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## Telling the People's Truth: Soviet Fairy Tale Film and the Construction of a National Bolshevik Film Genre

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**Telling the People's Truth: Soviet Fairy Tale Film and the Construction of a National  
Bolshevik Film Genre**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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April 24, 2009

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## Introduction

This study examines the evolution of Alexander Rou's fairy tale film from the Stalinist to the early post-Stalinist period (1930s-1960s). For a methodological model, I draw upon Katerina Clark's structuralist study of Soviet ideology and its narrative models.<sup>1</sup> The basis for my argument lies in David Brandenberger's work on "National Bolshevism," as he terms the ideology of Stalin's regime,<sup>2</sup> and in Hans Günther's work on the utilization of nationalism by totalitarian governments.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework, I analyze Rou's fairy tale films as representations of National Bolshevik ideology.

Significant for this study is the ideological shift from the internationalist, class-based utopianism of the 1920s to the Stalinist doctrine of National Bolshevism, the integral part of which was folk-mindedness<sup>4</sup> (*narodnost'*) – the notion of every individual's connection to a national tradition.<sup>5</sup> Stalinist ideology rejected the earlier proletarian egalitarianism in favor of the idea that it was the historical mission of certain nations, and of Russia in particular, to carry history forward to communism. Brandenberger conceives of folk-mindedness as the central characteristic of National Bolshevism, which sought to legitimize the Soviet state by grounding a Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology in the history of the Russian nation. This history, however, was not extant in the collective identity of the Russian people after the

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<sup>1</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost' i ee istoki," *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, Eds. Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko, (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000), pp. 377-389. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are my own. I have used a simplified version of the Library of Congress system for the transliteration of Cyrillic into Latin script.

<sup>4</sup> In choosing the term 'folk-mindedness' to represent the concept commonly translated as 'people-mindedness,' I wish to emphasize the importance of traditional national culture in National Bolshevik ideology. What is essential in *narodnost'* is not merely '(the) people' as such, but the unity of those people who belong to an ancient national tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost'," p. 377.

Revolution, and had to be constructed by the party hierarchy from the disparate, locally oriented Russian-speaking cultures that the Soviet regime inherited from the tsarist empire.<sup>6</sup>

Soviet educational authorities in the 1920s denounced the traditional subject of history for its association with the bourgeois system. They emphasized the break between the tsarist past and the Soviet present, condemning the former for imperialism and Russian chauvinism. Educators implemented new instructional methods to teach students the more theoretical aspects of the class struggle and the social forces that drove history. However, these pedagogical techniques failed to instill a sense of unity and pride in Soviet citizens, as became clear in 1927 when the possibility of war with Britain produced widespread defeatist rumors instead of mass mobilization.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the perceived failure of 1920s pedagogy induced Soviet cultural authorities to construct a new unifying doctrine for the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

The party hierarchy responded by implementing folk-mindedness as a cultural policy in education and popular culture. Authorities replaced the focus on abstract social forces with the history of Russian state-building, began to portray the Russian people as “first among equals” in the Soviet family of nations, and limited the discussion of the history of the non-Russian peoples to their traditional friendship with the Russians.<sup>9</sup> Brandenberger contends that folk-mindedness was a contingent innovation, implemented as a more practical alternative to the orthodox Marxist-Leninist sociological rhetoric of the 1920s, which had failed to unite the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union behind the banner of proletarian revolution. The change in focus from internationalism and the class struggle to history and

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<sup>6</sup> I follow Brandenberger in using the term “party hierarchy,” which he adopts as a calque of the Russian *partinaia verkhuska* – that is, the consensus of the relevant high-ranking policymakers (*National Bolshevism*, p. xiii).

<sup>7</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, pp. 21-22

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

the state-building heroes of the Russian past was intended to legitimize the Soviet state in the eyes of the people through familiar imagery.

The earlier Marxist-Leninist principles did not disappear, however, but rather continued to guide the policy choices of the Soviet leadership. “Pragmatism, in other words, precipitated the construction of a russocentric, etatist usable past to advance ideals that remained at least partially socialist.”<sup>10</sup> Among these earlier principles was a commitment by the Soviet state to foster the development of national consciousness in its minority populations.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the official glorification of Russian national tradition was never accompanied by an intense program of russification in the non-Russian republics. Soviet schools in the republics instructed children in both Russian and their native language throughout Stalin’s time in power,<sup>12</sup> and when national histories by non-Russian scholars came under criticism, it was not for nationalistic views *per se*, but for casting aspersions on Russia or marginalizing Russia’s contributions to their development.<sup>13</sup>

The turn to folk-mindedness helped to secure and legitimize the Soviet Regime, associating it with the history of the Russian nation that was ostensibly unique, primordial, and held together by bonds of language and culture.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, folk-mindedness served to insulate this Russo-Soviet culture from the pernicious influence of decadent foreign

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<sup>10</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> The orthodox Marxist teleology necessitated the formation of national identity as a prerequisite to socialism. On the rationale behind Soviet efforts to *encourage* nationalism in the Soviet Union’s border areas, see *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Eds. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Douglas T. Northrop, “Introduction,” in *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Suny and Terry, “Introduction,” *A State of Nations*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, pp. 124-131.

<sup>14</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 6-7. Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”

societies and stressed the regime's origin in the natural, long-standing wholeness of the nation.<sup>15</sup>

Folk-mindedness was not intended to supersede Marxism-Leninism, but was instead supposed to function as an interface between state ideology and the public. The official message of the party hierarchy during Stalinism remained, according to Brandenberger, "national in form, socialist in content."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, folk-mindedness manifested itself in the officially sanctioned culture by means of which citizens were socialized and mobilized. The introduction of folk-minded policy is evident in the changing official attitudes toward folk culture in general and the Russian folktale in particular.

Before the advent of National Bolshevism and the introduction of *narodnost'*, Soviet cultural authorities had disdained fairy tales and folk culture, which they associated with the old socio-economic order. In the 1920s, those authorities believed that children's visual culture should feature technological and industrial themes consistent with the rapid industrialization that the Soviet Union needed to undergo. The new Bolshevik conception of children's visual culture, mainly in the form of books, featured avant-garde illustrations, which were popular with artists but not with the young audiences for which they were created. Bolsheviks attacked fairy tales for their bourgeois origins, lack of educational content, and failure to engage with contemporary political and scientific developments.<sup>17</sup> Anthropomorphic animals and magical creatures did nothing to prepare children for the technological twentieth century.

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<sup>15</sup> Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost", p. 383-386. These benefits may help explain Günther's observation that an emphasis on the organicity of the nation is characteristic of totalitarian regimes in general, present both in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. However, the differences in the two systems, including the official anti-racism of the Soviet Union, should be acknowledged.

<sup>16</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 73-74.



The end of the first Five Year Plan in 1932 coincided with an official de-emphasis of positivism and statistics, and a metaphysical shift from a “horizontal, undifferentiated ordering of reality to a vertical, hierarchical ordering.”<sup>18</sup> The notion of a Great Family with Stalin at its head replaced the earlier egalitarianism. Great achievements – qualitative, not quantitative in their scope – as well as great heroes became central to Soviet ideology. In this atmosphere, writers drew analogies between modern-day heroes and folk heroes (*bogatyri*) and described their power as a natural, and not a technological force.<sup>19</sup>

In 1934, the Soviet Writers’ Union held its first Congress, where party cultural authority Andrei Zhdanov defined the future direction of Soviet art and literature by proclaiming the method of Socialist Realism. According to Katerina Clark, Socialist Realism served as the dominant method of Soviet literature at least from the time of the Congress, although Socialist Realist writers drew upon works dating from the 1920s and earlier as exemplary models. The most concise definition of Socialist Realism comes from Zhdanov’s own formulation at the Congress, where he described it as “a combination of the most matter-of-fact, everyday reality with the most heroic prospects.”<sup>20</sup> In other words: “the novel depicts ‘what is’ (i.e., it uses the realist mode) / the novel depicts ‘what ought to be’ (i.e., it idealizes reality, the utopian or mythic mode).”<sup>21</sup> The central narrative of the Socialist Realist work was the young protagonist’s resolution of what Clark calls the “spontaneity/consciousness

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<sup>18</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137-140. This ideological change was neither explicitly announced nor entirely systematic. For an example of the difficulties faced by Soviet writers and intellectuals struggling to grasp the contours of the new ideology as it was developing, see A. M. Dubrovsky, “Chronicle of a Poet’s Downfall: Dem’ian Bednyi, Russian History, and The Epic Heroes,” in *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, ed. Kevin Platt and David Brandenberger (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 77-98. Bednyi was a prominent poet whose “work was seen as the party line set to verse” throughout the 1920s and early 1930s (p. 79). Bednyi disastrously miscalculated the direction of official ideology when he composed the farcical 1936 play *The Epic Heroes*, in which he mocked the heroes of the Russian folk epics. The result was Bednyi’s expulsion from the Party and the Writers’ Union. He died in obscurity in 1945.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

dialectic.”<sup>22</sup> In the course of this process, the young protagonist received guidance from a mentor who helped him assert control over his innate, willful, and enthusiastic – but nonetheless positive – tendencies, and, by undergoing a rite of passage, transform himself into a “conscious” upholder of the Soviet cause, usually as a member of the Communist Party. This mixture of realism and mythical stylization arose from Zhdanov’s requirement that Socialist Realist narrative combine elements of the present reality with the utopian vision of the future.<sup>23</sup> Since National Bolshevism itself did not provide an ideologically correct master plot for writers and directors, the Socialist Realist model served as a set of unambiguous instructions for rendering National Bolshevik ideology in narrative form.

During the First Writers’ Congress, the writer Maksim Gor’kii gave a speech about Soviet literature in which he defended folklore as an expression of early materialist thought and social critique, as well as an exemplary demonstration of positivity and optimism.<sup>24</sup> This was a timely vindication of traditional stories. The new Stalinist rhetoric of heroic achievements and qualitative change dovetailed easily with the magical feats of folklore, which underwent a revival, first in the form of state-supported bards, and later in novels that incorporated folk imagery and language in describing the heroes of Socialist Realism.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, the fairy tale represented a natural convergence of Socialist Realism’s language of heroic feats and National Bolshevism’s promotion of national tradition.

The reemergence of folk themes in literature soon crossed over into cinema, where Rou released his first fairy tale film, *The Magic Fish*, in 1938.<sup>26</sup> This was followed in 1939

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<sup>22</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 16-17, 168.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Maksim Gor’kii, “Soviet Literature,” *Soviet Writers’ Congress, 1934*, Eds. Maksim Gorky and H. G. Scott (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), pp. 25-69, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2004, accessed 24 June 2008, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1934/soviet-literature.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 147-151.

<sup>26</sup> Aleksandr Rou, *Po shchuch'emu veleniiu* (Soiuzdetfil'm, 1938).

by his *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, and then by increasing numbers of films, both by Rou and other directors such as Aleksandr Ptushko and Vladimir Nemoliaev.

In this atmosphere, the fairy tale film had to articulate the National Bolshevik ideology and reproduce the archetypal form of the Socialist Realist text, all while maintaining the structural conventions of fairy tale. Concerning the latter, Vladimir Propp observed that all folktales<sup>27</sup> were structured around a limited number of actions or events, which he termed *functions*: “Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale. [...] The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.”<sup>28</sup> Not all folktales included all functions, but all the functions that were present in a given folktale occurred in the same sequence.<sup>29</sup> Propp identified several dozen functions, but a typical folktale included (1) a preparatory section, in which an initial villainy was followed by (2) a “connective incident,” which put the hero on the path to confronting the villain, (3) the hero’s departure from home, (4) his or her contact with a donor, an agent who would transfer to the hero some magical object that was necessary for the quest, (5) the hero’s journey or conveyance to a “designated place,” (6) the hero’s struggle with and victory over the villain, (7) undoing of the initial villainy, and finally, (8) the return of the hero, which could be followed by further challenges or culminate in a wedding.<sup>30</sup>

As a combination of Socialist Realist and folkloric elements, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* exemplifies the cultural turn of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s, when heroism and

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Haney, *An Introduction to the Russian Folktale* (Armonk, New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). Haney discusses the varieties of Russian folktales, or *narodnye skazki*. Among these is the category that he terms *wondertales*, which are contrasted with humorous tales of everyday life, animal tales, and others. Propp’s discussion of folktale morphology seems to refer specifically to the wondertale, as Haney notes (p. 12).

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Trans. Laurence Scott, Ed. Louis A. Wagner, 2nd ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-155.

folk-mindedness began to replace scientism and class-consciousness as the central tenets of state ideology. It is a work that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, when folklore represented backwardness and its promotion would have been tantamount to political reaction. The fairy tale film also outlived Stalin; Rou, for example, made his last film, *The Golden Horns*, in 1972,<sup>31</sup> and the tradition of fairy tale adaptations is very much alive in Russia today.<sup>32</sup>

The genre of fairy tale film is thus ideally situated to offer insights into the nature of National Bolshevism and its evolution over time. However, before taking a closer look at the salient features of two representative films, it is necessary to examine the concept of genre itself. In the broadest sense, genre is a set of conventions that maximize economy in storytelling. These conventions, although consistent enough to be recognizable by audiences, are also flexible enough to adapt to changing cultural values. Genre, in other words, is always changing as films build upon existing conventions and adapt to changing cultural conditions.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, as Barry Grant notes, genre films reveal more about the time in which they are made than about the time in which they are set: “genre movies may be understood as secular stories that seek to address and sometimes seemingly resolve our problems and dilemmas, some specifically historical and others more deeply rooted in our collective psyches.”<sup>34</sup> The story world of the genre film is a reflection of the present in which it is produced. Genre is therefore a constantly changing set of conventions, a flexible

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<sup>31</sup> Aleksandr Rou, *Zolotyie roga* (Gor'kii Film Studio, 1972).

<sup>32</sup> Examples of recent films illustrating continued interest in folk culture and epic heroes in particular include the Melnitsa Studio trilogy: *Alesha Popovich and Tugarin the Serpent* (Konstantin Bronzit, 2004), *Dobrynia Nikitich and the Dragon* (Il'ia Maksimov, 2006), and *Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber* (Vladimir Toropchin, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*, Short Cuts (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 10. See also Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Grant, *Film Genre*, p. 29.

syntax of images and narrative devices that evolves in accordance with the demands of the time.

Genre narratives are also never pure; they are hybrids of various influences.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Soviet fairy tale films, to varying degrees and depending on the time when they were created, incorporated the requirements of Socialist Realist texts, the iconography and narrative structure of folktales, and the prescribed characteristics of a new and purely socialist cinema. This syntactic flexibility permitted fairy tale films to express such varying cultural values as the militaristic heroism of the Stalin period and the concern with morality and behavior characteristic of the Khrushchev era.

On a final note, it should be made clear that this study does not claim that Rou or other figures involved in the cultures of the Stalin era and the Thaw were necessarily aware of the tropes and symbols that I identify in their works, or that they saw their work in the context of a project akin to National Bolshevism. Similarly, in those cases when evidence shows that they did consciously seek to express what they saw as the values of the time, they may have conceived of these values differently than they appear before the student of Soviet ideology today. Stephen Bittner observes in the introduction to *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw* that “the thaw that the intelligentsia experienced differed in important ways from the thaw it later remembered.”<sup>36</sup> This study is limited by the distortions of hindsight that separate it and its author from the immediate, lived experience of the period under investigation.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 23. See also Janet Staiger, “Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History,” in *Film Genre Reader 3*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 185-199.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 2.

**Chapter One. *Vasilisa the Beautiful: The Making of a National Bolshevik Film Genre***

This chapter examines the way in which *Vasilisa the Beautiful*<sup>37</sup> manifests the features of Socialist Realist narrative and the traditional fairy tale, and how these conventions, together with the film's epic introductory episode, contribute to its primary aim: the articulation of the central principles of National Bolshevism. The hero's classically Socialist Realist progression from an inherently positive, but undisciplined, youth into a serious and ideologically conscious member of the socio-political hierarchy mirrors the evolution of the Soviet citizen from an unenlightened individual into a member of the people who is subordinate to the collective interest, as articulated by the leader – the *vozhd'*.<sup>38</sup> This is the essential significance of *Vasilisa the Beautiful's* simple maturation plot, in which the young protagonist Ivan (Sergei Stoliarov) evolves from a provincial boy into a defender of the Russian land. The fairy tale setting grounds this maturation plot in national tradition while introducing young audience members to National Bolshevik values. These two elements – the ideological maturation plot, which communicates the National Bolshevik values through the form of Socialist Realist narrative, and fairy tale as a representative product of the new folk-mindedness – combine to make *Vasilisa the Beautiful* an ideal genre vehicle for National Bolshevik ideology. Finally, by communicating the ideology of the contemporary Soviet state through a story set in the remote time of the epic past, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* unifies the past and the present, linking the modern state and its demands on the citizen-filmgoer to the alleged organic<sup>39</sup> wholeness and naturalness of Russian folk tradition.

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<sup>37</sup> Aleksandr Rou, *Vasilisa Prekrasnaya* (Soiuzdetfil'm, 1939).

<sup>38</sup> Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost'," p. 377; The *vozhd'* (chief) is the masculine counterpart of the feminine land – the *mat'-rodina*. From this pairing, the Stalinist Great Family is born.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 383. The totalitarian regimes of Nazi German and the Soviet Union emphasized the "organicity" and "wholeness" of their cultures, and, by extension, the natural and historically determined legitimacy of their respective regimes: "brosaetsia v glaza to, chto v oboikh variantakh totalitarizma poniatie naroda sviazano s predstavleniiami ob organichnosti i tselnosti."

Finally, Rou's *Vasilisa the Beautiful* establishes not only the narrative conventions of the National Bolshevik fairy tale film, but also the key elements of the genre's visual language: its mise-en-scène, editing, and shot properties.

### *I. Narrative Structure of the National Bolshevik Fairy Tale Film*

In his 1935 book *Cinematography for the Millions*, Boris Shumiatskii, head of the Soviet film industry, charged Soviet filmmakers with the creation of new genres that would communicate Soviet ideology to the masses while also providing “a lively, cheerful spectacle” for filmgoers.<sup>40</sup> Avant-garde directors of the 1920s had communicated their ideological content through editing techniques such as montage. Such an approach demanded active interpretation on the part of the audience and failed to engage ordinary viewers. With *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Rou successfully fulfilled both of Shumiatskii's requirements by structuring a quasi-folkloric nationalist fairy tale film around a Socialist Realist narrative. Popular with Soviet audiences, the film communicated the key themes of folk-mindedness: membership in and service to the Russian nation, the ancient historical roots of Russian culture, and the greatness of the Russian land.

Socialist Realism provided a method for translating the message of *narodnost'* into narrative form. *Vasilisa the Beautiful* opens with a conflicted portrayal of ancient Russian life both as idyllic *Gemeinschaft*<sup>41</sup> and as a world of poverty and backwardness. In the utopian transformation that must take place, the former will be preserved, while the latter will

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<sup>40</sup>Boris Shumiatskii, *Kinematografiia millionov* (Moscow: Kinofotoizdat, 1935), p. 247.

<sup>41</sup> See Günther, “Totalitarnaia narodnost',” p. 383 and Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 107. The term *Gemeinschaft*, describing an organic, natural form of society, originated in the work of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who contrasted this with *Gesellschaft* – a contrived, unnatural form of association based on intellectual or economic ties. In Marxist terms, *Gemeinschaft* describes the economic relations of the pre-capitalist world; its re-establishment is the utopian aim of the class struggle.

be overcome. The protagonist Ivan is a naïve boy, his loyalties lying with his father (Georgii Milliar) and his older brothers, his horizons bounded by the little village and the friendly Russian forest. His demeanor in these early scenes is carefree, and he remains totally ignorant of higher aims as he laughs and jokes with his brothers. He is a spontaneous youth on the threshold of ideological maturation.

As part of his characteristically childish behavior, Ivan makes mistakes and requires guidance. In fact, his early impulsiveness motivates his betrothal to Vasilisa (Valentina Sorogozhskaia). At the beginning of the film, home life for Ivan, his brothers, and his father is riven with problems. The father cannot take care of his children, as he demonstrates by spilling their food on the floor, failing utterly to prepare their meal. The solution is for the two older brothers to find wives who will be able to take care of the household. The father instructs them to launch arrows into the distance, which will guide them to their future brides. Ivan impetuously does the same without his father's permission. When his unaimed arrow lands in a swamp, Ivan is compelled to take as his bride the frog that will later reveal itself to be the beautiful Vasilisa.

The arrows of the older brothers land on the estates of a merchant's daughter and a noblewoman. When the two women arrive at the farm, the father orders them to perform chores while the men are away in the fields. In a traditional presentation of class enemies – a reminder of Brandenberger's point that Stalinism remained "socialist in content" beneath its nationalist form<sup>42</sup> – the mendacious women refuse to do their share of work. Moreover, they function as causal agents of misfortune: when Vasilisa emerges from her frog skin as a beautiful woman, the brides-to-be squabble over the skin and destroy it, thereby violating the

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<sup>42</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 111.



spell cast on Vasilisa and summoning the dragon Zmei Gorynych, who kidnaps her.<sup>43</sup> When the men return from the fields, Vasilisa reveals that without the refuge of her amphibian form, she must now return to the domain of the serpent Zmei Gorynych and become his wife. Here Ivan vows to rescue her, defying his father's defeatist remark that a terrible fate has befallen him. This is a complicated moment in the film. On the one hand, Ivan is defying fate – getting ready to do the impossible. On the other, he is disregarding his father's wisdom – defying the authority of his elder. The apparent contradiction finds resolution in the comical nature of the father. His failure as head of the household delegitimizes him, giving Ivan space to maneuver against the father's judgment. Advertently or not, this adds a slight progressive element to the plot – the son can exceed the knowledge and achievements of the peasant father.

As he embarks upon his quest to recover his promised wife, Ivan encounters the Russian land and the wisdom of the Russian people, as represented by a blacksmith who gives him advice and tells him how to find the sword he needs for his mission. Not only does this first helper fulfill the traditional fairy tale function of a donor, but he also functions as an ideological mentor for spontaneous Ivan. As a proto-proletarian and member of the Russian peasantry, the blacksmith is an ideal source of counsel for Ivan.

The film reaches its climax when Ivan fights Zmei Gorynych, each of whose three heads attacks the hero with a natural element – wind, water, and finally, fire. The dragon's defeat at Ivan's hands thus acquires the significance of an allegorical victory of man over nature, a common theme of Socialist Realism. At the same time, Ivan's victory over the dragon, a traditional enemy from Russian folklore (and therefore the enemy of the whole

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<sup>43</sup> In the folktale which forms much of the plot of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Ivan is the one who destroys Vasilisa's frog skin. See "The Frog Princess" in Aleksandr Afanas'ev, *Russian Fairy Tales*, Trans. Robert Guterman (New York: Pantheon, 1976), pp. 119-123.

Russian people), establishes his new identity as a defender of Russia against powerful external threats, linking the conquest-of-nature theme of Socialist Realism with the statist and nationalistic themes of National Bolshevism. The quest to save Vasilisa and its culminating struggle function as a rite of passage, from which the young hero emerges stern, serious, and determined.<sup>44</sup>

In the course of his journey, Ivan becomes acquainted with the Russian land and with the boundaries of that land. The magical world in which Zmei Gorynych and his lackey Baba Iaga (Georgii Milliar) held Vasilisa prisoner is a forbidding forest of tall, dark trees, which contrast powerfully with the white birches of Russia. In the end, Ivan intends to return to the epic Russian land (a final shot of vast Russian expanses) instead of his humble village. In the struggle with Russia's enemies set in the magic forest evoking the landscapes of German expressionist cinema, the protagonist defined the borders of Russia and established his identity as the defender of his epic motherland. Ivan has done his duty as a soldier and now returns to the work of building the nation.<sup>45</sup> Having transfigured his regionally-oriented identity into national consciousness, Ivan stands ready to defend the newly defined Russia against external threats.<sup>46</sup> The horizon of infinite possibilities stretches out before the hero and his bride-to-be, symbolizing the return to *Gemeinschaft* following the struggle.

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<sup>44</sup> These are archetypal characteristics of a hero who has become "conscious." See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 60-63.

<sup>45</sup> In traditional Socialist Realist narratives, the newly conscious hero joins the party hierarchy. In the stateless world of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Ivan becomes a defender of the nation, which, in National Bolshevism is organically linked with the state (See Günther, pp.387: "Narod, kak nerashchlennoe, monolitnoe tseloe, v samoponimanii totalitarnoi kul'tury stal komplementarnym poniatiem k vozhdii.").

<sup>46</sup> Brandenberger claims that the Soviet Union inherited a population with a weak sense of national identity. Like the subjects of the Russian Empire, Soviet citizens in its early years would have regarded themselves primarily as inhabitants of a certain region, and not as members of a nation or a nation-state. A strong sense of national identity among the people would be necessary if the government was to mobilize them for reform and development on a national scale: hence the nationalistic focus of National Bolshevism. See *National Bolshevism*, pp. 10-24.

## II. Vasilisa the Beautiful: *The Production of the Stalinist Fairy Tale*

In a 1940 discussion of the *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, one of the writers of the screenplay, Galina Vladychina, explained that the production team's intention was not so much to adapt existing fairy tales to film as it was to create a new fairy tale relevant to the times: "Our goal was not to use any particular tales, but to create on the basis of Russian folklore a new tale, which would embody certain ideas closer to our time."<sup>47</sup>

That said, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* derives much of its plot from "The Frog Princess," although Rou replaced the royal family of that story with the impoverished peasants found in the film. *Vasilisa the Beautiful* shares its name with another Russian folktale, but takes almost nothing from the plot.<sup>48</sup> In the eponymous story, an independent and virtuous daughter, protected by the blessing of her dead mother, performs chores for a dangerous but fundamentally positive Baba Iaga. The witch rewards her with the light that her evil stepmother sent her to acquire.<sup>49</sup>

As a fairy tale film, Rou's *Vasilisa the Beautiful* features the characteristic functions identified by Propp.<sup>50</sup> After an extended preparatory section, the initial villainy occurs when Zmei Gorynych kidnaps Vasilisa. Ivan departs and meets a blacksmith along the way, who tells Ivan how to acquire the key to the lock that guards a legendary dragon-slaying sword. This is the first of three magic helpers, which Ivan encounters during his journey into the

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<sup>47</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274. The original reads: "Nashei tseliu ne bylo ispol'zovat' voobshche skazki kakie-to, a sozdat' na materiale russkogo fol'klora novuiu skazku, kotorai voploshchiala by kakie-to idei, bolee blizkie k nashemu vremeni." (p. 9).

<sup>48</sup> The original title of the screenplay for *Vasilisa the Beautiful* was *The Tale of Ivanushka and Vasilisa the Beautiful*. See K. M. Anderson et al., eds., *Kremlevskii kinoteatr 1928-1953: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), pp. 567-569. Listed in the Politburo's production plan for 1939-1941 is a film called *The Tale of Ivan the Peasant Son and Vasilisa the Beautiful*.

<sup>49</sup> I am grateful to Helena Goscilo for directing me to her talk "Russian Fairy Tales: Ideological Twists and Turns," *Literature on Screen, 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference, Atlanta, September 2007*. Her paper discusses the adaptation of Russian fairy tales for Soviet films, including Rou's.

<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Lawrence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968) pp. 149-155.

magic world. Each is more dangerous than the one before it, just as the land through which Ivan journeys grows ever more hostile. Following the friendly blacksmith, Ivan subdues a bear, which will later save him from drowning, and whose cubs help him to acquire the key. The third helper, a gigantic spider, ensnares Ivan in its web and asks him riddles, which he must answer on pain of death before the spider will give him the sword. The dragon-slaying weapon in hand, Ivan finds himself instantaneously transformed into a mighty *bogatyř* – Russian folk hero – complete with horse and armor (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Ivan transformed into an epic hero

He then rides into combat with Zmei Gorynych, weathers the monster's elemental attacks, and severs its three heads.

Meanwhile, Vasilisa shows unexpected autonomy and agency by escaping from Baba Iaga. Parallel to Ivan's epic battle with the dragon, Vasilisa achieves her own, albeit less impressive, victory over Baba Iaga, thereby alleging the equality of genders, which was an indispensable element of the Soviet utopia. Once she has cast the old witch into a pot of boiling water, Vasilisa finds Ivan, and they prepare to return to Mother Russia. The reunion of Ivan and Vasilisa undoes the major villainy, and the final function occurs with the

couple's implied return to the Russian land. The foreshadowed wedding brings the film to a close in accordance with fairy tale convention.

With its fairy tale narrative structure, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* makes a claim to origins in the Russian epic past. In fact, the film's introductory episode reinforces the image of the film as a glimpse into ancient history. Rou opens *Vasilisa the Beautiful* with a shot of three elders playing *gusli* – the traditional instrument of Russian folk singers – and singing for the viewers. In Old Russia, such bards usually performed epic songs for the prince and his warriors. In the Stalinist film, the introduction set the general epic tone of the picture, following which Rou combined elements of Socialist Realist and fairy tale narratives. In the words of the folk singers, this narrative structure meant that viewers were about to witness “*pravda narodnaia*” (the people's truth). Not surprisingly, the viewers noticed the ideological significance of the introduction, and during the film's discussion in the House of Journalists in May 1940, they suggested that the film should have ended with another shot of the epic bards, thus providing a narrative frame to the story of Ivan's and Vasilisa's service to Russian land: “It seems to me,” opines a newspaper correspondent, “that this [the singing bards] should have closed the picture as well: the *gusli* players finish their song [. . . the way it is now, . . .] [i]t turns out that the three *gusli* players are neither here nor there.”<sup>51</sup>

### *III. Mise-en-scène: From Comic to Epic in Acting and Setting*

Rou's *Vasilisa the Beautiful* successfully articulated the National Bolshevik message in an entertaining and commercially successful form. In accordance with Shumiatskii's prescriptions for the new “cinema for millions,” the director made humor the key attraction

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<sup>51</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274. The original text reads: “Mne kazhetsia, chto etim dolzhna byla by i okanhivat'sia kartina: gusliary dopevaiut svoiu pesniu. A pochemu to kartina okanchivaetsia poezdnoi na kone. Poluchaetsia, chto 3 gusliara ni k selu ni k gorodu.” (pp. 10-11).

of the film's first part and by doing so brought 19 million viewers to Soviet movie theaters, thus making *Vasilisa the Beautiful* the third most attended film of 1940.<sup>52</sup> Rou incorporated comic scenes into the film primarily through two elements of its *mise-en-scène*: acting and setting. First, the comic acting of the film's villains – representatives of enemy classes – contrasts with the epic acting of its positive heroes. Second, the opposition between clownish villains and epic heroes finds a parallel in the dominant opposition defining the film's setting – the opposition between private and public space.

*Vasilisa the Beautiful* carefully navigates the problematic of humor in Stalinist culture. Although Boris Shumiatskii expounded on the necessity of a purely Soviet comedy in his *Cinematography for the Millions*, the nature of humor, inevitably subversive and contrary to the seriousness of Socialist Realism and folk-minded culture, meant that subjects appropriate for laughter were highly restricted in the culture of the 1930s. As Richard Taylor formulated the problem, “the comedy film took neither itself nor its subject matter too seriously. It was often derided as flippant, whereas it was also essentially subversive.”<sup>53</sup> Satire had constituted an important part of the revolutionary culture of the early 1920s, when writers such as Vladimir Maiakovskii, Mikhail Bulgakov, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Nikolai Erdman had been able to publish social and political critique with relative freedom.<sup>54</sup> Toward the end of the decade, however, disagreements began to arise among literary critics about the appropriateness of satire in the new Soviet society. By the 1930s, cultural authorities had relegated comic cinema to the promotion of positivity and optimism; the only appropriate use

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<sup>52</sup> Sergei Kudriavtsev, “Otechestvennye fil'my v sovetskom kinoprokate, chast' 7, <<http://kinanet.livejournal.com/25331.html#cutid1>>.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Taylor, “A 'Cinema for the Millions': Soviet Socialist Realism and the Problem of Film Comedy,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 3 (1983): 454.

<sup>54</sup> Jochen-Ulrich Peters, “Satire under Stalinism: Zoshchenko's *Golubaya Kniga* and M. Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*,” *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, Ed. Hans Günther (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), pp. 210-226.

of satire was to “impugn and expose the external and internal class enemy, and thus to contribute both to the education and to the improvement of the new Socialist man.”<sup>55</sup> In this atmosphere, it was essential that a film not go too far in its satire.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* only satirizes those characters who are actual or potential enemies of the nation.

Problematic and villainous characters in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* appear comical, grotesque, and animalistic. The aspiring wives of Ivan’s older brothers are messy, squabbling fools, their faces marred by blemishes, their behavior clumsy and self-defeating. The comical old father tumbles under a fence and chases goats and chickens from his vegetable patch as if he were an animal himself. The two brothers, neutral characters overall, are physically clumsy – the one attenuated and the other bulbous, so that each appears all the more ridiculous as the counterpart of the other. In contrast to his siblings, Ivan appears as the archetypal male figure. These traits establish a sort of spectrum, where the positive characters represent healthy, organic, and national characteristics, while the negative characters are degenerate, contrived, and associated with foreignness.<sup>57</sup>

Satire appears only in the early scenes of the film, its main targets being the two wealthy wives-to-be and the father. The wives-to-be are satirized as class enemies, while the peasant father is mocked as a representative of the backward, provincial peasant class who is busy mismanaging his household instead of thinking about service to Great Russian land as a whole. In the language of National Bolshevism, Soviet Society was a Great Family.<sup>58</sup> As the head of a biological family, the father could have been a fundamentally positive character, an

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<sup>55</sup> Peters, “Satire Under Stalinism,” p. 215.

<sup>56</sup> Aleksandr Medvedkin, *Schast'e* (Moskinokombinat, 1934) is an example of a film that went too far. The intractable backwardness of its peasant protagonist manages to taint the entire Soviet experiment and casts doubt on the idea that bedraggled peasants could ever be made into modern socialists.

<sup>57</sup> See Günther, “Totalitarnaia narodnost’,” pp. 384-386 for further discussion of the opposition between the ‘healthy,’ national cultures in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia and the degenerate and diseased culture of the West.

<sup>58</sup> Günther, “Totalitarnaia narodnost’,” p. 377.

ideological mentor to his sons. However, it is the father's incompetence as a paterfamilias, as well as his inability to articulate an identity beyond the local, that motivates all the plot elements that follow. An epic role for the father would preclude incompetence insofar as all that belongs to the epic corresponds to great achievements, and so it is necessary for the film's plot that he be kept out of the epic realm.<sup>59</sup> According to Bakhtin, "laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, [...] making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it."<sup>60</sup> Humor is the ideal instrument for this, and the father's backward peasant mentality makes him a legitimate target for dethroning laughter, despite his status as the future epic hero's father.

Ivan's older brothers are subjected to relatively mild mockery, which reproduces the folktale convention in which the older, supposedly more competent brothers discredit themselves and make room for the success of the youngest brother, who manages to be wise despite his comic foolishness.<sup>61</sup> Ivan in the film is not the ambiguous fool of folk tradition, however. Early scenes contrasting Ivan's poise with his brothers' clumsiness makes clear his superiority to them. His heroic bearing indicates that he has heroic potential latent within him. All the same, the immature Ivan does degrade himself, however slightly, by calling to his brothers and ambushing them as they come looking for him. This is the only moment in the film when Ivan does anything humorous – although he demonstrates his superiority over his brothers even here by tricking them – and this use of humor to suggest his early immaturity also indicates the valuation accorded to humor in the film as a whole. The progressive structure of the narrative – whereby Ivan matures into a hero over the course of

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<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 3-40, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1989), 102-111.



the plot – makes this early lapse necessary. Ivan only becomes a *bogatyr*’ – an epic hero – in the course of his struggle and combat. When he departs from his village, he leaves behind the world of pettiness and humor.

Contrasted with the satirized, clumsy, exaggerated behavior of the negative characters, the positive characters in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* display the self-assuredness and infallibility of epic heroes. The epic world, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is characterized by the absolute separation between the epic past and the world of the audience: the past is fixed, immutable, closed to unofficial interpretation, and free from all the indeterminacy of the present.<sup>62</sup> In the epic past, “everything is good: all the really good things (i.e., the ‘first’ things) occur *only* in this past.”<sup>63</sup> Like the Socialist Realist master narrative, the epic brooks no humor or ambiguity. Consequently, the acting style and psychological portraiture of the positive characters in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* are entirely free of comic effects. Their speech is a literary imitation of folk language, delivered with the authority of tradition. They move slowly, rarely deviating from the monumental poses of Socialist Realist sculpture (fig. 2).



**Figure 2. Statue of Yuri Dolgoruki, the legendary founder of the city, in Moscow (Source: Wikipedia.org)**

<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” pp. 13-16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Even in combat or labor, their movement is slow and dignified. When he learns of Vasilisa's inevitable departure, Ivan casts himself onto the ground in a theatrical gesture of exaggerated and stylized grief (fig. 3).



**Figure 3. Ivan grieving at Vasilisa's abduction**

Except for this, his display of emotion is minimal – a characteristic of Vasilisa as well.

The villains that Ivan encounters in the magic forest during the film's second half receive the same serious portrayal as the positive epic characters. Baba Iaga is horrifying rather than comical in her simultaneously animalistic and androgynous appearance (fig. 4).



**Figure 4. Stooped, androgynous Baba Iaga**

She stoops to the ground as she scurries, leaps over logs in the manner of a scary ape, tumbles, and sniffs the ground like a dog when she detects the presence of enemies. It is significant that a man plays her part,<sup>64</sup> and that her resultant androgyny further distinguishes her from archetypically masculine Ivan and feminine Vasilisa.

Humor is incompatible with the epic world. “It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance,” contends Bakhtin.<sup>65</sup> This is the reason why Baba Iaga and Zmei Gorynych, despite being the most villainous characters, exhibit none of the clownish awkwardness that the film’s mise-en-scène associates with internal social villainy. By the time that Baba Iaga appears in the film, the setting and acting are unequivocally epic. To make her laughable would destroy the grandeur of Ivan’s victory.

Just as humor appears only in the early portion of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, its occurrence is confined to scenes of the home or other interior space. Over the course of the plot, a contrast emerges between interior space, on the one hand, and exterior space, on the other. The grandeur of Ivan’s journey through the majestic Russian land stands in opposition to his squalid village home.

Interior spaces are the domain of mendacity and deception, but also of incompetence, while public space is the arena for heroic labor and valiant combat. The moment that the merchant’s daughter and the noblewoman throw Vasilisa-the-frog out the window of the hut, she metamorphoses into Vasilisa-the-woman. While she is busy working outside, the suitors bring Vasilisa’s frog skin indoors and destroy it, thereby subjecting her to kidnapping by Zmei Gorynych. The old father, although apparently a competent farmer, cannot keep the

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<sup>64</sup> Georgii Milliar plays both Baba Iaga and Ivan’s father, as well as one of the epic singers from the film’s introductory episode.

<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” p. 26.

animals out of his vegetable patch. When he attempts to cook a meal for his sons, he spills it on the floor. The interior spaces outside of the village – the lair of Zmei Gorynych and Baba Iaga's hut – are prisons in which the villains confine Vasilisa, attempting to entice her with riches or bend her to their will. There is even a village parallel to Ivan's maturation: the older brothers attempt to assume the mantle of adults (by seeking wives), but instead of becoming men, they become victims of the manipulative upper classes.

Characters avoid private space to the degree that their roles are positive. Ivan never appears indoors over the course of the film. When the three brothers launch their arrows to find their wives, Ivan's is the only one that lands in the Russian forest, far from any household, while the arrows belonging to his brothers both land on the estates of wealthy families. Ivan's marriage to Vasilisa, who also never appears inside a building willingly, is thus legitimized by its complete separation from domestic space.

Public space – the Russian landscape – is the realm of great deeds. Scenes of nature frame the plot of the film. In the beginning, there is the Russian forest in which Ivan and his brothers reap the fruits of nature without straining their harmony with the land. While the brothers head for home with the animals Ivan has killed, he wanders in the woods. After the wife-finding interval, Ivan, his siblings, and his father depart their hovel to gather the harvest in the fields, singing happily as they walk and work. On the other hand, the rich women, whom the father instructs to perform chores in the meantime, are completely alienated from the land. Emerging from the hut to seize Vasilisa's frog skin, one of them trips over a pig. They proceed by clumsily skirting the edge of the hut, as if avoiding contact with the earth (fig. 5).



**Figure 5. The suitors emerge from the hut.**

Labor distinguishes the good characters from the bad. In the early hunting scene, Ivan displays the animals he has killed while his brothers look on, devouring a loaf of bread. The brothers then gather Ivan's game and take it home while he walks off into the woods. While the brothers sit in the cabin, waiting for their father to feed them, Ivan wanders through scenes of nature. However, the brothers redeem themselves partially when they depart with Ivan and their father to gather the harvest. The brothers' upper class suitors, on the other hand, squabble and refuse to do the chores assigned to them by the father. Vasilisa distinguishes herself from them by her eagerness to work outdoors. Her connection to the land is such that the wheat she has cut piles itself into stacks. As the most positive characters, Ivan and Vasilisa are the best laborers, in quantity and quality. The father and brothers, at least capable of improvement, do some work, but their incompetence limits their contributions. The irredeemably bad characters avoid work completely.

Nature in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* is not uniformly safe. The land in which Ivan seeks the key and encounters the first magical donor – the anthropomorphic bear – is still beautiful, but now more dangerous. This is a liminal space between Russia and the enchanted

“foreign” forest in which Zmei Gorynych holds Vasilisa captive. Thundering rapids almost spell Ivan’s doom when Baba Iaga, who has power in this liminal region, causes his tree bridge to collapse. But nature itself comes to Ivan’s aid in the form of the very same bear, which has become Ivan’s companion after he initially subdued it. Beyond this land lies the magical forest itself – that is, the only part of the world that is totally outside of Russia – and here nature is dark and forbidding. This is the realm of the epic warrior’s struggle, the place where Ivan the peasant youth becomes Ivan the hero. For the first time, nature becomes Ivan’s enemy as he stumbles over twisted roots. It attains the peak of its malevolence in the form of Zmei Gorynych, as the manifestation of hostile nature. The end of the film shows a sunrise over the vast Russian land, reflecting the promise that lies in Ivan’s and Vasilisa’s return to Russia.

To depict the hostile world beyond the Russian land, Rou utilized techniques inspired by the cinema of Weimar Republic. The jagged forms of the enchanted forest’s mise-en-scène recall German expressionist cinema of the 1920s (figs. 6-7).



**Figure 6.** The enchanted forest in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*



Figure 7. Expressionist mise-en-scène in *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920)

Like in Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*,<sup>66</sup> the border between the setting and the characters is blurred. The long necks of Zmei Gorynych's head evoke the horrifying trunks and brunches of the magic forest's trees. Rou even consciously modeled his Zmei Gorynych on the dragon from Fritz Lang's epic 1924 picture *Die Nibelungen*.<sup>67</sup> The difference was that the Soviet dragon was three times the size of the German beast and had three times the heads: "I should say that this dragon was three or four times the size of the dragon that was used in the German picture *Die Nibelungen*, and that one was one-headed," proudly reports the actor Lev Potemkin, who played the second brother, Agafon.<sup>68</sup> The superficial similarity between the expressive mise-en-scène of Weimar cinema and the fairy tale cinema of the Stalin era, however, conceals fundamental differences between the two cinematic traditions. While Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* used expressive mise-en-scène to portray a character's disturbed inner world, Rou's *Vasilisa the Beautiful* contains absolutely no examination of characters' internal states. The heroes and villains of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*

<sup>66</sup> Robert Wiene, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Goldwyn Distributing Company, 1920).

<sup>67</sup> Fritz Lang, *Die Nibelungen* (Decla-Bioscop-Ufa, 1924).

<sup>68</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274. The original reads: "Nado skazat', chto etot Zmei raza v 3-4 bol'she drakona, kotoryi byl v nemetskoj kartine "Nibellungi," tot byl odnogolovyi." (p. 6).

exhibit a marked lack of interiority. Instead, the expressive *mise-en-scène* identifies the ideologically hostile world of the enemies of the Russian land. This expressive *mise-en-scène* would become even more useful for propaganda purposes in Rou's 1944 picture *Koshchei-the-Deathless*,<sup>69</sup> where expressive *mise-en-scène* represented the world of the arch-villain and his army, the caricatured representation evoking simultaneously the Nazis and Teutonic knights.

The absence of interiority and individual motivation in the characters of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* reveals the difference between the narrative stance of Soviet fantastic cinema and that of German Expressionism. For example, Ivan does not engage in debate with himself about the feasibility of rescuing Vasilisa, and she, for her part, is never even tempted by Zmei Groynych's offer of riches. Those emotions that are appropriate to the occasion are communicated through expressive gestures. Nothing is concealed because there is no room for interiority in Ivan's and Vasilisa's epic world: "by its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation."<sup>70</sup> In the finalized epic world of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, just as in Stalinist culture, introspection harbors the possibility of concealment and conspiracy. In the logic of *narodnost'*, the ideal Soviet citizen should exhibit a close correspondence between his or her inner and outer lives. In this conception, the individual is not so much a subject radically isolated from the objective world, but part of an organic community – the *narod*, the Great Family, or, as Günther characterizes it, an "undifferentiated, monolithic whole."<sup>71</sup> As such, interiority is a deviation from wholeness,

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<sup>69</sup> Aleksandr Rou, *Kashchei Bessmertnyi* (Soiuzdetfil'm, 1944).

<sup>70</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost'," p. 387. The original reads "neraschlennoe, *monolitnoe tseloe*."



an escape into concealed individuality – in a way, a deception, and inherently suspicious because of its opacity.

Although the viewer has minimal insight into the emotional states of Ivan and Vasilisa, the plot is focused almost entirely on their actions, and one or both appear in virtually every scene. However, in contrast to Hollywood cinema, the protagonists play a limited causal role in the action. A force akin to fate or national character is the main causal agent in the film. Ivan first meets Vasilisa because the human-centered natural law of the land guides a man's arrow to his predestined wife. Although he must defy his father to go after Zmei Gorynych, the means of Ivan's victory are encoded in the wisdom of the people and the treasures of the land. Ivan is only a hero insofar as he gathers this latent power and turns it into a devastating weapon against the enemy of the people. In their final battle, Zmei Gorynych mocks Ivan's humble origins. Having decapitated the monster, Ivan asserts his Russian peasant pride.

*Vasilisa the Beautiful* simultaneously transports its viewers into the Russian folk past and brings its story, complete with its Socialist Realist undertones, out of the folk past and into the present. This linkage of discrete epochs serves to establish the completeness of Russian/Soviet culture in space and time. It is important to note, however, that the appearance of National Bolshevik ideology in the fairy tale world does not merely allow these elements to retroactively develop historical or cultural roots. The time of the fairy tale is precisely non-historical. The world of the fairy tale is located in what Mikhail Bakhtin called the epic past. The origins of National Bolshevism and of the Soviet state thus lie in a reality radically removed from the present and from the chain of historical events: "precisely because it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. [...]"

There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness , indecision, indeterminacy.”<sup>72</sup> At the same time, the medium of film allows the viewer to experience the epic past with the kind of immediacy impossible for the audience of a storyteller. While the ideology is separated off from the vicissitudes of history, the film viewers gain direct access to their own national epic past. The allegorical Socialist Realist elements of the film gain strength from the verisimilitude of the images in which they appear. The events of the plot become infused with the associations of contemporary audiences. In the terms of 1939, Ivan is a Red Army soldier defending the borders and the wealth of the USSR from the machinations of enemy powers.<sup>73</sup> The defeat of Zmei Gorynych is the annihilation of this threat, and the labor performed by the four men and Vasilisa signify the construction of socialism, and Ivan’s greatest achievement is his realization of his national identity, his apotheosis into service of the *narod*.

#### *IV. Editing and Cinematography: from Soviet Montage to narrative continuity*

Soviet directors and theorists of film in the 1920s were concerned with the development of a new, revolutionary cinema for the radically new Soviet society. Avant-garde filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov focused their efforts on developing their individual artistic styles, in which editing played a preeminent by conveying their ideological message to the audience. Ten years before the release of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Eisenstein discussed the dialectical nature of montage: “By what, then, is montage

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<sup>72</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is possible to see the menace of fascism in the figures of Zmei Gorynych and Baba Iaga who reside in a dark forest beyond the Russian border. However, these associations, if intended, were sufficiently deniable for censors to approve the film even after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1940. Sergei Eisenstein’s more overtly anti-German *Aleksandr Nevskii* (Mosfil’ m, 1938) was shelved until the Nazi invasion in 1941.

characterized and, consequently, its cell – the shot? [...] By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By Conflict. By Collision.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, the conflict between two scenes should motivate an interpretation that will reveal the implied deeper meaning.

The precepts of folk-mindedness, with its emphasis on the monolithic unity of the nation and with its privileging of everything natural and concrete over the contrived and abstract, tended to discourage the freedom of interpretation found in Soviet montage cinema of the 1920s. Consequently, the significance of editing and cinematography declined in Stalinist cinema. According to Josephine Woll, “[t]he primacy of montage yielded to a new emphasis on script, in part because scripts were easier to supervise, and throughout the 1930s and 1940s scenarios were privileged over other components of film-making.”<sup>75</sup> The cinematic component of a film became the mere execution of the screenplay: “the reduction of the cinema to a medium of conservation and translation meant in practice a disdain for film depiction and an assumption that they could not (and should not) have an independent semantics.”<sup>76</sup>

In terms of editing, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* differs drastically from the films of the Soviet montage movement. In place of the dialectical argument of 1920s Soviet montage, the editing in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* emphasizes narrative continuity, assuming an auxiliary function to the ideologically determined narrative. Techniques typical of Hollywood cinema, such as match on action and eyeline matching conceal editing while emphasizing the

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<sup>74</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Oksana Bulgakova, “Sovetskoe kino v poiskakh ‘obshchei modeli’,” p. 150. Quoted in Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*, trans. Sarah Young (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 5. A 1938 regulation by the Council of People’s Commissars prohibited filmmakers from changing even a single word without explicit permission from the Committee on Film Affairs. See V. I. Fomin and A. Deriabin, eds., “Ob uluchshenii organizatsii proizvodstva kinokartin (23 March 1938),” in *Letopis’ rossiiskogo kino 1930-1945* (Moscow: Materik, 2007), 548-549.

narrative. Takes tend to be long during slow scenes, but become faster during the most dramatic scenes, such as when the bear saves Ivan from drowning, or when Ivan battles the dragon. A strict hierarchy of characters and their ideological functions emerges from the frequent close-ups of Ivan and Vasilisa and the presentation of other characters through medium or long shots. That said, the editing in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* does communicate some ideologically significant aspects of the film despite its general inconspicuousness.

Some vestiges of earlier avant-garde techniques, however, do remain in the film. Associative editing, a common technique in the cinema of the 1920s, occurs once in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. A shot of abundant wheat follows immediately after one of Vasilisa's first appearances in human form, thereby associating her with the abundance of the Russian harvest. The association of Vasilisa with the land is not an isolated occurrence in National Bolshevik culture. According to Günther, Soviet culture of the 1930s adapted and incorporated pre-Christian Russian imagery of the productive, feminine earth into mass songs and film comedies that celebrated the fertility of the land.<sup>77</sup> This familiar symbol would have established another link between the film's epic past and the audience's Stalinist present.

Whereas Soviet films of the 1920s incorporated nondiegetic inserts and montage, thereby promoting the symbolic interpretation of onscreen events over reception of their immediate content, inconspicuous editing in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* enhances the film's claim of reality. By making cuts discrete and maintaining the temporal order of story events, the film encourages its viewers to see the magical events as natural, everyday phenomena. The magical transformations of Vasilisa from a frog into a beautiful woman and of Ivan the peasant into Ivan the epic hero, as well as Vasilisa's magically assisted labor, in which

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<sup>77</sup> Hans Günther, "Poiushchaia Rodina: Sovetskaia Massovaia pesnia kak vyrazhenie arkheta materi," *Voprosy Literaturny*, no. 4 (1997): 46-61.

sheaves of wheat gather themselves, all occur over the course of a single cut, by means of the stop motion editing. From the point of view of the audience, magical events are instantaneous. Although reality-defying, the magical changes and transformations appear as unassumingly as the most ordinary event. By analogy, qualitative changes are a matter of everyday life in the Soviet Reality to which *Vasilisa the Beautiful* implicitly refers.<sup>78</sup>

According to Rou, the scenes involving animals were the most time-consuming and difficult to film,<sup>79</sup> but the concealed editing of these scenes asserts their reality and the organicity of the story world. Careful match on action and eyeline matching create the illusion of animal actors interacting with the positive hero as his magic helpers. When Baba Iaga uses her magic to destroy the trunk bridging the rapids – a scene possibly borrowed from the 1936 Hollywood blockbuster *King Kong* – and Ivan is plunged into the water, the bears appear as a *deus ex machina* through the action of seamless editing to save him from imminent death.

#### *V: Sound in Vasilisa the Beautiful: Comic Noise Effects and Monologic Song*

Finally, the rise of the Soviet fairy tale film coincided with the advent of synchronized sound in Soviet cinema. Following initial debates about the role and consequences of sound technology in Soviet film, Stalinist cinema came to embrace sound as a means of limiting interpretive freedom and conveying the ideological message of the plot in unambiguous terms.<sup>80</sup> The emerging ritual of mass song found its way into film as a means

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<sup>78</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, ch. 6, pp. 136-152.

<sup>79</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274, pp. 6-7. It took approximately 580 pounds of honey to secure the two cubs' cooperation during filming.

<sup>80</sup> Taylor, "A 'Cinema for the Millions': Soviet Socialist Realism and the Problem of Film Comedy." pp.450-451.

of affirming folk-minded ideology.<sup>81</sup> In *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, sound, like editing, functioned primarily to advance the narrative to its conclusion while promoting *narodnost* along the way.

Early scenes in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* pair comical noise effects with the comic acting of the father, brothers, and suitors, but the sound effects disappear as abruptly as their buffoonery when Ivan embarks upon his quest. When Ivan plays along with his brothers' mockery, pretending to have caught nothing in the hunt, they laugh at him clownishly, and one smacks the other on the head in typical slapstick style, complete with an exaggerated sound effect. Later, when the brothers set out to find wives, a wooden rooster on the merchant's roof announces the arrival of the second brother's arrow. The merchant's fat daughter, gorging herself on an enormous meal (complete with prominent chewing noises), throws her food down and rushes around with her servant, who cleans her by dousing her face with water (fig. 8).



**Figure 8. The merchant's grotesque daughter**

<sup>81</sup> Günther, "Poiushchaia Rodina: Sovetskaia Massovaia pesnia kak vyrazhenie arkhetaipa materi."p. 50.

Dialogue also separates the comical and noisy characters from the serious ones. The brothers and the suitors squabble with each other, arguing and exchanging insults. Ivan's and Vasilisa's exchanges with others tend to be brief. It would be going too far to say that Ivan and Vasilisa avoid dialogue altogether and speak only in monologic proclamations,<sup>82</sup> but their voices convey little emotion, and their speech, clearly enunciated and slowly spoken, seems to be directed at the audience as much as at other characters on screen. All bickering disappears from the narrative when Ivan embarks upon his quest, as do all exaggerated comical sound effects. When he sets out to become an epic hero, Ivan leaves comedy and carnivalistic sound behind.<sup>83</sup>

Comedy contains an anarchic element, and the narrative of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* discredits this emancipatory feature by linking humor to the stupidity of Ivan's provincial home. As Andrew Horton conceives of it, comedy produces "an in-between state [...] predispos[ing] its audience to enter a state of liminality where the everyday is turned upside down."<sup>84</sup> The open-endedness of slapstick humor disappears along with the carnivalistic excesses of the brothers and the merchant's daughter as Ivan leaves his village, and the narrative of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* enters the epic realm.

In contrast to comical noise effects, singing emerges as ideologically correct and controlled sound in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. In further contrast to anarchic humor, song, and

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<sup>82</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bakhtin draws a distinction between discourses that are monologic and dialogic. In monologic discourse, a single authoritative voice refers only to the subject of its commentary. In dialogic discourse, the authorial voice comes into contact with other voices, responds to them, altering their meaning and being altered by them.

<sup>83</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 1-58. Deriving his idea from Medieval European folk culture, Bakhtin conceives of Carnival as a chaotic, destabilizing, emancipatory event involving the "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," as well as "ever changing, playful, undefined forms" of activity (pp. 10-11).

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Horton, "Introduction," in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew Horton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

particularly the Stalinist mass song with which the film's original audiences would have been familiar, is essentially monologic. Necessarily scripted and rehearsed, mass song is constrained by its structure at every moment of the performance.

The role of song is also consistent with the association between femininity, fertility, and the earth that developed during the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Singing appears in the film either during scenes of labor or in shots of Vasilisa in the outdoors. The association of song and labor is characteristic of Stalinist musical comedy. The men sing as they go off into the fields to gather the harvest, and Vasilisa sings as she works in the field and sews inside Baba Iaga's hut. The association between patriotic song and the motherland in Soviet culture supports an interpretation of Vasilisa as the feminine-national counterpart to Ivan the masculine, military, governing patriarch and hero: a microcosm of the National-Bolshevik Great Family.

Fairy tale film was one of the essential genres of National Bolshevik culture. Film adaptations of traditional Russian folk culture functioned ideally as "cinema for the millions," conveying the National Bolshevik ideological message in an accessible and entertaining format. As an articulation of folk-mindedness, *Vasilisa the Beautiful* linked the audience's present life under Stalin to the Russian epic past by portraying that past with the conventions of Socialist Realism. The naïve and spontaneous young hero Ivan overcomes the enemy that comes from beyond Russia's borders and becomes a serious, ideologically educated epic hero who rejects humor and the pettiness of village life. More at home in nature than in his father's hut from the very beginning, Ivan finally leaves behind the squalor of domestic space entirely and redefines himself as a citizen of the vast Russian land.

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<sup>85</sup> Günther, "Poiushchaia rodina," pp. 47-49.



Vasilisa, at once an ideal Soviet woman and a symbol of the fertile land, guides Ivan to the realization of his mission, which is not so much to save her, as it is to develop an all-Russian identity and become a defender of his nation. Mass song unites people in labor, while comedy isolates them as fools. Over the course of the narrative, epic acting – monologic, complete, and concealing nothing – replaces the anarchic ambiguity of comedy and the privacy of domestic space.

**Chapter 2: Morozko: Fairy Tale Film during the Thaw**

In making the 1964 film *Morozko*,<sup>86</sup> Rou, together with his scriptwriters Nikolai Erdman and Mikhail Vol'pin,<sup>87</sup> undertook a remake of the 1924 film version of the folktale, whether consciously or not.<sup>88</sup> Their gesture constituted a revival of the past which had been proscribed and rejected by the Stalinist regime, and as such indicated the general loosening of censorship restrictions that occurred under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership (1953-1964) during what came to be known as the Thaw.<sup>89</sup> It is not surprising, then, that *Morozko* represents a dramatic departure from the epic tone and nationalist focus of 1939's *Vasilisa the Beautiful*.

Following the death of Stalin and the ascent to power of Khrushchev in 1953, Soviet artists, writers, and intellectuals found themselves able to look critically at the Socialist Realist tropes of the 1930s and 1940s. Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalinist excesses at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 heralded a reevaluation of values which would find expression in Thaw-era Soviet culture. In this vein, *Morozko* represents a new narrative corresponding to the new values of the Thaw period. Consequently, the narrative and mise-en-scène of *Morozko* reflect the increasing acceptability and importance of domestic concerns and material well-being as well as a concern with truth and falsehood that is wholly absent from the 1939 film.

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<sup>86</sup> Aleksandr Rou, *Morozko* (Gor'kii Film Studio, 1964).

<sup>87</sup> The participation of Nikolai Erdman (1900-1970) and Mikhail Vol'pin (1902-1988) in the making of *Morozko* constitutes a rehabilitation of its own. Erdman, who worked with the dramatist Vsevolod Meierkhol'd in the 1920s, was suppressed in the 1930s and lived in obscurity afterwards, having narrowly avoided arrest for his satirical work. His entry into the relatively unimportant genre of children's cinema indicates his partial rehabilitation in the 1960s. Mikhail Vol'pin collaborated with Erdman throughout his life in writing drama and screenplays for animated and live action films. Imprisoned from 1933 to 1937 for anti-Soviet writings, he was permitted to work on fairy tale films after his release.

<sup>88</sup> Iurii Zheliabuzhskii, *Morozko* (Fabrika Mezhrabpom-Rus', 1924). For a discussion of this film, see Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), pp. 66, 197.

<sup>89</sup> The period of relative liberty that coincided roughly with Khrushchev's time in power came to be called the Thaw after the publication of the eponymous novel by Il'ia Erenburg in 1954. *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*) inaugurated a limited public acknowledgment of some excesses of the Stalin regime.

According to Richard Stites, writing and film during the Thaw tended to express popular concerns with contemporary social problems:

Almost all [Khrushchev-era films] were “demonumentalized.” Life was put up on screen once again, partly defantasized, made intimate, and drawn to a human scale. . . . [T]he true side of everyday life began creeping into pictures; and since bolder shooting began to replace the frozen frames of the late Stalin period, films became more “moving” – cinematically as well as emotionally.<sup>90</sup>

Although *Morozko* avoids direct confrontation with contemporary social reality by remaining in the remote past of fairy tale, it does mark a profound break with the larger-than-life patriotic and nationalist heroics of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. Fairy tale life, no longer epic, centers on the same essential concerns as those of Soviet audiences in the 1960s. Rather than presenting a distant, valorized epic past, *Morozko* features the far more familiar matters of family life and interpersonal relationships, albeit set in a pre-technological world of magic and folk tradition.<sup>91</sup> The values praised in *Morozko* – honesty, humility, conscientiousness – are hardly unique to Soviet culture, but the film’s emphasis on these virtues and its matrimonially oriented plot reflect an important change in Soviet culture during the Thaw.

Following the crisis years of the Second World War, the Soviet government faced the challenges of rebuilding a devastated economy, demobilizing parts of the enormous armed forces, and relieving the material and emotional burden imposed upon the population by wartime scarcity and loss. Furthermore, as Vera Dunham argues, the party hierarchy sought a tacit alliance with the Soviet middle class, both because it needed educated administrators

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 139.

<sup>91</sup> Curiously, fairy tale films in the Thaw era frequently served as test beds for new cinematographic technologies. Ptushko’s 1956 film *Il’ia Muromets*, for example, was the first Soviet film shot in widescreen format and recorded with stereo sound.

and functionaries more than ever, and because these professionals, if unappeased, would constitute a serious threat to the stability of the regime.<sup>92</sup> As a result, the significance of the private sphere in Soviet culture increased.

By uniting now, after the war, with its own indigenous middle class, the stalinist [sic] dictatorship was finally able to acquire class roots and it did this by fostering the interests it shared with the middle class. ... [T]he kind of social arrangement the regime was looking for was one which was capable of producing contented citizens who, in turn, would be eager to pass on the contentment to their children.<sup>93</sup>

The regime's offer "appealed to the partner's [the middle class professional's] complex of self-interests, involving his prestige, involving his pride in his work, the satisfaction derived from his professionalism, and from his apolitical conformism."<sup>94</sup> As the old Stalinist glorification of militarism, nationalism, and sacrifice waned, the nuclear family began to lead an independent existence from the Great Family.

Even as material acquisitions and private ambitions became acceptable in Soviet public discourse, public morality began to flow into the formerly isolated realm of domestic life. In essence, no sooner had private life gained the right to exist than Soviet culture appropriated it into the public sphere, adding a political and moral dimension to domesticity:

In Stalin's time the word "culture" acquired an important suffix, and the slogan of the 1920s, "cultural revolution," turned into an advocacy of

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<sup>92</sup> Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

*kulturnost*<sup>95</sup> [sic] (culturalization). This term included not only the new Soviet artistic canon, but also manners, ways of behavior, and discerning taste in food and consumer goods. Culturalization was one way of translating ideology into the everyday; it was a kind of Stalinist “civilizing process” that taught Marxist-Leninist ideology together with table manners, mixing Stalin with Pushkin. [...] Culturalization offered a way of legitimating the formerly despised bourgeois concerns about status and possession; it both justified and disguised the new social hierarchies and privileges of the Stalinist elite.<sup>96</sup>

The former opposition between public and private values evolved into the idea that a Soviet citizen’s public behavior reflected the state of his or her private life. In the totally politicized world of Soviet totalitarianism, the change in cultural values required a coherent ideological justification. Accordingly:

A new concept of happiness formed the bridge where fraternization took place between the private and the public. A model citizen was saddled with the moral and political obligation to be happy as a person, in his private life as well as in his job. A rich home life began to be praised; self-sacrificing, ascetic satisfaction were losing ground. No hero could now claim leadership if he denied private needs. It was no longer his business to be concerned about society as a whole and still less to be dogmatic about it.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>96</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Paradoxes of Unified Culture: From Stalin’s Fairy Tale to Molotov’s Lacquer Box,” *Socialist Realism without Shores*, Eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 121.

<sup>97</sup> Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, p. 18.

The alliance was solidified, according to Dunham, because both the Soviet regime and the middle class were interested in “stabilization, normalization, and material progress,” rather than “ideology or further revolutionary upheavals.”<sup>98</sup>

Following Stalin’s death, the Khrushchev regime again took on the task of reconstruction – this time after the crisis of Stalinism. Official policy during the Khrushchev years emphasized a new set of priorities, prominent among which was a concern with improving the material conditions for Soviet citizens as a means of returning to the task of building communism after the unfortunate detour of Stalinist excess.<sup>99</sup>

Under the extraordinary circumstances of the Thaw, the establishment of normal daily living demanded nothing less than the complete "restructuring of everyday life" (*perestroika byta*) [...] This was evident in official commitment to advance nutritional standards (namely by increasing the output of meat and dairy products), to improve education and healthcare, to reduce the workday to seven hours and concurrently expand the leisure time of the average worker, and to raise the production of consumer goods. The latter of these, particularly in the form of household wares, was integral to a major policy initiative that showcased the grand transformations of the era: a massive campaign to resolve the Soviet housing crisis and provide to each family a "separate apartment" (*otdel'naia kvartira*).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, p. 17.

<sup>99</sup> Christine Varga-Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era,” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 3 (2008): 561-589.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Promoters of the government's focus on modern amenities construed it as an integral part of the development of new Soviet citizens. Like Stalinism, Khrushchev-era ideology held that there was a direct connection between living standards and morality:

Implicit [in the ideology of the Thaw] is the notion that all private actions – from sexual to decorating choices--have public implications, and that private interests should not exist separate from public goals. This ethical vision was pronounced during the reform process due to the official position that Communism was imminent (it was believed to be attainable by 1980), and that therefore the strengthening of communist living, in terms of individual conduct and character, as well as material forms, was vital.<sup>101</sup>

People had to learn to conduct themselves in a manner befitting communists. Rather than promoting militarism, sacrifice, heroism, and willingness to defend the motherland from foreign threats, the Soviet regime during the Thaw emphasized the importance of “qualities like *sincerity, modesty, concern for others, courteousness and tact*, as well as cleanliness and order, which were relevant both to living space and personal comportment.”<sup>102</sup>

As the cultural values of Soviet society changed, so too did the image of the ideal Soviet citizen. After the war, and especially during the Thaw, this tended to be a competent professional, rather than a self-sacrificing warrior.<sup>103</sup>

From child to pensioner, the classic prewar bolshevik [sic] heroes both supported public values and were indeed their incarnation. Selflessness, devotion to the party, asceticism, quixotic courage – these were the main

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<sup>101</sup> Varga-Harris, “Homemaking,” p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 201-202.

virtues. ... Public commitment in those early days was pitched with unequivocal shrillness against primary loyalties and private values.<sup>104</sup>

In the last years of Stalin's reign and the Thaw, however, "someone resembling a middleclass careerist replaced the revolutionary saint of the twenties and the party vigilant of the thirties."<sup>105</sup>

It would be going too far to describe *Morozko's* Khrushchev-era Ivan as a middleclass careerist, if for no other reason, then at least because the pre-technological world of *Morozko* has no place for professionals. However, the change in Soviet cultural values from the late 1930s to post-war Stalinism and the years of Khrushchev's rule is mediated in the fairy tale films of the two periods. The epic hero of 1939, who denies himself the dissipating comforts of home life, and whose mission to save his intended bride is as much a matter of carrying out the objectively determined tendency implicit in their fated meeting as it is about love metamorphoses into the vain and feminized Ivan of 1964, whose heroics are secondary to his obedience, and who must learn to conform to the moral values of society if he is to enter it by starting a family.

As part of the loosening restrictions on public discourse and the change in cultural values to reflect the apparent return to normalcy after the Stalinist aberration, writers and filmmakers began to examine the complexities of truth and reality. "The pervasive concern of postwar Soviet society," writes Clark, "has been not with the heroic and the extraordinary, as in the thirties [...], but with the true and the false. The questions asked in this period were not How can a feat be performed? But How should one live?"<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, "after Stalin's death . . . the right to privacy and artistic truth were expanded in scope to include,

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<sup>104</sup> Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, p. 18.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 190.



respectively, the question of where to place the point of tradeoff between the state's interests and the needs and ideas of the individual, and the issue of intellectual truth in general."<sup>107</sup>

This engagement with questions of truth and falsehood occurred, in turn, within a general discussion of 'sincerity' in art – a discussion which initiated the cautious de-Stalinization of Soviet culture under Khrushchev. In 1953 the writer Vladimir Pomerantsev published an influential article titled "On Sincerity in Literature," in which he contended that Soviet literature was deficient on account of its contrivance and distance from everyday human affairs:<sup>108</sup>

When we read, for example, the stylizers, we are left with an unpleasant residue. We see too many carefully sought out, hand-picked, fanciful thoughts and words. We pay too much attention to the writing style, and therefore the substance is left outside the bounds of our consciousness. These are complex, artificially recondite things, and they aggravate the modern day reader with their obvious contrivance.<sup>109</sup>

To make matters worse, Pomerantsev argues, the substance was of little value in the first place. Literature was derivative and generic, and authors were preoccupied with staying attuned to the prevailing political winds. Politically correct writers avoided difficulties and the dark side of the Soviet experiment, delivering safe and preposterously unrealistic plots instead of providing edifying discussions of real human affairs. For Pomerantsev, this was

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<sup>107</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 213.

<sup>108</sup> Vladimir Pomerantsev, "Ob iskrennosti v literature," *Ottepel' 1953-1956: Stranitsy russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, Ed. S. I. Chuprinin (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989), pp. 17-61.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. The original reads: "Kogda my chitaem, naprimer, stilizatorov, to ostaetsia nepriiatnyi osadok. Slishkom mnogo vidim my vyiskannykh, podobrannykh, vychurnykh myslei i slov, slishkom napriazhenno sledim za maneroi pis'ma, i poetomu ego sodержanie ostaetsia za porogom soznaniia. Eto veshi neprostyle, iskusstvenno-slozhnye, I oni ugnetaiut chitatelia segodniashnikh dnei svoei iavnoi sostroennost'iu."

not the proper role of literature. “Just as the “Party makes people the center of attention,” he contends, “so too should novels, plays, and poems be written about people.”<sup>110</sup>

The reexamination of Stalinist values and aesthetics extended to cinema as well. In a 1959 article, Viktor Nekrasov contrasted two films: Iulia Solntseva’s *Poem about the Sea* and *Two Fedors* by Marlen Khutsiev.<sup>111</sup> Nekrasov argued that the monumental style of the former evoked the fake style of Stalinist film epics, whereas Khutsiev’s understated intonation and everyday heroes epitomized the realism and sincerity of the new film. The article prompted the first major discussion in the Soviet film press about the possibility of different coexisting film styles in Soviet cinema: the epic-poetic cinema associated with Stalinist aesthetics and the sincere, understated cinema characteristic of young filmmakers.

The new focus on material standards of living and the attempts by intellectuals to clarify matters of truth and falsehood naturally found expression in literature and film. Accordingly, *Morozko*’s dominant foci are Ivan’s moral progress and the culmination of his reeducation in marriage and settled domestic life, as well as a continuous preoccupation with true essences and false appearances.

It is significant that *Morozko* places contemporary values in the context of the fairy tale. After all, the Soviet regime had instituted Russocentric National Bolshevism in order to solidify its citizens’ sense of national solidarity. In this way, people could be mobilized for national defense or socialist construction. The regime’s rehabilitation of Russian history occurred along with a new focus on Russian culture and folk tradition. This latter development, with its emphasis on the wholeness of the people, the longevity of its tradition,

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<sup>110</sup> Pomerantsev, “Ob iskrennosti v literature,” p. 38: The original reads: “Partiia stavit cheloveka v tsentr vnimaniia. O cheloveke i dolzhny pisat’sia romany, p’esy, stikhi.”

<sup>111</sup> Viktor Nekrasov, “Slova ‘velikie’ i prostye,” *Iskusstvo Kino* 5 (1959): 55-61.

and its unique historical mission, promoted the Soviet regime as an organic counterpart to the people (*narod*).<sup>112</sup>

As products of folk-minded culture, fairy tale films were ideal vehicles for promoting the values and priorities of the regime. The appearance of current concerns and priorities in works allegedly reflecting traditional culture made it seem that those concerns and priorities were organic aspects of Russian cultural tradition. When Ivan appeared on screen as a militaristic defender of the motherland, heroic national service would start to seem a natural, deeply ingrained part of the Russian national character. On the other hand, if Ivan underwent reeducation in a fairy tale film, then the importance of such reeducation and the virtues it aimed at would become associated with the valorized national tradition.

Consequently, products of folk-minded culture in the Stalin era such as *Vasilisa the Beautiful* emphasized national unity, service to the nation-state, heroism, and the construction of the socialist (or proto-socialist) society. *Morozko*, for its part, elevates model behavior and the family. In place of Ivan-the-*bogatyr*'s coming-of-age as a defender of the motherland in the earlier Stalinist film, *Morozko* features a romantic comedy plot with a secondary reeducation theme. The seriousness of the earlier film and the spatio-temporal and emotional distance of its diegesis from the audience give way to lightheartedness and comedic accessibility in *Morozko*.

The predominantly masculine thematics of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* reflect the conceptual structure of Stalinist society, in which the powerful *vozhd'* (chief) and the productive *rodina* (motherland) constitute the Great Family.<sup>113</sup> In *Morozko*, the role of the

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<sup>112</sup>Günther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost'."

<sup>113</sup>Hans Günther, "Wise Father Stalin and his Family in Soviet Cinema," in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, trans. Julia Trubikhina (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 178-190.

male element is greatly diminished. Much of the narrative concerns female characters – the stepsisters Nasten’ka and Marfusha, the wicked stepmother, and Baba Iaga, whose androgyny is less emphasized than in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. The feminized Ivan wears makeup, constantly checks his appearance in his mirror, and sings, courting women rather than fighting monsters. Domestic space and family life, when restored to their correct order, serve as the happy ending of Ivan’s and Nasten’ka’s journey. In accordance with these changes, *Morozko* is humbler, its characters more comical and less heroic, its lessons more mundane and less epic than in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*.

### I. Narrative Form in *Morozko*

The plot of *Morozko* is a traditional romantic comedy: after an initial meeting, the fated couple – Ivan (Eduard Izotov) and Nasten’ka (Natal’ia Sedykh) – become separated through a misunderstanding, and, after a series of adventures, reunite to get married. Elements of Socialist Realist narrative, although present in the form of Ivan’s reeducation, are of secondary importance in determining the form of the plot.<sup>114</sup> Unlike the protagonist’s development into a national hero in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, the teleological aim of Ivan’s reformation in *Morozko* is his maturation into a good family man – that is, a person genuinely interested in other people and capable of loving someone other than himself. However, even the success of this modest transformation is ambiguous; at the end of the film, Ivan shows traces of recidivism.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Rou originally intended to emphasize the reeducation subplot by incorporating it into the opening credits and intertitles, but these features did not make it into the final version of the film. See “Rezhisserskii Stsenarii Po Odnoimennomu Literaturnomu Stsenariiu M. Vol’pina i N. Erdmana,” 1963, RGALI, F. 2944, op. 6, d. 316.

<sup>115</sup> When Nasten’ka remarks that Ivan is better than he was, he exaggerates his morality, proclaiming that he is now ready to do nothing but good deeds: “a teper’ ia gotov odni tol’ko dobrye dela delat’.” Detecting regression, Nasten’ka playfully warns him that bear fur might be sprouting on his face again.

*Morozko* begins with an introduction to the home lives of the future newlyweds: Nasten'ka is the unappreciated servant of her stepmother, who is a shrew, and the latter's daughter (Inna Churikova), who is pampered and foolish. Ivan, on the other hand, is the object of all the village girls' affections. However, he does not consider any of them worthy of his attention, and so he sets out to find a suitable wife.

As he journeys through the forest, Ivan meets the magical Grandfather Mushroom (Mikhail Ianshin), who gives him a bow and arrows in return for Ivan's participation in a game of hide-and-seek. However, Ivan refuses to thank the magic donor, and Grandfather Mushroom issues a prophecy to the insolent youth, portending his humiliation. Nonetheless, Ivan sets off again, and soon stumbles upon Nasten'ka, who has been ordered by her stepmother to water a stump until it sprouts flowers. In their first encounter, Ivan is taken with Nasten'ka, but fails to make an impression with his arrogance. In the course of trying to woo her, Ivan tries to shoot a bear with the bow and arrows he has received from Grandfather Mushroom. The compassionate girl, appalled by Ivan's willingness to kill the bear and orphan its cubs, prevents his show of virility by putting a pail over his head. When he takes it off, Nasten'ka recoils in horror, and Ivan soon notices that his well-groomed face has been magically replaced by the grotesque head of a bear. He stumbles off into the forest, mistakenly cursing Nasten'ka for his metamorphosis.

Ivan runs off into the woods, and Nasten'ka returns to her seemingly Sisyphean task. In reality, however, Nasten'ka's meekness has earned her the allegiance of nature, and so, the stump eventually blooms. Over the course of the film, Nasten'ka's innate virtue ensures her safe passage. Ivan, on the contrary, must learn to take an authentic interest in other people's welfare if he is to regain his human appearance.

As Ivan wanders in the forest, Grandfather Mushroom appears before him to explain the nature of his punishment: in order to regain his former appearance, Ivan must abandon his vanity and perform good deeds. However, Ivan fails to grasp the inner transformation that is required of him. He instrumentalizes the good deeds he is to perform, conceiving of them as mere means to the end of regaining his human appearance. Consequently, Ivan tries to impose his good will by force upon everyone he sees. Spotting a group of girls picking mushrooms in the forest, Ivan rushes toward them, oblivious to his monstrous visage. The intended targets of his good deed are understandably terrified and flee from the well-intentioned monster. In effect, Ivan initially fails to distinguish between the mere appearance of moral reformation and the actual, internal change that comes only with the renunciation of selfishness and vanity. In order to undo the transformation which has caused his face to mirror his character and mock his vanity, he will have to modify the underlying cause of his bearish visage: his antisocial attitude.

While Ivan wanders around in search of good deeds, the plot of *Morozko* cuts to Nasten'ka's home, where the wicked stepmother is trying to find a husband for her beloved Marfusha. The stepmother hides Nasten'ka in a back room and dresses Marfusha in elaborate finery, but the attempt to deceive the would-be groom's family fails when Marfusha proves incapable of attending to domestic tasks. In fact, her incompetence lands her in a lake, so that Nasten'ka must rush to her rescue.

While Nasten'ka demonstrates her heroism and Marfusha unwittingly reveals her own deception, Ivan performs a legitimate good deed. While roaming through the woods, he stumbles upon a blind old woman who requests his help in getting home. Her blindness is in fact what gives Ivan this opportunity – another reference to the theme of appearances – as all

his previous efforts to help people have ended in their terrified flight from his monstrous form. After Ivan carries the old woman and her firewood back to her hut, Grandfather Mushroom reappears and surreptitiously grants Ivan his human appearance. Meanwhile, Ivan, who has made his way back to the place where he first met Nasten'ka, prepares to drown himself in despair at her rejection, but, noticing his reflection in the water, vows to find her again.

As Ivan celebrates his new lease on life, the plot cuts again to Nasten'ka and her father. In a direct borrowing from the folktale "Morozko," the evil stepmother has ordered her compliant husband to abandon Nasten'ka in the woods.<sup>116</sup> Demonstrating psychological depth not found in the folktale, the father finally refuses to sacrifice his daughter, but she decides to sacrifice herself and jumps off the sleigh as he turns for home. Nasten'ka sits down by a tree and awaits her fate.

Meanwhile, Ivan wanders through the same wintry landscape until he stumbles upon the hut of Baba Iaga. This is not, however, the androgynous and animalistic villain of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. Rather, *Morozko's* Baba Iaga is merely a grumpy old crone (although still played by Georgii Milliar) (fig. 9).



**Figure 9. A humanized Baba Iaga waking up from a nap.**

<sup>116</sup> See Aleksandr Afanas'ev, *Russian Fairy Tales*, trans. Robert Guterman, (New York: Pantheon, 1976) pp. 366-369.

Baba Iaga has become comical rather than threatening. Nevertheless, she does make a token effort to kill Ivan. Summoning animated trees, she has them toss Ivan into her hut, where she attempts to cook him in her oven. However, Ivan deceives Baba Iaga, convincing her that he does not know how to sit on the bread paddle.<sup>117</sup> In response, Baba Iaga complains, in anachronistic idiom, about the ignorance of today's youth,<sup>118</sup> and climbs onto the paddle herself. Ivan pushes her into the oven, but instead of cooking her to death, as Vasilisa kills Baba Iaga in the 1939 film, Ivan acquiesces to Baba Iaga's pleas and lets her go, at which point she begrudgingly agrees to help Ivan find Nasten'ka.

Her aid involves sending Ivan on a comical chase after a self-propelled sled. After his departure, however, Baba Iaga, who has been seething with resentment at the visitor who outwitted her, decides to revenge herself and sends her fleet-footed cat to rendezvous with the sled – which has evaded Ivan – find Nasten'ka before he does, and kill her. In lamenting that her anger gives her no rest, Baba Iaga, like Nasten'ka earlier, reveals emotional depth that is absent both in the folktales and in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*.<sup>119</sup>

Consistent with its greater focus on personal interactions, relationships, domesticity, and inner moral fiber, the narrative of *Morozko* is motivated by individuals to a far greater extent than that of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. A comparison of parallel episodes in the two films reveals the extent of this change. In the 1939 epic, Ivan's arrow, released blindly, lands on a magic lily in the middle of a lake, thereby summoning Vasilisa and making her his lawful wife. The destruction of Vasilisa's frog skin by the upper class women precipitates the

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<sup>117</sup> Compare the folktale "About Egibikha (Baba Iaga)" in Jack Haney, ed., *An Anthology of Russian Folktales*, trans. Jack Haney (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 247-249.

<sup>118</sup> "Ekh, molodezh' poshla. Chemu vas tol'ko uchat?" she says.

<sup>119</sup> "Okh i plokho mne, okh i khudo! Ne goriachka u menia, ne prostuda. Gubit bednuiu starushku ne khvoroba, gubit, dushit, cerotinku zlaia zloba. Ia i spat' ne mogu, ia i zhrat' ne mogu! Obidel gost' nezvaniy Babushku Iagu," she laments in frustration.



arrival of Zmei Gorynych, who kidnaps Vasilisa because the terms of her freedom have been violated. Ivan must now set off to rescue her and become a hero. Crucially, every step in the plot is retroactively necessitated by the teleology of the narrative: the perfect naturalness of Ivan's transformation into a hero proves that it was his destiny all along, and that all the steps leading to it had to happen. The rich women *had* to come to the village, they *had* to destroy the frog skin, Vasilisa *had* to be kidnapped, and so on. In *Morozko*, by contrast, Ivan's departure is motivated rather more personally: he decides to find a wife, and the girls in his village are not good enough.

Magic pervades both story worlds, but in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, it is largely impersonal, latent in the world and waiting for Ivan, the predestined hero, to activate it, whether by launching arrows or by donning armor that has been made especially for him. In *Morozko*, magic tends to be personified, as in the forms of Grandfather Mushroom and Morozko himself. It is Grandfather Mushroom who tests Ivan, and, finding his behavior unacceptable, imposes his transmogrifying punishment upon the vain youth. Morozko too is more human being than winter spirit, and when he responds to other characters, he does so circumspectly, assessing their moral qualities and acting accordingly.

This is not to say, however, that magic in *Morozko* does not operate on a less personal and more objective scale as well. Nasten'ka in particular has an immediate magical link to nature. When she beseeches the sun not to rise, it obliges; when her tears fall on the stump, it sprouts flowers. One is reminded of Vasilisa's ability to gather sheaves of wheat without touching them. However, it should be noted that whereas Vasilisa sets to work automatically, as if agricultural labor were encoded in her nature, Nasten'ka does what she is told by other human beings.

If a predilection towards farm work is in Vasilisa's nature, it is difficult to make any further observations about her personality. Whereas the positive characters in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* tend only to lack faults such as stupidity or mendacity, those in *Morozko*, on the other hand, tend to have clear personal qualities. For this reason, Ivan in the latter film acts in accordance with his vanity and later with his love for Nasten'ka. It is this feeling which guides him toward moral reform.

Ivan in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* also follows his abducted bride out of ostensible love, but when the screen time devoted to his feelings is compared to that involving the Russian landscape and heroic feats, it becomes clear that his primary destiny is to become a hero, with Vasilisa almost an afterthought. Ivan in *Morozko* reminds the viewer regularly of his feelings, and his marriage to Nasten'ka is contingent upon his reform. Unlike Ivan in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, he resists the change; his transformation is a compromise rather than a destiny.

In general, motivation in *Morozko* is still not entirely psychological. The fundamental theme of true and false appearances depends upon the existence of an objective moral law, and the magical agents function as enforcers of it. However, human beings (or at least personified agents) serve as the proximal causes of the action in the film.

If magic in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* functions primarily as the mechanism by means of which powerful spontaneity matures into epic consciousness, then in *Morozko* it is an instrument for maintaining the symmetry of truth and appearance and is, therefore, associated not with heroes but with those who are behaving badly or suffering mistreatment.

II. *Truth, Falsehood, and the Rehabilitation of Domestic Space: Mise-en-Scène in Morozko*

At the end of *Morozko*, Nasten'ka returns with Ivan to her family home, where they hold their wedding feast. The wicked stepmother and her corrupt daughter have been discredited, and the young heroes of the film prepare to begin their married life. This ending makes a striking contrast to the conclusion of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, where the successful hero, having outgrown the confining village of his youth, greets the sunrise over the majestic Russian land with his fate-sanctioned bride at his side. The culmination of *Morozko*'s plot in the same cabin where Nasten'ka had formerly been oppressed suggests the rehabilitation of domestic space and family life in Thaw culture. Accordingly, the film's mise-en-scène reflects a change in perspective from the epic and national themes and images of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* to the comic and the personal in *Morozko*.

Whereas three epic bards, seated in a majestic landscape, introduced *Vasilisa the Beautiful* as the "people's truth" of bygone days, the storyteller scenes framing the plot of *Morozko* feature a cheerful old woman (Anastasiia Zueva) in a window frame, which evokes fairgrounds and popular celebration and does not aspire to convey any 'truth' beyond the entertaining spectacle (figs. 10-11).



Figure 10: The epic bards introduce *Vasilisa the Beautiful*.



Figure 11. The introductory storyteller

This image suggests a domestic setting and the physical proximity of the narrator to the audience. The woman's speech, consisting of folksy rhymes, calls to mind the idiomatic language of lower social strata. As a result, the narrator initiates a conversation with the viewer, rather than instructing her on how to understand the picture that follows. When the old woman's narration penetrates the plot of the film, these familiar and domestic aspects of the framing episode familiarize the diegesis and bring it closer to the audience. This familiarizing tendency recurs throughout the *mise-en-scène* of *Morozko*.

In *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, the oppositions between the epic and the comic, as well as that between public space and domestic space, serve to delineate the positive and negative characters. The conclusions arising inevitably from that film – that the heroic epic cannot coexist with the degenerate comic, and that great deeds take place in the public realm while mendacious schemes are hatched in private – gave the film its militaristic and nationalistic focus.

On the other hand, *Morozko*, as a romantic comedy, focuses on love and relationships rather than politics and warfare. The comic grotesque becomes omnipresent – characterizing good and bad characters alike – while epic seriousness disappears from the film. All the

characters in *Morozko* behave comically – laughing, joking, and, most importantly, making comical mistakes which lead to slapstick situations. In fact, much of the film’s humor targets Ivan, the male lead and potential positive hero of the film, who approaches his predicament with excessive seriousness.

Just as the comic no longer distinguishes the negative characters in *Morozko*, Russian nature, while elevated in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, is more ambivalent and complex in the later film. An idealized Russian landscape, reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century landscapes, is the stage for most of the film’s action, but none of the deeds here is great. It is the site of Ivan’s transformation, but his change is neither as convincing nor as profound as in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. The inhospitability of nature even threatens Nasten’ka’s life. Moreover, nature itself is changed. Characteristic of nature in *Morozko* are flowers and patches of mushrooms, rather than vast plains or waterfalls. In addition, *Morozko* does not involve any journeys beyond the Russian borders. Villains dwell in Russia itself, and not in an enchanted forest remote from Russia’s benevolent lakes and birch trees. There are no foreign threats and no need to defend the borders.

Along with the ambivalent portrayal of nature in *Morozko*, there is a corresponding re-evaluation of domestic space. Instead of the clear disdain for domestic space evident in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* – a disdain which culminates in Ivan’s and Vasilisa’s return not to the humble village, but to the epic expanse of the Russian landscape – the plot of *Morozko* includes departures and returns, feasts, celebrations, and interior spaces designed to impress rather than repel the audience. Given that *Morozko* ends with a marriage and a wedding feast, domestic space cannot serve as the feature distinguishing between the good public and the bad private. In fact, the narrative involves a progression from the bad domesticity of

Nasten'ka's exploitative stepmother to the good domesticity consummated by Ivan and Nasten'ka's marriage. Along the way, both characters find their way to Morozko's immaculate palace, which functions as a rejuvenating refuge for Nasten'ka after her brush with death in the wilderness.<sup>120</sup> Domestic space is no longer *ipso facto* confining and enervating.<sup>121</sup> Its qualities are dependent upon the moral qualities of the household.

In *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, positive moral qualities are linked to physical laborers, and most labor takes place outdoors.<sup>122</sup> As *Morozko*'s only unequivocally positive human character, Nasten'ka is also the film's only laborer. However, her labor is essentially domestic: knitting, cleaning, feeding farm animals. There is one occasion on which Nasten'ka labors outdoors – when her stepmother orders her to water a stump until it blooms. Here, the principle of folk-mindedness re-emerges, asserting the connection between morality and the natural world. Nasten'ka succeeds at her seemingly Sisyphean task because the natural world responds to her tears.

Moral reality reasserts itself physically whenever people's appearances start to diverge from their true selves. False appearances result from the incongruousness of a character's inner qualities with his or her image. However, in the magic world of *Morozko*, a person's inner and outer selves tend towards congruence. Good characters are attractive, while bad characters are ugly. Consequently, when a bad character tries to disguise herself as an attractive (and therefore good) character, her deception is revealed with a slapstick vengeance. When the story world's moral authorities decide that an attractive character has

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<sup>120</sup> As Morozko departs to continue winterizing the forests, he idly asks Nasten'ka to “do a little housewifery” in the palace (“Nu, a ty tut pokhozaiinichai”). There is, of course, not much room for housewifery in this magically pristine habitation.

<sup>121</sup> Domestic space is also no longer opposed to labor: the only kind of labor in *Morozko* is domestic chores.

<sup>122</sup> Even the one exception – the blacksmith – works in a tiny shack, which has almost more openings than walls.

become bad, they modify his appearance to suit his inner nature. The restoration of congruence between inner nature and outer appearance resolves the film's conflict and facilitates the happy conclusion of the romantic comedy plot.

It is possible to relate the theme of true and false appearances in *Morozko* to the emerging discourse of truth and authenticity in Thaw culture. Matters of truth and falsehood, prominent in Socialist Realist fiction during Stalinism, remained significant during the Thaw, although in a different form. Stalinist fiction contrasted truth and falsehood with regard to the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic, where “the ‘true’ leader represent[ed] a positive form of ‘consciousness’ [and] the ‘false’ one, an excess or distortion of true ‘consciousness.’”<sup>123</sup> Works produced during the Thaw, on the other hand, associated truth with the new issue of sincerity. For Pomerantsev, sincerity arose from engagement with real-life problems. “Do not reject anything in me,” he exhorted authors:

do not impose anything upon me, but rather look for a new synthesis, one in which I, my labor, my thoughts, and everything in my sense of life would stand at the center – all that I do not know about myself and which new heights will allow you to discover. But the most important thing is to raise me up to you and to these heights, so that the world may become more visible to me.<sup>124</sup>

The theme of true and false appearances constitutes one of the other major thematic foci of *Morozko*, along with domesticity. A moral force operates throughout the plot to expose false appearances and restore true ones. At the beginning of the film, Ivan prances

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<sup>123</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 212.

<sup>124</sup> Pomerantsev, “Ob iskrennosti v literature,” p. 25. The original text reads: “Ni ot chego ne otrekaisia vo mne, nichego mne ne naviazvai i ishchi novyi sintez, tsentrom kotorogo stal by ia, moi trud, moi dumy i vse to v moem zhizneoshchushchenii, chego sam ia ne znaiu i chto novye vysoty tebe pomogut otkryt'. A glavnoe, podnimai menia k sebe na eti vysoty, chtoby mir stal mne vidnee.”

through his village, attracting the attention of the local women. His heavily made-up face conceals unacceptable vanity (fig. 12).



**Figure 12: The discrepancy between moral nature and physical appearance**

Nasten'ka's attempt to teach Ivan a lesson provides nature with an opportunity to repair the discrepancy: when Ivan pries the bucket off his head, the face that emerges corresponds to his moral degeneracy (fig. 13).



**Figure 13: The discrepancy corrected**

During the matchmaking scene the stepmother attempts to find a rich husband for her daughter, Marfusha, by dressing her in elaborate finery and plastering her face with makeup



to conceal her homely features. Meanwhile, she tries to hide Nasten'ka's natural beauty by covering her face in soot and putting a rag over her hair (figs. 14-15).



**Figure 14. Marfusha made up**



**Figure 15. Nasten'ka concealed**

However, makeup cannot conceal reality for long, and the double deception fails utterly when the potential husband's shrewd mother asks Marfusha to prepare a meal from scratch. The daughter, pampered and doted on while Nasten'ka labors, proves incapable of catching the requisite goose. Her chase ends when she falls into a pond and begins to drown. The stepmother grabs her fake braid in an effort to pull her to safety, but the wig comes off, revealing the deception. Meanwhile, Nasten'ka, not hesitating to come to her cruel stepsister's aid, jumps into the water and pulls Marfusha to safety. The heroic act exposes

her to the truth-revealing water, which cleanses her face of soot and presents Nasten'ka to the stunned onlookers as the far more marriageable daughter. Bewildered, the stepmother refuses to offer Nasten'ka for marriage, and the outraged visiting family calls off the engagement. Fortunately for Nasten'ka, however, the world of *Morozko* is fundamentally just, and she will get the chance to don appropriate apparel.

In spite of the stepmother's attempt to kill her, Nasten'ka returns from the forest in a sleigh with the reformed Ivan, adorned like a princess and carrying a chest of treasure. The avaricious stepmother immediately decides to send her own daughter into the woods, expecting her to return with a husband and a handsome dowry. However, Marfusha returns with a grotesque parody of Nasten'ka's rewards: a pig-driven troika and a chest full of crows. Finally, the culmination of the theme of true and false appearances occurs at the final wedding scene where Ivan and Nasten'ka celebrate their marriage while dressed in spectacular gold-adorned folk costumes befitting their status as a perfect proto-socialist couple (fig 16).



**Figure 16. Ivan and Nasten'ka get married.**

### *III: Editing and Cinematography: Continuity and Spectacle*

The storyteller scenes that open *Vasilisa the Beautiful* and *Morozko* provide an immediate sense of the difference in pace between the pseudo-epic of 1939 and the romantic

comedy of 1964. The three bards who introduced *Vasilisa*'s "people's truth" sat in the middle of an immobile frame, slowly plucking the strings of their *gusli* before a stately natural backdrop. The far more effusive old woman who sets up the story of *Morozko*, on the other hand, occupies an ever-shrinking portion of the screen as the camera zooms out to reveal the decorative window frame that surrounds her. The moving camera in this scene already suggests the greater mobility of *Morozko*'s camerawork, and the impression of speed and liveliness foreshadowed by the opening scene is borne out by the film's editing and cinematography.

The frequent incorporation of rapid pans, tilts, and tracking shots throughout the narrative of *Morozko* keeps the scenery and characters in constant motion, contributing thereby to the general lightheartedness of the film. Given the increased pace of *Morozko* compared to *Vasilisa*, one could reasonably expect more frequent cutting in the former film. Analysis with Cinematics computer software, however, indicates the opposite.<sup>125</sup> Paradoxically, the older and shorter *Vasilisa the Beautiful* contains more shots than *Morozko*. The most probable explanation for this is that *Morozko* features far more dialogue, and that many scenes linger to accommodate lengthy exchanges between characters, as well as lyrical songs. What is more significant than the average shot length, however, is the pattern of shot lengths over the course of each film's plot.

Cinematic analysis provides insight into the relation between the length of shots and narrative form of *Morozko* and *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. In the 1964 film, shot length decreases noticeably over the course of the film and especially in the last minutes, albeit with the exception of the elaborate final crane shot (fig. 17).

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<sup>125</sup> *Vasilisa the Beautiful* contains 766 individual shots, compared to 689 for *Morozko*. See the online Cinematics database at < <http://www.cinematics.lv/database.php>>.

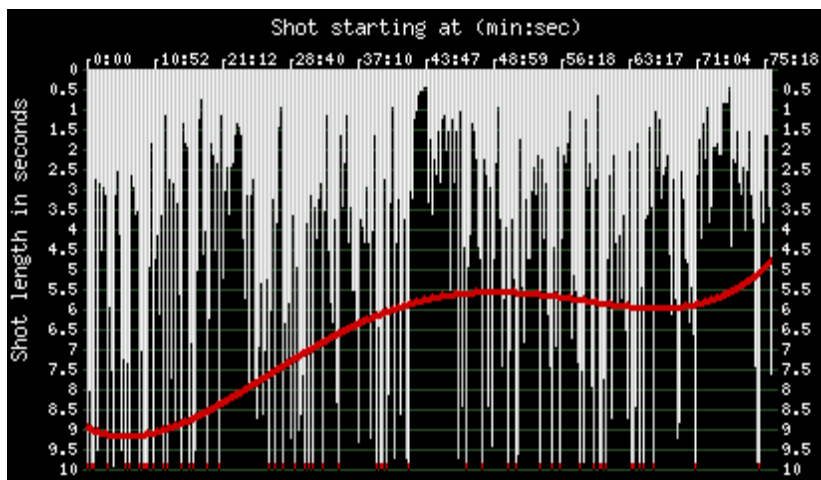


Figure 17: cinematic graph of shot lengths in *Morozko*

The increased pace of cutting, when aided by lively music and comical action, contributes to the cheerful tone of the film. In fact, as the graph above shows, shot lengths tend to decrease over the length of the film, liveliness increasing as the conclusion approaches. The final shot, filled with colors and textures and accompanied by energetic folk singing, carries the accelerating pace through to the exuberant ending.

In contrast, the length of shots in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* decreases only slightly with the rising action of the plot, and the dénouement is marked by increasing shot lengths, which reflect the solemnity of the film's conclusion (fig. 18).

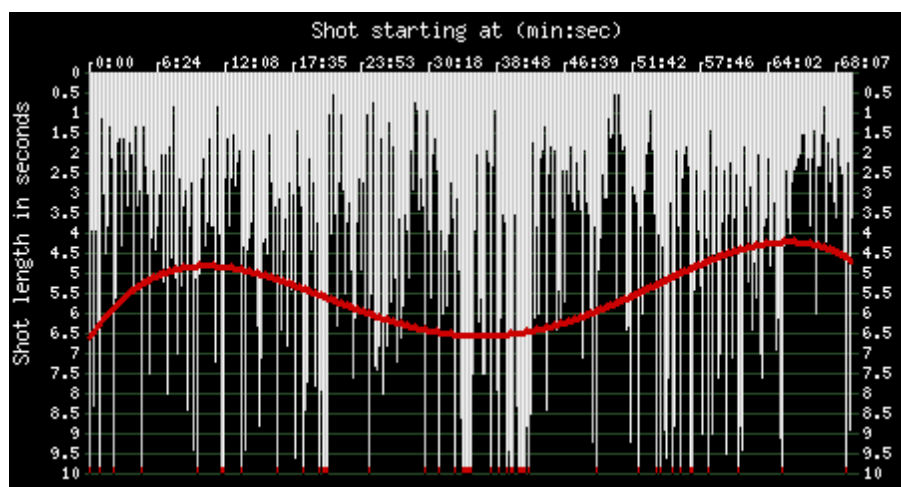


Figure 18: cinematic graph of shot lengths in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*

The frequency of cutting peaks on two occasions: early in the film, when Ivan and his brothers launch arrows to find their wives, and near the end, when Ivan decapitates Zmei Gorynych and Vasilisa frees herself from Baba Iaga. When Ivan and Vasilisa greet the sunrise and ride off over the great Russian landscape, long takes reflect the scale of the land and the grandeur of the victory.

The shots that conclude *Vasilisa the Beautiful* do not merely last a long time. The static camera and mise-en-scène in these shots contribute to the sense of epic finality that marks Ivan's maturation. In contrast, the longer takes in *Morozko* do not seem nearly so long because the highly mobile camera keeps the characters and mise-en-scène in constant motion. The camera sways to and fro as Ivan swaggers through his village, basking in the fawning attention of admiring girls. By means of pans, tilts, and zooms, the camera closes in on Ivan as he moves through the landscape, thereby managing to show his smallness in relation to the land, but also affirming the human-centered story by ending the shot with Ivan occupying most of the frame.

While agile camerawork maintains the pace of the film through the long takes, the action sequences in *Morozko*, consistent with filmmaking conventions, consist of numerous brief shots. Here too the camera remains highly mobile along its horizontal and vertical axes, and does not rely merely on the shot-reverse shot technique in *Vasilisa's* action sequences. The livelier and faster camerawork is no doubt at least in part the result of advances in camera technology, but the deliberate changes in pace and tone are undeniable.

The static camera and continuity editing prevalent in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* lent dignity and verisimilitude to that film's portrayal of its story world. Likewise, the livelier camerawork in *Morozko* helps define the film as a romantic comedy. Although editing in the

latter film is also usually optimized for narrative continuity, the narrative flow is occasionally interrupted by special effect attractions reminiscent of the illusionist techniques pioneered by George Méliès in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these cases, special effects editing serves to portray the natural world's response to Nasten'ka's unrewarded virtue or to emphasize certain events in the narrative. When Nasten'ka cannot complete her chores before sunrise, she beseeches the sun to wait, and the star obligingly recedes below the horizon with the aid of reverse projection.<sup>126</sup> Later, when Nasten'ka must water the stump until it blooms, her tears summon stop-motion animated flowers.

On other occasions, special effects serve not so much to portray the objective moral law in action, but merely to regale viewers with amusing spectacle. Following the sun's sympathetic response to Nasten'ka's plight, a sequence of cuts shows each of the local roosters heralding the delayed arrival of daybreak in succession.<sup>127</sup> A similar concatenation of images, combined with the reverse projection of trees being shaken of their snow, portrays Morozko's magical winterization of the forest. The technique known as pixilation – a variant of stop-motion where an inanimate object is gradually repositioned between successive shots to produce the appearance of movement – is utilized to show the movement of Baba Iaga's porcine sled.<sup>128</sup> When an unfortunate bird unwittingly lands on Morozko's scepter, its transformation into ice requires the same special effect. In these instances, special effects

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<sup>126</sup> Reverse projection is employed on one occasion in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*: Baba Iaga demonstrates her/his preternatural strength with an impossibly high jump. In other words, here, as in the episode with Zmei Gorynych, special effects emphasize the enormity of the challenge facing Ivan and the epic seriousness of the film.

<sup>127</sup> This rapid succession of images might recall Soviet montage, but the intent here is manifestly non-ideological. However, if one were to apply Eisenstein's theory of montage to this sequence, then it would best be described as an instance of tonal montage, where a concern with the "dominant emotional resonance of the shot" structures the montage. See "The Fourth Dimension in Cinema" in *Selected Works, vol. 1: Writings, 1922-34*, Ed. and Trans. Richard Taylor (London/Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 189.

<sup>128</sup> For an exemplary demonstration of this technique with both inanimate objects and people, see Jan Švankmajer's 1992 surrealist film *Jídlo (The Food)*.

contribute to the film's playful fairy tale atmosphere, just as the limited special effects in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* emphasized the grandeur of the epic past, the "time of 'firsts' and 'bests'."<sup>129</sup>

#### *IV: Sound: Domesticated Folk Song and Anachronistic Speech*

The music that accompanies *Morozko*'s opening credits begins as a gentle twinkling melody – a leitmotif that will later become associated with Nasten'ka – but quickly erupts in loud and jubilant pseudo-folk music. This is, in a sense, a musical allegory of the plot – beginning with the oppression of the comically delicate and pathetic Nasten'ka and developing into chases, slapstick combat, and carnivalistic animal humor.

The credits to *Morozko* list the Khor Piatnitskogo,<sup>130</sup> and the performances of this major folk choir appear twice in the film: in the early scene where the village girls try in vain to impress Ivan, and again at the end of the film, during the crane shot of Ivan's and Nasten'ka's wedding feast. The association of folk motifs with domesticity – present throughout the film, but exemplified by the presence of folk music in these scenes of consummately domestic activity – contrasts markedly with those aspects of folk culture emphasized by *Vasilisa the Beautiful* – namely warriors, epic bards, and agricultural labor.

Whereas singing occurred either in the presence of Vasilisa or in the context of the men's agricultural labor in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Ivan is the principal singer in *Morozko*, and the subject of his singing is decidedly less communal. As he struts through the forest in search of a wife, Ivan sings happily of his physical merits and his matrimonial aspirations. This is a far cry from the taciturn and dignified Ivan of the earlier epic film. In fact,

<sup>129</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," p. 13.

<sup>130</sup> For more on this folk choir, see Susannah Lockwood Smith, "From Peasants to Professionals: The Socialist-Realist Transformation of a Russian Folk Choir," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 3 (2002): 393-425.

*Morozko*'s Ivan sings of his journey over the forests and seas, thus bringing the image of Russia's expanses into his cheerful and self-centered celebration. Ivan's individual singing in *Morozko* does not, therefore, carry the 1930s association of song with organized collective activity. What is more, it contributes to the feminization of Ivan's character in *Morozko*. Finally, in an interesting reversal of the gender associations attached to singing in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, Nasten'ka does not sing.

If there was markedly less singing in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, there was, on the other hand, no shortage of poetic pseudo-folk language, declaimed by the characters with all the necessary gravity. In *Morozko*, while there is still some language of this sort, particularly in the narrator's descriptions and Nasten'ka's laments, the majority of dialogue is delivered in a substantially less rhythmical manner, and less of it contains intentional folk archaisms.

In fact, the anachronistic incorporation of 1960s idiomatic speech into characters' lines undermines the hermetic isolation of *Morozko*'s ancient folk setting for comical effect. When Ivan first happens upon Nasten'ka, she explains to him that her stepmother has consigned her to the absurd task of watering a stump. "What a cruel stepmother you have!" Ivan exclaims. Nasten'ka responds with perfect nonchalance that her stepmother is, on the contrary, a perfectly ordinary one.<sup>131</sup> The newly modernized Baba Iaga complains of her radiculitis, invoking the medical term for back pain, which has found its way modern Russian speech.<sup>132</sup> The step sister's Marfusha's comportment, although reminiscent of spoiled step siblings of fairy tale tradition, fits more coherently the very modern stereotype of the nasty teenager. Father Frost, encountering Marfusha in the forest, is taken aback by her self-

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<sup>131</sup> "Okh, i zliushchaia, vedat', u tebia machekha," Ivan exclaims. "Da net, obyknovennaia," clarifies Nasten'ka. It is unlikely that the casual demonization of stepmothers was as widespread in the unspecified Russian national past as it is in contemporary Russophone culture.

<sup>132</sup> "Radiculit zamuchil," complains Baba Iaga.



assertive demeanor and the stockpile of food she has brought along. “Are you senile or something?” she asks the befuddled winter spirit.<sup>133</sup> While it is true the narrative and mise-en-scène of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* suggests the values of contemporary reality, those suggestions are implicit, extending Stalinist values into the past and, in effect, naturalizing vigilance in the face of foreign threats. The modern idiomatic speech in *Morozko* creates comic effect and brings the story world closer to the audience rather than elevating aspects of the audience’s reality to the realm of the epic, as in the former film.

The comic sound effects in *Morozko* are not limited to anachronistic dialogue, however. In contrast to *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, sound effects characteristic of slapstick humor occur throughout the narrative. Significantly, the ostensible climax of the film – Ivan’s combat with Baba Iaga and her band of highwaymen is accompanied by generous amounts of comic noise effects. This is striking when one compares the heroic music and utter seriousness of the battle with the terrible monster that marks the climax of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. Sound in the 1939 film functioned primarily to reinforce the atmosphere determined by its narrative and mise-en-scène. Sound in *Morozko* serves approximately the same ends. The difference lies in the atmosphere, and the dialogue and sound effects reflect the contrast between the epic tone of *Vasilisa the Beautiful* and the fundamentally comic aspect of *Morozko*.

Like *Vasilisa the Beautiful* before it, *Morozko* reveals the hallmark of National Bolshevik cultural policy by relocating the dominant tropes of contemporary culture to a story world ostensibly portraying primordial national traditions. Both films situate their lessons about proper values and behavior in the folk past, thereby linking their didactic

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<sup>133</sup> “Da ty chto, staryi, ochumel chtoli?” is Marfusha’s impatient response.

content with what is posited as the eternal and unchanging national tradition. Insofar as the lesson reflected the direction of contemporary cultural policy, the film presented the moral system of its highly modified folktales as an antecedent or harbinger of the current state of affairs.

As Dobrenko writes about the use of history during the Stalin period, “legitimacy [...] was constructed on a constant appeal to prototypes ... [so that] ... the adjustment of ‘historical images’ to fit their ‘historical prototypes’ [became] almost the main occupation of historical writing.”<sup>134</sup> As with historical writing, so it was with the fairy tale films of the Stalin era: the fairy tale legitimized modern values by posing itself as their prototype, while its characters functioned as the ideal antecedents of modern Soviet citizens. In *Morozko*, however, it is the present that intrudes into the past, so that characters adopt contemporary registers and destroy any epic distance that may have survived the cheerful *mise-en-scène* and rapid camerawork.

The incorporation of moments from modern life into the world of the folk past does not, however, alter the fundamental function of the fairy tale film in the context of National Bolshevik folk-mindedness. The concerns of the present are transplanted into the past, thereby transforming the myth of the present into timeless nature.<sup>135</sup> The legitimation of contemporary reality with the aid of history is an emblematic manifestation of National Bolshevism in culture. The reliance on folk tradition rather than any other source of legitimacy for the recasting of modern initiatives as ancient concerns suggests the importance of folk-mindedness for the National Bolshevik project.

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<sup>134</sup> Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>135</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today." *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109-159.

The fundamental features of this project were still in effect in 1964, when *Morozko* was shown to Soviet audiences, but changing cultural values during the Thaw necessitated a corresponding change in the narrative form and mise-en-scène of the fairy tale film. In the Soviet Union of the Stalin era, citizens had to steel themselves for the struggles of overtaking the West and defending the country from foreign invasion and bourgeois culture. During the Thaw, trends latent in postwar Stalinism came to the surface in the form of an ideological reorientation toward the importance of personal fulfillment and proper socialist morality.

Consequently, the tale of immature Ivan's maturation into an epic warrior is replaced by a lighthearted romantic comedy with a decidedly domestic focus. Whereas *Vasilisa the Beautiful* consigned humor to the squalid and unenlightened world of the village and contrasted domestic space unfavorably with the magnificent Russian landscape, *Morozko* maintains the use of humor throughout the narrative and ends with the consummately domestic image of a wedding feast. The theme of truth and falsehood, represented in the mise-en-scène by costumes, masks, and physical transformations, and in the narrative by Ivan's gradual reeducation, introduces psychological depth and moral considerations wholly absent from the earlier film.

The lighthearted tone of *Morozko* does not prevent it from articulating National Bolshevik ideology. On the contrary, the emphasis on humor, happiness, and individual emotions reflects the Soviet party hierarchy's new concern with living standards, nutrition, consumer goods, and morality.<sup>136</sup> Singing and slapstick merely point to the promise of a brighter, happier, and more pleasant life. The reorientation of perspective from epic deeds, sublime nature, and individual submission to the collective interest indicates a retreat from

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<sup>136</sup> See Varga-Harris, "Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era."

the “heroic age” of Stalinism,<sup>137</sup> but the fundamental purpose of the fairy tale film remains the same.

The model presented for emulation and associated with age-old Russian national tradition in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* is that of a youth who acquires a stern demeanor and national consciousness in order to become an ever-vigilant defender of the land. In *Morozko*, the lesson to be learned is that one should be humble, kind, and honest if one wants to start a family and live happily ever after, and that Russians have always striven towards this goal.

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<sup>137</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 136-155.

**Conclusion: Russian Cultural Policies and the Post-Soviet Afterlife of the Fairy Tale Film**

In late 2008, a controversy developed in Russia over the television channel 2x2, which specialized in animated films, including such Western imports as *South Park* and *Happy Tree Friends*.<sup>138</sup> Following protests by conservative Christian groups, the office of the Prosecutor General of Russia recommended to the channel that it terminate the broadcasting of certain “extremist” content. The Russian Federal Surveillance Service for Mass Communications, Communications and Cultural Heritage Protection (Rossviaz’okhrankul’tura) issued a statement on its official website, claiming that the programs *The Adventures of Big Jeff* and *Little [sic] Tree Friends* “propagandize the cult of violence and cruelty, inflict harm on the health and the moral and spiritual development of the child, [and] encroach upon public morality,”<sup>139</sup> and threatened not to renew the channel’s broadcasting license. Although the license was eventually renewed (following the elimination of *The Adventures of Big Jeff* and *Happy Tree Friends* from its broadcasting lineup and the channel’s agreement to broadcast feature films and miniseries in addition to animations)<sup>140</sup> the agency’s response and the language used to justify it are indicative of a general trend in contemporary Russian cultural policy towards a renewed approach to children’s visual culture as an ideological issue.

In recent years, official emphasis on the importance of children’s programming has led to the establishment of television channels for children by all the major state-controlled broadcasters. These channels, including Channel One’s *Bibigon*, NTV’s *Detskii Mir*, and

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<sup>138</sup> Alexander Prokhorov, “Post-Soviet Screen Culture for Children: What has been Done?” *American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), Philadelphia, November 2008*, p. 7.

<sup>139</sup> The original statement reads: “propagandiruiut kul’t nasiliia i zhestokosti, nanosiat ushcherb zdorov’iu, нравstvennomu i dukhovnomu razvitiuu rebenka, poshiagaiut na obshchestvennuiu нравstvennost’” See the official site of the Russian Federal Surveillance Service for Mass Communications, Communications and Cultural Heritage Protection: <[http://www.rsoc.ru/site/news/?id\\_news=559](http://www.rsoc.ru/site/news/?id_news=559)>; See also <<http://lenta.ru/news/2008/09/12/letter/>>; <<http://lenta.ru/news/2008/03/12/protest/>>.

<sup>140</sup> <<http://lenta.ru/story/chanel/>>; <<http://lenta.ru/news/2008/10/07/two/>>.

*Teleniania*, owned by the state broadcasting company VGTRK, prioritize domestic children's programming and emphasize patriotic themes.<sup>141</sup> The website of Detskii Mir, for example, describes the channel's programming as "kind animated and feature films, produced in the studios of countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe."<sup>142</sup> Such a formulation implicitly opposes the channel's offerings to the unkind children's programming from outside the former Soviet Union. All three channels show Soviet-era fairy tale films regularly, at least when compared to Western children's channels. A cursory look through the channel listings for the month of March 2009 reveals such Soviet-era films as Ptushko's *Skazka o tsare Saltane* (*The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, 1966) and *Novyi Gulliver* (*The New Gulliver*, 1935) as well as Rou's *Kashchei Bessmertnyi* (*Kashchei the Deathless*, 1944) and *Varvara-krasa, dlinnaiia kosa* (*Barbara the Fair with the Silken Hair*, 1969). It is doubtful that American children's channels would so regularly broadcast films from several generations ago. Indeed, a search of program listings for the Disney Channel reveals a total absence of such classic Hollywood animated films as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Synopses of the fairy tale films emphasize the folk wisdom that these films contain. That there is a special term – *fil'm-skazka* – in Russian for the fairy tale film suggests the continuing significance and distinctiveness of the genre.

In the introduction to *National Bolshevism*, Brandenberger remarks on the continuity of Russian national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>143</sup> The durability of the imagery, language, and sense of history constructed by the policies of National Bolshevism points to the lasting success of the National Bolshevik project and its entrenchment in

<sup>141</sup> Prokhorov, "Post-Soviet Screen Culture for Children." pp. 5-7.

<sup>142</sup> <<http://www.ntvplus.ru/channel?id=1781>>.

<sup>143</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 9.

contemporary Russian culture. In his conclusion, Brandenberger also points to the continuing relevance of National Bolshevik policies in contemporary Russia:

the trafficking of Russian national heroes, myths, imagery, and iconography between 1937 and 1953 set the stage for both the latent russocentrism and full-blown nationalist sympathies present within contemporary Russian society today [...] Highly reminiscent of the national Bolshevism that came to dominate Soviet ideology and mass culture under Stalin, this [contemporary] rhetoric is at its heart intimately connected with the formation of a modern sense of Russian national identity during some of the most difficult years of the twentieth century.<sup>144</sup>

The conservative turn in Russian politics, which features a return of the old paternalistic concern for the morals and patriotic development of children, has therefore incorporated the old iconography of national tradition. Television, rather than cinema, is now the ‘most important art,’ but fairy tale films, as the most tested element of this ideological practice, remain an important component of state-supported children’s visual culture.

The continued broadcasting of fairy tale films is accompanied by several related developments. First is the emergence of fairy tale sculpture gardens, such as the statue of the frog princess at the Aleksandrovskii Garden near the Kremlin (fig. 19).<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, pp. 247-248.

<sup>145</sup> That this sculpture is the work of Zurab Tsereteli, in essence the official sculptor of the current Russian government, suggests the interrelation of folk-minded art and government policy. See Tsereteli’s official website at <<http://www.tsereteli.ru/eng/index.php>>.



**Figure 19: The Frog Princess (Photograph taken by Alexander Prokhorov, 20 Sept. 2008)**

Of a related nature is the reemergence of the Stalinist tradition of commemorating important dates in the lives of nationally significant cultural figures. A new feature film version of *Taras Bul'ba* is scheduled for release on April 2, 2009, the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Nikolai Gogol'.<sup>146</sup> Strikingly, Rou himself was commemorated with a film called *Strana volshebника Rou (The Land of the Magician Rou)*, which was released on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the director's birth in 2006.<sup>147</sup> All three developments reflect the continuing significance of Russian national tradition for contemporary state-sponsored visual culture.

National Bolshevism, with its emphasis on the past and the historical foundation of the present, no doubt finds fertile ground in contemporary Russian nostalgia for earlier, more glorious times. Svetlana Boym writes of the reemergence of nationalism in post-Soviet republics as an expression of nostalgia for a lost "Common Place:" "Nationalism is the only other available modern ideology [after communism ...] that modifies capitalist individualism and gives people an imaginary sense of community, a mythical map of rewritten history."<sup>148</sup> Historical films have met with great success among Russian audiences,<sup>149</sup> and directors, for

<sup>146</sup> <<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=261812>>.

<sup>147</sup> Irina Isaeva, *Strana volshebника Rou (Gosudarstvennaia televizionnaia radioveshchatel'naia kompaniia 'Sankt-Peterburg', 2006)*.

<sup>148</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 287.

<sup>149</sup> Stephen M. Norris, "Packaging the Past: Cinema and Nationhood in the Putin Era," *KinoKultura*, no. 21 (July 2008), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/21-norris.shtml>>.



their part, have responded to “the state order for the revival of the ideologeme ‘a great country with a great past’” with “moral and aesthetic archaisms” echoing “the trend of ‘new patriotism’.”<sup>150</sup>

This nostalgia for the Golden Age of the Soviet Union, and for the Stalin period in particular, is exemplified by a recent book by the film critic Fedor Razzakov titled *The Death of Soviet Cinema*, released by the major Moscow publisher Eksmo.<sup>151</sup> In what is essentially an unself-conscious vindication of National Bolshevism, the book praises the Stalinist rehabilitation of Russian history in film, which “strengthened the ideology of the Soviet state, bringing the ideas of patriotism and state power to art’s center stage on the eve of the most terrible war in the history of humanity.”<sup>152</sup> The Stalinist turn towards a renewed glorification of heroes from the past is likewise unproblematically explained: “Having subjected the majority of the participants in the revolution to repression, and having thus struck their names from history, Stalin understood perfectly well that it was impossible to leave history without any names at all. For this reason a rank of revolutionaries was then canonized at his behest.”<sup>153</sup> The problematic marriage of what Brandenberger calls “russocentric etatism” with the ostensibly internationalist ideology of Marxism-Leninism is elided. The result is an unequivocally sympathetic assessment of the National Bolshevik project from the point of view of a modern Russian state suffering from the disgrace of its lost superpower status and trying to reinvigorate a demoralized and inadequately patriotic citizenry.

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<sup>150</sup> Nina Tsyrukun, “Forward to the Past, or: What kind of Millennium has begun?,” *KinoKultura*, no. 22 (October 2008), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/22-tsyrukun.shtml>.

<sup>151</sup> Fedor Razzakov, *Gibel' sovetskogo kino: Intrigi i spory. 1918-1972* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2008).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. The original reads ...”ukrepil ideologiiu sovetskogo gosudarstva, vynesia na avantsenu iskusstva idei patriotizma i derzhavnosti nakanune samoi strashnoi voiny v istorii chelovechestva.”

<sup>153</sup> Razzakov, *Gibel' sovetskogo kino*, pp. 101-102. The original reads “Podvergnuv repressiiam bol'shenstvo uchastnikov revoliutsii i tem samym vycherknuv ikh imena iz istorii, Stalin v to zhe vremia prekrasno ponimal, chto ostavliat' istoriiu voobshche bez kakikh-libo imen nevozmozhno. Poetomu riad deiatelei byl im togda zhe kanonizirovan.”

## Appendix

Shorthand transcription of the discussion of the film *Vasilisa the Beautiful*<sup>154</sup>

10 May 1940

Chaired by Com. Sedykh.

### **Com. Sedykh**

Comrades, here among us are present the director of the picture, which we will now watch, and a portion of the artists, as well as some of the scriptwriters. Comrade Rou, director of the picture, will say a few introductory words.

### **Com. Rou**

Comrades, the course of the Russian folktale in Soviet cinematography is an extraordinarily difficult one. Russian folktale entered cinema relatively recently. This occurred for the following reasons.

As is known, in spite of the frequent directives, both in print and in speeches of A.M. Gor'kii, concerning the fact that the people's art, the people's folklore, should occupy a central place in the attention of the work of theater, literature, and cinematography – the arrival of folklore in art was impeded by a whole school of so-called 'pedologists,' who were relatively powerful. This was a pseudo-scientific, pernicious school, but it existed for a rather long time, and was destroyed with the personal participation of comrade Stalin.

After the destruction of this school – after the exposure of this pseudo-science – Russian folktales and fantasy literature began to appear from our publishers: Jules Verne,

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<sup>154</sup> RGALI, f. 1966, op. 1, d. 274.

Kipling, Mayne Reed, the tales of Pushkin began to appear, and so did Russian folktales. Writers began to work on the adaptation of folktales for the theater.

The folktale reached cinematography even later, as the pedologists still tried to impede the spread of fantastic materials on the sly. Back in 1929 the pedologist Ianovskaia released the book *Do our Youngsters need Folktales?* She bashed all folktales, dividing them into 3 categories. To the first category she assigned those tales which end with the marriage of ordinary people to, let's say, princesses. She concluded that this was a betrayal of class interests. To the second category she assigned those tales in which animals spoke and took part, and she claimed that this personification of animals impedes children's imaginations and referred to a whole series of studies that they conducted among children (in truth, among children who were practically mentally retarded). The only kind of story that she pardoned was the 'story of the turnip': she could not protest against the enthusiasm for the collective displayed here.

After the destruction of pedology, the folktale began to develop at a lively rate – in literature, in theater, and in film. The first to begin work with folktales was Ptushko, but he adapted folktales by very conventional means: he adapted them as stop-motion animations (*ob"emnaia mul'tiplikatsiia*).

We set ourselves a goal: to find the mode of visualization in which Russian storytellers themselves visualized it, that is, we decided to attempt a realistic depiction of the folktale. Various failures were predicted for us; people said that the tale would not be finished, but in spite of all these obstacles, *The Magic Fish* (Po shchuch'emu veleniiu) was completed.

When *The Magic Fish* was shown to the former leadership of the Committee, they didn't know how to respond and didn't respond at all for ten days, and only after corresponding reviews appeared – this tale appeared on the screens of the Soviet Union (just what an appearance it made – that is already well known).

After this the screenplay for *Vasilisa the Beautiful* was requested from the script writers comrades Vladychina, Nechaeva, and Shveitser.

For the basis of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, as with the basis of *The Magic Fish*, several folktales were utilized. In the present film we use several plots from Russian folktales, and in such a way that the primary idea of Russian folktale is not violated. This is a patriotic tale.

In the filming of this tale, all the newest methods of creating matte shots (*kombinirovannaia s'emka*) were utilized – all the methods which are today open to modern cinematography; that is to say, work on this film was to some extent experimental because a whole series of matte shots was tested on it – producing effects which are impossible to achieve with ordinary filming.

[The film is demonstrated]

### **Com. Sedykh**

Comrades, at this point we will exchange opinions. I ask the participants in the film comrades Sorogozhskaia, Potemkin, and Milliar, and the script writer comrade Vladychina take their places at the panel.

And so, comrades, we will begin the second part of our evening. I think that we will adopt the following procedure: you will ask questions – although everything is quite clear

here – but perhaps you wish to find out how or where something was made, etc. , and these comrades will answer you. You may ask the questions orally or in writing.

**Com. Zakharov**

I have several questions, but I must warn you that these questions might come across as childish to you.

First question: Why does Baba Iaga not have her mortar?

Second question: Why Baba Iaga speaks with a male voice?

And the third question: Why is there no hut on chicken legs?

**From the audience**

How much did this picture cost?

**From the audience**

How long did it take to film this picture?

**From the audience**

How was the filming of the bear cubs accomplished?

**From the audience**

What is Zmei Gorynych made of? Is he alive or not?

[laughter]

**From the audience**

Has a children's audience already watched this film? What age is this film intended for, and how do the youngsters react to certain wondrous scenes, to certain frightening moments?

**From the audience**

How many tales are combined? Where are their boundaries?

**From the audience**

How was the trick of the collapsing cliffs made?

**From the audience**

We hear that Com. Milliar plays three parts, but we have here the screen play (*libretto*), where it says that he plays the father, and nothing else is indicated there.

**Com. Milliar**

All the parts are not listed there.

**Question**

So which roles does he play?

**Question**

Why does the number three figure everywhere: three brothers, three heads on the dragon, etc.?

### **Com. Potemkin**

We filmed in Zagorsk outside of Moscow – for the Russian part of nature, and besides that, in studios in Moscow and Yalta.

There are 56 arrangements of mise-en-scène (*s"emochnykh ob"ektov*), whereas there are usually 20-25-30; from this you can see the complexity of this filming.

The picture took six months to make, and two million rubles were spent on it.

Zmei Gorynych is, of course, not alive, comrades. He was manufactured in Zagorsk at the toy factory, according to special blueprints which were prepared by engineers.

Eighteen trucks transported Zmei from Simferopol' to Yalta. In order to put the mechanism in motion – to operate the heads, the paws, the tail – 21 people were placed inside. I should say that this dragon was three or four times the size of the dragon that was in the German picture *Die Nibelungen*, and that one was one-headed.

The bears are our favorite participants in the picture: Potap and Klava. These are little cubs, terribly friendly and lively.

### **From the audience**

What about the bears' mother?

### **Com. Potemkin**

You can see for yourselves – it is the bear from the film *The Magic Fish*.

These cubs performed absolutely wonderfully, but, of course, not for free – but for honey. This came out to 16-17 puds of honey, and when the management tried to trick them

once and offered them compote instead of honey, they went on strike and categorically refused to work.

As far as various tricks and so forth – for example, the collapsing cliff – that was all done with the aid of matte shots. These are called matte shots [lit. combinative filming] because all conceivable methods of filming are utilized, including “mockups,” when real people – live people – are combined with mockups. Take, for instance, the collapsing cliffs – this is a variant of perspectival juxtaposition: a person of normal height and miniature cliffs, but it is filmed with special optics to get the corresponding effect. Or, for instance, the waterfall – that scene where Ivanushka is over the waterfall – perspectival juxtaposition; the waterfall was made on the scale of this pitcher. A trained eye might see that the water is falling from a very small height. This is very complex and very interesting work, which, strictly speaking, has only been undertaken in the last 2-3 years here in the Soviet Union, and is still in an early stage of implementation. That is the direction in which the director Ptushko and, here at Mosfil'm, Com. Rou, are working.

We showed this picture in the Central House of Pioneers, and to a lot of youngsters in general. This film elicits an absolutely wild reaction from the youngsters – one we honestly did not expect. The youngsters live along with the heroes and experience everything along with them.

I played Agafon and the blacksmith in this picture, and Com. Milliar – the father, Baba Iaga, and one of the *gusli* players, and also another old man who was later cut out.

### **Com. Milliar**

Concerning this old man, whom I played and who had to be cut out.



A prologue was written and filmed for the picture. It was well-written and filmed well too, and looked good on the screen, but in light of the fact that the picture was growing too big, it became necessary to excise this prologue. But that is not the point. The point is that many such things – tasteful things – were cut from the screenplay and even from among those things that had been filmed, all because the picture was being shortened severely, since it was growing too big. It was a shame to cut, but it had to be done. And a mortar was intended for Baba Iaga, and a broom, and chicken legs, but all of this had to be cut. It was a terrible shame.

A question was asked, why Baba Iaga had a rough male voice. The thing is, in the beginning I tried to imitate a woman's voice, and it was working, but it all came out in such a way that the woman's voice worked, but Baba Iaga didn't, because she did not correspond to the image that the spectators had in mind. I managed a very respectable voice, a regular woman's voice, but this kind of rough voice corresponds more closely to the image that appeared on screen.

### **Com. Vladychina**

And now for the questions to the author. First of all, how the idea for this film was conceived.

Initially Nechaeva and I wrote a play called *The Tale of Ivan the Peasant's Son and Vasilisa the Beautiful (Skazka o Ivanushke i Vasilise Prekrasnoi)*. It is performed at the theater at Nikol'skaia, which, unfortunately, is closed right now and being moved to the Akvarium.

When this play began, Detfil'm became interested in it and suggested that we make a screenplay. They added Shveitzer to us as an experience scriptwriter. And so the three of us started working on this screenplay.

How many tales did we use for this? Our goal was not to use any particular tales, but to create on the basis of Russian folklore a new tale, which would embody certain ideas closer to our time. It seemed to us that the fragment which we took from the story "The Frog Princess" – there it develops totally differently – but this fragment about the transformation of the frog into Vasilisa, our Russian girl – this is a successful element. Here we introduced the figure of Zmei Gorynych. In the tale of Vasilisa the Beautiful and of the Frog Princess he is absent; he is not taken from any particular tale. Likewise Baba Iaga does not have any interactions with Zmei Gorynych anywhere, as his mother or so forth. We simply took fragments from these tales, tied them together with a common plot which was closer to us.

We wanted to show in the character of Ivanushka the people's power, awakened in him, his manhood, his consciousness, his victory in combat with an enemy from a foreign land, who is enslaving our land, is taking our girls captive, burning our fields, destroying everything, and so on. We simply combined these themes into a separate tale.

We contacted the folklore section of the Writers' Union (Comrades Ryb... and Sokolova), and they said that this is good, that we made it in a legitimate way, that it turned out organic, that it is definitely artistic and definitely feasible for the theater and the cinema.

And now this question – why there are three heads, why there are three sons, and so on. This is a very typical thing in our Russian tales, and for tales in general – three apples, the tsar had three sons, the tsar had three daughters, and so on. Three and Seven – these are favorite numbers; and as far as Zmei Gorynych is concerned, he always has three heads.

**Com. Milliar**

Likewise the three kisses on Easter.

**From the Audience**

Everything is really very good – a very good impression.

**Com. Boronin (From *Bolshevik Precision*)**

I have a few impressions left from the picture.

First of all, the picture is good; the acting is on a high level, especially that of Com. Milliar in the role of the father. Very good. I like it.

I want to talk today not about successes, but about the fact that something is not quite done. Take, for example, this moment: the beginning of the picture – the three *gusli* players. It seems to me, that this should have closed the picture as well: the *gusli* players finish their song. But for some reason the picture ends with the ride on the horse. It turns out that the three *gusli* players are neither here nor there.

Furthermore this observation. Perhaps I am wrong, but it would seem to me that Zmei Gorynych should have been made in the form of a human. After all, the picture is intended for youngsters, and maybe even for grown-up youngsters. It should have been done somehow otherwise, because it's hard to imagine even in a tale that such a creature is all of a sudden going to marry this girl.

I have a son; he is eight years old. He likes pictures, but with this picture, I am sure that he will get upset and, in particular, because of Baba Iaga – not because she is played badly, but because it is too scary. He will say, of course, “Papa, let’s go.”

**Com. Vladychina**

He won’t say it and he won’t leave.

**Com. Boronin**

I am talking about my own son, I had such an experience once.

But in general I should say that, it seems to me, the cast and the director put quite a bit of work into the picture; I can feel that people employed a combination of professions. This is a new movement in our country. This should be welcomed in every way, all the more so since this movement is finding application everywhere in our country – we need to reduce overhead expenses.

The camera operators and artists did a good job.

On the subject of sound: The sound in the picture is not bad, but in some parts it is not entirely successful. Take, for example, when the spider was talking, and especially Zmei Gorynych – it was hard to decipher. But in general the sound in the picture is well done.

My opinion is that the artists’ collective – the actors and scriptwriters – should continue their work in this area.

I would ask that my observations be taken into account. Maybe the youngsters need to be consulted on this subject some more.

**Com. Sedykh**

Anyone else? In essence the comrade has spoken correctly; he has made a correct observation regarding the ending. Furthermore, he was very honest regarding the bravery of his son.

**Com. Zakharov (From *Rapid Construction*)**

If we're going to begin with sons, then I have a very small son. I want to express my opinion.

I read tales in my childhood – I had no occasion to listen to them, as there was no nanny. And a certain impression about Zmei Gorynych, about Baba Iaga, about Ivanushka – has remained with me, as with many others, for the rest of my life. And now, thanks to our present reality, you can see a tale on the screen – when you somehow refer to these impressions from childhood and involuntarily compare what has remained with you and what you now see as an adult on the screen – I must say that this tale on screen was composed with reference to the tales read in childhood. In this lies the merit of the film. This is a tale of the Russian folk, presented on the screen for our Soviet children, and presented very well.

Com. Vladychina said that in this screenplay they sought to show love for the motherland, to bring this tale closer to our days. It seems to me this worked out as well.

I watched *The Ring of the Nibelungen (Die Nibelungen)*, and it seems to me that Ivanushka in this film is richer in content. Siegfried made a great impression on me, but this is not a hero from our tales and legends, but this one is our national hero and a strong hero. Take the instance when, thanks to his valiance and bravery obtains the knight's suit of armor

– it fits him very well. An ordinary young man of the Russian folk became, when it was needed, a brave, valiant knight, and achieved his goal with honor.

Here Com. Milliar said that it was necessary to shorten the screenplay. This happens in our line of work as well, and when you start to cut material out and the work turns out worse – it has to be corrected. And the same goes here – you cut parts out and Baba Iaga lost her mobility.

As far as Zmei Gorynych is concerned – he is lifelike; he is portrayed well. They said here that he was three times as large as the German one, but this isn't bad. He is lifelike; he lives on the screen, and our knight fights and defeats him.

But no one has said anything here about Vasilisa the Beautiful's performance. I think that Vasilisa the Beautiful answers the call just fine and played her part beautifully. On the whole the picture is good.

Why did I ask the question about the child viewer? There are some terrifying scenes and children might not react the way they should. Take, for example, what one comrade here was saying about the bravery of his son. Of course, there are all kinds of children, and of course there are terrifying scenes, for example that spider, or Baba Iaga. Terrifying scenes. (By the way, about Baba Iaga – I think that it should have been done so that she had a woman's voice.) I admit that the aesthetic sense of the child might revolt against this image of Baba Iaga. Or take such a realistic shot – like when the bear is smothering Ivanushka. But in the end I think that children will take this the right way.

This tale is good in that it successfully integrates reality and fantasy. This is its merit.

**Com. Golovin (“Kalibr” factory)**

The picture is made, undoubtedly, with culture. When you watch the picture, motifs from Nekrasov come to mind: there is a great deal of the Russian spirit here, the power of the Russian people is shown very well. An excellent scene is where Vasilisa goes to reap; she gets along well with her work. Also very interesting is the scene where the father tells Ivanushka that it is necessary to walk through the land in order to learn where the key is located. Here another scene comes to mind inadvertently – the link with the people, as Com. Stalin speaks about it – as long as the party is linked with the people – it is strong. And so it is here – since he is linked with the people, he can work these wonders.

As far as inadequacies I want to say the following – in some places the sound is bad, for example, when the spider asks his riddles. Here something is technically incomplete; this will be difficult for the youngsters. And these scenes – where Baba Iaga speaks and when the riddles are asked.

### **Com. Aritov (Pioneer Trekhgorka)**

Children in the first through third grades will be very upset after this tale; it will have the same effect on the youngsters as the tales of Gogol'. But youngsters in fifth, sixth, seventh grade will watch this picture with great interest.

What is so frightening, particularly for youngsters of first through third grade age? For example, the scene where Vasilisa throws Baba Iaga into the cauldron. This will be a very difficult spot for the little youngsters.

### **From the audience**

On the contrary – they'll be overjoyed.

**Com. Aritov**

But they will cry at night.

Furthermore, it would have been good to make Zmei Gorynych approach a human aspect – or rather – he should metamorphose into a human. At the moment when he lands, he should discard his dragon aspect and metamorphose into a human, and the fight can take place as with the dragon.

And furthermore the very end will be incomprehensible to youngsters up to sixth grade. Youngsters of first through fifth grade age will not understand and will be baffled.

In general – the picture is made well and youngsters of fifth, sixth, and seventh grades will watch it with great interest, but I, personally, would not let the little ones of first-second grade watch it.

**Com. Leont'eva**

There is a certain scene – when Baba Iaga sniffs the air, sensing the Russian spirit, and finds the hat. The youngsters will become involuntarily doubtful at this point – how could the hat get into Baba Iaga's hut? After all, Ivanushka was down below.

Regarding the frightfulness of Baba Iaga: on the contrary – the broom and pestle would have produced a stronger impression in this regard. The youngsters inevitably imagine Baba Iaga with broom and pestle – she is a sorceress; she flies. So that to say this will be frightening to the child – this is untrue.



With regard to the ending – the comrade is right. But I think that the *gusli*-players should have been put back, and their return – and how the father greets them – should have been shown, and then the *gusli*-players could have ended it.

**Com. Kliukin (From *Red Seamstress*)**

I should say that during today's screening one could feel a reaction from the spectators to certain scenes which speaks for itself. If, at the time of the screening, the youngsters react in the necessary way to the film being shown to them, then the picture is valuable. That is, all of these episodes and scenes reached the youngsters. There is nothing frightening here, and the youngsters will, of course, will react to many things in this picture in a very lively way. In this lies the value of the film – to secure love for the heroes and, together with that, to show those dark powers which the people defeated in their tales.

I want to pause on the inadequacies that exist here. Take, for example, the scene where Baba Iaga brings Vasilisa to the palace – for the youngsters there is little here that befits a tale; these gifts are obscure and boring, and this could have been made more colorful, more attractive and rich.

This film is intended for children, and it seems to me that the boys will be with Ivanushka and the girls with Vasilisa. In contrast to the two brothers, Ivanushka really stands out – here is a good, strong lad, strong-willed, valiant. Vasilisa stands out as an image of our Russian woman, even of the modern Russian woman. After all, our modern woman certainly isn't characterized by the traits which characterize the noblewoman or the merchant's wife presented here. Certainly not. And the merit of the film, which adults will watch as well as children, lies in this. Today's screening showed this.

**Com. Aritov**

I also have a comment regarding the architecture of the palace: it is somehow unattractive; just some kind of circles. This does not look much like a palace.

**Com. Ovsianikov (From *Pedvuzovets*)**

Regarding the general tendency of these pictures. This is the second picture with this tendency. It seems to me that this direction, a fantastical direction, ought to be welcomed. This is the first point. Those presenting today have not spoken about this: do we need these films at all?

It seems to me that such films should definitely be made.

Now as far as the substance of this picture: there is a certain shortcoming in that the moral aspect of the Russian is inadequately explored. This is underscored by the fact that there are more negative examples than positive ones. And furthermore – the inner world of man is shown somehow one-sidedly: Ivanushka's courage is shown, but not his intelligence, his cleverness, maybe even his cunning, and so on. It seems to me that heroes should appear more multifaceted – they are too straightforward here.

The next comment regards the acting. It seems to me that Vasilisa's makeup is not quite successful; in reality the actress looks much prettier than in the picture, although she is supposed to be very pretty in the picture, even though she is supposed to be very pretty and compelling.

**From the audience**

I think, on the contrary, that she looks much better on screen.

**Com. Shafir (From *Shock Construction*)**

Several comrades here have raised troubling questions: won't you frighten the children? You responded to this with laughter, but if you think the question over, it seems to me that the question is not accidental and it occurred to those who asked it because both the scriptwriters and the crew that made this picture – they forgot about one very important and effective tool of the Russian folktale and all tales – that is laughter, laughter which lashes, which lightens the mood, which disperses these terrors, which is invigorating, cheerful, which infuses the viewer with optimism and love of life, and which shows that all these terrors are fleeting occurrences, and that life is healthy, real, and does not need to be feared.

Precisely because you forgot about laughter, you responded to this question thoughtlessly – and precisely for that reason such troubling questions are asked. If there were more laughter, children would respond to it very energetically. Children would laugh when the bride steps on the piglet, or when the father drops the pot, but this is very little. We didn't laugh because it was absolutely obvious that this pot was just about to fall over, that the piglet was lying there and she was about to step on it, and so on. We could have been made to laugh too if there were more cheerful bustle.

And now this as well: if you make a tale, spend two million rubles on it, then let's make use of everything that Soviet cinema has at its disposal. Today a tale without color is simply not a tale. A tale is colorful in itself, but you give us a gray picture. The picture would gain a great deal if you had not spent so much money on the transportation of Zmei Gorynych to Yalta, if you had not filmed in Yalta, which is totally unnecessary, since our

technology makes it possible to do this without such journeys – those resources could have been used in order to produce a color film. Then the film would have gained a great deal.

I think that the crew which makes children's pictures and works on tales will take these comments into account, and that they will, to some extent, aid future work.

### **Com. Sedykh**

Would anyone else like to participate? Does everyone agree with Com. Shafir's comments? There is much to discuss in what he has offered.

### **Com. Vladychina**

First of all, regarding the level of fright: You see – most Russian tales are of this sort. It is usually a wondertale, where the battle of the Russian folk hero takes place – he always encounters some monster, with some terrifying occurrence, with a frightening occurrence, which he must combat, which has to be defeated – otherwise it would have been impossible to create such a film.

If we were to make Zmei Gorynych in the form of a benevolent creature, this would be of no use to anyone. If we were to transform him later into a good lad, this is a different case (this can happen in those cases when he has been transformed by some evil power). Our Zmei Gorynych *is* that evil power – he transformed Vasilisa the Beautiful into a frog, and if we were to transform him into a good lad, then this would need to be discarded. If we were to turn him into an otherworldly knight, then Ivanushka would have to do battle twice. This will be a duplication of the same device.

As regards fright – this is a relative thing: youngsters really like frightening things, they like frightening pictures. I had the occasion to observe a whole row of the auditorium – unanimous delight. They would have been terribly disappointed if Baba Iaga were not so frightful, if Zmei Gorynych were not like he is here.

We listened to the responses of the youngsters, and I must say that the youngsters animatedly spoke and much more to the point. We have a shorthand transcription of the youngsters' responses, and they eagerly awaited the appearance of Zmei Gorynych – one girl said just that: 'here he is just like he should be.' The same goes for Baba Iaga. And there is no reason to soften them.

Now the question about laughter. This is a very good thing, but it is important to know when laughter is merited. The subject of the present film did not allow for its transformation into a comedy. The subject is lofty and emotional – it is about defense. And the laughter which is sprinkled in there is sufficient. Our play contains much more laughter, but again – not in the heroic scenes. How can there be laughter when Ivanushka is deprived of his beloved bride? The land is ruined, the people await deliverance – how can there be laughter here? We only managed to insert the bears which add a humorous note.

Regarding the antagonistic environment – that there is too much of it. Once again, the subject demands it – we want to show the people's valor. If the antagonistic environment is omnipresent, then there are foes to fight – the valor shines brighter. We couldn't possibly make Baba Iaga positive, and if we were to introduce some characters or other just so that they could be positive – that is totally unnecessary, that is only cumbersome.

Regarding the allotment of other qualities to Ivanushka. This is possible, but it would have been necessary to double the length of the film. Our subject was to show the people's valor.

Regarding the two million. Keep in mind that this is a very small sum, especially for such technically complicated productions, and as far as color pictures are concerned, Detfil'm could afford to make one such picture a year, or two at the most. Such a picture would cost about ten million.

Regarding the idea of filming in a studio – let the comrade know that there is a Detfil'm studio in Yalta, and it was cheaper to film there than here.

**Com. Milliar**

There are many clear days there – it's more convenient to work.

**Com. Sedykh**

Does anyone else want to add anything? (**voices:** No.). And so: no one wishes to add anything; no more questions.

I should remind you that the Hero of the Soviet Union Com. Vodop'ianov has written about this film, having judged it to be a very positive, a much-needed thing, as a major success both for the director and for the cast. He singled out the work of Com. Sorogozhskaia as a major and talented success. He also took note of the brilliant work of Milliar and also Potemkin. Unquestionable, also, is the contribution to this project (the foundation for it) is that of the film's scriptwriters. I will not make any generalizing conclusions, but I only regret that no one pointed this out.

There was an adult audience here. As far as its reaction goes, I must say that it reacted in a friendly manner and that this reaction reached every adult viewer. On the 13<sup>th</sup> the picture comes out on the big screen for adult viewers, as well as for young ones; in other words it will be shown from morning until evening. The audience should have spoken about this. You are worried about the youngsters, but the youngsters are major realists and they have their own ideas about Zmei Gorynych and Baba Iaga, and they will see all the horrors in this picture, but they will also see how a strong-willed, valiant Ivanushka – how he answers the spider’s questions, how he combats the Zmei and how he triumphs. In response to the spider’s question, he answers that a valiant heart can overcome anything. The youngsters will love this.

Last year, my son told me that at camp they sat on their beds at night and told each other about various horrors – such stories that what is Baba Iaga compared to them? – and Zmei Gorynych – terrifying things. And here in the picture – here they also have the defeat of all this darkness.

I think that children who have seen this picture multiple times, who have responded to it enthusiastically, who have accepted it heart and soul – they have given it a real and complete appraisal.

We should thank the comrades who came to us for this meeting. The meeting is now adjourned.

End

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