with other artists of the NEP era, had some freedom for experimentation and worked in several studios (most well-known was Mezhrabprom Rus’) where such acclaimed directors as the sisters Valentina and Zinaida Broomberg, Ivan Ivanov-Vano, and Ol’ga Khodataeva. Soon after Stalin became the sole Soviet leader, film studios were consolidated. Stalin had realized the importance of state control of the movie industry. In 1936, soon after the establishment of the major film studios Mosfil’m and Lenfil’m, Soyuzmul’tfil’m was founded and became the main animation studio of the Soviet Union.

As a result of the turn from the internationalism of the 1920s to the fusion of Bolshevism and nationalism in the mid-1930s, interest in Russian topics in art was revived. The Second World War became a turning point in rehabilitating imperial cultural values. Under the leadership of Stalin, the Soviet government tried to kindle Russian patriotism and in the late 1940s launched a campaign against the “cosmopolites” who kowtowed to the West. This turn to national themes made prominent Soviet film and animation directors adopt folklore motifs and characters for their works. In the 1930s-1950s animated pictures were often based on Russian

tales (*Ivashko and Baba-Yaga (Ivashko i Baba-Yaga)*, 1938; *The Tale of the Soldier (Skazka o soldate)*, 1948; *The Magic Swan-Geese (Gusi-lebedi)* 1949; *The Frog Princess (Tsarevna-liagushka)* 1954.

Initially avant-garde and satirical, Soviet animation changed in the middle of the 1930s with the establishment of Socialist Realism and was also influenced by the Disney animated films shown during The First International Film Festival in Moscow in 1935. Soviet animation turned toward productions for children. Control was tightened, and Stalin-era animation concentrated on mostly didactic animation for children. In such conditions, the trickster became a rare character in Soviet animation.

During the Khrushchev Thaw, the spectrum of animation topics was significantly broadened. The annual number of cartoons produced by Soyuzmul'tfil'm increased from 10 in 1948 to 36 in 1978. Apart from the Moscow studio, new animation studios were established, such as Ekran/Mul'teofil'm (Moscow), Sverdlovskaiia Kinostudia, Permteofil'm, and Kievnachfil'm. Soviet techniques shifted from Stalin-era Socialist Realist naturalistic cartoons that often employed rotoscoping, towards innovative methods (and rediscovery of the avant-garde aesthetics of the 1920s) causing a more cartoonish, abstract, and even surrealist appearance. Puppet and stop motion techniques were reintroduced. Folklore motifs, now not only Russian, remained important for Soviet animation. Such popular and critically acclaimed masterpieces based on folktales such as *The Tale is Told (Skazka skazyvaetsia)*, 1970; *Terem-teremok* 1971; *Vasilisa the Beautiful (Vasilisa prekrasnaia)*, 1977; *The Flying Ship (Letuchii korabl')*, 1979; the unforgettable Yuri Norshtein's *The Fox and the Hare (Lisa i zaiats)*, 1973 and *The Crane and the Heron (Zhuravl' i tsaplia)*, 1974, and many others were produced in the 1960-1970s. A long-standing tradition was continued in the post-Soviet period. One of the most

outstanding efforts of the Russian animation industry is *The Mountain of Gems (Gora samotsvetov)*, an animated TV-series produced in the recent decade and entirely based on folktales of the different peoples of the Russian Federation.

### **Emelya in the Soviet Union**

Initially, folklore topics were considered inappropriate for the new Soviet art. They were seen as outdated and too much connected with the rural past (Kononenko, 274). However, with the revival of pride and interest in the Russian past, folklore became an inspiring source for both plots and characters (such as Koshchei, Baba Yaga, the soldier, and Ivan Tsarevich).

*In a Certain Kingdom (V nekotom tsarstve)* - the first animated film I would like to discuss in detail – was filmed using the rotoscope technique in 1957 by Ivan Ivanov-Vano, based on a screenplay by Nikolai Erdman, a prominent writer who worked not only for Soyuzmul'tfil'm, but also with Vsevolod Meyerhold and, after arrest and exile, with Grigorii Aleksandrov (screenplays of *Veselye rebyata (Jolly Fellows)* and *Volga-Volga*).

The story about Emelya the fool and the magic pike is among the most well-known. Emelya is depicted in figurines, paintings, illustrations, and sometimes is seen as a symbol of Russia, slow to saddle up, but rides fast. Emelya is the third son, unmarried, untidy, lazy, and his only motivation to do something is the promise of a red kaftan. Emelya manages to catch the magic pike with his bare hands. The fool is not ambitious at the beginning and is satisfied by an opportunity to escape from hard everyday labor. For peasants who had to work hard to survive, this could have been an exciting fantasy. As the tale goes on, Emelya becomes an active trickster. Andrei Siniavskii points out that the tale's attention to magic buckets, the axe, and the moving stove makes Emelya a village magician, adding the charm of an entertainer and

performer (Siniavskii 20). As the trickster, Emelya brings not only fun, but also chaos to a town by running over people with his sled, but managing to escape their revenge. He is full of self-respect and does not want to be treated poorly. For peasants, Emelya could have been a hero who is able to defeat the tsar and his men. In some versions, he sees his foolishness and becomes a smart and beautiful prince.

In the folktale-based animated film *V nekotom tsarstve*, Emelya is significantly different. The film omits his brothers and sisters-in-law; Emelya lives with his mother and he does not argue when she asks him for something. He is not a lazy lad sitting on a stove all day, but he is shown quite capable of working; he does not lie on a stove but sits and makes baskets. Making wooden utensils, baskets, and toys was typical for peasants during winter months. He also knows how to play a whistle and mentions his refrain “I am lazy” only once when summoned by the tsar Gorokh. Emelya is also kinder: he lets the pike go without asking anything and the pike rewards him. He does not want to beat angry villagers and is quite peaceful until his motherland is threatened by foreigners.

Figures of pretentious westerners are among the main contemporary features of the film. The Cold War started about a decade before, and wicked foreigners were portrayed in Soviet animation again (e.g., *Mister Uolk*, 1949). The mass campaign depicting the West as mortal enemies was launched by the Soviet Union soon after the Marshall plan was introduced in 1947, and the death of Stalin did not stop the Soviet propaganda machine (Fatveev 1999). The generic foreigner is shown in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century European dress. Presumably, he is a French prince who barely speaks Russian and wants to marry Marya, the daughter of tsar Gorokh. The foreigner’s carriage is overthrown by dashing Emelya’s horseless sleds. He is shown as a scrawny tall figure with unnaturally sharp features reminiscent of a rooster (possibly another hint at his French

origin). The prince is extremely effeminate, always powdering his face, looking at a pocket mirror, but Maria does not mind his courtship (approved by her father) until Emelya sees her portrait and wishes her to fall in love with him. However, when the French prince is rejected by Marya, he launches an invasion. The image of foreign grenadiers marching in the snow reminds us not only of Napoleon, but also of the recent German invasion. The tsar's troops are defeated, and only the trickster, becoming patriotic when he sees the destruction the invaders are causing, is able to save his native land by making a broom to wipe out the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Emelya, Maria, and a soldier drummer who politely addresses the fool “Emelyan Ivanovich” are depicted in a humane fashion, with normal physical appearances. In contrast, the Russian court is shown in a somewhat comical way: the tsar is short, bearded, and single toothed; his general is worthless with cartoonish whiskers. As a result of Emelya's victory, the tsar loses his crown and flees abroad, while Emelya marries princess Marya and rides the stove home with her. Thus, in sharp contrast with the folktale, Emelya in this cartoon embodies the ideal of the Russian nation: he is witty and kind, able to work and play, he is not aggressive, but he can defend himself if bothered by foreigners or the tsar and his government. Foreign enemies are always ready to invade Russia, but they cannot defeat her people. The second part of the tale that shows weakness and passivity (Emelya is imprisoned in a barrel and Maria begs him to do something) is completely omitted. In the film Emelya is a smart peasant, salt of the earth, and does not need the pike's magic to become a handsome and clever prince.

Soviet animation of the late 1940s-1950s was not as satirical as the animation of the NEP era, the 1930s and the war years. It was aimed at children to promote loyalty to the country, a positive attitude towards Socialist society, and the common values of friendship, honesty, and

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<sup>1</sup> Literally executing, saying “гнать поганую метлой.”

politeness (Pontieri, 44). The rise of nationalism promoted by the naturalistic Disney style was combined with traditional Russian plots (often based on folktales, fables, and fairytales of Russian authors) and aesthetics. Beautifully executed, they were often burdened with didactic propaganda bringing Soviet ideals into the adaptation of folklore.

### **Flying Ship of the Late Stagnation.**

During Khrushchev's Thaw, Soviet animation adopted new techniques and themes. New topics included technological progress (especially space exploration), modernization and the struggle with the church and superstition, romanticizing the Revolution, and even satire aimed at Soviet shortcomings (bureaucracy, petit-bourgeoisie lifestyle, and alcoholism) (Pontieri, 57). The cartoons became less realistic and more schematic. One of the turning points was *Story of a Crime (Istoriia odnogo prestuplenia, 1962)*, the first effort of Fyodor Khitruk<sup>2</sup> as a director. The animated film genre was no longer oriented exclusively toward children. *The Flying Ship (Letuchii korabl', 1979)*, an animated musical, produced by Garry Bardin with lyrics by Yurii Entin, became one of such films popular among both children and adults. The famous *The Bremen Town Musicians (Bremenskie muzykanty, 1969)* was one of the first animated films of this popular genre. It is loosely based on the Grimm brothers' tale and featured a trickster Troubadour who resembled one of the Beatles, an attractive princess in a mini dress, and elements of rock music and hippy culture. *Letuchii korabl'* follows this successful pattern but in a Russian folktale setting.

*Letuchii korabl'* is loosely based on the folktale of the same title. Unlike *V nekotorem tsarstve*, this film shares with the folktale only the image of the magic ship, a magic donor, and

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<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Khitruk, who passed away this year, was a veteran-animator of many films, including *V nekotorem tsarstve* discussed above. In the 1960s-1970s he became one of the most outstanding Soviet animation directors.

the characters Vanya (Ivan), the tsar and his daughter. Briefly, the plot revolves around poor Vanya, the tsar, his daughter Zabava who loves Vanya, and the rich Polkan who wants to marry Zabava (Zabava hates Polkan). The tsar wants Polkan to become his son-in-law and locks the protesting Zabava in a tower. To free Zabava, Vanya goes on a quest to build a flying ship. Thanks to the Vodianoi and Baba-Yagas, Vanya builds a ship, but Polkan takes away the ship and throws Vanya in the water. Polkan manages to usurp the crown and tries to force Zabava to marry him. The Vodianoi helps Vanya to escape, and Ivan comes back in time to save Zabava. They fly away on the magic ship. Such treatment of folklore plots became typical for Soviet animation in the 1960s-1980s (films like *The Apples of Youth* (*Molodil'nye iabloki*), 1974; *Ivashka from the Palace of Pioneers* (*Ivashka iz dvortsa pionerov*), 1981; *How Ivan Saved the Tsar's Daughter* (*Kak Ivan tsarskuiu dochku spasal*), 1989). This film retains the quest to obtain the magic ship in order to marry the tsar's daughter, but completely abandons other trials given to Vanya by the tsar, as well as his helpers with superhuman abilities. The film is even more modern, particularly due to its musical nature: each character sings his part, providing insight into his thoughts and emotions, something atypical for folktales. The film retains the trickster, Vanya the chimneysweep (Vanya-pechnik) dark from ash and grime, as the main character, although it omits his parents and two elder brothers. The fool in the film bears the trickster's patterns: he possesses knowledge (Vanya is a good singer and dancer, he is handy with tools, both human and otherworldly that he receives from Vodianoi); he is a mediator between social groups (humble Vanya marries the princess); he is able to move between worlds (Vanya meets the Vodianoi and multiple Baba-Yagas); and to a degree he is immortal (the Vodianoi revives Vanya after he was drowned by Polkan).

Multiple elements of modernity make this folklore film both comical and current. It could be seen as a good-humored depiction of Thaw-era idealism and its collapse in the following decade. The comical tsar is a weak but loving father who wants to make sure his daughter is successfully married.<sup>3</sup> In anger, Zabava destroys her dowry utensils, declaring she wants a love-match. This scene not only mimics the hit comedy *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style* (*Kavkazskaia plennitsa*, 1967), but also reflects the spirit of the 1960s youth rebellion against the old rules, and appeal of love free from social boundaries. The older generation (the tsar) is weak and allows brutes like the greedy and vulgar Polkan (a popular dog's name derived from the half-dog creature featured in stories about Bova Korolevich) to dominate the land. The dog-like Polkan, a ruffian with enormous moustaches, wearing a furry coat and hat with a dog-tail, eavesdrops, spies, steals the magic ship, and cheats the tsar.<sup>4</sup> This could be seen as disappointment over the older generation's inability to prevent the horrors of the Stalin era. At first, the ideal of Vanya and Zabava, the new generation, is grounded in family happiness, even in "inner emigration" (Baraban, 443) so typical for the Soviet intelligentsia<sup>5</sup>. They often tried to separate from the atmosphere of stagnation by creating a small circle of close friends and family members. They shielded themselves from Socialist reality with literature, the cinema, tourism, hobbies, or even by moving into distant villages in search of a simple country life (Baraban, 443).

The danger of such a lifestyle is shown by the Vodianoi who sings a song to the trickster explaining his loneliness: "my only friends are leeches and frogs" ("мои подружки/пиявки да лягушки"). The Vodianoi is depicted as an old and disappointed merman in a boater hat. He had

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<sup>3</sup> The tsar sings: "<I will handle everything myself> if only I could see Zabava advantageously married/living in plenty/that's my happiness" "Лишь бы Забаву/Выгодно замуж!/Дом ее чтобы/Полная чаша/Вот оно счастье..."

<sup>4</sup> Polkan sings: "I am the king. <I have> Zabava, new lands, new glory, new money, new connections, that's my happiness: from rags to riches" "Я коронован/Рядом Забава/Новые земли/Новая слава/Новые деньги/Новые связи/Вот оно счастье -/В князи из грязи!"

<sup>5</sup> Zabava sings: "A small house, Russian oven... purring cat, hard-working husband, that's my happiness, sweetest of all" "Маленький домик/Русская печка/Дом деревянный/Лавка да свечка/Котик-мурлык/Муж работающий/Вот оно счастье/Нет его слаще."

a rough life but used to have high aspirations<sup>6</sup>, but now he desperate and lonely. To some degree it is a comical portrait of an *intelligent* who suffocates in the Soviet environment; he could not change much except for helping others to fulfill their dreams by becoming a donor and helper.

The trickster Vanya manages to build the magic ship and learns the spell from the Baba-Yagas (another comical mix of folklore and Soviet life is a multistory dorm building where thirteen Baba-Yagas - called Babki-Yozhki - live together and sing *chastushki*), but he is not able to deal with the brutal force of the state: Polkan and the palace guards try to kill him, and only the help of the Vodianoi, deliverance by a magic helper, keeps Vanya alive.

Polkan steals the ship, obtains the power and tries to force Zabava to marry him, but Vanya outwits him, saves Zabava (she loses her Russian folk dress and by the end looks like a modern girl) and escapes with her. Responses to the pressures of the Soviet environment are seen in inner emigration or sometimes in real emigration. As the film ends, Vanya and Zabava fly away, the camera stays with the flying ship as the kingdom below gets smaller and more obscured. This is the flight for freedom – to a new social life, another city, or even to another country. The trickster does not defend his nation any more. He defends his right for personal happiness, his private life, and his family. This is an enormous change from the ending of *V nekotorom tsarstve*. In both films the tsars lose their power and crowns. Nevertheless, if in the 1957 film the tsar flees to go abroad, leaving Emelya with his magic power to be the head of the land, in the 1979 film Vanya and the princess flee the country where corrupt thugs like Poltan came to power to seek a new place. Animation erases the border between the tale and reality. Under the guise of the folktale, artists were able to show modern trends in Soviet society.

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<sup>6</sup> Vodianoi sings “My poor life, to hell with it, I live like a fungus, and I wish I could fly” “Эх, жизнь моя жестянка!/А ну ее в болото!/Живу я как поганка/а мне летать охота!”

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